

The Chosen One:  
How Community Commitment makes certain Representatives More Preferable

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Abstract

What considerations do Black individuals use when choosing to support certain representatives over others? Expanding on existing representation literature, I argue and prove that perceptions of a candidate's commitment to prioritizing the racial group's interest over their own self-interest is an underlying mechanism that explains why Black voters choose certain candidates over others. I theorize that candidates use signals to convey their commitment to Black community. In two experiments with 1,150 Black respondents each, I vary the kind of community commitment signals Black and White candidates use, finding consistent evidence that Black individuals prefer candidates whose commitment to putting the racial group's interest first is communicated through signals of past personal sacrifices for the group. This work not only has strong implications for the way we understand Black political behavior, it provides a framework through which scholars can investigate the candidate preferability for other groups.

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Much of the literature on the candidate selection criteria of Black voters is based on their strong preference for descriptive representatives- representatives who share a demographic characteristic with the voters they represent- and Democratic politicians. Traditionally, when scholars have examined the influence of their representative's race, measuring it as a binary Black or White. These studies generally find that Black voters are more communicative with their representative (Broockman 2014), and experience increases in political knowledge, empowerment, and willingness to engage the political system (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Lublin 1999; Tate 2004; Gleason and Stout 2014; Stout 2015). Specifically, Katherine Tate (2004) suggests that Black voters' strong preference for Black politicians stems from the perception that they are more trustworthy, helpful, and hand-on in their districts than their White counterparts (see also Stout 2018). These findings might suggest that Black voters' preference for certain candidates is born out of physical similarity and shared experience.

However, recent developments in Black politics, I argue, make it clear that the findings in the descriptive representation literature about Black candidate preferability do not fully encapsulate the breadth and complexity of the Black voter candidate preferability, and invite us to investigate other explanations to explain what makes certain candidates preferable to Black voters. For example, despite the possibility of being the first Black governor of Maryland, a heavily Democratic state with a large and politically influential Black population, Anthony Brown lost the state's gubernatorial race in 2014 due, in large part, to lower than projected levels of Black support (Wagner and Craighill 2014). Moreover, existing frameworks cannot explain why Memphis Representative Steve Cohen, a White Democratic politician, has been able to attain and maintain Black support in his majority Black district despite being challenged by well-known and viable Black candidates (Brown 2009).

Attempts to reconcile Brown's failure and Cohen's success with existing literature on the factors Black voters consider exposes a puzzle in the relationship Black voters have with political

representatives. Are the affective and political attachments Black voters have to Black representatives unique because of the shared experiences and similar physical features? Or are Black voters attaching themselves to representatives based on other criterion that goes beyond skin color, and Black representatives are simply more likely to meet this criterion, making them the more apparent recipients of the affective rewards associated with descriptive representation? In this article, I address this puzzle by providing a framework to better understand the mechanisms underneath Black voter candidate selection by asking- What considerations, beyond skin color and partisanship, do Black individuals make when choosing to support certain representatives over others?

I argue that their perceived *community commitment*, or commitment to putting the Black community's interests above their own political interest or prestige is the underlying mechanism that explains why Black voters find some candidates more preferable than others.<sup>1</sup> Representatives seeking Black voter support must communicate this commitment to Black voters by sending certain signals I offer my *community commitment signaling theoretical framework*, which claims that representatives make rhetorical claims to the racial group that communicate their commitment to prioritizing the Black community's political interests. This framework draws on signaling theory, and Black individuals' history of using social sanctions to ensure that fellow racial group members are committed to the group norm of prioritizing the group's interest over their self-interest (Walton 1985; White and Laird 2020). From there, I argue that Black voters apply this same intragroup

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<sup>1</sup> I fully acknowledge that the Black racial group is not monolithic in its perceptions of candidates, their appeals, policies they deem important, or how they seek to address socio-political issues. That said, scholars do assert that most Black voters tend to support institutions and individuals that are perceived to be "advancing Black interests" (Dawson 1995; 97).

expectation of commitment to their political representatives and, in turn, and determine whether a candidate is preferable based on the commitment signals they send. Using two experimental tests, I find that Black voters' preference for group prioritization is not confined to same race candidates. Indeed, when a Black or White candidate signals past actions of sacrificing their well-being for the Black community, they are consistently evaluated more positively.

Black Americans are an optimal case for assessing the mechanisms that underlie voter preference for certain representatives. The general high levels of group solidarity in social and political arenas (Dawson 1995), the use of race as the lens through which they view the political world (Walton 1985; Dawson 1995), and a strong and consistent leaning towards the Democratic Party (White and Laird 2020) suggest that most Black voters' use of skin color and partisanship are the mechanisms for their candidate selection. If, among this extremely cohesive sociopolitical group, an underlying mechanism is found in their assessments of same-race and/or same party candidates, then my community commitment signaling framework to has the potential to provide deeper explanation into the candidate selection processes for other groups who have less cohesion on social and political dimensions (i.e. women, Latinx, LGBTQ+ voters).

Within the realm of Black political behavior, establishing community commitment as a mechanism provides a unique and strong contribution by showing the sophisticated and strategic nature with which Black voters choose their political representatives. By using a mechanism that is borne out of the group's social norms and expectations Black voters are better able optimize the kind of representative they get at the onset of an election, as opposed to waiting to hold them accountable only after they are in office. This work also offers scholars a way to examine the preferences of Black voters outside the descriptive representation paradigm as the findings suggest that the expectations Black voters have for those who seek to represent them are not confined to same race representatives.

## **Descriptive Representation: Finding the Mechanism**

Some important works have laid the groundwork for understanding what may make certain representatives more preferable to Black voters. Dovi (2002) pushes scholars to acknowledge that all descriptive representatives are not equal theorizes preferable Black descriptive representatives are those that are seen as “one of us,” but I contend that the notion of being “one of us” is not zero-sum, and the way of candidate communicates their belonging will matter for how they are viewed. Stout (2015) makes similar claims in his investigation of the role of deracialized political appeals from Black representatives and their influence on the attitudes of Black, Latino, and White individuals. He explores how different kinds of racialized appeals finding that Black voters prefer candidates who rely on positive racial appeals (those that do not deride an opponent’s racial identity). Despite his informative findings, he offers little explanation for why these appeals are more successful, or how variation even within positive appeals might affect how Black candidates are evaluated. In his seminal study Canon (1999) shows how Black representative represent white constituents. He shows that there are two different kinds of Black politicians with different governing perspectives. He suggests that traditional Black politicians with roots in the Civil Rights Movement are preferred by Black voters more than their coalition building counterparts. But does not explain why traditional Black leaders are preferred meaning even though we know who Black voters prefer we still are lacking the mechanism that explains why.

Some might suggest turning to policy to find a mechanism. Indeed, there is prominent body of work that shows the importance of descriptive representation for better substantive representation (Whitby 1997; Lublin 1999; Grose 2011). Though these studies provide important information about the relationship between substantive and descriptive representation, scholarship also tells us that most elections occur in low information environments where general knowledge of

bills passed is minimal amongst the American electorate (Lupia 1994; Tate 2004; Griffin and Flavin 2007). Moreover, multiple studies have shown that when asked to rank a representative's activities in terms of their perceived importance, Black voters consistently ranks policy is among the lowest priorities for many Black voters (Fenno 2003; Tate 2004; Griffin and Flavin 2011; Harden 2015; Hayes 2016). This is not to say that Black voters do not care about policy but rather that they tend to have greater concern for other aspects of representation. Thus, investigating policy preference and congruence as a mechanism may not offer a direct understanding of the mechanisms that Black voters rely on to support a candidate.

As such, I turn to contemporary research about how Black voters used, and continue to use, social interactions to ensure strong political cohesion amongst fellow group members (White and Laird 2020). Much of this research is focuses on how the social accountability structure within which many Blacks used social sanctions to keep individuals from choosing self-interest over group interest. I contend that understanding how Black people's use of social interactions with one another informs their expectations with potential representatives is a fruitful place to investigate Black political considerations of candidates.

### **The Social Accountability Structure & Black Voter Expectations**

To understand how Black individuals' social interactions inform their political behaviors and expectations comes from, I turn to the research tells us that, during the long period of political exclusion, Black voters were not politically dormant. Instead, “[B]lacks [sought] consciously through communication to produce not only a group awareness but also an internalization or active sharing of interests within the group strong enough to encourage them to coordinate their behavior in pursuit of common interests” (Walton 1985; 61). White and Laird (2020) call this the “social accountability structure.”

