The University of Chicago

Why Democrat? A Digital Ethnographic Study of Black Women's Political Decision-Making Process

By

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Abstract

The voting decision making process of Black American women is complex. This research study seeks to uncover how Black women feel about the Democrat Party. Are Black women having frequent conversations about politics, and if so, with whom? Why do Black women vote? These issues are important in more deeply understanding Black women as a voting bloc. The study found that the participants have mixed opinions about the Democrat Party, but they have very clear negative opinions about the Republican Party. The study also found that the majority of participants are having conversations about politics often, but it is inconclusive of if these conversations are impacting their voting decisions. Also, the study did find that there are two main reasons that the participants vote: responsibility and obligation. Although this study did uncover many interesting discoveries about Black women voters, there needs to be more research regarding the voting decision making process of Black women.

Introduction

Black women in America have a particularly unique experience within the political system. Unlike white women who gained suffrage in 1920, Black women were unable to vote until 1965. The gap in suffrage for Black women, in comparison to white women, created a capricious political terrain. Black women's political decisions are complexed by gender and race issues, excising them from white women and Black men. The intersectionality of Black womanhood requires a political decision-making process that encompasses the challenges of womanhood in tandem with the challenges of Blackness. Understanding the political decision-making process of Black women may further the understanding of marginalized groups and more specifically the ways in which intersectional marginalized groups collectively make voting

decisions. In their article, "The Impact of Gender and Race on the Politics of Black Women," (1998), Claudine Gay and Katherine Tate explore the intricacies of identity and policy for Black women. Gay and Tate explain, "Black women have come to see themselves as 'a special interest group fighting to overcome the twin barriers of racial and gender discrimination.' Battling both racism and sexism, they experience the world differently from those who are not black and female" (Gay and Tate, 1998, p. 172). Gay and Tate highlight the distinct position that Black women are in and how this impacts their politics in a very specific way. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) discusses intersectionality in her article, Mapping the Margins, through the lens of violence. Crenshaw (1991) notes the importance of intersectionality in fully understanding the experiences of women. Intersectionality is a topic frequently explored in many of Bell Hooks' books. () Hooks emphasize the importance of acknowledging and studying the intersectionality of race and gender. Although Crenshaw and Hooks were not studying how intersectionality directly impacts Black women's voting decision making process, their works helped guide the discourse that this thesis is in conversation with. Despite this research being conducted over 20 years ago, there are still so many aspects of Black women's voting behaviors that have not been fully studied within academia. Uncovering how Black women's intersectionality impacts their voting decisions and political behavior is imperative in conceptualizing their voting behavior and its efficacy in increasing attention to Black women supported issues and legislature.

There has been some research on the increase of political participation of Black women, but there is not extensive research on the voting decision making process of Black women. My research is an attempt to explore the voting decision making process of Black women in America, in an attempt to better understand Black women's voting behavior in the United States. I specifically focused on why Black women are in mass voting for the Democrat party and what

created this phenomenon. I explore why do Black women vote, if Black women are having conversations about politics regularly, and what are Black women's general feelings towards the Democrat Party.

I conducted a series of interviews with Black women across the United States across various socio-economic, geographic, and generational backgrounds. This thesis explores this research as follows: first, I will summarize the history of Black women gaining suffrage in the Women's Suffrage Movement and the Civil Rights Movement to illustrate how the double fight for suffrage impacted Black women as voters and engage with important works written about the topic. Then, I will discuss Black women's relationship to the Democrat Party and why the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections are important elections to study to better understand Black women voters in America. Next, I explain how I conducted the research and lastly, I highlight the findings of the research. The findings primarily focus on three categories: Black women's sentiments towards the Democrat and Republican Parties, Black women's political discussion activities, and Black women's reasons for voting. Although this study is not representative of Black women as voting bloc, this study is important in better understanding the voting decision making process of some Black women. This data can be used to guide more research in the future, by providing a few of the motivations of some Black women voters and adds to a wider conversation about Black women voters.

Review of Literature

The Women's Suffrage Movement

There can be no discussion about Black women as voters without taking into account the complex and unique history of Black women fighting for suffrage in the United States. Unlike

many other voting demographics, Black women fought for the right to vote on two different fronts.

The first fight for Black women's suffrage was during the women's suffrage movement. The women's suffrage movement refers to the organization of women in the United States fighting for the right to vote. The beginning and end of the movement is highly contested (Catt & Schuler). One of the reasons that the official start of the movement is debated is because the official women's movement is birthed by the anti-slavery movement. In the book, Woman Suffrage & Politics, by Carrie Chapman Catt & Nettie Rogers Shuler (famously published in 1923, 3 years after the 19th amendment), Rogers and Shuler explore the intricacies of the suffrage movement. Catt and Shuler discuss the creation of The National Female Anti-Slavery Society which formed in 1833 (Catt&Shuler, 1923). This organization was important to the genesis of the women's movement due to the fact that, "It is claimed as not only the first organized women's society but also as the first effort of women to affect a political question." (Catt & Shuler, 1923). It is during the anti-slavery movement that women begin to politically organize in large numbers.

In 1848, the Declaration of Women's Rights was drafted, adopted, and signed, sparking a massive growth of devotion to the women's movement (Catt & Shuler, 1923). During this time there is a switch from a sole focus on the anti-slavery movement to also include the fight for women's suffrage (Catt & Shuler, 1923). By 1850, "the first National Woman's Rights Convention was held in Worcester, Massachusetts" in October and "from 1850 to 1860, a national suffrage convention was held in the United States each year, with the exception of one year" (Catt & Shuler, 1923, p. 23). By "the tenth annual national suffrage convention" (Catt& Shuler, 1923, p.26) in 1860 the women's movement had made significant progress. The

chairman on the committee of Finance, Miss Anthony, gave a report at the convention, in her

report she stated:

> The press has changed its tone. Instead of ridicule we now have grave debate.' She
> reported the many legal changes already made, the aroused and sympathetic public
> opinion, and predicted that New York would 'enfranchise its women when it revises its
> constitution six years hence… 'During the past year we have had six women lecturing in
> New York for several months each. Conventions have been held in forty countries and
> one or more lectures delivered in one hundred and fifty towns and villages" (Catt&
> Shuler, 1923, p.26).

