"LIFE FOR ME AIN'T BEEN NO CRYSTAL STAIR": BLACK WOMEN CANDIDATES AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

NADIA E. BROWN∗ **& DANIELLE C. LEMI**∗∗

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

"I got into my first fight, Democrat versus Republican, in second grade.
I won."
—Stacey Abrams[1]

In 1939, Crystal Dreda Bird Fauset (D-PA) became the first duly elected Black woman to earn a seat in a state legislature.[2] Bird Fauset, an advocate for women's rights, was dedicated to a life of public service and political action. She would organize the Philadelphia Democratic Women's League and in 1936, she became the director of Black women's activities for the National Democratic Committee.[3] The *Philadelphia Record* reported that she was charged with "selling Roosevelt humanitarianism to Negro housewives."[4] Bird Fauset would later run for the Pennsylvania legislature as a Democrat with the support of the party leadership.[5] A close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, Fauset assisted with President Franklin Roosevelt's reelection campaign.[6] However, Bird Fauset would later resign from the Democratic National Committee due to a dispute with party leadership and in turn, switched her support to Governor Thomas E. Dewey, the Republican candidate for president.[7] Bird Fauset's partisan experiences speak to a tenuous relationship with party leadership that other Black women political elites have also faced. While Bird Fauset ultimately became disenchanted with politics, she remained active in political pursuits for the remainder of life. Was the Democratic Party itself an impediment to Fauset's political career? How do Black women candidates view their experiences with the Democratic Party?

The Democratic Party (the "Democratic Party" or "Party") is home to the majority of Black women political elites. In 2018, over 460 Black

---

[1] Jennifer Schuessler, *For Stacey Abrams, a Date With History – or at Least the People Who Write It*, N.Y. TIMES (Apr. 8, 2019), https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/08/arts/stacey-abrams-voter-suppression-historians.html.

[2] NOTABLE BLACK AMERICAN WOMEN 334-35 (Jesse Carney Smith ed., 1992).

[3] *Id.* at 334.

[4] *Id.*

[5] *Id.*

[6] *Id.* at 335.

[7] *Id.* ("[S]he withdrew from the Democratic National Committee because of a disappointment in and lack of cooperation from party leadership . . . she now declared her support for the Republican Party and its candidate for president, Governor Thomas E. Dewey.").

women ran for political office, and the majority of them are Democrats.[8] The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee endorsed only three Black women who were running for Congress. This came on the heels of Tom Perez's 2017 thank you to Black women voters for delivering key electoral victories in Alabama and Virginia. Perez, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said that "[b]lack women are the backbone of the Democratic Party, and we can't take that for granted. Period."[9] Yet, Black women Democrats have called on the party to be more inclusive and to rebuke transactional style politics. For instance, Alencia Johnson, a spokeswoman for the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, lauded the recognition that Black women voters gained for the role in delivering important races to the Democrats.[10] Still, Johnson noted that the Democratic Party should "[l]et Black women lead on strategy and engagement, support Black women candidates, resource campaigns geared toward our issues. And talk about the issues."[11] The dissatisfaction that Black women have voiced towards the Democratic Party was palpable in 2018. Although Black women continue to seek elected office as Democrats, they remain dissatisfied with the party's level of engagement with their candidacies. As we move deeper into the 2020 election season, we focus on the accounts of Black women Democratic candidates for elected office to learn about their experiences with the party.

Like Bird Fauset, we find that the Democratic Party has been a source of frustration for several Black women in American politics.[12] However, much of the scholarly discussion of Black women's experiences as candidates do not outright point to the Democratic Party as an impediment

---

[8] *Black Women Candidates Running for Office*, BLACK WOMEN POLITICS https://database.blackwomeninpolitics.com/ [https://perma.cc/GEC5-ZL2W] (last visited June 15, 2020).

[9] Eugene Scott & David Weigel, *Democrats See Road Map for 2018 in Huge Turnout among Black Voters in Alabama*, WASH. POST (Dec. 13, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/democrats-see-road-map-for-2018-in-huge-turnout-among-black-voters-in-alabama/2017/12/13/43f927b2-e04c-11e7-8679-a9728984779c_story.html.

[10] Eugene Scott, *Black Women are Demanding More than a Thank You from the Democratic Party*, WA. POST (Dec. 14, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/12/14/black-women-are-demanding-more-than-a-thank-you-from-the-democratic-party/.

[11] *Id.*

[12] *See* NADIA E. BROWN, SISTERS IN THE STATEHOUSE: BLACK WOMEN AND LEGISLATIVE DECISION- MAKING 106-07 (2014) (discussing rift between Democratic women, particularly Women's Caucus and Black women, over domestic violence legislation); Nadia E. Brown & Pearl K. Dowe, *Late to the Party: Black Women's Inconsistent Support from Political Parties*, *in* GOOD REASONS TO RUN: WOMEN AND POLITICAL CANDIDACY 153, 154 (Shauna Shames et al. eds., 2020) (arguing that Black women candidates do not typically get support from their political parties).

to their advancement.[13] We draw from data collected from a focus group of Black women political elites to argue that the Democratic Party is largely seen as impeding their electoral victories. Centering the narratives of Black women political elites helps to elucidate how they have had to navigate the Democratic Party as either a stepping stone or stumbling block. In the view of our participants, the Democratic Party, in essence, is practicing a form of electoral disenfranchisement that is seemingly based on the race and gender of the candidate. Yet, Democratic Black women candidates win their races or continue running in spite of the Democratic Party. As exemplified in the quote by Stacey Abrams in the epigraph, Black women may have a party affiliation but are often fighting for victories as individuals rather than as partisans.

The fight for women's suffrage is often lauded as a mark of progress in the American political system. Yet, even arguments to extend the franchise to women were not devoid of using the right to vote to protect White heteropatriarchy and White women's place in upholding White supremacy (Strolovitch et al. 2017; Parker 2008) and calculations about Black political empowerment (McConnaughy 2010, Chapter 5). Despite White suffragettes' attempts to keep Black men and women outside of the franchise, ironically, today, Black women are key to the success of the party best situated to protect women's rights—the Democrats. By contrast, White women, who lean Republican, are key to the sucesss of the party best situated to retract women's rights (Junn 2017). Black women's incorporation into American politics, and the Democratic Party more specifically, has been fraught. However, progress in the American political system thus lies with empowering Black women political leaders. As we celebrate the aniversary of women's suffrage, it is imperative to recognize the experiences of Black women political elites who benefit from the conscientious exercise of the vote, often by Black women (Philpot and Hanes Jr., 2007).

In what follows, we present an overview of the literature that examines Black women's candidacies for political office. Next, we provide a discussion of the data and methods used in this essay. We then move to a thematic data analysis of the women's conversation about Democratic Party politics in the South. We identified three core themes of how the Democratic Party animates their relationship to electoral politics: 1) the Party as gatekeeper and player of racial politics, 2) the Party as contributing to emotional hurt and misgivings, and 3) the women's display of agency and desire to push back against the Democratic Party. We conclude by

---

[13] *See, e.g.*, Susan J. Carroll & Kira Sanbonmatsu, More Women Can Run: Gender and Pathways to the State Legislature 2 (2013) (arguing that women candidates are held back by assumption of single pathway of candidate emergence, constricting their ability to forge their own path to candidacy).

relating the Democratic Party's relationship to Black women political elites with Langston Hughes' iconic poem *Mother to Son*. While Black women's experiences with the Democratic Party "ain't been no crystal stair,"[14] they press forward in hopes of offering a better tomorrow for those with nascent political ambition.

