

No More "Sticking to Sports": Black Athlete Activism and Its Political Consequences

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington
2024

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
Political Science

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Abstract

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This dissertation seeks to understand the political consequences of Black athlete activism. Despite the longstanding intersection of sports and politics, social-scientific inquiries into this symbiosis and its consequences for the political arena remain mostly absent. Most existing accounts of athlete activism, and the connection between sports and politics more broadly, only reach a descriptive, exploratory stage. In contrast, this dissertation offers empirical analyses to interrogate Black athletes' political influence. Apart from offering a history of Black athlete activism that runs counter to notions of a recent politicization of sports, I show that Black athletes are involved in a wide range of political advocacy online and receive strong engagement from the public, making it a viable avenue for Black athletes' political activism. On top, I demonstrate that Black athletes can successfully influence policy preferences and mobilize the Black community to participate politically, making them elite political actors. Overall, my findings suggest that sports and politics not only have anecdotal interconnections, but directly impact each other historically, as well as in contemporary times. In short, I contend that the study of Black athlete activism offers crucial insights into the politics of the Black community, and American politics more broadly.

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Acknowledgements

When I decided to move halfway across the world to pursue a PhD, leaving behind all of my family and closest friends, I had no idea what to expect, or what exactly I had signed up for. To be completely honest, now that I have reached the end, I am still not entirely sure. What I do know, however, is that over the course of the last eight years, I have had the pleasure of getting to know so many wonderful people that shaped my life for the better, and made this experience one I will cherish forever. I am infinitely grateful for the many individuals who, each in their own way, have given me so much love, support, guidance, and reassurance and thereby played an integral part in my ability to complete this journey. None of this would have been possible without you.

First, I owe an immense amount of gratitude to my committee chair, primary advisor, study abroad co-director, and friend Christopher Sebastian Parker. It is no hyperbole to say that without you, I would have never gotten here. In fact, I would have never stepped foot on UW's campus again, at least not to attend graduate school, if it was not for you. When I walked into your office as an undergraduate exchange student in 2014, neither of us could have imagined where the next 10 years would take us. You saw something in me and did everything you could to bring me back to UW. That effort, and my subsequent decision to indeed move back to Seattle, changed my life. I will be forever grateful for your mentorship and support, your belief in me, your unwavering commitment to making me a better scholar and person, and the many, many laughs we have shared.

Likewise, a massive thank you also to my co-chair and overall powerhouse, Sophia Jordán Wallace. Your guidance, especially during the later stages of the program, coupled with your compassion, rigor, and ability to provide clarity when everything seems obscure were indispensable to the completion of this dissertation. I am forever in your debt for all of your brilliant advice, tireless advocacy, and tenacious commitment toward me. You are an inspiration to many, and I can only hope to one day be half the scholar and mentor you are.

A big thank you is also owed to the set of other faculty members that I was lucky enough to learn from and that have shaped my intellectual development, first and foremost to my additional committee member Chip Turner, who has been incredibly generous with his time and support, as well as Jake Grumbach, Megan Ming Francis, Becca Thorpe, Mark Smith, Anthony Gill, and Scott Lemieux. I very much appreciate everything you have done for my educational pursuit. Thank you also to Cheryl Kaiser for serving as my GSR and being an incredibly smooth collaborator.

Additionally, thank you to the fantastic academic and administrative staff that do all of the tireless work behind the scenes: Meera Roy, Ann Buscherfeld, Steve Dunne, Ellen Gregoire, Ling Fu, Stephanie Lew, and Susanne Recordon.

The completion of this dissertation also would not have been possible without the incredible group of peers that I am lucky enough to call friends. To Jessica Sciarone, Carolyn Dapper, Brian Leung, Nicolas Wittstock, Grace Reinke, Chris Colligan, Bree Bang-Jensen, Rutger Ceballos, Nela Mrchkovska, Travis Nelson, Ryan Goehring, Megan Erickson, Morgan Wack, Sean Butorac, JP Anderson, Jon Beck, Kenya Amano, and anyone I inevitably forgot:

Thank you all for making my time in graduate school that much more enjoyable. I am deeply grateful for your friendship, support, community, and the time we got to spend together.

I am also thankful for having had the privilege of being part of the fantastic WISIR group during my time at UW. This brilliant group of scholars provided me with an intellectual home, continuously broadened my horizon, and fostered deeply meaningful community. Being part of WISIR was one of the most cherished and most impactful parts of my graduate school experience.

Moreover, I want to thank my Heidelberg University mentors, who set me up on a path that made my time at UW possible in the first place: Martin Thunert, Daniel Silliman, and especially Anthony Santoro, who was the first person to show me that a deep passion for sports can have a place in academic research as well.

Needless to say, a project of this magnitude cannot be completed without a strong support cast outside of the academy as well. First and foremost, I want to thank my parents. To my mom, Ute, thank you for always being supportive of this journey. When I told you I got accepted into UW, your first reaction was not one that questioned whether I was really thinking about going, but simply: “when do you have to be there?” You knew it was a done deal at that very moment, and you have done everything to make sure I succeed since I was born. To my dad, Rainer, even though you were not here anymore to witness any of it, I know you were with me at every step along the way. Whenever I had the inevitable moments of wanting to quit, you provided the motivation to keep going. I would have never gotten here without you. Thank you for everything you did to allow me to choose this path in the first place.

Moreover, thank you to my sister, Tamara, her loving husband Felix, and my little niece Emilia, the latter of whom was born during the writing of this dissertation and has brought an abundance of joy to my life since. Thank you for holding down the fort at home, for all the times you had to take care of bureaucratic tasks for me, and for all of the love and support throughout the years. You are everything one could ask for in a sister, and so much more.

Thank you also to Nicole for the support and encouragement in getting me through the tough early years of graduate school; I would not have been able to get to the later stages, let alone the finish line, without it.

I also am hugely indebted to a large group of people who have tremendously shaped my life in Seattle, and without whom I can safely say I would not have stuck with the program: my volleyball community, and especially the Men's Club Volleyball team at UW. There are too many people to name, but please know that from playing on the team in the early years of graduate school to coaching the team for the last three years, it has been an absolute joy and privilege to be in the gym with all of you over the years. Thank you to my former teammates and coaches, and to the coaching staff and players I now get to work with and learn from. One of the most gratifying things during my time at UW has been to see all of you grow and succeed, both on and off the court. Thank you for every single practice, tournament weekend, and the many national tournaments I was lucky enough to be a part of. I truly mean it when I say that all of you kept me sane and provided me with a much, much needed outlet to pursue my passion for sports outside of academia.

