

## The Historical Foundations of Community Commitment

You can never know where you are going unless you know where you have been.  
—Amelia Boynton Robinson

In the Introduction, I put forward the idea that contemporary Black voters prefer political representatives who communicate a strong commitment to putting the interests of the Black community before their own individual desires. But where did this preference come from? What are the historical foundations that Black voters draw on to inform this inclination? This chapter looks to the past to explore the origins of Black voters' desires for commitment to the group through costly actions and how those desires shifted and evolved over time. So much of Black voters' political behavior is born out of their past experiences and continues to have immense implications now and, as I will contend throughout this book, in the future. Understanding the sociohistorical foundations of the expectation for community commitment allows for a better ability to recognize not only where the considerations in Black voters' candidate selection emerged, but also how and why certain appeals work more effectively to meet the desires of Black voters in contemporary political settings.

In this chapter, I argue that Black voters have always drawn their political expectations for potential representatives from their own experiences. Throughout many moments of Black history, Black citizens had to make numerous sacrifices in the face of violence and brutality and, as a result, those individuals whom they selected to represent them tended to be those whose experiences were similar to theirs. Ultimately, though rarely discussed in research on the selection process of Black representatives, the desire for commitment to group prioritization is not a new phenomenon, merely an under-discussed one. For as long as Black people have expected their fellow group members to prioritize the racial group's interest, even in the face of monetary

incentives, prestige, and violence, they have expected it from those seeking to lead them. This chapter will show the historical parallels between the experiences of Black representatives and Black citizens as a way to explain how and why contemporary Black voters have these expectations for all those hoping to represent them.

My goal is to set the foundation for how we understand Black voters' candidate selection process and the role that race plays in it. This chapter helps curate our own expectations about the efficacy of certain community commitment signals; it illustrates that during various moments in history, Black people's desire for costly actions to better the group remained consistent. The historical perspective offered here not only catches us up to the contemporary Black political candidate selection process but also provides fertile ground on which to explore how community commitment signaling operates, for whom, and, most importantly, why.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Starting with the Reconstruction era, during which Black men asserted their newly gained political power as both voters and political representatives, the first portion of this chapter follows Black voters through their journey of political exclusion, inclusion, and back again. It ends with the culmination of the sacrifices made during the Civil Rights Movement, which ultimately changed the political circumstance of many Black people in the United States. Despite the numerous hardships Black people endured, from their enslavement to Jim Crow and other social and political exclusionary practices, they still found a way to create and maintain a sense of cohesion and group consciousness to make sure that they, and those leaders selected or vying to represent them, did so with the group's needs in mind.

The latter portion of this chapter draws on public opinion data from the 1960s and beyond to understand Black voters' attitudes toward the sacrifices made during the Civil Rights Movement to better their social and political lives. This portion of the chapter seeks to contextualize the current expectations that Black voters have for their representatives to understand how and why Black voters have certain expectations for representatives. Many Black people, throughout the decades and across data sources, credit societal and individual progress to the actions taken during the Civil Rights Movement. There is a clear appreciation and collective remembrance of the sacrifices made that informs much of Black people's engagement in politics. What is less clear is whether the preference that scholarship tells us comes out of this moment in Black history is merely a facet of a more recent Black politic or a relic of the actions and attitudes of Black people that developed throughout the course of American history.

## THE RECONSTRUCTION ERA

Black voters' expectations of potential representatives have their roots in their own community-based behaviors and actions. Historically, Black individuals

were extremely aware of how dangerous it was to challenge the prevailing White social and political structures, having experienced the brutality that came along with any explicit attempt at self-actualization as individuals or a racial group. During the Reconstruction era, when Black men were given the chance to choose who would represent them, there was a clear presumption of a politician's willingness to engage in costly political behavior for the sake of the group. This assumption was due, in large part, to the fact that, for Southern Black individuals, the horrors that many of them endured were the result of being Black, so most Black people, regardless of status, had to navigate the same terrors. To that end, any sacrifices made by individuals within the group were assumed to be uniform among Black people for the same reason. Thus, many of the Black men who were selected by their communities to represent them at state caucuses and beyond immediately recognized the costs they would incur representing Southern Blacks in office but persisted in service of their community, despite their warranted fears.

Though formalized access to politics was not given to Black people during their enslavement, they were not politically dormant. Scholars tell us that Black people engaged in an intergroup politic to create a powerful cohesion that could, if effective, help elevate their position in American society (White et al. 2014; White and Laird 2020). The numerous rebellions led by enslaved people that occurred across the South, and even the action of escape, were open rebukes to the treatment of Black people. The abolitionist movement that occurred across the country is another example of political engagement on the part of Black people (Franklin and Moss 1996). The Black community of the time was not helpless in their pursuit of equality, as White and Black leaders alike worked tirelessly to alleviate the burden of slavery and racism in America.

The Reconstruction Act of 1867 stood as a monumental sociopolitical shift in circumstance for many Black Americans, if only for a brief time. After the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863, and Federal troops entered the South to enforce the laws put forth to allow Southern states back into the Union, Black men were able to register to vote, take public office, and cast ballots.<sup>1</sup> As the right to politically engage spread across Southern Black communities, Black voters, much to the disdain and trepidation of White Southerners, were very excited about the prospect of being able to take control of their own lives through political engagement.

As political opportunities became available, some Black men from the North came down to the South – some returning after escaping their enslavement, others having been sent North to be educated – to join Black Southern leaders in mobilizing eager Black men and women toward a collective goal. Many of the leaders at the beginning of this time were pastors, teachers, or businesspeople with some level of formal education and loyalty to the efforts of many within the Black community (Franklin and Moss 1996; Foner 1988).

<sup>1</sup> While Black women were not given the right to vote or to run for office, they were still very active in the political process in direct and indirect ways (Sterling 1994; Barkley-Brown 1997).

Indeed, a young teacher from Virginia by the name of Robert G. Fitzgerald was asked to be a delegate at his state's constitutional convention in a letter written to him by thirty individuals from his community. They wanted to send him, they wrote, "as we believe you are the most reliable we can send to represent our interest in the important body[.] We therefore beg that you accept the nomination" (Sterling 1994: 104). Representing Black people in the South, however, came at a cost, which was well known to many of the men who were being sent to these state conventions. In response to the request of his neighbors, Fitzgerald wrote in his diary, "I feel that it is almost unkind to request me to fill that very important post which will incur the utmost hatred of the whole White population" (Sterling 1994: 105).

