Ties that Bind

Black Women Candidates and Familial Influence on Political Socialization in the US

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Abstract: *Our work helps to dispel the notion that there is a key set of family interactions that lead to political involvement. Family is an important socializing agent because a child's experiences with her immediate authority figures set the stage for their future political beliefs and efficacy. Because parental personality traits are important factors of the political socialization process (Renshon 1975), it is useful to understand how Black women have contextualized personal control and interpersonal trust through the linkages between family and politics. Yet, these studies were mostly conducted with White Americans and males, thus the foundational texts on political socialization did not use an intersectional lens to recognize the importance of a raced/gendered dynamic with the agencies of socialization into politics through the family unit. This analysis broadens the spectrum of feminism(s) in the United States, namely by showcasing how family plays a role in shaping Black women candidate's political ambition via encouraging their political ambition.*

The daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters of the enslaved secured voting rights and pushed for political inclusion. Historian Martha Jones' book *Vanguard* retells the past to examine how Freedwoman and their descendants pushed for universal suffrage at a time when race *or* gender voting rights were being debated (Jones 2020). Instead, courageous Black women like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper were political visionaries who pushed the United States to think more holistically about the intersecting needs manifested by sexism and racism. In doing so, she and others advocated for inalienable rights for Black women who were responding to racial and sexual violence as well as disenfranchisement (Murray/Eastwood 1965).

There is a long lineage of Black women who fought for political rights (Barnett 1993; Brown 2014) although their work has often been invisible in the modern retelling of women's or Black's role in shaping electoral politics (Materson 2009). Yet these women exist. They are the daughters, granddaughters, nieces, cousins, or fictive kin of other Black women who long toiled for freedom and a voice in US politics.

But what role does family play in Black women's political socialization? How do Black women learn about politics and then decide for themselves that they want to enter electoral politics? Our work takes up these questions. Political socialization is defined as the processes through which an individual acquires the beliefs, values, and attitudes of their political system. This concept also refers to the role the individual plays as a citizen within their political system (Greenberg 1970). Political socialization is important because political regimes want to instil a set of behaviors, values, or beliefs into children who will take up these foundational sets of viewpoints in order to maintain the political order. Thus, childhood political learning is instrumental as this lays the foundation for adult political orientations (Van Deth et al. 2011). Indeed, family is an important source of political attitudes and behaviors (Campbell et al. 1960; Berelson/Lazarfeld/McPhee 1954). Yet, how Black families instil (or not) political values in their young female members has yet to be examined from the vantage point of Black women candidates themselves.

In this study, we utilize the narratives of Black women candidates to help to provide a deeper understanding of how their own political socialization through lessons learned by engaging with their family members have led them to seek elected office. Here we uncover how family does (or does not) influence their desire to seek office. By using an intersectional lens, we distinctly analyze the mutually constitutive nature of race and gender on Black women's political socialization and political ambition. Our unique data – interviews with Black women candidates – presents a bird's eye view into their world to learn how family impacts their political calculation. This provides scholars with a more dynamic understanding of how the daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters of the formally enslaved made their way to electoral politics in modern-day America.

Gendered Political Socialization

A vast majority of gendered analyses of candidate emergence considers the way that women candidates' ambitions are stunted due to gender political socialization. Much of this socialization takes place prior to adulthood and stands in direct consequence of a perceived lack of self-esteem, a lack of parental support, a lack of politicized education, and a lack of competitive experiences. Gendered stereotypes emerge from the gendered socialization process, which deters women candidates from even attempting to enter the political arena. In further understanding and grappling with gender-based stereotypes and socialization practices that deter women from running for election, there has to be a consideration of how private roles as mother, wife, sister, and daughter constrain the political activation of women due to traditional gender roles (Sapiro 1983). In particular, the socialization process has instilled a sense of women not being sophisticated or capacious enough to engage with politics. Here a feeling of self-esteem, agency and political knowledge are resources that are not accessible to women, because of their private life ties and traditional gender roles (ibid.). This consistent state of political marginalization is replicated and naturalized for women candidates, obscuring their innate abilities and capacity for politics.