My profound gratitude also goes to you, Juliana, for being such a loving, caring, and understanding partner. You may never know just how much of an impact you have on me, and words will never adequately describe how I feel about you. Just know that I so, so appreciate you for keeping me grounded and providing a home base that made completing this project possible. Thank you for seeing me, giving me the space and encouragement necessary to finish this dissertation without hesitation, and for making me a better person every single day. I cannot wait to see what our future holds, and I am so excited to finally get to spend more time with you.

Last but certainly not least, I want to express my deepest appreciation for my two best friends, Tobi and Dominik, whom I left behind all these years ago to pursue this degree and who stuck with me every step along the way ever since. Thank you for everything you have done for me, and for all the memories we have created. You have shown me what true friendship looks like and I could not be more thankful to have you by my side. You truly are the brothers I never had, and life is infinitely more fun with the two of you around. This dissertation is dedicated to you, the Jogges.

Introduction

In the early morning hours of January 6, 2021, speaking into a camera at his own home due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Rev. Raphael Warnock proclaimed that “we were told that we couldn’t win this election. But tonight, we proved that with hope, hard work, and the people by our side, anything is possible” (Warnock 2021). Warnock, the Democratic challenger, had just beaten incumbent Republican senator Kelly Loeffler in Georgia’s special runoff election, becoming the state’s first Black senator and ensuring that the Senate would be evenly split between Democrats and Republicans for the next two years. Indeed, his success seemed improbable only a few months earlier, as Warnock, who had never held public office before, was navigating a crowded field of twenty candidates trying to oust a sitting U.S. senator. How, then, was he able to defeat Loeffler? Apart from hope, hard work, and the people by his side, one additional factor may have been missing from his list: the Black women of the WNBA.

Incumbent Kelly Loeffler was a co-owner of the WNBA’s Atlanta Dream at the time. When the league and its players joined many other Black athletes in their protest of racial injustice and support for the Black Lives Matter movement in July 2020, Loeffler penned a letter to WNBA commissioner Cathy Engelbert, asking her to halt the league’s support. Criticizing the movement as “misaligned with the values and goals of the WNBA” and accusing it of “promoting violence,” Loeffler directly affronted many of her own team’s players that were supporting the cause, as well as countless players on other teams (Hurt 2020). The players

demanded that Loeffler retract her statement or sell her ownership stakes. She refused to do so, instead doubling down on her remarks.

In response, the players of the WNBA engaged in one of the most prolific acts of Black athlete activism in recent history. Instead of continuing to attack Loeffler, the players decided to openly and ferociously support one of her political opponents, Rev. Raphael Warnock, whom Stacey Abrams suggested to the players as the best option of the existing challengers – after extensive vetting, the players agreed (Gregory 2021). On August 4, 2020, players across the league for the first time wore t-shirts before their (nationally televised) games with a simple slogan printed on them: “Vote Warnock.” In the following months, players kept wearing these shirts, engaged in massive social media outreach, and repeatedly brought Warnock up in interviews to support his campaign.¹ Players signed up as poll workers and volunteered to register voters. They narrated an ad by LeBron James’ “More Than A Vote” organization the day before the runoff election (Jones & Brito 2021). Warnock’s final campaign ad featured the Dream’s players and credited them as his first major supporters (Singer 2021).

It is impossible to assess the exact impact that the WNBA’s support for Warnock’s campaign had on the outcome of the election with definitive certainty. Nevertheless, some evidence suggests that the impact may have been substantial – especially its timing. In order for Warnock to win the Senate seat in January 2021, he first needed to put himself in a position to even reach the runoff in the November 2020 general election. In late July, Warnock polled at a mere 9%, fourth amongst all candidates, and a long shot from reaching a potential runoff

¹ See Singer (2021) and Gregory (2021) for particularly well-researched and detailed accounts of how the WNBA ran their support campaign for Warnock.

(Murray 2020). A week later, the WNBA pledged their support, and Warnock's campaign took off: within two days of the players' activism, Warnock's campaign had added 3,500 grassroots donors raising more than \$185,000 and added almost 3,500 new Twitter followers (Jones & Brito 2021). Notably, this constituted a 20% rise in average donations compared to previous days. While the financial boost was small compared to later stages of the campaign, it came at a critical moment in the race. Starting in early August, Warnock's polling numbers also grew exponentially until November (Delevoye 2020).

Of course, the WNBA's support was not the sole reason Warnock's campaign took off. His eulogy at John Lewis' funeral, the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, and generally positive news cycles for Democratic candidates may all have contributed to Warnock's rise. Yet, the WNBA's endorsement came at a crucial moment of the race, which allowed him to be competitive in November and head into the runoff, a fact that Warnock himself acknowledged when he called the WNBA's support a "turning point" in his campaign (Collier 2020). In the runoff, the Warnock campaign and the WNBA players used their synergy to eventually defeat Loeffler and provide the incoming Biden administration with a de-facto Democratic majority in the Senate. As such, given the slim margins of the 2020 election, the Black athlete activists of the WNBA arguably played a pivotal role in the outcome of the election and the political landscape of the United States going forward.

The level of protest activity displayed by WNBA players, openly campaigning against a team owner, came as a surprise to many (Deb 2020). However, upon closer examination, it was on par with two other recent developments. First, it was one of several instances of athletes using

sporting events to convey political messages in recent years. Colin Kaepernick, joined by other NFL players, started kneeling when the national anthem played in 2016 to protest police violence against Black people (Payne 2016). The Golden State Warriors refused to pay Donald Trump a visit at the White House after winning the NBA Championship (Cato & Medworth 2018). The U.S. women's national soccer team filed a lawsuit over their grievance about the gender pay gap in sports, and in society at large (Das 2016). Houston Rockets then-general manager Daryl Morey tweeted his support for the anti-government protests in Hong Kong, and a diplomatic crisis ensued (Polacek 2019). Second, the WNBA in particular had been at the forefront of renewed political activism by athletes for years, long before many other athletes decided to speak up (Ayala 2020, Lawrence 2020).

Nevertheless, it was not until the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota in May of 2020 that athlete activism rose to unprecedented prominence. The most visible instance of this resurgence of athlete activism occurred in August 2020, when the American sports world came to a virtual standstill due to multiple teams and athletes boycotting their games across five major American sport leagues for multiple days. The contemporary outburst of athlete activism even surpasses the efforts of the 1960s, from size, to diversity, to reach, making this moment an unprecedented evolution in the history of sports, politics, and race in America (Radnofsky & Beaton 2020, Streeter 2020, Sullivan 2020). Notably, it is predominantly Black athletes who engage in this activism.

The “politicization” of sports evokes controversial reactions. Some applaud athletes using their platform to engage in politics, while others think that sports remain a sanctuary from

America's divisive political discourse (Whitlock 2017). More than anything, however, the aforementioned events point to the robust interconnectedness between sports and politics in America, and all around the world. Regardless of normative standpoints, sports and politics have always existed in concert with each other. These interrelations between the world of sports, the world of politics, and the role that race plays in these dynamics are at the heart of this project.

