

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Following the Crowd: How Black Voters Use Group Consensus and the Media to Choose Candidates

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Abstract

This article investigates how Black voters choose candidates in majority-Black congressional districts. Partisanship often drives Black vote choice, but the lack of competition in general elections reduces its relevance and highlights the importance of primary elections. Racial cues are also referenced in literature, but the electoral setting reduces the relevance of race. Majority-Black congressional districts are racially homogeneous, and all emerging candidates are Black. Race cannot be used to distinguish between candidates. Congressional primary elections are also considered low-information environments, and voters have limited knowledge about the emerging candidates. In these settings, Black voters turn to cues to choose candidates. Since partisan and racial cues are not viable options, I argue that Black voters seek cues that signal group consensus. I highlight the role of endorsements and public opinion data. I utilize a mixed methodological approach incorporating a randomized survey experiment and focus group discussions with Black primary voters. Results from both methods suggest consensus cues are essential. Experimental results found no significant difference between racial and partisan endorsements, but they found a positive and significant effect for high polling. Focus group respondents had sincere preferences but were willing to abandon them if they differed from the group consensus. They also pointed to the importance of the media. I conducted an exploratory analysis of my experimental results, and I found that those with higher levels of media attention are more likely to rely on consensus cues. These results provide important insight into Black vote choice in majority-Black congressional districts.

Keywords: African American Politics; voting behavior; consensus cues; focus groups; experiments; public opinion polling; endorsements; media

This article investigates how Black voters choose candidates in majority-Black congressional districts. One of the most well-known patterns of Black voting

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behavior is strong support for the Democratic party (Carmines and Stimson 1989; White and Laird 2020). However, partisanship cannot be used to choose candidates in majority-Black congressional districts. Since Black voters support the Democratic party at high rates, any district with a large Black population will be safely Democratic. Since there are no competitive general elections, Black voters cannot use partisanship to distinguish between candidates. This fact also draws attention to the Democratic primary election because the winner will represent that district in Congress.

Racial factors could play a role in primary elections, and scholars point to group-based explanations for Black vote choice (Dawson 1994; White and Laird 2020; Wamble 2025). While these theories provide critical insight into Black vote choice, two important factors complicate their application to majority-Black congressional districts. First, majority-Black congressional districts are homogeneous electoral environments, and almost all emerging candidates are Black (Branton 2009; Fraga 2018; Fraga et al., 2020). This means that racial cues cannot be used to distinguish between candidates because everyone is Black. Second, prominent theoretical explanations of Black vote choice lack applicability because of the low-information environment (Ahler 2016; Bawn 2019). It is difficult to assume that Black voters are making high-level rational decisions (Dawson 1994), will succumb to racial group sanctioning (White and Laird 2020), or compare which candidate sacrificed the most for the racial group (Wamble 2025) when they lack a fundamental understanding of the candidates who are running.

A growing body of literature investigates Black vote choice in low-information environments, and scholars point to the importance of electoral cues. Black voters cannot use racial or partisan cues to choose candidates, but there are other cues that they can utilize. For example, Black voters could turn to incumbency (Benjamin and Carr 2022), ballot cues (Matson and Fine 2006), endorsements (Benjamin 2017; Benjamin and Miller 2019), polling (Boudreau and McCubbins 2010), yard signs (Green et al. 2016), and many other factors. This paper describes how Black voters utilize available information to choose candidates.

I posit that Black voters seek cues that signal group consensus. Group consensus is important to Black voters, and both positive and negative incentives can influence consensus support for the Democratic party (White and Laird 2020; Wamble et al. 2022). When information is limited, I argue that Black voters look for group consensus as a source of information. If large portions of the community demonstrate support for a particular candidate, that signals to a Black voter that they are the consensus pick. Two cues provide a clear signal of group consensus: endorsements and polling. Endorsements can come from individuals or groups and are common signals in most elections (Dominguez 2011; Benjamin and Miller 2019). Public opinion data provides the most precise snapshot of the candidate's support (Boudreau 2009). Polling can come from internal campaign polls and third-party organizations (e.g., newspapers, think tanks, etc.), but they are far less frequent than endorsements.

This paper focuses on how endorsements and polling influence Black vote choice. First, I investigate the difference between racial and partisan endorsements. Voters cannot infer much from a candidate's partisanship or race, but endorsements from Democratic or predominately Black institutions can provide voters with partisan

and racial signals. I argue that racial endorsements will positively affect vote choice when compared to partisan endorsements. Second, I investigate the role of public opinion polling. Since polling from a majority-Black district directly reflects the opinions of other Black voters, I argue that high public opinion polling will positively affect a candidate's vote choice. On the other hand, low polling numbers will negatively affect Black vote choice. Third, I highlight that consensus cues should have a cumulative effect. I argue that a candidate with an endorsement from a Black institution and high polling numbers should get the highest vote share.

To test my theory, I utilize a mixed methodological approach by conducting an online randomized survey experiment and two online focus groups with Black primary voters. The experimental results provide support for the use of consensus cues. Candidates with high polling numbers have a significantly higher vote share than candidates with no polling information. The most surprising finding was that racial endorsements had no effect. The focus group responses support these findings. Every respondent expressed sincere preferences but unanimously agreed that they would deviate from these preferences to vote in accord with group consensus. Focus group responses also highlighted the importance of the media as an excellent source of information. A subgroup analysis of my experiment suggests that those with higher levels of media consumption are more likely to rely on consensus cues.

The findings in this paper contribute to our understanding of Black vote choice in numerous ways. First, I provide insight into group consensus' role in Black voters' choices in low-information environments. We know that Black voters utilize cues, but I specify which types of cues they turn to and why. Second, this paper raises doubts about the dominance of racial cues. Evidence shows that respondents were no more favorable to a racial endorsement than a partisan one. Focus group responses suggest that racial endorsements hold slightly more value, but respondents raised skepticism about racial and partisan organizations. Finally, I highlight the intervening role of the media. Those with high levels of media engagement are the most likely to rely on consensus cues.