Francis L. Cardozo, a freedman from South Carolina and organizer of schools for freedpersons, gave voice to similar reservations in a letter to his brother:

My friends here have requested me to become a Candidate for the Constitutional Convention, and I have consented to do so, more, however, from a sense of duty than from choice, for I have no desire for the turbulent political scene, but being the only educated colored man here my friends thought it my duty to go if elected, and I consented to do so. (Sterling 1994)

Underlying both passages is an open recognition that to be a Black political leader was to wade into the violent waters of White-dominated political space for the sake of the Black community. Interestingly, the justification given to both Fitzgerald and Cardozo is their educational background, suggesting that Black individuals assumed a willingness to deal with the problems the men would undoubtedly face. Black individuals during this time had a clear sense of what they needed in leaders in order to get the kind of representation they wanted and what would be required of them if they accepted the position. There was a comprehension, on the part of those selected and those selecting, of the cost of representing Black people and entering a charged political context. Given their experiences with White violence before and during Reconstruction, Black voters knew all too well the price that came from asserting their newly acquired formalized political voices, a recognition reflected in both the letter from Cardozo and the diary entry from Fitzgerald (Foner 1988). Both men expressed concern about being on the receiving end of White anger in an elevated position, but, despite that trepidation, both men affirmed their duty to the racial group and chose to weather the coming storm to help their community.

In addition to desiring educated representatives with leadership experience, Black voters had a healthy skepticism of White people who sought to sway them toward certain political choices. In an address to the Black people of Louisiana, Dr. I. R. Cromwell, a Black Northerner who assisted in educating new Southern Black voters, published a popular speech of his in the *New Orleans Tribune*:

[T]he overseer of plantations who once dared prowls around her cabins to destroy your families, the old master (so-called) now comes to tell you he is your best friend yes, you know him. You know that when you were his slave you, your wife, your children were treated like dumb beasts ... these men now come to you and ask you to trust them, elevate them into office and they will do you good. Will you be deceived by these old foxy fellows? Believe them not, trust them not, for if you do, we are shipwrecked ... If we do not vote in good and true man we will have slavery in another form, and qualified suffrage, excluding colored men. We want every man to vote, hold office, sit on juries, travel on steamboats, eat in any restaurant, drink in any saloon, dine at any hotel, or educate our children at any school we choose ... we must elect as many of our own race as we can ... but be sure to vote for no rebel or secessionist, for if you do, you are pulling the hemp to hang yourself with ... Remember, it is from one of your race who is an old abolitionist of the North who has been here in New Orleans the last four years fighting against conservatism and prejudice and traders and shall continue to fight on till the state is reconstructed on the true basis of liberty- political, social and religious. (New Orleans Tribune; April 1867)

This passage taps into an undercurrent of belief among Black people of the time that voting for Black men means that, unlike their White counterparts who were willing to lie to Black voters to get their support, Black representatives would prioritize the community. In the priority list for who should garner more support from Black men, as set forth in Cromwell's address, in-group representatives were the most preferred because, as his own work for the group demonstrates, they could be trusted to do what was best for the racial group, which could not be said of White politicians, no matter what promises they made.

White individuals, politicians, and party officials often made strong appeals to Black men, using a myriad of incentivization and intimidation tactics, hoping to convince them to support policies that would not benefit the Black community (Franklin and Moss 1996; Foner 1988). This was most pronounced among White Democrats who were angered by Black individuals' acquisition of political rights and resorted to monetary incentives as well as physical intimidation to compel Black voters to abandon the Republican Party, which most Black voters supported fervidly. Most White individuals who resorted to violence did so in the hope that they could terrorize Black people either to give up their political pursuits or to support the Democratic Party. In a letter to the commander of the Third Military District, twenty-four residents of Calhoun, Georgia wrote, "[w]e wish to do right, obey the [l]aws and live in peace and quietude but when we are assailed at the midnight hour, our lives threatened and the [l]aws fail to protect or assist us we can but defend ourselves, let the consequences be what they may[.] Yet we wish to avoid such collisions" (Sterling 1994: 113 as recorded in the National Archives).

Black Southerners continuously experienced atrocities at the hands of White individuals, and their new political rights did nothing to quell this violence against them. However, they were more inclined to use their newly gained recourses of public officials rather than match the violence they endured with

the same. Foner (1988) writes, “[c]onsidering the extent of White violence against [B]lacks, it is remarkable in how few instances [B]lacks attacked Whites” (121).

Black voters and citizens in the South were not alone in their experiences with violent intimidation at the hands of White people. Black representatives, perhaps because of their newly acquired political power, seemingly had larger targets on their backs. Sterling (1994) says, “[i]t took courage and a quick wit to be a [B]lack politician in the deep South during Reconstruction ... [H]undreds ... jeopardized their lives in order to exercise their rights” (157). Black representatives across levels of government, particularly those who represented Black people in state legislatures, quickly came to understand the costliness of being a Black representative, as they endured threats and physical violence, like those whom they represented.

James H. Alston, a member of the Alabama’s House of Representatives, recounted his harrowing experience as one of the first Black elected officials in the South for the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States in 1872:

My place of residence is Tuskegee ... I was shot somewhere about May or June 1870. It was done by a band of men who are against my politics ... I was threatened by a good many White persons ... Mr. Johnson offered me \$3000 to use my influence in favor of the Democrats. I told him that Jesus Christ was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, only one to the thousand to what he offered me, but that I wouldn’t do it for \$3000 or to save my life; that I held my life dear but I wouldn’t betray my people ... Every Black man, woman and child was for me and I was offered \$3000 to change and because I wouldn’t take it I was shot. I was one of five men that went up to Washington and I am the only man that is living. Everyone is killed that went there to the inauguration of Grant. (United States Congress)

Black politicians at that time had to make numerous physical and financial sacrifices, some abandoning their families and their homes simply to stay alive. Given the frequency and similarity in experiences of violence and intimidation for Black Southerners and their representatives, Black citizens understood the sacrifices their representatives had to make because they too had to navigate the perils of political engagement, or indeed any kind of liberatory practice, in the South. Thus, there developed a shared understanding of the cost not only of being Black in the South but also of asserting oneself as a political actor, or indeed a person.

The mere engagement in politics came at a very high cost for Black people and their representatives, and while the violence discussed earlier tended to be used against those local representatives, the few Black men elected to the United States Congress still endured discrimination. The cost they paid was not necessarily physical but they were not treated equally by their White congressional counterparts (Franklin 1996; Foner 1988; Sterling 1994). These

representatives had not only to navigate the tricky nature of being Black in a majority White political space but also to represent a population of people who knew what it was they wanted from the representative and had seen first-hand what local leaders were willing to give up to represent Black people's interests in their respective state houses.