The story of Warnock's Senate campaign and the WNBA's role in it provides a compelling example of the impact that Black athlete activists can have on the political arena. These athletes, given the platforms and reach they possess in their communities, can be key political actors that raise the saliency of an issue, and swing elections or public opinion. Therefore, not recognizing the role that Black athletes played in Warnock's success, and, by extension, the role that Black athletes can play in American politics in general, would cause observers to miss a crucial aspect of American political behavior.

As the events discussed in the opening of this dissertation display, such an analysis is vital to fully comprehend, for example, the outcomes of the 2020 presidential election and the political direction the country headed into. In particular, it offers insights into the tipping points that led to the Democrats' control of the Senate, as well as getting Joe Biden across the finish line in major swing states, including Georgia, with the use of sporting venues as polling places (Cancian 2020, Peter et al. 2020). Studying Black athletes and their political activism thus does not simply constitute an attempt at creating a scholastic impact confined to the academy, but is warranted due to its practical, real-world implications for American politics.

The centrality of Black athletes in the fight for racial justice over the past few years bears witness to the importance of this topic. After all, sports can be described as contested racial terrain (Hartmann 2000, 2003). Sports provide a locale where racial identities are created, transformed, reinforced, and destroyed – a process that Omi & Winant (1994) refer to as racial formation. Put differently, the dynamic sociohistorical process of race making – or racial formation – constantly, publicly occurs all across sports; negative racial stereotypes and progressive racial viewpoints coexist and contest one another. Indeed, due to society’s increasing cultural fragmentation and political polarization, sports may be more important than ever as a site of social debate and a window into broader societal trends (Serazio 2019). In particular, I agree with Pelak (2005) that studying sports as a site of social change and athletes as political actors is a worthwhile endeavor.

Another reason why it is important to understand the political potential of Black athletes relates to the controversial role that sports, and Black athletes, play in the Black community. Whereas sports are predominantly a leisurely activity for white people, it is often much more than that for Black people (Cashmore 1982). What exactly it represent to many Black people, however, remains heavily debated. Generally speaking, two broad perspectives exist, in line with the contested racial terrain metaphor alluded to above: one side suggests that sports are a premier way for Black people to achieve social and economic upward mobility, positioning Black athletes as ideal role models; the other side postulates that sports are inherently exploitative of and discriminatory toward Black people and reinforce existing power structures in society, making Black athletes mere pawns in this game (Harris 1997, Rudman 1986, Edwards 1973).

Which of these two perspectives is correct is beyond the scope of this project. Certainly, both perspectives have merit, and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, I posit that if Black athletes, through their elevated status as role models, influence their community politically, they are certainly more than puppets reinforcing existing systems, devoid of any agency. Investigating the political impact of Black athletes on their communities, then, may also contribute to an increased understanding of the broader effects that sports can have in the Black community and whether or not the positive aspects of sports prevail.

This dissertation encourages a more complete comprehension of Black athlete activism and the interrelation of sports, politics, and race than hitherto accounts. Despite the historic occurrence and importance of relations between sports and politics, sports remain heavily understudied in political science (Gift & Miner 2017). Some observers highlight the paradoxical lack of political scientists interested in the politics of sports given the many intriguing potential research topics the intersection of the two fields provides (Grix 2013). Similarly, research on celebrity and politics is seldom discussed. Nevertheless, I share Dan Brockington's belief that "the study of celebrity is not a shallow or trivial exercise," nor is it "off-limits to the academe" (Brockington 2014, 88). To the contrary, I believe the study of Black athlete activism can offer crucial insights into the politics of the Black community, and American politics writ large.

Most existing accounts of athlete activism, and the connection between sports and politics more broadly, only reach a descriptive, exploratory stage. They are mainly anecdotal and take a historical approach (Rhoden 2006, Zirin 2008 & 2013, Bryant 2018, Harris 2019, Jackson 2020). In recent years, a few scholars began to explore athlete activism in the realm of political

science. As anthem protests developed, public opinion data on these protests became available. However, existing public opinion research rarely goes beyond measuring public approval or disapproval of such protests and the potential causes of those reactions (cf., Quinnipiac University Poll 2016, Gramlich 2019, New York Times/Siena College Research Institute 2022). One study includes athletes' influence on LGBTQ-rights (Harrison & Michelson 2017); another study provides an assessment of Colin Kaepernick's influence on political engagement among Black voters (Towler et al. 2019). Yet another study investigates the impact of Mo Salah (an Egyptian, Muslim soccer player who plays internationally) on anti-Muslim sentiments among soccer fans (Arababa'h et al. 2021).² Such endeavors are laudable and necessary yet, so far, they represent the exception rather than the rule.

To this day, social-scientific inquiries into (Black) athlete activism and its consequences for the political arena remain mostly absent. By and large, scholarship disregards athletes as potential political elites. Although several pundits, journalists, and sports broadcasters now offer opinions on the resurgence of athlete activism, they're poorly informed given their reliance on anecdotal evidence. While such accounts are useful, they remain spatially and temporally confined. A more social-scientific approach promises to furnish a more generalizable analysis of (Black) athlete activism and its consequences, helping to improve our knowledge of this topic. My project expands on existing analyses by providing a theoretical framework, empirical evidence, and paying special attention to the role that race plays in the politics of sports.

² The study measures Salah's passive impact, i.e. simply playing for the club, rather than active activism on his part, on fan behavior.

Some of the key questions this project seeks to answer are as follows: What impact, if any, do politically mobilized athletes have on politics? How does the public engage with politically active Black athletes in the digital sphere? Are Black athletes capable of persuading the mass public? Do Black athletes shape people's attitudes and policy preferences? Do they provide elite cues to the masses? Can Black athletes encourage people to get more involved politically? Consequently, this dissertation analyzes how Black athlete activists influence politics. It adds a political science perspective to an understudied topic that previously received attention mainly from historians, journalists, and some sociologists. In doing so, this project contributes to filling the gaps in our knowledge documented above.

To achieve this, my dissertation begins with an examination of the long history of Black athletes fighting for racial justice in the United States. As I will show, characterizing the contemporary intersections of sports and politics as a sudden "politicization" of sports is an uninformed mistake at best, and a deceitful revision of history at worst. Using the historical patterns that this exploration brings to light, I then provide a theoretical basis for why Black athlete activists have the ability to act as political elites in their communities. I then investigate how the public engages with Black athlete activism online, and what impacts Black athletes have on Black political participation and policy preferences.