I.   BLACK WOMEN CANDIDATES AND PARTY POLITICS

A.   *Democratic Party*

There are more Democratic women in government than Republican women across all ethno-racial groups. In 2020, Democratic women held 105 seats in Congress as compared to 22 Republican women.[15] According to the Center for American Women and Politics, this demographic trend also holds true at the state level. There are 48 Democratic women who hold statewide elective executive office compared to that of the 40 Republican women and 2 non-partisan women.[16] In state legislatures, Democratic women nearly double the number of Republican women serving in this branch of government. At 1,453 compared to 671 members of the Republican party, Democratic women are the overwhelming majority of elected officials in the states.[17] This large partisan gap is more striking when examining the elections of women of color. Indeed, women of color in the Democratic Party-in-government within state legislatures comprise 36 percent of this group. Compared to their Republican colleagues, the Democratic women are much more diverse. More than 97 percent of Republican women state legislatures are White.[18] In the 116th Congress, only Jaime Herrera Beutler (R-WA), who is Latinx, is a Republican woman of color.[19] While Democratic women have steadily increased their presence

---

[14] 11 LANGSTON HUGHES, *Mother to Son*, *in* THE COLLECTED WORKS OF LANGSTON HUGHES – WORKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS: POETRY, FICTION, AND OTHER WRITING 81, 81 (Dianne Johnson ed., 2003).

[15] *Women in the U.S. Congress 2020*, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POL., https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-us-congress-2020 (last visited June 15, 2020) [https://perma.cc/PR22-AHYN].

[16] *Women in Statewide Elective Executive Office 2020*, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POL., https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-statewide-elective-executive-office-2020 (last visited June 15, 2020) [https://perma.cc/QU7D-ZFJK].

[17] *Women in State Legislatures 2020*, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POL., https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-state-legislature-2020 (last visited June 15, 2020) [https://perma.cc/U6U9-UXJR].

[18] *See id.* (noting that women of color only account for nineteen republican state legislators nation-wide).

[19] *Women of Color in Elective Office 2019*, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POL., https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-color-elective-office-2019 (last visited June 15, 2020) [https://perma.cc/RGQ2-4T7K].

in electoral positions, discussions at the intersection of ethno-race and gender alongside partisan dynamics have been largely absent.

Given the increasing role of partisan polarization, the role of party ideology has contributed to the partisan gap among women in elected office.[20] The Republican Party's increasing conservativism has led to fewer Republican women, who are disproportionately represented among moderates, to win elections.[21] Indeed, Senator Olympia Snow (R-ME), noted that the Republican Party has difficulty in attracting women because the party has moved so far to the right that it does not entice women candidates to run under the party's banner.[22] The Republican Party is also less welcoming to women's rights and feminist policy preferences.[23] In contrast, the Democratic Party is more committed to the women's right agenda.[24] Ties between the Democratic Party and feminist organizations, the incorporation of feminists within the Democratic Party, and pro-women and feminist policy preferences within the Democratic Party helped to create a gender gap between the parties.[25] The Democratic Party embraced

---

[20] *See* KELLY DITTMAN, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POL., UNFINISHED BUSINESS: WOMEN RUNNING IN 2018 AND BEYOND 19-20 (2019), https://womenrun.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Unfinished-Business_Full.pdf [https://perma.cc/RD3C-U445] (noting that only thirty-one percent of all women state legislators are Republican and arguing that this may be in part caused by Republican Party's broader political agenda).

[21] CARROLL & SANBONMATSU, *supra* note 6, at 78; Danielle M. Thomsen, *Ideological Moderates Won't Run: How Party Fit Matters for Partisan Polarization in Congress*, 76 J. POL. 786, 787 (2014); Danielle M. Thomsen, *Why So Few (Republican) Women? Explaining the Partisan Imbalance of Women in the U.S. Congress*, 40 LEGIS. STUD. Q. 295, 296 (2015).

[22] Albert R. Hunt, *Despite Leaps, Women Lag in Politics*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 16, 2014), http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/17/us/politics/despite-leaps-women-lag-in-politics.html?_r=0.

[23] Malliga Och, *The Grand Old Party of 2016: No Longer a Party of Old White Men?*, *in* THE RIGHT WOMEN: REPUBLICAN PARTY ACTIVISTS, CANDIDATES, AND LEGISLATORS 3, 3 (Malliga Och & Shauna L. Shames eds., 2018); Michele L. Swers & Carin Larson, *Women and Congress: Do They Act as Advocates for Women's Issues*, *in* WOMEN AND ELECTIVE OFFICE: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE 110, 117-18 (Sue Thomas & Clyde Wilcox eds., 2d ed. 2005); Laurel Elder, Steven Greene & Mary Kate Lizotte, *Feminism in the Age of Trump: The 2016 Election and the State of Feminism*, AM. POL. SCIENCE ASS'N CONF., Aug. 2018, at 1, 4.

[24] CHRISTINA WOLBRECHT, THE POLITICS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS: PARTIES, POSITIONS, AND CHANGE 107 (2000).

[25] *See* Swers & Larson, *supra* note 23, at 117-18 (arguing Democratic Party is more supportive of feminist ideals than Republican Party); Tiffany D. Barnes & Erin C. Cassese, *American Party Women: A Look at the Gender Gap within Parties*, 70 POL. RES. Q. 127, 128 (2017) (noting that women are much more likely than men to support pro-women policies and in turn to become Democrats, who are more supportive of these

polices such as paid family leave and universal pre-K, as well as placed an emphasis on electing more women which helped the party to brand itself as prioritizing women's equality.[26] The ideological gap between Republicans and Democrats on women's issues at the elite level is tied to a gender gap.

Similar to gendered issues, political parties have divergent policy preferences on issues of racial equality. Once the party of slavery, White supremacy, and segregation, the Democratic Party transformed itself to be the champion of racial equality and embraced policies that addressed racial inequalities.[27] Racial attitudes among Republicans have become more conservative from the 1980s, turning into a salient factor in Republican candidate evaluation.[28] Furthermore, the importance of White identity politics as impacting and predicting Republican political views has been tied to Republican Party ideology, particularly in the Trump era.[29]

---

policies); Jo Freeman, *Feminism vs. Family Values: Women at the 1992 Democratic and Republican Conventions*, 26 PS POL. SCI. & POL. 21, 21 (1993) (arguing that although "family values" policies were not overtly defined, they were inherently anti-woman independence, seeking to promote patriarchal family model where husband is bread-winner and wife is caretaker).

[26] Barbara Burrell, *Political Parties and Women's Organizations*, *in* GENDER AND ELECTIONS: SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS 220, 220-34 (Susan J. Carroll & Richard L. Fox eds., 4th ed. 2018) (examining Democratic push to have first female presidential candidate and support of progressive, pro-women policies); LAUREL ELDER & STEVEN GREENE, THE POLITICS OF PARENTHOOD: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE POLITIZATION AND POLARIZATION OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY 34 (2012) (noting 1968 Democrat policy statement advocating efficacy of universal pre-school).

[27] *See, e.g.*, Susan Davis, Claudia Grisales & Kelsey Snell, *Democrats Unveil Police Reform Legislation Amid Protests Nationwide*, NPR (June 8, 2020, 5:00 AM), https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/871625856/in-wake-of-protests-democrats-to-unveil-police-reform-legislation [https://perma.cc/4KX3-MLCJ] (describing Democratic legislation aimed at remedying racial injustice in policing practices nationwide).

