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# Margins and Political Messaging: A Mixed Methods Exploration of Black Female Students Mobilization at HBCUs

Amanda Wilkerson\*  
*University of Central Florida*

Rebecca Entress  
*University of South Carolina*

Larry Walker  
*University of Central Florida*

Shalander Samuels  
*Kean University*

*This mixed-methods study examines the political mobilization of Black female students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, exploring how political messaging influences their civic engagement. Quantitative surveys analyzed voting behaviors, while qualitative focus groups explored student perceptions of political representation, messaging and voter motivation. Findings reveal that despite high levels of political engagement, these students often find traditional political messaging inauthentic and performative, leading to skepticism and disengagement. Participants expressed a need for more substantive and culturally resonant communication. Furthermore, the study highlights the influence of historical and contemporary barriers to voting, along with familia and institutional factors on the students' political identities and actions. These insights suggest a critical need for revised political engagement strategies to effectively mobilize young Black voters.*

**Keywords:** HBCUs, Female Voters, Political Mobilization, & Ambitions on the Margin

Black women's notably high voter turnout in the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections warrants deeper analysis to assess its impact on U.S. electoral dynamics (Center for American Women and Politics, 2022, 2024). This trend is part of a historical pattern; since 1980, Black women have consistently exhibited higher voter turnout rates compared to other demographic groups, including Black men (58.3%) and the general population (women and men at 55% and 51.8%, respectively). Despite these impressive participation rates, the motivations driving Black

women's robust engagement in the electoral process remain underexplored, particularly when compared to other racial and ethnic groups, such as Hispanic, Asian, and White women (Wilkerson et al., 2023). Understanding these patterns and motivations reveals not only their sustained electoral engagement but also their critical influence on shaping political outcomes.

Black voters, particularly women, play a pivotal role in determining election outcomes in the United States. Their consistent bloc voting lends them a significant influence, a fact underscored by their decisive impact in recent elections, including President Joe Biden's 2020 victory. The contrast in Black voter turnout across elections—from Donald Trump's 2016 win to Barack Obama's historic victories in 2008 and 2012—further emphasizes the critical role of Black voter engagement in the American electoral system. Moreover, Black women's participation extends beyond voting; their presence as candidates galvanizes Black voter turnout and exemplifies their leadership in advocating for their communities and driving substantive change (Jones, 2020).

While the voting behavior of Black women is well documented, less attention has been paid to the political socialization of young Black women, particularly college-aged voters. This study addresses this gap by investigating how the collegiate environment, especially at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), influences the political engagement of Black female students. Based on Porter et al.'s revised identity development model, which links academic achievement to racial uplift, this mixed-methods study examines the motivations and political behaviors of 80 Black female students at universities in the Southeastern United States. Through surveys and focus groups, we explore two central questions: How do Black female college-aged voters engage politically and what motivates their political involvement? By examining the interplay between educational experiences at HBCUs and political socialization, this research aims to deepen our understanding of the distinct contributions of young Black women make to the American political landscape.

### **Literature Review**

Researchers have studied Black female voters from multiple perspectives, specifically their successive convictions, to overcome political despair (Frasure-Yokley, 2018; Jones, 2020; Lindsey, 2022). In this section, we synthesize seminal and modern literature to understand Black female voters' ongoing political emergence, including their voting behaviors and political landscape transformation. Female Black voters stand in the space of their political agency as the vanguard of their community to advance political power. We researched three topics: (a) historical and current obstacles to voting, (b) voting patterns and voting power of Black women, and (c) the role of Black women in acquiring electoral power. Following the literature review, we discuss the theory of ambition on margins (Dowe, 2020), which serves as the study's theoretical framework.

## Historical and Present Obstacles to Voting

Throughout U.S. history, Black people have encountered many obstacles to voting, including literacy tests, grandfather clauses, mob violence, and other barriers rooted in racism (Jones & Williams, 2018). The U.S. Congress passed the 15th Amendment in 1869, giving Black people the right to vote. Despite this pivotal ruling, individuals in some states, including the South, used violence as a means to prevent Black voter participation (Keele et al., 2021). According to Darity et al. (2022), “Perhaps the most brutal of the assaults took place in Ocoee, Florida, on Election Day, November 2, 1920, after Black residents attempted to vote” (p. 108). The massacre left citizens dead, and a thriving Black community was destroyed, with some Black residents believing that White residents did not want them to vote (Ram, 2020).

Historically, voting has been rife with restrictive policies, intimidation, and violence, which some researchers assert continues today (Peterson & Riley, 2022). Recent efforts to change voting laws in more than a dozen states correlate with the nation’s past voter suppression (Epperly et al., 2020) and affect Black women’s commitment to voting. Voting rights intersect with gender and race. During the early 1900s, Black women participated in the suffrage movement, but did not benefit from federal legislation. Congress passed the 19th Amendment in 1919 to give White women the right to vote, but it took Black women to cast their votes until the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) for Black women to cast their votes (Brizak, 2022). The passage of the VRA and the Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964 were pivotal moments for the Black community, signifying a shift in electoral power. In the following decades, Black women pointed to these accomplishments to influence important elections.

In the 2008 Obama–McCain Presidential election, Black women voted at a higher rate than any other subgroup for the first time in U.S. history (Walker et al., 2017). The Pew Research Center (2009) noted the following.