Ultimately, this dissertation project presents a more comprehensive account of Black athlete activism than exists in political science scholarship so far. I display that the study of Black athlete activism offers crucial insights into the politics of the Black community, and American politics writ large. Aside from offering a history of Black athlete activism that runs

counter to notions of a recent politicization of sports, I show that Black athletes are involved in a wide range of political advocacy online and receive strong engagement from the public, making it a feasible avenue for Black athletes' political activism. Additionally, I demonstrate that Black athletes can successfully mobilize the Black community to participate politically and influence their policy preferences, even though more refined inquiries into this dynamic are necessary. Before turning to the historical review, theoretical elaborations, and empirical analysis, however, a brief outline of how the following chapters of this dissertation proceed is in order.

Chapter Roadmap

To gain leverage on the various ways in which Black athletes may affect American politics, this dissertation takes a multitude of approaches to investigate the different dynamics that exist around Black athlete activism and their political agency, engagement, and impact. In addition, challenging the assumption that politics has infiltrated sports only recently, and that mixing sports and politics thus is an anomaly, is another contribution this dissertation aims to make.

Therefore, Chapter One, "It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint – Black Athlete Activists' Long Fight for Racial Equality," draws on primary and secondary sources to develop a historical throughline of the ways in which Black athletes have engaged in politics over the course of American history. By focusing on how previous generations shaped following generations of Black athlete activists, I provide a coherent and insightful history of how Black athletes have influenced racial politics in the United States. The chapter first details the rich history of sports,

politics, and race in America, thereby scrutinizing the myth that sports and politics only recently began to commingle. It shows that, rather than a recent “politicization” of sports, sports and politics have historically always been intertwined – especially so when it comes to racial politics in America. Second, the chapter traces a thread that weaves through the past two centuries and ultimately inspired an unprecedented number of athletes to speak out politically in recent years.

The argument I put forward in this chapter is one of continuity as well as change: the relationship of Black athletes and politics is a continuous one throughout American history. Simultaneously, the ways in which Black athletes engaged in politics has differed, at times dramatically, over time – in large parts due to changes in the structural constraints Black athletes faced and, interrelatedly, the agency they possessed. In sum, this chapter traces how multiple generations of Black athletes have listened to, learned from, engaged with, rebutted, utilized, and differed from previous generations’ political engagement in their own quest for racial justice. Ultimately, this chapter tells the story of a long struggle for racial equality among Black athletes that shows that sports and politics have always been, and continue to be, intertwined in meaningful ways.

This history of Black athlete activism provides the backdrop for my theoretical elaborations that conclude this chapter. I situate athletes, as a subgroup of celebrities, within the literature on elite-driven public opinion and persuasion research. Moreover, I embed Black athlete activists and their function as elite role models within theories of self-interest and symbolic politics. As I will explain, these two concepts present two possible lenses through which to understand Black athlete activists’ ability to persuade members of the Black community

toward more political engagement and to shape policy preferences. In turn, this theory serves as the foundation for my substantive interrogation of the ways in which Black athlete activists influence politics in the following two chapters.

Chapter Two, “Cheered On or Booed Off? The Public’s Reaction to Black Athlete Activism Online,” explores how the public responds to the resurgence of athlete activism, especially in the digital era, and what this suggests about athletes’ ability to drive political engagement. Specifically, it investigates how Twitter users engage with political tweets from Black athletes. Moreover, this chapter examines the different forms of content that Black athletes’ political online activism entails. The exploratory analysis of the salient online engagement that Black athlete activists can command provides a baseline and justification for deeper, causal analysis in the last substantive chapter. This constitutes a crucial first step in widening our understanding of Black athletes’ political influence more broadly, moving on from purely anecdotal evidence.

The chapter analyzes the Twitter feeds of 25 Black athletes that engaged in political activism on Twitter between May 2020 and January 2021 by comparing interaction rates of political and nonpolitical tweets during that time frame. In addition, I conduct a content analysis of all political tweets by those Black athletes during that time frame to gain a better understanding of the types of political content Black athletes engage with, as well as the depth of their political engagement. The analysis presented in the chapter reveals a pattern wherein political tweets, on average, receive significantly higher absolute engagement numbers than nonpolitical tweets. Likewise, political tweets get retweeted disproportionately more than

nonpolitical tweets. Furthermore, the content analysis suggests that Black athletes engage in a variety of political activism online, often releasing explicit encouragements for people to get involved politically.

In short, this chapter shows that rather than shying away from Black athletes who turn to political activism, Twitter users embrace the activism and are willing to engage with it on a higher level than they usually would with nonpolitical tweets. Put differently, Black athlete activism fosters political participation among the public, at least in the digital sphere. The descriptive, exploratory analysis of Twitter users' engagement with Black athletes' political tweets in this chapter serves as a bridge between the historical throughline presented in the previous chapter and the quantitative analysis that follows in the subsequent chapter.

The examination of Black athlete activists' direct political impact takes place in Chapter Three, "Home Field Advantage: Black Athletes' Impact on Political Participation and Policy Preferences in the Black Community." In this chapter, I directly test Black athletes' ability to shape Black people's political attitudes and mobilize their communities toward more political participation by employing original survey data, including a survey experiment, collected as part of the Black Voter Project's national survey panel in fall 2022, with 1,213 Black respondents who constitute a nationally representative sample. The use of survey data allows me to engage in more thorough quantitative analysis; the experiment allows me to make more causal claims about Black athlete activists' potential for impacting American politics.

The results indicate that LeBron James enjoys fairly high favorability among the Black population, on par with politicians such as Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, yet higher than Jay-Z, a

Black non-athlete celebrity. The vast majority of the Black community also supports Black celebrities' political activism, regardless of whether it stems from Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, or Jay-Z. Furthermore, when directly asked about whether or not LeBron James or Jay-Z ever inspired them to get involved politically in different ways, a substantial number of participants responded affirmatively. As such, it appears that Black athletes can indeed mobilize significant parts of the Black community politically.

Yet, when looking at the results of the survey experiment, the picture becomes less clear. Only LeBron James's encouragement resulted in any statistically significant influence on Black people's political participation likelihood, and only for one specific kind of participation. Similarly, LeBron is the only celebrity to have a statistically significant impact on Black respondent's voting rights reform policy preferences. Ultimately, I demonstrate that Black athlete activists can influence public opinion on voting rights reform policies and can successfully mobilize the Black community to participate politically. However, my findings also show that these dynamics are not always as straight-forward as one might expect, as exhibited by the complexity of the results of my analysis. The chapter closes with a discussion of these seemingly inconsistent findings.

The final chapter of this dissertation reviews my theoretical expectations and arguments before summarizing the empirical findings that the substantive chapters offer. In doing so, I reiterate the political consequences of Black athlete activism, especially as regards their political engagement and ability to mobilize the Black community. Naturally, the conclusion also offers space for a discussion of the shortcomings and limitations of my project. In addition, the final

chapter elaborates on the implications of my findings and offers suggestions for areas of further research based on the fresh knowledge that this dissertation produces.