To that end, Black congressional representatives' charge was to convince White representatives that they were not trying to offend the current system lest their more influential, White colleagues make their ability to provide for Black voters more difficult. This time in history was not one of complete harmony between Black voters and their Black representatives. Indeed, there was some divergence between the desires of Black people and what their leaders thought was best to effectively advocate for the Black electorate. Some Black elected officials sought to overcome the negative perceptions of their capacity for governance by advocating that Black men vote not only for Black representatives but also for White ones as well. James Sims is quoted as saying, "[o]ffices should be filled by both White and colored men who are capable of serving with honor" (New Orleans Tribune 1867). This sentiment can be found too in the following quote from Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina, who in June 1874 said, "we don't want any law making us socially equal but we do want that when we are orderly and decently dressed that we shall be allowed to purchase for our need the same as anyone else" (The New National Era 1874).

Despite these assertions from Black leaders, Black voters remained committed to electing Black representatives, and as their political power and prowess grew, the number of Black representatives did as well (Sterling 1994: 110). Over time, Black people benefitted from their decision to prioritize Black representatives, in terms of both legislation and economic opportunities. One of the main ways Black representatives served their constituents, given that they were often few in number and lacked seniority in their respective political bodies, was by providing an increase in jobs for Black people through the political patronage system. "A Black congressman in Washington meant Black post men in Mississippi, Black customers inspectors in South Carolina, a Black Internal Revenue Agency in Alabama, and Black cadets at West Point" (Sterling 1994: 201). Despite the constraints on their power in Congress and state legislatures, Black representatives fervently pushed for substantive legislation that would make public education accessible to Black children and the armed services integrated (Sterling 1994). In 1870, Charles Sumner and his Black colleagues in Congress introduced a Civil Rights Act, which was ultimately passed in 1875, to comprehensively forbid segregation in public places.

On the whole, the Reconstruction era serves as a foundation upon which Black people's expectations for their political representatives were established. This period in Black history also shows, in clear terms, how Black Americans' experiences with structural racism and rampant violence informed what they wanted from those men they chose to represent them. Interestingly, there seems to be less of a need for these representatives to prove their willingness

to prioritize the group. In many ways, the prioritization seems implied in the request from the individuals and imbued in the willingness put forth by the citizens turned politicians themselves. The earlier passages suggest a strong sense among Black voters that their concern was more about the educational acumen and less about whether they were committed to the racial group. Indeed, Black voters wanted educated representatives who had leadership experience, whom they perceived would be willing and able to navigate the dangers of the new political landscape and most effectively represent the group's interests. This desire suggests that, because of the seemingly uniform treatment of many Black people during enslavement, politicians' commitment to seeking to better the circumstance of the racial group was a foregone conclusion for all Black people in the United States, particularly those from the South.

#### POST-RECONSTRUCTION AND THE INTERWAR YEARS

During the decades after Reconstruction, Black citizens developed and displayed a greater commitment to sacrificial behavior, cultivated stronger cultural bonds, and an increased skepticism of those seeking to lead them. The revocation of the franchise across the South created hurdles for Black Southerners, but their commitment to both political and social access no matter the costs flourished during this time as many Black people migrated out of the South and to various Northern and Midwestern cities, where White residents resisted their presence with continued violence and intimidation.

Upon the enactment of the Compromise of 1877, Federal troops were pulled from the South, effectively ending the Black citizens' political progress brought about through the Reconstruction Acts and any prospect of further improvement in the standing of Black Southerners. Without the enforcement power of federal troops, Southern states enacted laws that progressively revoked Black people's political rights and barred them from asserting themselves, employing tactics like poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and literacy tests to bar Black people from being eligible to vote. This shift in political access and protection also led to an increase in the already prevalent violence perpetrated by White people against Black Americans in the South, mostly in the form of lynching.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, increasing violence, a lack of political access to change one's lived circumstances, and the continuation of economic hardships that Black people faced as many White Southerners remained unwilling to provide sustainable jobs, compelled Black families to move in droves to urban cities further north like Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York. It is estimated that between 1910 and 1930, "more than three million African American men, women and children left their homes in the South" (Holt and Barkley-Brown 2000).

This Great Migration to the North brought about a number of shifts in Black people's sociopolitical circumstances. Many Black people, for the first time in their lives, were able to take industrial jobs, which offered better economic

opportunities. However, these new prospects also fostered tensions with their White American and immigrant co-workers, who saw this influx of new Black workers as a threat to their own economic well-being. This tension led to more racial violence between White and Black people and was exacerbated by the higher concentration of Black people in these urban centers – many of which were racially segregated. The backdrop of the First World War was rife with democratic language that Black people, both soldiers and civilians, internalized, leading to further growth in Black people's willingness to engage in more costly actions to defend themselves against the rampant inequality and physical violence.

An illustration of this sentiment can be found in an op-ed written in the NAACP's *The Crisis Magazine*, in which W. E. B. DuBois sought to capture the feelings of Black soldiers returning after fighting for America, only to be met with the violence and hatred upon their return. He wrote: “[w]e sing: this country of ours, despite all its better souls have done and dreamed, is yet a shameful land. It lynches ... It disenfranchises its own citizens ... We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the U.S.A.” (DuBois 1919: 7).

The sense that to be Black and push against the power structures of dominant society was dangerous remained with Black people from the Reconstruction era but, in this time, the fight for equality manifested in the form of extra-political activities such as protests and riots. In these post-Reconstruction years, the costly behaviors Black people engaged in are more than simply existing as a freed Black person, it is also in the greater willingness to fight not only for their rights but their lives. These actions echoed the sentiment put forth by Ida B. Wells when she wrote,

[t]he only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense. The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every Black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. (Wells-Barnett 1892)

Black people's keenness to take a more active role in their self-defense can be clearly observed during the late summer and fall of 1919. A wave of violent anti-Black attacks left the blood of many Black people strewn across the expanse of the American landscape, prompting the then National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) field secretary, James Weldon Johnson, to call this moment the “Red Summer.” At this time, when “[u]nrest and disappointment seized a considerable portion of the Negro population, and when it became clear that many Whites were seeking to deprive them of some of the gains they had made during the war, [B]lack bristled into action and showed a willingness to defend themselves that they had not shown before” (Franklin and Moss 1996: 357).

