Anger in Black and White

I Never Thought I’d See the Day: Black Joy in the Good Times

The sun barely peered through a sea of clouds on this frigid morning in January 2009, overlooking the expanse of people in front of the Capitol steps in Washington, DC. To this day I remember the sensations I felt as I stood in that crowd, frantically shifting my weight from one leg to the other in the vain hope of warming my feet on the cold brown dirt surface along the National Mall. The bitter wintry cold of that day was overwhelmed by the enveloping warmth I felt from the throngs of black folks that had been gathering since before dawn. They proudly displayed their elation at the historical moment that was about to unfold. Older people exclaimed to anyone within earshot that they had thought they would never see this moment in their lifetimes. Younger folks swayed in exuberance, alternating shouts of yes we can! and yes we did!

The emotions expressed by the gatherings of jubilant black people on the Mall were palpable. The pride in the sense of collective accomplishment. We really did it. We elected a black president. The surreal sense of joyous disbelief at a long-delayed dream finally realized. Is this really happening? I almost can’t believe it. These feelings would undergird black people’s longstanding support of Obama long after the honeymoon period would end for white members of Obama’s support coalition.¹ These feelings would elevate black participation to new heights. In 2010, the first midterm election of the Obama era, African Americans were the

¹ Newport (2014).
only group whose turnout increased from the previous midterm in 2006.² When seizing the chance to reelect Obama in 2012, black people made history, marking the first occasion in which a minority group exceeded the turnout of whites in a presidential election.³ Indeed, while the Barack Obama era was a political touchstone celebrated by many people around the globe, it is clear black people possess a special claim to ownership over it. Obama’s transcendent 2008 victory represented the apex of a decades-long black strategy to move “from protest to politics” in order to achieve political equity via the election of African Americans to office.⁴ And this moment ushered in an era of sustained and energized black participation. Would these higher levels of participation become the new norm, giving black people greater say in political decisions made by power holders? Or would the surge be only a short-lived artifact of the unique times?

The chaotic 2016 election may have provided some insight. During this time, black people assessed a political landscape that was unsettling on numerous fronts. Although Obama prepared to leave office with the smallest black–white unemployment gap since the Clinton era,⁵ other substantial markers of racial progress were few and far between.

Further, many African Americans may well have remembered the Obama era as much for the triumphant symbolism of a black family in the White House as for the seemingly endless stream of sobering images of black women and men slain in high-profile confrontations with civilians and police officers – often with the people by whose hands they died facing few or no legal repercussions. Not far from the minds of many black Americans throughout this time were the names and faces of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Rekia Boyd, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling and countless others – unarmed black citizens felled by individuals and then failed by a phalanx of legal, sociopolitical and cultural systems that give the distinct impression that black lives do not matter.

As African Americans watched such instances of racialized violence unfold on repeat, they simultaneously witnessed the rise of an arch-conservative partisan movement fueled largely by white people’s sense

² Lopez (2011).
⁴ See Browning, Marshall and Tabb (1984) and Tate (1994) for discussions on the causes and consequences of the shift in black political strategizing from counter-institutional to electoral activities in response to the post-1960s Civil Rights gains.
⁵ Luhby (2016).
of grievance over the perceived erosion of their sociopolitical dominance. The Tea Party quickly morphed from a grassroots movement to a force to be reckoned with, gaining access to national halls of power and effectively halting or disrupting much of the President’s policy agenda.  

On another front, black people in many pivotal states were subject to new challenges on their ability to cast the ballot. After the surge in black turnout in 2008, states across the nation responded almost immediately with a barrage of voting restrictions and requirements. These new laws, from identification requirements to limitations on early voting, heightened the barriers to voting for disproportionately large numbers of black (and brown) voters.

If the political climate for African Americans in 2008 was defined by historic opportunity (however symbolic), then the climate in 2016 was one marked by a seemingly unending series of threats to black economic, social and legal well-being. Enthusiastic feelings had appeared to boost black participation in previous years. Would black participation similarly be boosted in the present era by feelings of indignation over the prospect of a Trump presidency hostile to racial interests?

All indications suggest a resounding no. As displayed in Figure 1.1, black turnout – which had been on a steady upward swing since 1996 – tumbled precipitously from 2012 to 2016.

Now, it should surprise no one that the surge in black turnout would not be sustained once Obama no longer headed the Democratic ticket. But with so much at stake in an election surfacing racial fault lines, why did black voting plummet to its lowest levels in 16 years? Could this depressed turnout in the face of a barrage of political threats reflect something fundamentally distinct about how African Americans respond to times of political triumph and turmoil?

**We Told You So: Black Resilience in the Down Times**

On a cloud-darkened and damp January morning in 2017, millions of people gathered in the nation’s capital to mark an inauguration few would have thought possible as recently as the day of the election. Adorned with bright pink pussy ribbon hats that injected a pop of color against the drab sky, this crowd was energetic and effusive. Yet, it carried none of

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6 See Parker and Barreto (2014) for an analysis of the rise of the Tea Party movement as a politically viable conservative reactionary force in the US.

7 Sobel and Smith (2009).
the joy or exuberance of the crowd gathered around me on the National Mall eight years ago. This group of participants in the Women’s March on Washington, just one of many groups protesting Donald Trump’s inauguration across the globe, maintained an air of indignation and (in what would be a buzz word of the ensuing year) resistance.

As I took in the sights, sounds and senses of this march, I was struck by the efforts of participants to reorient one another’s dismay to defiance. To transform their sadness into solidarity. To turn their anguish over the shocking election outcome to an anger that could mobilize them for the challenging work ahead. As I saw this unfold, my mind couldn’t help but wander to, of all things, a Saturday Night Live sketch that had aired the weekend immediately after the election. A far cry from the black jubilation of 2009, this sketch portrayed the black emotion state in 2017 as one of stoic acceptance.