[28] [CITE] Nicholas A. Valentino and David O. Sears
American Journal of Political Science
Vol. 49, No. 3 (Jul., 2005), pp. 672-688

[29] *See* ASHLEY JARDINA, WHITE IDENTITY POLITICS 202 (2019) (examining link between traditional Republican values and policies supported by Whites and today's Republican Party); Jane Junn, *The Trump Majority: White Womanhood and the Making of Female Voters in the U.S.*, 5 POL. GROUPS & IDENTITIES 343, 344 (2017) (arguing that observed voting demographics among White women in 2016 presidential election was expected based on past voting practices and link between White womanhood and Republican policies); Dara Z. Strolovitch, Janelle S. Wong & Andrew Proctor, *A Possessive Investment in White Heteropatriarchy? The 2016 Election and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Sexuality*, 5 POL. GROUPS & IDENTITIES 353, 356 (2017) (arguing that White women voted against their own interests in 2016 presidential election in

The passages of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, coupled with the 1965 Immigration Act, led to significant increases of the representation of ethno-racial minorities in the electorate. People of color were elected at unseen rates to both state and federal offices.[30] Furthermore, the creation of majority-minority districts—which helped candidates of color achieve electoral victories in states with historic racially polarized voting—increased the number of ethno-racial minority candidates and officeholders.[31] However, because of racism and sexism, women of color gained electoral office after White women and men of color.[32] Although people of color remain underrepresented in electoral office, women of color are better represented among ethno-racial state legislators than that of White women compared to White men state legislators.[33]

B.   *Black Women Candidates*

Women of color, particularly Black women, have increased their numbers in both Congress and state legislatures among their male counterparts at a faster rate than White women among White male lawmakers.[34] Indeed, women of color have found significant success in winning seats in majority-minority districts as well as open seats at both the state and national level.[35] Their results have led to higher levels of

order to perpetuate "their allegiance to the white enthonational alliance that had rallied behind Trump's candidacy").

[30] KATHERINE TATE, FROM PROTEST TO POLITICS: THE NEW BLACK VOTERS IN AMERICAN ELECTIONS 1-3 (enlarged ed., 1994).

[31] Wendy G. Smooth, *African American Women and Electoral Politics*, *in* GENDER AND ELECTIONS: SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS 171, 191 (Susan J. Carroll & Richard L. Fox eds., 4th ed. 2018); William D. Hicks et al., *Revisiting Majority-Minority Districts and Black Representation*, 71 POL. RES. Q. 408, 419 (2018).

[32] *See* Beth Reingold, *Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Representation in State Legislatures*, 52 PS POL. SCI. & POL. 426, 426 (2019) ("In 1973, shortly after passage of the VRA and congressional approval of the Equal Rights Amendment, roughly 97% of legislators were white men. Forty years later, in the wake of President Obama's 2012 reelection, two thirds were white men. The most recent data available show impressive gains for both women and racial/ethnic minorities.").

[33] *See* Smooth, *supra* note 31, at 189 (noting that women of color are steadily gaining state-level legislative seats despite total number of women in state legislature hitting a plateau).

[34] *See* Lisa Garcia Bedolla et al., *Indelible Effects: The Impact of Women of Color in the U.S. Congress*, *in* WOMEN AND ELECTIVE OFFICE: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE 235, 251 (Sue Thomas & Clyde Wilcox eds., 3rd ed. 2014) (noting that women of color are "more represented within their respective racial group than White women").

[35] Laurel Elder, *Whither Republican Women: The Growing Partisan Gap among Women in Congress*, FORUM, Mar. 2008, at 1, 13.

representation among elected officials of color.[36] The overrepresentation of women of color compared to that of White women has led to a racialized gender gap. Women of color are disproportionately Democratic—like other legislators of color[37]—as each election cycle witnessed an increase of Democratic state legislators of color.[38] To be sure, an overwhelming majority of Black women state legislators identify as Democrats.[39] The partisan gender gap has grown because of women of color's elections to state legislatures. Much of this has been attributed to the growth of Black women's electoral successes in Southern legislatures.[40] Indeed, in 2015, Black women comprised the majority of Democratic women state legislators in the South.[41]

While Black women have enjoyed significant electoral success as Democrats, they face challenges as candidates that are unique due to their race and gender.[42] Women of color face different obstacles to obtaining elected office than non-Latinx White women. Party leaders are reluctant to recruit and support the campaigns of women of color.[43] The political

---

[36] Wendy G. Smooth, *Intersectionality in Electoral Politics: A Mess Worth Making*, 2 POL. & GENDER 400, 401 (2006) ("By 2001, there was a reported 9,101 black elected officials, of whom 3,220 were African-American women. . . . [O]ver the last decade, all of the growth in the number of black elected officials is attributable to these women.").

[37] Karl Kurtz, *Who We Elect: The Demographics of State Legislatures*, NAT'L CONF. ST. LEGISLATURES (Dec. 1, 2015), https://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/who-we-elect.aspx [https://perma.cc/E8EM-YHCK].

[38] KIRA SANBONMATSU, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POL., WOMEN OF COLOR IN AMERICAN POLITICS 1, https://www.politicalparity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Parity-Research-Women-Of-Color.pdf (last visited June 16, 2020) [https://perma.cc/2D52-B8KK] .

[39] *Id.*

[40] *See* Paru Shah, Jamil Scott & Erik Gonzalez Juenke, *Women of Color Candidates: Examining Emergence and Success in State Legislative Elections*, 7 POL. GROUPS & IDENTITIES 429, 429, 433 (2019) (noting that women of color have overtaken men of color in state legislature representation and displaying graphic depicting geographical locations).

[41] *See Legislators' Race and Ethnicity 2015*, NAT'L. CONF. ST. LEGISLATURES, https://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/About_State_Legislatures/Raceethnicity_ Rev2.pdf (last visited June 16, 2020) [https://perma.cc/ZWC4-92Z9] (displaying table of ethnicities of state-level legislators nationwide).

[42] CARROLL & SANBONMATSU, *supra* note 13, at 94 ("Attracting campaign resources and party support are challenges that confront women of color and white women alike, although they appear to present somewhat greater challenges for women of color.").

[43] *Id.* at 105.

establishment does not help to launch the candidacy of women of color.[44] Party leaders' willingness, or lack thereof, to support Black women candidates often serves a death knell for some with nascent political ambition.[45] Furthermore, Black candidates raise less money than White candidates and are more likely to rely on small donations.[46] Data from 2012 Congressional races find that Black male members of the Congressional Black Caucus raised on average $1,015,821 compared to an average of $781,763 raised by Black women of the Caucus.[47] In sum, Black women candidates face significant challenges in their quest to earn elected office.

Yet, a pessimistic view of Black women's candidacies does not fully depict their electoral experiences. Because Black women have outpaced Black men and White women in winning electoral seats, the perception of Black women as always disadvantaged due to racism and sexism may be inaccurate.[48] Indeed, Black women display higher levels of political ambition than candidates from other social groups. They draw from pre-existing political and organizational networks that enable them to win electoral office, often with scant resources or party support.[49] Furthermore, Black women's long tradition in community leadership, religious networks, and movement politics has provided the necessary expertise and pathways for political success.[50]

In sum, the "paradox of participation," which refers to the high levels of Black women's political participation in spite of their perceived disadvantages and sociodemographic deficiencies, is a puzzle for

---

[44] Shauna Lani Shames, The Rational Non-Candidate: A Theory of (Uneven) Candidate Deterrence 113 (Apr. 16, 2014) (unpublished Ph.D dissertation, Harvard University) (on file with the Harvard Library, Harvard University) (noting that "the deterrence effects are clearly the strongest" against women of color pursuing political office).

