

# Black Women's Optimism, Resilience, and Political Engagement in Times of Crisis

CHRISTINE MARIE SLAUGHTER

## INTRODUCTION

Black women's political engagement has garnered much attention from scholars, pundits, and organizers.<sup>1</sup> African-American women's support for the Democratic party, along with African-American women's higher rates of political participation have a broad impact on politics. Between 2016 and 2020, the highest political office eschewed xenophobic, anti-Black rhetoric and policies.<sup>2</sup> But in these times, Black women remained steadfast participants in the political process. In the 2017 Alabama Senate special election, African-American women supported Democratic Sen. Doug Jones over alleged child abuser, Republican Roy Moore more than other groups (Smooth 2018). In 2018, African-American women pursued appointed and elected offices at local, state, and federal levels in record numbers ("Women of Color in Elective Office 2018"). In 2020, African-American women in Georgia and South Carolina ushered in new voters into the electorate in support of Democratic Presidential candidate Joe Biden, but also to build their own political power (Herndon 2020). How might African-American women have the foresight to participate despite less than optimal social and economic conditions to arrive at a chance of better future outcomes? To provide insight into this question, I explore the role of optimism for African-American women's engagement in civic organizations, political acts, and voting in presidential elections. Black women's optimism in the United States has likely influenced their outlook towards

society for generations. African-American women are active participants, organizers, and leaders in social movements which have brought about change in American society. Often, Black women engage in political acts with only a fraction of the resources held by their counterparts. Regarding electoral politics, Black women have been active voters, and their participation often exceeds other women since gaining access to the ballot in 1965. Optimism about the future of the United States is likely associated with this engagement. However, in 2012 Black women may have been especially optimistic about the historic re-election of President Barack Obama. Using the "2012 Outlook on Life Study," which includes several assessments of optimism, I examine the association between political engagement and optimism for Black women. In doing this, I compared the participation rates by the perception of optimism for Black women, Black men, and White men and women. From this, I discovered that Black women's optimism about the future of the United States is distinct in its association with political engagement and participation.

Examining African-American women's optimism about the United States in times of crisis is important for several reasons. The historic election of President Barack Obama in 2008 relied on messages of "hope" and "change" which stroked an optimism uptick of African-Americans desiring a course correction from the leadership of former President George W. Bush (see Atwater 2007 for analysis of his Senate campaign). However, the nation faced turmoil during Obama's

first presidential term. In 2012, the national economy had not yet recovered from the blows of the 2008/2009 Great Recession with high levels of unemployment and stagnated economic growth (Bivens, Fieldhouse, and Shierholz 2013).<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, African-Americans were the slowest at recovering from the economic recession (Wilson 2018). Racially motivated killings of young African-American men by vigilantes were covered extensively by the media after the murder of Trayvon Martin and failure to arrest his killer George Zimmerman sparked outrage among many African-Americans. In 2012, African-American women earned less; on average, as compared to White women for equal work, and thus pay inequity slowed African-American women's recovery in the aftermath of the economic downturn. African-American women had a host of reasons to be gloom-ridden about the future of the United States. This period of national crisis omits the passive microaggressions, racism, sexism, misogyny, and other intersecting and interlocking forms of discrimination that Black women experience daily.

The link between optimism and African-American women is quite intuitive. Optimism, the extent to which people hold generalized favorable expectancies for their future, is associated with a host of positive outcomes, including individual well-being (Carver, Scheier, and Segerstrom 2010). African-Americans with a strong religiosity are more likely to be optimistic (Mattis, Fontenot, and Hatcher-Kay 2003; Mattis et al. 2004; 2017). However, Mattis Fotenote and Hatcher-Kay (2003) find that only measures of spirituality, including a connection to God are associated with optimism, which suggests that empirically optimism and faith serve different purposes.

African-Americans are an overwhelmingly religious racial group compared to other minorities. Over two-thirds of African-Americans identify with a religious denomination and the majority identify as Protestants and Christians (Mohamed et al., 2021). Among Black Protestants, the role of faith and optimism through troubled times is a dominant and recurring message, and is drawn from

spiritual and religious texts (Harris 1999). In many ways, optimism is similar in definition to faith. Faith is an essential component of spirituality, religious attitudes, and religiosity. What distinguishes optimism from faith is their realm of influence. Optimism is a disposition which can be examined in secular contexts, while faith is primary a component of religious identity.