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In the sketch, Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock play black friends attending an election-night watching party. As the night unfolds, the white party guests – youngish, wide-eyed progressives – become increasingly more disillusioned and disgusted. The demeanor of the black guests throughout the night provides a sharp contrast; they are decidedly

![Figure 1.1 Rates of black and white turnout in presidential elections, 1976–2016. Data from US Census Current Population Study.](https://www.cambridge.org/core/).
unfazed as Trump continues to collect Electoral College votes. They show more bemusement at their white colleagues’ displays of disbelief than over the election outcome. When one of the white guests despairingly pronounces what now seems inevitable, “Trump might actually win,” Chris Rock replies matter-of-factly, “Of course! I mean, what are you talking about?” Here Chappelle chimes in – “I tried to tell ‘em.”

The subtext in this exchange is abundantly clear. The sense of idealism – and perhaps entitlement – leading the white viewers to expect positive outcomes from the political system is shattered. Their dashed hopes are juxtaposed with the sense of wary fatalism of the black guests. This subtext reaches its crescendo in the final joke of the sketch. After the last state is called for Trump, a white guest expresses an epiphany: “Oh my God. I think America is racist.” Chappelle supplies the punchline, in the form of an exclamation exaggerated for sarcastic effect, followed by a casually rendered retort to the guest’s naiveté about the state of race in the country: “Oh... my... God! You know, I remember my great-grandfather told me something like that. But, he was, like, a slave or somethin’. I dunno.”

The main premise of this comedy sketch – that white and black Americans can view their political environment so differently – was not particularly novel. Yet I found it to be an effective illustration of an idea at the heart of this book. Yes, black and white Americans do view the political environment differently, as each group is informed by distinct sets of expectations, ideologies and narratives about their respective positioning within the political sphere. These viewpoints in turn shape how members of each group feel about the developments that occur within their environment. And those feelings do not just reflect where group members stand on these developments; they influence individuals’ behavior.

The main endeavor of this book is to identify how those feelings shape the turnout trends seen in Figure 1.1, to offer a framework for assessing how racial differences in emotion translate to racial disparities in political participation.

Emotions and Political Behavior

What precisely is an emotion? Is it an impression formed internally? Something expressed outwardly? Social psychologists view emotions as a combination of these forces, defining them as bundles of feelings, physiological changes and psychological responses that are activated in
response to something specific.\footnote{Halperin and Gross \citeyear{2011}.} Emotions do not simply characterize one’s feelings in response to an object, individual or event; they generate a motivation to respond with a particular action. In his seminal study \textit{The Emotions}, Nico H. Frijda identified a total of 17 distinct emotions, each with their own corresponding action type.\footnote{Frijda \citeyear{1986}.} Indeed, understanding the role of emotions in shaping human behavior can illuminate why and how people choose to participate in politics.

In recent years the role of emotions in politics has received considerable attention from researchers. Scholars such as Leonie Huddy, George E. Marcus, Ted Brader and Nicholas Valentino have illuminated the diverse effects that emotion states such as anger, fear and enthusiasm have on individuals’ policy preferences, as well as their decisions on whether and how to participate in politics.\footnote{I will be referring more specifically to the work of these individuals throughout the book, especially in Chapter 2. Exemplary work by these scholars examining the effect of emotions on political decision making includes Brader \citeyear{2006}, Huddy, Feldman and Cassese \citeyear{2007}, Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen \citeyear{2000}, Valentino, Gregorowicz and Groenendyk \citeyear{2009} and Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz and Hutchings \citeyear{2011}.} The emotion state of anger has emerged as a particularly strong mobilizer of political action. Defined as a feeling of belligerence over a perceived slight or injustice, anger has been demonstrated to make individuals more likely to take up costly political actions such as voting, donating to campaigns and canvassing.\footnote{Valentino et al. \citeyear{2009}; \citeyear{2011}.} Studies shifting the point of emphasis from individuals to groups demonstrate that members of social groups who feel angered over their perceived marginalized status are more likely to engage in collective action to advance the group’s standing.\footnote{Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer and Leach \citeyear{2004}.}

On the other end of the spectrum, the positive emotions of pride and hope are typically linked under the umbrella term of enthusiasm. This emotion state typically stimulates creativity and problem solving.\footnote{Isen, Daubman and Nowicki \citeyear{1987}.} And in contexts of intergroup conflict, feelings of hope animating enthusiasm can facilitate group members’ envisioning of a future free from strife.\footnote{Bar-Tal \citeyear{2011}.} Whereas enthusiasm undoubtedly animates a change in behavior, the conventional wisdom stresses that anger translates more effectively to increased political action. The thinking largely follows that enthusiasm may inspire rigorous new ideas and innovative thinking, but anger

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\footnotesize{8} Halperin and Gross \citeyear{2011}.
\footnotesize{9} Frijda \citeyear{1986}.
\footnotesize{10} I will be referring more specifically to the work of these individuals throughout the book, especially in Chapter 2. Exemplary work by these scholars examining the effect of emotions on political decision making includes Brader \citeyear{2006}, Huddy, Feldman and Cassese \citeyear{2007}, Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen \citeyear{2000}, Valentino, Gregorowicz and Groenendyk \citeyear{2009} and Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz and Hutchings \citeyear{2011}.
\footnotesize{11} Valentino et al. \citeyear{2009}; \citeyear{2011}.
\footnotesize{12} Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer and Leach \citeyear{2004}.
\footnotesize{13} Isen, Daubman and Nowicki \citeyear{1987}.
\footnotesize{14} Bar-Tal \citeyear{2011}.
inspires people to actually roll up their sleeves and engage in the work of advancing political change.

This logic is plainly apparent in the appeals to action regularly made to individuals and groups by various sets of political actors. While there are certainly appeals to enthusiasm, appeals to anger are predominant. Political anger has been particularly palpable in the post-Obama political landscape. It reverberated resoundingly throughout campaign rallies for Donald J. Trump during the 2016 election, as throngs of supporters repeated chants of “lock her up!” Since the 2016 election, multiple instances arose of people unleashing their ire directly at Trump administration officials, such as protesters interrupting the dinner of Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristjen Nielsen by shouting “if kids don’t eat in peace, you don’t eat in peace.”

This political climate appears to be summed up nicely in the iconic line from the 1976 classic satire film Network, in which disgruntled news anchor Howard Beale starts a social revolution with his unhinged declaration, I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take this anymore!

