Executive Summary

As we approach the 2024 election cycle, the Democratic Party is confronted with a serious problem: a lack of enthusiasm in the Black community. After furnishing crucial support for Democrats in the 2020 and 2022 elections cycles respectively, the Black electorate is neither sold on President Biden, nor the Party. In a closely divided electorate in which the president and his predecessor remain in a statistical dead heat, every vote matters. If Democrats hope to avoid a repeat of 2016, when the GOP took advantage of lackluster turnout in the Black community, driven in part by the lack of enthusiasm for the standard bearer, they need to figure out a way to energize the Black community for 2024, absent enthusiasm. Is this possible?

We contend that it is—through the use of threat.

We argue that the existential threat posed by Trump/MAGA, and the GOP respectively, will go a long way toward mobilizing the Black electorate in 2024. Reasoning that *high-propensity* Black voters will turnout regardless, we seek to explore the extent to which threat closes the turnout gap between them, i.e., the *high-propensity* group, and their low-propensity counterparts in the Black community. Since, by definition, the latter group is more likely to fall into political apathy than *high-propensity* groups, it stands to reason that it's more sensitive to treatment effects when it comes to political mobilization.[1] In short, treatments are more likely to work among *low versus high-propensity* voters. If we're able to rouse *low-propensity* Black voters from their apathy and disaffection from the president and the party, closing the gap between *low and high-propensity* Black voters, American democracy will survive—at least for the foreseeable future.

Toward this end, and in addition to focus groups conducted during the first phase of this study, *TargetSmart* (TS) and *Black Insights Research* (BIR) directed a national survey of the Black electorate, where 2,040 respondents were interviewed. The present study was undertaken to identify the sources underlying the political mobilization (or lack thereof) of the Black community, especially low-propensity voters. As it turns out, *high- and low-propensity voters* sometimes see things quite differently, differences largely driven by the perception of threat, supporting our focus-group findings. The research makes plain that, across both experimental results as well as our observational findings, *low-propensity* voters are more easily mobilized by threat than their more politically-engaged counterparts. **Indeed, threat narrows the turnout gap between high and low-propensity Black voters**.

Our findings are important for several reasons, the most important of which is that the study paints a nuanced portrait of the Black community. Class is an oft-cited source of internal division within the Black electorate. By and large, and similar to our focus-group findings, this analysis supports this claim. Yet, as our findings here show, and much like our focus groups, regardless of class divisions, the Black community may unite in a common cause as a reaction to threat. Another insight suggested by the data is that victory in 2024 on the part of the president and the party needn't rest on generating enthusiasm so long as Trump and the GOP, respectively, are perceived as a threat to the Black community. For the balance of the **Executive Summary**, we review our key findings, after which we detail them.

Key Findings: experimental results

[1] See D. Sunshine Hillygus, "Campaign Effects and the Dynamics of Turnout Intentions in Election 2000," *Journal of Politics* 67(1): 50-68.

As we touched on above, and as we detail below, threat is, apparently, a source of political mobilization in communities of color, especially the Black community.[2] (Below, we elaborate on the theory on which this rests.) We examined an array of outcomes that tap political mobilization, including intention to vote in 2024, the intent to vote in state and local elections, whether or not they (participants) intend on attending a political meeting, contacting an elected official, or donating to a campaign. We also included three items related more to non-electoral mobilization: protesting, signing a political petition, and boycotting. (In the interest of brevity, this document confines our reporting to the first three election-related activities. The balance of the analysis is available on request.)

(In keeping with social-scientific norms, be advised that we account for various and sundry competing explanations associated with Black political mobilization when reporting our results. We mention this because results often change once one adjusts for competing explanations.)