In their entirety, the various chapters of my dissertation present a more comprehensive account of Black athlete activism than exists in political science scholarship so far. I content that the study of Black athlete activism offers crucial insights into the politics of the Black community, and American politics more broadly. Apart from offering a history of Black athlete activism that runs counter to notions of a recent politicization of sports, I show that Black athletes are involved in a wide range of political advocacy online and receive strong engagement from the public, making it a viable avenue for Black athletes' political activism. On top, I demonstrate that Black athletes can successfully influence policy preferences and mobilize the Black community to participate politically, even though more refined inquiries into this dynamic are necessary.

Overall, I expect the analyses presented in this dissertation to be of interest to political scientists and sports enthusiasts alike. My findings suggest that sports and politics not only have anecdotal interconnections, but directly impact each other historically, as well as in contemporary times. In other words, sports, and Black athletes in particular, can have real-world effects on the political landscape. At the same time, politics continue to stay involved in sports, as they have over the course of history. The persistent role that race plays in American politics and sports further underscores the importance of this relationship. If history is any indication, the connection between sports, politics, and race will persist to shape the role of Black athletes in their communities and the ways in which these athletes and communities interact with American

politics. Continuing to expand our knowledge of this dynamic thus is a worthwhile endeavor in order to better understand American political behavior, especially among the Black community, as well as seeing sports for what it truly is: much more than just a game.

Chapter 1: It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint – Black Athlete Activists' Long Fight for Racial Equality

I. Introduction

This chapter draws on primary and secondary sources to develop a historical throughline of the ways in which Black athletes have engaged in politics over the course of American history. I am not the first person to tell the stories of Black athletes throughout American history, nor am I the first to chronicle their development as both athletes and activists over the course of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century. There are plenty of books written on many of the Black athletes I discuss in this chapter, as well as brilliant overview works that encompass the history of Black people in sports (Wiggins 2006, Zirin 2008, Henderson 1939, Edwards 2017). What I aspire to do in this chapter is not to simply reiterate what has been said before, although I concede that I will inevitably do so at certain parts. Instead, I aim to compile and organize existing accounts of the history of Black athletes in the U.S., supplement it with primary and secondary sources of individual athletes living through these different periods of time in U.S. history, and analyze the similarities and differences between each generation.

My contribution is this: I take some of these works (by no means do I claim to have consulted every single piece of literature on every athlete or sport) and combine them into a coherent *political* history of Black athletes. That is, my intent is not to offer a better historical overview of Black people in sports as such - there are enough out there - nor do I wish to rewrite any particular athlete's life experience. Rather, I strive to focus specifically on the ways in which

the actions of Black athletes have shaped racial politics in the United States and provide a thorough analysis of this specific, political history here.³ In addition, I connect Black athletes to leaders in Black political thought and civil rights wherever such synergies existed. Along the way, I pay special attention to the ways in which the development of ideas and actions among Black athletes built on each previous generation of athletes and their respective social environments, including the constraints they faced.

The argument I put forward in this chapter is one of continuity as well as change. On the one hand, the relationship of Black athletes and politics is a continuous one throughout American history. On the other hand, the ways in which Black athletes engaged in politics has differed, at times dramatically, over time – in large parts due to changes in the structural constraints Black athletes faced and, interrelatedly, the agency they possessed. In general, each era of athletes faced constraints from their respective environments and the institutions that governed these environments. For a long time, Black athletes’ capacity for agency therefore was severely limited in this dynamic. Over time, changes to the sets of rules and resources that make up societal structures slowly increased the capacity for agency among Black athletes. Put differently, because of the gradual bending of boundaries, breaking of barriers, and the steady increase of

³ The focus of this chapter is on those Black athletes that gained at least considerable national attention. Undoubtedly, other Black athletes existed that dominated in their respective sports across these eras. However, given my focus on the political impacts of Black athletes, a certain familiarity was necessary for athletes to have such an impact. Among other things, this means that especially in the earlier periods, but really throughout this chapter, Black female athletes are not as well represented as they should be – for no reason other than the fact that they were not granted the amount of attention they deserved, which would have been necessary for them to create larger political relevance. This trend has noticeably shifted in contemporary times, with Black women now often leading political activism in sports.

things athletes said and did, many of these environments opened up enough to allow the next elaboration and progression of athlete activism in the following era.

Overall, the chapter's main objectives are threefold. First, the chapter details the rich history of sports, politics, and race in America, but also around the world. That is, it scrutinizes and challenges the myth that sports and politics only recently began to commingle. It shows that, rather than a recent "politicization" of sports, sports and politics have historically always been intertwined, and especially so when it comes to racial politics in America. Second, the chapter situates the occurrence of Black athletes' political engagement in a larger historical framework, providing a thread that weaves through the past two centuries and ultimately inspired an unprecedented number of athletes to speak out politically in recent years. Third, the chapter provides a theoretical framework for my empirical analysis based on the history of Black athletes in the United States and existing scholarship.

For the second objective, the chapter heavily relies on first-hand accounts, as well as detailed secondary literature by biographers and others, to identify different eras of athlete activism, the methods by which each era's athletes engaged politically, and to analyze how following generations build on the knowledge and actions of their predecessors. The history-based elaborations in this chapter provide the foundation for my substantive interrogation of the ways in which Black athlete activists impact politics in the chapters that follow.

In sum, this chapter traces how multiple generations of Black athletes have listened to, learned from, engaged with, rebutted, utilized, and differed from previous generations' political engagement in their own quest for racial justice. I depict that Black athlete activists have been in

conversation with each other for a long time, even if they never actually met or spoke to each other face to face. Ultimately, this chapter tells the story of a long struggle for racial equality among Black athletes that shows that sports and politics have always been, and continue to be, intertwined in meaningful ways. Additionally, the overarching interplay of structural constraints and individual agency shape this relationship. Over time, Black athletes went from enslaved entertainers (that had largely covert, yet significant influence on racial politics) to outspoken, active political figures. Nevertheless, they are still often denounced for their “newfound” political activism. This chapter details this transformation and why the history of Black athletes fighting for racial justice runs counter to the notion that athletes should go back to a time when they were “sticking to sports”, as some pundits have suggested.

To do so, the chapter first creates a baseline for the interconnection of sports and politics. It starts with a discussion of sports and politics in a global context, before moving to the United States in particular. Afterwards, the chapter discusses the specific role that race plays amidst this intersection in the United States and the role Black athletes have played in this dynamic. Then, the chapter discusses developments in the tactics used by various generations of Black athlete activists, the various contexts they operated in, and how the contexts shaped the tactics of each generation. As such, the chapter chronicles multiple “waves” of athlete activism⁴, with a particular focus on how previous generations inspired, educated, and otherwise impacted following generations of Black athlete activists. Lastly, after discussing the long history of Black athlete activism in the United States, I provide an elaboration on my theoretical expectations,

⁴ Harry Edwards (2017) has categorized athlete activism into different waves before.

informed by said history and existing scholarship, to close the chapter and move into the empirical analysis of Black athlete activists' political impact.