But it is worth questioning whether this anger has been felt and expressed equally across social dividing lines – specifically the racial divide. Was the general collective emotional response of African Americans to the specter of Trump in the post-Obama era more aligned with the defiant and angry posture on display at the Women’s March and subsequent sites of the Resistance movement, or with the resigned shrug of Dave Chappelle in the SNL sketch? Thinking through the manner in which race shapes the general emotional dispositions of both black and white Americans provides insight to answer this question.

**White Anger, Black Resignation: Racial Differences in Expectation, Entitlement and Emotional Sentiments**

The emotions we feel at any point in time may appear to be born of the immediate moment. But, in fact, these emotions are anchored in our longstanding expectations, goals and beliefs. For instance, many African Americans’ jubilant expressions of hope and pride at Barack Obama’s election in 2008 were propelled in no small part by the puncturing of their long-held belief that a black individual would never ascend to the presidency. The immediate response of enthusiasm over this milestone cannot be untethered from the nagging belief often gnawing away at...
many black Americans – that electoral politics simply will not produce the outcome most favored by the group. Indeed, that persistent sense of collective skepticism informed and shaped the excitement felt in the election’s aftermath, by making Obama’s accomplishment that much sweeter to a group often forced to soldier through rather than celebrate political developments.

That same sense of skepticism can also be expected to inform African Americans’ immediate emotional responses to negative or threatening political developments. In addition to making the good times sweeter, this disposition can make the tough times easier to swallow. Consider, for instance, the apparent divergence in the responses of black and white Americans to the severe economic downturn of the early twenty-first century. In the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2009, if anyone had the most credible reason to take to the streets in protest of economic injustice, it was African Americans. During this time the black unemployment rate was double that of whites, while one-fourth of black people were under the poverty line.  

Yet nationwide, black people made up less than 2 percent of the Occupy movement at its height.

So, why were African Americans by and large sitting out on Occupy? Black people are certainly no strangers to insurgent protest strategies. And the idea that the Occupy movement was “too white” ignores the widespread and diligent efforts by black community elites and popular figures to mobilize black people to take part. In her opinion column for the Washington Post, journalism professor Stacy Patton offered an illuminating take on what black people’s lack of participation signified:

Blacks have historically suffered the income inequality and job scarcity that the Wall Street protesters are now railing against. Perhaps Black America’s absence is
sending a message to the Occupiers: “We told you so! Nothing will change. We’ve been here already. It’s hopeless.”

This argument sheds light on how the long-running expectations of African Americans inform their immediate responses to negative developments such as the great recession. A reaction of I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore simply cannot arise if one’s modal disposition is one of nothing will change. It’s hopeless. A useful distinction can be between the emotions felt and expressed by individuals in the moment and the broader emotional sentiments they hold. Social psychologists define sentiments as a stable set of emotional impressions directed toward specific objects, actors and symbols.²⁰ Whereas we tend to think of specific emotions as an individual-level construct, sentiments can be viewed as a collective phenomenon, one shaped by the major developments of a given sociopolitical climate. Accordingly, for any era in American history one can surmise the prevailing collective sentiment of the body politic.

For example, how would one characterize the collective American sentiment toward political institutions and leaders throughout the tumultuous period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time period marked by assassinations, unrest over an increasingly unpopular war, the exposure of massive government corruption and the boiling over of social tensions? I define it as a heightened and pervasive sense of cynicism and mistrust toward those wielding power, open hostility toward gatekeepers of social norms and political values and an eager embrace of alternative ideas and modes of organizing. These sentiments manifested in the intensive conflicts and outbreaks that define the era, from the violent clashes at the 1968 Democratic National Convention to urban rebellions across cities throughout the nation, to the anti-war movement.

Just as one can think of different American sentiments across varying political eras, we can think of the respective sentiments held by different social groupings within the body politic, such as those of white and African Americans. The perspective offered by Stacey Patton on the relative absence of black people from the Occupy Movement. The non-plussed reactions of Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock to the election-night results in the SNL sketch. These are reflections of and commentaries on the unique emotional sentiment generally held by black Americans toward the institutions and actors of US politics.

This sentiment, characterized by a racially distinct sense of resignation, has long reverberated in black discourses throughout history. In an address in Berkeley in 1966, activist, author and early proponent of Black Power Stokely Carmichael articulated this sense of resignation as a feeling of collective fatigue that sets in from black people’s exhausting efforts to extract responsiveness from a recalcitrant system:

We have been tired of trying to prove things to white people. We are tired of trying to explain to white people that we’re not going to hurt them. We are concerned with getting the things we want, the things that we have to have to be able to function. The question is, can white people allow for that in this country?

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also expounded on the distinct sense of resignation that cannot help but creep into the minds of African Americans with even the most ardent faith in the American promise, as they encounter time and again the resistance of American institutions to their demands for justice:

I must confess that that dream that I had that day has in many points turned into a nightmare. Now I’m not one to lose hope. I keep on hoping. I still have faith in the future. But I’ve had to analyze many things over the last few years and I would say over the last few months. I’ve gone through a lot of soul-searching and agonizing moments. And I’ve come to see that we have many more difficulties ahead and some of the old optimism was a little superficial and now it must be tempered with a solid realism. And I think the realistic fact is that we still have a long, long way to go…

Finally, Kweisi Mfume identified the longstanding perception that many African Americans have of the US sociopolitical system. This perception of the system as racially unjust fuels the sentiment of racial resignation, which in turn shapes black people’s immediate emotional responses to politics. In his first address to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since leaving his position as a Congressional Representative to become the NAACP president, Mfume remarked in 1997:

[This nation] was conceived in hypocrisy. Even before the republic was founded, it compromised the moral claim and the moral principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence and in the Preamble to the Constitution, and in all other documents that they issue to justify their revolution against tyranny, having subjected human beings, our ancestors, to a bondage of the flesh as well as a bondage of the spirit.\(^{21}\)

\(^{21}\) Mfume (1997).
If this is the image of America that is conjured in the minds of many African Americans, then it should come as no surprise when emergent threats are met with more of a resigned shrug than clenched fists and flared nostrils.