These progressions in the early women's movement are crucial in understanding the women's

movement holistically.

The national organization of women centered race and slavery and was the genesis of the

women's movement. It is interesting to point out that it is race that later divides the women's

movement. The start of the Civil War irrevocably impacts the women's movement, Catt and

Shuler (1923) state, "Alas, before the date for the next annual suffrage convention the nation was

plunged into the tragic depths of Civil War over the slavery issue; and thereafter woman suffrage

was so hopelessly enmeshed in the politics of the Negro question as to be inextricable for long

years to come" (Catt & Shuler, 1923, p.27). After the Civil War the focus on the women's

movement declined tremendously. The discussion surrounding the possible ratification of the

14th amendment that granted Black men the right to vote and women's suffrage was a large

debate in the country, Catt & Shuler (1923) state:

> This gauntlet thrown down to the Republican leaders brought out a paradoxical debate,
> many supporters of woman suffrage stoutly opposed the amendment, and many
> opponents defending it … They contended, however, that while woman and Negro
> suffrage were both just and logical, the nation would not accept two reforms at one time;
> therefore the question of suffrage must be divided and the first chance be given to the
> Negro (Catt & Shuler,1923, p.42)

This debate caused massive division between each side arguing which should take precedence.

Many of these spaces that were created for women during the women's movement were unwelcoming to Black women. Black women held a peculiar position because their identity of womanhood and Blackness impacted their ability to participate in the movement, furthering the political differences among women. This was an entirely impossible task because women are not a monolith. The women's movement hyper focused on the issues of white women and politically redefined womanhood on the basis of white womanhood, further ostracizing Black women and their importance to the movement.

The division of women is extremely important because it is the basis of understanding the criticism of the concept of "the women's vote" and why it fails to address the variability in women's political opinions. The "women's vote" refers to the concept that women are a voting bloc, who share similar voting patterns and political concerns (Jalbert, 2009). In the article, "The Myth of the Women's Vote: From Suffrage to the 2008 Election, by Celeste Jalbert" (2009), Jalbert (2009) details the history of women's suffrage in the United States from the women's movement until the 2008 election. Jalbert (2009) challenges the concept of a uniform women's voting bloc and details how even during the women's suffragist movement, there was strife in creating a collective political position, especially on the topic of race. There was a deep divide regarding Black men receiving the right to vote before women (Jalbert, 2009). Jalbert (2009) explains that groups such as the American Woman Suffrage Association were accepting of Black men's suffrage before women, while other groups such as the New York charter of the AWSA believed in a women's first approach. The split between organizations that included Black men in the fight for suffrage and the organizations that believed that women should have the right to vote before Black men, highlight the lack of unionization of women and further explain the lack of a "women's vote" correlated with the women's vote myth.

Despite Black women actively fighting in the movement, they were simultaneously being excluded by many groups within the movement. The exclusion of Black women created a political divide that split the women's movement into political facets factions?.

The myth of the women's vote is important to highlight because it captures the complexity of women's voting and details the difference between women as a voting demographic and Black women as a voting bloc. Understanding the history of the women's movement colors the experience of Black women voters. This difference in experience is pivotal in understanding how the women's movement impacted Black women's voting experiences.

While Black women were being disenfranchised in the women's movement, many Black men were disenfranchising Black women during this time period (Gordon et al., 1997). The book, *African American Women and the Vote 1837 to 1965*, includes essays submitted by Black women at the Afro-American Women and the Vote: From Abolitionism to the Voting Rights Act conference which was held in 1987 at the University of Massachusetts. In the essay, "Architects of a Vision," by Willi Coleman. Coleman describes the response of Black men to the issues of Black women during this time period after the civil war, Coleman states:

> In general, black men emulated the attitudes of their white counterparts toward issues of leadership and gender. The public arena, and especially that of politics was masculine by law, religion and custom … few men thought that the treatment of women had any philosophical or political relationship to the broader struggle for social and political equality … equal female participation on the convention floor was viewed as an encroachment on 'manhood rights (Gordon et al., 1997, p.29).

The response of Black men to the issues of Black women further disenfranchised them. National conventions, such as the Colored National Convention, dismissed the importance of Black women's rights (Gordon et al., 1997). Coleman details the 1849 convention in Ohio, "At Ohio's state convention, women still sought clarification of their position, even though many of the

same delegates were present (Gordon et al., 1997, p.30). Black women's issues were not prioritized, "the Negro convention movement never developed a concrete philosophy to which males were expected to adhere or upon which women could rely."(Gordon et al., 1997, p.30). This is an important piece of history that impacted Black women politically.

Black women in large numbers decided to dedicate their issues to more important matters and focused their efforts in effective ways (Gordon et al., 1997). Coleman states, "Black females did not concentrate the major part of their energies on efforts to integrate spheres claimed by men. They chose instead to radicalize, and were themselves radicalized within, their own organizations" (Gordon et al., 1997, p.30). Black women across various backgrounds found solace in each other and organized on their own throughout both of these movements, Coleman details this by stating, "In spite of class differences, the tight cocoon of gender and race similarity provided a base that nurtured leadership and harbored the kernels of progressive ideas. It was an allegiance bound by equal portions of devotion to race (Gordon et al., 1997, p.30).

This solidarity among Black women was pivotal in creating the Black women voting bloc. White women in the women's movement failed to understand the complexities that Blackness presented in their fight for suffrage and Black men often agreed with sexist ideologies (Catt & Shuler) (Gordon et al., 1997) or believed that Black women's issues should take a backseat. This presented a unique issue for Black women. Black women's suffrage depended on both of these movements. The fight for the *Negro* vote did not include Black women's right to vote and solely fighting for the women's suffrage would also end in Black women's inability to vote. Creating the paradoxical existence of the political nature of Black women. Black women were the only ones who could truly understand and identify with their own unique struggle for suffrage.