Before I begin my historical exploration of the history of sports, politics, and race in the United States and the role Black athletes play in this relationship, I want to offer a caveat on nomenclature. Throughout this chapter, I use the term *activism* to refer to Black athletes tangled up in racial politics. However, especially in the earlier periods, many athletes never considered themselves to be intentional activists. In fact, the chapter shows that some athletes influenced racial politics without even realizing it. A few athletes even decidedly abjured activism. Nevertheless, they all had a profound role in the nexus of sports and racial politics. Therefore, when I talk about the history of Black athlete activism in this chapter, I include the contributions of those athletes that would not usually be classified as activists, but led to the more overt, intentional activism we see today. As such, I apply the term *activism* in a broad manner to include any politically meaningful contribution by a Black athlete, regardless of intention. With this primer in mind, I now turn to a brief discussion of the historical relationship between sports and politics in general before delving deeper into the history of Black athlete activism in the United States.

II. Sports and Politics in a Global Context

The relation of sports and politics can be traced back for as long as athletic competitions exist. In fact, relevant scholarship argues that even the ancient Olympic games, from roughly 800 to 350 BC, were deeply intertwined with politics. The games signaled a city-state's strength, and

thus functioned as an indirect dispute-resolving mechanism. Moreover, athletic success at the ancient Olympics symbolized success in public life, thereby further increasing the games' political value (Allen & Lantinova 2013, Spivey 2004). Similarly, the first modern Olympics in 1896 turned political when France and Germany refused to compete against each other as a result of the Franco-Prussian War. In the centuries following, almost every Olympics saw politics' interference with sports. For example, athletes from 28 African countries boycotted the 1976 Olympics in Montreal over New Zealand's violation of the sports embargo – a political move in itself – placed on Apartheid South Africa (Rosen 2012). Comparably, the United States led a boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, backed by resolutions from Congress, and the Soviet Union returned the favor by boycotting the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles amidst the Cold War. The 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro were part of Brazil's long-term plan to achieve the status of a global political power; paradoxically, they ended up causing more political turmoil in the country (Mares & Trinkunas 2016). These interferences are likely to continue because the Olympic games are organized around national teams and nation-states involved in political conflict. If politicians can use sports to their advantage, they will (Senn 2008, Hill 1996).

The long, intertwined history of sports and politics is present in places all around the world. Some argue that sports are particularly political in Asia, using the 2008 Olympics in Beijing as an example (Cha 2013, Tan & Greene 2008). Others point to soccer as a critical factor reinforcing nationalistic, authoritarian, gender-, and class-based identities and cultures in Latin America (Bar-On 1997). Brazil's Congress declared soccer superstar Pelé a national treasure in 1961 to prohibit his transfer outside of the country (Abrams 2013). In Spain, soccer similarly

contributes to the creation of national identities, especially among autonomous communities such as Catalonia and the Basque Country (Tunon & Brey 2012). Additionally, sports was a critical component of nation-building and fostering national integration in former Soviet satellite states such as Romania and East Germany (Vinokur 1988). In 1969, the Canadian government actively promoted elite and high-performance sports to bolster its image at international sporting competitions (Macintosh et al. 1987). In essence, there is no country where sports and politics do not intertwine.

Importantly, the interaction of politics and sports is not limited to the domestic political arena. As the literature indicates, winning an international sports competition is sometimes used as a political tool to promote dominant political ideologies, encourage the establishment of national identities, and spread propaganda (Strenk 1979, Tomlinson & Young 2006). This forces some international competitions to go to great lengths to avoid political conflict. For example, UEFA, Europe's soccer governing body, prohibits any matches between certain countries due to existing political tensions, such as between Serbia and Kosovo, Russia and Ukraine, Spain and Gibraltar, and Armenia and Azerbaijan (Nestler 2019). In some parts of the world, authoritarian leaders work hard to host international sport mega-events such as soccer world cups, Olympic games, and Formula 1 races to gain legitimacy and present the world with a favorable view of their respective countries (Nossel 2015, Roan 2015, Tunis 1936). It comes as little surprise, then, that Formula 1 races have taken place in various countries that are widely considered authoritarian, such as Bahrain, China, Russia, Singapore, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi

Arabia within the past three years, or that the two most recent soccer world cups were hosted in Russia and Qatar.

The swift decision by most major sports governing bodies to ban Russian teams and athletes from competition in February 2022 in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine serves as yet another example of politics intermingling with sports (Golden 2022). Sports and the platforms they provide play an important role in spreading political messages and voicing political support. Sanctioning a country by banning them from sports competitions thus has direct political consequences for both the sanctioning countries and the sanctioned one. While the sanctioned country loses an avenue to promote its political ideology, the sanctioning countries send a symbolic political message to the contrary – in this case, their support of Ukraine in its defense from Russia's aggression. These sanctions not only have economic effects, but will likely impact Russia's athletic capabilities (and, in turn, its ability to use sports for political gains) for years to come (Moore 2022). In short, governing bodies, nations, teams, and individual athletes all constantly engage in political acts.

Ultimately, drawing from examples elsewhere in the world, it is evident that politics and sports are interconnected. Sports, by its very nature, creates political resources and divides others by necessitating conflict (Allison 1986). This is the case for both foreign and domestic politics. Indeed, the comingling of sports and politics outdates America's colonization. Having established the existence of this relationship globally, I now turn to the specific role sports plays in American politics.

III. Sports and Politics in the United States

The story is no different in the United States. Just as sports and politics were already intertwined in ancient civilizations in Europe, sports was politicized at the time of the country's nascency. More accurately, politics' connection to sports on the North American continent existed long before the United States existed as a country: Native Americans had a vibrant sporting culture, often mixing sports with spiritual rituals that governed daily life (Gorn 1996). One of their most prominent ball games the Cherokee termed "anetso", today better known as lacrosse (Zogry 2010). A few historians go as far as to suggest that the very foundation of politics in America is rooted in sporting culture, and that sports regulations provided an insight into the impending political challenges that the American nation faced in its early years (Cohen 2017, Gems et al. 2008). Supporting evidence flows from the creation of uniquely American sports such as baseball and American football—both modified versions of pre-existing sports in other countries—that assisted in forming a unified national identity, one distinct from British or European cultural influence (Pope 1997, Waldstein & Wagg 1995).