Ongoing conditions of racial injustices towards African-Americans within the United States have warranted their optimism about the future. Since the period of Reconstruction following enslavement, Black people have a lower socio-economic status compared to other Americans, whites and other non-Black racial groups. Structural inequalities between Black and White Americans through lower education, lower income, and substantially wider wealth-gaps (Kilson 1981; Sigelman and Welch 1994; Oliver and Shapiro 2006) have societal consequences for African-Americans' ability to thrive and prosper without difficulty in the United States. However, the causes for pessimism among the general American public do not evenly transfer to African-American's assessment of their respective futures or social status within society. Thus, African-American women's unique outlook of resolve towards hardship in times of crisis is a form of optimism about the future despite ongoing and former injustices.

Prior research has examined the unique sense of optimism among African-Americans (Graham 2004). African-American's expectations of optimism are unique from other disadvantaged groups and notably different from White Americans. Compared to other racial groups, African-Americans have a higher religious affiliation, greater social connectedness, and a stronger ethnic identity (Dawson 1994; Harris-Perry 2004). Journalist Kenya Vaughn remarked, "The culture of African-Americans is predicated on a fierce faith – faith in a higher power and a kind of militant optimism that their efforts could rescue American democracy from white supremacy." Here, the distinct elements of African-American culture — and its ability to remain motivated — are interconnected

with optimism, resilience, and the American racial hierarchy as it manifests through unequal democracy and politics.

In this article, I explore the political implications of optimism for African-American women. This article makes two main contributions: (1) African-American women's optimism about the United States' future is unique and higher than African-American men, White women, and White men; and (2) African-American women who are optimistic about the future of the United States remain engaged in political participation, elections, and organizational involvement. In addition, I show that Black women's optimistic views about the future of the United States is distinct from their sense of efficacy, and their perceptions of the national economy. Using logistic regression, I then demonstrate how moving from a pessimistic outlook, I rely on measures of optimism that assess how African-American women view the perspective for their own lives and the future of the United States.

The article proceeds as follows: I first examine the background literature on optimism as measured by health psychologists. I then explore the factors that influence African-American women's participation. Lastly, I present the framework which connects optimism to engagement. Drawing from this, I provide the main hypotheses of the relationship between optimism and engagement. I then discuss the unique dataset used in the paper and present the results where I showcase the differences in mean values across race, gender and levels of optimism. Finally, I expand to discuss African-American women's optimism and provide a conclusion.

## DEFINING OPTIMISM

To health psychologists, optimism is defined as the belief that one will experience more positive as compared to more negative outcomes in life (Scheier and Carver 1985). Dispositional optimism is a tendency of an individual to hold generalized positive expectancies even "when people confront adversity or difficulty in their lives" (Scheier, Carver, and Bridges 2001). Measures of dis-

positional optimism include several survey items, as dispositional optimism tracts to a personality trait among individuals, which is not measured in a singular question. Research has shown that individuals with greater optimism experience fewer adverse effects of stress (Scheier and Carver 1992). While there is robust literature documenting the positive impacts of optimism, few studies of dispositional optimism include political engagement as an outcome measure. Centering the narratives of African-American women, optimism about the future of the United States may serve as a motivation to engage in political acts that work towards enhancing society.

Tompson and Benz (2013) operationalize optimism as the belief that an individual or their family can improve the "quality of standard living" and as "if the country is heading in the right direction or not" (2013, 2-3). While these optimism measures from the General Social Survey (GSS) are desirable because they are asked in a repeated time-series (1987-2002), they lack a direct measurement of optimism about the future of the United States. When it comes to African-Americans, Tompson and Benz find that the election of Barack Obama in 2008 is associated with a spike in the belief that the country is headed in the right direction. For African-Americans specifically, optimism may be associated with descriptive representation, however, it is unclear if optimism about the future is associated with political engagement.

Other studies on the role of optimism utilize different measures to reach their conclusions. Dispositional optimism is the "result of stable, global, and internal factors" (Peterson 2000) rather than an external assessment. Thus, generally, when dispositional optimism is used across psychological studies, it is a trait-based measure and not an evaluation of social conditions. In the article, I utilize a measure of optimism which directly asks about optimism about the future of the United States. I expect that this measure, as compared to existing measures, is most politically relevant.

Even with a different conceptualization of optimism, the research supports

that optimism is a distinct outlook of African-Americans, and rooted in cultural practices. Utsey et al. (2008) and Graham and Pinto (2019) utilize life satisfaction measures among Whites, Latinos, and African-Americans to discern how optimism varies among these groups. Utsey (2008) finds that more religious individuals are also more optimistic and have greater levels of subjective well-being. Graham and Pinto (2019) also view life satisfaction as a product of optimism and find variations by age as life expectancy decreases among African-Americans. Graham and Pinto suggest that African-Americans' adaptation to adversity may be a cause of their optimism and resilience, which explains why financially poor African-Americans have higher levels of life-satisfaction. This makes clear that life-satisfaction is not solely driven by income and material resources. While measuring life satisfaction is a suitable proxy measure for optimism, life satisfaction does not capture positivity towards the future, only satisfaction within their present-day circumstances.

