Resisting Marginalization: Black Women's Political Ambition and Agency

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In 2018, more than 600 Black women sought elected office in the United States. Of these candidates, one of the most radical was Stacey Abrams, who sought to become the first Black women governor in the nation. Not only does she exemplify the untapped campaign strength of Black women and their ability to access networks to mobilize diverse populations, and not only did she seek to become the first Black woman gubernatorial officeholder, *she also took the crucial step to do so.* Along with countless other Black women, Abrams envisions a larger world in which Black women's resistance to inequality and oppression matter and in which they feel their work is beneficial to those in their community and society overall. The literature on understanding the political ambition of women variously explains the challenges that women face in seeking elected positions. Much of it concentrates on white women; it negates the lens through which Black women view themselves and their political agency. The literature also ignores how Black women navigate political choices, opportunities, and obstacles. This narrow scope, therefore, limits our understanding and regard for mechanisms beyond voting in which Black women engage, such as community organizing, civic engagement, and office seeking (Cohen 2003; Smooth 2014). This narrow scope prompts me to ask: What is the path to Black women's political ambition? Is ambition defined too narrowly for these women? I propose a theory of *ambition on the margins* to explore how and why Black women decide to run for office and engage politically. Data gathered from focus groups of young Black women support my theory by revealing the value of social networks and their continuous fight to resist stereotypes while striving to advance their communities.

AMBITION OF MARGINALITY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ambition theory often either misunderstands or completely neglects the sense of community that leads Black women to engage in a unique type of political work. Schlesinger's (1966) foundational book on political ambition argued that political careers depend on the structural conditions of the political system and political opportunity. The concept of political structural conditions expanded to include incumbency, stereotypes, partisanship, and electoral systems (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Hayes and Lawless 2016; Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2011; Schneider and Bos 2014). Structural factors undoubtedly affect and determine which political offices women seek. However, what more crucially determines Black women's decision to seek office and specifically higher office is which venue is most likely to provide the greatest impact for their communities. This can mean seeking and staying in a position at the local level or in a state legislature rather than seeking higher office. For Stacey Abrams and for other Black women, three factors seem to determine their decision: (1) radical imagination, (2) ambition, and (3) marginalization.

Radical Imagination

Stacey Abrams continues the legacy of Black women throughout history who dared to use their body, mind, and talents—as well as even the possibility of death—to oppose violence, discriminatory laws, social norms, and culture to make their voices heard and to elevate the standing of Black women and the Black community. These women include Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Shirley Chisholm, and Barbara Jordan. They and countless others envisioned a more just world in which their resistance mattered and would be beneficial to both those who looked like them and society overall. This type of social vision, or radical imagination, is what animates Black women in the face of adversity and marginalization to translate their vision of justice, equality, access, and freedom into social action. Black women's radical imagination convinces them that individually and collectively they can change a world that tells them they are less than.

Black women activate this radical imagination through networking, political mobilization, and office seeking. They are so aware that political engagement enhances their lives and their communities despite the marginalization that they face (e.g., pay discrimination, sexism, public shaming, and isolation). Indeed, Black women have used political engagement to undermine that very marginalization, to sustain ambition, and to foster socialization that encourages independence and collective identity through families, organizations, and religious institutions. That is, Black women's radical imagination enacted.

Ambition

Black women's ambition is shaped by political socialization, networks, and gendered and racial identity. Abrams and many other Black women in politics utilize their membership in primarily Black women organizations for