Black Women as Ambitious and Emergent Political Candidates

Black women tend to be more ambitious than White women due to their political socialization, networks, and their raced-gendered identity (Dowe 2020). Indeed, Black women, are participating in electoral politics at an increasing rate; exceeding that of their Black male counterparts (Hardy-Fanta et al. 2016). Simply, Black women do not lack political ambition. Structural barriers prove to be the fundamental cause of Black women candidates' underdeveloped role in the US political arena.

Furthermore, intersectionality-focused literature has taken gender and race gap scholarship further to explain how both race and gender inform the experiences of those who are most marginalized. For example, scholars have found that racial and gender phenotypes of Black women candidates are calculated in voters' evaluations of Black women candidates, in ways that disadvantage candidates who are darker-skinned and have kinky-textured hair (Terkildesen 1993; Lemi/Brown 2020). In sum, an intersectional approach

to studying Black women political candidacy makes space for the intricacies and nuances of Black women's political experiences in the US.

Methods and Data

The data for this chapter comes from twenty one-on-one interviews with Black women elected officials and candidates that were conducted between 2011–2021. While data collection for this project has spanned a decade, the narratives of Black women candidates remain rather consistent. These political elites agreed to on-the-record semi-structured interviews with Nadia Brown. The overwhelming majority of these interviews were conducted in person, whereas those that were conducted in 2021 were via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents range in age, nativity, social-economic background, previous political experience, and region. There also is great variety in the kinds of positions that these Black women sought. We believe that this variation among the sample provides a unique snapshot of the challenges and opportunities that Black women candidates face and how they navigate this political terrain.

We have given each woman a pseudonym but share accurate details of her political race and other key electoral contexts. We find three themes of the family as influencers in our data*: Supportive Mother; Father as Political Inspiration; No Family Support*. These three categories demonstrate the differences and similarities that Black women candidates find in their family unit as a driving force in their political development.

Family as Influencers

Supportive Mother

Charney Hamilton credits her political activism to her mother. In a March 2012 interview, Delegate Hamilton shared her aspirations for winning a seat in her state's upper chamber. She currently served in the lower chamber and sought to be the first Black woman in her district to earn this position. At the time, Hamilton's Southern state was turning from red to purple. This home of the confederacy was electing more and more Democrats as the population began to shift and new voters of color started to reside in the state. While Charney

Hamilton was ultimately unsuccessful in her bid for the state senate, she was upbeat and optimistic in the interview.

Delegate Hamilton recalled her first political memory as accompanying her mother to Capitol Hill to lobby Members of Congress for healthcare coverage. Her mother was in the military and relied on these benefits to provide for herself and a young Charney after she divorced. Charney Hamilton was 13 when shared with Members of Congress that she and her mother should still have access to military healthcare. "And I remember testifying in front of a committee that Pat Schroeder chaired and talking about my asthma and needing hospital care." When asked about this experience in detail, Delegate Hamilton replied "I think that all the activism, my mom would say that's not me. But yea, it's her. She pushed for things".

Indeed, Delegate Hamilton shared that her mother was her motivating factor in all things- not just politics. "When I was told [that] I shouldn't go to college because we were homeless for a period of time and [my] grades weren't great, my mom said, 'You're gonna apply and you're gonna apply whenever you wanna go." That led Charney Hamilton to apply to Ivy League colleges as well as her local university. "I applied here at home at George Mason. And that's where I got in. Luckily, there was a state program that gave me a summer to prove [that] I could do college-level work. And I got admitted." Because Charney Hamilton's mother believed in her, she also believed in herself. Her mother was influential in developing Delegate Hamilton's outlook as a "go-getter" who was "not bound by external limitations." This belief in hereself would be the internal motivation that helped Delegate Charney Hamilton to seek higher office although naysayers advised that her state was not ready for a Black women state senator from her district.