Likewise, America used sports to combat problems created by the Industrial Revolution and rapid urbanization in the early to mid-1800s. Sports functioned as a tool to improve the health, morality, and character of alienated poor urban populations; for example, cities preserved public park space to offer outdoor recreation. Framing sports as a positive force was part of a larger reform movement during the Jacksonian era that promoted political democracy, social justice, and economic opportunity (Riess 1995). Overseas, especially in the Pacific, Progressive reformers believed American sports to be a subtle tool to implement commercial, colonial, and

hegemonic cultural dominance. They hoped to spread American democracy by transforming the traditional culture to white, Anglo, Protestant norms through baseball and other sports (Gems 2004). In addition, studies show that Congressional involvement in sports increased alongside the rise of professional sports in American life (Lowe 1995).

Blurring the lines between domestic and foreign intersections of politics and sports, President Dwight D. Eisenhower allegedly once proclaimed that “the true mission of American sports is to prepare young people for war” (Burstyn 2000). In similar fashion, Attorney General Robert Kennedy in 1964 directly invoked the political nature of the Olympics when he posited that “part of a nation’s prestige in the Cold War is won in the Olympic Games” as “nations use the scoreboard of sports as a visible measuring stick to prove their superiority” (Kennedy 1964, 13). Other work points to very direct linkages between sports and the executive branch: presidents throwing out the ceremonial first pitch at a baseball game and striking deals on the golf course, as well as national championship-winning teams receiving invitations to the White House (Abrams 2013, Duberstein 1989).

Despite these historical events, skeptical voices continue to refute the claim that sports and politics were intertwined in the past and consider the “recent” mingling an undesirable development. Noticeably, many of these voices stem from the political right. Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that Russia’s critics mixed politics and sports ahead of the 2014 Olympic games, insisting that there is no place for politics in the Olympics (Phippen 2016). Fox News host Laura Ingraham told LeBron James to “shut up and dribble” after he discussed the current political climate in an *ESPN* interview (Sullivan 2018). Another pundit suggests that

“infiltrating” sports with politics is a mechanism of the political left meant to spread progressive propaganda and undermine the unity sports provide (Travis 2018).

However, this argument omits the fact that the political right also uses sports for conservative purposes. Conservative presidential, gubernatorial, and senatorial candidates also welcome the endorsements of current and former athletes, such as George W. Bush releasing an endorsement letter from 24 athletes during the 2004 campaign, John Elway endorsing Mitt Romney in 2012, and Shaquille O’Neal endorsing Chris Christie in 2013 (Bush-Cheney ’04 Communications 2004, McDevitt 2012, Fitzgerald 2013). Furthermore, the Department of Defense spent millions of dollars on what some have termed “paid patriotism”, paying professional sports leagues to include military promotions such as flyovers or salutes to service during their games (Everett 2015). Based on Eisenhower’s quote, the government spending money to promote the military at sporting events seems like a natural fit.

Indeed, in many ways, sports are inherently conservative by virtue of their existence. Covert conservative values entrenched in sports culture are perceived as natural (Wiggins 1997). While leftist societal critiques are quickly denounced as illegitimate and intrusive, the conservative narrative that upholds the virtues of a capitalist meritocracy embedded in sports is widely accepted (Serazio 2019). Sports often portray the world as a level playing field, one in which the source of success stems not from pre-existing privilege, but rather from the effort and commitment displayed to the cause. This traditionally conservative narrative of individual responsibility, in combination with the athletic accomplishments of Black athletes, moreover, is perceived as confirmation that the system works for everyone. Failure to succeed is perceived as

rooted in individual shortcomings, such as laziness or lacking capacity, rather than systematic inequalities (Edwards 1973).

Relatedly, American sports also continuously promote conservative gender norms, often referred to as hegemonic masculinity (Trujillo 2009, English 2017, Messner 2002, Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). As such, sports tend to overemphasize stereotypically masculine traits such as strength, toughness, stoicism, and at times violence as necessary for athletic success and acclaim. However, neither the meritocratic nature nor the hegemonic masculinity displayed in sports are usually openly discussed. Rather, there are subtle hints to these concepts across the sports world, with a large part of the population accepting them without question. The conservative values promoted through sports seem to transfer to the political arena as well: on average, sports fans tend to hold more conservative political attitudes than non-sports fans, including support for the U.S. military (Thorson & Serazio 2018).

In essence, there exists a long, rich history of sport and politics around the globe and in the United States. The previous pages, then, correct the misperception of sports and politics as divorced, unrelated experiences that only recently merged. Notably, the politics that bleed into sports are not limited to one end of the ideological spectrum; political actors from the far-left to the far-right use sports to convey political messages. Given the inherently conservative nature of American sports, the backlash to Black athletes engaging in political activism is particularly noteworthy. Black athletes tend to, for the most part, advocate for progressive political and social causes, most prominently for racial justice and equality. The attempts to shut down this activism

by many who have benefited from and contributed to the (white) conservatism of American sports suggest that something more than just politics is at play here.

IV. Sports, Politics, and Race

Within the intersection of sports and politics in America exists another key element: the role of race. For much of American history, sporting venues have been a stage on which issues of racial discrimination were paramount, tracing developments in larger American society (Davies 2017). In fact, arguably no other identity marker has been intertwined with sports history in America as much as race (Kaliss 2012). The driving force behind this relationship are Black athletes themselves; they have served on the frontlines of debates around race and racism in America since the early days of the republic. Sports and the Black athletes participating in them, then, are located squarely at the center of “America’s dilemma” (Wiggins 2018, Myrdal 1944).

Today, the lives of Black athletes reflect, in a way, the realities of many Black Americans in general. Most are better off than previous generations, relatively speaking, but at the same time they still face a significant amount of resentment and prejudice (Rhoden 2006). Therefore, especially when considering race, sports is neither apolitical nor does it solely exist for the purpose of entertainment. The defining cultural power of sports exists in the reflection and revealing of broader social and political contestations, offering a way to understand contemporary political and societal issues in the field of play (Serazio 2019). Sports serve a dual role of both reproducing racial discrimination and resisting the status of white privilege (Hawkins 2008).

Although race plays a particularly prominent role in the sports and politics of the United States, it is not exclusive to America. For example, sports played a crucial role in supporting political apartheid in its early stages, as well as in the destruction of apartheid and, later, the process of integration in South Africa (Lapchick 1975, 1996; Booth 1998). Similarly, sports was of central importance in changing the nature of national and racial identities in Great Britain (Carrington & McDonald, 2001). In this chapter, however, I stick to the political impact of Black athletes in the United States.

The spike of Black athlete activism in the 1960s triggered an emergence of scholarly literature on the history of Black Americans' experience in sports (Wiggins 1997, 2018). I believe the resurgence of Black athlete activism in the contemporary era deserves equal scholarly attention, especially regarding its political impact. Now that I established the historical intersection of sports, politics, and race in the United States, the balance of this chapter analyzes each era of Black athletes involved in American politics in detail. I show how ideas, institutional constraints and opportunities, and collaborations between athletes have evolved over time to gradually expand the reach and impact of Black athletes on racial politics in the United States. I believe these different eras need to be put into dialogue with one another; pulling together examples across a wide range of time and space allows for a deeper analysis of the ways in which structure and agency impacted Black athletes' political engagement over time and offers a more complete understanding of the historical legacy of Black athlete activism in America.