[45] Brown & Dowe, *supra* note 12, at 155.

[46] ROBERT SINGH, THE CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS **PINCITE** (1998) (**PARENTHETICAL**); John Theilmann & A.L. Wilhite, *The Determinants of Individuals' Campaign Contributions to Congressional Campaigns*, 17 AM. POL. Q. 312, 326-27 (1989).

[47] CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POL. & HIGHER HEIGHTS LEADERSHIP FUND, THE STATUS OF BLACK WOMEN IN AMERICAN POLITICS 2 (2014).

[48] *See* Deborah K. King, *Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology*, 14 SIGNS J. WOMEN CULTURE & SOC'Y 42, 43 (1988) (noting that "dual and systematic discriminations of racism and sexism remain pervasive" as militating against women of color).

[49] Katherine Tate, *African American Female Senatorial Candidates: Twin Assets or Double Liabilities?*, *in* AFRICAN AMERICAN POWER AND POLITICS: THE POLITIAL CONTEXT VARIABLE 267-69 (Hanes Walton, Jr. ed., 1997); Bedolla et al., *supra* note 34, at 245.

[50] KATHERINE TATE, BLACK FACES IN THE MIRROR: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVES IN THE U.S. CONGRESS **PINCITE** (2003) (**PARENTHETICAL**).

scholars.[51] Given these systematic challenges to achieving elected office, why do Black women candidates have high levels of electoral representation? Black women's electoral success, particularly in comparison to Black men and White women, may lie with their ability to engage and empathize with multiple communities of voters.[52] Once elected, Black women express a responsibility and desire to represent multiple constituencies.[53] Black women support progressive agendas to support policies that are in line with a Democratic base, such as health care, education, and economic development.[54] Therefore, voters may be willing to support Black women Democratic candidates because of their policy preferences, proven track record in office, and desire to represent diverse constituencies.

Black women's electoral chances are tied to that of the Democratic Party.[55] However, the Democratic Party fails to create a political opportunity structure that advantages Black women.[56] By viewing the positionality of Black women candidates within the Democratic Party we learn that while this party has relied on the votes of Black Americans since the New Deal realignment, it has largely left Black women candidates unsupported. How do Black women candidates view their experience with the Democratic Party?

---

[51] *See, e.g.*, Smooth, *supra* note 31, at 176-80 (noting that Black women have consistently participated in American politics despite formidable obstacles to their participation); Emily M. Farris & Mirya R. Holman, *Social Capital and Solving the Puzzle of Black Women's Political Participation*, 2 POL. GROUPS & IDENTITIES 331, 332 (2014) (noting that despite gender and race-based impediments, Black women engage in "elevated levels of politcal participation").

[52] *See* Smooth, *supra* note 31, at 179 (noting that African American women are far more likely than African American men to engage in both traditional and nontraditional forms of political participation); Tasha S. Philpot & Hanes Walton, Jr., *One of Our Own: Black Female Candidates and the Voters Who Support Them*, 51 AM. J. POL. SCI. 49, 53 (2007) (noting that Black women can more easily "mobilize voters along both racial and gender lines" than White women).

[53] BROWN, *supra* note 12, at 119.

[54] Kathleen A. Bratton, Kerry L. Haynie & Beth Reingold, *Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Representation: The Changing Landscape of Legislative Diversity*, *in* THE BOOK OF THE STATES 2008, at 73, 75 (2008); Edith J. Barrett, *Black Women in State Legislatures: The Relationship of Race and Gender to the Legislative Experience*, *in* THE IMPACT OF WOMEN IN PUBLIC OFFICE 185, 193 (Susan J. Carroll ed., 2001).

[55] *E.g.*, BROWN, *supra* note 12, at 69 (emphasizing that vast majority of elected Black women are Democrats).

[56] CARROLL & SANBONMATSU, *supra* note 13, at 105.

II.   DATA AND METHODS

A.   *The Sample*

The data collected for this essay are from a focus group with participants of the 2019 Black Women's Political Action Committee of Texas ("BW PAC TX"),[57] which is an organization that seeks to support the political ambitions of Black women in Texas. The BW PAC TX seeks to develop, train, build, fund, and grow the required political and intellectual infrastructure that will allow Black women win elections and successfully govern.[58] The organization is also building a network of Black women political donors to help elect more Black women nationwide. Under the motto of "We are Our Sister's Keeper" the BW PAC TX aims to advocate for Black women, mobilize Black women voters, finance the campaigns of Black women political candidates, and protect one another in a political climate the marginalizes Black women. While the organization is nonpartisan, the focus group is comprised entirely of Democrats.

The BW PAC TX holds an annual Policy, Politics and Donor Summit in November each year.[59] The director of the BW PAC TX sought to bring academic research to bear on the praxis of preparing to run for office, how to govern once elected, and how to build supportive political networks for Black women.[60] As such, the director has provided space for academics to engage with the BW PAC TX participants and has shared the outcome of our published work via the organization's newsletter with its membership. The members of this research team participated in the 2018 summit and have maintained a close professional relationship with the director.

Collecting data with BW PAC TX participants allowed our research team to observe in-depth a distinct set of perspectives about "shared

---

[57] Certain quotations are reproduced here, but due to confidentiality concerns, the full transcript of the conversation is available only to the researchers who took part in the study.

[58] For more on the BW PAC TX, see BLACK WOMEN'S PAC TEX., https://www.blackwomenspactx.org/ [https://perma.cc/8BTV-N3JZ] (last visited June 2, 2020).

[59] For more on the 2018 and 2019 Summit, see *Past Events*, BLACK WOMEN'S PAC: TEX., https://www.blackwomenspactx.org/photo-albums [https://perma.cc/6NR3-5USV] (last visited June 2, 2020).

[60] *See About Us: Our Mission*, BLACK WOMEN'S PAC: TEX., https://www.blackwomenspactx.org/about [https://perma.cc/LNC4-VPXQ] (last visited June 2, 2020) (outlining nature of BW PAC TX's support of Black women candidates).

cultural knowledge."[61] The BW PAC TX's membership consists of a diverse group of elected officials at varying levels of office, community organizers in different parts of the state, and political practitioners who operate in an assortment of administrative positions across the region.[62] Membership is also diverse in terms of age cohort, economic background, educational attainment, and geographic location.[63] Therefore, partnering with the BW PAC TX allowed us to observe how a group of individuals with shared identities draw from their social locations to discuss their political experiences.

Working with a Texas-based organization was also ideal for this project. As of 2018, Texas had a population of over 28 million people, and Black people comprise 12.3% of the general population.[64] Texas is also home to key historical Black women figures and moments. For example, Houston-based Congresswoman Barbara Jordan represented the 18th TX-U.S. Congressional district.[65] Jordan, a giant in both state and national politics, held a number of firsts: first Black elected official in the Texas state legislature since Reconstruction, first Texan Black woman in Congress, and first Southern Black woman in Congress.[66] In 2018, Black women in Texas led the way supporting Beto O'Rourke during his narrowly unsuccessful challenge for the U.S. Senate seat held by Ted Cruz.[67] Black women also overwhelmingly supported Lupe Valdez, who stood to be the

---

[61] *See Linda* C. Tillman, *Culturally Sensitive Research Approaches: An African-American Perspective*, 31 EDUC. RESEARCHER 3, 4 (2002) (discussing "culturally sensitive research" as relying on "understanding the cultural and historical contexts" of African American lives, "privileging of voice," and "unequal power relations in educational research" to teach others about how African Americans "understand and experience the world").

