

A Certain Type of Descriptive Representative?:
Understanding How the Skin Tone and Gender of Candidates Influences Black Politics

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Abstract

Although sociologists and psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated that colorism shapes how Black Americans evaluate members of their racial group, the literature on colorism in electoral politics remains curiously and ironically bereft of studies of Black Americans. We fill this lacuna in our paper by asking how and in what ways might the skin tone and gender of Black candidates shape Blacks' vote intention along with perceptions of representativeness? Using an original survey experiment with 1,260 Black Americans (of which we analyze 839) that varies the gender and skin tone of political candidates, we find that darker skinned candidates are evaluated more favorably than lighter skinned candidates. Our results advance the research on colorism in electoral politics and have sweeping implications for the vast body of literature on descriptive representation.

Keywords: descriptive representation; colorism; Black politics

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- (a) Supplementary material for this article is available in an online appendix.
- (b) Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse.
- (c) This study was conducted in compliance with relevant laws and was approved and deemed exempt by the Villanova Institutional Review Board.

A burgeoning literature in political science examines the importance of skin tone in politics. While some scholars assess how the skin tone of Black people shapes their ideological leanings (Hutchings et al 2016; Yadon 2018), others examine how the skin tone of Black male candidates shape Whites' evaluations of candidates and willingness to vote for them; finding that Whites are far more likely to support those with lighter skin (Terkildsen 1993; Weaver 2012; Carew 2016). Given that most Black representatives in Congress and lower levels of government come from majority Black areas (Highton 2004), it is surprising that much of the work on the electoral consequences of colorism focuses on White attitudes towards Black candidates of various skin tones (Carew 2016; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Lerman, McCabe, and Sadin 2015; Terkildsen 1993; Weaver 2012), and not how skin tone affects Black voters' evaluations of Black candidates.

The limited literature on the effect of skin tone among Blacks in politics finds that Black Democrats, who are economically liberal but socially conservative, use skin tone as a signal to decide which candidate lines up with their own political preferences, but find “only limited evidence that skin tone matters” (Lerman, McCabe, and Sadin 2015, 63). This begs the following questions: how and in what ways might the skin tone of Black candidates shape Blacks' perceptions of representativeness and vote choice? Moreover, how does the gender of candidates along with variation in skin tone further shape these evaluations? We answer these questions by arguing that the perceived discrimination and other lived experiences of dark skinned Black candidates leads them to be more preferable to Black voters who want descriptive representatives that understand and can address the needs of the racial group. Though this argument runs counter to much of the colorism research within political science and sociology, it is our claim that skin color serves as a powerful heuristic among Black individuals in politics.

The literature that engages the influence of colorism within the Black community tends to focus on social contexts, finding that lighter skinned Blacks tend to have higher incomes, better health outcomes, and greater chances at marriage (Allen et al 2000). In these contexts, the effects of colorism are often felt more by Black women than Black men (Drake and Cayton 1945; Russell et al 1992). Indeed, lighter skinned women are associated with higher educational attainment, increased levels of income, and higher spousal

status (Hill 2002; Hunter 2002). What remains unclear is whether we should expect these findings to translate to Black evaluations of co-racial candidates of various skin tones, and whether Black preferences for lighter-skinned Black women persist in political contexts. To provide more clarity to this oversight, we use an original survey experiment with 1,260 Black respondents that varies the skin tone and gender of fictitious candidates to examine how skin color operates for Black representatives when co-racial voters are evaluating them.

Black Voter Expectations, Colorism, and Candidate Evaluations

Generally speaking, Black political representatives are held to higher standards and have to meet a different set of expectations than those set among ordinary citizens (McAllistar 2000). Charles Hamilton (1981) claims, Black representatives are individuals “who [speak] and [act] on matters of specific (but not necessarily, exclusive) concern to Black people as a direct purpose of occupying that role” (8). Moreover, scholarship shows that Black representatives are expected to use their elevated position to address the socio-political issues of the Black community (Walters 1999; Wamble 2018). Indeed, the literature on descriptive representation suggests that Black voters often prefer Black representatives because they are seen as having a greater ability to represent and address the concerns of the Black community given the perception of shared experiences as Black individuals (Tate 2003).