In this social model of politics, organizations like the Black church and the Black press fostered an understanding amongst many Black individuals that in order to bring about racial equality the group's interest needed to be prioritized. However, there was an understanding by those in positions of power that the Black community is not a monolith and, despite knowing the norms and expectations of the group, some Black individuals would benefit from making decisions based on their individual interests. To combat this potential inclination, scholars tell us, Black individuals used social sanctions, like public ridicule and stereotyping on those who were seen as acting against the racial group, to ensure a commitment to prioritizing the Black community's interest. (Walton 1985; White and Laird 2020). As such, the use of social sanctions maintained a commitment to the community and placing its interest first for those who might be advantaged by deviating from that norm.

In their numerous experiments across various studies, White and Laird (2020) show that the internalized aspects of the social accountability structure discussed by Walton (1985) remain potent influencers on the political behavior of Black individuals. They consistently find that the influence of social sanctions is most pronounced in their affiliation with the Democratic Party. When in the presence of a racial in-group member, Black individuals are more likely to claim a stronger affiliation with the Democratic Party and less likely to donate to Republican candidates even when doing so means gaining monetary compensation. These results show that the social accountability structure and the use of sanctions to hold each other accountable to the norms of placing the group's interest first is still a significant part of Black political behavior.

### **Civil Rights Politicians & Black Voter Political Expectations**

I contend that in the same way Black individuals expect each other to not only be aware but committed to placing the group's interests first, they look for that same commitment in their elected representatives. In fact, they may expect a clearer commitment to the group interests from their

political representatives because of their heightened status as representatives of the group (Frimer and Skitka 2020). In addition to holding representatives to a higher standard, many of the expectations of commitment to Black interests that Black voters have for their political representatives were epitomized by the civil rights activists many of whom became among the first political representatives for whom many Black individuals voted. (Ardrey and Nelson 1990).

Not only do they have high expectations by they have seen the expectations met by politicians, which I argued their expectations for political representatives. I contend that Black voters' notions of effective political leadership are informed by their socialized association of civil rights politicians and their sacrifices for the racial group. This contention might explain the work of David Canon (1999) who finds that Black politicians with roots in the Civil Rights Movement, tend to have greater electoral success with Black voters. This success, I argue, is borne out of traditional Black politicians' clear commitment to making the interests of the racial group their primary concern, and showing that to Black voters through their sacrifices during the Civil Rights Movement.

However, the face of Black political representation is changing (Gillespie 2010; Tate 2010). As traditional Black politicians begin to leave office and are replaced by younger more professionalized Black representatives without the history of being active in the Civil Rights Movement. This transition in Black political representation begs the question-by what means do non-Civil Rights politicians communicate their commitment to making the group's interests their primary political concern? To do this, politicians should employ what I call *community commitment signals*, which are rhetorical claims of personal sacrifice or social connection that communicate their commitment to prioritizing the group's interests.

### **Signaling Theory & Community Commitment**



To better assess how community commitment signals generally work, I draw on signaling theory. Often found in economics and business management literature, signaling theory tells us that individuals, corporations, or institutions send certain signals to communicate their credibility to another party in need of particular information (Spence 2002). Scholars of signaling theory use the example of an individual putting their education level on a job resume to communicate their competency for a position. Their education level may not explicitly indicate whether they have the specific skills for the job to which they are applying, but it does show their aptitude to learn the necessary skills (Spence 1973). There are two dominant tenets of signaling theory-

1. The receiver needs certain kinds of information from and about the signaler to establish their credibility.
2. The signals used for needs to be something that is recognizable to the receiver.

Within signaling theory, there are signalers, signals, and receivers. Upon the receipt of the signal, receivers determine of the signaler's credibility based on perceptions of the signals' costliness. The costlier a signal, the more likely the signal is perceived to be credible (Bird and Smith 2005). In applying this theory to the framework of voter candidate preferability, the signals used by politicians, who are the signalers, are used to communicate the candidate's ability and likelihood of meeting the expectations of their constituents.

### **Black Voters & Community Commitment Signals**

Based on the social accountability structure within which many Black voters operate, a strong signal of credibility is one that shows a representative not only understands the group norm is of placing the group's interest first, but is, in the words of Walton (1985) "active[ly] sharing" in those interests. The receivers are Black voters, who want to optimize their political representations by choosing a candidate whose signals reflect an understanding of their expectations, seek signals of community commitment to the group's interest from the signalers, or political representatives.

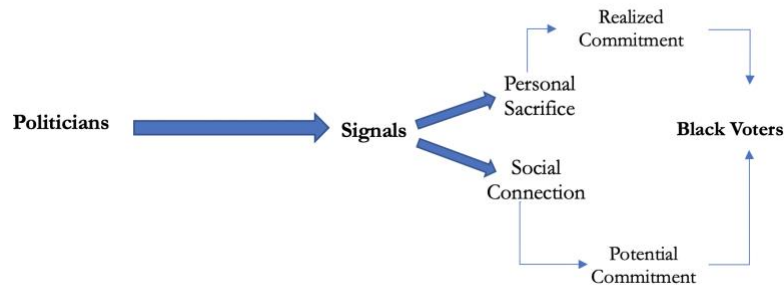
Thus, the signals non-Civil Rights politicians have to send are ones that effectively communicate a commitment to prioritizing the Black community's interest. But what do effective signals look like? How would Black individuals recognize them? I argue that the most recognizable signals would be those that Black people look for in each other to maintain their own credibility within the racial group and have witnessed in certain preferred political representatives, which tended to be those with backgrounds in the Civil Rights Movement. Even though these individuals are leaving office, I posit that it is their actions that made them more preferable, and those can be replicated by those with that background.

I draw on the experiences of Civil Rights politicians. In this paper, I focus on two signals that scholars of the Civil Rights Movement point to as staples of civil rights activists- *social connections* and *personal sacrifices*.<sup>2</sup> These are signals, I argue, that are recognizable to Black voters because of their socialization about the importance of Civil Rights Movement (Morris et al. 1989; Deane et al. 2016), the collective memory of the movement and its influence on their social and political livelihoods that many Blacks still have (Harris 2006), and the pictures and narratives of the leaders' sacrifices can often be found in campaign and mobilization materials (Johnson 2014; Booker 2019).

### **Community Commitment Signals**

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<sup>2</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of signals, but ones that, based on existing literature, are more likely to be successful because of their roots in the Civil Rights Movement.



**Figure 1. An Illustration of the Community Commitment Signaling Framework**

Srivastava (2001) explains that all signals do not communicate the same level of underlying cost and credibility. In the case of Black voter candidate preferability, means that the personal sacrifice and social connection community commitment signals sent to Black voters will not convey the same level of commitment to group interest prioritization, as illustrated in Figure 1. This is not to say that the signals are at odds with one another, but rather those signals that communicate a higher cost will be more preferable as they suggest a greater level of commitment than those signals whose cost are perceived to be lower. As shown in Figure 1, the underlying information communicated by personal sacrifice community commitment signals is a realized commitment to placing the group’s interest first. On the other hand, the information conveyed by social connection community commitment signals suggests a potential commitment to prioritizing the group’s interests.

*Personal Sacrifice*

In his findings that that individuals who make personal sacrifices for the group are rewarded with higher status in the group, sociologist Robb Willer (2009) corroborates the claims made by scholars of signaling theory about the importance of a signal’s perceived cost. Within the context of the community commitment signaling framework, I contend that politicians who communicate a *realized commitment* through references to past instances where they have put their well-being in jeopardy for the sake of greater inclusion political and social spaces are more effective in signaling

the likelihood of staying committed. Personal sacrifice signals are inherently costly which, according to signaling theory, communicates a greater credibility, or, in this context, a greater likelihood of being and remaining committed.

If, as I theorize, Black voters seek to optimize their representation by choosing candidates who are committed to placing the group's interest first, candidates who communicate a realized commitment will be more preferred because they have provided evidence of their commitment. Moreover, in the unique historical narrative of Black Americans, the sacrifices made by civil rights activists and politicians led to meaningful and drastic changes in the position of many Black individuals (Holt et al. 2000). Thus, Blacks' understanding of personal sacrifice is that it is not only costly but effective which, I posit, makes the potency of personal sacrifice signals, and the power of realized commitment, greater.

In 2018, at a rally in Georgia, Representative John Lewis exemplified a personal sacrifice signal when he said, "I got arrested a few times. During the 60s, I was arrested 40 times. Since I've been in Congress, I've been arrested another 5 times. And I'm probably gonna get arrested again for something... I gave a little blood on the bridge in Selma. 53 years ago. I almost died." (NBC News 2018). Lewis's highlighting of his near-death experience during a protest in the Civil Rights Movement conveys a realized commitment because it illustrates an instance where he nearly gave his life to ensure Black people gained social and political equality.