Together, African-American's hopeful expectations of positive outcomes coupled with their experience of persistent economic subjugation sustain the foundation for their brewing optimism. Personal and autobiographical narratives of African-American women's domestic labor in the post-war South have used the language and rhetoric of resilience directly. Relying on six in-depth interviews, van Wormer, Sudduth, and Jackson (2011) conclude that African-American women who were domestic workers maintained positivity despite cumulative adversity through their faith, values, spirituality, resistance, personal optimism, and social support. Given the unique experiences of African-American women, one might expect that optimism about the future is a powerful force in shaping their willingness to participate in social and political acts. Previous studies of the impacts of optimism use measures of life satisfaction, and economic mobility, yet these measures do not fully address how views towards the future of country are relevant in political decision making. Using a direct measure of optimism

overcomes this shortcoming and it allows for the assessment of perceptions of optimism about the future.

## AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S POLITICS

Given the inequities and barriers that African-American women face, optimism can be a resource that influences their participation beyond the traditional resources that lead to greater political engagement—including having time, money, civic skills and motivation to participate (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). African-American women are motivated to engage in politics through a unique set of factors, including their social networks and social capital (Farris and Holman 2014).

Farris and Holman find that social capital – the embeddedness of African-American women in networks – helps alleviate the burdens of political participation. While social capital is important for others, it is particularly motivating for African-American women. African-American women are embedded in social networks that generate support for political candidates and often involve frequent political discussions. While social networks are important for disseminating political information and building social capital, embeddedness in social networks is also a factor associated with increased levels of resilience and optimism.

As change agents, African-American women have been involved as organizers in various social movements (Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001). In examining why students joined protests during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Biggs (2006) finds that Black students were motivated by “optimism about the prospects of success” of a collective action demonstration in addition to other resources. For Black women, participating in male-dominated movements required a sense of optimism about enacting change in American society. For these reasons, African-American women's optimism in their social activism may be relevant to their engagement in politics, and their commitment to democratic participation.

On the other hand, African-American women elected officials must also draw from

the well-sprout of optimism. Brown and Gershon (2020) examine African-American women politicians' electoral gains to higher offices with cautious optimism that these roles indicate change, knowing that the barriers African-American women face once elected are heightened. African-American women's advocacy to eradicate the systemic challenges that marginalized Americans face is reflective of their unique standpoint at the intersection of race and gender.

## **LINKING OPTIMISM TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

Given the economic subjugation of African-American women, and their steadfastness in participating in politics as voters, in movements, and as elected officials, I expect that optimism is a characteristic that is associated with their positive outlook towards affairs in the United States. This unique optimism of African-American women is linked to increased political participation. I expect that African-American women who are more optimistic about their respective futures engage in acts that enhance the welfare of all citizens. In addition, I expect that African-American women who feel more optimistic about the United States engage more frequently in collective political behaviors, including non-electoral acts. This optimism about the future of the United States may shield African-American women from exiting the political system and lead them toward engagement in ways that differ from those who lack optimism, are pessimistic or do not have strong views toward either optimism or pessimism. I examine optimism about the future of the United States, rather than African-American women's optimism about their own lives, to provide a potential explanation for how and why African-American women are frequent participants in political acts.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

I rely on data from the "2012 Outlook on Life" survey led by sociologist, Dr. Belinda Robnett and political scientist, Dr. Katherine Tate (Robnett and Tate 2015). The sampling

frame included adults in the United States, with an oversample of African-American respondents. The study was conducted by GfK Knowledge Network over two waves. Wave 1 comprises 2,294 completed interviews conducted in August 2012 before the presidential election, and study investigators re-contacted a total of 2,133 respondents for 1,601 interviews with both a Wave 1 and Wave 2 response. Of those 1,601 respondents, I use 1,595 cases in these analyses. Together, there are 485 African-American women, 380 African-American males, 286 White women, and 315 White males. I examine African-American women who completed both waves of the study. The main independent variables are drawn from Wave 1. The proceeding analyses specify from which wave the other items were drawn. In addition, the values presented are weighted to be reflective of the characteristics of the national population for the group under study. Survey weights were appended to the publicly available data.

In the survey, respondents were presented a range of items around economic, political, and social, and attitudinal matters. The "Outlook on Life Study" is underutilized among scholars of race, gender, and politics. By engaging with the "Outlook on Life Study," questions surrounding African-American women's political capital and resources can be addressed empirically, benefiting academic researchers, pundits, organizers, and practitioners. In addition, the timing of the study near President Barack Obama's re-election, and after the economic recession is ideal for understanding the contours surrounding optimism.