A contrast can be drawn between the sentiment conveyed in the black political discourses highlighted above and the one emergent in the discourses of white mainstream political actors. As an example, just a few years before Mfume diagnosed the ills plaguing the country as inextricably tethered to the racist legacies of its founding, Governor of Arkansas Bill Clinton offered a contrasting assessment of those ills, as well as the capacity of the American system of governance to solve them. During his speech accepting the Democratic Party’s nomination for president in 1992, Clinton invoked black activist icon Fannie Lou Hamer when making the declaration:

If you are sick and tired of a government that doesn’t work to create jobs, if you’re sick and tired of a tax system that’s stacked against you, if you’re sick and tired of exploding debt and reduced investments in our future or if, like the great civil rights pioneer Fannie Lou Hamer, you’re just plain old sick and tired of being sick and tired, then join us, work with us, win with us, and we can make our country the country it was meant to be.11

What is the difference here? Clinton speaks of “our country” as fundamentally just and serviceable in its normal functioning. This is why the audience can be expected to be “sick and tired” over the litany of issues Clinton raises. Because they demand more from their government. They expect more. Clinton’s call for Democrats to get mad as hell implicitly trades on the premise that the general sentiment of this audience toward the political system is characterized by a strong sense of entitlement to responsiveness and fair treatment.

Indeed, this sentiment has undergirded many an instance of Americans, albeit predominantly or exclusively white Americans, taking up political action as a result of their indignation over a system not operating as expected. The annals of American history contain an extensively chronicled – and often romanticized – tradition of Americans rising up in anger to challenge an unjust status quo. One need look no further than the mythologized image of the scrappy American colonialists, taking on their oppressive British overseers and fueling the revolutionary flame that would birth the United States. The story of America cannot be told without talking about anger.

And contemporary politics cannot be fully understood without reckoning with the role of anger. There is a clear through line from the colonists to the Occupy Wall Street protesters, from the Tea Party movement activists to the so-called Bernie Bros to the throngs of people gathered at Trump rallies, shouting “make America great again.” Anger is as American as apple pie.

As a large body of work in social and political psychology makes clear, this anger has long been a form of capital in politics, leveraged to energize political activity and propel major sea changes in the political environment. What are the consequences, then, if an emotional response of anger is muted among African Americans by a general sentiment of racial resignation? I answer that question by demonstrating that black Americans exhibit an anger gap in politics relative to their white counterparts, and I highlight the politically consequential effects of that racial anger gap.

Drawing upon data from the cumulative American National Election Study (ANES), a nationally representative survey of the political views and actions of Americans conducted every presidential election year, I present an initial glimpse of the raw anger gap exhibited by African Americans. Since the year 1980, the ANES has asked participants whether the presidential incumbent and the major party presidential candidates have made them feel each of the following emotions: angry, afraid, proud and hopeful. Figure 1.2 displays black and white Democrats’ mean reports of anger toward the incumbents and major party candidates in the respective presidential races, while Figure 1.3 displays the mean anger reports from black and white Republicans.

As ensuing chapters will reveal, partisanship exhibits a major influence on individuals’ emotional responses to politics. And as the trend lines indicate, people generally express more anger when the White House is occupied by the party they oppose. But across people sharing partisan affiliation, a clear racial difference is apparent. Among Democrats, the mean anger reported by white respondents is higher than that of black respondents in all but two election years, 1988 and 2016. Further, black anger just barely eclipses white anger in those years. Across the entire time period, the mean anger reported toward presidential figures by white Democrats is 53.25 on a scale of 100, compared to 46.53 for black

23 If there was any doubt that Trump effectively tapped into the anger his supporters felt over a variety of issues, an NBC News poll revealed that whites and Republicans ranked as the angriest sets of individuals during the 2016 election (Rafferty 2016).
Democrats. Of note are both the difference in means and the fact that black anger is below the midpoint, distinguishing this group as more likely to refrain from expressing anger than to exhibit it.

Republicans follow a generally similar pattern. Although the mean anger reports of black Republicans exceed those of white Republicans in five of the ten election years, across the entire time period whites express more anger, by a count of 47.18 to 42.98. Unsurprisingly, the number of African Americans in the American National Election Study (ANES) identifying as Republican is greatly outweighed by the number of self-identified Democrats. The larger racial anger gap apparent among Democrats, then, is a more telling indication of the racial disparity in the leveraging of anger in politics.

Ensuing chapters will paint a refined picture of this racial anger gap, and demonstrate the implications of this gap for both electoral and unconventional modes of political activity. But I also aim to make clear that the anger gap has farther-reaching consequences than widening the racial participation disparity. This gap has consequences for African
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Americans’ capacity to form political coalitions with other groups. And this gap further reinforces the invisibilization and ostracism of African Americans from the American polity. From its founding, America’s story is one of people seeing red over politics and rising up in anger to alter their fortunes. By not seeing red to nearly the same extent as their white counterparts, black people have too often been confined to the margins within this story.

Angry While Black: The Legal, Social and Political Costs of Expressing Black Grievance

The black anger gap looms large for party politics. Recent election cycles have made clear how critically dependent the Democratic Party is on black votes. The Democrats’ inability in 2016 to maintain black turnout levels in key swing states like Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania resulted in razor-thin losses to Trump. In contrast, the surge in turnout among black voters – specifically black women – in a special Senate election in 2017 gave Democrats the unthinkable: a statewide victory in the state of
Alabama. As the battle rages for the direction of the Democratic Party in the post-Obama era – will it become more progressive or reclaim the moderate ground? – its survival is dependent on its ability to mobilize black voters. The presence of a black anger gap is something the party needs to fully reckon with in order to ensure its message does not fall on deaf ears.

At the same time, the Democratic Party bears some responsibility for that anger gap in the first place. As I will lay out in greater detail in Chapter 2, messaging from Democrats (and, indeed, all major party candidates and officials) to black audiences has been restrained, to the detriment of Democrats’ attempts to rally the group to action. While partisan elites express no hesitation to channel the grievances of white audiences over politics, sparking the anger that mobilizes individuals to take up action, these political elites water down their messaging to black people.