By and large, the results suggest that the low-propensity group is more affected by the treatments than their *high-propensity* counterparts. For instance, in turnout questions, i.e., intention to vote in 2024, and intention to vote in subnational elections, both *non-voters* and *infrequent voters* were affected by the treatments. Non-voters respond favorably to the threat primes (Trump and GOP, respectively) when it comes to voting in subnational elections. The narrative shifts a bit for intent to vote in 2024 in that professed *non-voters* remain motivated by threats from the GOP, but are also motivated by empowerment. Likewise, our *infrequent voters* are motivated by threat primes. When the subject switches to subnational elections, the GOP does the trick, but when it shifts to 2024 *both* the GOP and Trump primes work well. By contrast, none of the treatments work among the *high-propensity* groups: there's a ceiling effect.

(Shifting to other modes of conventional mobilization, the pattern of relationships remains largely intact. By this, we mean that the low-propensity groups are motivated by threat. To illustrate, *non-voters* are motivated to attend political meetings and donate, at least in part, from the threat posed by Trump/MAGA. Similarly, *infrequent* voters are more likely to do the same in response to the GOP (meetings) and MAGA and the GOP (donate). With these non-voting modes of mobilization, *super-voters* are also motivated by a treatment, though not the same one. Instead of threat, they're motivated by empowerment.)

Key Findings: observational results

As a kind of robustness check for these experimental results, we sought to drill down a bit more on our findings when it comes to threat. Given the continued political currency of Trump, we thought it wise to examine the threat he poses to the Black community shorn of MAGA. Pushing it further, we examined whether or not it makes a difference if Trump is framed as an explicit threat versus an implicit threat. We were also curious about reactions to a broader use of threat.

For example, thus far, all of the threats we examine are rooted in politics. Yet, given the Black experience in America, we have reason to believe that perceived threats to the Black community aren't confined to the political domain. Toward this end, we asked a battery of questions that explored everything from institutional and policy-related threat to perceived threats connected to recent events. Rounding out the observational results, we also examined empowerment. As outcomes for the observational results, our focus shifts exclusively to turnout-related sentiment: intent to vote in 2024 and subnational elections. However, to this, we add self-reported midterm turnout in 2022.

[2] For communities of color in general, see Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto (2018); for the Black community more specifically, see Towler and Parker (2018).

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Starting with our results for Trump, it's plain to see that explicit threat works best, increasing the likelihood of turning out in 2024 across propensity groups. In contrast, the results for implicit threat are completely impotent. Turning to our examination of the threat battery, we limit our focus to examples of institutional, policy, and event-based threats: the Supreme Court, police and local law enforcement, voter suppression, abortion bans, and Covid-19. Absent swapping out a few words as they pertain to the domain and outcomes, the results remain the same. As we move from low to high perceptions of threat, differences between *low and high-propensity* groups decline, especially for infrequent voters. In practical terms, this means that as threat increases, *low-propensity* voters behave more like *high-propensity* voters, something especially evident among the *infrequent voters* in the low-propensity camp.

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To summarize, it seems that threat promises to mobilize segments of the Black community—*low-propensity voters*, especially ***infrequent voters***. We witnessed this response in both experimental and observational settings. As with other work in which existential threat mobilizes voters of color, our findings follow suit.[3] The main exception is how *super voters* were motivated by empowerment when the inquiry shifted to non-voting election behavior.

Recommendations

Such robust results, in both experimental and observational settings, demand further testing—only this time in the field. Given what's at stake, and the centrality of the Black vote to the success of the Democratic party, it's of paramount importance the Trump/MAGA and the GOP primes be tested as messages in the context of randomized controlled trials. We emphasize testing these messages for the following reasons. The first is that Trump obviously retains favor among the GOP. The second is that the GOP-threat prime, of course, captures the ability to mobilize the Black community if, for some unforeseen reason, Trump's candidacy doesn't survive his legal troubles.

[3] Matt A. Barreto, Sylvia Manzano, Ricardo Ramirez, and Kathy Rim, "Mobilization, participation, and solidaridad: Latino participation in the 2006 immigration protest rallies," *Urban Affairs Review* 44(5): 736-764; Christopher Zepedia-Millan, *Latino Mass Mobilization: Immigration, Racialization, and Activism* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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