Considering the strong evidence in colorism research on the vastly different lived experiences of Black individuals might help us understand why Suzanne Dovi (2002) cautions scholars not to think that the lived experiences of all descriptive representatives will resonate in similar ways with co-racial voters. Darker skinned Black individuals, on average, come from poorer homes with lower education backgrounds, and endure more difficult circumstances than lighter skinned Blacks (Massey et al. 2003). Moreover, dark-skinned Blacks tend to be seen as more Afro-centric with stronger social connections to the racial group because they have experienced greater struggles with racial discrimination, and often have negative stereotypes leveraged against them (Hughes and Hertel 1990; Allen et al. 2000; Ono 2002). Conversely, lighter-skinned Black individuals generally have higher incomes, higher status within the Black community,

and better health outcomes (Allen et al 2000). However, despite their higher social status, “lighter skinned men and women are typically not regarded as legitimate members of their ethnic communities” (Hunter 2005). These results encourage us to heed Dovi’s (2002) caution about broadly applying the idea that the lived experiences of Black representatives will automatically resonate with Black voters, and calls us to consider how the lived experiences of light skinned and dark-skinned Blacks inform how Black representatives are evaluated by co-racial constituents.

Because Black descriptive representatives are expected to represent the broader interests of the racial group, we build from the findings of Lerman et al. (2015) that skin color is a signal to Blacks, and contend that Black individuals use skin color as a means to determine which Black candidates are more likely to “speak and act on matters of specific concern to Black people.” Since Black voters prefer candidates who are perceived to have a stronger connection to, and understanding of, the racial group’s hardships (Wamble 2018), and darker-skinned Blacks are viewed as having stronger ties and experiences with discrimination, *we expect darker-skinned candidates to be perceived as having a greater ability to represent Blacks’ interests than lighter skinned candidates (H1). We also expect Black people to be more likely to vote for darker skinned candidates than their lighter skinned counterparts (H2).* This may indicate a greater need for lighter-skinned candidates to communicate their connections to the racial group in more explicit ways.

We stand by these expectations even when we take candidate gender into account. Though the attributes associated with lighter-skinned women, such as higher educational attainment (Hunter 2002), are seemingly important for political representatives, they do not inherently communicate one’s ability to understand and address the issues of the Black community. Thus, we hypothesize that *Black people will be more likely to vote for darker-skinned Black women (H3) and that Black people will believe that darker Black women are more capable of representing their interests (H4).* As it pertains to gender differences, we also expect that there will be no differences in how Black voters evaluate dark-skinned Black men and women candidates. This expectation stems from what we posit as an overarching desire for candidates who have a greater experiential proximity to the issues and problems of the Black community.

Method

We conducted a survey experiment that varies the race and skin tone of fictitious candidates in August of 2017 on a sample of 1,260 self-identified Black/African-Americans through Qualtrics, an opt-in online survey community. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of six conditions that varied the skin tone and gender of our fictitious congressional candidate from Pennsylvania (the candidates' names were James or Julie Thompson), but kept the biographical information about the candidate constant; only the picture accompanying the candidate's biography changed throughout these conditions. Though the candidates' names are fictitious, the photographs we used are headshots of real former members of the United States Congress (Carolyn Kilpatrick and Floyd Flake).¹ We hired a graphic designer to manipulate the skin tones of our fictitious candidates, thus yielding the following conditions: two conditions with images of flags that mentioned the name of the candidate, the remaining conditions had an image of Candidate Julie Thompson as light or dark skinned, and Candidate James Thompson as light or dark skinned. Respondents were then asked to rate their vote intention, whether the candidate represented their interests, and the likelihood of the candidate receiving the Black vote. Our sample contains 630 males and 630 females. The average respondent was 40 years old with some college education, and an average family income ranging from \$40,000 to \$49,999. In our analyses we focus on the respondents assigned to the light and dark skinned candidate conditions yielding a total of 839 respondents. It is important to note that because of the slight, though realistic, change in our experimental manipulations, we expect smaller effect

¹ We intentionally selected a congressional election, as these are the types of national contests where we are likely to see Black candidates challenge one another in primary races. Since most Black Congressional candidates come out of majority Black districts (Lublin 2018) we can assume that Black voters are choosing between multiple Black candidates.

sizes in our experimental results. However, any change we do see, small or otherwise, suggests that skin color is an important and influential consideration Black voters make.