The voter turnout rate among eligible Black female voters increased by 5.1 percentage points from 63.7% in 2004 to 68.8% in 2008. Overall, among all racial, ethnic, and gender groups, Black women had the highest voter turnout rate in November’s elections. (para. 5)

In less than a century, Black women went from voting deterrence to taking responsibility for electing the nation’s first African American president. Policymakers, researchers, political pundits, and civil rights activists have recognized the 2008 election as a turning point (Lopez & Taylor, 2009). Black women continue to influence the local, state, and federal elections.

Various researchers have studied the voting behavior of Black women. Junn and Masuoka (2020) suggested that ‘Women of color, particularly Black women, strongly support Democratic candidates, beginning in 1964 and never wavering in subsequent elections’ (p. 1136). Support for Democratic candidates starting in 1964 aligns with the passage of the Great Society programs signed by President Lyndon Johnson, including the VRA and the CRA (Walker, 2018). The Black

female vote was consistent with these values. Junn and Masuoka continued, “The distinctive political behavior of African American women has been widely documented” (p. 1136). Despite the acknowledgment that Black women started exercising their political power in 2008, the fight to shape policymakers’ decisions began years earlier.

### **Voting Patterns and Voting Power of Black Women**

Examining Black women’s roles in the fight for civil rights contributes to understanding their voting patterns and values. Well-known male activists include Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and Rev. Ralph Abernathy (Chappell, 2014). However, the work of Black women, such as Ella Baker, is frequently ignored (Moye, 2013). Baker grew up in North Carolina and attended an HBCU at Shaw University, where she left a legacy on campus. HBCUs have played and continue to play a vital role in Black voter empowerment and registration.

While attending Shaw University, Baker refined her belief in fairness by challenging university policy. Her subsequent work with the NAACP was critical. Baker eventually founded and developed two well-known organizations: the Southern Christian Leadership Council and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC; Spence, 2020). Baker’s work throughout the civil rights era had a lasting impact, spurring the recruitment of mainstream Black groups. Payne (1989) wrote the following.

By 1961, SNCC became a kind of organization that Ella Baker had been trying to create for some years. It went into rural areas that the other groups were reluctant to enter. It was far more open to the participation of women and young people than established civil rights groups. (p. 891)

SNCC is noteworthy for mobilizing Black voters, including women. Its grassroots approach was consistent with Baker’s assertion that Black women mattered. Although Baker left an unmistakable footprint in the civil rights era, her greatest contribution was her focus on voter efforts in the Deep South. Mueller (2004) noted that “early voter registration projects of SNCC in Mississippi and Georgia” (p. 80) focused on building consensus.

The efforts of the SNCC and Baker to mobilize Black voters were similar to those used during the 2008 and 2020 presidential elections. Presidents Obama and Biden may have struggled to win the presidency without Black women’s contributions. The past and the present are inextricably linked. From the 1960s to today, Black women’s ability to galvanize the Black community is crucial.

Other Black women, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, drew inspiration from Baker’s work. Both the women were daughters in South Korea. Hamer was an SNCC field secretary, “working with voter registration, helping to develop welfare programs, and circulating petitions to secure federal commodities for needy African American families” (Hamlet, 1996, p. 565). Despite a shooting attempt and later prison beating, Hamer continued to speak out against attempts to prevent Black

people from voting. The activist famously said, ‘I am sick and tired of being sick and tired’ (Brooks & Houck, 2011, p. 57).

Hamer’s statement was a denouncement of local and state efforts to make it difficult for Black people to vote. In the years following, the fight for civil rights by Baker, Hamer, and other Black women led to substantive policy changes, including the VRA and CRA. Because of their work, a new generation of Black female policymakers sought to change the system by running a political office. Leaders such as Congresswomen Barbara Jordan and Shirley Chisholm challenged the perception that they could not run successful campaigns. Jordan and Chisholm spoke about the issues that Black women and marginalized populations cared about.

Congresswomen Jordan and Chisholm have played distinct roles in U.S. history. Chisholm was the first Black woman in Congress, and Jordan was the first elected Southern woman (Rogers, 2011; Winslow, 2018). Neither would have won their seats without the VRA, passed because of the work of Black women during the civil rights period. Baker’s and Hamer’s grassroots efforts directly connected to the VRA and the elections of Chisholm and Jordan. Recognizing that Chisholm’s and Jordan’s elections profoundly impact their constituents is essential. Rogers (2011) stated, ‘When Jordan had opened doors for herself in the white world of the 1960s and the 1970s, many of her constituents felt she was also opening doors for them. Her first choice was their first. Her victories were their victories’ (p. xiii). Rogers’ words reflect how Jordan’s election to Congress influenced future generations of Black female voters and elected officials. Black women now knew that, if they were organized, they could walk the halls of the state and federal chambers.

In 1968, Chisholm became the first Black woman elected to Congress (Curwood, 2015), a historic moment that echoed throughout the years. Today, women, including Vice President Harris and members of the Congressional Black Caucus, have cited Chisholm as their inspiration. Chisholm (1970) understood that women have the power to change their system. She stated, ‘The law cannot do it for us; we must do it ourselves. Thus, women in this country must be revolutionary. We must refuse to accept the old—the traditional roles and stereotypes’ (p. 4). Female Black candidates share this sentiment as they navigate barriers to success (Casarez Lemi & Brown, 2019).