The Civil Rights Movement

The second fight for Black women was during the civil rights movement. Despite women earning the right to vote in 1920 with the 19th amendment, Black women were unable to vote until the civil rights act was passed due to grandfather clauses, voting intimidation, and other tactics used to deter and prevent Black people from voting. Both Black men and Black women had to fight for the right to vote during the civil rights movement, but Black women's double minority of Blackness and Womanhood impacted their experience during the civil rights movement.

One of the ways that Black women's intersectional identities impacted their experience in the civil rights movement is the way that the history of the civil rights movement minimizes the role of Black women organizers in comparison to their male counterparts. The book, "Women in the Civil Rights Movement Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965," is a collection of essays submitted from the convention, Women in the Civil Rights Movement, Trailblazers & Torchbearers, 1941-1965, which was held in October of 1988 at Georgia State University in the Martin Luther King Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change (Crawford, 2008). In one of the essays, *The Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement,* by Anne Standley, Standley describes the lack of information on Black women activists during the civil rights movement, Standley states:

> The role of black women in the civil rights movement has received scant attention from historians. Most studies of the movement have examined such organizations as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee … and accordingly have focused on the black ministers who served as officers in those organizations, all of whom were men." (Crawford & Standley, 2008, p. 183).

Despite many attempts to minimize the roles of Black women in the civil rights movement,

Black women were very prominent in the movement. Standley describes the influential positions

of Black women in the movement, she states:

> Yet, in fact, women exerted an enormous influence, both formally, as members of the
> upper echelon of SNCC, SCLC, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and
> informally, as spontaneous leaders and dedicated participants. Many of the protests that
> historians describe as led by ministers were initiated by women" (Crawford & Standley,
> 2008).

Standley describes one of the many instances in which Black women's roles in the civil rights

movement were minimized and written out of the mainstream history, she states:

> For example, Martin Luther King, Jr., is usually cited as the leader of the Montgomery
> Bus Boycott, since it was King who was appointed director of the organization that
> coordinated the boycott, the Montgomery Improvement Association. Yet the boycott was
> started by a woman, Jo Ann Robinson, and by the women's group that she headed, the
> Women's Political Council. (Crawford & Standley, 2008, p.184).

Recognizing the ways in which Black women mobilized themselves and their community and

the direct impact that Black women had in propelling the movement, is important in

understanding the journey to the Civil Rights Act and ultimately the *full* granting of voting rights

to Black women.

Black women were also major propellers in the civil rights movement through their roles

as cultural leaders. In the essay, *Women as Culture Carriers in the Civil Rights Movement:*

Fannie Lou Hamer, by Bernice Johnson Reagon, from the book, "Women in the Civil Rights

Movement Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965," Reagon details the importance of Black

women cultural leaders through the study of Fannie Lou Hamer, she states, "Fannie Lou Hamer

was an activist and a cultural leader who assumed major responsibility for the creation and

maintenance of the environment within which those who struggle for freedom lived and worked"

(Crawford & Johnson Reagon, 2008, p.204). Reagon (2008) further examines the ways that

Black women cultural leaders propel their communities by utilizing their status as insiders to

relate and connect to their community. This insider status provides the cultural leader with a

unique understanding of the people they are leading, Reagon explains Hamer's delivery in

relation to her insider status by stating, "We know about her because of the power of her voice.

Everywhere she went she spoke, sang, and shared her life and her vision of a better world. It was

a powerful message; her delivery was Southern, Black and riveting." (Crawford & Johnson

Reagon, 2008, p.204). Hamer was Black and Southern and was specifically fighting for other

Black Southern people. Her deep understanding and personal experiences with racism made her

more relatable and important to the movement. Many Black women activists during the civil

rights movement, used oral storytelling as a way to organize. Reagon describes the important

role of storytelling by stating:

> Within the African American oral tradition our stories and our legacies travel through time in a bed of rich cultural sound. I am not talking about simply starting something in a room and changing the space the people in the room have to deal with. It goes much farther because the oral tradition requires the transmission of its lode across generations. When you are a part of such an environment the experiences that are passed in that space become forever a part of who you are. In order to serve and extend the process and keep alive these treasures for others living in your time and beyond, you walk out of that space with responsibility for the stories you now carry within your soul (Crawford & Johnson Reagon, 2008, p.204)

The tradition of storytelling in Black American people, according to Reagon, is not just a

retelling of a story but rather a way to connect generations of people in ways that transcend time.

Black women cultural leaders utilize the art of oral storytelling to connect Black people through

time and space to further the understanding and progression of Black people. If, relatability and

insider status connects Black communities, Black struggles and experiences connect Black

people even more deeply. Black women activists use the retelling of generational trauma and

terror to further the understanding of the Black experience in order to revolutionize and empower

Black people in the present. This connection through the use of storytelling organizes Black

people politically and was an important backbone of the civil rights movement.

A major component of keeping morale high during the civil rights movement is the use of

oral storytelling through the form of singing. Many Black organizers used Negro spirituals

passed down from generations to further strengthen their endurance during their horrific

treatment in the civil rights movement. It is this storytelling that connected Black people from

slavery, who used these very songs to get through their enslavement, to the Black people in the

civil rights movement, who got through the mental, physical, and sexual torture during the civil

rights movement. Reagon details a song that she learned that describes this specific phenomenon

she states:

> I cannot tell you when I learned that song. I did not get it out of a book and I did not learn
> it in a classroom. It was traveling to me through time, an integral element of the cultural
> world into which I was born. I know the song and the singing because when I was
> surrounded by it, its power moved me and became a comfort to me, and I now continue
> its life in sharing it (Crawford & Johnson Reagon, 2008, p.206).