Black poet, Claude McKay, penned a poem entitled, “If We Must Die,” which captured the growing sentiment among Black people about pushing back against their oppression even if it cost them their lives.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
 Hunted and penned in an [inglorious] spot,  
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
 Making their mark at our accursed lot.  
 If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
 So that our precious blood may not be shed  
 In vain; then even the monsters will defy  
 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
 O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!  
 Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
 And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
 What though before I slide the opening grave?  
 Like men will face the murderous, cowardly packs,  
 Pressed to the wall, dying by fighting back!

The words of this poem embody the seemingly new collective sense and willingness of some to act in more costly and potentially dangerous ways.

While the Black citizenry tackled issues of lynching and violence on the ground, some within the ranks of the Black elite pursued other avenues to address the societal ills that plagued the nation’s Black population. Numerous Black organizations, like the renowned NAACP, who through a myriad of means, were established and rose to prominence during the interwar years. The NAACP led the charge against acts like lynching and laws that buttressed the derogation of Black people by working through formal political channels across all three branches of government (Morris 1986; Franklin and Moss 1996; Francis 2014). The NAACP argued in numerous legal cases, some of which made it to the United States Supreme Court, such as *Guinn v. United States* (1915) – which sought to make grandfather clauses, literacy test and other blockages to voting unconstitutional – and *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917), which worked to make government-sanctioned racial segregation unconstitutional.

Despite the lack of political access of many Black Americans, they still wielded strong influence in the cities where they resided. In Chicago, Black voters played a pivotal role in the political success of politicians like Oscar DePriest, and in New York, Black voters led to the success of Edward A. Johnson who became a state assemblyman. This newfound power did not go unnoticed by Republicans or their Democratic opponents. Politicians began appealing to Black voters with claims that they would make “no distinctions on the basis of race or creed.” These appeals had the desired, albeit small, effect of moving some Black voters away from the Republican Party (Franklin and Moss 1996: 395). The influence of Black individuals in Northern cities culminated with DePriest becoming the first Black Northerner and the first Black representative since 1901 to be elected as a member of the House of Representatives in 1928.

DePriest was the only Black representative in the House for all three of his terms in office, which made him more than just a representative for his district; he was a representative for the entire race.

Much like his Reconstruction era predecessors, DePriest used his political power to advocate for the entire Black population, introducing anti-discrimination legislation including an anti-lynching bill. And, like those Black politicians who came before him, he dealt with the costs of his position, having to navigate those Southern Whites who thought his new post was ill-gotten and a harbinger of change that they worked to avoid. Indeed, the Ku Klux Klan burned him in effigy while he was in Birmingham, Alabama, and shortly after his election, White Southern legislators passed resolutions condemning the “entertaining of Negroes,” after his wife was invited to the White House by First Lady Lou Hoover. After this incident, DePriest said, “[i]’ve been Jim Crowed, segregated, persecuted, and I think I know how best the Negro can put a stop to being imposed upon. It is through the ballot, through organization, through fighting eternally for his rights” (Gary 1929; 2).

As with Black politicians during Reconstruction, DePriest’s experiences of discrimination, while not as violent, mirrored those of his co-racial group members; his commitment to the group seemingly emerged out of that collective belief that no Black person was free until every Black person was free. His ascension to Congress due to the influence of Black Chicago residents was a beacon to other politicians about the growing political influence that Black people possessed during the early twentieth century. As a result of that influence, White politicians, from both Republican and Democratic parties, began to send emissaries to the Black community to get their support. Over time, however, Black voters grew more skeptical of White politicians because their appeals led to no change for those in the Black community. These suspicions proved well-founded, as time and time again throughout the Depression Era and beyond, the needs of Black voters went unmentioned and unmet by White politicians (Franklin and Moss 1996).

Black voters, despite their wariness, remained hopeful that the power they wielded would motivate politicians to engage with them, particularly concerning the discrimination they experienced, and made them more attentive to the kinds of messages they received. Black people were “considerably heartened” when Woodrow Wilson asserted that he “want[ed] to assure [Black Americans] that should [he] become president of United States they may count upon [him] for absolute fair dealing, for everything by which [he] could assist in advancing the interests of their race in the United States.” This appeal was meaningful enough to Black voters that more Black people supported the Democratic candidate “than many Republicans would have believed possible” (Franklin and Moss 1996; 334).

The arrival of the 1940s and the 1950s found Black people tackling their plight in a myriad of ways- through grassroots politics and institutional politics. They relied on organizations like the NAACP to fight on behalf of Black

people in judicial and legislative spaces while the ever-growing motivation of some within the community to engage in costly behaviors led to an increase in riots, protests, and boycotts in hopes to better the group's position in social and political realms. As had been the case throughout their history with leaders, Black voters expected those who sought to lead them to mirror that inclination to sacrifice, which, coupled with their ever-evolving skepticism, made them more discerning about the political appeals used to get their support. This development occurred as Black people prepared for another world war and as Jim Crow persisted in the foreground of many Black people's hearts, minds, and lives continuing to wreak havoc on those still residing in the South.

### THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

At the "beginning" of the Civil Rights Movement, numerous organizations continued to fight the powers that be in politics for Black people's inclusion (Morris 1986; Francis 2014), Black soldiers returned home from the Second World War with a growing impatience about the lack of equal rights despite their having just fought for the very country that continued to deny them basic freedoms. This impatience bled into, and altered, many of the attitudes and behaviors that Black people had previously held throughout their quest for equal rights. Black citizens became "bolder and more aggressive" as they pushed for their rights to work and play without fear of persecution (Franklin and Moss 1996). Famed civil rights icon, John Lewis, succinctly voiced this emerging sentiment in his speech during the March on Washington in 1963 when he said, "[w]e will not wait for the courts to act, for we have been waiting for hundreds of years. We will not wait for the president, the justice department, nor Congress but we will take matters into our own hands and create a source of power, outside any national structure that could and would assure us a victory" (Lewis 1963).

Figure 1.1 illustrates this resolve in the Black respondents of the 1963 National Opinion Research Center poll in which 71 percent of the Black sample viewed the protests and actions taken by activists favorably, saying that the work toward equal rights done by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was moving at the right speed. And, in that same data, 72 percent of the Black sample indicated that they would be willing to take part in a "peaceful parade, march or [picket]" in their town. Black people recognized the need for change and the importance of the work being done by civil rights activists like King and Lewis and were willing to play a part in it themselves if it meant bringing equality to fruition faster.