Results

Figures 1 through 3 present our main findings via differences of means, showing that, relative to a lighter skinned Candidate Thompson, Black respondents are more likely to vote for dark-skinned Candidate Thompson ($p < .05$), believe that Black people will be more likely to vote for the darker skinned candidate ($p < .01$), and that (s)he can represent their political interests ($p < .05$).² These results corroborate our argument that Black voters look for signals of connection to the racial group, and use skin color as a signal to assess a candidate's connection. Scholarship tells us that Black voters support individuals, parties, and organizations that they believe can better the socio-political position of the racial group (Dawson 1994; Wamble 2018). Who better to take on that task than individuals, who sociological scholarship tells us, are perceived, based on their skin color, to have experienced more hardships than others within the racial group? These results provide clear evidence for our argument about skin color's role in Black candidate evaluations.

In Appendix Tables 1 through 3, we use OLS regression analyses to examine the size of the treatment effect while controlling for gender, education, income, age, self-reported skin tone, and partisanship. Treatment effect estimates in the pooled experimental conditions range from 3 to 5 percentage points. Respondents were 3 percentage points more likely to vote for dark skinned candidates and believe the candidate represents their interest, and 5 percentage points more likely to believe the candidate will receive the Black vote. When benchmarked against partisanship, wherein respondents who identify as Democrats are 30 percentage points more likely to support the candidate, about 10% of the effect can be attributed to skin tone. This finding reveals that partisanship is not the only variable that matters in terms of

² Our appendix contains the full experimental results, including comparisons to the control group, and effect sizes.

descriptive representation; skin tone matters in a substantively significant way. We speculate that the differences in our findings and those in Lerman et al (2015) can be attributed to their conservative experimental test where their experiment's light skinned candidate experiment is darker than the light skin candidate presented in ours. By showing a lighter Black candidate than Lerman and her colleagues, we believe that respondents in our experiment made a clearer distinction between the dark skin and light skin Black candidates, and evaluated in more distinctive ways.

In Figure 4, we investigate how skin tone and gender shape vote intention and representativeness using coefficient plots with 95% confidence intervals. Model 1 in Figure 4 directly compares those assigned to the Dark and Light Julie conditions. In this model, likelihood of receiving the Black vote is the only variable where we observe a significant difference ($p < .01$). In Model 2 of Figure 4, we see drastic differences between Light and Dark James on all three variables as respondents are circumspect towards Light James and far more likely to vote for Dark James ($p < .05$), believe that Black voters will support him ($p < .10$), and believe that he can better represent their interests ($p < .05$). Using OLS regression analyses, Appendix Tables 2 and 3 reveal effect sizes across our dependent variables and treatment conditions that assess both gender and skin tone. For dark skinned Julie, findings in Table 2 suggest that skin tone comprises half of the effect of partisanship. Findings from Table 3, which examine comparisons between those assigned to the light and dark-skinned James conditions, reveal that skin tone is almost one third of the effect of partisanship. Whereas previous evaluations of descriptive representation focus solely on race broadly construed and partisanship, our findings indicate that skin tone also matters for representativeness. These results affirm our expectations that lighter skinned Blacks may face larger obstacles than their darker skinned counterparts in political contexts and corroborate extant sociology literature on skin color and racial authenticity (Veras 2016).

Despite the dearth of literature on Black women candidates, we know that Black women candidates face unique hurdles in how they are viewed and evaluated (Gay and Tate 1998; Brown and Lemi 2019; Philpot and Walton 2007), which could explain why dark James is evaluated more positively across

numerous measures. Yet, Model 3 in Figure 4, which compares Dark Julie to Dark James, reveals that respondents believe the darker woman candidate is likely to receive the Black vote. Appendix Table 4 reveals effect sizes across our dependent variables for those assigned to the Dark Julie and Dark James conditions. For dark skinned Julie, Table 4 suggests that skin tone makes up approximately one third of the effect of partisanship. This result, consistent with previous findings, intimates that respondents recognize or perceive a group-based preference for darker women candidates. It is our hope that with the growing number of Black women being elected to political office, future literature can answer the questions these findings present.