The art of storytelling in the Black community connects Black Americans of generations in

ways that connect socially and politically and greatly impact the ways in which Black people

organize politically. Reagon (2008) states, "It is important to talk about cultural transmission,

how ideas, analysis, social stances, and worldviews move through communities and across time"

(Crawford & Johnson Reagon, 2008, p.206). Cultural leaders are incredibly important in

understanding the political activity of Black people and it would be remiss to not acknowledge

the important role that Black women cultural leaders played in the civil rights movement and

how they impact Black women voters in the present. Below is the song that Reagan included:

> Walk with me, my Lord, walk with me
> Walk with me, my Lord, walk with me
> While I'm on this tedious journey
> I want Jesus to walk with me

It is this double fight, the fight for suffrage in the women's movement and the fight for suffrage during the civil rights movement, that distinguishes the experience of Black women voters. This unique history has informed the politics of Black women today and are important in understanding how Black women navigate the political system.

The relationship between Black women voters and the Democrat party

Black women have a peculiar relationship with the Democrat party. In the article, "Not Your Mule? Disrupting Political Powerlessness of Black Women Voters," by Chinyere Ezie (2021), Ezie (2021) explores the voting patterns of Black women in the United States and discusses the increasing loss of political power of Black women despite the increase in the number of Black women voters. Ezie (2021) also discusses Black women's mass voting for the Democratic Party candidates and argues that this loyalty exhibited by Black women is not met with political opportunity, power, or access. Ezie states, "Black women also lead all other demographic groups when it comes to their support of the Democratic Party. As political scientist Kelly Dittmar declared after analyzing two decades of voting data, 'Black women voters voted for the Democratic candidates in each year at the highest levels of any gender and race subgroup.' (Ezie, 2021, p.671).

In the article, "Black Girl Magic and the 2020 Election," by Julianne Malveaux (2020), Malveaux explores some of the most important political issues for Black women. Malveaux (2020) states:

> Essence magazine and the Black Women's Roundtable have surveyed Black women about the issues that concern them most. Melanie Campbell, convener of the Black Women's Roundtable and president and CEO of the National Coalition for Black Civic Participation, summarizes the top concerns: "survival, safety and stability." Black women are concerned about the rise in hate crimes and the persistence of structural racism. In light of the public lynching of George Floyd

and the racist rhetoric of the incumbent president, these concerns are unsurprising (Malveaux, 2020).

The main issues that concern Black women in the current political climate are racially biased. In contrast, in the 2020 Democratic Platform created by the DNC 2020 Platform Committee, the issues that were most relevant for the Democrat party in 2020 were: building a stronger fairer economy, achieving universal, affordable, and quality health care, reforming the judicial system and protecting more communities, climate change and environmental justice, updating a more modern immigration system, improving access to quality education, and fixing American leadership and diplomacy (2020 Platform). Black women and the Democrat party only share one common major priority; reforming the judicial system and protecting more communities, and it is important to note that the priority most relevant to Black women is a sub point in a greater plan for the Democrat Party. The Democrat party lists two pieces of legislation aimed at protecting civil rights and an ambiguous plan for ending racial discrimination throughout the country. It is very clear that despite the fact that the Democrat party is not prioritizing the most important issues of Black women by creating tangible, systemic, and permanent solutions to these issues, Black women chose to vote for the Democrat party in the 2020 election.

The phenomenon of Black women voting for the Democrat party in such large numbers is noteworthy because they are not single issue voters (Belknap & Hawkins, 2020). In the article, "In Their Names Black Women's Political Power in the United States," by Emilia Belknap and Skyler Hawkin, Belknap and Hawkins explore Black women's political behavior, they state:

> It would be amiss to assume that they vote only to advance the Democratic agenda. They are showing up to the polls to advance an inclusive and wide-ranging political agenda that addresses a range of gender, racial, economic and social inequalities, which Black communities can organize behind" (Belknap & Hawkins, 2020, p. 15).

It is easy to assume that because Black women are voting in such large numbers for the

Democratic Party, that they are dedicated and committed to the principles of the party. Belknap

and Hawkins (2020) suggest that there is more to the political decisions of Black women. What,

then, are Black women's political motivations? What is the "political agenda" that Belknap and

Hawkins are alluding to? If Black women are not in mass in favor of the policies and practices of

the Democratic Party, then why are they voting for the party in such large numbers?

Understanding the decision making process and political activity for Black women is crucial in

comprehending Black women as a voting bloc.

Theoretical Analysis

The 2016 and 2020 Elections

In the 2016 presidential election Black women voted overwhelmingly for candidate

Hillary Clinton, while white women voted underwhelmingly and under-predicted for Hillary

Clinton (Pew Research Center, 2020) (Jaffe, 2018). White women were predicted to vote in mass

for the Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton, but the majority of white women actually voted for

Republican candidate Donald Trump (Jaffe, 2018). White women also held the position for the

highest voter turnout rate in the 2016 election (Pew Research Center, 2020). While there has

been research on why white women voted vastly differently than predicted (Hamad, 2020) (Jaffe,

2018) (Tien, 2017), I am interested in exploring the phenomena that lead to Black women in

mass voting for the Democrat party. Ezie (2021) also explains that Black women had the second

highest voting demographic turnout in the 2016 election, she states:

> Although Black women's voter turnout saw a dip in 2016 with 66 percent of Black
> women participating, Black women voters still exceeded turnout by every demographic
> group besides white women, who showed up to the polls at a rate of 67 percent … While

2020 turnout numbers are still being calculated, the trend of strong voter participation by Black women appears to have continued unbroken (Ezie, 2021).

Why did Black women in mass choose to vote for Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton, how did Black women come to this voting decision, and would this voting decision have aided in increasing attention to issues important to Black women?

This thesis seeks to explore this phenomenon of Black women voters trend in voting for the Democrat Party despite the party not prioritizing the issues most important to Black women and to further understand why Black women are choosing to vote, what are their political motivations, and how do their conversations about politics influence their voting behavior.