That provocation to act undoubtedly led Black people to make the numerous sacrifices of their financial and physical well-being necessary for protests and boycotts across the South. Indeed, during the Baton Rouge bus boycott of 1954, it is said that no one took the bus, and Black Louisianans

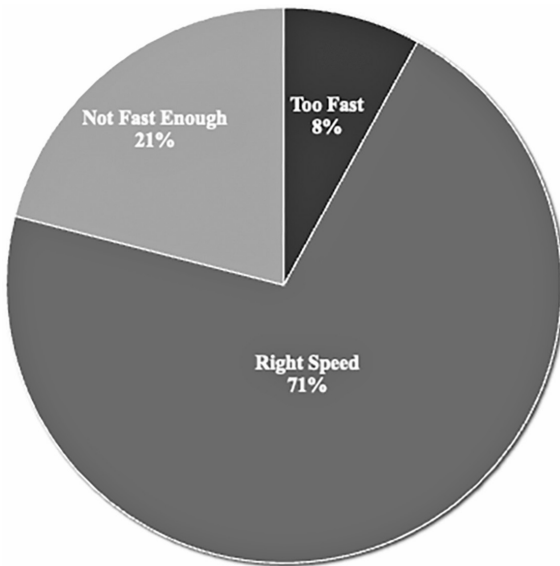


FIGURE 1.1 Some people feel that in working for equal rights for Negroes, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King is moving too fast, others think he is not working fast enough. What do you think?

Source: 1963 NORC poll.

created a system wherein those with automobiles would take those who normally took the bus to work. Actions like this illustrate the communal understanding of the roles of protest, sacrifice, and collective action on the part of Black people to achieve rights for everyone. And though not every Black person may have agreed with the means used by civil rights activists to address Jim Crow, surveys, like the one shown in Figure 1.1, suggest that most Black people were in support of these protest, even if not necessarily taking part in them.

As Black people's outlook for overcoming their circumstance continued to the shift even after the interwar years, their expectations of their leaders also changed as their skepticism toward White politicians was also found in their feelings about those Black men representing them in public office. Before this period, Black voters had strong, trusting relationships with their co-racial representatives. However, the sociopolitical experience of Black people began to diversify in terms of the different places, occupations, and circumstances in which Black people found themselves. As a result, the assumptions about what Black individuals would give up for the group shifted to reflect this new, heterogeneous reality. The structure of the Southern economy made it such that many Black people's incomes were tied to White businesses and individuals, meaning that the ability of any supposed leader of the group to fully commit

to the causes of the Black community was limited for fear of losing their livelihood. That was a chance that few were willing to take, and for those who did make this choice, the price was steep (Morris 1984; Franklin and Moss 1996). This economic cost was coupled with a physical cost; as with other moments in Black history, Black people were still being murdered in high numbers by Whites, and Black leaders were no exception.

Black elites' dependency on White sources of income sullied the once steadfast trust Black people had in their co-racial leaders, causing them to consider more carefully who, from within the racial group, should take on the mantle of leading. Aldon D. Morris (1984) writes, "the severity of oppression of the [B]lack community made the masses distrustful of anyone claiming to be a leader. They knew that any leader would be subjected to pressure from Whites to abandon the masses for personal gain" (20). This required those who sought to lead the group in their fight against injustice to prove that they were willing, able, and independent enough to do so.

The Black church presented this opportunity, as it was one of the few bodies within the Black community outside the sphere of White influence, providing its leaders a degree of economic freedom (McDaniel 2009). Thus, in their quest for leaders who could not be so easily swayed by White power, Black voters often chose from the leaders of the church. This decision makes sense, given that Black people, during the era of their enslavement and beyond, depended upon the church and its leaders for information, direction, and guidance not just in spiritual matters, but in social and political ones as well. Even Black pastors were not exempt from their need to prove their ability and willingness to pay the cost for the group.

This is clearly illustrated at the beginning of the Baton Rouge bus boycott in 1954 with the arrival of the Reverend J.T. Jemison, a highly educated and respected pastor in the community. Despite meeting those expectations of education and community ties, he still was not "above suspicion." The skepticism and doubt Black people had in those who took leadership positions remained despite Jemison's role in the church; he still had to prove that he would work for the group and not for himself. Morris (1984) speaks about how Jemison convinced members of the Black Baton Rouge community that he could be trusted to lead them:

[Jemison] was economically independent of the White community. This independence enabled Jemison to avoid many of the constraints facing the [B]lack leadership that function within the tripartite system of domination. Jemison was not free from suspicion, but in several incidents prior to the boycott had proved that his leadership was authentic ... In [an] incident, word circulated about a family comprising a mother, a father, and nine children living in a one 14'x14' room. Jemison led a community effort to pull resources and buy the family a 60'x90' lot on which a seven-room house was built. Jemison was relatively new to the community, and it was rumored that he had had the title to the property put in his name; after all, "people just don't do what he did." Immediately Jamison and his followers took out

a full -page newspaper ad that showed the title in the family's name. Jemison later recalled that 'from that point ... They had confidence. There were other incidents, several of them. It was incidents like this that made people know that I was more or less for other people rather than myself, and then I could be followed and that I could be trusted' (19–20).

The ebbs and flows of appeals and the self-interested nature with which politicians petition Black voters, their understanding of how White domination, particularly in the South, compromised many Black individuals justified this growing need for evidence of a politician's commitment from this Civil Rights Movement era. It was Jemison's display in the newspaper that led him to be trusted, illustrating that even among Black leaders there was a necessity to prove their willingness to work on behalf of the group. Being Black was not inherently a sign of Jemison's commitment to the group, nor was his desire to be a leader for the group. Black people required some outward display of commitment, and even leaders of prominent Black organizations, like the Black church, had to assuage Black people's skepticism by meeting their desire for commitment with actions.

As in the eras before it, the cost of being a leader in the Civil Rights Movement was great because the brutal violence perpetrated against Black people was, in many cases, heightened for those who led them. Leaders were brutalized – many tortured and killed – for their advocacy for equal rights (Morris 1984). In the 1960s, the movement reached its zenith as Black and White students across the country organized sit-ins; boycotts like those in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Montgomery, Alabama gained national attention; and the vitriol from White supremacists and their sympathizers continued to escalate. The bombing of one of the Freedom Riders' buses in Anniston, Alabama, which left Black and White activists brutally maimed and injured, was one of the more brutal attacks on those leading the charge across the South for Black rights.