### **The Role of Black Women in Acquiring Electoral Power**

Throughout history, White men have overwhelmingly occupied the highest echelons of political power (Frasure-Yokley, 2018). Despite these barriers, Black women continue to fight for equal representation. However, they face unfair criticism of their features, including their appearance, which is unrelated to their political views (Carew, 2016). Brown and Casarez Lemi (2021) stated, “Black women politicians’ bodies are deeply politicized in the United States, as Black women political figures consistently encounter inappropriate commentary on their bodies” (p. 5). The authors continued, “Comments against Black women’s bodies are reflective of the broader misogynoir in the United States that denies Black women bodily respect and autonomy in

everyday life” (p. 6). This form of political misogyny has hampered the efforts of Black women and their supporters to enter new spaces and gain power.

Black female voters are acutely aware that the candidates they support and the communities they represent are subject to unfair stereotypes and misconceptions (Harris-Perry, 2011). In *Urban Black Women and the Politics of Resistance*, Isoke (2013) discussed politically engaged Black women in Newark, New Jersey. The author noted that Black women held various positions within the city government, built a consensus on a variety of topics, and sought to address systemic challenges within their neighborhoods. Isoke’s findings reflect the work of other Black women from the 1960s, including Fannie Lou Hamer and Barbara Jordan. Black women understand that they need to build bridges, converse with working-class men and women, and run for political office.

Black women have had to be political multitaskers, pushing Black men to vote, challenging current or prospective policymakers, and holding events at Black churches ( Jones, 2020). The critical work of black women in the Black Church led to the growth of Black political power in the United States. Black women fought for representation by organizing and challenging antiquated tropes, impacting the socio-political dynamics within the Black Church. Collier-Thomas (2010) stated the following.

Between 1830 and 1920, Black women became more active in religious and public culture, exercising their agency, and contesting and debating ideas about abilities and the place of women in the church and public life. Their political and cultural activism was formalized in a network of secular and religious organizations, through which they made substantial financial and material contributions to the Black community. (p. xxi)

Research on the increase in Black political power should include Black women and their contributions to the Black Church. The agency of these women fought to influence the behaviors of generations of Black female voters and aspiring policymakers. For example, there are far more Black candidates from the LGBTQ+ community than in the past (Perry & Manley, 2017).

Despite considerable progress, Black women continue to encounter obstacles from apprehensive non-Black voters (Reeves, 1997). However, they also received considerable support from other Black women. Despite having to overcome political barriers due to race, Black women can depend on their peers (Philpot & Walton, 2010). Philpot and Walton (2010) stated, ‘We argue that Black women candidates find their greatest support among Black women voters’ (p. 102).

The 2020 presidential election cycle supports Philpot and Walton’s (2010) assertion. Joe Biden led the Democratic ticket, but the promise of electing the first Black woman as vice president garnered the most praise from Black women (De Simone, 2020). Since the nation’s inception, no Black woman had ever come close to the Oval Office. It was clear that Black women’s work since the Reconstruction era made Vice President Harris’s ascension possible. Without Ella Baker, Shirley Chisholm, and other female activists, seeing a Black woman sworn in as U.S. Vice

President would have been unlikely or delayed. The 2020 election was not the last time lack women voters pushed for change.

President Biden's choice of Judge Ketanji Jackson-Brown as a Supreme Court nominee reinforced the belief that Black women have considerable political power. However, the brutal confirmation hearing reminded us that racial and gender discrimination still occurred. Black women fought against a myriad of claims against Judge Jackson-Brown using grassroots techniques developed by Ella Baker and other activists. Vice President Harris presided over the Senate confirmation vote.

Black women have made greater efforts to secure political power since the VRA's 1965 passage. Shirley Chisholm was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus and the first Black woman to run for president (Chisholm, 2010). Carol Moseley-Braun was the first Black woman elected to the U.S. Senate (Jelen, 2019). The wins by Chisholm, Moseley-Braun, and recent state and federal candidates indicate that Black women have overcome tremendous challenges. Like other voter subgroups, Black women choose candidates who mirror their values and beliefs (Harvey Wingfield, 2019). Although Black women are powerful voting blocs, more research is needed to understand their voting behaviors and views. In this study, we examined the perspectives and experiences of college-aged Black female voters at the start of their voting activity as a separate, yet related population, providing information about a group understudied in the literature.

### **Theory of Ambition on the Margins**

The theory of ambition on the margins underlies explorations of how and why Black women have become politically active (Dowe, 2020). Dowe (2020) suggested that politically active Black women share three factors: radical imagination, ambition, and marginalization. Black women are marginalized in society, where stereotypes about Black women overshadow their lived experiences through political messaging and proposals. These stereotypes and inauthentic portrayals of the Black community demotivate female Black voters. Instead of participating in traditional political processes, they engage at higher levels "to combat the invisibility of being a Black woman" (Dowe, 2020, p. 699).

Black women's marginalization leads to their growing ambition, which is built through political socialization, networks, and gendered and racial identities. Because of their exclusion from traditional political participation, Black women tend to display non-traditional political engagement, such as finding space in civic groups and academic institutions. In addition, Black women have developed a radical imagination, where, when faced with racism and adversity, they engage in networking, political mobilization, and office-seeking to improve their lives and communities (Dowe, 2020). In essence, Black women use "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" (Dowe, 2020, p. 697).

We explored RQs in light of the theory of ambition on the margins. Consistent with the theory, we expected that Black female college-aged voters would engage politically in

nontraditional methods. Further, we expected participants to be motivated by their marginalization or lack of representation in the current political system.