Though the example provided above comes from a politician who was active during the Civil Rights Movement, I contend the realized commitment can be communicated through signals that come from non-civil rights politicians. Indeed, in the typologies Andra Gillespie (2010) provides about the different kinds of Black politicians that are found in what she calls the "3<sup>rd</sup> wave" of Black politicians, she discusses the variety of ways that some younger Black representatives can behave in similar ways to their civil rights predecessors. She categorizes them "Rebrands of their parents,"

“Chips off the Old Block,” and “New Activists” (22-23). We see examples of these younger politicians behaving in ways similar to their more traditional Black politicians like Newark, New Jersey Mayor Ras Baraka leading a protest to increase the number of jobs in his city (Associated Press), Missouri Congresswoman Cori Bush who frequently references her time on the front lines during protests in Ferguson, MO (coribush.org), and Ohio congressional candidate Yvette Simpson who also referenced her time in local Black Lives Matter protests when running in the Democratic primary election (Knight 2017). These examples offer evidence that the activities that are often associated with civil rights politicians are not temporally bound, but rather can be found in younger politicians as well.

### *Social Connection*

Not all politicians can signal personal sacrifice either because it is not part of their personal narrative or not politically expedient. They instead can rely on social connection signals that are less costly, but also have roots in the Civil Rights Movement and communicate some level of commitment, but as Srivastava (2001) claims that all signals don't communicate the same level of commitment. As illustrated in Figure 1, these social connection signals communicate a *potential commitment*. Those politicians who use social connection signals to communicate a potential commitment to making the Black community's political interest a priority through references connection to individuals, institutions, or symbols that have strong meanings to the racial group.

By communicating a connection to the racial group, I posit that social connections signal an awareness of the norms and by way of having contact with group member or prominent institutions. The inability to reference past actions that the individuals can point to means that Black voters have less proof that the politicians relying on these signals are likely to pay the costs associated with placing the group's interest before their own. As such, I contend the kind of social connection invoked by the politicians also conveys an understanding of the consequences they would face,

namely social sanctions, should their potential commitment to ensuring the group's political needs are met is not realized.

In a tweet responding to claims about her time as a prosecutor, presidential hopeful, Kamala Harris wrote “I am a daughter of parents who met when they were active in the [C]ivil [R]ights [M]ovement. Nobody had to teach me about the disparities in the criminal justice system. I was born knowing what they are” (Harris 2019). Harris's discussion of her connection to parents who were active in the Civil Rights Movement serves as an example of a social connection signal. As previously discussed, the Civil Rights Movement, is an important and potent symbol of inclusion for many within the Black community. Harris's invocation of her parents' involvement communicates an understanding of the sacrifices made for Black people by those during the movement. Her claim that she was born knowing the “disparities in the criminal justice system” communicates that she was socialized to understand the norms and expectations of the racial group and thus has the potential to prioritize the group's interest. Harris often references her connection to prominent institutions within the Black community like the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority and Howard University, a historic Black university (Saul 2019).

## **Methods**

The nuance unpacked in the community commitment framework is hard to see in existing models used to explain Black voter candidate preferability. Scholars in this area often rely on a binary variable for the race of the candidate to determine its influence on Black voters view their representatives. Though the operationalization of a candidate's race as a binary variable does offer us important information about the different ways Black voters evaluate in-group and out-group representatives, it offers little information into how these evaluations may vary within these representatives based specific messages they send to Black voters. Taken at face value, the results of these models would lead people to believe that simply being, or not being, Black is the most salient

factor in the decision-making process of Black individuals. Moreover, these existing models are comprised of measures that capture Black voter candidate assessments after the candidate has been elected. This means that the positive evaluations of candidates (particularly descriptive representatives) could be the result of something the politician did during their campaign, or after they had been elected. It is difficult to truly gauge what considerations Black voters use to choose their candidates, whether the positive evaluations often associated with some representatives comes pre-or post-election, and what mechanism(s) informs those evaluations.

To overcome the problems of past models, and offer deeper methodological insights into how community commitment serves as a mechanism to explain how candidates are evaluated, I run two experiments. In each experiment, I subtly vary how the candidate signals his commitment to placing the group's interest first. If, as I argue, the community commitment mechanism is used by Black individuals as a pre-election filter to optimize their political representation, the methodological test investigating the mechanism should be one that examines how Black voters evaluate a candidate based on their signaling before they get into office.

### *Experimental Design*

The goal of these experiments is to show the existence and influence of community commitment. To achieve this goal, I set the experiments in the context of a Congressional Democratic primary election where the race and partisan affiliation of the candidate sending the signals are the same. In other electoral contexts where the race and/or party of the candidate varies, it may be easy to conflate the findings of more positive evaluations with either candidate of a race or

party. Thus, setting this experimental context assists in establishing the presence of, and illustrating influence of community commitment.<sup>3</sup>

Not only do Black voters have to choose between Black and White candidates vying for their support, it is a frequent occurrence that in these instances, candidates have to overcome claims, either from opponents or members of the Black electorate, that they are not committed to the interests of the racial group.<sup>4</sup> I chose this context to provide both external validity and a greater sense of how community commitment signaling is most commonly used in real world contexts. Thus, in the experimental treatments, participants are shown an USA Today article about a Democratic congressional hopeful, whose picture is displayed in the article (see Figures 1 and 2 in Appendix for examples of the treatments) whose commitment to the group been called out by his opponent, Tyrone Moseley (the same in each experiment). I imbed the community commitment signals in the candidate's response to Moseley I vary the kinds of signals that are sent based on the condition into which respondents are randomly placed, and vary the kind of signals he sensed based on the condition into which respondents are randomly placed (see Table 2 for the language in each condition).

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<sup>3</sup> To be clear, I am not arguing that community commitment signals are only seen in this context, rather that the ability to hold race, partisanship, and in this case, gender constant provides a clearer picture of community commitment at work in Black voter candidate preferability and selection.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of these slights: Steve Cohen vs. W.W. Herenton 2007:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/14/us/14memphis.html>; Sharpe James vs. Cory Booker 2002:<http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/politics/newyork/features/5921/>



Article Title: “Congressional Hopeful responds to Opponent’s Slight.”

<u>Control</u>	<u>Social Ties – Wife</u>	<u>Social Ties – NAACP</u>	<u>Personal Sacrifice- Financial</u>	<u>Personal Sacrifice- Physical</u>
<p>“I’ve heard Mr. Moseley has said that I am ‘part of the white establishment of the Democratic Party.’</p> <p>Such statements made to hurt my chances at election are further proof of the change in leadership Washington needs.”</p>	<p>“I’ve heard Mr. Moseley has said that I am ‘part of the white establishment of the Democratic Party,’ <b>which shows that he clearly does not know my wife, Kyara, because if I had turned my back on black people, she would have all the locks changed, and my things would be on the street.</b></p> <p>Such statements made to hurt my chances at election are further proof of the change in leadership we need.</p>	<p>I’ve heard Mr. Moseley has said that I am ‘part of the white establishment of the Democratic Party,’ <b>which shows that he clearly does not know that I am backed by our local NAACP chapter. If I turned my back on black people, they mostly certainly would not support me.</b></p> <p>Such statements made to hurt my chances at election are further proof of the change in leadership we need.”</p>	<p>“I’ve heard Mr. Moseley has said that I am ‘part of the white establishment of the Democratic Party,’ <b>which shows that he clearly does not know that I gave up my job at a prominent law firm to work as an attorney for numerous civil rights organizations. If I had turned my back on black people, I would have remained in corporate America and collected my check.</b></p> <p>Such statements made to hurt my chances at election are further proof of the change in leadership we need.”</p>	<p>“I’ve heard Mr. Moseley has said that I am ‘part of the white establishment of the Democratic Party,’ <b>which shows that he clearly does not know that I have been hit with rubber bullets, tear gassed, and put in jail while fighting for equality. If I had turned my back on black people, it would be an insult to all of those people for whom I fight.</b>”</p> <p>Such statements made to hurt my chances at election are further proof of the change in leadership we need.”</p>

**Table 2. Text of Reginald Washington’s Statement Manipulation**

As shown in Table 2, each of the treatments show the candidate’s response to the negative claim made by his opponent, Tyrone Moseley. As discussed in the theory, each of these statements communicates a commitment to placing the group’s interest first, but the kind of commitment varies based on whether the treatment is one of social connection or personal sacrifice. Those respondents who read the article in which the candidate offers a community commitment signal of

social connection will see an acknowledgement of a connection that is either to an individual, in this case the candidate's wife Kyara, or an institution, the NAACP. I argue that these connections communicate an understanding, through the connection, of the social accountability structure and the need to communicate a commitment. But, because their commitment to prioritizing the group's interest is yet to be realized, they have to show a susceptibility to social sanctions should they deviate from the group's norms.