[62] [CITE] https://www.blackwomenspactx.org/about

[63] [CITE] https://www.blackwomenspactx.org/about

[64] *Texas*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?g=0400000US48&q=Texas (last visited June 16, 2020) [https://perma.cc/H3Z9-9KWV].

[65] Nick Fouriezos, *The Black Texas Congresswoman Who Took on Nixon*, OZY (Oct. 30, 2018), https://www.ozy.com/flashback/the-black-texas-congresswoman-who-took-on-nixon/87679/ [https://perma.cc/YHA7-ENJE].

[66] Judith N. McArthur, *Women and Politics*, TEX. ST. HIST. ASS'N (June 10, 2010), https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pwwzj [https://perma.cc/S3RU-QQKH].

[67] *See, e.g.*, Taylor Crumpton, *Beto O'Rourke Won with Texas's Black Women because We Are Still the Moral Compass of United States Politics*, TEEN VOGUE (Nov. 18, 2018), https://www.teenvogue.com/story/beto-orourke-won-texas-black-women-still-moral-compass-united-states-politics [https://perma.cc/UK2X-23JW] (outlining reasons why O'Rourke won 94% of the Black women vote in 2018 Senate election).

first Latina and lesbian governor of Texas.[68] Lastly, Harris County, Texas also elected a record number of Black women to judgships in 2018.[69] The focus group was conducted on November 9, 2019 during the BW PAC TX's 2nd Annual Policy, Politics, and Donor Summit. The 2019 event was held at The Riveter, a woman-owned workspace cooperative in Dallas, Texas.[70] The researchers worked with the coordinator of the BW PAC TX to invite focus group participants through a survey link placed on the event registration website, and the director of the BW PAC TX reached out personally to individuals who may have been interested. The target criteria were Democratic Black women who have run, were currently running, or who were considering running for office. We also extended an invitation to Black women who have worked on Democratic political campaigns, although we did not receive participants from this category for our focus group. In partnering with the BW PAC TX, we worked closely with the director of the PAC to approve recruitment language, publicize the focus group, and to recruit participants.

B.   *The Method*

The focus group consisted of 12 participants. After procuring informed consent and permission to record the conversation, we opened the focus group with brief introductions. The facilitator, one member from our research team, asked participants to discuss their visions of ideal Black women leaders, participants' paths to office, and participants' styling decisions. The focus group's discussion lasted 1 hour and 49 minutes. Participants freely discussed their experiences with the Democratic Party, although specific questions about the Democratic Party were not posed to the women in the group.

The focus group was the optimal method for this study for two important reasons. First, because a focus group is a conversation among similar

---

[68] Abigail Abrams, *"I'm Getting Darn Good at Uphill Battles." Lupe Valdez Could Be Texas' First Openly Gay, Latina Governor*, TIME (May 25, 2018, 11:06 AM), https://time.com/5290985/lupe-valdez-governor-texas-democratic-candidate/ [https://perma.cc/HRM6-8D92] ("When Lupe Valdez won the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in Texas on Tuesday night, she became the first Latina and first openly gay person nominated by a major party for governor in the state."); *Exit Polls*, CNN, https://www.cnn.com/election/2018/exit-polls/texas/governor [https://perma.cc/JA2E-RFMZ] (last visited June 3, 2020) (noting that Valdez won 89% of Black women vote).

[69] Harris county elected 17 new Black women judges in 2018. *See, e.g.*, AJ Willingham, *One Texas County Just Swore In 17 Black Female Judges*, CNN (Jan. 1, 2019, 5:02 PM), https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/01/us/harris-county-judges-texas-houston-black-women-trnd/index.html [https://perma.cc/XMG5-ZQAE].

[70] For more on The Riveter, see THE RIVETER, https://theriveter.co/coworking-locations/dallas/ (last visited June 16, 2020) [https://perma.cc/2XEH-PCTH].

individuals, it encourages candidness.[71] Focus groups are ideal because participants feel comfortable to discuss "sensitive" topics more freely than if one-on-one with an interviewer.[72] By using the focus group method, we facilitate Black women elites discussing personal experiences with other Black women elites that they might not otherwise share with an individual researcher. Next, focus groups are ideal to observe the group dynamic that emerges in the conversation—a dynamic that does not exist between a single participant and researcher.[73] By using the focus group, we were able to observe these dynamics play out in real time.

III.   BLACK WOMEN CANDIDATES' EXPERIENCES WITH THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

A.   *The Democratic Party—Gatekeeping and Racial Politics*

A common theme among the focus group participants was the lack of party support.[74] This robust conversation was fueled with emotional recollections of how their local parties served as obstacles in their political paths. One of the personal narratives that resonated with the majority of the focus group was shared by Tabatha, who is middle-aged, retired military, and an unsuccessful former candidate for lieutenant governor in a Southern state. Tabatha shared that she learned a deep and meaningful lesson in that loss. It made her more determined to earn elected office so that she can represent people that she believes the government has forgotten. Tabatha engaged in a heavy canvassing campaign across her state, often speaking with Black voters in rural counties who told her that they had never been contacted by a government official or candidate for elected office. This puzzled and angered Tabatha, who believes that it is the responsibility of elected officials to talk with all citizens. When asked about the role her party played in helping to ensure that voters—particularly remote voters or those that are seen as unreliable voters—are brought in to the democratic

---

[71] RICHARD A. KRUEGER & MARY ANNE CASEY, FOCUS GROUPS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR APPLIED RESEARCH 9 (3d ed. 2000).

[72] Greg Guest et al., *Comparing Focus Groups and Individual Interviews: Findings from a Randomized Study*, 20 INT'L J. SOC. RES. METHODOLOGY 693, 706 (2017).

[73] Frances Montell, *Focus Group Interviews: A New Feminist Method*, 11 NWSA J. 44, 44 (1999); Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie et al., *A Qualitative Framework for Collecting and Analyzing Data in Focus Group Research*, 8 INT'L J. QUALITATIVE METHODS 1, 2 (2009); Janet Smithson, *Using and Analysing Focus Groups: Limitations and Possibilities*, 3 INT'L J. SOC. RES. METHODOLOGY 103, 103 (2000).

[74] *See* CARROLL & SANBONMATSU, *supra* note 13, at 94 ("Attracting campaign resources and party support are challenges that confront women of color and white women alike, although they appear to present somewhat greater challenges for women of color.").

process, Tabatha expressed an even-keeled but pessimistic outlook: "You would think that your party would be leading you or guiding you or helping you or supporting you. And I'm not saying that there aren't people there that aren't trying. There are people that are trying. But there's a significant amount of work that needs to be done in our party system. I mean, from the nation[al] party to your local party." Many of the women in the focus group visibly agreed with Tabatha's contention. They nodded and audibly confirmed Tabatha's experiences with a chorus of "ummms," "yeses," and "ah huhs."

Rachel, one of the more senior women in the focus group, responded to Tabatha's comments by adding her own take on issues within the Democratic Party. She said, "well, to me there are layers to it. And that's why the more you're into politics, you get to see the layers. You start seeing the big picture." This big picture is that there are differences between the local party, the state party, and the national party. But, as Rachel shared, these three entities may not always work in concert to support Black women candidates. As such, Rachel concluded: "And as Black women, we really need to develop our own outside of the party system. Our own leadership plot line for people to run for office. That's why Black women's political practices are so important, so we can do that."