Methods

Procedures

This research process began with the University of Chicago's Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. I filled out an application with information regarding the research process, recruiting scripts, interview questions, and verbal consent forms. The IRB reviewed the application and determined that this research project was exempt and served minimal risk to the participants, no more risk than everyday life. After the IRB made their decision, I began the research process.

I recruited the participants in this study through word of mouth referrals and past research participants that consented to being contacted about future studies. I corresponded with the participants through email and before the start of each interview, I emailed a copy of the verbal consent form.

At the beginning of each Zoom meeting, I asked the participant for their consent to record. After receiving consent, I started the recording and went over the verbal informed consent form and received consent for the interview.

Interviews

I conducted 6 different interviews over Zoom. Each interview was audio and video recorded and then transcribed by a transcribing software. The average interview lasted about 25 minutes in duration. The interviews were semi-structured. Each participant was asked a set of questions based on the research questions and additional follow up questions based on their responses.

Interviews were the most fitting method for this research project because I wanted to understand the process of Black women's voting, interviewing them allowed me the opportunity to speak with various Black women about their political views. I was able to gain insight into their voting history and political beliefs in a more relaxed environment in an attempt to achieve the most honest and unrehearsed answers.

Verbal Consent Form

For this research study, I chose verbal consent forms to keep my participants anonymous. Verbal consent forms allowed me to give all of the information regarding the research process to the participants and to receive consent for the interview and recordings without connecting any paperwork to individual participants. This limited my need to keep track of any documents and code them to anonymize the participants.

Participants

I chose to keep the participants in the study anonymous to protect their identities and to ensure that they would be comfortable sharing their opinions.

The requirements for the study were that each participant had to identify as a Black woman, be of voting age, and currently reside in the United States. All of the participants met these requirements and vary across age, educational background, work experience, and where they live in the United States.

I chose to interview Black women with a variety of different backgrounds to better understand Black women across the United States and to limit the amount of bias within the study. If I intentionally only interviewed Black women who lived in a specific state, identified with one specific party, were of the same religion, etc., I wouldn't have been able to get a grasp on what Black women across different backgrounds thought. While this study is not a representational survey of Black women in America, there are many things that can be learned from the study. Figures one, two, and three are charts detailing the participants' variation in backgrounds.
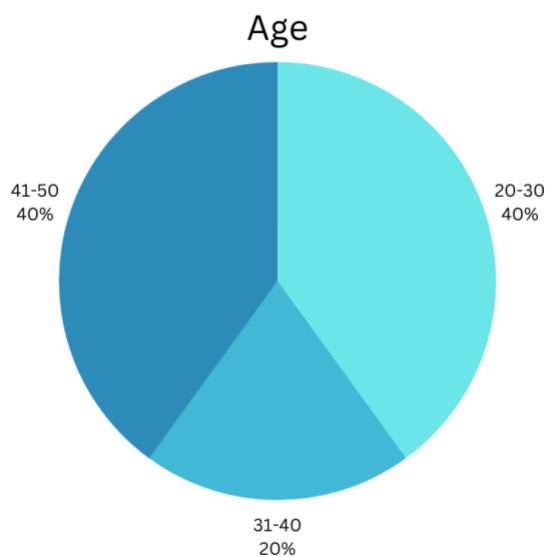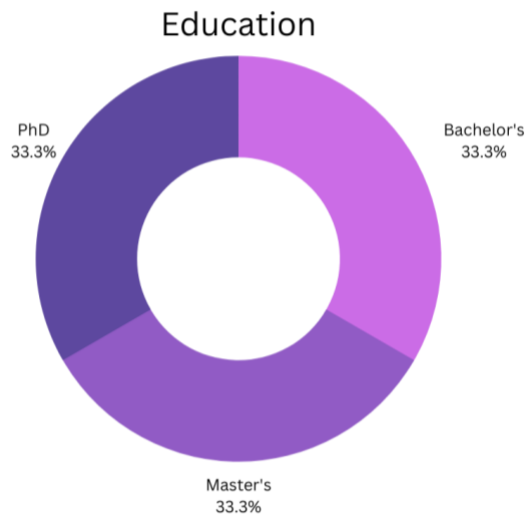
Age

41-50
40%

20-30
40%

31-40
20%

Figure 1

Education

PhD
33.3%

Bachelor's
33.3%

Master's
33.3%

Figure 2

Origin (within the United States)
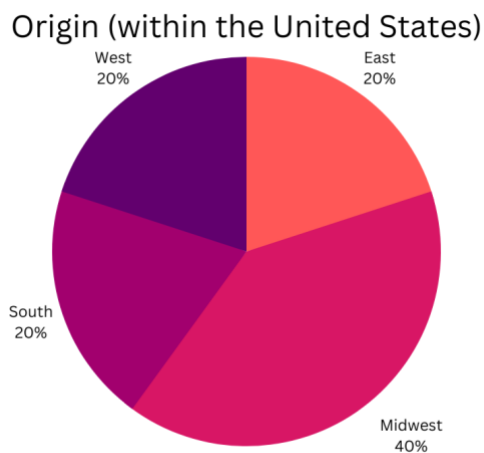

West
20%

East
20%

South
20%

Midwest
40%

Figure 3

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of the study is the size of the study. I intended on interviewing 10 participants, but due to the time constraints of the research project and lack of resources, I was only able to interview 6 people. Ideally, I would have been able to continue interviewing until I

reached saturation across each of the research questions. Despite interviewing less participants than intended, I was still able to reach saturation in a number of different interview questions.

Another limitation of the study is that all of the participants interviewed have at least a Bachelor's degree. The study would be more representative if there were more participants that did not have a college degree.

The next limitation of the study is the inherent issue of demographic polling data. Since, race and ethnicity is not collected on voting ballots, the demographic polling data is sourced from exit interviews and census data, which is not always completely accurate. It is important to account for these possible inaccuracies in the study.

Researcher Positionality

My position as a researcher in this research study is unique in this study because I am also a member of the demographic being studied. I am a Black woman, that is of voting age, that currently resides in the United States. This makes me an insider/outsider, an insider because I am a part of the community being researched and an outsider because I am the researcher in the study. It would be remiss to not include how my identity impacts the research study.