In each of the social connection experimental conditions, the candidate highlights his connection to the group by invoking his marriage to his wife, a black woman, or an endorsement from the local chapter of the NAACP. He then goes on to explain the consequences he would face from these respective connections if he “turned his back on Black people,” which is an acknowledgement of the potential sanctions we would face. Motivation for the “Social Connection-wife” comes from Elsa Barkley Brown's (1997) research where she provides examples of wives sanctioning their husbands for working against the Black community. She writes, “[w]omen reportedly initiated sanctions against men who voted Democratic. One South Carolina witness reported that “no mens were to go to the polls unless their wives were right alongside of them; some had hickory sticks; some had nails—four nails drive in the shape of a cross—and dare their husbands to vote any other than the Republican ticket” (82). Moreover, contemporary politicians like Barack Obama and Bill deBlasio often referenced their wives and family members as responses to their ability to represent the interest of Black voters, particularly in the face of critiques about their connections to the Black community (Fraser 2009; Grynbaum 2013).

A social connection to an organization is one that many elected officials reference to show a connection to the Black community. An institution like the NAACP, a prominent Black institution that was very involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and remains an important part of the push for Black socio-political inclusion, serves as an integral signal of one's understanding of what the racial

group wants from their representatives. Using a community commitment signal that draws on one's connection with the NAACP, I argue, communicates a stronger potential for a candidate to be committed to the group because of the commitment the organization has already displayed, and thus the connection to it will be stronger. Black voters want the strongest evidence possible about whether a candidate's likelihood of making the group's interest a priority, being backed by an institution like the NAACP, whose history of making the racial group's history is well documented and proven, serves as a stronger signal of commitment. Conversely, being married to an individual of whom voters may not know will not provide as much evidence about their potential commitment because there is less information about whether an individual connection has the ability to hold the candidate accountable. Thus, *I expect that candidates who use the institutional social connection signal will receive more positive evaluations relative to the individual social connection condition (H1).*

As previously notes, signals of personal sacrifice that communicate a realized commitment, and tend to be seen as costlier because they involve sacrifices of the candidate's well-being for the racial group. This type of signal shows an awareness, internalization, and commitment to the group norm. But, like signals of social connection, there are different sacrifices that can be employed to communicate one's realized commitment. Here, I return to the profiles of Civil Rights Movement activists and the financial and physical sacrifices they made during their time in the movement (Chong 1999; Williams 2007).

In the "Personal Sacrifice- Financial" experimental condition, the candidate communicates a realized commitment by explaining that if he had turned his back on Black people he would not have left a high paying job to work for civil rights organizations. This is a signal of personal sacrifice because the candidate is taking less money for the work he is doing, but working with organizations that are helping the racial group. This treatment draws inspiration from Barack Obama's time as a community organizer in the South Side of Chicago, which I contend serves as an example of a

financial sacrifice. He earned approximately \$10,000 a year during his time as an organizer, and worked in communities that were often underserved (Kovaleski 2008).

I also turn to a recent signal used frequently by New Jersey Senator Cory Booker who references his taking up residence in a housing-project in Newark, New Jersey as mayor “not by necessity-but by choice” (Jacobs 2006; Grunwald 2019). Both Obama and Booker provide examples of financial sacrifice because they are each playing a cost by choosing, in Obama’s case, to not take a job earning more money despite his educational background, and in Booker’s case, returning back each weekend to an apartment complex where there was often no heat or hot water though he can afford to live in nicer conditions (Grunwald 2019).

Those participants randomly placed into the “Personal Sacrifice- Physical” condition will read the article in which the candidate says that he would not turn his back on Black people because he endured any number physical attacks for the sake of bringing equality to Black people. The sacrifices highlighted in this condition signal are the costliest of the experimental conditions, and the most easily identified as being similar to the acts of civil rights leaders. Indeed, those leaders were known for putting their lives in danger for the sake of attain equal rights. The realized accountability in this condition is displayed through the mention of past acts where the candidate’s physical well-being was in harm’s way. By using this kind of signal, the candidate shows that he has already put the group’s interests first at the expense of his own physical safety for the sake of furthering the interests of the Black community.

As outlined in signaling theory, receivers seeking information from signalers use their signals to figure out whether the information they are providing is credible, and use the perceived cost of the signals to determine that credibility. In the context of Black voter candidate preferability, Black voters examine a signal’s cost, and the personal sacrifice signals convey a higher cost as they require the candidate to give up something of their well-being. Thus, I hypothesize that *Black voters will be*

*more favorable to in their evaluations of politicians who use personal sacrifice community commitment signals than a Black politician that does not use a community commitment signal (H2). Moreover, given the reverence many Black individuals have for civil rights politicians, and the understanding that the sacrifices they made led to meaningful changes for the Black community, signals of physical sacrifice that are reminiscent of those actions not only communicate cost but a greater potential to bring meaningful change to the racial group. It is based on this assertion that I expect that the candidate who uses the physical sacrifice signal will be evaluated higher than the candidate who uses the financial sacrifice community commitment signal (H2a).*

### **Outcome Measures**

Since this work is building on research that emphasizes the difference in affective evaluations of candidates based on their race, I focus my analysis on similar measures to better understand the how certain community commitment signals influence those evaluations. Moreover, existing research suggests that voters' vote choice is heavily informed by affective evaluations of candidates, and the last of the considerations made by voters is vote choice (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). As such, I focus on four different affective measures of candidate evaluation to understand how messages that signal different kinds of community commitment signals affect those evaluations.

1. General Evaluation: Based on what you have read, do you like Reginald Wallace? Yes or No
2. Trustworthiness: How much do you think you can trust Reginald Wallace? The answer options were on a scale of 0-10, 0 being "Not at All" and 10 being "Very Much."
3. Perceived Genuineness: How genuine do you think Reginald Wallace is about addressing the interests that are important to the Black community? 0 being "Not at all Genuine" and 10 being "Very Genuine." With the answer options being on a scale of 0-10, 0 being "Not at Genuine" and 10 being "Very Genuine."

4. Willingness to Support: Based on the information you have heard, how willing would you be to support Reginald Wallace? On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being "Not at All Willing" and 10 being "Very Willing."

It is important to note that the experimental design presented in this paper is a conservative test of my theory. By controlling for the race, partisanship, and gender of the candidate in each condition, I am effectively removing the three main demographic influencers of Black political behavior (Tate 2004). Moreover, the changes between each condition are fairly small (no more than a sentence, see Table 1). With this in mind, one might expect to see little to no movement in the candidate's evaluations. However, the goal of this work is to expose an underlying mechanism that has gone undiscussed in current research. Thus, any movement we do see, no matter the size, offers a first look at undiscussed nuances with which Black's engage in political decision-making.

### Experiment 1- Black Candidate Evaluations

*Sample 5*

<b>Observations (N)</b>	1150
<b>Sex</b>	
<i>Male</i>	575
<i>Female</i>	575
<b>Average Party Identification</b>	Democrat
<b>Median Ideology</b>	Slightly Liberal
<b>Average Age</b>	37 years old
<b>Median Income</b>	\$40,000-49,999
<b>Median Education Level</b>	Some College

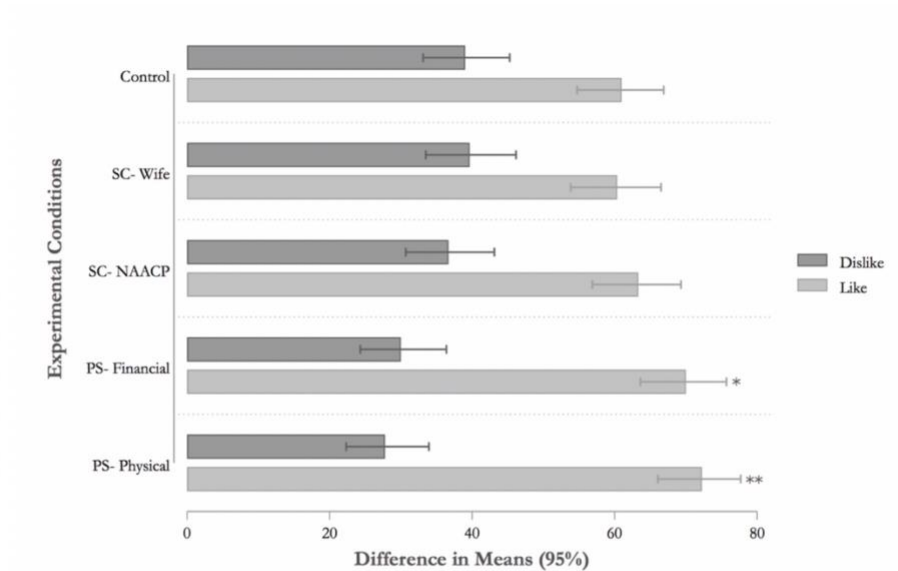
**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Full Sample**