Rachel's affirmation of Tabatha's statement was based on decades of serving as an elected official in her county. Because she is a long-term incumbent and an effective legislator, Rachel rarely faces a challenger. Her candidacy in a safe district means that she has to rely less on the Democratic Party for support,[75] though she notes that she has an intimate knowledge of how her local, state, and national party often ignore Black women candidates. As such, she implored the other women in the focus group to work together to help one another win elected office. She noted that Black women need to form their own coalitions as a means of political advancement. Rachel would reiterate a similar point at other times during the conversation. She believes that because Black women often have to go it alone without party backing, that they should support each other as Black women candidates.

While discussing the fractured nature of political parties, Grace added that being Black adds an additional layer to one's political calculus when seeking party support for a candidacy. Another of the more senior women in the focus group, Grace is a retired military officer and the first Black party chair in her county. She had recently lost a race to represent her district in the House of Representatives. At the time of our focus group, Grace was planning a run for an open senate seat in her state's legislature.

---

[75] *See* R. Darcy & Charles D. Hadley, *Black Women in Politics: The Puzzle of Success*, 69 Soc. Sci. Q. 629, 632 (1988) (noting that incumbent legislators are statistically very difficult for challengers to unseat).

In reflecting on her experiences during her recent unsuccessful race, Grace lamented:

> So, if you are a Black elected official or if you're running for office, you have to maneuver party politics and people of color politics in your respective city, county, wherever you are located. Because if you don't go and talk to those people who believe they are the power brokers and get them [on your side]—it may or may not happen for you. That's what I think is happening in my county just because we are such a transactional county.

Several of the women in the room visibly agreed with Grace's statement. There were numerous candidates who affirmed Grace's articulation of having to play by the informal rules of the Black political leadership in the county in order to run a successful campaign. Regardless of the type of district that the women seek to serve, they all acknowledged the need to please the Black power brokers in the party. The women in our focus group ran in districts with various ethno-racial compositions. For example, some women ran in districts where the majority of residents were African American, some in majority White districts, others in districts with more Latinx residents, and others in districts with a more even number of Black, White, and Latinx constituents. When the conversation moved to the Millennial women in the group expressing their frustrations with "waiting their turn" or being told that they needed to "go speak to so and so" prior to running for office, two older women in the group were discernably bothered by these statements. Rachel, an older Black woman who is part of the leadership in her local Democratic Party, retorted:

> I don't think that a lot of those people that are moving here are listening to old, Black elected power. They are more independent with their votes than they were 10 years ago. I don't know if it's meaningful as it was. But you still have to maneuver those politics if you want to be elected.

It appeared that Rachel may be part of the Black leadership within the Democratic Party that was perceived as gatekeeping. During this part of the conversation, Rachel—who had once been gregarious and open during the conversation—appeared to become combative and authoritative. Her earlier comments acknowledged the role that the Democratic Party plays in prohibiting Black women's political advancement, but here she seemed closed off to criticisms that some older Black political elites use the Democratic Party to prohibit other Blacks for seeking elected office.

Grace sought to change the tone of the conversation and to draw a sense of consensus among the women. She conceded, "obviously it becomes a problem when they try to block people, new blood. Because you need to

be growing the Party with new people, young people, because you know, people are going to die out." This comment lightened the mood in the room. The older women nodded their heads in agreement, recognizing that young Democrats are necessary to keep the party vibrant and relevant in a state that has a younger population than the nation as a whole. The Millennial women in the group seemed to be heartened to hear an older woman's recognition of their issues with Black political elites who serve as gatekeepers.

B.   *The Democratic Party—Hurt and Misgivings*

Several of the women in the focus group mentioned that because Black women are a reliable voting bloc for the Democratic Party, the Party should support Black women as candidates.[76] Indeed, women are voting for Democrats at higher rates than men, which led scholars to identify a gender gap in the early 1980s.[77] Furthermore, strong backing for the Democratic Party within Black communities also covers small but important gender differences. Black women are more reliable Democratic voters than are Black men.[78] And as such, the Democratic party owes much of its successes—at the local and national levels—to Black women.

This feeling was paramount among several of the more vocal members of the focus group. Several felt as if the Democratic Party had taken them for granted and assumed that they would be loyal voters. Instead, these women have sought or are seeking elected office so they may change the priorities of the Democratic Party, have the ability to set agendas, and advocate for constituents who they feel are being left out of the democratic process. Teary-eyed, Pamela forcefully stated:

> But I think that, that, because I have found it hurtful and [I'm] angry. Because I've found that in my party, is that they would always talk about how we are the biggest voter bloc, but they do not want to give you a position. They select who and what they want. They handpick what and who they want.

---

[76] *See* Claudine Gay & Katherine Tate, *Doubly Bound: The Impact of Gender and Race on the Politics of Black Women*, 19 POL. PSYCHOL. 169, 172 (1998) (emphasizing overwhelming identification of Black women with Democratic Party).

[77] *See, e.g.*, Susan J. Carroll, *Partisan Dynamics of the Gender Gap among State Legislators*, 75 SPECTRUM J. ST. GOV'T 18, 18 (2002) (summarizing 1970s and 1980s gender gap scholarship).

[78] *See* Andra Gillespie & Nadia E. Brown, *#BlackGirlMagic Demystified: Black Women as Voters, Partisans and Political Actors*, PHYLON CLARK ATLANTA U. REV. RACE & CULTURE, Winter 2019, at 37, 39-42 (exploring Black voting behavior and differences between voting behavior of Black men and women).

Pamela is a Millennial, single mother of two young children, and was mounting her first race for a position on her city council. She shared that although she lives in a racially diverse community, the Democratic Party only supports White candidates. Her city, a newer ring suburb of a large metropolis, is liberal leaning and overwhelmingly votes Democratic. As such, the winner of the Democratic primary will normally win the general election. The Democrats run competitive primaries and the Party will support a candidate at the mid-point of the race once one it seems viable. For Pamela, the term *viable* is loaded. In practice, the Democratic Party has always seen White candidates as viable in this city rather than Black or Latinx candidates. Because the Party bestows support for a candidate midway through the election, the other candidates often do not have the resources to combat the Party's support of the chosen candidate.[79] In essence, the other candidates cannot compete on the same scale for the seat. While Pamela did not receive her party's endorsement and recognized that she faced serious challenges toward her goal of winning the election, she was determined to press on. Pamela's frustration lay with her inability to raise enough money to pay for effective advertising, her lack of networks to get before political kingmakers in her community, and the personal attacks leveed at her by her opponent. Instead of seeing these things as insurmountable, Pamela mustered the courage to endure. She continued her grassroots style campaign and she and her children would knock on doors in the evenings and on weekends to ask residents for their votes. Pamela also leveraged personal networks such as her church, her friendship circles, and her sorority to help get out the vote. The frustration in Pamela's narrative was noticeably felt by other participants in the focus group. Many women nodded in agreement and the two women in close proximity to Pamela put their arms around her in a show of support.

In a more emboldened tone, Pamela added "[a] lot of times, even though they look at us as important people to the Party, I'm talking about Black women, they're like, 'Is she electable?'" This statement drew "amens" and "uh-huhs" from the other women in the group. Adele, a Millennial candidate seeking a judgeship, cosigned Pamela's point by stating "they [the Party] want your time, energy and money." Accordingly, as voters and grassroots organizers, the Democratic Party values Black women. But Adele noted that this does not ring true for Black women candidates. "You have to make sure that your race is critical. If your race is critical, they are going give you your time. They are going to give energy. But how does your race become critical if the Party does not support you in the primary?" The women were audibly dismayed by both Adele's and Pamela's comments. The Democratic Party's role in primary races was likened to the Party putting its thumb on the scale to tip the balance in favor of its

---

[79] *See, e.g.*, CARROLL & SANBONMATSU, *supra* note 13, at 100 (identifying race and gender inequality as depriving women of color from major party resources).

chosen candidates The losers in this often happen to be Black women who do not have the Party's support.