As a Black woman in higher education I had more access to other Black women who were college educated and were willing to talk about political issues. This positioned me in spaces that allowed me to be well connected to find participants for the study.

Another way that my identity impacts my position within this research is due to the comfortability many participants may have felt during the interview process. Since I am within the participant's cultural community, participants may feel more inclined to use colloquial terms and African American Vernacular English. This allows me the ability to translate and fully

understand the context of the conversation. In the article, Negotiating the Insider/Outsider Status: Black Feminist Ethnography and Legislative Studies, by Nadia E. Brown, Brown (2012) discusses her own positionality as a researcher studying participants who she shared identities with. Brown highlights centering your own experiences within the research to gain further insight into the research, Brown (2012) states, "By placing my experiences as a Black woman at the center of analysis, this study offers fresh insight on the prevailing paradigms and epistemologies in legislative studies." (Brown, 2012, p.21). I hope that I am able to use my own unique experiences to gain deeper insight into the research.

Research Questions

These are the research questions that the study seeks to address:

1. What are Black women's general feelings about the Democrat and Republican Party? Are either of these parties supporting the political issues most important to Black women?

2. Do Black women have conversations about politics often? If so, whom are they having political discussions with and whom are they choosing to not have political discussions with? Why?

3. Why are Black women choosing to vote? What does voting mean to Black women and what are they hoping to gain from voting?

Findings

The findings of this research study include the results alongside the discussion. It is split into three major categories: Black women's sentiments towards the Democrat and Republican Parties, Black women's political discussion activities, and Black women's reasons for voting.

Black women's sentiments towards the Democrat and Republican Parties

Understanding Black women's sentiments towards the Democrat and Republican Parties

is necessary in comprehending Black women's voting process.

There were mixed opinions about the Democrat Party throughout this study. While some

participants were in alignment with the Democrat Party's current initiatives, other participants

were unenthused by the party's inability to fulfill campaign promises. One of the participants

who had positive feelings towards the Democrat Party said, "In general, I agree with most of

what they stand for, what they represent." Another participant stated:

> I think they're trying. I think I will give them the benefit of the doubt and the fact that
> there are efforts being made … I mean, we just saw efforts from Biden that he's coming
> out with this student loan forgiveness plan that he promised within his campaign, which
> is nice to see a connection between what they were campaigning for and what they're
> doing. I think that they're trying to give us the best thing they can .. I do think a lot of it is
> like second choice options, which isn't ideal. But again, I think that's a function of our
> government.

This particular statement is interesting because this participant is stating that the Democrat Party

has limited power due to the design of the government structure. I found this to be notable

because many of the participants agreed that the Democrat Party was failing to address their

main concerns, but agreed that the Republican Party was able to get their own initiatives

accomplished. Why can the Republican Party, under the same government structure, meet their

objectives, while the Democrat Party seems to be consistently failing to achieve their initiatives

in the eyes of some of their Black women voters. One of the participants stated, "Yes, I think the

Republican party does better at representing its constituency than the Democratic party does

because there is no guessing about what a Republican is going to vote for or against. You just got

to look at what the consensus of the party is saying, and that's what they're doing." Another

participant illustrated this disconnection between the Democrat Party and their Black female

voters, she stated, " It's [Democrat Party] typically the party I vote for. It is the party that my

family has voted for my entire life and it is a party that I want to say, with my full chest,

represents what my community needs. But that's why I say it's complicated because I think we

have a lot of mismatches between what voters are wanting and what they're getting. And I think

just recent politics has shown its face." What is striking about this quote is the allegiance to the

Democrat Party that many of the participants reported. Even though many of the participants

describe a lack of satisfaction with the party's behaviors, they are still drawn to the party. A

participant alluded to the viewpoint that the Democrat Party was better for more liberal people

she stated, "It's supposed to be the better of the two parties for like more liberal people. At the

same time, I feel like a lot of the things that they do are performative. And for minorities

specifically, like. Black and Brown people. The requests or needs of those groups are not being

met by the Democratic party as is, even though that's kind of what a lot of them campaign for."

Multiple participants reported that many of the Democrat Party's actions seemed performative,

one the responses was:

> I think they do a lot of performative things like, they talk the talk, but they don't actually have the action. Like I'm thinking of AOC who is very vocal about what she thinks is right and what she thinks is wrong. But then, there was something a few months ago she had to vote for something and she knew her side wasn't going to win, so instead of voting nay she just did something and then was crying and I'm like, girl, why are you crying? You are literally our Congress, like, why are you crying? Or like the fact that there's a democratic majority and you would think, oh, there's Democrat majority all over. We have a democratic president or a house. All that. You would think that, okay things are going to get done, but things aren't getting done. Like the student loan thing. It's great, but there's still all this pushback, all this stuff. And it's not even the best they could have done. It's like, you guys are doing the bare minimum and it's embarrassing, like it's bad. And so then, whenever there's any issue, they get on the internet … We voted last year or two years ago … and you haven't done what you're supposed to. And it's like, in theory, on paper, it looks good, but when you actually look at what they're doing, they're not doing enough.

There is an awareness between some of the participants, that the Democrat Party is using Black and Brown voters to ensure their win in elections, but the party is not fulfilling the campaign requests that would actually impact Black and Brown communities.

Despite that realization many of the participants were unwilling to consider voting any other way. When asked, "If you saw that the Democrat party didn't align with your values would you still vote for them," there were many mixed responses. Some of the participants answered they wouldn't:

> No. I think that there's a choke hold of the democratic party on minorities, because it was previously a party that represented our values and policies well. But I don't have a connection. It's really who is advocating for what I want. And, that's what it should be. They're representatives of us. The reason they have a job is to represent us. So I think when we lose that connection, we feel like we need to just stay loyal to a party. I think that's something worth dissecting on its own, within the Black community, and Latin X community; all of the communities that are the backbone of votes for these parties. I think that if the Republican party became less extreme and actually had policies that would uphold and uplift and empower communities of color. Yeah, y'all got my vote.

