

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**The Hidden Minority Within the Black Electorate:
An Exploration of Black Political Norm Violation**



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Abstract

With the onslaught of political chatter that surrounds any presidential election comes conversation about the major political parties and their respective voter bases. Certain populations of voters are expected—by the parties or by other individuals—to vote in particular ways as a combined result of aspects of voters’ identities and other political factors. Studies show that for Black American voters who make up the US Black electorate, the general expectation is that they will vote for Democratic Party presidential candidates. These political norms, historically maintained by various socio-political factors, over time have, as demonstrated by recent election data, been shifting as fewer Black Americans feel beholden to and/or supported by the Democratic Party. This thesis examines the impact of Black political norms on those who violate them, and the ways these norms are evolving in the modern political sphere. Using a series of interviews with Black political norm-violating voters (those who choose to vote for Republican candidates, third-party candidates, or do not vote), this thesis seeks to illustrate that Black voters cannot be sufficiently addressed as a monolithic and uniform group with roughly the same political interests and ways of thinking about the political world. Guided by two primary research questions, “*What factors impact Black political norm violators’ political action and decisions?*” and “*How do Black political norm violators think about their place within the Black community and their political role within the electorate?*”, this thesis finds that Black political norm violators detach from voting norms for various reasons. These reasons include, but are not limited to, separation of party loyalty from advancement of racially-tied political objectives, devaluing of racial in-group membership, and prioritization of alternative political action. By highlighting the experiences, political ideologies, and actions of six young political norm violators, it both combats the treatment of the Black electorate as a monolith and delves into unique attributes of the Black electorate’s Gen-Z and Millennial voters. This work seeks to fill in these gaps, launch conversations around the ideological diversity within the Black electorate, and draw attention to its transformation.

Keywords: *Black electorate, political norm violation, Democratic Party, Political party loyalty, Black conservatism, Generation-Z voters, linked fate, electoral capture, racial in-group identity, ideological diversity, political action, voting behavior*

A Note From the Author

I began working on this thesis in the Fall of 2024 after spending a summer interning in the U.S. House of Representatives. I had fallen into a groove of checking election maps, news, and projections daily. The news coverage was inescapable, especially as the world witnessed the first debate, Biden's drop from the race, and VP Harris' debut as the new Democratic Party presidential nominee. Of course, paired with the news of her run were headlines criticizing her, her dubious ability to mobilize Democrats, and her loosening grasp on Black voters. The idea for this project came from a desire to investigate the merits of claims that Black voters were leaving the Democratic Party and understand the perspectives of Black conservatives as the country was plunged into a historic election season. Of course, when designing the project, I had no clue I would be proceeding through it while simultaneously witnessing the first months of President Trump's second term.

Without getting too much into my political ideology, I think it is important for me to disclose that I voted for Harris in the 2024 election and Biden in the 2020 election. In the past, I have always identified as a democrat, and do not fall into the population eligible to participate in this study. That being said, motivated by the desire to understand the voting decisions of non-voters, Trump voters, and third-party voters, I, to the best of my ability, tried to work through this project by leading with curiosity, taking nothing for granted, and being open to having my own worldview/perspective shaken up (and it was!).

To say that this project has changed my life would be an understatement. This thesis has turned me into a kinder, more loving, more compassionate, inquisitive, and understanding person. It has opened me up to divergent viewpoints and allowed me to envision a political world where people engage in dialogue with one another regardless of identity, party lines, or ideology. Throughout the writing and research process, this thesis has transformed in ways that I could not have imagined, and I feel truly proud of the shape it has taken. This work feels true to me and conveys a message that is in desperate need of communication. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to convey it.

There are endless individuals who have contributed to this thesis, both directly and indirectly, and to them I extend my sincerest thank you:

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Lastly and most importantly, thank you to my family. I love you all from the bottom of my heart. Caleb and Christian, your impromptu phone calls kept me grounded and made me laugh when I needed it most. Mama, I'm finding myself wishing there was a bigger word than thank you. Thank you (big version) for supporting me through every moment of this year, for letting me rant to you for hours, for letting me take over the kitchen table with my books and notes, for being my first (and second and third) reader, for teaching me to persevere through tough challenges, and for being my best friend. I love you thiiiiiiiiiii(∞)iiiiiiiiis much.

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Introduction

Many have sought to explain the cohesion of the Black electorate and its loyalty to the Democratic Party in the face of the Party's apathy towards Black voters. It is empirically true that extremely high percentages of Black voters turn out for Democratic Party candidates in presidential elections, and that these voting norms have persisted for decades, but it is crucial to study the *entire* Black American population while in pursuit of explanations. Typically, both political actors and those within academic circles pay exclusive attention to conforming Black Americans, but few have turned to norm-violating Black Americans to contribute to the full picture. Black Americans who vote Republican, third-party, and those who do not vote, make up a significant—and expanding—portion of the Black population in America. In this study, these individuals are called Black political norm violators. This inattention renders them and their needs practically invisible to those who might be able to address them and the needs of Black Americans more broadly. Understanding political norm violation among Black voters is vital for both advancing academic debate and informing party strategy.

This thesis was initially motivated by the 2024 discourse around former Vice President Harris' run for president, particularly as it relates to her and the Democratic Party's popularity among Black voters. The party assumed that Black voters would automatically support a candidate who both failed to adequately address "black issues"¹ and used her racial identity as a political strategy, highlighting it for particular audiences and avoiding it entirely with others, simply because of her racial identity and party affiliation. This assumption drove the deterioration of Black voters' support for her in 2024, which resulted in her receiving a

¹ Here, "black issues" is in quotes to acknowledge that ascribing a racial or ethnic identity to any political issue is reductive and contributes to the monolithic treatment of people groups. In the context of the paper, which seeks to dismantle this treatment of the Black electorate by political actors, "black issues" describes those commonly supported by Black voters, such as civil rights and criminal legal system reform. Important to clarify, however, is that "black issues" are not necessarily supported by all Black Americans. This is further demonstrated in the proceeding pages.

historically low percentage of votes from the Black voting population. For many in Democratic Party leadership, the diminished support she received from Black voters when compared with Democratic Party presidential candidates of the past 20+ years signaled a stark shift within the Black electorate. Realistically, Harris' struggle to vie for Black votes was an extension of an ongoing decline in Democratic Party popularity among Black Americans² (Sanders 2024).

By studying the individuals who contribute to this decline and were not mobilized by Harris' campaign, I seek to illuminate the unique ideologies and political decision-making processes of Black voters and, by doing so, demonstrate that treating the Black electorate as a monolith has become increasingly detrimental to the Democratic Party and the American system at large. Additionally, by stringing together common themes brought up by participants, I contribute to conversations about whether or not the Black electorate is experiencing a shift away from these norms. Drawing from 6 in-depth interviews with young Black political norm violators and guided by research questions such as, "*What factors impact Black political norm violators' political action and decisions?*" and "*How do Black political norm violators think about their place within the Black community³ and their political role within the electorate?*", this thesis illustrates that Black voters cannot be sufficiently addressed as a uniform group with roughly the same political interests and ways of thinking. With all participants being under the age of 35 at the time of interviewing, and the majority belonging to Generation Z, I address a significant gap in the literature that fails to consider the Black electorate's newest voters, and thus fails to recognize the impact of the country's fastest-growing voting population.

Ultimately, I find that Black political norm violators detach from voting norms for many different reasons. Consistent across my interview data and findings in the literature are the

² See Figure A in the Appendix for graph of Black voter turnout for Democratic Party Presidential candidates from 1996-2024.

³ The term "Black community" is used in this study to describe all Black Americans.

following: separation of party loyalty from advancement of racially-tied political objectives and devaluing of racial in-group membership. The third reason found in the literature, low political efficacy, conflicts slightly with the findings of this study.

This paper proceeds in four sections with a literature review, data & methods section, discussion, and a findings & conclusion section.

Literature Review

This literature review, broken into four sections, first examines the emergence of “the Black vote” and the historical development of Black voting norms throughout U.S. History, then lays out various explanations for these norms that have emerged since the late 1990s. In the following section, by utilizing election data, it establishes the changes that the Black electorate has undergone in the 21st century, including lower commitment to voting norms and growth of the Black norm-violating population. The final section of the review presents the limited scholarship on political norm violation among Black voters and the existing explanations for it. This section also delves into the political experiences of younger generations of voters and the ways that they have contributed to the electorate’s declining norm adherence.

Black Voting Norms

The origins of “the black vote” can be traced back to the post-Civil War era, after Black men gained the legal right to vote. The Black voting bloc supported the Republican Party, the party that supported Black political representation and voting rights at the time (Johnson 2020). From that point on, “the black vote”— a phrase used here to describe the majority of votes cast by African-Americans – predictably went toward whichever party supported civil rights and equality for Black Americans, now the Democratic Party. The bloc effectively held significant political power, influencing the Democratic Party and the actions of its elected officials for years.