In his memoir, *Walking with the Wind*, John Lewis detailed the decision he and civil rights hero, Diane Nash, made to continue the Freedom Rides after the Anniston bus bombing. He wrote,

we had already considered the brutal reality that lay ahead of us ... We felt there was no choice but to face it, to push on. To back down would effectively end the entire civil rights movement as we saw it. It would tell those in the South and anywhere else in the nation who respond with their fist and weapons to opposition that violence can put an end to a peaceful protest. And it cannot. The danger we faced was not, as many people – saw it, the continuation of this ride. Quite the opposite. the danger, as we saw it, was in ending it. (Lewis 2015; 148)

Lewis and Nash's dedication to persevering despite the brutality of White police and citizens remained throughout the Civil Rights Movement, and he was not alone. Many took on the mantle of non-violence and were victims of horrific attacks in the name of equal rights for Black people.

The atrocities Lewis, Nash, and other Black leaders faced during the Civil Rights Movement are part of a panoply of historical occurrences in which those seeking to help Black people overcome faced as well. As in the Reconstruction and interwar eras, there are clear parallels of sacrifice and cost that Black Americans and those leading them were forced to withstand. The physical and mental abuse they endured to accomplish anything for the sake of the Black community speaks not only to the sacrifices Black leaders have to make, but also how the constant need for those sacrifices would ultimately inform how Black people understand effective Black political leadership.

#### THE LEGACY OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND BLACK VOTER CANDIDATE SELECTION

Unlike past eras, the costly behavior of Black Americans, both rank and file members and their leaders led to significant legislative changes in the circumstances of Black people. The actions and the sacrifices of Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, Diane Nash and countless other leaders who came before them, coupled with the tireless work of the NAACP and numerous other organizations, culminated in the passage of two landmark legislative victories – The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The work of politicians since Reconstruction was realized, if only in part, through these two laws and a number of court cases, which brought about a drastic change in the lives of Black people across the country. This paradigm shift is epitomized by the increase in the number of Black individuals who registered to vote, Black voter registration in the South increased by approximately 24 percent following the passage and implementation of these two laws, which introduced the franchise to Black women for the first time and to many Black men for the first time in almost ninety years (Campbell and Feagin 1975).

This significant increase in the number of registered Black voters gave way to a similarly integral increase in the number of Black elected officials. Campbell and Feagin (1975) write,

The gains in voter registration, voting turnout, and political organization have been paralleled by a substantial increase in [B]lack southerners elected to office. This outcome is so far perhaps the most important result of [B]lack participation in southern politics. In 1965, approximately 70 Black southerners held elective office. Yet by January 1974 Blacks held 1,314 elective positions in the 11 southern states (139).

It is clear from both the increase in voter registration and the number of Black elected officials in the South that the Civil Rights Movement, its leaders, and the subsequent legislation made meaningful changes in how Black people saw themselves as political actors.

The sacrifices and actions of those who were fighting for civil rights resonated with Black voters in meaningful ways. In Figure 1.2, we see that Black

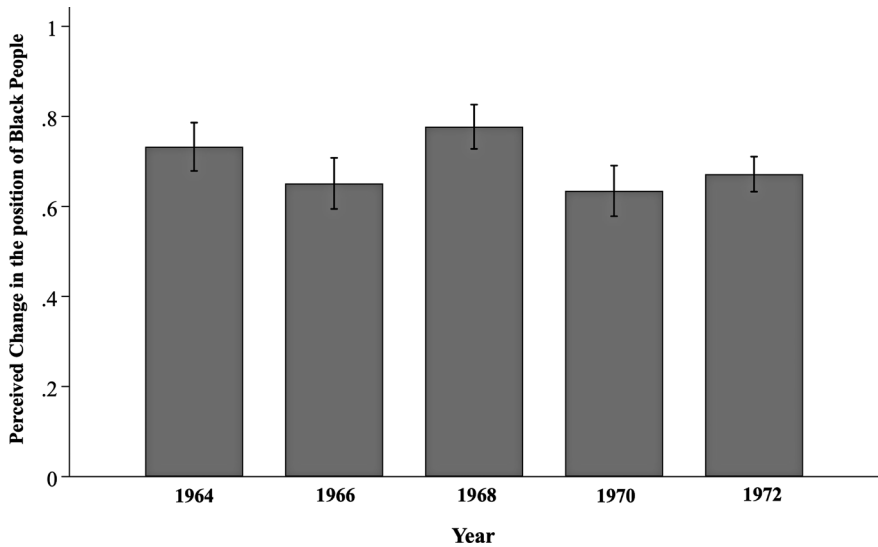


FIGURE 1.2 Perceptions of change in Black sociopolitical circumstance from 1964 to 1972

Source: Cumulative ANES 1948–2012.

voters felt that their sociopolitical position had increased meaningfully in 1964 following the passage of the Civil Rights Act, as well as in 1968 when many Black individuals voted in a presidential election for the first time, solidifying the efforts of the many women and men who fought for these rights.

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Black people melded their understanding about the importance of prioritizing the Black community's sociopolitical interest, and, once given the opportunity, selected those politicians who personified this very concept. Figure 1.3 makes apparent that Black individuals credited the sacrificial practices made by many leaders and activists during the Civil Rights Movement for securing their voting rights and bringing about the end of formal institutionalized segregation. This political decision-making reflects a generational understanding that seemingly persisted from the time of Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement, when Black leaders fought – some losing their lives – for the collective betterment of the Black community. Given the history of Black voters' candidate selection and the understanding that, in the Civil Rights era, these actions made a monumental difference in the lives of Black Americans, it is not surprising that when Black voters were given the chance to assert themselves politically, many of the first co-racial representatives they voted into office were leaders during the Civil Rights Movement (Ardrey and Nelson 1990).

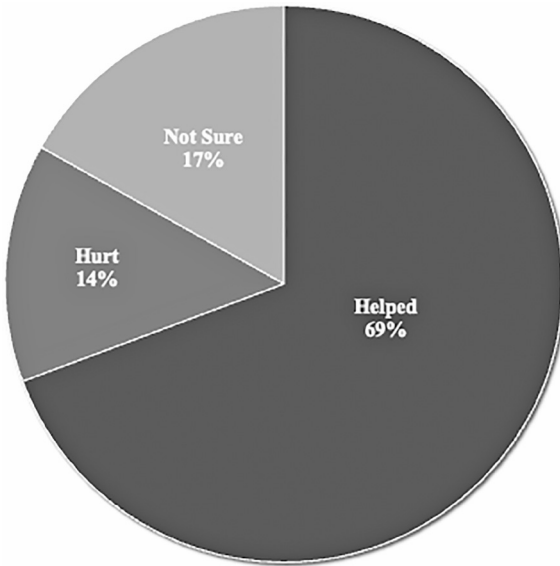


FIGURE 1.3 Do you think activities such as sit-ins, demonstrations, store picketing, store boycotts, and going to jail have helped or hurt Negroes in their efforts to win their rights?