I present select demographic characteristics of the "Outlook on Life Study" participants who responded to the optimism questions across both waves of the study. Individuals who did not complete both waves, and are missing responses on the independent measures were removed from the analyses. Regarding partisanship, most of the sample identifies as Democrats. However, political ideology is more split, with a majority identifying as moderate as compared to liberals (31 percent) or conservatives (28 percent). Overall, most of the sample earns

between \$25,000 and \$50,000 annually. For education, the average respondent possesses a high school diploma. The sample is slightly older and both the median and average age is 50. The demographic characteristics of the “Outlook on Life Study” are comparable to other reputable surveys. In the supplementary appendix, in Table 1, alongside the sample characteristics, characteristics of Black women are shown for comparison.

**MEASURING AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN’S OPTIMISM**

Psychologists have employed a range of sophisticated measures to operationalize optimism (M. F. Scheier and Carver 1985; Michael F. Scheier and Carver 1992; Shelby et al. 2008; Michael F. Scheier, Carver, and Bridges 2001). These measures often involve multiple items and statistical procedures to arrive at a construct that reliably measures optimism. I rely on several survey questions to operationalize the concept of optimism. Responses are on a 7-point Likert scale from “Extremely Pessimistic” to “Extremely Optimistic.” The first question is posed in both waves of the study, “When you think about your future, are you generally optimistic, pessimistic, or neither optimistic nor pessimistic?”. For Black women, about 56 percent report being optimistic about their future in Wave 1, while 66 percent report being optimistic

in Wave 2. Respondents then answer a follow-up question that gauges the intensity of their optimism or pessimism. Of those who reported being optimistic toward the future, only 10 percent are extremely optimistic in the first wave, and this declines to 3 percent remaining extremely optimistic in Wave 2. To best address the political implications of optimism for African-American women, I primarily rely on the question, “And when you think about the future of the United States as a whole, are you generally optimistic, pessimistic, or neither optimistic nor pessimistic?” in the analysis. Over 57 percent of Black women are optimistic about the future of the United States, and only 10 percent are pessimistic. For the intensity of this optimism about the United States, over 19 percent of African-American women are extremely optimistic, and 34 percent are moderately optimistic.

**AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S OPTIMISM IS DISTINCTIVE**

I examine the contours of optimism for African-American women. In Table 2, I examine four measures of optimism: (1) optimism about the future reported in Wave 1, (2) optimism about the future reported in Wave 2, (3) the net change between optimism about the future in Wave 1 and Wave 2, and (4) the levels of optimism toward the future of the

TABLE 1: MEAN LEVELS OF OPTIMISM ABOUT FUTURE BY RACE AND GENDER				
	OPTIMISM TOWARDS FUTURE (WAVE 1)	OPTIMISM TOWARDS FUTURE (WAVE 2)	AVERAGE CHANGE IN WAVE 1 TO WAVE 2	OPTIMISM TOWARDS FUTURE OF THE UNITED STATES (WAVE 1)
African-American Women	2.97	2.82	- 0.15	5.1
African-American Men	3.11	2.87	- 0.24	4.92
White Women	3.17	3.28	+ 0.11	3.75
White Men	3.07	2.98	- 0.09	3.58
<b>All</b>	<b>3.07</b>	<b>2.95</b>	<b>-0.12</b>	<b>4.45</b>

SOURCE: Outlook on Life Study 2012

United States. Each of these items gauge how individuals perceive the state of their futures at two-time points and the collective future of the United States. Cell entries report the mean value as a numeric from assigning each response a numeric value, where the minimum one (1) corresponds to “Extremely Pessimistic” and the maximum seven (7) corresponds to “Extreme Optimism.” Values closer to seven indicate greater optimism. In Table 2, each column represents the measure of optimism under consideration.

In Table 1, the difference in mean levels of optimism are presented across the three measures of optimism available in the “Outlook on Life Study” (2012). In the first two columns, we observe that African-American women have lower levels of optimism about their future than others, which persist into the second wave of the study. Also, the average change from Wave 1 to Wave 2 is negative for African-American women, consistent with African-American and White men. Only for White women is there an increase in optimism, on average from Wave 1 to Wave 2. White women have gains in their sense of optimism about their future. Without a follow-up question about the sources of this growth and optimism, it is unclear why White women are more optimistic about their respective futures while others decrease.

Table 1 column 4 indicates that African-American women have the greatest optimism about the future of the United States, as compared to others. African-American men are slightly behind in their levels of optimism about their future. This points to racial differences in optimism, which has been found in previous studies of optimism among Black, White, and Hispanic Americans (Tompson and Benz 2013).<sup>4</sup> However, given how differently African-Americans and White Americans experience life in the United States, it is interesting to see the lower levels of optimism among Caucasians than African-Americans. However, this difference highlights the distinctiveness of African-American’s resolve, and their orientation toward positivity and optimism even in times of heightened crises and challenges.