After President Lyndon B. Johnson enacted pro-Black pieces of legislation such as the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, there was a shift in the behavior of the Democratic Party toward the Black voter. The Democratic Party practically halted support for “black issues” after the election of Richard Nixon in 1968, his reelection in 1972, and Jimmy Carter’s one-term presidency. It did this because its leaders saw the link between African Americans and the party as a barrier to electoral success. Issues widely supported by Black Americans were put on the back burner by the Democratic Party due to the issues’ controversial nature among the Democratic voter base at large. From then on, the Democratic Party, which had come to be known as “the Black party” by many Americans, was no longer (Frymer 1999, 91). As time went on, the Democratic Party retained the support of Black voters even as it continued to distance itself from Black interests. The 1992 election of Bill Clinton is an important example of this. Throughout his campaign, Clinton worked to distance himself from the Black constituency⁴ (Edsall 1992). The Clinton platform, “...called for extensive welfare reform, as well as cutbacks on ‘excessive’ unemployment benefits and other areas of government spending widely perceived as benefiting ‘undeserving’ African American citizens.” (Frymer 1999, 5). In the face of all of this, the Black constituency held strong in its devotion to the Democratic Party. Exit polls from The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research showed that 83% of Black voters voted for Clinton that year. The Democratic Party, which saw this as confirmation that it did not need to support pro-Black legislative measures to earn Black votes and be electorally successful, continues to lean into this strategy for presidential elections.

⁴ Clinton distanced himself from political issues important to many Black Americans at the time by depicting himself as “tough on crime”, watching the execution of an African-American murder convict in Arkansas, and in defiance of prominent civil rights leader Jesse L. Jackson, comparing the remarks of rap artist, Sister Soulja, to those of David Duke during a Rainbow Coalition speech. Notably, while Clinton made no attempt to cater to policy issues that Black Americans cared about, he did make quite a few cultural appeals including an infamous appearance playing the saxophone on the Arsenio Hall show in 1992. These cultural appeals may have contributed to his popularity among Black voters.

A political party seizing votes from a population that it intentionally neglects is an irregular phenomenon within a political system reliant on constituents' ability to express their satisfaction and dissatisfaction through votes. In theory, within a functional representative democracy, if large portions of the electorate are consistently dissatisfied with the action—or inaction—of political actors, they can withhold their votes to communicate their dissatisfaction and bring new leaders to positions of power. This is a major portion of what holds elected officials accountable and ensures that the government remains sensitive to the needs and preferences of its citizens. For Black people in America, this dynamic has been suspended, severely diminishing the political power and influence of the Black electorate, and making the political interests of Black Americans practically invisible to those who might be able to improve the socio-economic and political condition of Black Americans.

Explaining Norms

Previous literature on the Black American electorate, racial group voting norms outside of the United States, and voting data from recent U.S. elections helps to situate the research associated with this thesis in current scholarship. In *The Social Citizen* (2012), Betsy Sinclair posits that “shared political behaviors of an individual’s social network affect both participation and political choices”. Sinclair goes on to explain that social norms within social networks are highly effective at impacting the political behaviors of individuals within the network who would not have picked up the behaviors outside of that particular network. Individuals are either persuaded by “information shared between...social ties” or conform “...to a social norm for purely social purposes”. Individuals who conform to social norms for purely social purposes do so because they believe the norms are “correct” and “socially desirable” within their network. Sinclair also acknowledges that political norms are successfully established “as a consequence of

the desire to establish a common social identity” within groups in which “politics become a salient component of the group conversation” (Sinclair 2012). These phenomena persist across many groups and networks. Steven Rosenzweig’s study of group norms in Kenya showed that many voters were willing to vote against their political ideology to gain group acceptance and avoid conflict with people with whom they have close relationships. He posits that “...individuals face social pressure to conform with others in their network...Most individuals prefer to agree with their social network than to defend their individual politics; they thus succumb to social pressure and adopt the preferences and behaviors most common among their network...” (Rosenzweig 2024). Taken together, these studies establish that social contexts have a profoundly impactful effect on political behaviors in general.

Authors Ismail White and Chryl Laird recontextualize these ideas and address the Black electorate in the United States directly. In their study on the role that social forces play in the shaping of Black political behavior, they note that “supporting the Democratic Party has come to be understood as just something you do as a Black person, an expectation of behavior meant to empower the racial group...Adherence with this norm of Democratic Party support is [ensured] through a set of social rewards and penalties which recognize compliance and punish defection of racial group members”. They also explain that over time, Black Americans have tied political behaviors that are beneficial for Black Americans as a whole to Black “in-group identity”. This connection associates these behaviors with “idealized representations of blackness” and contributes to the system where these norms are positively reinforced (2020, 28). Not only is conformity to political norms something that Black people do, but it is also something that is done to be Black, that is, to earn Black in-group membership. Social norms have a powerful impact on voting behavior within a voting bloc.

Another indicator of the power of these norms is the declining number of Black voters who identify as Democrats. White and Laird also speak to the increase of Black political conservatism in the United States. According to the American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys, “in the early 1970s, less than 10 percent of Blacks identified as politically conservative. By the 2000s, nearly 50 percent of Black Americans described themselves as such.” (White and Laird 2020, 20). At the time, this increase in conservatism had not been accompanied by a decline in Democratic Party identification among Black people, but more recent data indicate that this is changing. According to polls conducted by Gallup, Inc., in 2008, 70% of surveyed non-Hispanic Black voters self-identified as Democrats, and in 2023, only 46% self-identified that way (Jones, 2024). This is another demonstration that there is a notable distinction between the voting choices, party affiliations, and the often related, but separate political ideologies of people within the Black electorate. The Gallup data, put side-by-side with presidential polling data from 2008 and 2024, respectively, confirms that large percentages of Black voters vote for Democratic candidates despite not personally identifying as Democrats.

Michael Dawson offers a different explanation of the “political unity among [B]lacks,” attributing it to linked fate, the idea that outcomes for Black individuals are connected to outcomes of Black people as a whole. He says that “the more one believes one's own life chances are linked to those of [B]lacks as a group, the more one will consider racial group interests in evaluating alternative political choices...[linked fate] explicitly links perceptions of self-interest to perceptions of racial group interests” (1994, 75-76). Because Black Americans connected civil rights era political progress with the actions of elected Democrats, it makes sense that Black individuals with high linked fate might see the continued election of Democrats as a means to ensure prosperity for Black people, and thus themselves. Dawson fails to address that, for Black

Americans who are more conservative, high levels of linked fate might result in more conservative voting behaviors if that individual is able to rationalize those behaviors as what would be best for all Black Americans. Linked fate also does not explain why “the Black vote” would not have shifted away from the Democratic Party after the electorate stopped reaping the benefits of party support.

Paul Frymer notes that this dissonance between the voting behavior of Black people and their desire for adequate representation and social progress is a result of electoral capture. Electoral capture describes “those circumstances when the group has no choice but to remain in the party. The opposing party does not want the group's vote, so the group cannot threaten its own party's leaders with defection. The party leadership, then, can take the group for granted because it recognizes that, short of abstention or an independent (and usually electorally suicidal) third party, the group has nowhere else to go,” (1999, 8). After the 1992 election, “the Black vote” remained intact despite inadequate representation of Black political interests. The electoral capture of Black Americans by the Democratic Party ostensibly eliminates all other voting options for Black voters and practically eliminates the power and influence that the Black voter bloc historically held. Frymer’s explanation offers a framework that attributes Black voting choices not to norms or self-interests, but to a lack of options and the inattention of political actors. An unfortunate limitation of Dawson and Frymer’s respective explanations is that they do not address the ideological diversity of the Black electorate as White and Laird do. This oversight unintentionally obscures how remarkable the loyalty of Black people to the Democratic Party truly is.

Many more explanations of Black voting bloc solidarity and Democratic Party loyalty contribute to this scholarship, but very few scholars look beyond norm-conforming voters to

further develop the explanations. Black Americans who do not vote for Democratic Party presidential candidates are often affected by linked fate, electoral capture, and social reinforcement of political norms, insofar as these concepts can fully explain Black Democratic Party loyalty, but are not impacted enough for it to influence their votes.

A Changing Electorate

Black political norm violators are a portion of the Black electorate that has long been considered too small to be significant or representative of electoral trends, but recent election data show that this population is on the rise. In the 2024 presidential election, polling data exhibited that more than 83% of Black voters voted for the Democratic Party candidate, Kamala Harris (Sanders 2024). As previously explained, overwhelming numbers of Black voters supporting the Democratic Party and its candidates is not new, but the number of Black voters who are not conforming to this normative behavior is. According to AP News, the support for Vice President Harris' presidential campaign among Black voters, "was down from about 9 in 10 in the last presidential election who went for Biden" (Sanders 2024). Although relatively minor, these decreasing numbers signal a weaker commitment to normative voting behaviors among some Black voters.

According to the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research's analysis of how groups voted in presidential elections between 1996 and 2020, 84% of Black voters supported Bill Clinton's second presidential term in 1996, and in 2000, 90% of Black voters supported Al Gore. Black support for Democrats peaked in 2008; Barack Obama received 95% and 93% during his campaigns, respectively, and Hillary Clinton earned 89% of Black votes in 2016⁵. Black support for Democratic candidates had not waned much. Only in the past few elections has there been

⁵ See Figure A in the Appendix for graph of Black voter turnout for Democratic Party Presidential candidates from 1996-2024

any indication that the Black electorate is deviating from these trends. To return to the example of the 2024 election, Vice President Harris lost critical votes within the Democratic base. The votes she received from the Black electorate represented a vast majority of the population, but were fewer than any Democratic Party presidential candidate had received in the past 28 years, and a considerable decrease from the ~88% support that Joe Biden received during his run in 2020. It seems that Harris took the biggest hit among Black men: “about 3 in 10 Black men under the age of 45 went for Trump, roughly double the number he got in 2020”. Ultimately, 16% of Black voters cast ballots in favor of Donald Trump, who had only earned 8% of Black votes in the 2020 election (Sanders, 2024). Others opted not to vote at all⁶. While Harris was never in danger of *losing* “the black vote” in its entirety, these slipping numbers continually indicate that it may be experiencing a shift. It would be difficult to make a definitive judgment about long-term trends from such a short period⁷, but to continue to ignore political and ideological shifts in the Black electorate would be a mistake that will continue to cost the Democratic Party electoral wins. No longer can Black voters be taken for granted by the Democratic Party.