   Tabatha chimed in to share her experiences with the group. In an emotional declaration, she condemned Democratic Political Action Committee and Emily's List:

> The Party or different organizations like Emily's List, are problems. They aren't helping. Right now, I'm going against a Senate majority leader. Oh my God. And so, I'm like, "yeah, he's a Senate majority leader. He's a bully, you know?" I am fighting to prove that my race is critical. I'm working on messaging now because I am viable. I lasted through the lieutenant governor's race with no money. I'm credible because of my background, my experience, my education, who I am, and where I come from. Okay, but I still need to get over that hurdle. I need [to] show that my race is critical. Then, the Party and EMILY's List will support me.

   The pain and frustration in Tabatha's voice was felt throughout the room. While her words were optimistic and she highlighted her agency as a political candidate, the sentiment expressed was sobering. The other participants in the focus group shook their heads in disgust when Tabatha described her opponent as a bully. Several in the room noted that they recognized similar behavior being rewarded with party support and with the attention of national PACs. The consensus was that Black women have a harder time accessing these resources even when they prove themselves to be viable and credible candidates.[80]

   Adele weighed in to share that she was thankful that she has not had Tabatha's and Pamela's experiences. While she has not personally experienced these things, she is aware that others have. Adele commented that she's "heard lots of things. Racist words. The Party grows a campaign around another candidate. It's a shame. Black women voters are the backbone of the Party." Again, other participants audibly confirmed Adele's assertion by providing a refrain of "yeses" and "um-hums." The other women acknowledged that these kinds of interactions have been felt personally, not just politically. Being made to feel like your group is taken for granted but then ignored as candidates was uniformly seen as disrespectful. This was received as a personal attack on Black women in general and a willful act of exclusion by the Democratic Party. The Party's inability to see Black women as electable was a common frustration expressed in the focus group—even by those who held positions of power within their local Democratic Party.

---

   [80] *See generally id.* at 114-20 (discussing disparate political fundraising for Black women candidates).

C.   *The Democratic Party—Pushback and Agency*

While mounting a successful campaign with little to no party support is challenging, Black women candidates demonstrate that they are forging their own paths to electoral success.[81] The women in the focus group are examples of tenacity and fortitude. Rachel reminded the participants that while the Party has often been an impediment to Black women candidates, there are uplifting examples of Black women who have bucked the Party and gone on to win their elections. Rachel asked the women in the focus group to remember the last election in 2018, when 17 Black women judges were elected or appointed to the Texas state bench from a single county.[82] She reminded the room that:

> That happened following the Party [not supporting us], and then charging Black women judges. And that's because the women that won that election cycle, it was because they just bulldozed their way in and they just decided to run. . . And so, in 2018, when those judges decided to run, they just, you know. So what? None of the campaign people will help us to win? We just went around and did what we knew to do. And they did just that. They did grassroots and common-sense things. They just went out and started campaigning. And then, surprise, surprise, they are on the bench. And which is why people don't feel welcome in the Democratic Party because people aren't happy about what happened. And even if someone does make it on to the bench, sometimes you have to accept it because there are so many of us [who] will go around the party.

Rachel was referencing the historic election of Black women judges in Houston, Texas in which Harris County elected the largest number of Black women to the bench.[83] Rachel noted that the Harris County Democratic Party held a meet and greet with all the candidates, but that no one raised an eyebrow at the number of Black women candidates in the room or suggested that they run together. Because Harris County is racially and ethnically diverse, the primary race had a number of diverse candidates. Once the Black women made it out of the primaries, the Party paid closer attention to them as nominees. However, as Rachel notes, the

---

[81] *See generally* Darcy & Hadley, *supra* note 75 (investigating electoral success of Black women).

[82] *See, e.g.*, Andrew Schneider, *Meet 'Black Girl Magic,' The 19 African-American Women Elected as Judges In Texas*, NPR (Jan. 16, 2019, 4:17 PM), https://www.npr.org/2019/01/16/685815783/meet-black-girl-magic-the-19-african-american-women-elected-as-judges-in-texas [https://perma.cc/4B2L-QQ7P] (discussing historic election of seventeen new Black women judges in Harris County, Texas, to make nineteen total Black women judges in Harris County).

[83] *See supra* notes 69, 82 and accompanying text.

Black women judges put in the hard work on their own—largely without Party support—to win their primary race, which was arguably the most important race to win in this Democratic leaning county.

Tabatha affirmed Rachel's commentary by noting that lack of support should never stop a Black woman from pursuing elected office if that is what she feels that God has purposed her to do. The Democratic Party should not be the thing that prohibits one's nascent political ambition:

> But if it's going to keep you from doing whatever you are called to do, we've got to move on and do what you go to do. We have to keep going and not bow down to people saying, "oh, you're not supposed to be doing that." Seriously, but, who are you?

Tabatha thus advocated that Black women candidates recognize their own agency in deciding to run for office and to stay in the race despite lack of party support. Using the 19 Black women judges in Harris County as an example, Tabatha reminded the women in the focus group that those who seek political office for the right reasons are called to fulfill a higher calling and should be purpose driven. As such, the Party should not deter one from walking in her purpose. Although handicaps and obstacles will arise and a successful electoral outcome is not guaranteed, Black women who seek political office look to their own strength in order to run for office and to stay in the race.[84]

Lastly, Michelle surmised that "Black women are basically powerhouses in the National Democratic Party politics." Michelle is a Millennial and first-time candidate for a judgeship in a primarily Black district. She ended the conversation about party politics by reminding the women in the focus group that Black women have reached incredible heights within Democratic Party leadership and that local women can look to these national leaders for inspiration. Michelle prompted the room to remember Donna Brazile, interim chair of the Democratic National Committee, and Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-OH), chair of the Democratic National Convention, as leaders who are able to shape presidential elections.[85] For Michelle, these women serve a source of encouragement and motivation when local Black Democratic women experience problems with the Party. She recommended that the participants in the focus group read *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Politics* authored by Donna Brazile, Yolanda Caraway, Leah Daughtry, and Minyon

---

[84] *See* CARROLL & SANBONMATSU, *supra* note 13, at 104 (discussing challenges Black women face to gain party support in Democratic primaries).

[85] *Congresswoman Marcia Fudge: Biography*, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, https://fudge.house.gov/biography1/ [https://perma.cc/PSU3-R3S4] (last visited June 7, 2020); *Donna Brazile*, HIST. MAKERS, https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/donna-brazile [https://perma.cc/F2EW-V9HU] (last visited June 7, 2020).

Moore with Veronica Chambers.[86] This inspirational text demonstrates that political leaders also require mentors, that leaders need time to rest and retool, offers lessons learned from electoral disappointment, and highlights the importance of sister-circles.[87] Michelle gave the book a high endorsement, stating: "I thought it was a well-reasoned book. It was helpful. I had an opportunity to see them when they were in Dallas for a book signing and they talked about their experiences. So, it's a very good book." The women thanked Michelle for the recommendation.