Source: 1969 Negro Poll.

#### THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Earlier in this chapter, I outlined what the Civil Rights Movement accomplished for Black people through meaningful policies like the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. What remains less clear is whether these policies, as well as the actions of those activists who brought them to fruition, have left an indelible imprint upon minds of Black people. Put simply, how much of the Civil Rights Movement's influence remains known within the Black American psyche?

Literature on collective memory explains that these memories tend to be shared across generations (Halbwachs 1950; Funkenstein 1989; Pennebaker et al. 1997; Candou 2005). There are Black individuals who, based on a 2016 PEW study believe that the Civil Rights Movement is one of the most important things that occurred in their lifetime behind 9/11 and the election of Barack Obama, the nation's first Black president. The appreciation and reverence for the Civil Rights Movement is not reflected in the answers of any other racial groups which, I believe, reflects the significance of the movement for Black people. The appreciation for the movement tends to be stronger for older Black people, scholarship tells us that the narratives about the Civil Rights Movement remain in the collective memory of Black people.

The literature on collective memory, which is defined as “a shared reconstructive story of the community, linking today community identity to a tradition and a common ground of values” is an integral factor in understanding how the salience of the Civil Rights Movement has persisted over the decades (Schuman and Scott 1989; Bellelli et al. 2007). Scholarship offers different perspectives about how collective memory works, and how the memories of a collective are remembered by different parties. Collective memory tends to be shared by people who have experienced a similar hardship and can be influential in how they approach certain aspects of their life (Mannheim 1952; Schuman and Scott 1989; Olick and Levy 1997; Olick and Robbins 1998; Bellelli et al. 2007; Liu and Atsumi 2008; Luminet and Curci 2008; Liu et al. 2009). Shared memories among a collective are found to be potent in historical moments in which social movements, like the Civil Rights Movement, have occurred (Funkenstien 1989; Griffin 2004; Harris 2006; Griffin and Bollen 2009; Kubal and Becerra 2014; Yazdiha 2017; Selvanathan et al. 2022).

Black Americans are the only ones across the racial groups surveyed by PEW that name the Civil Rights Movement as one of the most significant historical moments in their lifetimes. Furthermore, many people, particularly those from minority backgrounds, live in cross-generational homes (Vansin 1985; Pennebacker et al. 1997; Candou 2005), meaning that despite the generational shift away from the Civil Rights Movement, there remains a narrative about the movement’s importance which permeates the psyche of the Black community in such a way that the impact of the movement is still recognized, as shown in Figure 1.4.<sup>2</sup>

Within contemporary politics, the Civil Rights Movement remains an important part of the way that many Black people view themselves as Black political actors. That is made evident in polls that ask how important the Civil Rights Movement was to Black people; as Figure 1.4 shows, even in 2007, some forty-three years after the formal movement is said to have ended, the majority of Black people still feel its salience in their lives. There are still living, politically active, Black individuals who can remember a time before they had the right to vote. Statements like “people have died for my right to vote” echo in the minds and mouths of many Black voters every time they go to the polls, coming both from relatives as well as politicians. In the recent 2020 Presidential election, this very sentiment was repeated by numerous voters in different cities around the country.

Another force resonated for others: a wariness, born of decades of voter suppression targeting Black Americans, to truth their vote could be counted if they couldn’t feed it into a scanner themselves. “Since I was 18, I feel more comfortable this

<sup>2</sup> [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/05/a-record-64-million-americans-live-in-multigenerational-households/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/05/a-record-64-million-americans-live-in-multigenerational-households/)

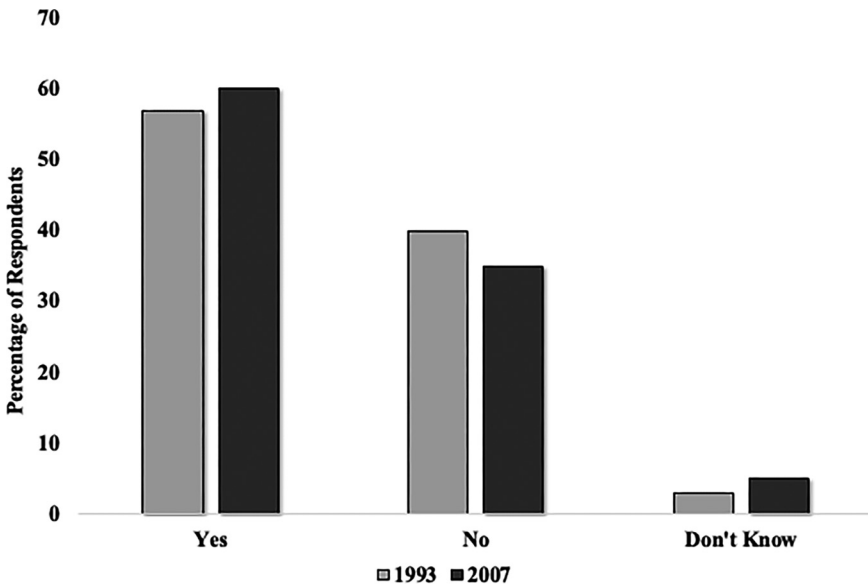


FIGURE 1.4 Is the Civil Rights Movement still having a major impact on American society, or not?

Source: PEW.

way,” said Alyson Marsalis, 57, a psychologist from Waukegan, [Illinois]. “I have folk who got beaten over voting.” Said Jatona Mitchell, 37, a home-care nurse who votes ... near Charlotte: “My people fought for the right to vote.” Carole Blount, 60, of Detroit, also a retired postal worker, offered a succinct answer to the question why she cast her ballot in person. “To get it counted,” she said. “My people, my heritage, were not born with this right, and they had to fight,” she said. “I owe them my vote. They fought hard and shed blood and died so I could be here in 2020 to vote.” (Gardner 2020)<sup>3</sup>

These women’s statements paint a clear picture of not only the importance of their votes, but also their understanding and appreciation for the sacrifices which assisted in their ability to cast them. When thinking about the Civil Rights Movement, all of the factors that make a collective memory potent – shared struggle, generationally disseminated narratives, teaching in schools – hold. This is undoubtedly the reason that even politicians use the narratives and stories of the Civil Rights Movement in their appeals.