Next, I examine two conditions that may influence Black women’s optimism about the future of the United States: perception of the national economy and efficacy. One potential concern about the higher levels of optimism is that it blindsides people in making accurate assessments about the world surrounding them. I find evidence that the more optimistic Black women are the greater their awareness about economic disadvantages. I do this by examining the relationship between optimism and Black women’s perceptions of the national economy through three indicators: (1) unemployment, (2) poverty, and the (3) national deficit. For each economic indicator, there are weak correlations (1) unemployment ( $r=0.17$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), (2) poverty ( $r=0.11$ ,  $p=0.01$ ), and the (3) national deficit ( $r=0.13$ ,  $p=0.02$ ). I find that even though African-American women are optimistic about the future of the United States, they recognize that economic conditions were worse in 2012, as compared to earlier years, more so than African-American women who were more pessimistic about the future.

I examine if efficacy is related to optimism and pessimism, specifically for African-American women. I expect African-American women who are optimistic about the future also believe that they can enact change within politics. Efficacy is complex and is a known factor influential to the engagement of African-Americans within politics (Pierce and Carey 1971; Shingles 1981). Overall, optimistic Black women are more internally and externally efficacious compared to pessimistic Black women. Lower levels of efficacy among pessimistic Black women suggests that pessimistic Black women are less interested in politics. We may expect that efficacy is a mechanism connecting optimism to political engagement for Black women. In fact, for Black women, I find weak associations between levels of internal and external efficacy, and levels of optimism ( $r=0.14$ ,  $p=0.001$ ;  $r=0.07$ ,  $p=0.08$ ). This suggests that optimism is not strongly associated with efficacy, and thus both optimism and efficacy are independent in their influence on political engagement.

## OPTIMISM AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Establishing that Black women have a distinct optimism about the future of the United States, I now examine the role of optimism on several types of political participation and engagement. I examine three broad types of political participation: organizational involvement, electoral participation, and general political participation. In addition to voting, I use measures of electoral participation, including volunteering with a political campaign, helping individuals register to vote, attending a community meeting, signing a petition and contacting an elected official, among other acts (Verba et al. 1993; Rosenstone, Hansen, and Reeves 2003). In addition to these traditional measures, one unique feature of the “Outlook on Life Study” is the organizational participation in historically African-American Civil Rights organizations. I use self-reported political engagement in the past 12 months. Frequency of participation in these acts for the full sample is reported in Table 2, Column 1.

Percentage values of levels of optimism for all participation acts are reported in Table 2, Column 1. Column 2 has the percent of optimistic Black women who participate in organizational electoral and general participation. First, when examining Black women who are optimistic about the future of the United States, compared to the pessimistic (Column 3), the former report greater engagement across all acts of participation except for attending a march. Similarly, comparing optimistic Black women to optimistic Black men (Column 4) and optimistic White women and men (column 5), it is evident that optimistic Black women are more participatory across several types of acts. Overall, I find that individuals who have an optimistic outlook toward the future of the United States are more participatory in certain political acts than others. But specifically, I find that optimism is uniquely relevant for African-American women. These findings support the political relevance of optimism and how an optimistic outlook is influential for political engagement.

Broadly, there are lower rates of organizational participation. It is worthwhile to call attention to participation in three prominent African American civil rights organizations: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League (NUL), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Across organization involvements in these organizations, there are insignificant differences between participation of pessimistic and optimistic Black women. In addition, optimistic Black women are like optimistic Black men in their rates of participation. However, I find that individuals who report a sense of optimism toward the future of the United States future are most engaged in organizational acts.

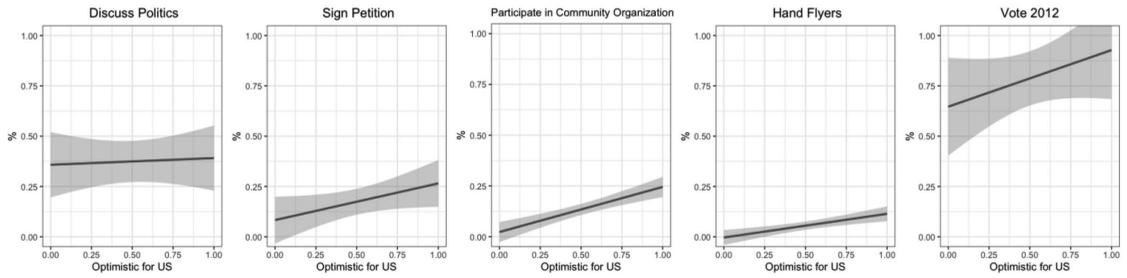
Regarding voting, I find that optimism about the future of the United States report is associated with participation. This is especially the case for optimistic Black women, 94 percent of optimistic Black women report voting in 2012, compared to 78 percent of pessimistic Black women, 91 percent of optimistic Black men, and 87 percent of White Americans. These findings provide greater evidence of the role of optimism as a resource useful for engagement in politics, considering how the absence of optimism is associated with less participation.