Father as Political Inspiration

Alderwoman Denise Lawrence similarly noted that her father was an inspiration. At the time of the interview on April 11, 2017, Alderwoman Lawrence was serving her first time in office. She was elected to represent her home district in a Midwest city where she grew up and watched her father, Elon Lawrence, engaged in local politics. Elon Lawrence was elected Democratic committeeman for their ward in 1991 and Denise was elected as committeewoman of the same district in 1996. She'd later win a seat on the city council in 2017. Alderwoman Lawrence credits her political orientations to her family's barbershop and not her father's elected position. During our interview, she shared that her

father instilled in a young Denise to get a skill. He learned to cut hair after his discharge from the US Army at the conclusion of the Korean War. The Veterans Administration provided the elder Lawrence with job training skills that were proscribed by a segregated society. At the time, Blacks were not allowed to be trained as electricians or carpenters, but they could be trained as barbers. Elon Lawrence later opened a barbershop on the northside of the city, a traditionally Black neighborhood. Denise Lawrence decided that she'd needed to come home from college to care for her mother who was seriously injured in a car accident. While at home, Elon reminded Denise of her need to have a vocation – a skill that she could fall back on. He then enrolled her in barber school. The family barbershop was a political hub. Elon Lawrence cut the hair of the city's most influential politicos, from the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to the city's mayor. The barbershop was filled with talk about politics. This was Alderwoman Lawrence's introduction to political life.

It was Elon Lawrence's insistence that his daughter learn a trade that helped her to see the value in having a skill. "One of the things my father instilled in me was a work ethic […] My dad was right. You need a skill because you're not always promised that go to college. He always told me you're not going to succeed unless you go to work. So, I got to work." She credits her father as being foundational in her worldview. She noted "if it wasn't for him, I probably would have missed it. I didn't really get the opportunity at first. This was beneficial for learning." The barbershop was Alderwoman Lawrence's introduction to politics. She recalled that in barber school she was advised to stay away from conversations about "politics, religion, or money. But in our barbershop, we always talked about those things." As an insider in this political hub, Alderwoman Lawrence had the opportunity to openly talk about politics with leaders of the city and in particular, leaders of the Black community in her city.

However, politics did not come naturally to her. She said, "growing up I did not like to be around people, so politics is really something that took me to overcome a lot of things that were challenging to me as a kid […] I asked God what he wanted me to do and I just felt like it was a calling that I had to answer." During the time when Denise Lawrence was considering running for office, her father was in an elected position. But the mood of the barbershop changed because of Elon Lawrence's political views. The elder Lawrence switched party affiliation and became a Republican because he was unhappy with President Clinton's handling of the Monica Lewinsky situation. "Yeah, he said, 'the presi-

dent lied to the people.' Well, wouldn't any man lie about that?" So, some of the city politicos stopped coming to the barbershop and the neighborhood started to gentrify. Alderwoman Denise Lawrence reflected on her first campaign and noted that both her father and the barbershop were instrumental to her feelings about politics. She stated "We had voters come to the shop. I was able to campaign in there too. But my dad kind of started turning some people off. And that was kind of hard. And a lot of Caucasians started moving into the neighborhood and we started getting new people, so it was like re-educating. So, about the third of so time that they [political opponents] came after me, they said terrible things in campaigns. I would walk into my campaign office and gag. I just didn't like it. I don't like the competition part of it." While Alderwoman Lawrence expressed disdain for some aspects of politics, she immediately noted that she remains in politics so that she can assist her constituents and the community that surrounds the barbershop. These are her people, and she has an obligation to help them in any way that she can, albeit with a haircut or with public policy.

No Family Support

Conversely, State Senator Jasmine Nealy had no family support. Unlike the other women in the sample, she did not have a supportive nor involved family. Yet, she became an entrepreneur who was known in the community. Her path to politics was "nonconventional, so nonconventional. You know, sometimes people have this fire in their belly, and they have this passion and want to make a difference based on an issue. That wasn't me at all." However, as the conversation unfolded during the interview, it was quickly apparent that State Senator Nealy's upbringing provided the passion and impetus for her political career. She has a passion for helping what society would deem wayward children "because that was me."