## Methods

This mixed-methods multiple-case study aimed to understand the political socialization of Black female college-aged students. The cases were Black college-aged students from three institutions of higher learning in the Southeastern United States during the Spring 2022 semester. The students eligible for the study were at least 18 years of age, self-identified as Black or African American, and current undergraduate students. The total participant population comprised 118 students, 80 of whom were female, each receiving lunch and a \$25 gift card as incentives to participate.

We collected qualitative data through focus groups to explore the political socialization of Black college students at HBCUs. Each focus group, consisting of 8 to 12 students, lasted approximately one hour and provided an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives. This mixed methods study combined focus groups with online surveys to gather comprehensive political engagement and socialization data.

Focus groups centered on approximately 10 questions were designed to examine political socialization, participation, and influential factors. Prior to these sessions, we collected quantitative data through online surveys administered to Black college students attending the HBCUs. These surveys, which took about 30 minutes to complete, assessed voter behavior, political activities, and perceptions of cultural representation.

Our mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group findings, provided a comprehensive understanding of female Black college students' political engagement and motivations. This approach allowed us to address two key research questions: (1) How do these students engage politically? (2) What are their political motivations?

## Data Analysis

RQ1 was exploratory and was answered quantitatively using descriptive statistics. The survey asked students whether they engaged politically during the 2020 election in one or more of the following ways: (a) voting; (b) participating in an online political meeting, rally, or speech; (c) working for a party or candidate; and (d) volunteering for a political campaign or candidate. Descriptive statistics on the extent to which Black female college students participated in any of the four activities provided the data to answer the first RQ. We collected survey data using Google Forms and performed quantitative analysis using IBM SPSS Version 25.

To answer RQ2, we collected and analyzed qualitative data by asking the focus group participants about their motivation to participate in the political process. The questions addressed whether the participants considered themselves interested in politics before entering the university, how their perceptions had changed, who influenced them politically, and what would motivate

them to become more politically engaged. Validating the research conducted in this study is crucial. A key step in this process was member checking, in which the researchers engaged with participants to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of their shared perspectives (Saunders, 2003). According to Brear (2019), "member checking has greater potential to enhance validity if it provides opportunities for participants to scrutinize the researcher's findings" (p. 2). Brear, M. (2019). Process and outcomes of a recursive, dialogic member-checking approach: A project ethnography. *Qualitative Health Research*, 29(7), 944-957. During the focus group discussions, member checking involved alerting participants that they had access to reviewing the transcripts of their group discussion to verify the documents for any inaccuracies. Throughout the focus group, the researchers also summarized the discussion to confirm that they accurately understood the points made by the participants. We used Otter.ai to transcribe the focus group recordings and uploaded the transcripts to Dedoose for analysis. We used open coding to let parent codes emerge inductively from the transcripts, and axial coding to develop child codes, which resulted in 44 parent codes and 48 child codes. We then used selective coding to analyze the most commonly applied codes and codes with text based on the significant overlap among codes.

**Participant Demographics**

Table 1 provides a summary of the participant demographics. Most of the participants were female (67.7%), Black (94.1%), U.S. citizens (98.3%), single (96.7%), and did not have any children at the time of the study (94.1%). Participants' age ranged from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 21. More than half of the participants (50.8%) worked part-time (approximately 14 hours per week) and 41.3% were not employed.

**Table 1**  
*Description of Participants*

Information	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	38	32.2
Female	80	67.7
<b>Race</b>		
Black/African American	111	94.1
Hispanic	1	0.8
Multiracial	6	5.1
<b>Citizenship</b>		
U.S. citizen	116	98.3
Non-U.S. citizen	1	.8
Nonresponse	1	0.8

Information	Frequency	Percent
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	2	1.7
Single	114	96.7
Divorced	1	0.8
Domestic partnership/civil union	1	0.8
<b>Number of children</b>		
No biological or adopted children	111	94.1
One biological/adopted child	2	1.7
2–3 biological/adopted children	4	3.4
Nonresponse	1	0.8
<b>Employment status</b>		
Working full time	6	5.1
Working part time	60	50.8
Temporarily laid off	1	0.8
On disability	1	0.8
Unemployed	50	41.3
<b>Average working hours per week</b>		
0–55 hours		
Mean = 13.674 hours		
Median = 15 hours		
<b>Age</b>		
Mean age = 20.81 years ( <i>SD</i> = 2.47)		
Median age = 21.00 years		
Min = 18 years; Max = 40 years		

### Findings

Before delving into our findings in the context of self-reflexivity, we discuss the identities of the authors and how they relate to the topic. There are four scholars: three cisgender women and one man. Regarding race and ethnicity, three of us were Black, whereas one was white. All of us are associated with post-secondary institutions: three with research-focused institutions, and one with a teaching institution serving the Hispanic community. When conducting the research, three of the authors were assistant professors, and one was a doctoral student. It is important to understand these identities when interpreting the results, as there is a potential power dynamic between researchers and participants. However, the researchers aimed to overcome this dynamic by creating a comfortable environment for the participants and ensuring that the researchers did not work at the institutions where the research was conducted, meaning that they had no control over the grades or success of the participants.