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

In May of 2017, Tom Perez, the Democratic National Committee chairman, received a letter from more than two dozen Black women in which he was asked to be accountable to the Party's most loyal base. The writers of the letter, Black women political activists and elected officials, called on Perez to support Black women candidates. These activists and lawmakers called on the Democratic Party to refocus its attention from attempting to lure White voters back to the Party and shift its efforts to supporting Black women voters who have consistently supported the Party. This letter stated:

> We have voted and organized our communities with little support or investment from the Democratic Party for voter mobilization efforts. We have shown how Black women lead, yet the Party's leadership from Washington to the state parties have few or no Black women in leadership. More and more, Black women are running for office and winning elections—with scant support from Democratic Party infrastructure.[88]

Demonstrating that they are not waiting for the Democratic Party to advance their political goals, Black women continue to run without the support of the Party and win electoral races.[89] Yet, it is more difficult to

---

[86] *See generally* Donna Brazile, Yolanda Caraway, Leah Daughtry & Minyon Moore, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Politics (2018) (discussing history and future of Black women involved in American politics).

[87] *See generally id.* (exploring history and experiences of Black women in American politics to draw conclusions about political leadership, electoral frustration, and solidarity).

[88] *Open Letter to DNC Chair: 'There's Too Much at Stake to Ignore Black Women,'* NBC News (May 25, 2017, 5:52 PM), https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/open-letter-dnc-chair-tom-perez-there-s-too-much-n764221 [https://perma.cc/23W6-UTHC].

[89] *See* Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, *supra* note 13, at 105 (evaluating success of Black women candidates without Democratic Party support); *supra* Part III.C (discussing Black women's willingness to run despite lacking support from Democratic Party infrastructure).

secure an electoral victory without help from the Party. In the 244-year history of the United States, no state has ever elected a Black woman to a governorship, and only 12 Black women have held statewide elected executive office.[90]

The women in the focus group were vocal in articulating their difficulties running as Black women within the Democratic Party. They openly shared how Democratic Party politics left them with deep emotional pain, compelling them to strategize without Party support.[91] Langston Hughes' poem, *Mother to Son*, aptly describes the experiences of the women in the focus group.[92] They expressed their frustrations, but in the end turned to an optimistic tone—particularly from the younger participants in the focus group. They seemed to want to share their narratives as a way of offering the next generation a lesson in perseverance. Similarly, the mother in Hughes poem reminds her son that he must keep going just as she did, in the face of life's obstacles.

> *Well, son, I'll tell you:*
> *Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*
> *It's had tacks in it,*
> *And splinters,*
> *And boards torn up,*
> *And places with no carpet on the floor—*
> *Bare.*
> *But all the time*
> *I'se been a-climbin' on,*
> *And reachin' landin's,*
> *And turnin' corners,*
> *And sometimes goin' in the dark*
> *Where there ain't been no light.*
> *So boy, don't you turn back.*
> *Don't you set down on the steps*
> *'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.*
> *Don't you fall now—*
> *For I'se still goin', honey,*
> *I'se still climbin',*
> *And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*[93]

---

[90] Brown & Dowe, *supra* note 12, at 157.

[91] *See supra* Parts III.A-C (examining focus group discussion regarding experiences of Black women within Democratic party).

[92] HUGHES, *supra* note 15, at 81.

[93] *Id.*

As the women in this focus group demonstrate, they are seeking elected office as Democrats in spite of the Party's lack of support.[94] This shows that they are highly driven and capable political actors who persist in the face of institutional adversities. They do not shrink from undertakings that are difficult or seemingly impossible but rather rise to the occasion, often with little to no institutional resources. These women have exhibited a tremendous amount of personal fortitude as Democratic candidates for elected office in a region of the country that is slowly turning purple. The women in our study document several challenges in gaining elective office from issues ranging from electabilty, to "waiting their turn", or senority, the voices of the women in our study demontrate that there are several points where they feel that the Democratic Party is not being as inclusive as possible.

There are several scholarly and practical implications for this study. First, the Democratic Party's poor treatment of Black women may provide an opening for the Republican Party to recruit this powerful group of voters and candidates. If the Republican Party were to advance a set of policy priorities that were more attractive to ethno-racial communities and women, it could signal a party realignment. In turn, Black women may be open to be recruited to run for elected positions as Republicans. This may be, however, a distant possibility. But it is one worth noting.

Next, the Democratic Party has displayed similar levels of ambivalence to other women of color—not just Black women.[95] An intra-categorical approach, in which the experiences of women of color are compared to each other, may be useful to examine the ways that ethno-race and gender intersect to inform the experiences of women of color candidates.[96] While there may be similarities in how the Democratic Party has treated women of color candidates, there may also be distinct differences depending the ethno-racial identification of the woman candidate. Other salient political identities such as nativity, generational cohort, religiosity, and/or sexual orientation may also influence how the Democratic Party treats women of color candidates.

Lastly, candidates and political practitioners may find this study instructive for several reasons. The narratives of the women in this study speak to the ubiquitous nature of the Democratic Party—at the local, state,

---

[94] *See supra* Parts III.A-C (discussing Black women's motivation to run as Democrats despite lack of institutional party support).

[95] CAROL HARDY-FANTA ET AL., CONTESTED TRANSFORMATION: RACE, GENDER, AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA PINCITE (2016) (noting that "women of color" broadly do not receive benefit of Party recruitment before already having succeeded electorally).

[96] *See* Leslie McCall, *The Complexity of Intersectionality*, 30 SIGNS J. WOMEN CULTURE & SOC'Y 1771, 1774 (2005) (defining intra-categorical approach as "focus[ing] on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection . . . .").

and national levels—as an obstacle that must be overcome.[97] Other Black women with similar experiences should not take their party's ambivalence as a personal attack. Instead, they may find solace in knowing that other women have had similar experiences with the Democratic Party. Furthermore, this research may be instructive for politically ambitious Black women to build a case for their candidacies by showing that the failures and neglect of Democratic Party leadership have real-life consequences for the candidates that represent "the backbone of the Democratic Party."[98] Given that Black women are now the face of the Democratic Party in several state legislatures, this data may help to move conversations from anecdotes to data-driven analysis in advocating for more resources for Black women candidates. Additionally, Democratic Party elites should take seriously the candidacies of Black women and see them as electorally viable. The Party should take an active interest in creating a pipeline of Black women candidates and incorporate their issues into the Party's platform.

In recognition of the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, we highlight the narratives of Black women who are left out of discussions of electoral politics or only tacilty included (Radford Hill 2000). The unfinished business of universal suffrage is to inlclude citizens who still remain on the periphy of electoral politics. As the women in our study show, it is not simiply enough to allow historically marginalized groups into the fold. But rather, the political system must end prohibitze structures that limit full and equal participation.

NEW REFERENCES

Junn, Jane. 2017. The Trump majority. White womanhood and the making of female voters in the U.S. *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5(2): 343-352.

McConnaughy, Corrine. 2013. *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment.* Cambridge University Press. 170-206.

Parker, Maegan. 2008. Desiring citizenship: A rhetorical analysis of the Wells/Willard controversy. *Women's Studies in Communication* 31(1): 56-78.

Philpot, Tasha, and Hanes Walton Jr. 2007. "One of Our Own: Black Female Candidates and the Voters Who Support

---

[97] *See supra* Parts III.A-C (recounting narratives provided within focus group).

[98] *See supra* Part III.B (discussing hurt felt by Black women candidates over neglect and gatekeeping within Democratic Party establishment).

Them." *American Journal of Political Science* 51(1): 49–62.

Radford-Hill, Sheila. *Further to fly: Black women and the politics of empowerment.* U of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Strolovitch, Dara Z., Janelle S. Wong, and Andrew Proctor. 2017. A possessive investment in white heteropatriarchy? The 2016 election and the politics of race, gender, and sexuality. *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5(2): 353-363.