Black Voters, Safe Districts, and Primary Elections

How do Black voters make choices in majority-Black congressional districts? One of the most well-known factors driving Black vote choice is partisanship. Black voters support the Democratic party at very high rates and have done so for decades (Carmines and Stimson 1989). Evidence also shows that this party attachment is stronger than that of other racial groups (Dun and Jessee 2020). There is even a large body of literature investigating why Black conservatives support the Democratic party, despite their economic interests (Dawson 1994) and ideological preferences (Philpot 2017) being out of line with the party. Strong partisanship also allows strategic voting based on candidate electability (Simas 2017). Since Black voters are such strong partisans, electing a Democratic candidate becomes the most important factor driving their vote choice in the primary election. Rather than voting for their sincere preference,¹ many primary voters support the most "electable" candidate or the candidate with the best shot of beating the Republican candidate in the general

election (Abramowitz 1989). Recent research shows that Black voters rely heavily on a candidate's electability to choose candidates (e.g., Smith 2022).

Partisanship explains Black vote choice in many electoral settings, but the growing number of safe congressional districts reduces its electoral significance. Safe congressional districts are electorally secure for one of the two major parties (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006). There is no competition in the general election because one party has far more political power than another. Scholars investigating this trend point to factors like gerrymandering (McDonald 2007) or the incumbency advantage (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006). Regardless of the exact cause, the lack of congressional competition is troubling because it can influence government responsiveness (Griffin 2006) or political participation (Stauffer and Fraga 2022), among other factors. This trend is most relevant for voters in majority-Black congressional districts because all are safe for the Democratic party.

To illustrate this, I calculated each district's level of partisanship using the normalized presidential vote (e.g. Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006; Stauffer and Fraga 2022). This measure is calculated by subtracting the Democratic party's national presidential vote share from the Democratic candidate's vote share in the district. Districts are considered safe if the district-level presidential vote share is ten points more than the national vote. This approach is ideal because it provides a measure of district-level partisanship that can be compared across districts and is independent of individual congressional election results (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006). I collected partisan and racial demographic data for every congressional district between 1992 and 2020. Appendix A describes the results in detail.² The main findings show that districts with large Black populations are almost always safe. Between 2012 and 2020, one hundred percent of majority-Black districts were safe for the Democratic party, suggesting that Black voters in majority-Black districts never experience competitive general elections.

Since these districts are safe, the Democratic party has electoral control, and no Republican could win the general election. This means whoever wins the Democratic primary election will serve in Congress. Since all the candidates running in the Democratic primary are Democratic candidates, their partisanship cannot be used to differentiate between them. In addition, candidate electability, which applies specifically to vote choice in primary elections, falls short because there is no meaningful two-stage electoral process. Since the winner of the general election is effectively predetermined to be the Democratic candidate, Black voters do not need to consider who is the most electable because any Democratic candidate would win. This fact casts doubt on the role of partisanship and places great importance on the winner of the primary election.

A related body of literature uses group-based explanations to explain Black vote choice (Verba and Nie 1972; Dawson 1994; White and Laird 2020; Wamble 2025). Early work on Black political participation points to racial group attachments to explain high levels of voter turnout (Verba and Nie 1972, 157). The literature is full of examples highlighting the role of group connectedness, like the role of descriptive representation in vote choice (e.g., Dovi 2002; Mansbridge 1999). Dawson (1994) states that "as long as African Americans' life chances are powerfully shaped by race,

it is efficient for individual African Americans to use their perceptions of the interests of African Americans as a group as a proxy for their own interests” (61).

White and Laird (2020) argue that the Black community enforces support for the Democratic party, and other important norms, by using social sanctioning and positive and negative incentives. Similarly, Anoll (2022) also highlights the role of group membership when discussing the “Racialized Norm Model (RNM)” (43). Adherence to two norms, “honoring ancestors” and “helping hands,” explains Black political behavior. Her interview data signify that Black respondents are most likely to link these norms to politics. This effect is most significant when the individual is embedded in Black spaces. Most recently, Wamble (2025) points to the role of community commitment and finds that candidates who can signal that they sacrificed for the Black community will likely get large support from said community. Group-based explanations garner much attention in the literature and provide important insight into Black vote choice.

Despite the rich information provided by previous group-based explanations, two factors complicate their application to majority-Black congressional districts. First, Black voters cannot use race to distinguish between candidates. As the racial makeup of a district increases, the number of candidates from that racial group will also increase (Branton 2009; Fraga 2018; Fraga et al., 2020). Therefore, when almost all the candidates who emerge are of the same race, voters cannot use racial cues to distinguish between candidates. Second, voters in primary elections have limited knowledge about the candidates running. Congressional primary elections are considered low-information because voters have little information about the candidates running (Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2016; Bawn et al. 2019; Hirano et al. 2015). Research shows voters learn about candidates during gubernatorial and U.S. Senate primary elections but not in U.S. House primary elections (Hirano et al. 2015).

Other scholars find that voters cannot recall important information about primary candidates. One study found that “47% of exit poll respondents could not recall the name of a single House primary candidate, *despite having cast ballots only minutes before*. Only 16% were able to list all the candidates” (Bawn et al. 2019). This lack of knowledge complicates many of the major theoretical explanations. When explaining how Black voters utilize heuristics, Dawson (1994) claims that “determining what political and social policies would provide the most utility for each individual African American . . . was more cost-effective than the calculation of individual utility” (57). This calculation is straightforward when a Black voter chooses between Republican or Democratic candidates or between Black or White candidates. However, the lack of information in primary elections makes engaging in deeper cognitive reasoning difficult.

This point applies more to White and Laird’s (2020) theory of *racialized social constraint*, which only works in highly salient settings. When discussing the assumptions of their theory, they point to four necessary conditions: (1) a well-defined norm of Black political behavior, (2) the behavior is public, (3) racially homogeneous social networks, and (4) potential for sanctioning or rewards (White and Laird 2020, 47). Majority-Black congressional districts create an opportunity for Black people to have racially homogeneous social networks and create a potential for sanctioning, but they do not meet the other conditions. Support for the

Democratic party is the norm they reference, but partisan considerations are not relevant in primaries because all candidates are in the same party. There are also no well-defined norms for choosing between Black candidates. Wamble's (2025) theory suffers from a similar issue when applied to majority-Black congressional districts. It is difficult for voters to learn much about primary candidates, so I question if voters have the knowledge to determine which candidate sacrificed the most for the Black community.