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<sup>5</sup> For Balance statistics and comparisons to the general Black population, please see Tables 1-2 in the Appendix

As previously stated, the descriptive representation literature provides much of what we know about Black voter candidate preferability. Thus, I begin my investigation with the influence of community commitment signaling on Black respondents' evaluations of Black representatives. In this experiment the candidate sending the signals is named Reginald Washington, and he is responding to the slight that he “a part of the White establishment of the Democratic Party.” I procured a representative online quota sample of self-identified Black individuals from Qualtrics.<sup>6</sup> The following results illustrate how the signals he uses to combat this critique alter how participants perceive him

## Results



**Figure 2. The Effect of Experimental Conditions of Whether or Not Respondents like Reginald Washington**

**Note:** Statistical significance is two-tailed and compared to the Control condition. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

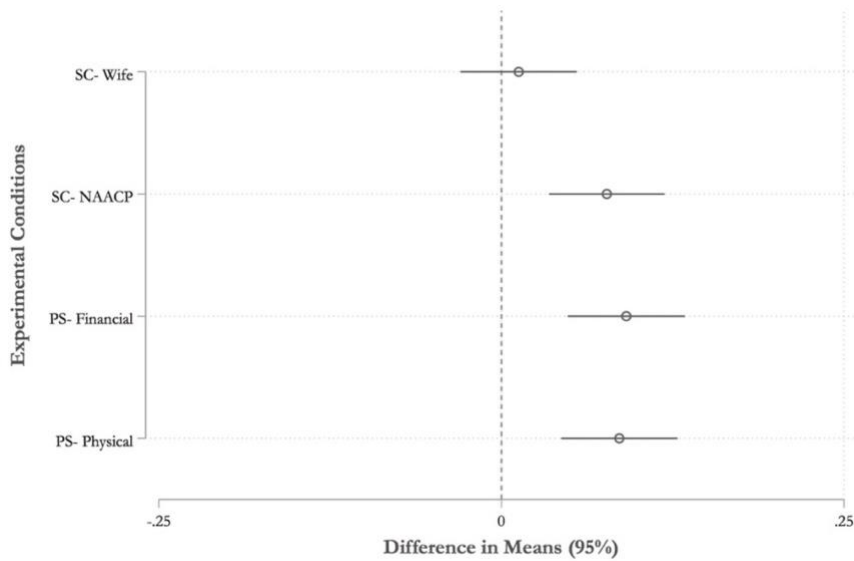
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<sup>6</sup> Qualtrics, LLC is an internet survey firm.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of individuals within each condition that liked or disliked the candidate based on the kind of community commitment signal he used to respond to Moseley's slight. It offers a clear and concise picture of how community commitment signals influence the ways in which Black voters evaluate co-racial candidates. What is clear from Figure 2 is that respondents in the "Sacrifice-Physical" condition like Reginald Washington more than respondents in the control condition ( $p < .01$ ) (H1a). Moreover, when he discusses his physical sacrifice for the Black community's betterment, respondents like him more than those who were exposed to the candidate who spoke of his NAACP endorsement ( $p < .05$ ) or the potential backlash from his wife ( $p < .01$ ).

Additionally, respondents who read about Washington's financial sacrifice for the racial group favored him more than those who read about the candidate who did not use a community commitment signal ( $p < .05$ ), or who referenced his wife as a means to show connection to the racial group ( $p < .05$ ). These results provide a clear indication that community commitment signals that use sacrifice, whether physical or financial, cause people to like Reginald Washington more than who do not use a signal or rely on social connection to refute the negative claims. These findings do not provide support for H2, and suggests that community commitment signals that rely on social connections to the Black community do not lead to meaningful differences.





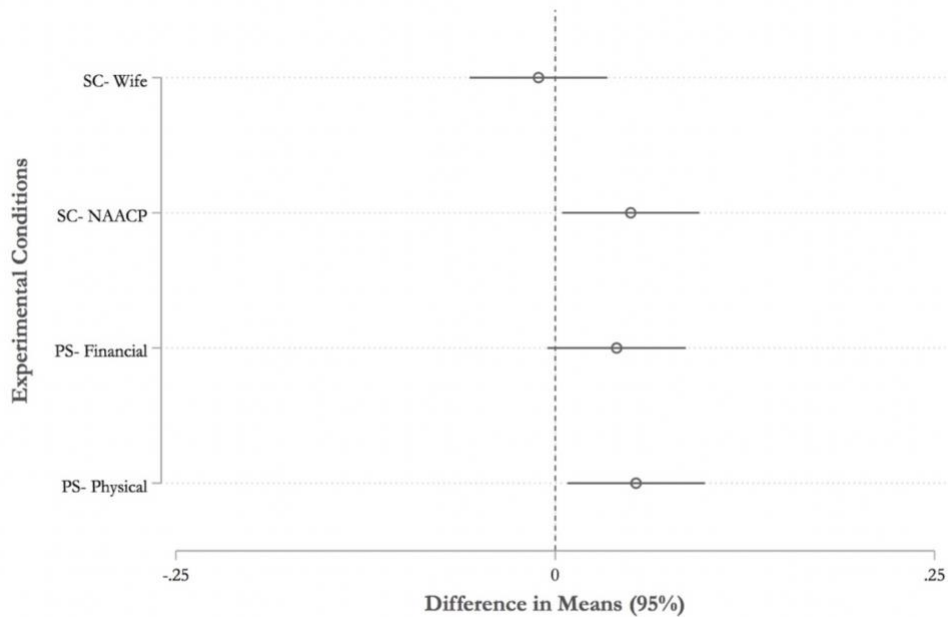
**Figure 3. The Effect of Experimental Conditions of Respondents’ Perceptions of Reginald Washington’s Trustworthiness <sup>7</sup>**

Tate’s (2004) study finds that Black voters believe that Black representatives are more trustworthy than non-Black representatives (also see Broockman 2014). By showing how different signals vary Black respondents’ perceptions of trust, Figure 3 offers a more nuanced understanding of what factors Blacks consider when assessing a candidate’s trustworthiness. Most notably, when

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<sup>7</sup> The results in Figures 3-5 present the coefficients from an Ordinary Least Square Regression. Statistical significance is compared to the Control condition (represented by the dashed vertical line). All dependent variables scaled from 0-1. Confidence intervals that do not touch the dashed line indicate statistical significance. The greater the distance, the greater the statistical significance. The model controls for age, education level, sex, Southern residence, partisanship, racial identity salience, linked fate, ideology, and income. See Appendix for Tables 5-10 of models with and without controls as well the Average Experimental Effects for each of the dependent variables.

Washington responds with a signal of physical sacrifice, he is perceived to be the most trustworthy - yielding a difference between both sacrifice conditions ( $p < .01$ ) followed by financial sacrifice community commitment signal condition ( $p < .05$ ) relative to the control condition (H1). Additionally, when Reginald Washington replies to his opponent's slight against his connection and commitment to the community by citing that the local NAACP chapter backs him, he is perceived to be more trustworthy ( $p < 0.01$ ) relative to the control condition. Washington's reference of his wife as a means to hold him accountable to the Black community led him to be seen as less trustworthy than all other signals ( $p < .01$  for each). When a Black candidates' trustworthiness is called into question how they respond matters, and certain signals can change the way that Black voters view descriptive representatives. Signals of sacrifice for the group communicate a realized commitment, and are more effective at helping Black politicians overcome attacks on their commitment.