Figure 1
Ambition of Marginality
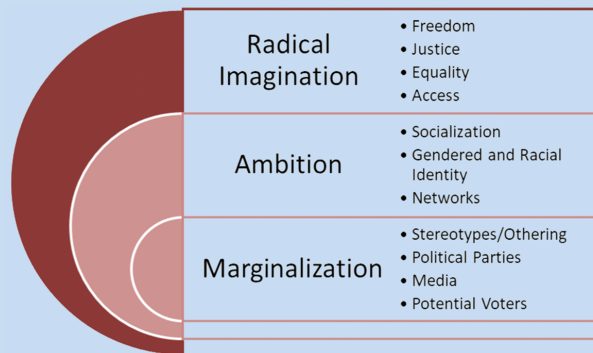
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mobilization and fundraising. In 2018, Democratic presidential candidate Senator Kamala Harris gained significant media attention about her membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha, the oldest Black sorority[1]. It is worth noting that of the total 25 Black women serving in the 116th US Congress, 18 are members of Black sororities. Scholars routinely posited that socialization into certain careers reinforced structural obstacles and that traditional gender roles hindered women candidates' emergence (Fowlkes, Perkins, and Rinehart 1979). However, this is not so true of Black women who, although limited in career options, developed autonomy in their homes and social capital within their communities (Guy-Sheftall 1995; Prestage 1991). They did this by developing a culture that encouraged the pursuit of successful

The exclusion of Black women from political participation facilitated the development of a nontraditional form of engagement that was informed by their political, economic, and social conditions (Giddings 1984; 1988). This participation outside of the mainstream is evident in the heightened level of community work and internal networks that Black women developed. For Black women seeking office, these networks increase social capital and provide access to potential voters and donors. They also facilitate candidate recruitment, fundraising, and voter mobilization. These networks are fostered in spaces within academic institutions, Black Greek-letter organizations, and Black female civic groups, which also provide an opportunity for Black women to cultivate community and develop strategies for social change within their organizations and professions.

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careers, economic self-reliance, political activism, and value in effectively representing themselves to and for the Black community (Barnes 2015; Higginbotham 1993). This unique race and gender status (Gay and Tate 1998; King 1988) strongly influenced how they define family and community and resist gender and racial oppression. This led Black women to use political participation as a means to achieve full equality and improve the status of the group (Barker, Jones, and Tate 1999; Gay and Tate 1998; Gilkes 1988; Morris 2015; Simien 2006).

Marginalization

Understanding the dynamics of marginalization informs what motivates Black women to engage in politics. King (1975) wrote about the "policy of invisibility" in which stereotypes, images, and myths result in the marginalization of Black women. She concluded, "[i]t should be emphasized that although the stereotyped images of Black women are generally devoid of reality, this actually hardly diminishes their effectiveness in achieving the political power that they serve" (King 1975, 122). Scholars including Collins (1990), Cohen (1999), Hancock (2004), and

Jordan-Zachery (2009) further explored the relationship among the social construction of Black womanhood, policy process, and marginalization. They concluded that stereotypes and culture demobilize or mobilize Black women. The images that King (1975) referenced influence media, voters, and political parties to ignore the needs and viability of Black women as candidates.

Indicative of their societal marginalization, when society has responded at all to Black women, it has done so with discomfort, neglect, hostility, and fear.[2] Public hostility and rebuke is not isolated; it permeates how institutions engage or fail to engage with Black women. Black women as candidates face heightened scrutiny due to hair texture, complexion, and financial and career history (Lemi and Brown 2020; Orey and Zhang 2019). During her gubernatorial campaign, Abrams was forced to publicly address her financial history and student-loan debt. Senator Kamala Harris faced additional scrutiny about her career as a prosecutor and her identity during her effort to become the 2020 Democratic Party presidential nominee (Price 2019). In many ways, the Democratic Party has followed suit by failing to address the viability of Black women candidates. These candidates reflect the political views and needs of its strongest voting bloc. Consequently, in May 2017, more than two dozen African American women submitted an open letter to Democratic National Committee Chairman Tom Perez, criticizing him for seeming to take for granted the party's most loyal base of support.