A body of literature investigates Black vote choice in low-information environments, and scholars point to the importance of electoral cues. Evidence shows that primary elections have significantly lower turnout than general elections (Boatright 2014), less money is contributed and spent (Boatright 2014, 224), and campaigns have smaller ground games (Hughes et al. 2017). This means campaigns are less equipped to contact voters and spread their message. Since voters have little factual information about the candidates who emerge, voters look for signals in the environment to help them make choices. Black voters cannot use racial or partisan cues to choose candidates, but there are other cues that they can utilize. For example, Black voters could turn to incumbency (Benjamin and Carr 2022), ballot cues (Matson and Fine 2006), endorsements (Benjamin 2017; Benjamin and Miller 2019), polling (Boudreau and McCubbins 2010), yard signs (Green et al. 2016), and many others. This paper contributes to the literature on Black vote choice by highlighting the role of group consensus.

The Community as Information Sources

Existing studies of Black vote choice already have group consensus components. For example, studies suggest that Black voters use positive and negative incentives to ensure that members of the Black community follow in-group norms (White and Laird 2020; Wamble et al. 2022). This shows that the Black community values group consensus and is even willing to take steps to enforce consensus. I agree that group-based explanations can provide important insights. Rather than having other Black people enforce social norms (e.g., White and Laird 2020), or having individual Black people make rational choices (Dawson 1994), I suggest that Black voters use other community members and Black institutions to determine group consensus. Since congressional primary elections are low-information, Black voters have limited information about the candidates running. In these environments, all voters, including Black voters, will rely heavily on cues (McDermott 1998). However, the most important cues they traditionally use (e.g., partisan, electability, or racial cues) cannot be used in these settings.

Because of their strong group connection, Black voters will rely on in-group consensus cues to choose candidates. Consensus cues are simply signals that provide respondents with information about consensus on a topic, and they can effectively induce a change of opinion (Kruglanski and Webster 1996; Burnstein, Vinokur, and Trope 1973). Since members of the Black community exhibit a strong connection to their racial group (Verba and Nie 1972; Dawson 1994; White and Laird 2020; Wamble 2025), it is reasonable to theorize that they will turn to group consensus cues in the right setting. Consensus cues can come in many forms. Repetition can work as a consensus cue. The more people hear about a particular position, the more

likely they are to adjust their attitudes accordingly (Tesser 1978). Therefore, repetitively seeing a candidate's yard sign or campaign flyer could influence vote choice.

Incumbency is one of the most well-studied examples of a consensus cue used in political science. Existing literature highlights that incumbents have built-in legitimacy, an existing fundraising network, and can garner endorsements from prominent party leaders (Banks and Kiewiet 1989; Boatright 2013; 2014). Data shows that incumbents virtually never lose, and fears of "getting primaried" by an ideologically extreme challenger are unfounded (Boatright 2014).³ Once voters in the district see that most voters support a particular candidate, other voters will fall in line and support the incumbent. What is less clear is how Black voters utilize consensus cues if the incumbent is electorally weak (e.g., political scandal), or no incumbent is present (e.g., open seat elections). Which consensus cues are Black voters using to choose candidates in majority-Black congressional primary elections?

Two other important consensus cues that can significantly affect Black vote choice are elite endorsements and public opinion polling results. Both factors provide information about broad segments of the voting population. Endorsements are a way "that elites—celebrities, community leaders, interest groups—can vouch for the quality of a candidate" (Dominguez 2011, 535). The individual or institution is putting its reputation on the line to support this candidate publicly. Public opinion data provide the clearest message of who other voters support and significantly improves the perception of the leading candidate (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). We also know that Black voters rely on these cues in low-information environments (Benjamin 2017; Benjamin and Miller 2019; Dominguez 2011). For example, if a non-Black minority candidate receives an endorsement from a Black institution, Black voters are significantly more likely to vote for the candidate (Benjamin 2017).

However, endorsements and public opinion polling data are not equally accessible to voters. Endorsements are far more readily available than public opinion data. In most elections, most candidates receive some form of endorsement. For example, Dominguez (2011) collected data on candidates running in the 2002 primary elections in forty-three districts and found that each candidate received 14.3 endorsements on average (538). Polling provides the best snapshot of consensus but is rare in congressional primary elections. Conducting a public opinion poll is a costly endeavor that many campaigns do not and cannot engage in during the primary election (Boatright 2014). Third-party firms also only get involved when the elections have national significance.⁴ Polling results may not be as accessible to voters as endorsements, but they can have a meaningful effect on vote choice when combined with endorsements.

This paper contributes to this literature by focusing on how Black voters balance partisan and racial consensus cues. Which cue will significantly influence vote choice in majority-Black congressional districts? Will an endorsement from a prominent Black Institution or a national Democratic Institution have a more significant effect on vote choice? In addition, what will the combination of consensus cues play in a candidate's vote share? Will endorsements and polling together have a significant effect on vote choice?

As mentioned in previous sections, partisanship plays a dominant role in Black vote choice, but because majority-Black districts are safe, many partisan signals are not helpful to voters. However, partisanship can still play a significant role through endorsements. A Democratic institution or individual can put their full support behind a candidate, and partisan endorsements can significantly affect vote choice (Dominquez 2011). However, when two endorsers are both members of the Democratic party, I expect racial signals will have a significant effect on vote choice. Since Blacks were excluded from the larger political and social world in the United States, they developed parallel institutions to advance Black interests. This includes major activist organizations, like the NAACP, and Black-focused media outlets or newspapers (Jet, etc.), but it also includes common spaces, like churches, barber shops, or hair salons, where people regularly meet. These institutions allow Black people to engage with other Black people about important topics. Harris-Lacewell (2004) refers to these encounters as “everyday talk.” These institutions help solidify a strong group connection and work to spread information relevant to the Black community (Harris-Lacewell 2004).

Currently, many of these Black institutions align with the Democratic party. Much of this can be traced to the Civil Rights Movement in the middle of the 20th century. The Democratic party passed critical legislation and solidified support from the Black community. However, Black institutions take the fight for equality further than the Democratic party. The Democratic party has a much broader issue base, and Black institutions focus on issues relevant to the Black community. This means that Black voters can be confident that an endorsement from a Black institution will signal that the candidate will advocate for the Black community. Therefore, *I argue that endorsements from prominent Black institutions will positively affect a candidate’s vote share among Black respondents voting in a majority-Black congressional primary compared to a national Democratic institution.*

While polling is less readily available, it should have a significant positive effect, regardless of the racial or partisan endorsement. Reliable polling in majority-Black congressional districts specifically signals Black voters’ preferences. In other words, polling data directly signal consensus in the Black community. When polling numbers are high, Black voters can be confident that large portions of fellow Black voters support a particular candidate. Therefore, *I argue that high polling numbers will positively affect a candidate’s vote share among Black respondents voting in a majority-Black congressional primary compared to a candidate with no polling information.*