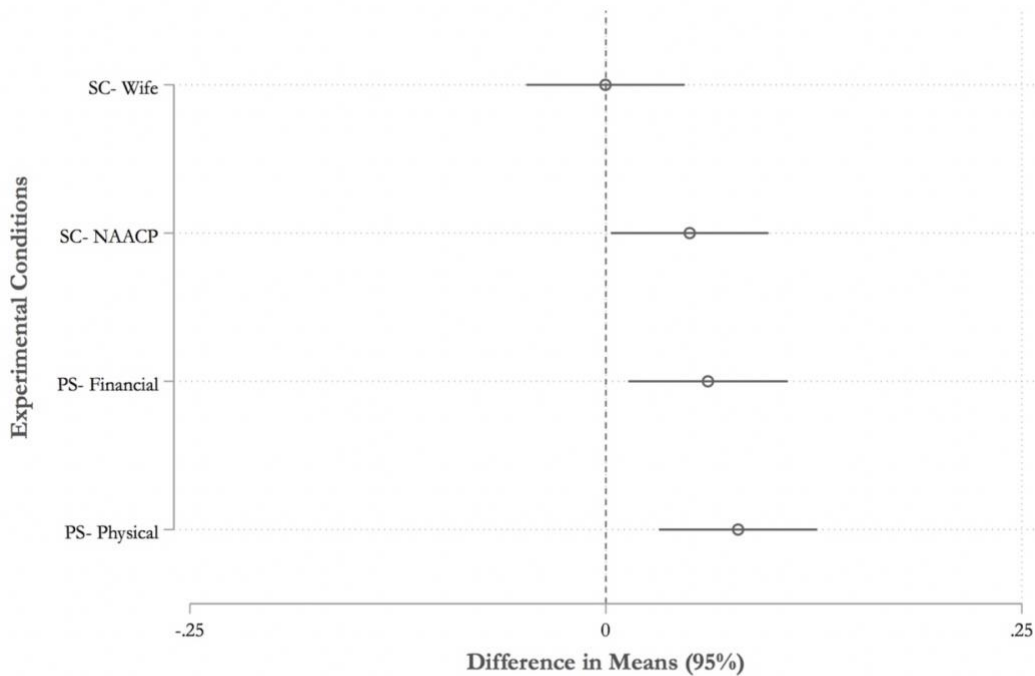


**Figure 4. The Effect of Experimental Conditions of Respondents' Perceptions of Reginald Washington's Genuineness in Addressing the Black Community's Issues**

Within the literature on Black descriptive representation, Black individuals believe some race candidates “[care] more about working on behalf of their constituents” (Tate 2004; 122). I contend that Tate’s findings, while compelling, could lead some to assume that Black individuals perceive that all Black politicians, regardless of if and how they show a connection to the Black community, care equally about that Black community’s interests. If those assumptions hold, we should see no meaningful variation in whether respondents believe that Reginald Washington is genuine in addressing the concerns of the Black community. However, the results in Figure 4 do not affirm that assumption, instead showing that, on average, those who read Reginald Washington’s response to the slight where he referenced his physical sacrifice believed him to be the most genuine in addressing the Black community’s interests when compared to his response in the control condition ( $p < .05$ ) where no community commitment signal was conveyed (H1a). When a Black candidate highlights his/her physical sacrifices on behalf of the racial group it causes Black individuals to see the candidate as more caring of the Black community. Those who read about Washington’s connection to the NAACP and how the organization would not support him if he turned his back on Black people also led respondents to see his concerns for the Black community as genuine relative to those in the control condition ( $p < .05$ ).

Also, worth mentioning is how those individuals who read about the potential backlash Washington would face from his wife, Kyara, were he to turn his back on the Black community did not see his concern as genuine. Indeed, relative to signals of physical sacrifice and the NAACP’s endorsement, respondents’ perceptions of the candidate’s genuineness when referencing his wife are markedly lower ( $p < .01$  for both). These findings suggest that signaling his wife may be seen as pandering and not taken to be a reliable indication of one’s commitment to the racial group. Perhaps there needs to be more information about the candidate’s wife in order to make the use of her as a connection that can enforce the norms of the group should Washington deviate from them.

Finding an almost equal effect for respondents in the “Social Connection- NAACP” condition provides the first indication of how political candidates who cannot or do not draw on their signals of sacrifice can signal their connection to the Black community through an organization like the NAACP to convey commitment in the face of criticism. Figure 4 shows that Black voters recognize the strategic value of some signals and discount Black politicians appropriately. Their determinations go beyond whether they like a candidate and go into whether they believe his appeal is genuine, which has implications for how helpful and trustworthy they might find him.



**Figure 5. The Effect of Experimental Conditions of Respondents’ Willingness to Support Reginald Washington**

Consistent with other findings, Figure 5 shows that when Reginald Washington signaled his physical sacrifice to show why he had not turned his back on Black people, Black respondents were more willing to support him relative to the condition where he signals no commitment in his response ( $p < 0.01$ ) (H1a). Again, we see that Black individuals respond more favorably when Black politicians invoke sacrifice on behalf of the group to prove their commitment. The difference

between the control and physical sacrifice conditions supports my claim that Black people make distinctions between the kinds of signals that Black politicians send. Rewarding a Black candidate who has sacrificed for the betterment of the group is also apparent when examining the difference in willingness to support between the control condition and the “Sacrifice-Financial” condition ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, for those candidates who are unable to signal any form of sacrifice, we also see that discussing one’s connection to an organization known for helping the Black community like the NAACP leads to a significant increase in the willingness to support Reginald Washington ( $p < 0.05$ ) relative to the control. This difference highlights that this particular kind of social connection does lead to a substantively meaningful increase. However, as with the other outcomes, referencing a personal connection to the racial group through his wife led respondents in the physical sacrifice ( $p < .01$ ), financial sacrifice ( $p < .05$ ), and the NAACP endorsement ( $p < .05$ ) conditions to be less willing to support Reginald Washington.

It appears that when evaluating Black candidates who are cast as being uncommitted, Black voters make little distinctions between signals of sacrifice, but do see important differences in the social connections descriptive representatives invoke to communicate the potential commitment. This evidence is suggestive that signals that communicate a realized commitment to the racial group are evaluated with less scrutiny because candidates have already proven the likelihood of placing the group’s interest above their own in a costly way. This not only boosts the politician’s perceived credibility, but makes it be easier for Black voters to believe the candidate will continue to behave in this way once elected. Those candidates who seek to show a potential commitment through signals of social connection, however, have more to prove and thus some signals are not as effective. The findings about social connection signals offer strong evidence that seeking to show commitment to the racial group is more effective with signals of institutional connection rather than individual.

## Experiment 2- White Candidate Evaluations

At the beginning of this article, I introduce a puzzle as to whether the expectations and evaluations Black voters have for their representatives are unique to the relationship between Black voters and same race candidates. Or if the community commitment framework speaks to a general desire among Black voters for representatives, regardless of race, who make the interests of the Black community a priority.

The use of community commitment signals is not anathema to White representatives seeking Black support. Like their Black counterparts, many White politicians at different levels of elected office have to appeal to the Black community. They employ similar strategies to do so. For example, during his 2016 presidential campaign, photographs of Bernie Sander's 1963 arrest during a protest against segregation surfaced and "bolster[ed] the candidate's narrative about his civil rights activism" (Skiba 2016). Additionally, many Blacks saw New York City Mayor Bill deBlasio's Black family members as a signal that he would be able to understand their perspectives and experiences. In particular, people valued his wife, Chirlain McCray, saying, "You have a Black woman sitting there who can say, 'My side of the family is hurting over here, now.' He's going to hear that direct... He's not going to get it from somebody off the street he has no relationship with" (Grynbaum 2013). Finally, the electoral success of Memphis Congressman Steve Cohen, a White, Jewish, Memphis native who has, through endorsements of prominent Black figures within the Congressional Black Caucus, maintained support amongst his Black constituents despite running against numerous viable Black opponents (Brown 2009).

To parse this out, I run a similar study to the first with a few notable changes. First, the picture in the article now reflects that the candidate is White. I also changed his name to Reginald

Wallaces who is responding to claims that he is “unable to represent the interests of the community.” This slight was used in the 2007 Congressional Democratic Primary against White candidate, Steve Cohen by well-known Black Memphis mayor W.W. Herenton.

*Sample*

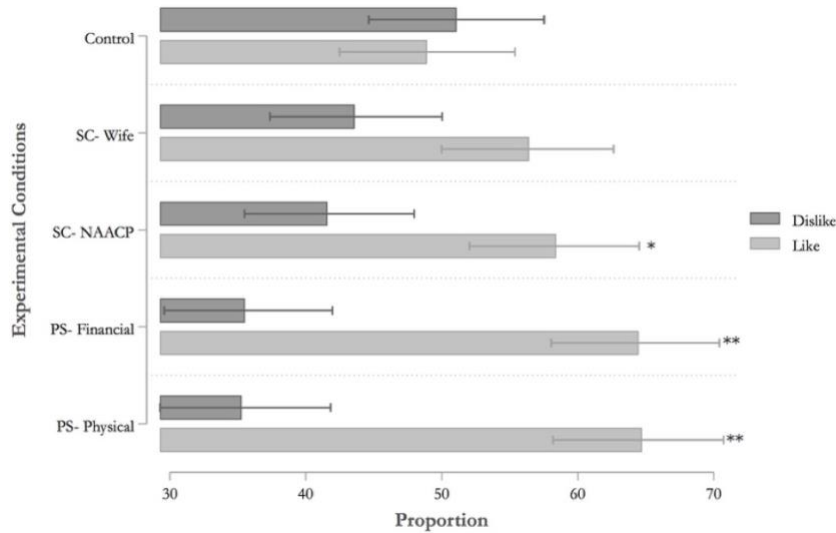
<b>Observations (N)</b>	1150
<b>Sex</b>	
<i>Male</i>	575
<i>Female</i>	575
<b>Median Party Identification</b>	Democrat
<b>Median Ideology</b>	Slightly Liberal
<b>Average Age</b>	38 years old
<b>Median Income</b>	\$40,000-49,999
<b>Median Education Level</b>	Some College

**Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of Full Sample**

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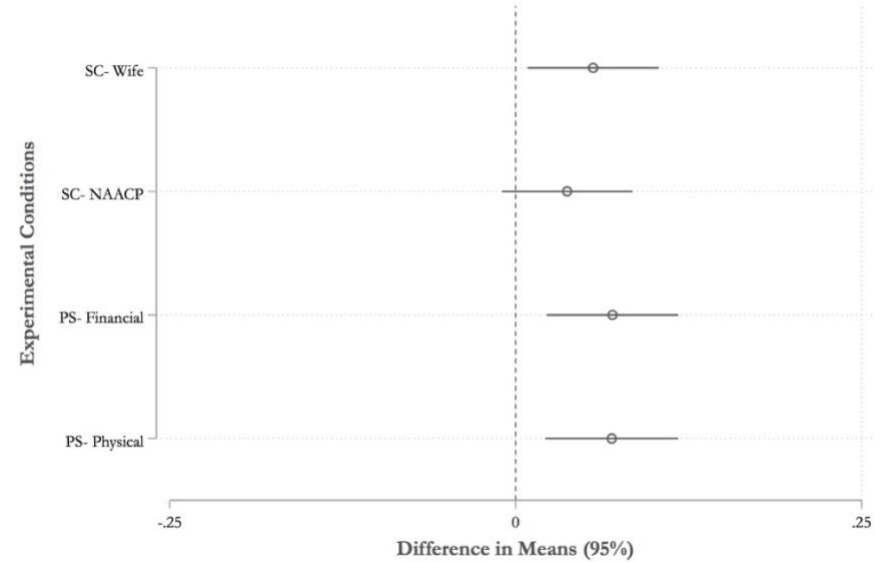
<sup>8</sup>The change in the candidate’s last name was for believability. According to the 2010 Census, approximately 87.5% of the individuals with the last name of “Washington” are African American. In order to ensure no doubt was cast about the White candidate I changed the last name to Wallace, and, according to the 2010 Census, approximately 69% of individuals with this last name are White.

## Results



**Figure 6. The Proportional Effect of Experimental Conditions of Whether or Not Respondents like Reginald Wallace**

**Note:** Statistical significance is two-tailed and compared to the Control condition. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

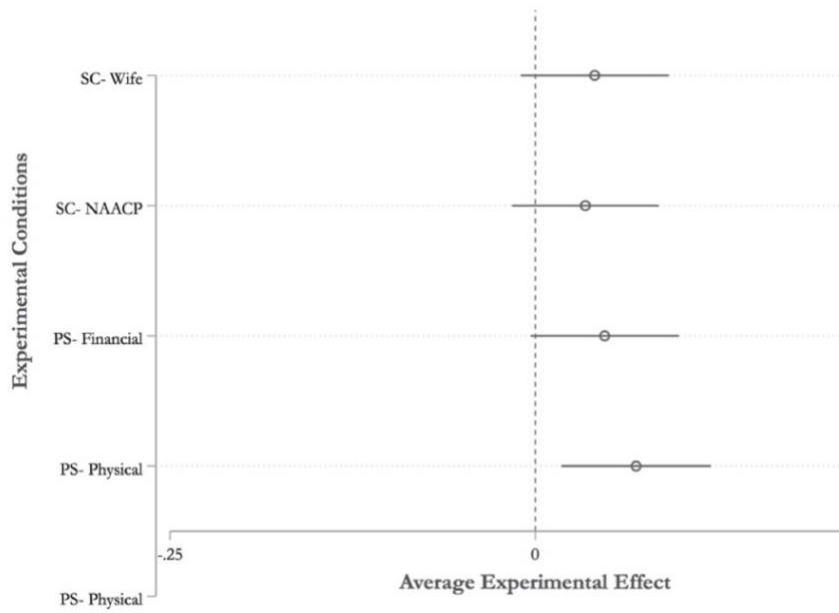


**Figure 7. The Effect of Experimental Conditions of Respondents' Perceptions of Reginald Wallace's Trustworthiness**

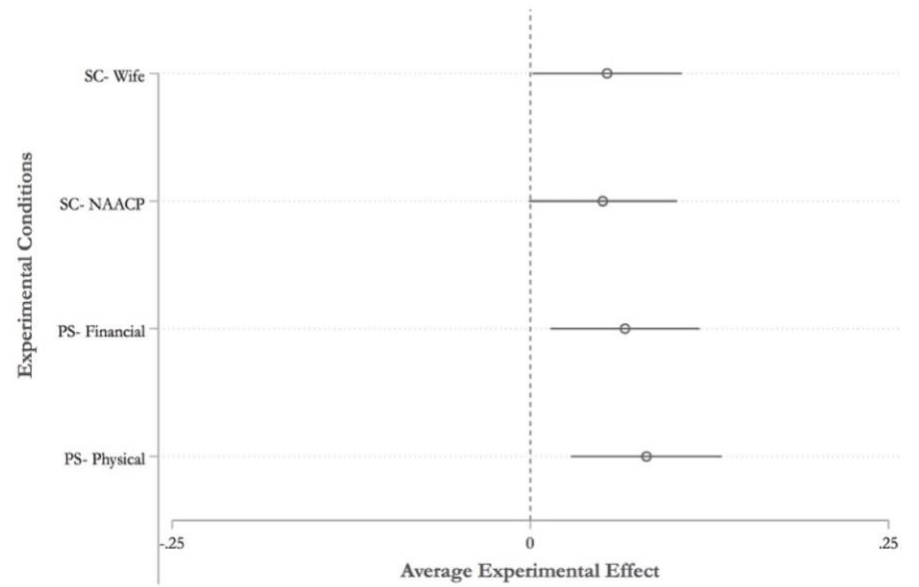
**Note for Figures 7-9:** The results in Figures 3-5 present the OLS Regression coefficients. Statistical significance is compared to the Control condition (represented by the dashed vertical line). Confidence intervals that do not touch the dashed line indicate statistical significance. All dependent variables scaled from 0-1.

The models control for respondents' age, education level, sex, Southern residence, partisanship, racial identity salience, linked fate, ideology, and income. See Appendix for tables of models with and without controls.





**Figure 8. The Effect of Experimental Conditions of Respondents' Perceptions of Reginald Wallace's Genuineness in Addressing the Black Community's Issues**



**Figure 9. The Effect of Experimental Conditions of Respondents' Willingness to Support Reginald Wallace**

Figures 6-9 show how Black respondents' evaluations of Reginald Wallace vary based on the kind of community commitment signal he used to overcome Moseley's negative claims about his commitment. They offer a clear and concise picture of how community commitment signals influence the ways in which that Black voters evaluate candidates seeking to connect with Black voters. It is evident that respondents in the "Sacrifice-Physical" condition view Reginald Wallace more positively than respondents in the control condition (H1a). Additionally, in Figures 7 and 9, respondents who read his response about his financial sacrifice for the racial group liked him compared to those who read about the candidate who did not use a community commitment signal. These results provide consistent evidence that community commitment signals that reference personal sacrifices, whether physical or financial, lead to more people seeing Reginald Wallace as likeable, trustworthy, genuine, and worthy of support relative to the control condition. These results suggest that in order to overcome claims about a lacking commitment to the Black community, White politicians have to engage in costlier signals to get Black voters to support them and evaluate them positively.

Moreover, these findings suggest that community commitment signals that rely on social connections to the Black community are not consistent in their ability to lead Black individuals to positively evaluate White candidates relative to the control condition. Interestingly, unlike in Experiment 1, Wallace's discussion of social connection to his wife Kyara led to him being seen as more trustworthy when compared to those who read his statement that did not include a community commitment signal ( $p < .05$ ). For the White candidate, it appears that for some Black individuals, a White representative being married to a Black woman suggests a stronger understanding of and connection to the Black community, and thus Wallace is seen as more trustworthy than someone without that connection. This particular finding makes it clear that while the effect of realized commitment on Black voters consistently leads to similar candidate evaluations regardless of the

candidate's race, the effect of social connection signals is contingent upon whether the candidate is White or Black.

## **Discussion**

Within the study of democratic representation there has been little exploration into the salient factors, outside of partisanship and race, that influence the way that individuals, particularly those communities with histories of political exclusion, choose their descriptive representatives. Understanding the criterion citizens use to include or exclude certain representatives informs whether and how democratic institutions operate fairly.