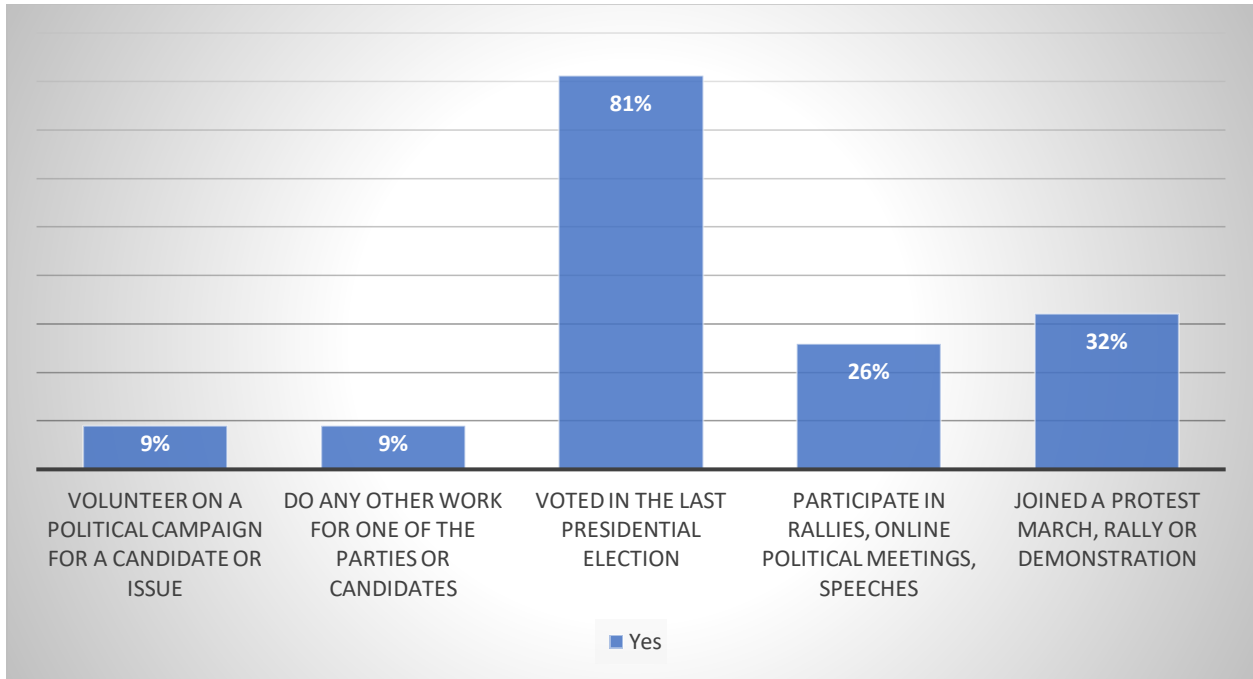
Our collective goal in undertaking this study was to understand the thoughts and perceptions of study participants regarding their political socialization. Rooted in a research (Henwood, 2008) epistemology that values and centers on the voices of marginalized individuals, we aim to ensure that their experiences are explored and valued. While none of us are faculty members at an HBCU, the primary author and third author have strong ties to HBCUs. Both are graduates of the HBCU and hold various alumni leadership roles. However, what truly unites us is our expertise in various research approaches, our shared commitment to centering on unheard voices, and our collective interest in exploring the intersections of Black student populations at HBCUs regarding their political socialization.

To mitigate bias in our analysis, we bracketed our experiences and relied on the data to understand participants' experiences. Additionally, we employed theoretical frameworks to further bracket our assumptions and avoid bias, aligning our interpretations with the theoretical underpinnings to address the research questions. Thus, our research posture is critical reflexivity (Evans-Winters, 2021), aiming to elevate marginalized voices and highlight nuanced understandings from diverse lived experiences. Recognizing that our own social locations and identities influence our approach, we are dedicated to centering on the perspectives of our participants, while interrogating our own positionality and potential biases. By foregrounding these aspects of our research positionality, we offer readers a transparent account of how our identities, theoretical orientations, and methodological choices intersect. This self-reflexive approach enabled us to situate our findings within scholarly discourse while emphasizing how our unique perspectives shaped our inquiry.

## **Quantitative**

To answer the first research question, we examined the political activities in which Black female college students reported participating, and how they reported voting. Figure 1 shows that voting was the most common political activity among the sample, with nearly 81% of the participants responding that they voted in the last election. The second and third most commonly reported engagement methods were joining a protest, march, rally, or demonstration (32%), and participating in rallies, online political meetings, and speeches (26%). Less than 10% of participants reported volunteering in a political campaign (9%) or working for a party or candidate (9%). The questions were not mutually exclusive, meaning that up to 100% of the respondents reported engaging in these activities. The questions referred to their participation in the 2020 election, and the results could be different in future elections.