A natural corollary is that bad polling numbers will hurt candidates’ support. While high polling numbers signal mass support, poor polling numbers raise doubts about the candidate’s potential success. This is especially true in a majority-Black congressional district. If a candidate signals that a small number of Black voters are supporting them, then it will signal to other Black voters that they may not be a viable option. Therefore, *I argue that negative polling numbers will have a negative effect on a candidate’s support among Black respondents voting in a majority-Black congressional primary when compared to a candidate with no polling information.*

While I expect polling and endorsements to have an independent effect, I contend that candidates who can signal multiple consensus cues will have the most support. In particular, the candidate who can signal a racial endorsement and high

polling numbers in a majority-Black district should get the highest support. Therefore, *I argue that the combination of high polling numbers and a racial endorsement should have the largest effect on a candidate's vote total.*

Data and Methodology

I tested my theory using a mixed methodological approach with quantitative and qualitative methods. Combining both empirical approaches will provide a comprehensive understanding of Black vote choice and allow me to explore the topic more deeply. I use an Explanatory Sequential Design with two phases (Arezina 2023; Driscoll et al. 2007). In the first phase, the researcher conducts quantitative analysis. I conducted a randomized online survey experiment in September 2022, a few weeks before the 2022 midterm election. Experiments are excellent because they allow researchers to isolate specific factors and measure their effects. Since respondents are randomly assigned to treatment groups, and each respondent has an equal chance of being in any treatment, we can make causal claims about how viability affects likely support (Gerber and Green 2012). However, one limitation is that we cannot gather in-depth information about why voters decide.

In the second phase, the researcher conducts qualitative research to supplement the initial results. I conducted two online focus groups with Black primary voters in January 2023 to get in-depth accounts directly from voters. Focus groups reveal insight and nuances that other approaches cannot, and they are the ideal way to discover a person's (or voter's) hidden feelings and motives. The questions used in this approach are open-ended so the researcher can capture a wide range of responses. Researchers can hear people's word choices when discussing these topics and uncover common terms that voters use when discussing this topic. This setting allows me to get details about why voters choose the candidate they do. Once I determined important factors, I returned to my experimental analysis to investigate subgroup effects. The sections below detail my quantitative and qualitative approaches in chronological order.

Randomized Experimental Design

To quantitatively test my hypotheses, I conducted a randomized experiment embedded in an online survey. I used the Qualtrics online panel to collect a sample of African American primary voters. While this is a convenience sample, Qualtrics produces more demographically representative samples than other popular online recruitment companies (Boas, Christenson & Glick 2020). This fact makes it the best choice to obtain a sample of African American respondents. 1,548 respondents were initially recruited for my survey experiment. Following the informed consent, respondents were screened pretreatment to verify that they were African American, they identified as Democrats, and they were primary voters.⁵ Following these screener questions, I was left with 1,046 respondents. I then randomly assigned the remaining respondents to their treatment groups.

I take steps to compare the demographics of my sample with the demographics of national African American primary voters. To accomplish this, I utilize data from AP Vote Cast, who conducted over 130,000 interviews with registered primary

Table 1. Comparing Survey Sample to National Sample

Demographics	Sample Percentage	AP Vote Cast Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	49.7%	64%
Male	50.3%	36%
<i>Age^a</i>		
18–29	29.4%	25%
30–49	32.3%	31%
50 and above	38.3%	44%
<i>Income</i>		
\$0–\$49,999	63.8%	63%
\$50,000–\$99,999	26.4%	25%
\$100,000 and above	9.8%	9%

^aThe measure for the Age variable is different for my survey and AP Vote Cast. My survey measures Age from 18–34, 30–55, and 55 and above. As Table 1 indicates, AP Vote Cast measures Age from 18–29, 30–49, and 50 and above.

voters before the 2020 general election. Their sample covered 17 states, and the interviews were conducted via phone or the web. I looked at three critical demographics: gender, age, and income. Table 1 reports those results. Overall, my sample is similar to the national sample in terms of age and income. The most significant difference can be found with gender. My sample has 14% more men than the national sample. However, results for age and income are very similar. The most significant age variable is among those above fifty years old. My sample has 6% fewer respondents over fifty than the national sample.⁶ The results for income are almost identical. This suggests that my sample has some level of generalizability to actual Black primary voters.

Experimental Design

The first stage of my analysis consists of a randomized survey experiment. I utilized a 2x3 factorial design where respondents were randomly assigned to one of six treatment groups. One three-level factor manipulates the candidate's polling numbers, and another two-level factor manipulates the candidate's endorsement. The three levels for the polling treatment are High (75%), Low (25%), and no polling. The two-level endorsement treatment is an endorsement from either the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) Political Action Committee (PAC), to signal Black institutional support, or an endorsement from the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), to signal Democratic support.⁷

All treatments are identical except for a few words to ensure that the length of each treatment is roughly the same. Each treatment will begin with information about congressional primaries. Respondents were told about the definition of a safe congressional district. The exact wording can be found below:

A safe congressional district is one that is electorally safe for one party. For example, IL-01 has had a Democratic representative since the 1930s. This means that it is virtually impossible for a Republican candidate to win during the general election. Now, imagine that you are voting in a safe majority-Black congressional district. Please read a short description of a fictional candidate running for office in your congressional district. Please read the following statements and review their campaign flyer.

Respondents are then asked to read a flyer of an African American candidate running against other African American candidates in a safe Democratic district. Respondents must stay on this page for 30 seconds to ensure they have ample time to read the treatments. The following passage is used to signal a candidate's polling numbers:

George Thompson is running in the Democratic primary in your majority-Black congressional district. Recent polling suggests that [75%; 25%; delete sentence] of Democratic voters plan to support Thompson. Please read the following flyer and answer the following questions.

After respondents read the previous passage, they were forced to review the campaign flyer. The actual flyer and treatments can be found in Appendix E.1. I use a campaign flyer to proxy for campaign contact. This approach has two benefits. First, it increases the experiment's external validity because it mimics the structure of actual campaign literature. Second, using a campaign flyer allows me to vary the relevant factors to test my hypotheses realistically. Immediately following the treatment, respondents were asked whether they would support this candidate. Specifically, respondents were asked: "Imagine that George Thompson was running for Congress in your congressional district. Would you consider voting for him during the primary election?" This is a binary variable, where a "yes" response is coded at 1 and a "no" response is coded at 0. The average level of support is 72.6 percent.