Ever fearful of channeling a black anger that has long been stereotyped as dangerous and uncontrollable, elites offer black audiences messages intended to placate rather than animate. Rather than have their grievances with the political status quo affirmed, legitimized and activated toward action, black people are constantly reassured that despite the injustices of the past, the political system is making steady upward progress toward racial equity.

Whereas the predominant black worldview identifies racial inequity as woven into the fabric of American politics, dominant messaging from political elites to black people imposes its own worldview – one in which African Americans need not feel angry, because the political system is naturally self-corrective. When you are dissatisfied with your situation, why be mad as hell (and accordingly, politically active as hell) when you can just be patient and prudent?

It is critical to take time to consider how this rhetorical reality is reinforced by a set of state and legal actors that work exhaustively to provide strong shows of force in response to expressions of black anger deemed to stray too far beyond the bounds of “acceptable” black behavior. History provides a litany of instances of black individuals feeling the full weight of the state apparatus after they dare to mobilize explicitly on the basis of expressed grievance with the sociopolitical status quo. Examples from two different eras illustrate this point.

The Black Panther Party for Self Defense, a Black Nationalist organization originating in late-1960s Oakland, California, was exhaustively targeted by the FBI for surveillance and clandestine infiltration, with moles planted by the FBI gaining access to the organization. One of these moles was the right-hand man of Deputy Chairman Fred Hampton. Hampton had begun to successfully build broad multi-racial coalitions between the Panthers and advocacy groups such as the Puerto Rican Young Lords and the Young Patriots – a group of poor whites based in the Appalachians. Though they appeared to make for strange bedfellows, these groups united on the basis of an intersectional race- and class-based critique of American economic and sociopolitical systems.

Looking at the Black Panther Party’s coalition building through one lens, it could be hailed as affirming a distinctly American tradition. This group, radically opposed to the existing order, sought to ally with other groups that were “mad as hell” to challenge an entrenched system and forge a new, more equitable political order.

But viewing the Panthers through the archetypal lens of perpetual black danger, the FBI and local law enforcement agencies labeled the Panthers not as patriots, but as unassailable threats to the peace. Thus, with the aid of the embedded mole, the FBI operated alongside the Chicago Police Department to conduct a raid on Hampton’s apartment, resulting in his death. In the raid’s aftermath, there emerged conflicting accounts over exactly what happened. In response to a reporter’s question inquiring whether the FBI may have intentionally targeted Hampton in the confrontation, a Chicago PD officer replied, “all indications to me, personally, was that this was, uh, obviously a political assassination.”

The second example is much more recent. During the summer of 2017, less than two weeks before a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville resulted in the death by vehicular homicide of a woman protesting the supremacists, the FBI issued a report highlighting the threat of a newly classified domestic terror group – “Black Identity Extremists” (BIE). This label is not the name of any particular organization or movement. Rather, it is largely an umbrella term that could be applied to any black individual or group that expresses anger over instances of police brutality. From the report:

The FBI assesses it is very likely that BIEs’ perceptions of unjust treatment of African Americans and the perceived unchallenged illegitimate actions of law

enforcement will inspire premeditated attacks against law enforcement over the next year. This may also lead to an increase in BIE group memberships, collaboration among BIE groups, or the appearance of additional violent lone offenders motivated by BIE rhetoric. The FBI further assesses it is very likely additional controversial police shootings of African Americans and the associated legal proceedings will continue to serve as drivers for violence against law enforcement.\footnote{Federal Bureau of Investigation (2017).}

Note the attempt here by the FBI to reframe black expressions of critique (to say nothing of anger) over controversial police shootings. Such expressions are not deemed to be reasonable, legitimate, or even acceptable. On the contrary, these expressions are viewed as indicative of the potential of African Americans to commit violence against law enforcement agents. This FBI report illuminates the degree to which the specter of black anger is feared within the sociopolitical system. Rather than devoting resources to problematizing the rash of incidents of police killings of black civilians, the highest law enforcement agency in the land emphasizes the systematic threat posed by black people who are justifiably disturbed by such incidents.

In December 2017, Christopher Daniels became the first individual believed to be arrested as a result of FBI monitoring under the BIE classification. Daniels’ apartment was raided, and he was arrested for possessing firearms he was prohibited from owning as a result of a 2007 conviction. Legal advocates assert that Daniels was only on the FBI’s radar due to his political activism and public expressions of contempt for law enforcement. Attorney Kamau Franklin warned, “[t]his is obviously the first of what will be several attempts to begin to criminalize black organizing, militant black organizing in particular, and work their way down to other types of organizing.”\footnote{De Bourmont (2018).}

Instances such as this send a clear message to black individuals across the nation who are considering joining efforts to advocate for black lives – even if simply in the form of a social media post. You risk being labeled a threat, targeted, monitored, and brought down by agents of the system you challenge. While the majority of black people will never personally lumber under the weight of such state-enforced pressure, the threat nonetheless looms large in the collective black psyche.

Beyond examples of intensive state-sanctioned pushback against expressions of black grievance, many prevailing images and narratives
throughout history illustrate the distinct space that black anger occupies in the public imagination. The specter of the archetypal *angry black man* and *woman* haunted Barack and Michelle Obama throughout their tenure in the national spotlight.\(^{28}\) In a 2016 interview with Oprah Winfrey for CBS News, Michelle Obama expounded on how being labeled an “angry black woman” made her feel:

That was one of those things where you just sort of think, “Dang, you don’t even know me” […] You just sort of feel like, “Wow, where’d that come from?” […] You start thinking, “Oh wow, we’re so afraid of each other.”\(^{29}\)

A long-running satire of the collective scrutinizing of the Obamas through the lens of *perpetual black danger* arrived in the form of the popular “Obama translator” sketch on the show *Key and Peele*. Jordan Peele portrayed the president as unfailingly erudite, composed and stately. Meanwhile, Keagan Michael Key portrayed Obama’s “anger translator” Luther, who would rephrase Obama’s remarks with the unrestrained, palpable rage of which the POTUS would never deign to provide glimpses. For years this sketch mined comedy from the pointed observation that the most high-profile black man in the world had severe socially imposed limits on the emotions he could publicly convey.