Explaining Political Norm Violation

Though there is disagreement among scholars about why Black political norms persist, one thing is clear – Black voters face significant social and political pressure to conform to these norms. So why then might a person subject to these pressures violate these norms?

One study by Donovan Watts suggests that increasing voting norm violation among Black voters might have a generational explanation. As Watts concludes, Black millennials are

⁶ It is more difficult to find information about non-voters because election data doesn’t reveal much about those who do not cast ballots.

⁷ The electoral data this thesis relies on to establish shifting norms within the Black electorate was pulled from 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2024. It is important to note that all but one of these years is an election that Donald Trump ran in, and more data would be needed to definitively claim that norms are changing.

far less loyal to the Democratic Party than previous generations. He states that older Black voters “came [of] age experiencing prominent leaders in the Democratic Party making substantive changes in their lives. Examples include the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the rise of the Black middle class,” (2024, 212). Watts attributes Black voters’ party loyalty to this and notes that Black millennials were not of age during this time, and many have not perceived tangible benefits as a result of loyalty to the party. Though his study focused on millennials, Black Gen-Z voters also have a distance from the Democratic Party’s support of “black issues” and the passage of this landmark civil rights legislation. Building on White and Laird’s attribution of Black political norms to the connection of “...certain group-benefiting political behaviors with racial in-group identity,” the opposite phenomenon—the separation of certain party loyalties or political behaviors from racial in-group identity—might further explain vote bloc norm violation. Because fewer Black voters in younger generations see Democratic Party loyalty as “group-benefiting”, they are able to separate their racial identity and idealized behavior within it from classic Black voter bloc norms. Additionally, if Black voters devalue racial in-group membership, they might be less interested in commonly accepted group-benefiting behaviors and thus more likely to violate norms.

Political inequity may also contribute to political norm violation because it lowers incentives for captured group members’ participation in elections. Despite the common belief that marginalization or socio-political inequality mobilizes voters and increases turnout, one study by Bernard Fraga proves this is far from the truth. By comparing turnout percentages for Black and white voters, respectively, Fraga draws attention to the widening racial turnout gap and its causes. There is a significant disparity between election turnout for Black Americans and turnout for white Americans, which he associates with the disparity in electoral influence

between the two groups. He explains, "...electoral influence... shapes the incentives for citizens to vote and politicians to seek that vote in turn. Thus, when any racial/ethnic group is perceived to have greater electoral influence, they are more likely to get mobilized by elites and feel politically empowered in a manner leading to greater levels of participation in elections" (Fraga 2018, 14). Inversely, racial/ethnic groups with *lesser* electoral influence are *less* likely to be mobilized and participate. Sally A. Nuamah's concept of collective participatory debt might also explain the widening racial turnout gap and increase in Black non-voters. She defines collective participatory debt as "a type of mobilization fatigue that transpires when citizens engaged in policy processes are met with a lack of democratic transparency and responsiveness despite high levels of repeated participation." (2021, 1115). Political participation by Black Americans has been ignored by both political parties since the beginning of the era of electoral capture in 1996 (Frymer 1999). Nuamah's framework illuminates low Black voter turnout as one of the major long-term effects of this. Considered together, Fraga and Nuamah's findings would suggest that low political efficacy might contribute to the number of vote-abstaining norm violators.

These scholars shed some light on voting norm violation, but as they attempt to develop generalizable answers to questions brought on by changes to the Black electorate, they inadvertently contribute to the Black electorate's monolithic treatment. This thesis goes further by attending to the ideological diversity of the Black electorate and extending Watt's generational explanation of shifting norms. Additionally, by highlighting cases where classic Black political norms were not adhered to, this work illuminates that the existing debate between linked fate, electoral capture, and social norm reinforcement as explanations for Black political norms is not a debate at all. Rather, these three factors should be thought of as contributors to the ways Black Americans experience the political world. By focusing on young Black voters'

individual experiences, political actions, and thought processes, my work seeks to fill in these gaps, launch conversations around the ideological diversity within the Black electorate, and draw attention to its transformation.

Data & Methods

Recruitment

To examine these questions about political norm violation within the Black electorate, a series of 6 semi-structured interviews was conducted with Black voters. In order to be eligible for the study, participants had to be eligible voters in the United States who identified as Black Americans. Further, participants had to be identified as political norm violators, having not voted for the Democratic Party's presidential candidate during a designated election year, which, in the context of this study, is 2024. Selected participants also could have exhibited norm-violating or conforming voting behaviors during previous election years. These individuals violated Black political norms by voting for Republican candidates, voting for third-party candidates, or *intentionally* abstaining from voting⁸.

During recruitment, the goal was to interview a diverse set of Black voters with various socioeconomic statuses, home states, genders, and political ideologies. I began recruiting by utilizing my network to identify political norm violators who might be willing to participate. I discussed my study with classmates and others in the Chicago area. No one with whom the study was directly discussed was eligible, but many knew others who might be. This led to the compilation of another list of individuals to whom I could reach out directly. This method was most effective, granting me the most responses and two additional participants, Julius and Elliot⁹.

⁸ The category of intentional vote abstainer, does not include individuals who may have intended to vote for a Democratic candidate, but were prevented from doing so due to administrative issues (mail-in ballot, registration, scheduling issues, etc.) or other mitigating factors without which they would have voted. All interview participants who did not vote in the 2024 presidential election opted not to do so and had no intention of casting a ballot.

⁹ Pseudonyms are utilized for all interview participants.

Additionally, infographics were created to share on Instagram, LinkedIn, and with political organizations. The Instagram and LinkedIn posts were able to be instantly shared/re-posted by followers and connections, which allowed for the infographics to be seen and shared far outside of my network. Instagram and LinkedIn recruitment provided me with two participants, Malik and Trinity. To determine organizations to reach out to about further recruitment, I compiled a contact list of political organizations likely to have high Republican or third-party voting populations (Young Democratic Socialists of America, Green Party, College Republicans, The Chicago Thinker, etc.), organizations likely to have predominately Black membership (University Black Student Unions, NAACP), and organizations where the two populations might likely intersect (Black Conservative Federation). In the end, I contacted more than 25 organizations, but unfortunately, this did not give way to new participants. Once contact was made with a person interested in participating, they were asked to fill out a short eligibility survey and schedule a meeting time. Interviews were initially expected to last about an hour each, but after conducting the first interview, all interviewees were asked to set aside two hours to ensure full coverage of all the topics in the interview guide. To aid with recruitment, at the end of each interview, interviewees were asked to identify others who might be eligible to participate in the study. Snowball sampling in this way yielded two more participants, Carlota and Genesis.

Demographics

Ultimately, six people were interviewed for this study. Even within this small sample, participants represented a diverse swath of the Black electorate across multiple dimensions. The appendix¹⁰ displays some key demographic factors of the participants. Overall, I interviewed three men and three women, ranging in age from 21 to 33. All but one of the participants were members of Generation Z (Gen-Z), in their early to mid-20s. Representing the majority, four of

¹⁰ See Figure B in the Appendix for demographic table.

the participants were from urban environments and two from suburban environments. Three participants were non-voters, one was a third-party voter, and the remaining two were Trump voters. The ideological diversity was also striking – participants gave themselves a variety of ideological designations that spanned the political spectrum. These include “anti-colonial pan-africanist”, “neoliberal conservative democrat”, “socialist libertarian”, “conservative”, and “not too far left or right...down the middle”. Recruiting through my network and via snowball sampling, though effective, significantly limited the diversity of the resulting sample of participants. For the most part, my network is comprised of individuals who, similarly to me, are early to mid-20s, are based in the Midwest, and have earned a bachelor’s degree¹¹. Because of this, my sample lacks geographical, educational¹², and age¹³ diversity. Using another recruitment method may have yielded participants who represent more of the United States, particularly the northeastern region, western region, southwestern region, suburban, and rural areas. It also might have improved education and age diversity to create a sample of participants who are more representative of all Black Americans. Given these limitations, the results of the study are most applicable to urban, college-educated individuals who are Millennials or Gen-Zers.

Positionality

It is important for any researcher to acknowledge their positionality and the ways that it might impact the results of their study. As previously acknowledged, because I am a college-aged individual based in the Midwest, recruitment of participants was heavily influenced by my positionality and the limitations of my network. Additionally, White and Laird's work draws attention to my positionality as a Black interviewer. They found that their experiments had

¹¹ More on researcher positionality can be found in the positionality subsection and in the authors’s note.

¹² All participants had attended at least some college or university, with the most educated participant having earned a master’s degree.

¹³ This study was initially designed for participants of all ages, but as recruitment progressed, and I ran into difficulty finding older participants, the scope was narrowed to encompass Gen-Z and Millennials exclusively.

different results when Black participants were interviewed by a Black person versus a white person. Other experiments have different results when Black participants were socially pressured by a Black person versus a white person (White and Laird 2020). It is possible that my racial identity created social pressure for many of the participants and influenced their responses in some ways. Additionally, I fall on the left end of the political spectrum and in the past have voted for Democratic Party presidential candidates. Though I made every attempt to be unbiased during recruitment, data collection, and analysis, I am certain there are ways that my own ideological bias impacted the way I carried out this study. Had this study been conducted by an individual with a different racial identity and ideological leanings than mine, the resulting findings may have been different.