Experimental Results

This section reports the results of my experiment. My first hypothesis suggests that an endorsement from a predominantly Black institution will positively influence vote choice compared to an endorsement from a Democratic institution. I compare the vote choice for the candidate with a DLC endorsement and no polling information, 0.68, to a candidate with an endorsement from the CBC and no polling information, 0.69. This is only a one-point difference, and it is not statistically significant.

Next, I investigate the effect of racial endorsements on the entire sample. In other words, I compare the vote share of the candidates with a DLC endorsement, regardless of polling numbers, to the vote share of the candidates with a CBC endorsement, regardless of polling numbers. Figure 1 reports the results. The candidate with an endorsement from the CBC has a mean level of support of 0.73, and the candidate with an endorsement from the DLC has a mean level of support of

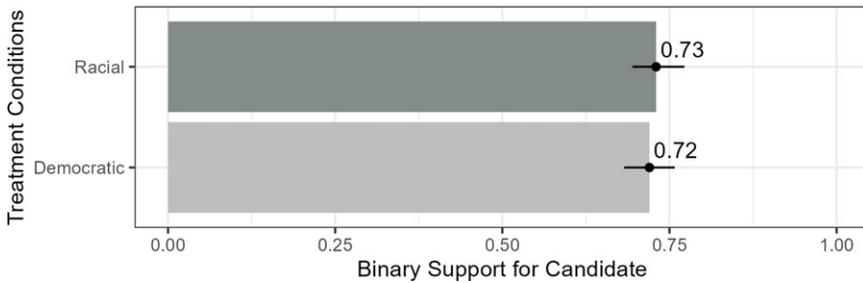


Figure 1. Respondent's Support by Racialized Endorsement.

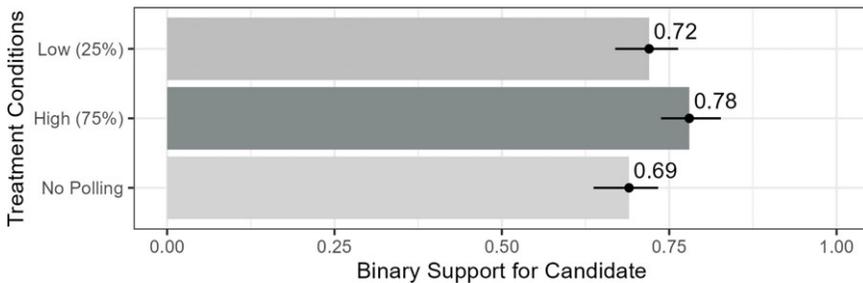


Figure 2. Respondent's Support by Level of Polling.

0.72. There is no significant difference between the groups. This finding suggests that an endorsement from a Black institution does not affect a respondent's level of support when compared to a generic Democratic institution.

The next factor I investigate is the role that polling can have on Black vote choice. Figure 2 below shows a candidate's level of support with varying polling results, regardless of endorsement type. The results suggest that high polling numbers significantly affect the candidate's support. The results indicate that informing voters about high polling numbers is associated with almost a ten-point increase in support, and this difference is statistically significant. Respondents in the high-polling treatment group have a mean level of support of 0.78, and respondents in the no polling group have a mean level of support of 0.69. On the other hand, there is no significant difference for those with low polling numbers. The level of support for those in the low-polling group is 0.72, only two points higher than the no-polling group, and the result is not statistically significant. This result suggests that there is no difference between bad polling information and no polling information.

Lastly, I test whether high polling numbers and a racialized endorsement boost support for a candidate. Figure 3 reports the results. The graph on the left reports results for an endorsement from the DLC, and the graph on the right reports results for the CBC. When I compare the vote share for those with a DLC endorsement and no polling information, 0.68, to those with a CBC endorsement and high polling numbers, 0.79, there is an eleven-point difference. However, the results in Figure 3 suggest no added benefit for racialized endorsements. We can see that across both

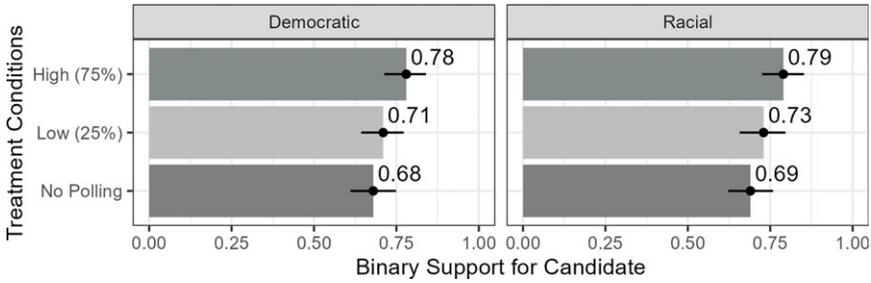


Figure 3. Respondent's Support by Polling and Endorsement.

graphs, the point estimates are virtually identical. For example, the level of support for respondents in the high-polling treatment group with an endorsement from the DLC has a level of support of 0.78, and respondents in the high-polling treatment group with an endorsement from the CBC also have a level of support of 0.79. This suggests no added benefit exists for a racialized endorsement, even for candidates with high polling numbers.

The results from the experimental design point to numerous take-aways. Evidence suggests that Black voters rely on consensus cues. On average, all candidates received over seventy percent vote support, and there was a significant and positive effect on high polling. There was no effect for low polling numbers. These findings suggest that high polling numbers improve a candidate's vote percentage. I also find that Black voters support a candidate with low polling information at the same rate as a candidate with no polling information. The biggest surprise was that racial endorsement had no effect. The evidence shows that the vote share was the same for candidates endorsed by the CBC and the DLC. While these preliminary results provide important insights, it is critical to provide first-hand accounts describing why Black primary voters utilize consensus cues. I conducted two focus groups to get open-ended responses to questions about vote choice from Black primary voters.

Focus Group in Georgia's 5th Congressional District

The second stage of my methodological approach takes advantage of qualitative methods. I use the focus group setting to understand Black political decision-making in primary elections held in majority-Black congressional districts. I conducted two virtual focus groups with Black voters in Georgia's 5th congressional district. Georgia's 5th congressional district is an excellent setting to host this discussion for multiple reasons. First, it has a long history of being safely Democratic. Figure 4 shows the Democratic vote share and the Black population for Georgia's 5th congressional district from 1980 to 2020.⁸ We can see that the Democratic candidate has gotten no less than 70 percent of the vote for this period. Vote share for Democrats only dropped below 70 percent once, when it was 69.1 percent. This fact illustrates complete Democratic dominance in the district.