The societal limits on black expression of grievance are further illuminated when we consider the lack of such limits on similarly positioned white Americans. Barack and Michelle Obama were continuously reminded of their need to remain poised and calm whenever in the public view. In contrast, South Carolina Congressional Representative Joe Wilson had no compunction when breaking with decorum to shout “you lie!” during Obama’s inaugural speech to a joint session of Congress in 2009. While Wilson issued an apology for this “lack of civility,” stating “I let my emotions get the best of me,” he never once had to worry about his outburst casting a pall over his entire racial group.\(^{30}\)

As illuminated by these contrasting examples, the societal fear of black anger creates an interesting – and politically impactful – irony. Being saddled with the prospects of legal retribution or social stigmatization from seeing red while black actually contributes to a depressing of the anger African Americans express over politics. White Americans, on the

\(^{28}\) Cassidy (2016).
\(^{29}\) Hensch (2016).
\(^{30}\) Bailey (2009).
other hand, facing no such adverse effects of seeing red, express and act upon their anger in politics with greater frequency and intensity.

One can rightfully point to black political movements and actions that appear motivated by political anger, from the Black Power movement of the late 1960s to the contemporary movement for black lives. While such movements may loom large in the collective memory, one could easily question why we have not witnessed more of such movements. After all, there has never been a shortage of conditions or inciting factors to activate black political grievance. From the aforementioned lack of a major black presence in the Occupy movement, to a lack of broad-based black activism in the face of the Flint water crisis, to the absence of a coordinated counter-mobilization to the proposed welfare reform legislation in the mid-1990s, we can observe clear bounds on black activism. To what extent do these bounds reflect the fact that, contrary to popular belief, African Americans do not perceive the same incentives or utility to register anger over politics as whites?

In contrast, while there is no such narrative of angry white men/women, there is no shortage of political movements that appear to be animated by white political anger. From the Reagan revolution to the rise of Trumpism, from the Tea Party to the anti-Trump resistance movement, we witness numerous instances of white Americans mobilizing based on a collective sense of grievance, on both sides of the aisle and across the spectrum of electoral and insurgent actions. There may be no socially constructed racial narrative that ties together these actions. But, as I demonstrate in this book, these myriad instances point to an important truth about anger in American politics. Seeing red carries greater political capital for white Americans.

Because white anger is often legitimized and championed by the same discourses, practices and actors that demonize and stigmatize black anger, white people are uniquely able to engender anger over politics and translate it to effective political action. By providing an in-depth account of the divergent stakes and consequences of expressing anger among black and white Americans, I cast the racial participation gap in a brand-new light, while also dispelling a long-standing myth about black people being prone to anger.

The Distinct Political Force of Black Anger

A fuller picture of the anger gap emerges when accounting for its psychological and sociopolitical origins, both the sentiment of resignation
that stifles the emergence of anger in response to negative political developments, and the concern over stigmatization and pushback from being “angry while black.” To further flesh out understanding of the anger gap, I pinpoint the divergence in how the anger actually expressed by white and black Americans translates to political action. Not all anger is created equal. Thus, in addition to tracing the causes and consequences of the anger gap, this book will demonstrate that black anger generally mobilizes a different and more limited set of actions compared to the anger mobilizing white Americans.

Black political figures often bemoan the mischaracterizations of their expressions of grievance with the political system. In his earlier-cited 1997 address, NAACP President Mfume expressed exasperation with the labeling applied to black people who give pointed critiques of the racial status quo:

I get tired of having to stand up like you have to stand up in your communities around the country and defend your patriotism, defend your love of America simply because you question that which is wrong. I get tired of those who suggest how somehow that because our branches want to speak out and demonstrate and petition for the redress of their grievances that they are somehow less than full-fledged Americans.  

Mfume captures here the distinct and despairing societal response to black anger. Whereas expressions of grievance from white Americans are typically viewed as legitimate, if not patriotic, such expressions from black people are often viewed through lenses of suspicion and derision. Politicians ignore black anger, government actors aggressively suppress its expression, and widely disseminated sociocultural narratives demonize or ridicule black anger. Given these potential costs of being angry while black, it bears asking what distinguishes the black individuals who are willing to be angry while black in light of the consequences.

Because of the risks associated with being angry while black, the act of expressing black anger is best conceived as a politically defiant act in its own right. By letting their anger be known, black people flout the long-established conventions dictating that African Americans be pliant and patient. Two questions arise when considering the unique fore of political anger as expressed by African Americans. First, what factors should be expected to facilitate this willingness to defy racial convention? A strong sense of racial identity? A politicized racial consciousness? Being of a
younger age, or identifying as a certain gender? Exploring the roles of these intersecting social identities and racial attitudes in shaping black individuals’ orientations toward political anger, I identify which groups within the black body politic may carry more or less license to express anger. Are black women doubly precluded from exhibiting anger by the racial and gendered bounds placed upon them? Are younger African Americans more likely to take action in anger than older cohorts? Are racially conscious black people more or less likely to get mad as hell over politics?

Second, does black anger translate to the same set of political actions as white anger? Answering this question uncovers the extent of the racial anger gap in multiple domains of politics. As will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters, while anger effectively moves white Americans to conventional playing fields of action, from the voting booth to the town halls, anger expressed by African Americans translates more strongly to confrontational and system-challenging domains of action, from the front lines of protest to the sites of marches and demonstrations. Thus, while the anger gap carries consequences for turnout, its effect is most keenly felt in the domain of black activism, which has long played an instrumental role in black politics.