Interview Procedure

All six interviews were conducted from February to April of 2025. They ranged in length from about an hour and fifteen minutes to just over two and a half hours. Interviews were semi-structured, based on an interview guide¹⁴ comprised of about 44 questions and probes divided into 9 categories¹⁵. Rather than proceeding through the questions chronologically, guided by the static order of the questions, I allowed interview participants to naturally traverse the categories and asked spontaneous probes when needed. By approaching interviews conversationally and approaching data collection from the position of a person attempting to understand another person's perspective, rather than that of a researcher extracting information, participants revealed information that likely could not have been gained from a structured interview. The semi-structured approach also made the interview process more enjoyable and interesting because there was less pressure to keep the participant exactly on track. All

¹⁴ As my pilot participant, I conducted a pre-interview with Elliot over text. His pre-interview answers helped to further develop of the interview guide that was used for his official interview and subsequent interviews.

¹⁵ See Figure C in the Appendix for a partial interview guide.

interviews, regardless of where the participant was located, were conducted, recorded, and transcribed using Zoom¹⁶. Due to a lack of funding, none of the participants were offered compensation.

Coding

After completing interviews and cleaning up the transcripts, they were uploaded to MAXQDA, where all coding for this project was conducted. For each transcript, lump process and in vivo codes were used. This coding approach helped to maintain consistency across all transcripts and separate my memory of the interviews from the data provided by the participants. It also allowed for the development of categories and themes that had not previously been noticed, and helped me to discover important quotes. As I proceeded through subsequent transcripts, each transcript was coded separately, avoiding reapplication of process or in vivo codes from prior transcripts. At the end of the coding process, there were 806 codes across all of the transcripts, with 86 codes from Elliot, 193 from Julius, 265 from Malik, 127 from Trinity, and 135 from Carlota. The sixth transcript, Genesis, was unable to be coded¹⁷.

To develop themes from codes, the codes from each transcript were kept separate and then sorted into categories roughly designated by topic. For example, in Elliot's transcript, codes *defining liberalism*, *defining anti-colonialism*, *defining colonialism*, and *defining pan-africanism* were sorted into the “*definitions*” category, which exhibited participants' definitions of important terms and ideological categories; conservative, liberal, colonialism, etc.” After this, the categories of all transcripts were brought together and used to develop final themes. Combining categories allowed me to apply a more analytical lens and refine thematic conclusions. 31 total categories were created and then sorted into seven themes. The resulting themes were:

¹⁶ An exception to this is interview #6 where the recording failed due to technical issues and only a partial transcript was recovered. More on this in the discussion section.

¹⁷ See footnote 16.

Understanding Voter Norms, Social Influence, Discourse, Norm Violation and Rationalization, Ideology, Delineating Party and Ideology, and Political Efficacy.

Discussion

The following section delves into each interview participant individually, tracing out their respective perspectives on the political world, the Black electorate, and their role within it. By addressing each person individually, this study seeks to contribute to breaking down the conception of Black voters as a monolith and highlight the nuance and individuality of each participant's point of view. For anonymity's sake, all participants are given codenames, and all personally identifying information is anonymized or excluded from this thesis.

*Interview #1: Elliot (he/they)*¹⁸

“I think our goal should be to reach across the street and pull our neighbor into our house and just talk and lean into what we disagree on...and build our political understanding with each other” (Elliot Transcript, p. 19)

Elliot is in his early twenties and is a student at an HBCU in a city near the East Coast. They identify as a Black American¹⁹ and have no religious affiliation. He describes himself as an anti-colonial pan-africanist. This political ideology, which Elliot shares with one other participant in this study, is a leftist ideology that centers on the struggles of globally colonized people and works against the subjugation of pan-african people, which includes Black Americans. Throughout the interview, he explained that individuals grounded in anti-coloniality “[seek] to destroy all structures that promote...or preserve colonialism...[which includes] all oppressive structures that keep people under control...confined, and unfree.” He went on to explain his conception of pan-africanism: “Pan-africanism...comes in to sort of unify...all people

¹⁸ For participants with pronoun pairs, this discussion will use both interchangeably.

¹⁹ Black Americans have different preferences and ways of referring to their racial identities. Though all participants fall into the category of Black American, it is important to acknowledge and respect how they refer to their racial identity and how they prefer to be referred to.

who descend from Africa specifically with the context of breaking the relationship that they have to...the dominant superstructure...which...seeks to extract labor and resources from Africans, and my goal really is...to break that relationship”. The anti-colonial pan-africanist ideology has contributed to how they think about their place within the Black electorate and their community.

The 2024 election was the first presidential election that Elliot would have been eligible to vote in, and he opted not to vote. As the interview progressed, he discussed traditional forms of political action, such as voting, and how he sees that many of those forms are “rendered ineffective by the colonialist structures, but...” he says, “I think there's a way to institute political change, and I think that way is through grassroots organizing.” He does not see voting as necessary to his political role and instead is involved in multiple community organizations that work “to raise political consciousness of young Black people in [his area].” By involving himself in these organizations, Elliot directly contributes to the advancement of his political goals: the political education and unification of Black people in his community and pan-africans globally. As Elliot dove further into his reasons for not voting, he explained: “...election night for me was very much evidence of why it was somewhat justifiable or why I could be okay morally with not necessarily voting because what was gonna happen was gonna happen regardless, whether or not I voted in [blue state] specifically.” If they had been registered to vote in a swing state or red state, they explained, “I would have voted and still held my same position...that voting doesn't really change anything, but because of the fact of how dangerous it is there...I probably would have been in the polls.” Out of all of the non-voting participants interviewed for this study, Elliot remains the most open to the voting system, tracking smaller races in his area.

Elliot voiced that when they share their political views in predominantly Black spaces, they experience pushback and harsh judgment. As he thinks about voting norms in the Black

community, he attributes them to these social factors. “I definitely think [pressure from peers is] probably one of the big forces that keeps Black people pushing for Democratic Party, because nobody likes to feel othered and nobody likes to feel like the odd one out...when that is accepted by the masses as the only way forward, and you seem to be against the only way forward, then naturally people are gonna be against it, against you.” When it comes to norm changes in the Black electorate, Elliot was cautiously optimistic that they would change over time. Invoking Dr. Frank Wilderson III’s Afro-pessimism framework, he said, “the Afro-pessimist in me thinks that Black people are gonna keep voting, and thinks that this trend of the Black electorate is just gonna continue. The Afro-optimist in me thinks that change can be instituted and that it can be instituted through...anti-colonialist, politically informed grassroots organizing. So, I think that change can be instituted...I have to hope that it can change because if not, then all my work is futile, but you know...I like to hope that it will change.” Even Elliot, an individual who frequently navigates politically non-conforming spaces and is in community with Black political norm violators, acknowledges the strength of these norms and what it takes to consider other options.

*Interview #2: Julius*²⁰

“I was voting on the behalf of [Black people]...You may hate Donald Trump, [but] I’m voting because I think he can honestly solve *some* of the issues we face, not all of them, and I think...that's better for all of our lives than to risk it for Kamala Harris...My vote isn’t just for me, it's for all of us.” (Julius Transcript, p. 21)

Julius is a student at a university in the Midwest and is in his mid-twenties. He identifies as African American, is of Jamaican and Cuban descent, and his mother is a Jamaican immigrant. He also identifies as a Christian. Ideologically, he identifies as a “neoliberalist, conservative Democrat.” As he recounted his ideological journey, he explained that he “used to

²⁰ Participant did not disclose pronouns.

identify as a pretty far left liberal,” but over time found footing in conservatism. “I...can see the...the pros of many leftist arguments. And when it comes to economic inequality, when it comes [to] social programs to support certain people, but I think the conservative side...makes it more tailored...more pragmatic and more efficient. So...when I look at any kind of policy or...cultural debate...I'm looking at how do you balance people's freedoms that should be supported by the government with common sense policies or stances that support their overall well-being.” Julius’ ideology does not fit neatly into a box, and his turn towards conservatism has not changed the fact that he identifies and is officially registered as a Democrat. He explained that party identity is not important to him. “There are Democrats and Republicans who take money from the same lobbyists...some of them are united [in] working against us in many ways. At the end of the day, it's just a label.” Julius’ detachment from these labels has allowed him to forge a unique path as he navigates the political world.

Julius grew up in a major city in a swing state and attended public schools that were predominantly Black and heavily under-resourced until partway through high school, when he was accepted into a private high school and offered a significant scholarship. This new school was about 80% white, and presumably, given that the school had a yearly tuition of about forty thousand dollars, mostly made up of students from wealthy families. He said that previously, he had not paid much attention to politics, but after being exposed to this new demographic of students and a host of “racial problems” within the student body, he started to question his prior worldview. “When you're in a...predominant...environment that matches your ethnicity or race, I think you tend to ask...less questions. Like we all go with the grain, we're all clued into the same media, to the same conversations...” This realization caused him to go against the grain and consider the merits of new perspectives.

The crux of his “political reckoning” was his bent for devil’s advocacy. When discussing the merits of the American Dream in class, he grew frustrated that his peers were taught narratives about wealth inequality and disparities between Black and white Americans in school, but did not have to live through or truly experience those things in the ways that he did. He complained, “...The conversations there were just boring, like I'm doing the reading, I'm here to really engage... I spent all my time trying to get into the school...[and] I agreed with them, but just to make conversation interesting, I said so what if... the success that people don't achieve in life...has more to do with their own shortcomings and their own personal decisions rather than some kind of systemic barrier...placed on them?” These comments got back to Black upperclassmen in the school who confronted Julius for “stirring the pot” and “giving white people...ideas”, but Julius continued to ask these types of questions.