The limited literature suggests that marginalization faced by Black women promotes their higher levels of participation to combat the invisibility of being a Black woman (Alex-Assensoh and Stanford 1997; Stokes-Brown and Dolan 2010). Black women have begun to take it upon themselves to increase their own representation through the work of national organizations, including the Black Women's Roundtable, established by the National Coalition on Black Civic Engagement; and Higher Heights, which focuses on encouraging Black women not only to vote but also to seek political office.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study draws on data gathered from five focus groups (a total of 40 women) held from 2016 to 2019 in Florida, Illinois, and Texas[3] with undergraduate and graduate African American women students. They were highly engaged in their campus communities and interested in continuing to provide service through elected office and/or community activism.[4] The young women who participated were from various communities, from majority African American communities in rural and urban population centers to predominantly white suburban neighborhoods. The data presented represent the themes that emerged from the focus groups. Their comments show how Black women navigate marginalization, their sense of identity, and the value of organizations. The women describe how they found a sense of purpose in achieving goals and community engagement. Their ideas about service and a future in politics often were a result of their community experiences as well as the example of Black women in their home community.

BEING BLACK, FEMALE, AND AMBITIOUS

The complexity of being both Black and female provides a foundation for future political engagement.

Ambition

Black women embrace their identity and navigate the world with strength and agency. The students in the focus groups noted that their dual identity makes them unique and that this duality contributed to the high level of esteem they witnessed in Black women who provided service in their communities. When asked if they viewed their identity as positive or negative, Sharon,[5] a 19-year-old sophomore from Tampa, noted: "Definitely yes, it's a positive, because I feel as a Black woman we have a deep perspective that literally no one else has." Eunique, a 21-year-old senior from Houston, expounded on which identity influences her the most while contrasting Black women with other women: "I think my blackness has more of a role, and my gender is kinda shoved in there, because I think… black women have always been a little bit more dominant than other cultures of women. In my opinion, we have always been more…upfront about how we feel about what is going on."

Several of the participants articulated the complexity of racialized gendered identity that shaped their awareness and motivated them to consider a political career. Jasmine, an 18-year-old freshman from St. Louis, said: "I'm just changing my career plans and decided that I want to run for office. I really realized that it's my gender that is just as important as my blackness because I realized [that]…both [are] underrepresented…groups within the political atmosphere…but now I'm coming to more the context of my gender because I realize the type of male-dominated society [into which] I'm planning on venturing…so I'm being more conscious of my gender now."

Marginalization

As a result of marginalization, group members often are evaluated by a stigmatized "mark," which affects how they engage in society. Elise, a 20-year-old junior from Atlanta, said: "As Black women, we already have…so many stereotypes placed [on] us. Like if we come off too powerful, we're viewed as, you know, the B word. And then if we are…more standoffish, when we're just minding our business, we come off more aggressive." Shaun, a 19-year-old sophomore from Jacksonville, Florida, expressed how society marginalizes the physical appearance of Black women through body shaming and rejection of natural hairstyles and how Black women resist: "There is a lack of spaces for us to be ourselves. Like whether it's…our natural hair, our curves, just who we are. Like we've constantly…been exploited. And I just feel over it. For example, they have Melanin Mondays and Black Girl Magic—the hashtag on Twitter and all forms of social media. And I believe it's a way for us to uplift ourselves. Society doesn't really respect Black women or view us as human, [and] fine. [So] we're gonna uplift ourselves, support each other, and we're going to take pride in not only our melanin but our curves, our natural hair, and we're going to be okay with it."

April, a 20-year-old junior from Miami, saw value in Black women seeking office and using that role to respond to negative stereotypes. Regarding Black women in leadership

could do for you. Some are offended if you don't let them know you have a need...people will get upset if they know that they have resources that you can use or needed, and you did not ask."

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positions, she noted: "I can see value in it. I think it's important. Now, as far as...the challenges they'll face, Black women I think will always have that angry Black woman label. So, whatever they do in office, I think it should have purpose, effectiveness....Whatever they do needs to make a statement... so they can say [that]...not all Black women act like how you think they act. Some of us, you know, [have] got class and we do what needs to be done."