Second, Georgia's 5th has been a majority Black district for decades. Figure 4 indicates that the percentage of Black voters in Georgia's 5th district has dropped

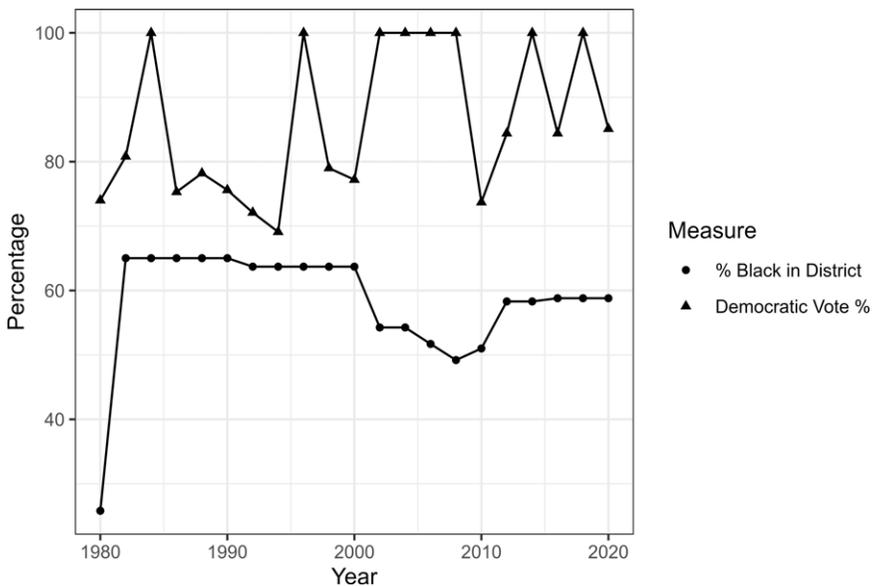


Figure 4. Democratic Vote Percentage and Black Percentage in Georgia's 5th (1980 – 2020).

below 50 percent only once, down to 49.2 percent in 2008. The only exception to this was the 1980 election, which occurred before it changed to majority-Black following the 1982 redistricting cycle. Finally, this district has been represented by a Black representative for a long time. John Lewis, the lauded civil rights activist, served in this district for over 20 years. He won the election in 1986, assuming the seat held by his white predecessor, Wyche Fowler. Before Fowler, Andrew Young, another prominent Black leader, served in this district. This point shows that Black leadership has served in this district for a long time. Therefore, Georgia's 5th congressional district has critical long-term trends that make it prime for my focus groups.

Finally, Georgia's 5th congressional district is a good option because of election-specific factors. The primary took place on May 24, 2022, consisting of three Black women. The incumbent, Nikema Williams, won 86.6 percent of the vote, defeating Charlotte Macbagito (3.9) and Valencia Stovall (9.3). However, Williams was not a traditional incumbent. John Lewis actually won the 2020 Democratic primary election but passed away before the November election. Williams, who had political experience at the state level, was appointed to fill his seat following the death of John Lewis. This made Williams the incumbent, but 2022 was the first time she actually ran in a Democratic primary election. This fact suggests that she still had an incumbency bump but did not have the same name recognition as her predecessor. These three important factors make Georgia's 5th congressional district a good option for my focus groups.

Focus Group Participants

All individuals recruited are African American voters who voted in the 2022 primary election. Participants are recruited using GroundWork Georgia, a political

consulting organization. GroundWork Georgia was invaluable in recruiting respondents because they have decades of political experience in Georgia, and they verified each respondent's participation using Georgia's voter rolls. I conducted two focus groups with voters in Georgia's 5th congressional district. The focus groups took place virtually on January 26, 2023, and each discussion lasted one hour. I also protect respondents' identities using pseudonyms instead of real names. I label respondents in order from Respondent 1 to Respondent 12. Demographic details for each participant are in Appendix C.1.

Twelve respondents participated: six in the first and six in the second focus group. Within each focus group, I recruit respondents based on gender and age. My sample has three males and nine females, which corresponds to the demographics of voters in the 2022 5th District primary. According to Table 1, 36 percent of Black primary voters are male, and 64 percent are female. My sample is 75 percent female and 25 percent male. My sample has more women than the general sample. My sample consists of two participants between 18 and 24, three participants between 35 and 44, five participants between 45 and 54, and two respondents above 55 years old. As indicated in Table 1, primary voters are older, so I represented this with most participants over 45. Finally, I collected data on the respondent's level of income. I have three respondents who make less than 35 thousand dollars, three who make between 35 and 99 thousand, and six who make above 100 thousand dollars. African American primary voters make less income than participants in my focus group. Focus group respondents are not representative of national voters, but I achieve some parity on gender and age.

Focus Group Questions and Responses

Responses from this focus group come from a larger project, and the responses provide important insight into the importance of consensus cues. I am interested in responses on four subjects, and the exact wording of the questions is in Appendix C. 2. First, I ask respondents about their sincere preferences for the optimal candidate. In other words, I ask them what are the most important characteristics of a candidate. This question is crucial because it sheds light on the candidate a voter would choose if they used their sincere preferences. Second, I ask respondents how important the opinions of other voters in your district are. This question is crucial because it will show voters how relevant polling cues will be. Third, I asked respondents how vital prominent Black institutions' opinions are. This question is crucial because it will provide important feedback on the relevant political endorsements from prominent institutions. Finally, I ask respondents about the importance of the media and attempt to provide insight into how they utilize this source to make decisions.

The first relevant finding is that Black voters have opinions about the qualities a candidate should have. The most common response pointed to either a personality characteristic or a specific policy position. For example, the most common personality characteristic was trustworthiness or authenticity. Respondent 1 suggests that his most important trait is having "the heart for people" or having a community-centered mindset. He claims that "leadership requires a commitment to serve, it requires a commitment to others, and then also having balance. You must

be able to fight for the district's people but also be diplomatic. Respondent 12 made a similar point by highlighting those who have sacrificed for the Black community. She claims that "many Black leaders have been arrested for supporting Black interests. Most leaders will not sacrifice for their community, so those that do should garner additional support." Therefore, we see that trustworthiness and authenticity are important traits of a candidate.