During the time of our interview which was held on June 2, 2018, State Senator Nealy was leading a political arm of a Black Lives Matter movement in a midwestern state. She was a community activist who is known for being outspoken on issues of race and racism. But prior to her engagement in electoral politics, Jasmine Nealy was a Black girl who was suffering. "My mother committed suicide […] And my father came back home from the Vietnam war. And there as a drive-by shooting and he had gotten shot and killed. And my mother was pregnant with me. And I was motherless and fatherless. And once I realized this, I became very angry and bitter. Imagine living in a world motherless

and fatherless. So, I was really angry with my parents. I was angry with my condition. Because we had nothing, we were literally in poverty, so I joined a gang. This little girls' gang. And they called me the leader and there were 12 of us and we just go out and wreak havoc." As an orphan, young Jasmine Nealy was in a world of hurt. She joined a gang to have the support that she did not get at home although she lived with her grandmother. Jasmine Nealy seemed to crave family and a connection or bond with others to fill the void left by her parents' death.

When she was not engaged in gang-related activities, Jasmine Nealy would spend time at the local bookstore. She did not like school, but she really enjoyed reading books. The lack of supervision allowed the future state senator to spend the majority of her school day outside of the classroom but inside of the local bookstore. "And I would go to school and my grandmother, bless her heart, she would say 'Go on get out of here. When you go to school wake me up.' And I would get out my book bag and go to school and after lunch would sneak out the side door because I just wasn't into my schoolwork. It just wasn't there. It had gotten so bad that the principal brought me in and said 'You have to go. You are too far behind in your credit and there is no way that you're going to catch up. You just have to get out.' And they literally pushed me out of the system, and they never sent anyone to check on me."

This aspect of State Senator Nealy's early life is harrowing. She later turned this pain into a community resource. She would later open her own bookstore and campaign on a promise to help the indigent children of the city who were pushed out or dropped out of the public school system. Prior to her election as a state senator, Nealy served in her state's House of Representatives. In this capacity she "and members of the clergy within the 60th district me with the interim superintendent at the time. And I said 'look we have approximately 12,000 kids that are on the street or hanging out on their grandmothers' porches. If we do not educate them, we are going to incarcerate them." In response to the indigent children crisis, State Senator Nealy helped to reopen a school that was previously closed just to educate the children that were pushed out or dropped out of school. She made a positive impact on the children in her district by reaching out to them directly. "I knocked on those doors and made phone calls" and contacted the students and or their families directly. This policy priority is personal for State Senator Jasmine Nealy because of her own upbringing. She noted, "I was so geared to do this because it happened to me." In this case, the lack of a stable upbringing and parents who either

believed in her or steered her towards politics was precisely the reason why Jasmine Nealy became politically active.

Conclusion

Family shapes how Black women think about politics. The women in our study were absolute in their descriptions of how their familial ties did or did not shape their viewpoints on entering electoral politics. What is important to note, however, is that family plays differing roles for women, and that this is not a universal model for Black women's engagement with family political influencers. For some, family can be either a push or pull factor into electoral politics. But as our data show, it's more complicated than that. The narratives of the Black women in our study demonstrate that family (or the lack thereof) offers unique perspectives on how and why they should enter politics. As a result, these Black women candidates sought different paths and have engaged with the political system in a variety of ways.

Future studies should take this intracategorial approach to revisit traditional topics in political science with an eye towards intersectional analysis. We encourage scholars to deeply investigate differences among provisional groups which we believe will uncover more intersectional knowledge about how minoritized groups engage with US-American politics. Furthermore, we recognize that there may be limitations in our study due to our limited sample size. These women's experiences are unique and cannot be used to generalize to the entirety of Black women candidates. However, our findings are illustrative of the myriad of ways Black women's families help to create their pathways toward electoral politics. In sum, we find that the complexity in which Black women are pushed or pulled into electoral politics by their families is a meaningful one. The nuances that we unearth in this essay demonstrate the importance of family influence for Black women political elites. Even if a candidate does not have a positive experience with family – or lacks concrete and sustained family involvement – the impact of family on setting one's political agenda or desire to run for office is evident. The dynamism between family engagement and nascent political ambition is a factor that should be considered in intersectional conversations about Black women's political activism.

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