This led to him being ostracized from the small Black community at his high school and eventually at his university. “They were fully in protest of... my presence being there, just from asking or just saying different things that they weren't used to.” After high school, he started joining conservative groups to “argue with them” and see if his criticisms and questions were met with the same ostracism that he experienced in Black liberal circles. “Anytime I would attack a conservative position, it wasn't necessarily about ‘you're a disgusting human being who deserves to be pushed off a cliff, off the edge of the world,’ it was more so, ‘okay, let's think through this and see what kind of merit your argument has’...” The continuation of this journey allowed Julius to hone in on his current political ideology.

Julius was first eligible to vote in the 2020 election, and he voted for President Biden. Then, dissatisfied with Biden’s actions during his term and concerned that, as president, Harris would send the country to war, Julius voted Republican down ballot in 2024, including, at the top

of the ticket, Donald Trump. Though Julius truly believes in Trump's ability to improve the country, as he described his rationale for voting Republican down ballot, it became clear that his vote was also about “sending a message...of protest” to the Democratic Party. From his perspective, the Democratic Party has been failing to make positive changes or push policies that adequately represent Black communities, and yet it still relies on votes from Black Americans to get elected. He expressed that the party sees cities as “plantations for votes,” and is not interested in engaging with Black voters in any concrete sense. “[Democrats] can't win national elections or even local elections sometimes without Black people and the Black vote...When you start holding that as leverage—I think that's what you have to convince people to do—when they start holding that vote as leverage, then they might see the Democratic Party start to bend to the will of African-Americans.” Julius believes that if the Democratic Party started to witness Black people voting for Republicans en masse, the party would have no choice but to listen to the Black electorate and start taking action on its behalf.

Leveraging votes to strategically communicate with people in power is especially important to Julius, who has little confidence in his ability to make substantial systemic change. He hopes that he can catalyze change by encouraging people to ask more questions. “I can't lead everyone down the same journey I was down, but I can give you the tools necessary to catalyze something similar for you, not even to make you a conservative or to vote Republican, but just be a critical thinker...your vote should never be easy for any politician, and I think that's one of my goals.” The central focus of Julius' ideology and political goals is supporting and changing the Black community for the better.

As he thinks about political norms within the Black electorate, Julius does not attribute them to social pressure as Elliot did. “I think a lot of people who weren't even pressured, they

just voted for her because it was just the first thing they saw, they said like, ‘you know what, I’m just going to do it just because’ I don’t have a better explanation other than that.” Rather than seeking out other options, he feels that many Black people go with “safe” ones they are familiar with which prevents them from being as critical of Democrats as they should be. Additionally, he believes that the Republican Party’s lack of outreach to people of color and the unlikelihood that they would be capable of passing legislation as meaningful to the Black electorate as the Civil Rights Act contribute to Black political norms. For these reasons, he does not think that voting norms in the Black community will change anytime soon.

Interview #3: Malik (he/him)

“I think the world is at a precipice. We’re kind of in that point where we’re creating those definitions for the future... We’re kind of developing a new way of seeing the world and interfacing with it, and who knows what political movements will rise after this is over.” (Malik Transcript, p. 11)

Malik is in his mid-twenties and identifies as Muslim. At the time of the interview, he was in the process of becoming a police officer in a large midwestern city and running a small business on the side. Malik is half Black and half white and the only mixed-race participant in this study. When first starting to think about politics as a child, he was most attracted to libertarian-socialist ideas and heavily influenced by communist and socialist thinkers. “I’ve always been a deep political thinker, and at first I started off with learning about the politics of the Russian revolution... When I was in middle school... my dad was introducing some of these books like *Wealth of Nations*, *Das Kapital*, and some of Engel’s works...” Reading these works at such a young age brought on “weird looks” from his teachers, and rather than be discouraged by this, he leaned in more. “I like to be on the fringe of things, I like to be a little extreme... I think part of it was for shock value in the first place, but... I got something out of it... I was genuinely interested in what I was talking about, and so they really couldn’t say much to

discourage me from finding the information I was looking for.” As he learned and read more, he was attracted to anarcho-syndicalism, but over time took up more centrist beliefs and now identifies as a socialist libertarian.

Unaffiliated with any political parties, Malik explained where his current political allegiance lies. “I associate myself with Muslims for the most part...I vote for the support of Muslim people...I don't believe that either party is fighting for either of the people's rights.” This is a major thing that differentiates Malik from both Elliot and Julius, whose primary political priorities and associations fall along racial lines. In addition to his religious affiliation, Malik also associates himself with the lower class, seeing class conflict and not racial division alone as the U.S.'s defining conflict. “It is about race, but it's not at the same time. It's just there's a ruling class that happens to be white...”As he sees it, class conflict encompasses racial conflicts, “because racism is a tool for control of the lower class.” In sum, his current ideology is motivated by a “wariness of the system”, the resolution of class conflict, and the ideals of Islam, which he sees as “fundamentally intertwined” with those of democracy.

In the 2024 presidential election, Malik did not vote. “I didn't feel...there was a right choice. There wasn't a lesser of two evils. I felt they were both evil.” This view, and the decision not to vote, was largely guided by U.S.-Palestine foreign policy. “If they continue this foreign policy on Palestine, I don't see myself participating in the political system or voting or anything...As a Muslim, how could I in conscience participate in the system that's...not even giving me a choice! It's like, do you want to kill Palestinians or do you want to kill Palestinians?” When confronted with judgment about this decision from peers, Malik expressed that he believed those who judged him for not voting were not coming from a sincere place, but instead judged him in order to feel superior and be able to tell him that he “did something wrong and that they

did something right.” He went on to explain, “I don't feel I did something wrong. You know what I'm saying? I feel I [would have been] doing something wrong by participating—it's almost a protest in itself. I feel I can't identify with this system so much that I refuse to participate in it anymore.” Similar to Julius, Malik chose to use his vote to protest, and similar to Elliot, Malik does not see his political role as tied to voting, but to community involvement. “I absolutely want to involve myself, but the way that I see myself being involved is not through the political process, it's through keeping my people safe, being well connected, involving myself in my community...” These similarities are perhaps surprising given that Elliot, Julius, and Malik's individual views run the gamut of the political spectrum.

Unlike both Elliot and Julius, however, Malik is certain that Black political norms will change. Malik sees the culture of the Black community as far more conservative than liberal, and attributes Black Democratic Party loyalty to identity. “The only reason why Black people vote Democrat is because of identity, it's not because they really do much for Black people. Arguably, there are a lot of Democratic policies that are bad for Black people.” Malik believes that Black political norms are shifting and will continue to do so until Black cultural conservatism aligns with Black political identity. As he rationalizes why the Black electorate might be shifting rightward, he blames liberal identity and the Democratic Party. Firstly, he sees that “American liberalism based [on] capitalism” is straying from liberalism's defining principles and is ill-equipped to contend with the modern Republican Party, which has been able to unite and mobilize in a way that he believes liberals and Democrats have not. As liberalism drifts from its principles, it loses what makes it compelling for Black voters with more conservative ideals. Additionally, the Democratic Party, which he sees as intertwined with liberal identity and ideology, is losing Black voters due to the way the party treats Black Americans while seeking

their votes. “The Democratic Party is [so] worried about parading Black people around as some sort of mascot that they're starting to alienate Black people from the movement because they don't understand Black people or what Black people go through or how they think. And they're slowly going to get more and more people going to the other side because of this fact...It seems disingenuous; it doesn't seem real.” Though Malik does not share the perspective that things within the Black electorate are unlikely to change, the same hopelessness of that notion echoes through his perspective.

Interview #4: Trinity (she/her)

“...We don't all exist as a monolith. And if we lived that out instead of...quietly while outwardly submitting to...the groupthink, we'd all sleep better at night, just knowing we stood on what we believed, and then we could make the choices from there on how we coexist with each other.”
(Trinity Transcript, p. 17)

Trinity, the first of three Black female interview participants, is from Southern Florida, where she works in local government. She is the oldest interviewee and the only millennial, being in her early thirties. She is also a Christian and a first-generation Black Caribbean; her mother is an immigrant from Jamaica. Though she did not have a specific name for her ideology, she described herself as “down the middle”. Having been raised in a Christian family, those values have influenced her political views. “I would say I'm not too far left or right...I'm just indifferent, I just vote my values and the things that are important to me, and...some could be viewed as more Democratic, some could be viewed more Republican, and some are down the middle.” She acknowledged that her parents, who primarily vote for Democratic candidates, but hold some of the more conservative values of Christianity showed her “a fair and well-rounded point of view of both sides.” From that, she learned that “you really can't trust [Republicans or Democrats]...you don't have to pick a side.” She explained that she’s never been a “politically-driven person”, so as she navigates the political world, she “[does her] part as a

citizen” by voting, but fundamentally is “just living [her] life” and “wants to get back to not caring what the president is doing.” Trinity used to identify as further left on the political spectrum, but as she interrogated her true political perspective, she came to realize that her political ideology fell closer to the middle of the ideological spectrum. She credits her early ideological positions to “outward influences and not really taking time to think for [her]self.” Now, her political beliefs, while culturally informed, are most influenced by her religious beliefs, “gut-feelings”, and moral compass.