**The Anger Gap in Focus: Leveraging Emotion to Better Understand Black Politics**

Better understanding the anger gap can provide insights that help us answer many of the pressing political questions of our time. The viability of the Democratic Party, the strength and capacity of interracial insurgent coalitions, and the present and future of black politics all hinge in part on the degree to which substantial numbers of black people feel sufficiently motivated to take up political action in a political climate increasingly polarized both racially and ideologically. What are the lessons that should be taken away from instances in which black participation surges, and instances in which it wanes? What are the cues and messages that animate black participation, despite what conventional wisdom says? What would black participation look like if African Americans were given full license to get angry over politics? Would anger then translate more effectively to electoral actions such as voting for black people? Or would we see even greater numbers of black people continuing the rich tradition of black insurgent activism in the US?
As I set about to answer these questions, I will tie together insights from psychology, black political identity, and political communication and behavior. From psychology I grapple with major issues in the field of emotions, such as the behavioral cues associated with varying emotions states, and how the emotions engendered within individuals vary based on whether they are members of advantaged or disadvantaged groups in society. From the field of black political identity, I explore how black-specific ideological narratives disseminated among African Americans, through messages from community elites, black media and everyday talk, shape dominant black worldviews. And in turn, I assess how these worldviews offer black individuals a framework for interpreting the world around them, thus influencing their broader collective emotional sentiments and their immediate emotional responses to the objects and actors therein. Finally, from the lens of political communications and behavior, I examine the emotional cues present and absent from messaging to black audiences from various sets of political elites. Additionally, I detail how the mobilizing effects of various emotions on participation are shaped by one’s senses of racial identity and group agency. Bridging this diverse set of theoretical approaches, I explain the racial anger gap in politics as a product of varying emotional sentiments, divergent racialized messages about entitlement, grievance and legitimacy, and differences in the opportunities and limitations distributed to groups within the political sphere.

By uncovering this racial anger gap and highlighting its effect on the racial participation gap, I aim to illuminate how we think about political behavior. We derive a great deal of insight about African American electoral participation from seminal work that sheds light on how black decisions to take actions such as voting, donating and campaigning are distinctly shaped by their perceptions of the responsiveness of the political system to their demands, their sense of racial solidarity and the availability of black political elites behind which to rally.32

32 Work by Dawson (1994; 2001) examines how distinct racial ideologies and perceptions of racial solidarity shape African Americans’ political attitudes and behavior. Gay (2001) explores the effect of being represented in Congress by black elected officials on black individuals’ participation. Tate (1994) assesses the relationship between African Americans’ partisanship, policy preferences and their political decision making. Walton Jr. (1985) problematizes the behavioralist approach to studying political participation, analyzing black political action as a function of racial socialization and the functions and capacities of black indigenous institutions. Nunnally (2012) demonstrates that perceptions of racial stratification in the US characterize African Americans as generally
Similarly, scholars have assessed the unique opportunities and bounds faced by African Americans seeking to affect political change through insurgent political activity, i.e., protest, demonstrations, marches and uprisings.\footnote{See, for example, work by Davenport (2009), Gillion (2013) and Gause (2016).} Their scholarship sheds light on why black people may perceive a distinct utility to these actions that they may not perceive from electoral actions. Further, they reveal how these insurgent actions are framed by media and political actors in ways that can either advance or regress black interests.

This scholarship paints a vivid picture of how the participation of African Americans in various spheres of politics is influenced by the material and immaterial resources they possess (or lack), what they think about politics and their collective place within politics and their perceptions of intragroup racial solidarity. My focus here is to complement this work by considering another dimension – how black people feel about race, politics and their collective role within it.

Considering the role of emotions adds a unique element of dynamism to our understanding of black political behavior. Neither the resources at one’s disposal nor one’s underlying views about race or politics should be expected to vary much from one election cycle or issue campaign to another. But how one feels about those resources, race, the political environment, or one’s role within it at any given time? Those feelings should be flexible, adaptive and mutable from one instance to another. And within the variance of those emotion states lies great promise in forging understanding of why someone’s patterns of participation change from one instance to the next, despite consistency in their political views, resources and racial attitudes.

By accounting for the role of emotions in shaping black people’s engagement of politics, I can both add greater nuance to our understanding of the racial participation divides – both in volume and type of action – and also sharpen the ability to predict how black and white participation will vary from one political context to another. For instance, I can reframe the surge in black turnout during the Obama era as a reflection of the uniquely mobilizing effects of positive emotions on black political behavior relative to whites. And I can contextualize the rise of Trumpism within the long history of white Americans leveraging political anger toward electoral behavior more effectively than racial minority groups.

less trusting socially and politically. This absence of trust carries consequences for black Americans’ political engagement. Finally, Cohen (2010) examines the extent to which the emergent political generation of black youth in the Obama era view racial discrimination as a key determinant of their life trajectories.
Additionally, I can trace the extensive history of black participation in insurgent movements – from the Black Power movement to Black Lives Matter – to the specific manner in which black anger is translated toward counter-systemic behaviors more so than system-oriented actions. Finally, looking ahead, I can assess how the racial anger gap may ultimately inhibit the policy gains of African Americans in a political era that should be marked for the foreseeable future by intensive racial and political polarization.

I am not alone in grappling with the reflexive relationship between race and emotion in shaping people’s political decision making. Political psychologist Antoine Banks has established a clear connection between white Americans’ anger and their racial attitudes – specifically their resentment toward African Americans for their perceived failure to live up to American ideals of work ethic and personal responsibility. This anger-attitude linkage has wide-reaching effects on white individuals’ policy preferences and political decision making, thus creating a meaningful political impact to being angry while white. Camille Burge has created a framework for understanding how the narratives and instances shaping the collective black experience produce distinctive group-based emotions of pride, anger and shame. She assesses how these group-based emotions influence black individuals’ political opinions and behaviors.

Drawing on black feminist epistemology, Brittney Cooper explores how Black women navigate the confines of the “angry Black woman” stereotype to effectively leverage anger within sociopolitical spaces. Finally, Julia Jordan-Zachery conceives of black women’s anger as an intergenerational force that shapes individual and collective responses to racial and gendered trauma. Building on the theoretical foundations laid by these scholars, I aim to integrate ideas from psychology and political behavior with insights from the black politics literature to provide a comprehensive account of how seeing red over politics while black differs consequentially from seeing red while white.

This opening chapter sets the stage for my approach to uncovering the anger gap and its consequences for black politics. I first aim to establish just how prevalent and impactful is the socially constructed narrative around the angry black man/woman. The stigma associated with being angry while black carries a host of legal and social consequences. And the fear of bearing the weight of these consequences in turn inhibits many African Americans from exhibiting anger in the political sphere.