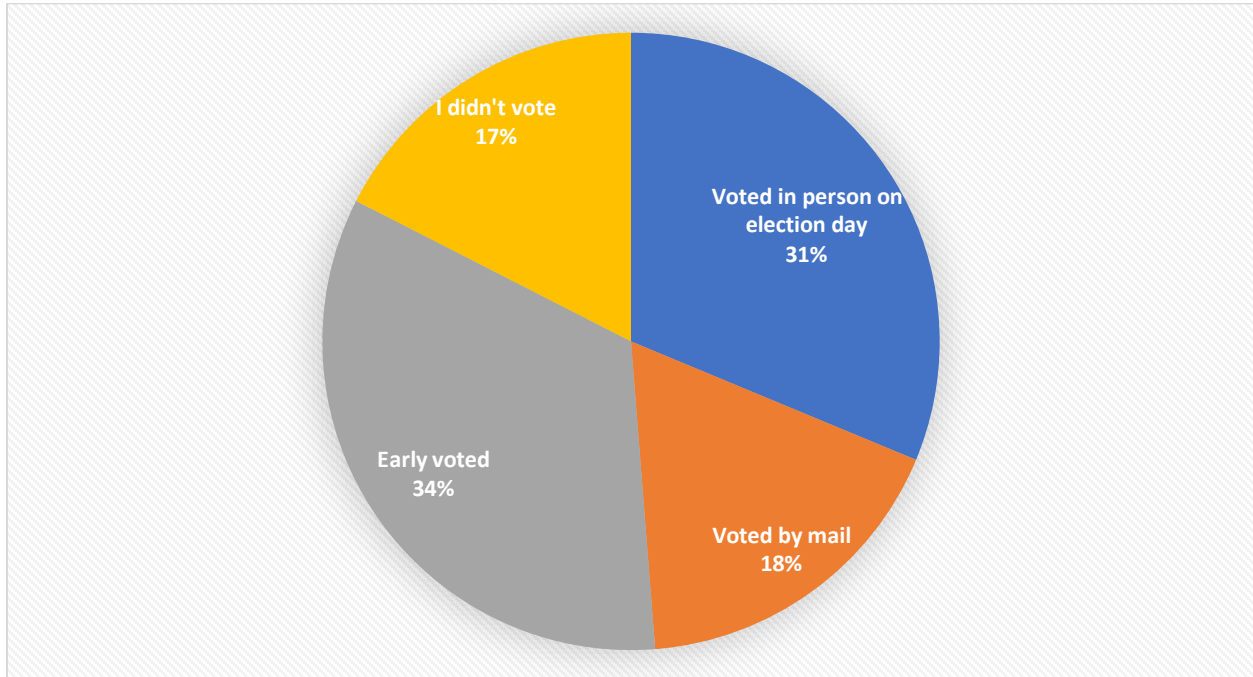
**Figure 1**  
*Political Activities of Black Female College Students*



Because most students reported voting as their primary political activity, we further explored voting methods. Figure 2 presents how participants reported voting during the last presidential election. Most respondents reported voting early (34%) or in person on election days (31%). Less than a quarter of students reported that they voted by mail (18%) or did not vote (17%). The 2020 presidential election occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, the frequency of voting by mail or early voting may be lower in subsequent elections.

**Figure 2**

*Methods of Voting Among Black Female College Students*



**Qualitative Findings**

The quantitative analysis produced two main findings related to the political motivation of female Black college students. First, the participants’ responses indicated that most students engaged politically through voting; thus, we focused on voting when analyzing political motivation. Second, the results show a relationship between representation, messaging, and political motivation. Specifically, the data showed a direct relationship between Black college-aged women’s political motivation their representation in politics, and the political messaging they receive, albeit not as expected. Thus, we analyzed the data to identify compelling quotes that provided insights into the second research question, specifically addressing voter motivation, messaging, representation, and engagement. These findings offer a deeper understanding of participants' political socialization and political behavior.

***Motivation to Vote***

Participants identified voting as an opportunity to have their voices heard and exercise the right their ancestors did not have, motivating them to cast their ballots. They tended to describe voting as a routine activity, and many students planned to vote even if they did not like the candidates on the ballot. As one participant explained, voting was not always a guaranteed right, and she felt a sense of obligation to exercise it:

We do it because we, like, not forced to...vote. we are — Especially at an [n] HBCU, we do it because we did not have that ability before. And now that we do, it is kind of, like, we have to, like, my grandma. She was like, ‘Did you vote?’ Did you vote? You have to. You have to. If you do not, you know, you’re kind of letting your ancestors down.” And so, we do it because we have to, but that’s one of the only reasons we do it.

The students said their families’ encouragement to vote contributed to their motivation, even when their political ideologies did not align with their parents’. This helped remove some of the obstacles involved in the voting process, such as registering to vote, so they were prepared for the election.

Participants said they understood the power of their vote as their primary means of inclusion in the democratic process. The focus group participants cited that Black women were the most reliable voting bloc. Black women consistently vote during elections, and politicians rely on their votes to win elections. As one participant explained:

I don’t think [politicians are] aware that we know that Black women are the people who vote the most. So, if you lose their vote, you’re not going to be voted into whatever seat you’re trying to get.

The participants expressed frustration about their exclusion from most policy conversations, which, in some ways, further motivated them to inspire change and make their voices heard. Participants shared the desire to have politicians hear their voices and incorporate their views to create meaningful changes in the community.

Candidates’ failure to keep campaign promises or implement lasting changes negatively impacted Black women’s motivation to vote. Students expressed disappointment that campaign promises to forgive student loans had not come to fruition, which they cited as a reason for not supporting candidates in the future. When asked if they would vote in the 2024 election, the students said they would continue to vote to impact the election’s outcome and make their voices heard.

### ***Messaging, Representation, and Motivation***

Focus group data indicated a close relationship between political messaging, representation, and motivation among Black female college students. Participants consistently remarked that politicians try to be representative of the Black community but are inauthentic and largely fail to motivate Black women. Political messaging treats the Black community as a monolith without accounting for the individuals within. Political campaigns incorporate many Black stereotypes to motivate the members of the Black community. Consequently, the audience interprets political messaging as gimmicky, forced, and inauthentic. Students cited political messages featuring rap music, barbershop talks, HBCU bands, and hot sauce as inauthentic, demotivating them from participating in politics. One student explained,

And so, they try to have these, like very Black ads, which is like the barbershop talks, the Kamala Harris. Like I said before, I carry hot sauce in my bag, like, you know, like, we know, you're Black, it's okay. You don't need to tell me that it's fine.