The first election that Trinity was eligible to vote in was the 2012 election, when President Obama was elected to his second term. Then, she voted for Obama, but restated that it was “groupthink” and not necessarily tied to her true political preferences. In subsequent elections, she spent more time looking into candidates and issues across the political spectrum, voting third party in 2016 and for Biden in 2020. Most recently, during the 2024 election, Trinity voted for Peter Sonski of the American Solidarity Party²¹. By voting, Trinity felt she was “doing [her] part to not let Trump get into the office,” but “didn't feel like [the election] was do or die” as many of her colleagues might have. Having Trump as president certainly would not have been her preference, but ultimately, she said, “it's in God's hands...I've always felt that...we need the balance of all different types of views in leadership, and...I've never believed...one party is right all the time and should be in leadership and making the decision all the time. So it didn't feel do or die to me. It just felt like, okay, this is democracy.”

The American Solidarity Party is “based in the tradition of Christian democracy”

(American Solidarity Party n.d.). When asked about what attracted her to the party and Sonski,

²¹ During the interview, Trinity was unsure of which candidate she voted for and initially disclosed that she voted for the Constitution Party presidential candidate. After doublechecking, she confirmed that she had actually voted for Peter Sonski, but never re-confirmed his party affiliation. As the interview proceeded, we referred to Sonski’s party affiliation as the Constitution Party. After independently confirming Sonski’s party affiliation after the interview, and operating under the assumption that Trinity misspoke when initially mentioning Sonski’s political party, I opted to substitute the American Solidarity Party where the Constitution Party was mentioned in this paper.

she replied, “I like that he sells Christian values, I like that he also was in alignment with what I feel, where it's like I should not have any say over anyone else's very personal decision and... Yeah those were like the two major things.” She highlighted the party’s christian values and emphasized that its platform “was fair and just for all people” which she found to be refreshing in today’s political climate.

In her everyday life, Trinity tries to avoid discussing politics, but she stated that as political topics come up or her voting choice comes under scrutiny, she does not shy away from the conversations. “I've had responses where someone's been like, ‘oh, that's a vote for Republican’ or ‘third party...that's just a throwaway!’” She doesn’t see third-party votes as throwaways at all, and according to her, “good marketing” convinces people that they must decide between one of two options of political parties and sows division. “I've always been somebody who likes having options in all things, so if you tell me other options are available, I'm going to seek it out...They just are so convinced that there's no way a third party could win that they don't bother.” Trinity hopes that more Black Democratic voters who fall within that ~80% start to have an open mind to consider their third-party options. Having experienced lots of judgment about her voting decisions, she tries not to judge anyone based on who they voted for, regardless of their racial identity or political leanings. “I try not to judge them based on who they voted for in a moment on an individual day. I don't know what you were feeling, what you were thinking, and what you were convinced of or persuaded toward, so I can't judge you for making a decision.” Trinity remarked at multiple points during the interview that it isn’t acceptable to treat any group of voters as a monolith, because people have different experiences and interests that cannot be uniformly represented by any one candidate or political party.

Trinity was very aware of voting norms within the Black electorate due to her parents' influence on her views, "They definitely were not for Republicans and very vocal about that...like Democrats are for us, people of color, Black people." Similar to Elliot, Trinity blames outward pressures for the ongoing persistence of Black political norms. "It's cultural pressure, it's media pressure, it's community pressure...people don't like being the outlier, people naturally want to conform, people naturally want acceptance. So it's... a certain amount of gumption and backbone to just stand on your own thoughts regardless of how it may be viewed, that a lot of people just get pressured out of having, unfortunately." As previously mentioned, Trinity does hope that Black electoral norms start to change, but ultimately, she has little hope that the change will be significant.

*Interview #5: Carlota (she/they)*²²

"I think we do have the power...there's no way that our ancestors can be revolting against slavery...and literally staging successful slave revolts, and we don't have that same like blood memory...so yeah, I have a great deal of revolutionary optimism." (Carlota Transcript, p. 16)

Carlota is in her early twenties and is a student at an HBCU in a city near the East Coast, and has no religious affiliation. They are Afro-Cubana on their father's side, but use Black to describe their racial identity. "I take a lot of pride in my identity. I love to be Black. I love to be in the tradition of our people, and I also take a lot of pride in being Cuban." Her identity plays a significant role in her ideology, and, like Elliot, Carlota describes herself as an anti-colonial pan-africanist. Carlota first started paying attention to politics during the COVID-19 pandemic and explained that seeing the impact of the pandemic was a call to action for her. Initially, she aligned with politics "on the left" and was not radicalized until college. "The summer of my freshman year, when I first got to [HBCU]...I immediately got tapped in with politics." They were connected to their local chapter of the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL), but left the

²² For participants with pronoun pairs, this discussion will use both interchangeably.

party after a few years as they started to discover and connect more with the pan-africanist ideology. “I learned a lot, I learned how to public speak, I learned how to organize a teach-in, I learned how to do outreach...but I think that ultimately the work that I was doing in the PSL was kind of just devoid of an emphasis on African people, and ... that was really what drove me to leave.” After leaving PSL, Carlota fully leaned into pan-africanism. As they define it, anti-colonial pan-africanism is “rooted in pan-africanism, which is basically about the unification of Africa and the African diaspora under a...collective decolonial understanding of the world...” This ideology has uniquely informed Carlota’s political goals and her approach to accomplishing them.

Carlota is not currently associated with any political party and is highly critical of both the Democratic and Republican parties. “The Democratic Party is like ‘on the left’, but really the Democratic Party is a liberal...shade over fascism, and you can peel it back and you can see that the Republicans and the Democrats are the same. Their interests lie in the same things. They lie in domination, they lie in money, they lie in corporations, but... liberals and Democrats will try to gaslight you into thinking that they're not actively against your interests and that they're for you as a colonized person.” The last of the non-voting participants in the study, Carlota did not vote in the 2024 election. Explaining her reasoning for not voting, she said, “I did not vote in the election because...I just understand that the institution of voting is simply not something that I want to invest my energy in because I know that it's not what's going to get us free...that's just not even something that I look to when it comes to what I want to build out. I want to be building out organizations, I want to be contributing to a radical consciousness, and if you want to vote, go ahead and do that, but that is not the end of your political responsibility to your people.” Carlota takes their role as an organizer and activist very seriously, but like Malik and Elliot, does

not see voting as a part of that role. She explained that she is not receptive to being judged by her peers for not voting because of how solid she feels in her decision not to engage with the voting system. Carlota does not see herself voting in any election in the future, but she does not judge those who do. “...I don't shame anybody for [voting]. It just is kind of like, you know, you got to reflect on like...what was your reason? Why did you feel compelled? I mean, hey, people got to sleep with themselves at the end of the night...” Carlota sees being rooted in political values and principles as instrumental for people who choose not to vote.

Carlota sees political norms in the Black electorate as a result of “the comfortability that lies in [them]” and the party’s association with civil rights struggles. “It's going to take... really getting people to understand the contradictions in the Democratic Party and what they actually do for Black people to start moving away from [norms]. Of all the participants, Carlota’s perspective on whether or not norms are changing is the most optimistic. Though she doubts older generations of Black voters will stray from Democratic Party loyalty, she recognizes that younger generations are less connected to the party. “I really do think that there's a lot of Black people who vote just because they think that's what they should do, not necessarily because they want to and I think that tapping into those people and helping them understand that there is a third option, like you don't have to be aligned with this, there is another way of living, of being then change will definitely start to filter through.”

Interview #6²³: Genesis²⁴

“No, we're not going to vote for someone just because of their skin color, but more the content of their character—dare I say—but also the policies that they're putting forth and how they affect our

²³ Though data from interview #6, Genesis, was unable to be included with the coded data due to technical issues with recording and transcription software, the interview is highlighted in this section. Despite not having a full transcript to work from, I was able to utilize a partial transcript, notes from the interview, and analytical memos to ensure an accurate depiction of the participant’s interview and perspective.

²⁴ Participant did not disclose pronouns.

communities, not specifically just the Black community. Obviously, yes, we're Black but also just the community we live in.” (Genesis)

Genesis is a policy analyst working in the midwestern U.S. and is in her mid-twenties. She is a Christian and identifies as Black. Politically, she identifies as conservative, and her political ideology is “rooted in [her] biblical faith”. When asked to describe her political ideology, she added, “I'd consider myself a patriot as well. I love my country...I identify with what my country stands for regardless of party line. America has its own ideology in general.” Genesis first started thinking about politics in middle school during Obama’s run for president. She explained that though her parents were never particularly political, they became more politically active during Obama’s run because they did not agree with supporting a candidate solely based on their skin color. Being raised primarily in rural and suburban areas, her family was “probably one of like two Black families in [her] grade”. During this time, she first noticed that, due to her racial identity, people expected her to have certain political leanings and opinions. “It was interesting to see my peers so interested in the fact that I disagreed with [Obama’s] politics. That was a red flag for me.” As she got older, more ideologically grounded, and noticed Black political norms at play, she came to realize that as a conservative, she was a “minority within the Black community.” When discussing politics in majority Black environments in college, she became aware that as Black person who expressed “anti-democrat and anti-leftist” stances, she was perceived as anti-Black. “I feel like I was kind of boxed into this stereotype of I didn't like my people or I didn't care for my community...I'm a Christian first; all else falls after that because that's my foundation, who I am in Christ. I happen to be a woman. I happen to be Black. I happen to be from this area...All those things are things that I cannot help...so for me to identify myself solely by the color of my skin...I can't do anything about that...that's not what prompts the content of who I am as a person.” She elaborated that she

loves her community, but her Blackness does not encompass the whole of who she is, nor does it dictate her political perspective and worldview.