Lastly, I examine non-electoral acts of political participation. Given the novelty of outreach in the 2012 election, these acts reveal the myriad of ways that ordinary individuals were involved in the political process. Examining political participation through these measures provides the greatest evidence of a role of optimism about the United States. These acts require greater attention and effort, and civic skills to complete and encourage others to do (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). Except for attending a march, optimistic Black women report greater engagement as compared to pessimistic Black women. Comparing values across more optimistic Black women and Black men, the relationship is mixed. In some acts, optimistic Black women outpace Black men, such as handing out flyers, but overall, optimistic Black men report greater

**TABLE 2: LEVELS OF OPTIMISM AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

	ALL (1)	OPTIMISTIC BLACK WOMEN (2)	PESSIMISTIC BLACK WOMEN (3)	OPTIMISTIC BLACK MEN (4)	OPTIMISTIC WHITE WOMEN AND MEN (5)
<b>ORGANIZATIONAL INVOLVEMENT</b>					
Participate in professional organization	28%	27%	24%	34%	23%
Participate in political party	26%	25%	19%	30%	21%
Participate in Cultural Organization	22%	25%	20%	21%	18%
Participate in NAACP	11%	14%	14%	17%	-
Participate in SCLC	2%	4%	1%	3%	-
Participate in NUL	3%	4%	4%	5%	-
Participate in Community Organization	26%	28%	18%	28%	20%
<b>VOTING</b>					
2008	89%	92%	68%	89%	83%
2012	91%	94%	78%	91%	87%
<b>POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT</b>					
Political Interest	64%	64%	52%	68%	59%
Signed Petition	30%	34%	22%	33%	22%
Contact Official	29%	25%	21%	31%	32%
Donate Money	29%	29%	17%	35%	22%
Discuss Politics	46%	46%	35%	48%	45%
Attend March	7%	7%	8%	11%	3%
Attend Protest	12%	11%	9%	16%	6%
Help Register Voters	12%	15%	11%	15%	6%
Hand Flyers	11%	14%	8%	9%	8%
Gave Rides	10%	13%	8%	13%	3%
Attend Fundraiser	12%	11%	7%	14%	11%

**FIGURE 1: PREDICTED PROBABILITIES FOR OPTIMISM ABOUT THE UNITED STATES FUTURE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**



**TABLE 4: OPTIMISM ABOUT UNITED STATES FUTURE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

	POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:				
	DISCUSS POLITICS (1)	SIGN PETITION (2)	PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION (3)	HAND FLYERS (4)	VOTE IN 2012 (5)
Optimistic About U.S.	0.496 (0.434)	1.226** (0.557)	1.371** (0.624)	1.993** (0.995)	1.716*** (0.612)
Constant	-1.748*** (0.472)	-3.190*** (0.614)	-5.953*** (0.853)	-8.220*** (1.462)	-1.686*** (0.620)
Observations	462	462	462	462	462
Log Likelihood	-180.899	-175.165	-143.732	-80.568	-119.693
Akaike Inf. Crit.	383.797	372.329	309.464	183.136	261.385

NOTE:

\*p\*\*p\*\*\*p<0.01

2012 Outlook on Life Study, Black Women Only (n= 485).

rates of engagement. However, when comparing optimistic Black women to optimistic White persons, Black women are evidently more participatory. From this, we can observe that optimism distinguishes individuals on their propensity and willingness to engage in different forms of politics, including recruiting others to participate.

Next, Columns 2 and 3 of Table 2 look specifically at African-American women’s levels of optimism and how it correlates with their political involvement. African-American women who are optimistic toward the United States participate in a range of political acts at greater frequency than Afri-

can-American women who lack optimism. The greatest differences between optimistic and pessimistic African-American women exist in involvement within a community organization, handing out flyers, discussing politics and signing a petition. I examine this relationship using a logistic regression to understand which factors distinguish optimistic Black women’s optimism from pessimistic Black women’s propensity to engage in political acts. Using a subset of Black women in the “Outlook on Life Study,” Table 3 demonstrates the bivariate relationship between optimism and community organizations, handing out flyers, discussing

politics and signing a petition. The full model, with the additional control variables, is reported in Table 2 of the appendix. To interpret the logistic regression odds, I convert the odds into predicted probabilities, and this bivariate relationship for each outcome is reported in Figure 1.