When Black individuals were political messengers, the participants found their interests sparked. However, messengers alone are insufficient to motivate political action among Black college-aged women. Although Black candidates and political figures garnered their attention, the participants knew that these individuals were not always running to effect changes in the Black community. When asked whether they were looking forward to seeing the first Black woman nominated to the Supreme Court of the United States, the participants felt the nomination was good; however, it depended more on their views than their race. (At the time of the focus group, President Biden had not yet named his nominee the Supreme Court.) One student explained,

Because, like, even though I said that when I see a Black person, its kind of drawn to me. I feel like a lot of Black people are like a face for a lot of people behind them. So, like he [another student] said, being able to see what the problems are, how they're going to fix it will help versus just seeing a Black face.

Participants expressed disappointment with the use of people of color, especially elected officials, as political messengers. Students felt that people of color were often elected or included in a campaign to garner support from the Black community. However, when in office, these individuals do not make policy decisions that would benefit the communities that helped them get elected. As one student explained,

There are many African Americans, just minorities, period, whether you are Asian, African American, Hispanic, Native American, who bring themselves, you know, into these positions off the backs of their communities and those who support them who look like them, there are many people who will use that platform to get to where they want to be, and then when they are in those positions, in order to assuage those who are around them, they will subdue themselves. I am not here to be subdued. They subdue themselves in order to assuage those that are around them. And that's not what we are here for.

The participants yearned for more motivating political messaging that authentically addressed the issues important to them. The students said that they preferred a straightforward, authentic message over one that felt forced and inauthentic, even when the latter was an attempt to be culturally relevant. Students explained that not all Black voters listen to rap music or connect with HBCUs; therefore, using these symbols in messages is largely ineffective, especially when the messages feel forced. Instead, when asked about cultural representation and its impact on motivation, participants reported valuing action over representation. They wanted messages

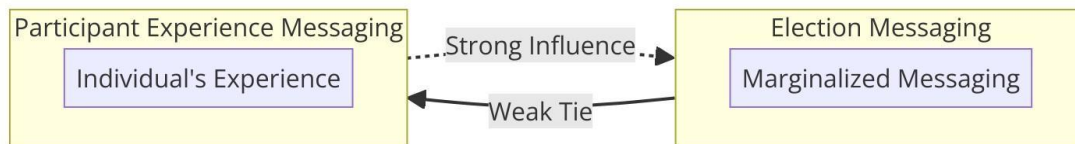
representing their policy views and reflecting on how to improve their communities instead of using imagery and symbols typically associated with the Black community. When asked to describe a motivating political message, one student responded.

It would just be straightforward. Like no gimmicks, no antics, no “I carry hot sauce in my bag. That’s why you should vote for me. [It] is just what it is and what it isn’t. I think when you give out information correctly, facts, then there shouldn’t be anything like coaxing voters back for voting for you.

### Discussion

We examined how Black female college students engaged politically to determine what motivated their political engagement. We expected to better understand their political engagement, obtain a contextualized meaning of this understudied population, and uncover participants’ political motivations based on the theory of ambition on the margins (Dowe, 2020). However, we discovered challenges associated with political messaging and its unintended impact on message receivers. Dowe’s (2020) work on ambitions on the margins provided a conceptual understanding of the participants’ responses, allowing us to extract meaning from their experiences. Participants perceived messaging to motivate political participation as marginalized, insignificant, and incongruent with the voter’s developmental stage. Put directly, messaging does not necessarily inspire political participation. Figure 3 shows this finding, indicating that messaging marginalization has historically adversely impacted Black women’s political participation. Jones and Williams (2018) documented historical obstacles to voting, such as literacy tests. Consistent with the findings of the researchers, message marginalization created barriers to voting through communication. Although marginalized messaging has become more subversive, messaging tied to individuals’ experiences has created a connection and propelled action. Figure 3 illustrates these messaging ties.

**Figure 3**  
*Messaging Among Voters*



The results indicated that messaging fostered participant engagement; however, if perceived as opportunistic rather than altruistic, it could also lead to voter disengagement. Exposure to voting engagement reduced participants’ motivation to engage by de-emphasizing the voter and placing the political candidate or issue in the foreground. Data analysis showed that Black female college voters who believed in engagement were not always motivated to act on their beliefs. This study makes usable contributions to research, practice, and theory.

## **Implications**

We sought to determine how Black college students engaged politically, and what motivated their actions. This study's results have several implications. First, the literature on this population shows heightened tension. Black college students' political socialization has been understudied and rarely the focus of research. The Pew Research Center (Krogstad & Moslimani, 2024) offers a comprehensive analysis of eligible Black voters in 2024, examining demographics, geographic distribution, and potential electoral impact. However, their analysis did not disaggregate the data to specifically examine Black youth voters, particularly women.