Discussion

At the congressional and local levels, Black voters are often choosing between multiple Black candidates in their primaries. Although recent research within political science investigates how skin color informs Black political preferences and intragroup dynamics (Hutchings et al 2016; Yadon 2018), it does little to inform how important political shortcuts like skin color informs which candidates are preferred and why. In the 2018 midterms alone, we saw three Black gubernatorial candidates rise with many others running at the Congressional level. This article shows that Black voters prefer dark-skinned Black candidates, regardless of their gender, relative to their lighter skinned counterparts. The answers provided in this article allow us to see how Black voters, an important voting bloc, consider the kinds of descriptive representatives they prefer.

In this paper, we expand scholarly understandings of the role of colorism within politics by looking at how it works within the Black electorate. We are able to show that, despite the strong evidence in other works about how skin color is leveraged against women and women candidates, that dark-skinned women candidates are preferred to light-skinned women candidates. This finding has been echoed in more recent research as Brown and Lemi (2019) also find that Black voters are more likely to support candidates with Afrocentric features. At its root, this article reveals the importance a perceived connection to the Black community is to Black voters. As said before, these results are not to say that lighter-skinned Black

candidates are unable to garner success with Black voters, but rather that because their skin color suggests an experiential difference from many Black people, they may have to do more than their darker counterparts to show their connection to the Black community.

Speaking more broadly we contribute to the study of colorism overall by showing that the preferences for light-skinned individuals may not be as consistent as research within political science and sociology suggests. Research on colorism is not solely tied to the Black population. Due to its pervasiveness during the era of global colonials, perceptions of light skin as attractive and dark skin as less appealing has been internalized by many cultures in Central and South America (Hunter 2005; Telles, Flores, and Urrea-Giraldo 2015). It is possible that our findings about how skin color operates in the representative/constituent model could be applied to other racial/ethnic groups. The findings in this article offer new avenues for research across fields to further investigate whether skin color preferences are more dynamic, especially in the political realm, than previously assumed.

Figure 1:
Willingness to Vote for Candidate
by Pooled Experimental Condition

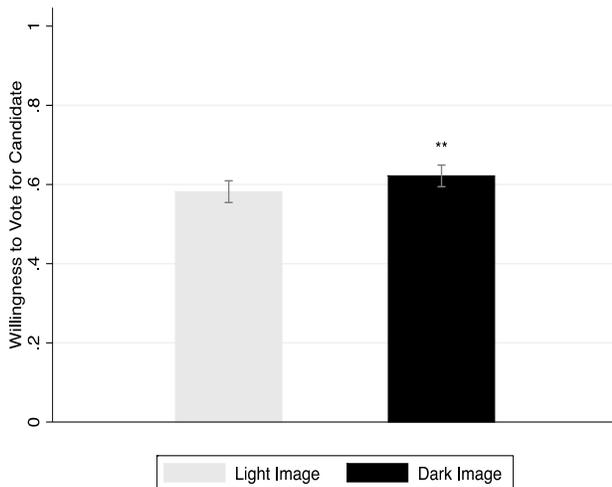


Figure 2:
Ability to Represent Interests
by Pooled Experimental Condition

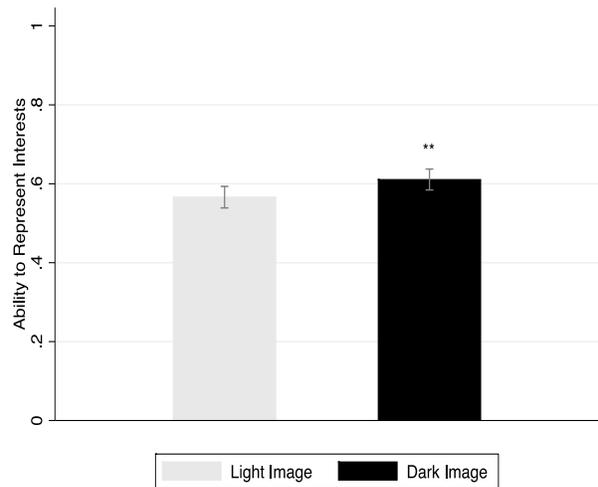


Figure 3:
Likelihood of Receiving the Black Vote
by Pooled Experimental Condition