Among Black women, I find that moving from pessimism to optimism is associated with a significant increase in the willingness to sign a petition, participate in a community organization, hand out flyers, and vote in the 2012 election. This provides further evidence that optimism is associated with engagement. Not only is their descriptive evidence to support Black women's heightened participation, but also Figure 1 shows that optimistic Black women are more likely to engage in these acts compared to pessimistic Black women. This suggests that Black women who are optimistic about the future of the United States are also willing to engage in the political process, which ultimately brings about change in society. On the other hand, I do not find a relationship between optimism and discussing politics for Black women. Being more optimistic about the future of the United States is not associated with pessimism or optimism. Relevant for discussing politics is a sense of connection to other African-Americans, through linked fate (Dawson 1994), and also a greater sense of external efficacy. However, for voting, handing out flyers, participating in a community organization, and signing a petition, the effect of optimism about the United States remains, even after accounting for other relevant measures.

## DISCUSSION

This section detailed the key findings on African-American women's optimism and its political relevance. There are four key attributes of African-American women who are optimistic about the future of the United States. First, in Table 2, I find that African-American women are least optimistic about their individual futures as compared to White men, White women, and African-American men. However, I find that

African-American women are the most optimistic about the future of the United States. Second, I show correlational evidence that optimism is less linked to feelings of efficacy and perceptions of the economy for Black women. Lastly, I find that optimism about the United States future is a politically useful resource as African-American women who are optimistic participate in several acts, more so than African-American women who lack this optimism. These findings suggest that African-American women can hold on to the prospect of a better future for the United States in times of crisis, which in turn increases their resolve in the face of hardships, and this embrace of optimism about the United States lends itself to political engagement and participation.

## CONCLUSION

These findings have revealed several important characteristics of optimistic Black women, and their political engagement. During a resurgent national economic crisis, African-American women were more optimistic about the future of the United States than others. This optimistic outlook is politically relevant when it refers to the collective United States rather than when it reflects African-American women's assessment of their personal outlooks and futures. Second, this article has demonstrated that African-American women's optimism is distinct, and it persists and helps with the interpretation of the economic climate that African-American women are often most vulnerable. African-American women who are optimistic are most accurately engaging in an economic moment of crises. Next, I demonstrated that optimistic African-American women have a greater sense of internal and external efficacy. A heightened sense of efficacy among optimistic African-American women may be associated with increased engagement and political acts. I then demonstrate women with the psychological resource of optimism support greater participation than those who lack it. Rather than narrowly examining voting, I demonstrated this across three different types of participation. Optimistic

African-American women report engagement in acts that require tremendous effort and dedication, civic skills, time, and other resources.

Perhaps it is clear that African-American women's optimism is a political resource. African-American women are the leaders within their families, within their churches, in the workplace and throughout civil society. Reaching prominent leadership roles for Black women has not come absent of faith and optimism, and now a slither of evidence demonstrates the influence of optimism as a political resource.

This research has implications which are useful to organizations looking to target, capitalize, and further expand African-American women's optimism. Optimism is relevant to political parties and is deployable through messaging similar to the "Yes We Can" mantra of former President Barack Obama. While political distrust is well engrained into the African-American tradition, messages of optimism may very well mobilize participation among African-American women in ways that are underexplored. Secondly, this research has demonstrated a positive association between optimism and political behavior. While it has relevance to politics, optimism is not a standard measure for explaining political behavior. However, I have demonstrated how cleavages in political efficacy, and views towards the national economy exist by optimism levels. The way that Black women think about politics may be less connected to political predispositions such as partisan affiliation, ideology, and demographic factors such as income, and education, in ways that were previously theorized. This invites greater research into understanding the non-political factors that influence political participation, especially as the American electorate expands and diversifies and African-American women remain

a staple in electing Democratic and progressive candidates.

This paper has invited several avenues for future research on the topic of optimism. Are there other sources of optimism among African-American women that extend beyond perceptions of the future of the United States? The main question employed in this study examined African-American women's outlook toward the United States. Future work should interrogate how and why African-American women's optimism around their futures is lower than their optimism about the United States. Also, evident in the observational data, more research is needed to parse how optimism is connected to political participation not just for African-American women but generally among Americans. Lastly, the timing of the "Outlook on Life Survey" occurred during the Obama administration, which potentially influenced the extent to which African-American women were optimistic about the future of the United States. Might these levels of optimism remain unchanged today? For instance, are the impacts of optimism time-bound to the Obama administration or do they persist beyond his leadership? Exploring the role of optimism in other electoral contexts, including at the state and local level, may also answer this question. Without considering every potential extension of Black women's optimism, it is important to recognize that Black women's resolve in the face of hardships is foundational to how Black women persevere and triumph. When examining the political participation of African-American women, novel factors, such as optimism, is associated with political involvement and participation. Studying the role of optimism is important to understand how African-American women make it through times of crisis, mostly unscathed.