Another participant in agreement with this sentiment stated, "Uh, no. Sorry, but no… I would look at someone that's closer into what my beliefs are. Now if somebody is just totally off the rails, obviously I'm not going to vote for that candidate." On the opposite end of the spectrum another participant said, "I would rather have them [the Democrat Party] in office than like Donald Trump, or people like that. Because I feel like at the end of the day, although they don't align with my values, they are more likely to pass policies or laws that are more helpful to me than the Republican Party. At the end of the day, on paper, my life statistics are more like the Democrats than the Republicans." This quote is fascinating because it explores going beyond her personal values in the hopes that they continue to vote in a way that is better than the Republican Party. Which begs the question: What makes a Democrat Party vote against your values better than a Republican vote against your values?

As expected, most of the participants had negative feelings towards the Republican Party, but unexpectedly many of the participants relayed the effectiveness of the Republican Party in getting their objectives achieved. Ezie explores her theory, the trapped constituency problem, which addresses how the two-party system negatively impacts Black women, she states, "At the root of the trapped constituency problem is America's two-party system where third-party voting is inevitable and where one party—the Republican Party—has purposefully branded itself as the party of white identity" (Ezie, 2021). The trapped constituency problem is problematic to Black women voters because it ultimately leaves them with no choice but the Democrat party. The consequences of this system is reflected through the views of many of the participants. One of the participants stated, "No, I think they prioritize the opposite of what I want to happen and they do make it happen. If it's one thing they're gonna do, it's attack human rights." This participant went on to explain how the Republican Party's views regarding abortion, health care, and critical race theory directly go against their personal views and what they're actively fighting against. Another participant stated, "They're going to take care of their own … they're going to do what works for them and for theirs. They don't look at the big picture." This finding was crucial because it calls into question, if the Republican Party can consistently achieve their objectives, why can't the Democrat Party? Or more importantly whose goals are being achieved within the Democrat Party and do they align with Black women voters?

Black women's political discussion activities

A major part of this research paper was to explore the political discussion activities of Black women. I aimed to find if there were patterns in the types of political conversations Black women were having and their voting activity. Despite my research efforts, there needs to be

more research to make definitive claims about any patterns or connections. Even still, this research project will add to the existing scholarship.

The frequency of Black women voters' conversations about politics were often. All of the participants reported having conversations about politics on at least a monthly basis. What was more informative was whom Black women voters were having these political discussions with. Most of the participants reported having conversations about politics with their coworkers, which was especially thought-provoking considering that politics is known to be an uncomfortable topic that is often avoided in work environments. The Society for Human Resource Management, the largest Human Resources professional society (Society for, n.d.), conducted a survey about the rise of politics at work (Shrm, 2020). In the Society for Human Resource Management's press release, "A Workforce Divided: Survey Finds Alarming Rise of Politics at Work," they explained the findings of the survey, which shows an uptick in the amount of political discussions that are being discussed at work, "For decades, conventional business wisdom has held that employees should check their political opinions at the door. A new SHRM survey, however, shows that not only are political conversations occurring at work, they're on the rise—and causing conflicts. The findings suggest that political topics—like race, sex and gender—are a dimension of diversity that workplace cultures should include and embrace by facilitating civil conversations." This increase in political discussion in the workplace in conjunction with increasingly clashing political opinions is very interesting considering that Black women voters tend to be very liberal. In the future, there should be more research on why Black women are choosing to have these conversations and if these conversations have an impact on their voting decisions. Another group of people that most of the participants chose to have political conversations with are their friends and family. Almost all of the participants reported

having political discussions with their friends and family. When asked what these discussions

consist of, one of the participants relayed her conversations with her family:

> It's sometimes me just sort of listening, it's very interesting to me because there seems to be like this investment, or it seems personal to them. Like such and such did this and they they're blocking this bill because blah, blah, blah, blah. I'm like, well, no, none of these people know that you in particular exist. So. I don't see the investment of energy to make such emotional investments or have such emotional reactions to some of these politicians or political acts. And again, those conversations revolve around just the specific incident or person not in alignment with the context of why these things keep occurring in the first place.

Another participant explained their conversations with their friends by stating:

> Yeah. So I think a lot of people's friend groups are reflective of their own personal opinions and probably political stances. I can say, I personally don't have any conservative, Republican friends, that I choose to hang out with outside of classes. So obviously, like the makeup is different. I also tend to be with more minorities than anything and so the conversation for us is always race and politics. It's all we talk about. We'll talk about ethnicity, nationality. We'll talk about voting. We'll talk about like classic American politics things, but I think because all of us are from a background that isn't a majority, we all kind of engage in, both like, comfort in conversations where we affirm each other's beliefs and affirm the work that we're doing, because nearly all of us are studying race and politics. And so like hearing from other people, what they're doing, what we're doing, how we're trying to advocate for ourselves in the classroom and in politics in general, like what activism efforts are we doing outside of the classroom, how are we helping the community around us. That's kind of the politics that we have on a personal level.

What's important to note is the variability in topics and engagement within discussions amongst

the participants. There was no definitive answer of how Black women conduct political

discussions, and therefore it was inconclusive of if political discussions impact Black women's

voting decision making process. Further research is needed to explore these hypotheses.

Black women's reasons for voting

The most informative section of the findings is the data regarding the reason the

participants vote. There was great variability in the responses of the participants. Many of the

participants were skeptical about the effectiveness of voting and despite their skepticism, a

common theme throughout the responses was that they felt a responsibility and obligation to vote.

Despite many of the participants reporting feeling a responsibility and/or obligation to vote, many of the participants were skeptical about the value in voting. When asked, why do you vote, a participant responded by stating, "I feel like the answer that people want to hear is because it matters and it makes a difference, which I would agree with. I guess I'm saying, it's hard to see that your vote matters." Another participant was even more skeptical about the process of voting, she said:

> Honestly, the stickers, that's all I expect from them. Because I don't know. I feel like maybe I'm hoping that the people that we elect will actually represent our views and what we want. But, yeah, I don't know. I feel like a lot of the times I vote because I know it's like my duty I should vote, but … I really don't expect anything from y'all."