In this article, I offer a novel theoretical framework, and employing two experimental tests I establish that community commitment is an underlying mechanism that helps explain Black voters' candidate preferability. Specifically, I varied the kind of signal candidates used to show their community commitment, or commitment to placing the group's political interests above their own individual interests. The results show, across both experiments and numerous outcome variables, signaling one's personal sacrifice for the racial group is the most optimal manifestation of community commitment, and led respondents, on average, to reward the candidate the highest evaluations relative to when he did not signal any community commitment in response to a slight. The consistency in this finding across two experimental tests, and candidates of different races, suggests that Black voters prefer representatives whose signals are costlier and thus convey a greater level of commitment to prioritizing the group's interest. Given the numerous social and institutional impediments Black Americans, a powerful voting bloc within the American electorate, face in their attempts to gain and maintain socio-political equality, understanding how they use intra-group social interactions to optimize their political representation is integral. This is particularly true as we consider the broader implications of the role race and identity play in candidate selection.

While the two experiments do yield important similarities that speak to a general behavior amongst Black Americans, there are meaningful differences in how they assess the signals from Black and White candidates that have implications for the kinds of candidates who can garner Black support. These differences manifest most notably when candidates who use social connection signals to convey their potential for being committed to making the group's interest a priority. Generally, signals of community commitment led to an increase in affective evaluations and certain political evaluations, but when Reginald Washington (the Black candidate) referenced his wife Kyara, he received evaluations that were almost equal to or lower than when he did not signal commitment at all. Why this signal was not effective requires further investigation, but these results suggest that simply invoking one's spouse or family member as a potential accountability structure might be insufficient to show one's adherence to the norms of the group. However, this finding does not translate when the candidate is White.

Indeed, when presented with the White candidate, Reginald Wallace, respondents who read about his wife, Kyara, were more inclined to see him as more genuine and more trustworthy relative to the control. This finding makes it clear that individual or personal connections to the racial group operate differently for out-group candidates. I suspect that Black candidates are expected to know the norms of the group thus reliance on one's wife or personal contact to enforce the norms casts more doubt on their ability to adequately address the political issues of the group. White candidates, however, are held to the opposite expectation, and thus a connection to someone who can inform and enforce the social accountability norms of the racial group serves as a better indicator of one's ability to further the group's interests.

Interestingly, the reactions from those participants randomly placed into the NAACP experimental condition also varied based on the race of the candidate. The results in the first experiment provide some preliminary insights into how Black politicians can be seen positively and

subsequently gain support from Black voters without communicating a realized commitment. Unlike the invocation of his wife, Reginald Washington's endorsement from the NAACP, an organization known for its work on behalf of the Black community, serves as a potent signal of his potential to be committed to group prioritization. In fact, many respondents gave him comparable evaluations to those who were exposed to the personal sacrifice signals suggesting that when one's commitment is being enforced by a prominent organization known for its role in fighting for the rights of the group, Black people are more likely to perceive stronger levels of potential commitment. This finding is not the case for the White candidate, Reginald Wallace. When he responds with discussions of his NAACP endorsement, Black respondents did not consistently evaluate him positively suggesting that for White candidates having a more personal connection is more important than an institutional one while the opposite is true for Black candidates.

While these results certainly do provide deeper insights into the role of descriptive representation, these results show community commitment is a mechanism that explains why some representatives, broadly construed are preferred while some are not. The results presented here make it clear that all the expectations and subsequent evaluations are not confined to descriptive representatives, but for anyone who seeks to represent Black voters. Using their historical exclusion and strong social cohesion as a foundation for their political considerations, Blacks have a sophisticated screening mechanism that they use to ensure that the representatives they vote into office are ones that will further the interests of the group. But there is an understanding that certain signals may not lead to effective representation. I contend that Black voters are aware of this potential, and that is why they prefer candidates who employ costlier signaling through personal sacrifice. These signals provide verifiable proof of commitment to putting the group's needs first, which minimize concern about the possibility of them doing so in the future. The results of this work offer consistent results across measures and experiments that when a candidate can show a

history commitment to prioritizing the group's interest, they are amass stronger support from Black voters.

Studying variation in Black Americans' assessments of co-racial politicians presents a highly conservative test of my theoretical framework that, when coupled with two conservative experimental tests, offers important insights for how scholars in future research might approach similar questions for other identity groups. If finding meaningful variation in how representatives are viewed and evaluated is possible for a population that displays high levels of political and identity cohesion, we should expect it to be found in groups that have more variation in their identity salience and partisanship like women or Latinx populations. This work offers the first look at the mechanisms that explains how the source of the expectations leveraged against descriptive representatives informs how certain representatives gain success, and offers a road map for future scholars to consider when applying to other groups.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this project was to establish community commitment as a mechanism that is often overlooked in existing literature on Black voter candidate preferability and political behavior. To do this, I use two experimental tests that control for the candidate's race, partisan affiliation, and gender. In these tests, we see the influence of community commitment working underneath the hood of Black voter political decision-making and candidate preferability. However, this method is not without its limitations. In any given election, there are a myriad of contextual factors that play a part in the decision-making process of voters that cannot be replicated experimentally.

The goal of this paper is to show the existence of community commitment as a factor in Black voters' political calculus, which is not to say that it is the sole explanation for why certain candidates are chosen but rather a salient, yet overlooked consideration that operates in conjunction with those other factors. One important consideration that should be addressed in future tests of

this framework is the influence of generational cohorts. With the continuous changes in representation and the ebbing and flowing of different kinds of representatives, one should expect that younger Black voters' expectations may not be the same as their older counterparts. Indeed, Canon et al (1996) tells us that younger Black voters prefer different kinds of candidates. As time goes on and younger voters become more of a political force, exploring the evolution of their preferences and the efficacy of certain community commitment signals will move this body of work further in its predictive power.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the work that examines the way that Black voters choose candidates does so by comparing their methods to those of White voters, and often leads to the conclusion that, because of a lack of information, Black voters' ability to hold politicians accountable is lacking (see Griffin and Flavin 2011). However, what I have been able to show, in part, in this research is that Black voters have created a nuanced model of representation optimization that works outside of formal political structures to ensure that when a candidate is voted into office, they are one who is seen to be committed to furthering the group's interests. The use of the community commitment to hold representatives accountable offers a new way of thinking about political accountability which is often discussed by scholars in reference to incumbents and the goal of reelection. Here, however, we see that Black voters have a social accountability structure that keep politicians accountable to the racial group. By screening candidates based on their perceived commitment to the community, Black voters are able to keep out those representatives who seemingly have no understanding or

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<sup>9</sup> Look to Figures 4-7 in the Appendix to see the effect of generation on the appeal of community commitment signaling.

commitment to the norms of the group and thus are less likely to adequately address their political interests.

The answers provided in this work invite more questions to be addressed in future research. There is a myriad of other signals that can be used to convey one's commitment to a group. Indeed, some work has already been done on how Black voters use skin color as a signal when evaluating Black representatives (Burge et al. 2019). Moreover, while policy may not be the most salient factor in Black voters' consideration of candidates, it could serve as a signal of their commitment to putting the group's interests first. Furthermore, future research should explore the generalizability of these findings for other groups, this piece offers strong evidence of a mechanism beyond the traditionally employed ones like party (and policy by proxy) to explain how voters choose their representatives has for our understandings of the traditional models of identity-based representation.

At its most basic level, the community commitment signaling framework affirms that some people respond positively to costly signals (Connelly et al. 2011). Thus, if preference is given to a representative who references sacrifices she has made for the group to appeal to voters, one could correctly claim that doing something costly for the group will yield more positive evaluations for the candidate. However, the fuller contribution of this framework is that it draws on the socio-historical narratives of the group to explain why certain signals, costly or otherwise, resonate with voters in particular ways. In other words, in order to optimize the community commitment signaling framework's explanatory power, it is best to consider what signals, based on the unique experiences of that group will be most effective in communicating an awareness, understanding, and commitment to meeting those expectations.

This article expands understandings of representation because the mechanism of community commitment does not solely rely on the physical characteristics of the representatives or even similar lived experiences as necessary and sufficient tenets of their ability to represent the interests of a set



of constituents. It delves deeper into the group's norms and expectations to find the glue behind the group's consciousness and applies that to the representative/constituent relationship. To be sure, sharing the physical similarities of one's constituents may contribute to perceptions of one's ability, but, as shown here, it is not sufficient to meet the expectations of voters, particularly in the face of skepticism or critique. Future research should not solely rely on the existing explanations for the success of descriptive representatives, but should continue to investigate the descriptive representative/constituent relationship to understand how certain representatives in office got there.

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