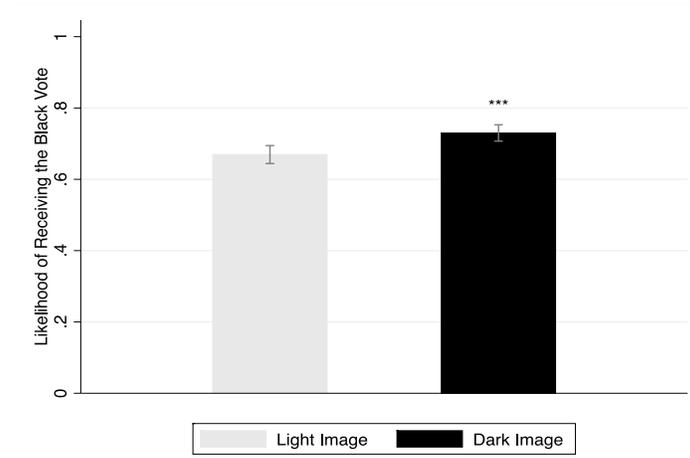


Figure 4:
Evaluations of Candidate Thompson by Gender and Skin Tone

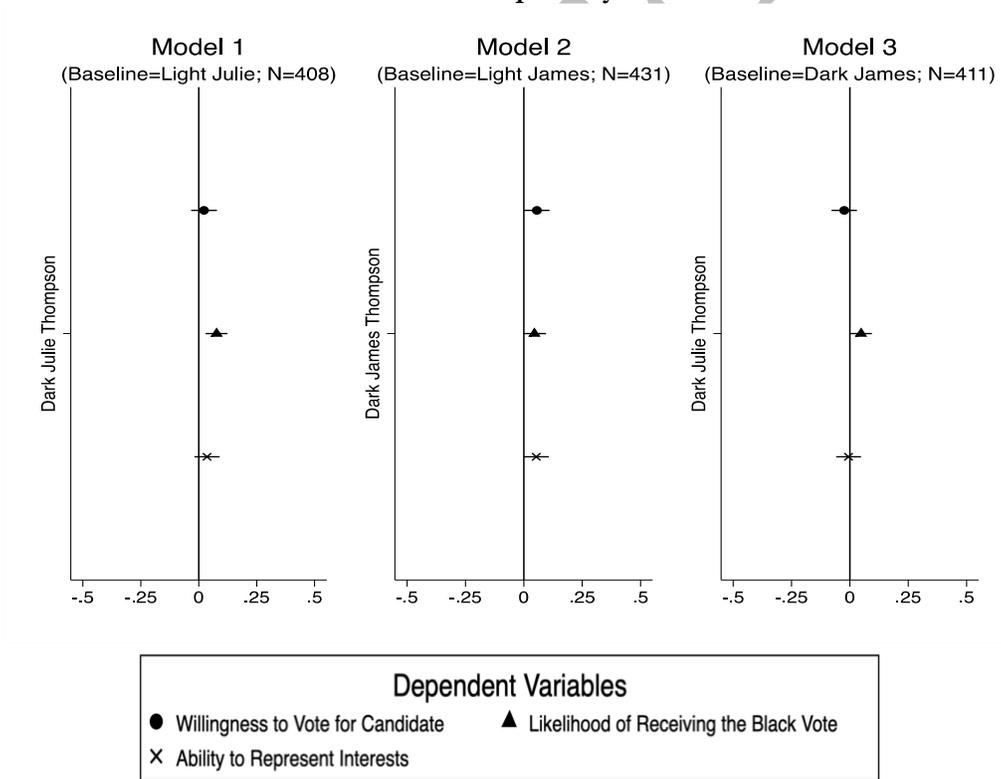


Figure 4 contains OLS Regression coefficient plots with 95% confidence intervals.

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