If Black women as a collective are not seeing an increase in political power through voting and some are even skeptical of the process of voting, why are Black women continuing to vote?

One of the reasons that Black women may continue to vote is due to their perceived level of responsibility. A number of the participants alluded to a sense of responsibility to vote. One of the participants illustrated this opinion by stating, "The decision to vote for me is not really a decision. I think there's both responsibility in my head that I need to and also, of course, social pressure to do so." Another participant reported a similar experience, she said:

> I vote to make a change for the folks coming up behind me. For our future and the other generations that are coming up. I think it's important because if there's a cause that you agree on every vote counts.

These responses were particularly notable because they reported feeling a responsibility to vote for people other than themselves, due to either social pressure or the hopes of creating a better society for the next generation. Their reasons for voting did not include wanting to personally benefit themselves. This indicates a possible reason why Black women are willing to consistently vote for the Democrat Party even if the party isn't aligned with their personal values. Some

Black women are willing to vote outside of their personal beliefs and take on the responsibility

of voting for outside factors that are not necessarily within their benefit. There needs to be

further research on what are the specific outside factors that impact Black women's voting

decisions, and why are Black women taking on this responsibility.

      Obligation was another major theme throughout the interviews. The theme of obligation

was different in comparison to responsibility because instead of an overall sense of responsibility

to society, the theme of obligation was focused on how the history of Black voters in America

impacted the importance of voting to Black women. A large majority of the participants

described feelings of obligation to their ancestors and the people who fought in the civil rights

movement. One of the participants reflected this view point by saying, "I participate in this

process because I know I had ancestors who literally sacrificed their lives [for the right to vote].

So I do it in remembrance of them." A second participant stated, "I just feel like I am obligated

to vote based on my cultural history." Another participant said, "I have to vote. My ancestors

died for the right to vote. So that's the least that I can do." Throughout the interviews there was a

constant theme that some of the participants were voting in remembrance and in solidarity with

their ancestors. This connects the theory earlier stated in the literature review. The feeling of an

obligation to vote felt by many Black women today is heavily related to the stories of inability to

vote by Black women in the past. These stories connect these two groups in a way that

transcends time and space and is important in understanding why Black American women may

choose to vote even if there is no tangible benefit to themselves. They may not be voting for

themselves directly, but out of respect for the people before them that could not vote. The people

that came before them felt an optimism about how their voting could possibly change society and

it may be a possible reason why we see Black women voting against their personal values and even at all, despite not seeing a systemic change reflected in society.

It is this responsibility and obligation that seems to be a possible indicator of how Black women vote and why they might make voting decisions that are not necessarily in their best interest.

Even though most of the participants said that their main reason for voting was rooted in responsibility or obligation, it is important to note the political issues that are important to them. In this research study I asked participants what were their top three most pressing political issues. Figure 4 is a chart detailing their responses:
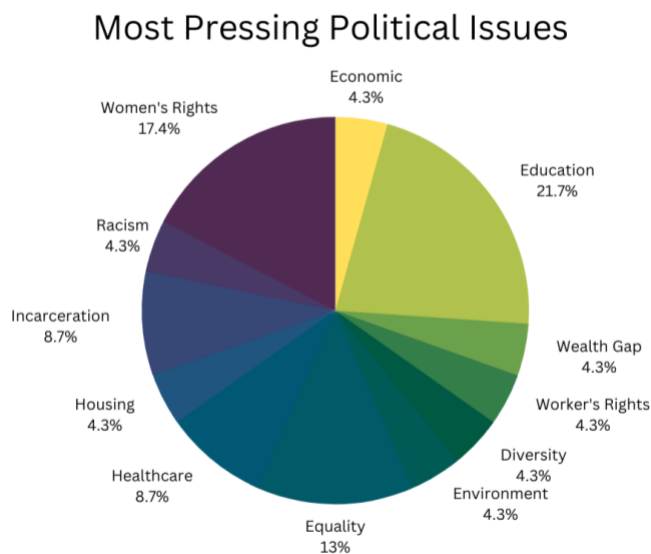
Most Pressing Political Issues

Economic 4.3%
Women's Rights 17.4%
Education 21.7%
Racism 4.3%
Incarceration 8.7%
Wealth Gap 4.3%
Housing 4.3%
Worker's Rights 4.3%
Diversity 4.3%
Healthcare 8.7%
Environment 4.3%
Equality 13%

Figure 4

The top three issues were education, women's rights, and equality. Only one of these were listed as a priority in the DNC's 2020 Platform.

Conclusion

Black women's unique identities of Blackness and womanhood greatly impact their political experience. Black women have a complicated voting decision making process that is

deeply rooted in their cultural history. An important takeaway from this research study is that despite the Democrat Party's failings in rising to the expectations of Black women voters, most of the participants were unwilling to stop voting for the Democrat Party. A possible way to combat this issue is through Ezie's swing vote plan. Ezie argues that Black women need to position themselves as swing voters, she states, "instead of hinging swing voting on the non-credible threat that Black women intend to join the Republican Party en masse, Black women can act like swing voters by placing their voter turnout in jeopardy" (Ezie, 2021). Ezie details a four step plan to implement Black women's potential strategy as swing voters. While, I do agree that Ezie's swing-vote plan is innovative, I am skeptical about the implementation and efficacy of the project. There should be future research about this swing state plan and about other ways to solve this issue for Black women voters. There should also be future research diving deeper into the patterns of Black women's political discussions and voting. Even though the Democrat Party may at surface seem like a plausible and rational voting choice, after further investigation, Black women's reasons for voting for the party are varied and complex. In all, it is the choice of Black women to continue to make voting decisions that they believe in, but I hope that these voting choices will eventually result in an increase of political power.

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