Many respondents also point to the importance of social welfare policies. For example, Respondent 7 argues that her deal breaker is whether they show up for poor people. She says, "Do they speak up for poor people? That is my litmus test right there. You know, for the people who do not necessarily have a voice? Are they ever a voice for those types of individuals . . . and when I see that, that speaks volumes to get my support." Also, Respondent 3 highlights the importance of social issues in her vote choice. She argues that "social issues do weigh in on some of this. Like women's rights."

However, the most important factor is a candidate's level of electability. Respondent 5 claims, "I may like this candidate over there, but knowing people as I do, does this person have the best chance of winning? If the answer is no, then I will vote for someone who has a better chance." This sentiment was repeated by almost all respondents in the focus group. For example, Respondent 6 claims that she ultimately votes for the person who "will do the least amount of damage" and Respondent 9 claims "sometimes I will support a candidate early in an electoral cycle, but if they do not perform well, I will look for other options." Therefore, respondents all point to the importance of sincere preferences, but these preferences come second to a candidate's ability to win an election.

The second important finding is that respondents discuss using consensus cues to influence their vote choice, and some directly point to the importance of polling. For example, Respondent 11 discusses the importance of the opinions of others. He says, "If it is a candidate that I was not thinking about, but it seems like an overwhelming majority of voters are leaning that way, it would not make me vote that way, but it would make me question what is going on. What are they about? Did I miss something?" Respondent 3 claims, "In real life, in this real election, this real vote is too valuable for me to throw it away on somebody who cannot win."

Other respondents also directly pointed to the importance of polling, and Respondent 5 provides the clearest example of how she uses consensus cues strategically. She claims, "If you are of the mindset that I do not want to waste my vote, right . . . I wonder if there is a psychological trigger that says if it is close, I may need to pay closer attention . . . if this person has got 80 percent of the vote and has 20 percent, why would I need to go out and do much research? We are pack animals, so if all these folks think she is cool, I will vote for her. Then I can go on with the other things in my life." After others agree, she continues, "Is there a psychological trigger when the gap is big enough, you say, I am going to vote because that is what we have to do. After all, this person will probably win, so I will not do much research and just support that candidate." Therefore, respondents value group consensus and suggest polling results are enough to sway their vote toward a candidate.

Third, respondents argue that Black sources are more reliable than Democratic sources. Most respondents point to the importance of Black institutions. However, they claim that information from a Black source is not enough. Respondent 12

claims she utilizes information from “the Congressional Black Caucus, the local Democratic party, and the state Democratic party . . . Although I will probably read both, I pay more attention to the Congressional Black Caucus.” She highlights the importance of information coming from Democratic and Black Democratic sources, but she places more importance on information coming from Black Democratic sources. Respondent 10 has a similar sentiment, claiming when comparing these two institutions, “I would need to do more research if the information came from a traditional Democratic organization. She claims, “Black institutions, specifically the Congressional Black Caucus, are more trustworthy.”

However, respondents are also skeptical of all information coming from political institutions. For example, Respondent 11 “says he goes to Black sources first but needs to fact-check everything. Just because a Black source says, it does not mean the information is accurate.” In addition, Respondent 7 concurs that she is far more trusting of Black institutions and claims that mainstream sources are far too conservative. Finally, Respondent 3 shares skepticism of celebrity endorsements. She argues that “Killer Mike was introduced to progressive politics by Bernie Sanders, but [Killer Mike] did not do Stacy Abrams any favors. So we should avoid listening to or being motivated by celebrities.” Therefore, the group sentiment is that information from prominent Black institutions weighs more than information coming from generic Democratic institutions. However, respondents were skeptical of signals coming from both institutions.

Fourth, respondents also highlight the importance of the media. For example, Respondent 9 suggests that she follows “different news and media outlets,” highlighting that she relies on “trusted news sources for information.” Respondent 1 agrees and says he relies on the media for information on candidates who are running for Congress and other higher offices. There is also evidence that respondents also rely on horse race coverage. For example, Respondent 5 suggests that her vote choices change depending on whether it is clear “who is going to win anyway, versus when the media has told you it’s a tight race.” However, it must be stated that many respondents raised concerns about the reliability of the media. For example, Respondent 1 suggests that “a lot of the information we get is certainly through the media, but it is not always the most concise, and for lack of a better word, honest or accurate.” The responses indicate that voters use the media to learn about elections, despite being skeptical of many sources. Therefore, how much attention someone pays to the media could affect how primary voters use consensus cues. To test these implications, I conduct an exploratory analysis of my experimental results to determine if varying levels of media attention coincide with a higher use of consensus cues.

The Intervening Effect of Media Attention

This section returns to the experimental design to investigate subgroup media effects. In particular, the role of the media is critical for learning about consensus cues. Cues are only helpful to voters if they are accessible and allow them to differentiate between options (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989), and access to the media allows voters to learn more about the electoral setting (Hayes and Lawless 2015). This point is particularly valid for horse-race coverage that discusses the

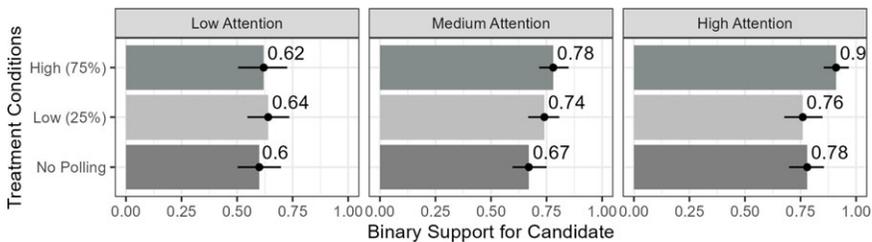


Figure 5. Support for Candidate by Level of Media Attention.

winners and losers in an election (Bartels 1988). This type of coverage allows voters to reassess their own opinions and move them toward the opinion of consensus. When voters know that the information comes from other members of a closely attached group, that information will move opinions significantly. Therefore, *I argue that voters who consume large amounts of media will be more likely to rely on consensus cues.*

To investigate the role of the media, I included a pretreatment measure of media attention. Respondents were asked: “How often do you consume political news?” Respondents who indicated “very often” were coded as high media attention, respondents who indicated “often” were coded as medium media attention, and respondents who indicated “not very often” or “not at all” were coded as low media attention. This section will focus on vote share differences for the three polling groups because I found no statistically significant difference between racial and partisan endorsements. I calculated the subgroup effects for the DLC and CBC endorsement by level of media attention, and the results can be found in Appendix D.2. Figure 5 reports the candidate’s vote share for each polling treatment group by the level of media attention. The chart on the left shows respondents with low levels of media attention, the chart in the middle represents respondents with medium media attention, and the chart on the right represents respondents with high media attention.