Though Genesis does not identify as a republican, in the 2024 election, she voted for Donald Trump. She positively views Trump's position as a disruptor within the party and commends his DOGE policies and efforts to cut government spending and make it more efficient. Additionally, she believes that the Democratic Party touts a lot of policies that are harmful to Black communities, and, because she is someone who comes from a more affluent family background, she has different political and economic interests than people coming from less wealthy backgrounds or who are reliant on support from the welfare state. When discussing electoral trends and Black political norms, she acknowledged that, when compared with other racio-ethnic groups, the Black community is highly religious and culturally conservative. As Malik also noticed, a lot of these conservative aspects do not bleed over into the political sphere. Explaining some public opinion research she conducted while earning her bachelor's degree, she said, "[I was]...looking at how African-Americans who have such a deep religiosity historically...and seeing how the trends that they vote along do not coincide with biblical principles and values—because to me, that was of utmost importance...the intersection of faith and politics. So I was like, why is it that Black people are not voting with the Bible, yet they are claiming to be Christians...what I found was it was a lot of groupthink and a lot of group consciousness at play...just following and hopping on the bandwagon." Even though she recognizes the strength and significance of Black political norms, she attests to changes in the Black electorate proven by the increase in Black men and women who voted for Trump in 2024.

Putting these six participants in conversation with one another, it becomes clear that even the most ideologically dissimilar participants hold some interestingly similar views. Along the

same vein, those who made the same voting choice or are ideologically similar differ in surprising ways. These differences and similarities, as well as common themes, are interrogated further in the following section.

Findings & Conclusion

Across my participants, I found that they devalue party loyalty and violate political norms for various reasons. Though multiple factors impact each participant's political action, voting decisions, and perspectives, the participants were most influenced by their separation of party loyalty from the advancement of racially tied political objectives and the devaluing of racial in-group membership. The third cause of political norm violation discussed in the literature review, low political efficacy, applies to some, but not all, participants. This leads to the conclusion that low political efficacy doesn't necessarily contribute to political norm violation, but the perception that the Black electorate has lower electoral influence could contribute to the devaluation of the electoral system and/or prioritization of alternative political action by Black political norm violators.

From data analysis, 7 themes were discovered, four of which fall into the three major causes of political norm violation as supported by extant literature. These themes are *"Delineating Party And Ideology"* and *"Norm Violation And Rationalization"* under separation of party loyalty from the advancement of racially-tied political objectives; *"Ideology"* and *"Social Influence"* under devaluing of racial in-group membership; and *"Political Efficacy"* under low political efficacy. The remaining two themes, *"Understanding Voter Norms"* and *"Discourse,"* are not directly related to norm violation and will not be discussed further in this section²⁵.

²⁵ All themes are listed and defined in the Appendix in Figure D.

Separation of Party Loyalty from the Advancement of Racially Tied Political Objectives

As supported by Watts, the civil rights era progress that was supported by the Democratic Party helped to instate political norms within the Black electorate because Black voters connected this political progress with the election of Democratic leaders and legislators. To reiterate Watts' point, young Black voters, like those interviewed for this study, were not directly impacted by civil rights era legislation and have made no such connection. All of the participants, regardless of their voting choice or ideological leaning, were highly critical of the Democratic Party and its approach to "black issues". This indicates that they do not see the Democratic Party as supportive of racially tied political objectives, nor do they view disloyalty to the party as anti-Black or contrary to their support of the Black community.

The theme *Delineating Party and Ideology* encompasses codes and categories connected to how participants define and differentiate political parties and ideological packages²⁶. It also encompasses codes that confirm that participants selectively choose aspects of ideological packages that serve them. Although a particular participant might identify as conservative or republican, their political perspective is unlikely to be uniformly conservative or fully encompassed by the republican ideological package. This theme contributes to the first cause of political norm violation because participants were able to support racially-tied political objectives without subscribing to an ideological package or supporting the political party that might also support those objectives.

The theme *Norm Violation and Rationalization* encompasses codes and categories that describe participants' voting choices and how they rationalize them as in support of Black communities and interests, while common societal narratives tell them otherwise. My data shows

²⁶ An "ideological package" is a set of political preferences, ideals, and goals associated with an ideology or political party. For example, falling within the Republican Party's ideological package are things like patriotism.

that, as these participants filter legislation and other aspects of the political world through the lens of their respective ideologies, they tend to think of what might benefit the Black community in different ways. More left-leaning participants, like Elliot or Carlota, might see certain republican policies as anti-Black or harmful to Black communities, but a conservative participant like Genesis sees these same policies as supportive of the Black community. This reinforces White and Laird's critique of Dawson's linked fate; conservative participants are absolutely able to rationalize conservative policies, and thus conservative voting choices, as best for the Black community. Black Democratic Party voting cannot be attributed to linked fate alone, but linked fate can help bring Black voters' political priorities into focus even when those priorities don't result in political norm conformity.

Devaluing of Racial In-Group Membership

White and Laird posited that political norms can be attributed to the linkage of "group-benefiting" political behaviors with racial in-group identity. This suggests that devaluing racial in-group identity could lead to political norm violation among Black voters. To clarify, devaluing racial in-group identity does not mean that the political norm violator does not take pride in their racial identity or view it as important. Those who devalue racial in-group identity either have another identity that contributes more to their ideology and political behavior, or their voting choices and political behaviors are not impacted by social sanctions that might involve the withholding of in-group identity.

The theme *Ideology* includes coded segments describing the ideological journey of participants, descriptions of participants' current ideologies, ideological focuses, and influences. For four out of six of these participants, their ideologies were heavily influenced by their religious identities, and most saw their religious identity as the largest influence on their

ideology, over their racial identity. In all four of these cases, participants cited their religion as a major reason for why they did not vote or why they voted the way they did. This indicates that possession of a hyper-salient non-racial identity contributes to political norm violation.

The theme *Social Influences* is comprised of coded segments that speak to the impact of social rewards and sanctions on ideology and voting choices. The participants interviewed expressed that as they started to form a political ideology and communicate counter-cultural ideas to other Black people, they experienced ridicule, harsh judgment, pressure to conform, and dismissal of their perspective. Many expressed that even conversations about their political ideas were shut down before their perspective was fully heard. What is interesting here is that this does not seem to be tied to political ideology at all. This phenomenon persists for political norm violators regardless of their political leaning or the particular way that they express their vote. Although these participants experienced social sanctions, they either expressed indifference to them or stated that the sanctions didn't impact their political decisions. This persisted even when those sanctions included being regarded as anti-Black or being kept out of social circles with other Black people. These individuals devalue racial in-group membership insofar as it can be granted to or withheld from them by other Black individuals. These participants still highly value their racial in-group identity, but do not seek out approval from others within that racial in-group. Because they do not seek out approval, which might be more readily granted to norm conformers, they are more likely to violate political norms.

Surprisingly, most participants expressed judgment toward other types of vote norm violators. For example, one Trump voting participant harshly judged non-voters and third-party voters, and one of the non-voters expressed harsh judgment toward third-party and Trump voters. These participants have reconciled their own voting choices with their ideology, but have not

done the same for other types of political norm violators in the Black electorate. This could be one way that political norm violators think about their position in the Black electorate. They might not feel as impacted by the withholding of racial in-group identity when compared with others from whom they distinguish themselves.

To further address the research question, “*How do Black political norm violators think about their place within the Black community and their political role within the electorate?*”, the political norm violators that participated in this study tended to make voting choices with the Black community in mind, even if they prioritized other communities simultaneously. Even Malik, who saw racial issues more as a result of class conflict, indirectly prioritized the Black community through the lens of class. These participants have differing ideas about what would most support the Black community, and that is reflected in their political decisions. Black political norm conformers might tend to see norm violation as failure to fulfill some instrumental political role as a Black voter, but norm violators tend not to see it that way. The varying perspectives of these participants make it clear that there is no such instrumental role, and voting choices are not fully representative of an individual’s ideology and political priorities.

Low Political Efficacy

This final reason for norm violation displays a tension between my findings and the literature. In their respective studies, Nuamah and Fraga discovered that as voters perceive they have low electoral influence, they are less likely to engage with the electoral system. Thus, individuals with low political efficacy might opt not to vote. This explains the voting choices of non-voting participants who have low political efficacy, but does not explain why a participant like Carlota, with high political efficacy, might choose not to vote. More accurately, people who perceive that they have decreased electoral influence due to their racial identity might choose to

abstain from voting because they believe their vote isn't particularly impactful or important.

These participants might opt to prioritize alternative political behaviors to support their political goals. This phenomenon can persist regardless of the non-voter's level of political efficacy.

The theme *Political Efficacy* represents coded segments displaying participants' thoughts about their ability to catalyze or influence systemic change, improve the political world, and/or accomplish their political goals. Most participants had low political efficacy, and even these participants sought out ways they could support their political goals outside of voting in federal elections (i.e., community engagement, coalition building, organizing, local voting, attending commission meetings). By prioritizing alternative political action, both non-voting and voting norm violators with high or low political efficacy were able to rationalize their voting choices and serve their political goals.

Limitations

The findings of this study, due to the small sample size and a lack of diversity along some dimensions, are not generalizable across all young Black political norm violators. This could be seen as a shortcoming of this research; however, I believe it should not be. Studies that prioritize generalizability of results over demonstration of nuance and representation of divergent perspectives contribute to the monolithic treatment of the groups they study. The Black electorate, particularly susceptible to this type of treatment by academics and political actors alike, ought to be researched by individuals interested in breaking down these narratives and highlighting ways that the electorate can be better attended to by political actors. Nevertheless, this study could certainly have benefited from a much larger sample size to increase the representation of the Black electorate's diversity. As further research on this topic is conducted, more representative samples with larger sample sizes should be sought out.