The collective memory theory illustrates what the internalized understandings of what effective leadership can do to help and ensure greater political

<sup>3</sup> [www.washingtonpost.com/politics/Black-voters-2020-election/2020/10/18/bdco6ado-of3b-11eb-8074-0e943a91bfo8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/Black-voters-2020-election/2020/10/18/bdco6ado-of3b-11eb-8074-0e943a91bfo8_story.html)

inclusion for the Black electorate and provides a strong benchmark. Even if one does not know all the details of the movement, they know, through stories shared through social networks and the educational system, enough to appreciate what the movement did to improve the way of life for many Black people. When there are other moments of radicalized social movements, like the Black Lives Matter Movement, people tend to draw a direct comparison to the Civil Rights Movement, saying “this is another Civil Rights Movement” (Harris 2015; Siscoe 2016; Jones-Eversley et al. 2017; Clayton 2018).

The Movement for Black Lives is comprised mostly of those who were born two generations or more after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Whether the comparison between the two movements is negative or positive is, in some ways, inconsequential; the point is that the connection between the two movements is another lens through which we see the memory of the Civil Rights Movement, and the sacrifices therein, brought out and connected to a younger generation of people. Black people have endured slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, and those moments have all been central to their narrative as Americans. Those stories and experiences do not go away as generations pass, nor do, I argue, the expectations for leaders that were met in the actions of civil rights activists turned politicians whose sacrificial narratives are deeply embedded in the story of Black people’s political journey.

## CONCLUSION

Black individuals, throughout history, have persevered through innumerable atrocities to achieve the progress that has been attained. Most of this progress has come as a result of a strong cohesion and commitment to putting the group’s needs and desires above their own individual needs. These experiences of sacrifice, which still exist for many Black Americans today, I argue, have direct implications for Black people’s expectations of those seeking to represent them. However, the roots of those expectations run deep because their seeds were planted during the Reconstruction era where, because of the seemingly universally horrific treatment of Southern Black people post-enslavement, new Southern Black voters presumed that their leaders would be committed to the group without needing any proof. However, over time, as the roots of commitment delved deeper, they transformed into a discerning cynicism about politicians’ commitment to the group which fostered a greater need to prove one’s commitment.

During Reconstruction, Black citizens were more willing to engage with the formal political structures and appeal to what they believed was the better nature of some White Americans. By the end of Reconstruction, as the physical violence against Black people escalated around the country and the injustices of Jim Crow emerged in the South, Black people’s willingness to engage in a more grassroots-based politic increased. In many ways, this change in engagement was the result of both the revocation of formal political access – requiring Black

people to resort to other tactics to change their circumstance in America – and an increased dissatisfaction with the lack of progress made despite the efforts of many Black citizens moving in what was considered respectable ways.

At the onset of the Civil Rights Movement, a combination of a more formalized desire to engage with the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government as well as the continued recognition of the importance of protest politics persisted. By the end of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, there was a confluence of engagement on the part of Black people but, more than anything, there was a solidified understanding of what they, Black people, wanted from those who sought to represent them. The contemporary skepticism that Black people have toward those who seek to lead them becomes clearer in the later decades and offers a better appreciation for why Black people's preference for certain candidates requires costly behavior. There is also a shared intuition about the virtues of personal sacrifice for the sake of collective gain which paves the way for the desire for leaders whose commitment to the group prompts them to shunt their own wants. It is clear that the need for evidence of commitment is not tied solely to White representatives or White leaders, but rather, broadly applied.

From Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement, Black people continuously learned and applied what it would take to attain equality so that by the time leaders like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and John Lewis appear, there are very strong historical priors among individuals about what kinds of leaders present the best chance to make the goals of many within the racial group a reality. Being Black in America by itself was very costly, but it was particularly costly to be Black in America and fight against the prevailing structure of White supremacy. The leaders of Reconstruction sought to do this in a more formalized and palatable way; however, as the Civil Rights Movement began to take shape, Black people's mentality shifted. The Black population was much more educated than in the Reconstruction era, fostering a much more cohesive population of Black people with a stronger sense of racial group consciousness. Gone were the days when Black people sought to go along to get along in hopes that White power structures would allow them to engage equally. By the Civil Rights Movement, the racial dynamics of the country had changed dramatically – the prominence of people with more militant politics like Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, and the Black Panthers had risen and along with them a greater willingness to push back against that power structure by any means necessary.

The continued use of sacrificial behavior by Black voters indicates that the expectations held during earlier eras of Black politics still persist and play an important role not only in how Black people see themselves as political actors but also in how they view the role of those who seek to represent them. Thus, the main tenet of the Black community's social accountability structure – placing the group's interest above one's own individual interest remains relevant even in contemporary times. Black politicians with a history of activism have shown their commitment to the Black community through their social

connections and personal sacrifices on behalf of the racial group. It should not come as a surprise, then, that Black voters' expectations and desires for political representation are influenced by the sacrifices and behaviors of politicians.

This chapter set out to explain the foundations of Black people's expectations for commitment to prioritizing the group came from. I argued that Black people's own individual sacrifices for the betterment of the group drastically informed what they wanted from their representatives. Over the years, those expectations changed and culminated in the sacrificial behavior of the civil rights politicians serving as a benchmark for how contemporary Black individuals understand effective political representation. Furthermore, I showed that the continued sharing of memories remains in the hearts and minds of many Black voters and influences their considerations when choosing politicians to support.

However, leaders with backgrounds in the Civil Rights Movement are leaving office, which brings about the query of how representatives who need Black support, but do not have backgrounds in the Civil Rights Movement show their commitment to Black voters. As time has progressed, opportunities for those politicians, especially Black ones, with higher aspirations have increased. The election of Barack Obama has shifted the political paradigm in such a way that those Black politicians who seek higher office must make different strategic choices in their appeals. Some focus on co-racial coalitional appeals. Some forsake racialized campaigns altogether in hopes they can subvert stereotypes about their legislative and governing priorities. This growing variation within the ranks of potential co-racial representatives means that Black voters have to, now more than ever, be more discerning about who they select. Some politicians may simply use their position for the racial group as a stepping stone to higher offices and greater prestige.

Black voters who, as I have articulated, are already wary of those seeking to represent them have more reasons to expect strong and clear indications of a politician's commitment to group prioritization. Gone are the presumptions of a politician's concern for the Black community, signals of commitment are necessary. The next chapter details my community commitment signaling framework, provides numerous examples of how representatives show their commitment to the Black community through an array of rhetorical claims, and explains the implications of certain signals.