**APPENDIX TABLE 1: SELECT DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS**

	ALL PARTICIPANTS (N=1595)	BLACK WOMEN (N=485)
<b>PARTISANSHIP</b>		
Republican	17% (253)	1% (6)
Democrat	54% (852)	79% (379)
Independent	25% (384)	16% (71)
Other	4% (69)	4% (13)
<b>IDEOLOGY</b>		
Conservative	28% (509)	19% (96)
Liberal	31% (499)	34% (169)
Moderate	39% (587)	45% (220)
<b>INCOME</b>		
Less than \$25k	12% (374)	36% (160)
\$ 25 - \$50k	33% (381)	28% (119)
\$ 50 - \$100k	31% (487)	25% (107)
\$100k +	25% (353)	11% (99)
<b>EDUCATION</b>		
Less than High School Diploma	12% (142)	10% (49)
High School Diploma	33% (472)	30% (148)
Some College	31% (474)	29% (142)
College Degree +	25% (507)	30% (146)
<b>AGE</b>		
Mean	50	49
25th Percentile	36	38
Median	48	53
75th percentile	62	60

**Cell entries** are percentages which may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Percent values include survey weights for representativeness. Numeric values in parentheses represent raw counts.

SOURCE: Outlook on Life Study 2012

**APPENDIX TABLE 2: OPTIMISM TOWARDS UNITED STATES FUTURE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

	POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:				
	DISCUSS POLITICS (1)	SIGN PETITION (2)	PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION (3)	HAND FLYERS (4)	VOTE IN 2012 (5)
Optimistic About U.S.	0.496 (0.434)	1.226** (0.557)	1.371** (0.624)	1.993** (0.995)	1.716*** (0.612)
Linked Fate	0.584** (0.255)	0.582* (0.306)	1.362*** (0.353)	1.049** (0.474)	-0.233 (0.402)
Church Attendance	-0.023 (0.070)	0.103 (0.087)	0.342*** (0.106)	0.524*** (0.166)	0.056 (0.100)
External Efficacy	1.235*** (0.349)	0.541 (0.436)	0.436 (0.458)	-1.093* (0.646)	1.028** (0.506)
South	0.008 (0.221)	-1.431*** (0.273)	0.421 (0.308)	-0.328 (0.419)	-0.633* (0.355)
Age	-0.018 (0.317)	0.856** (0.391)	-0.044 (0.417)	1.221* (0.627)	1.876*** (0.514)
Income	0.402 (0.357)	-0.013 (0.443)	1.170** (0.470)	0.026 (0.668)	-0.585 (0.524)
Education	0.155 (0.388)	0.440 (0.481)	0.381 (0.513)	0.613 (0.749)	0.582 (0.598)
Liberal	0.204 (0.229)	0.661** (0.267)	0.420 (0.304)	0.741* (0.404)	0.206 (0.380)
Democrat	-0.190 (0.290)	-0.094 (0.369)	0.008 (0.414)	0.959 (0.760)	1.645*** (0.348)
Constant	-1.748*** (0.472)	-3.190*** (0.614)	-5.953*** (0.853)	-8.220*** (1.462)	-1.686*** (0.620)
Observations	462	462	462	462	462
Log Likelihood	-180.899	-175.165	-143.732	-80.568	-119.693
Akaike Inf. Crit.	383.797	372.329	309.464	183.136	261.385

NOTE:

\*p\*\*p\*\*\*p<0.01

2012 Outlook on Life Study, Black Women Only (n= 485).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, I use “Black” and “African American” interchangeably. I capitalized Black to note that I am referencing a race of people, not a color.

<sup>2</sup> Trump’s remarks on the Coronavirus, Mexican immigrants in the United States, Haiti and the inner city are example of his discriminatory rhetoric. Policies such as building a wall between the United States and Mexico, banning asylum seekers from Central America, and banning travel from predominant Muslim countries are examples of his xenophobic policies.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Economic Policy Institute, the severity of the Great Recession persisted beyond 2009 and the national economy lagged behind its expected growth going into 2012. For more detailed report see, Bivens, Fieldhouse, and Shierholz (2013).

<sup>4</sup> The Outlook on Life study lacks a sufficient sample of other races/ ethnicities to include in the analysis.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.stlamerican.com/entertainment/living\\_it/hyers-sisters-legacy-uneearthed/article\\_e834a870-640b-11ea-b523-7f3d17a70fd0.html](http://www.stlamerican.com/entertainment/living_it/hyers-sisters-legacy-uneearthed/article_e834a870-640b-11ea-b523-7f3d17a70fd0.html)

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