Concluding Thoughts and Implications

These findings contribute a fresh lens with which to view Black Americans and illuminate that the Black electorate is not a group with interests that can be fully captured by any political party or ideological package. Even those who make the same voting decisions process those decisions differently, and those with the same political leanings might make different voting decisions. Though many participants of this study were pessimistic about changes to political norms in the Black community, I believe that this pessimism is unfounded. The inaction of the Democratic Party, coupled with generational differences that make young voters more amenable to norm violation, clearly indicates that Black political norms have already experienced a shift and will continue to do so over time. Continuing to track voting norms within the Black electorate is important to the study of race and politics because it allows social scientists to better assess the political preferences of Black voters and predict electoral outcomes. By studying voting norms, researchers can also help advocate for Black voters by representing them accurately.

To further attend to the ongoing tension between linked fate, electoral capture, and social reinforcement of norms as explanations for Democratic Party loyalty, all three have shortcomings that prevent them from being able to fully address the experiences of individuals within the Black electorate. These limitations highlight that the experiences of Black voters are not uniform and the modern electorate is in need of more nuanced explanations of electoral phenomena. Linked fate, electoral capture, and social reinforcement of norms should not be explanations thought of as in competition with each other, but as collaborating explanations that work to build a complete explanation of Democratic Party loyalty within an electorate that processes the political world in divergent ways.

Ultimately, this thesis has two target audiences: the Democratic Party and the Black electorate. To the Democratic Party, this thesis attempts to communicate that it is failing to represent its constituents. The party cannot afford to continually disregard its voter base as it seeks out votes outside of it. Electoral incentives and white supremacy have blinded the party, causing it to forget its purpose: ensuring that the democratic process can thrive by representing the people. By losing sight of this, the party also fails to realize that political parties that successfully represent their constituents are rewarded with electoral success. Thus, the party's alienation of Black voters, their most reliable voting bloc, manifests in further struggles to achieve electoral success in federal elections. As more and more young Black Americans reach voting age, the party will find that the norms it has taken for granted are disappearing. The Democratic Party must change its approach or be rendered irrelevant.

Lastly, to Black Americans, this thesis attempts to communicate that there is much that can be learned from political norm violators. The conservatism of the Black community, coupled with lowered Democrat identification by Black individuals, and decreasing (but still quite high) numbers of Black Dem voters, indicates that the Democratic Party has been claiming unearned votes from Black people. I want to make it clear that I am not necessarily making a case for the mass exodus of the Black community from the Democratic Party, nor am I attempting to encourage any specific voting choices among any population. I am, however, making the case that, as Julius said, "your vote should not be easy for anyone." The moment that a political party can count on your vote is the moment that it is no longer incentivized to seek it out. By continuing to throw votes at a party that hasn't attempted to earn them, Black Democratic voters communicate to the party that Black Americans are not only not worth working for, but are satisfied with the party as it stands.

Appendix

Figure A

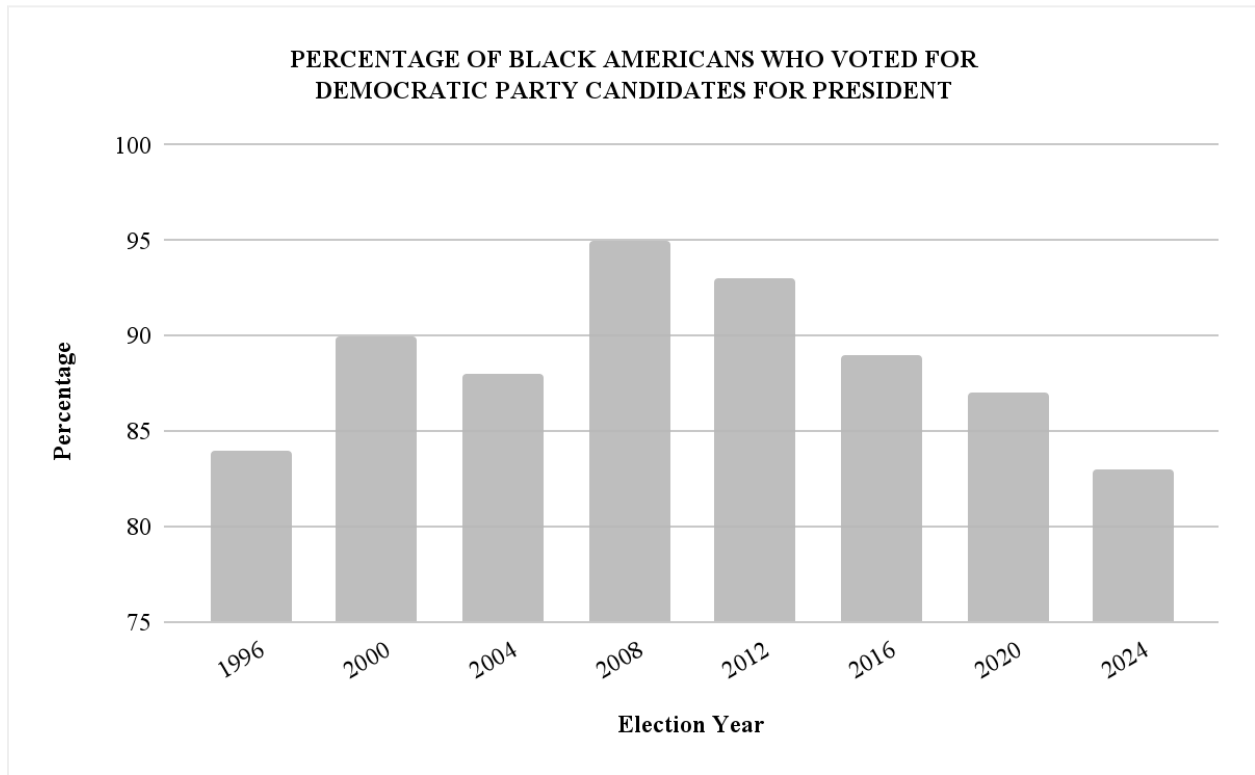


Figure B – Demographics

	AGE RANGE	STATE	GENDER	RACE	EDUCATION	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	RELIGION	VOTING CHOICE
1	20-24	MD	Male	Black	Some college	\$0-\$29,999	None	non-voter
2	20-24	PA	Male	Black	Some college	\$60,000-\$99,999	Christianity	Trump
3	20-24	OH	Male	Black & White	Some college	\$30,000-\$59,999	Islam	non-voter
4	30-34	FL	Female	Black	Bachelor's degree	\$100,000-\$149,999	Christianity	Third-party
5	20-24	MD	Female	Black	Bachelor's degree	\$100,000-\$149,999	None	non-voter
6	25-29	IL	Female	Black	Master's degree	\$100,000-\$149,999	Christianity	Trump

Figure C – Partial Interview Guide

<p>1) Ease in Questions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me a little about yourself. 2. Where are you from? What was it like growing up there? 	<p>Introductory questions to ease tension and gain baseline information, key people in their life, profession</p>
<p>2) Ideology Formation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Can you recall when you first started paying attention to politics or thinking about political issues? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Do you recall conversations or experiences that shaped your early political views? b. Were there key figures (family, teachers, mentors) who influenced how you think about politics today? c. Were your political views different then than they are now? In what ways? 	<p>Ideology formation, key events, attitudes toward specific political figures, change of views over time, opposition</p>
<p>3) Political Ideology</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. How would you describe your political ideology to someone unfamiliar with U.S. politics? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. How would you describe the Democratic Party to someone unfamiliar with U.S. politics? b. How would you describe the Republican Party to someone unfamiliar with U.S. politics? c. Do you associate yourself with a particular political party? If so, which and why 	<p>Attitudes about the Democratic and Republican parties, perception of party ideology, personal association with political party, personal ideology</p>
<p>4) Voting choice/attitudes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. What was the first election you voted in? What was that experience like? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Who did you vote for? 6. Have you ever voted for a Democratic candidate? What was that like? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What factors went into that decision for you? b. Did you notice any particular reaction from close friends/family/Black peers? 7. Think back to the 2024 presidential election. What was voting day like for you? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What happened in the following days (as the results came out)? How were you feeling? b. What were your close friends and family thinking around this time? 	<p>voting choices/attitudes, voting choices/attitudes of close network, discussion of politics with network, emotions around recent election</p>

Figure D – Theme Definitions

Theme	Definiton
Understanding Voter Norms	How participants think about voting norms within the Black electorate. Also includes their thoughts about whether or not norms are changing.
Social Influence	Participants' experience with social sanctions/benefits as a result of political ideology and voter behavior. Also includes the impact of these experiences on their voting choices.
Discourse	Participants' experiences with unwelcome/welcome opposition, conflict, and discourse as a result of their political action and voting choices.
Norm Violation and Rationalization	Participants' voter behavior, how they rationalize it as in support of Black communities and interests, as common societal narratives tell them otherwise. Also includes how they compare themselves to other Black voters as it relates to those voters' voting decisions.
Ideology	Ideological journey of participants -- includes current ideology, things central to ideology, ideology formation, and influences
Delineating Party and Ideology	How participants define and differentiate political parties and ideological packages, how they select aspects of ideological packages that serve them, and how they perceive political parties, ideologies, etc.
Political Efficacy	Participants' thoughts about their ability to make systemic change, improve the political world, and/or accomplish their political goals

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