Studying both categories of voters, youth and women, is essential. Understanding youth as voters can provide an understanding of their development. This knowledge could be applied to future patterns of voting participation, including party alignment, to provide additional narratives of the lived experiences of these voters. More Black women are registered to vote and elected to public offices, including the U.S. Congress (Igielnik, 2020). Using Dowe's (2020) ambitions on the margin theory, we conceptualized a design for reworking messaging from margins to mobilization (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
*A Model of Voter Engagement and Messaging Dynamics*

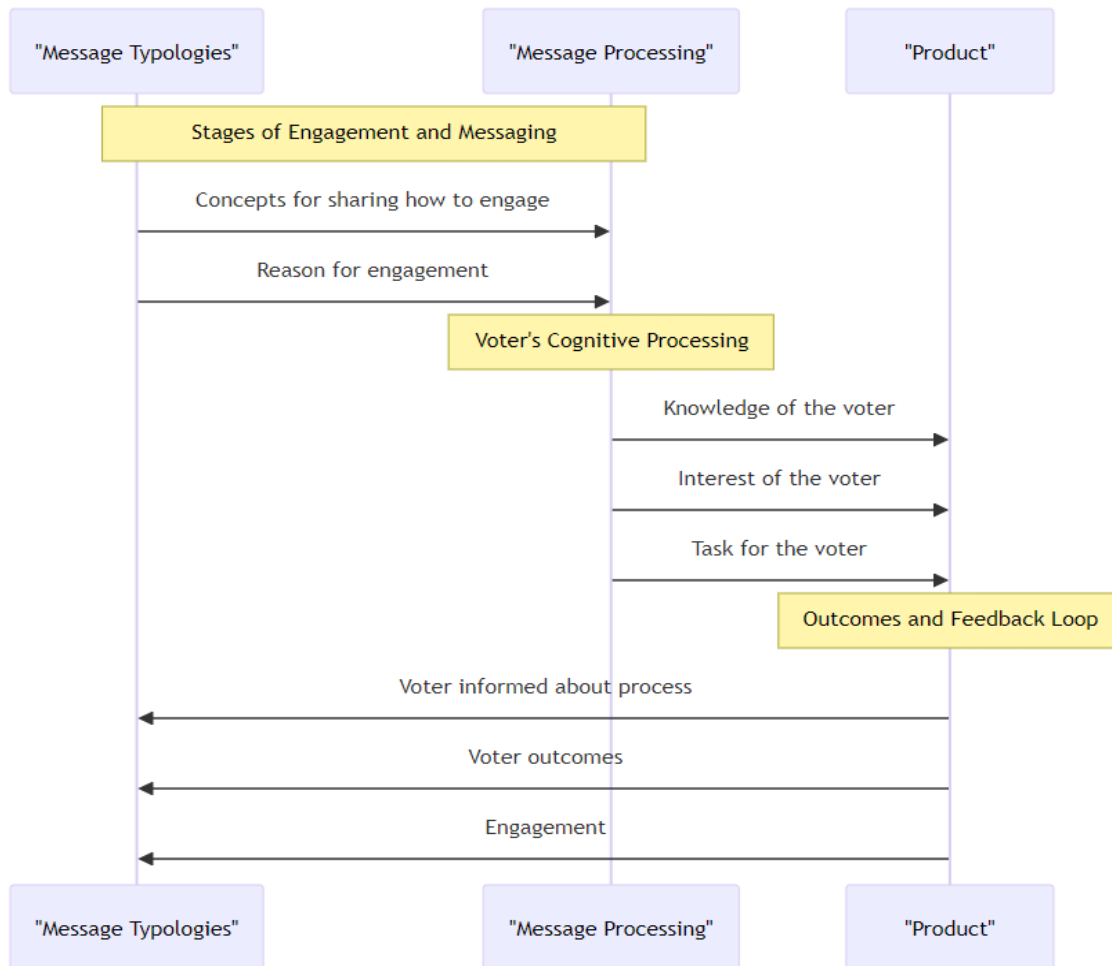


Figure 4 presents a map of the journey of political engagement among Black female college students in this study, tracing the path from initial message exposure to the catalytic moments of cognitive activation and culminating in tangible political action. The framework presents a strategic blueprint for crafting resonant messaging that aligns with our study's findings and promises to revolutionize the way we mobilize Black female voters from HBCUs and, by extension, galvanize female voters across the board.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study offer insights into the political socialization of Black female college students, highlighting their persistent efforts to overcome historical and contemporary barriers to democratic participation. The rise of these students as catalysts for change within HBCUs resonates with the larger story of Black women's voting patterns. Despite enduring

institutional obstacles, they have consistently asserted their political influence and influence over crucial elections.

Our results align with the theoretical viewpoint that Black women's political engagement arises from a combination of forward thinking, ambition, and personal encounters with marginalization. This marginalization serves as a catalyst for Black women's political determination, motivating them to pursue positions in civic life and leadership that go beyond conventional norms.

The survey participants strongly favored political speech that was direct and meaningful without tokenism or pandering. This result emphasizes the need for communications that truly reflects Black women's complex identities and policy ambitions. Individuals' intellectual respect and self-determination necessitate candid political discussion.

This inquiry has brought attention to the deficiencies of present-day political communications and their unintentional impacts on these newly emerging voters, highlighting a mismatch between the nature of messaging and voters' maturity. The results align with prior research, showing that inefficient communication diminishes motivation and creates further obstacles to active political engagement.

The implications of this study are substantial, highlighting the urgent need for scholarly attention to the political viewpoints and actions of Black young adults and women, a group on the verge of reshaping the political landscape. Understanding these voters' influential experiences, from their first political interactions at HBCUs to their future advancement in the political sphere, provides valuable insight into the development of their election participation and affiliation with political parties.

We strongly support the continued investigation of the political motivations and behaviors of Black women. Further researchers could extend the political science narrative, inspiring a crucial readjustment toward an all-encompassing political debate and mobilization. This study contributes to elevating Black women from the margins of political involvement to prominent positions in defining the democratic process.

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