34 Banks (2014).
35 Cooper (2018); Jordan-Zachery (2017).
Additionally, I trace the anger gap to the prevalent political narratives within both mainstream and black discursive spaces. These narratives reveal stark divides in the senses of expectation and entitlement that black and white Americans are socialized to draw from the political system, as well as the legitimacy that the polity ascribes to the grievances articulated by these respective groups. In subsequent chapters, I detail how these divides contribute to emotional sentiments that result in a paucity of anger expressed by African Americans over politics.

Plan of the Book

The remainder of this book fleshes out these concepts to paint a comprehensive picture of the factors shaping the racial anger gap and its consequences for race, political participation and politics.

Chapter 2 investigates a range of campaign messages and speeches from political elites over the years to highlight the whys and hows behind elites’ attempts to activate various emotions within the intended public – specifically anger. I conduct emotion discourse analyses of these messages in order to identify the emotional sentiments that are cultivated and reinforced within primarily white and black audiences, respectively.

Drawing on different traditions in social psychology, this chapter breaks down the distinct attitudes underlying the emotion of anger, as well as the specific behaviors to which anger is expected to translate. It then demonstrates why and how mainstream political figures’ appeals to anger are nearly exclusively reserved for white audiences, while black audiences receive more appeals to positive emotions.

Finally, the chapter showcases the effects of this racial difference by presenting and commenting on the divergent responses of black and white subjects to two different anger primes in an original survey experiment titled the 2018 Race, Anger and Participation (RAP) Study. Within this experiment, subjects are invited to reflect on anything that makes them angry about either politics or about race and racial controversies in the US. Whether the object of anger is politics or race, black subjects show a pronounced hesitation to express anger relative to white subjects. And the open-ended reflections of black and white subjects reflect systematically varying sentiments about the fairness of politics.

Chapter 3 provides robust evidence of the black anger gap and its consequences for participation. With the aid of findings from survey data providing nearly 40 years’ worth of information on black and white Americans’ political attitudes, emotions and participation, I demonstrate
the effect of the anger gap on black turnout. Insights on how the anger gap shaped black decisions to participate in electoral politics span the Reagan era to the dawn of the Trump era.

The first object of respondents’ anger measured in this chapter is the set of presidential incumbents and major party candidates across election years. The second measure employed is an indicator of how often survey respondents felt angry over the course of the 2016 election. Whereas this is a more open-ended measure, analyses demonstrate that individuals’ reports of anger were closely tied to their perceptions of the figure who dominated the election season – Donald J. Trump.

Chapter 4 grapples directly with how seeing red over politics differs for the political participation of black and white people. From examinations of black discourses debating the proper role of anger in black political strategizing emerges a picture of black anger that directs individuals toward oppositional actions such as protesting and boycotting rather than electoral actions like campaigning. Data from both a national survey and the 2018 RAP Study show that anger over politics and racial issues more effectively steers African Americans to activist activities than vote-related activities. These data also show how the relationship between black people’s anger and their participation in such activities is shaped by their views on race and their collective agency within politics.

Chapter 5 investigates the idea that while African Americans exhibit an anger gap in politics, they also demonstrate an enthusiasm advantage. With the aid of survey data, I demonstrate that across different political eras that carry positive prospects for African Americans – from Clinton to Obama – greater proportions of black individuals exhibit positive emotions relative to comparable whites. Further, these emotions exhibit a stronger mobilizing effect on black participation relative to whites. This chapter also highlights the findings from a second original experimental study, in which black subjects exhibit a uniquely motivating effect of hope on their participation in a local issue area. This chapter ultimately illustrates that the boost to black participation accrued from the enthusiasm advantage is generally not sufficient to balance out the disparity caused by the anger gap.

Similar to the objects of anger measured in the previous chapters, the measures of enthusiasm here include survey respondents’ reports of hope and pride felt toward presidential incumbents and candidates across election years, as well as the frequency with which they report feeling hope and pride during the 2016 election season. The experiment offers a new measurement by asking subjects to indicate how hopeful they feel
(if at all) after receiving information about a promising political opportunity in their local community.

Chapter 6 extends the argument beyond the black–white binary by exploring the degree to which the racial anger gap and enthusiasm advantage are exhibited by Asian and Latina/o Americans. This chapter illuminates how features that distinguish these respective racial groups – specifically narratives that paint these groups as politically dormant or ostracized – shape their emotional responses to politics in a manner similar to African Americans. Using reports of the frequency of anger and enthusiasm felt during the 2016 election, I show that the anger gap and enthusiasm advantage are not limited to African Americans. Further, this chapter reveals the unique association between people of color’s expressions of anger and their perceptions of intergroup racial solidarity, uncovering a new potential consequence of the racial anger gap.

Chapter 7 offers concluding thoughts and reflections on the major implications of this work. I highlight the most important lessons to be taken away from the fact that smaller proportions of African Americans (and, indeed, racial minorities more broadly) feel agentic, entitled or secure enough to express and translate anger to political activity. How should this change the way we think about the roles of emotions in politics? Of the costs of the angry black man/woman stereotype? Of the state of black participation in a political era that seems sure to be defined by rife and rancor for a long time to come? This chapter also identifies indicators of a potential changing landscape in the role of black anger in politics. Is an emerging set of black political figures laying the groundwork for black people to leverage anger toward political action to greater effect?

A Final Note on the Operationalization of Emotions

Multiple measures of emotions are utilized throughout this book, from open-ended reflections, to frequency reports, to binary responses of whether or not one feels the specified emotion. This variation reflects the different means through which emotions have been operationalized in social and political psychology. By employing a diverse range of measurement options, I can examine the robustness of the anger gap across various specifications.

Additionally, the objects of people’s reported emotions vary, from specific actors and policy changes, to particular political climates, to ideas broadly defined by the individuals. Critical to my argument, I find that
the racial anger gap is generally robust across these various purported objects. In fact, whereas the anger gap is apparent despite the specific object of emotion, the potential racial enthusiasm advantage appears to be much more dependent on the specific object. That the anger gap emerges as a consistent force across different measurements and objects illustrates the wide-ranging power found in the racially distinct emotional sentiments of black and white Americans.