Despite marginalized positions, respondents commented in detail on their experiences of Black women in their communities who had major achievements. Lisa, a 28-year-old fourth-year graduate student from Yonkers, New York, noted that in her community, she observed that "Black people drive the bus and the white people teach. That's how it was. But the women that I really saw that were in leadership positions were in church, so either in the choir, or organizing Easter events, or post-mass gatherings and fellowship and things like that. Growing up, I was never told that I couldn't do anything. So even though I didn't see people necessarily in particular roles, I was never discouraged from doing things. When I came to grad school and saw only white faces, I was told I can't."

These female students also noted that organizations in which they participate inform their political knowledge and ambition by giving them a deeper sense of issues and by providing avenues for increased community engagement and the possibility of seeking political office in the future. Zara, a 21-year-old junior from Chicago, who is a member of an African American sorority, noted that participation in her organization "teaches me...not [to] sit comfortably with what has been told to me." Her experience with the sorority has prompted her to increase her engagement in campus organizations that support low-income students: "[S]ocialization in general just makes me more aware. [E]very space I go into, it's like, 'How can I make this better for low-income first-generation students? How can I make this better for Black women?' Because those are the two organizations I'm most a part of and those are my most salient identities. So, it just really teaches me to think critically about everywhere I'm going and how to make it more accessible and make it better."

Karrie, who is a second-year doctoral student from central Arkansas and a member of a different African American sorority, appreciated the networking that these organizations provide: "I intentionally used my connections with my sorority....I like the fact that these connections are made to be used. You don't meet people just to say you know them and then be through with it. No, you meet people and they tell you what they

Radical Imagination

As for running for office, the respondents said they would consider it. Zara noted: "I'm a person that does things not by what other people want or the opinions of others. So, I definitely feel that [running for office] would have to be because of an issue that would make me think, 'This is how I feel, and I can actually accomplish something and address it.'" Lisa, a 22-year-old senior from South Florida, added that she was not sure about running but, if she were to be asked and the other candidate was not good for her community, she would step forward.

CONCLUSION

The experiences shared by these young women underscore the need to advance how Black women view themselves and engage in society, specifically with politics. The reported comments draw attention to the esteem in which Black women hold themselves, the value of indigenous organizations, and how Black women refute and protect themselves from negative stereotypes. By exploring how Black women respond to marginalization through political engagement and their sense of self, we learn what affects their choices to seek elected office. Black women's ideals and resistance to marginalization also inform us about the conditions that shape their political socialization; ambition helps us understand what they do in response. For Black women, the decision to engage politically—particularly as a candidate—encompasses personal, political, and social choices that often are misunderstood and misrepresented. However, they are significant and provide substantive and descriptive representations of Black women and the Black community.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520000554. ∎

NOTES

1. See Reston 2019 and Givhan 2019.
2. Incidents of public shaming of Black women include the harassment of a chapter of the predominantly Black sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha at American University in 2017; the series of contentious White House press briefings with journalist April Ryan; efforts to ridicule the intellect and appearance of Congresswoman Maxine Waters after her criticism of the Trump administration and sports-journalist treatment via social media following her use of the term "white supremacy" to critique Donald Trump.
3. Given the standard practice in focus-group research, the author stopped collecting data after she stopped hearing new information (Morgan 1996). These states were selected due to available funding opportunities at the time. A larger study will include participants in states across the nation.

4. Interview questions, recruitment materials, and a demographic summary are in the online appendix.
5. Pseudonyms are used to identify participants. The corresponding demographic information is accurate.

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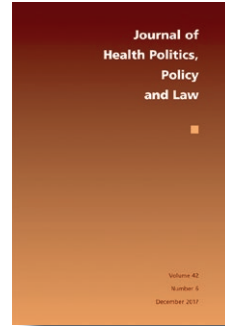
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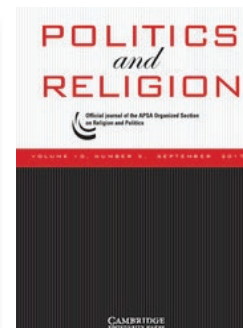
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