The results indicate that respondents with higher levels of media attention utilized cues at higher rates than those with low media attention. Among low media consumers, candidates with high polling numbers have a slight two-point advantage compared to those without polling, and the difference is not statistically significant. The difference in support between the low polling treatment and the control group is slightly higher at four points, but this difference is not statistically significant. This finding shows that varying levels of polling data do not influence respondents with low media attention. When looking at respondents with medium levels of media attention, we see a significant positive effect for high polling numbers. The candidate with high polling numbers has an eleven-point higher level of support when compared to a candidate without polling. The candidate without polling has a 0.67 mean level of support, and the candidate with high polling numbers has a 0.78 mean level of support. This difference is statistically significant. The difference in support between the candidate with low polling numbers and the candidate without polling is seven points, but the difference is not statistically significant.

As expected, the high media attention respondents had the most significant change from no polling to high polling. Among these respondents, the candidate

without polling received a 0.78 level of support, and the candidate with high polling numbers had a 0.91 level of support. This is a thirteen-point increase, and the difference is statistically significant. This point suggests that high media attention respondents are the most likely to respond to consensus cues. The difference in support between the low-polling treatment and the no-polling group was negative, following the hypothesized pattern. The candidate with low polling has a mean support of 0.76, and the candidate with no polling has a mean support of 0.78. However, the difference is not statistically significant. The results from this section suggest that Black voters who consume more media are more likely to utilize consensus cues to choose candidates.

Conclusion

This article addressed Black vote choice in majority-Black congressional districts. Since Black voters have a strong group connection, they use group consensus as a source of information to help them choose candidates. I used a mixed methodological approach to provide quantitative and qualitative evidence for my theory. Evidence from a randomized experiment and a focus group of Black primary voters illustrates the importance of group consensus. The experimental results show that high polling numbers significantly affected a candidate's vote share. However, low polling numbers do not negatively influence vote share. Focus group responses indicated that voters have sincere preferences but are willing to support a less preferred candidate to vote in line with group consensus. Finally, this paper highlights the role of the media. Exploratory analysis indicates that Black primary voters who consume news media often are the most likely to rely on consensus cues.

This article makes numerous contributions to the literature on Black vote choice. First, my theory departs from existing theories of Black vote choice because I focus specifically on vote choice in low information environments. Major theories of Black vote choice (Dawson 1994; White and Laird 2020; Wamble 2025) provide critical insight into Black vote choice. This paper complements this literature by providing a group-based theory of Black vote choice in low-information environments. We know that Black voters utilize a candidate's racial and partisan cues, but how do they navigate elections when these cues are not available? This paper provides evidence that Black voters turn to consensus cues. One surprising finding is that low polling numbers are viewed as equal to no information. In other words, low polling numbers do not have the negative effect I hypothesized. I think this occurs because it is still information about the candidate. Adding additional polling numbers will not hurt a candidate's support if they are low. However, if they are positive, it will significantly affect your vote share.

Second, I raise doubts about the dominant role of racial signals. The expectation presented in this paper is that endorsements from predominately Black institutions should have a positive effect on a candidate's vote share because it signals race and partisanship. An endorsement from a Democratic institution will only signal partisanship. However, experimental evidence shows that candidates endorsed by the CBC had votes similar to candidates with DLC endorsements. Focus group respondents pointed to the importance of racial endorsements. However, they shared skepticism about Democratic and predominantly Black institutions. Do

Black institutions no longer hold the same electoral power among the Black community as they did in past decades? It is possible that Black voters now see historically Black institutions the same as Democratic institutions. Evidence shows that Black leaders have gradually become more incorporated into the Democratic party over time (Tate 2020). The results from this paper suggest that Black voters view information from Black institutions as similar to Democratic institutions. These results may be troubling to salient Black actors and institutions. Black people have supported the Democratic party for decades, but Black institutions have always held an elevated status in the Black community. However, the results presented in this paper suggest that Black institutions may be losing some credibility in the Black community.

Finally, I raise awareness of the importance of the media as a source of information. Focus group respondents were adamant that the media was an important source of information, and subgroup experimental analysis shows that Black voters with higher levels of media attention rely on consensus cues at higher rates. This means that the media can play an important part as voters look for consensus cues. Future iterations of this research should look at the mode of media consumption. In particular, determining if traditional media, newspapers or TV news, or social media, Facebook or X, influence the reliance on cues. The theoretical and empirical results presented in this paper can provide important insight into Black vote choice in majority-Black congressional districts. In particular, the idea that Black voters rely on consensus cues and the media to choose candidates in low-information environments.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2025.27>

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Competing interests. The author(s) declare none.

Notes

1 Scholars studying sincere preferences often refer to ideology or a voter's sincere opinions about a set of issue positions (e.g. Jessee 2012).

2 Data for this analysis comes from two sources: Ella Foster-Molina. Legislative and District Data 1972-2013. October 2016., and The Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP) by Race and Ethnicity. MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2017, "U.S. President 1976-2020."

3 Data is found in Boatright (2014) "Getting Primaried". The term "getting primaried" refers to an election where a sitting incumbent who is running for re-election is challenged, often times from the ideological extreme. For example, if this was a Democratic primary, a sitting incumbent could get challenged by an extreme progressive candidate.

4 One key example of this was the Ohio 11th special election between Nina Turner and Shontel Brown. Since Nina Turner was already a national figure, many independent progressive organizations conducted independent polls. For example, Data for Progressive conducted multiple polls during the primary election.

- 5 All respondents self-reported voting in the 2022 or the 2020 congressional primary election. The specific question wording for all screener questions is in Appendix B.1.
- 6 The age measure in my survey and AP Vote Cast is off by five years. For example, the measure used in my sample measures age in groupings of 18-34, but the AP Vote Cast measures it between 18-29. The exact question working for all demographic questions is in Appendix B.2.
- 7 The sample sizes are roughly even in size and range from 161 to 195. The exact sample size information is located in Appendix D.
- 8 Data for this analysis comes from numerous sources. Ella Foster-Molina. Legislative and District Data 1972-2013. The Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP) by Race and Ethnicity. MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2017, "U.S. President 1976-2020".

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