Below, I rely on various primary and secondary accounts of Black athletes directly involved in each era to extrapolate shared patterns of engagement, differences in strategies and

goals, and linkages between activists across time and space. While I place a strong focus on the athletes in this part, through biographies and other primary documents, I also make use of some broader accounts to connect each individual's political impact to the circumstances of the time and to develop throughlines across different generations. In large parts, I do so because I agree with the notion that "biographies are subject to an extremely short time frame, and by isolating and emphasizing the contributions of one individual, they tend to understate the importance of events, institutions, and societal change in the course of history" (Sammons 1988, xiv).

A common separation in the literature of time periods during which Black athlete activism occurred is one that delineates slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow and separate/parallel institutions, post-World War II desegregation and the leadup to the Civil Rights Movement, its immediate aftermath and the Black Power movement, and contemporary times since roughly 2012 (see Wiggins 2006, 2018; Edwards 2017). This also includes a noteworthy dormancy of political activism in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. I will largely adopt this delineation as I elaborate on the history of Black athletes engaging in politics throughout this chapter. I begin with the state of play in the antebellum period.

V. Black Athletes' Political Engagement over the Course of American History

Slavery (pre-1865)

A prevalent starting date for the history of the Black experience in American sports is 1865, after the conclusion of the Civil War. This does not come as a surprise, with most Black people, especially those enslaved in the South, unable to participate in any form of organized

sports before then. Few, if any, sporting opportunities were available for Black people before emancipation. Yet, this neglects the crucial role that a few Black athletes played in the antebellum period. The contributions by these athletes may not have seemed politically meaningful at the time, but in retrospect, they were an important foundation for the ways in which Black athletes affected politics in the decades to come.

Sports played an important role in Black people's lives well before many of them were granted political or social rights. Some free people of color participated in working-class sports in the antebellum period and partook in the reliefs that sports brought to a rapidly urbanizing country. Enslaved people also often were allowed to compete in recreational activities and games amongst each other, usually organized by enslavers to extract labor and resources by different means. Despite the dubious underlying rationale of these games, they provided a vital aspect of creating a shared culture and opportunities to express themselves for enslaved communities (Wiggins 2018, Davies 2017).

The focus of my analysis here, however, are those enslaved Black people that participated in sports on behalf of the planters. Two types of athletes were particularly prevalent: boxers and jockeys. These Black athletes would often engage in athletic competition as planters pitted their best respective athletes against each other for entertainment and wagers (Sammons 1988, Gorn 2012). These athletes enjoyed significantly more privileges on the plantation and participated in front of big audiences. A few of them even gained freedom as a reward for outstanding performance (Wiggins 2018, Fleischer 1938, Henderson 1939). Unfortunately, few primary sources of Black athletes exist from this time period. Therefore, I mainly make use of secondary

sources for this era, but also utilize some of the few primary sources I was able to compile. Among them are personal accounts of enslaved jockeys and boxers, the two types of Black athletes from which the first Black sport stars hailed.

Boxing, or pugilism as people referred to it in the early republic, is a particularly intriguing sport for tracing the development of sports and politics in the United States. It can serve as a microcosm of society that reflects societal trends and developments (Sammons 1988). The majority consensus on Black boxing history is that the first Black boxers in the United States were enslaved (Sammons 1988, Magriel 1951, Wiggins 2018). Supporting evidence flows from Frederick Douglass's account of holiday times on the plantation. Although he condemns the practice of allowing enslaved people to engage in lowly sports during holidays as a means of social control by enslavers, it nevertheless serves as proof that enslaved Black people at times participated in boxing, among other sports (Douglass 1962). In fact, boxing itself in America started with Black people – while boxing occurred among enslaved Black people and free Black boxers took part in prizefights as early as the late eighteenth century, the first prizefight between white men in America did not take place until 1816 (Henderson 1939). Two Black boxers are of particular importance during the antebellum period: Tom Molineaux and Bill Richmond.

Bill Richmond is widely regarded to be the first American prizefighter of international acclaim, beating a host of premier British boxers around the turn of the nineteenth century (Sammons 1988, Wiggins 2018). Richmond was taken to Britain as a servant by General Hugh Percy and trained as a boxer. He was American-born, likely enslaved, but won all of his acclaim abroad. Notably, people cherished Richmond not only for his athletic abilities, but also his

conduct outside of the ring. The British upper class praised Richmond for never losing sight of the situation he was in and not overstepping any boundaries – so much so that some even suggested some overconfident white boxers should take a hint from Richmond, the Black boxer (Henderson 1939, Gorn 2012).

As such, Richmond was one of the first Black athletes to be heralded for what one might refer to as “respectability politics”: a set of behaviors and attitudes that reproduce dominant norms and a tactic used by lower-status individuals to potentially obtain social mobility by focusing on self-presentation that avoids playing into white stereotypes of Black people, acting in a morally sound way, and prioritizing individual uplift (Harris 2003, Higginbotham 1994, Harris 2014, Shaw 1995). The social and political circumstances certainly constrained Richmond in his behavior and his acceptance of the social hierarchies helped his status. Importantly, Richmond mostly gained acceptance among white people in Britain, not America, but his actions were noticed in the United States as well. Bill Richmond, then, is perhaps the first Black American athlete to have an impact on racial politics – through engaging in behavior deemed respectable by whites on top of his athletic abilities. At the end of his career, Richmond took in a Black boxer that had just arrived from the United States and was looking to make a name for himself in Britain: his name was Tom Molineaux.

Tom Molineaux, who, based on the sparse existing historical evidence, was most likely enslaved at the beginning of his life, eventually gained freedom because of his boxing abilities

(Henderson 1938, 1978; Sammons 1988).⁵ In 1810, Molineaux became the first Black boxer to fight for the heavyweight championship, challenging British champion Tom Cribb in London. Despite losing the fight after 33 rounds, commentators praised Molineaux as a formidable opponent with much more knowledge of the science of boxing than anyone had expected him to have as a Black man (Magriel 1951, Egan 1812).

Of course, such underestimation was deeply rooted in racist ideology which did not wane after the fight. Nevertheless, Molineaux emerged as an early example of Black athletes, and boxers in particular, challenging the notion of Black inferiority through their athletic achievements. It may not have had any substantial impact on society yet, but it was a starting point that established the boxing ring as a possible locale of contention not only for pugilism, but for racial politics as well. The actual political impact may have been lessened by the outcome of the fight, as the English population was quite aware of the potential implications had a Black man won the championship (Magriel 1951). Again, I want to be careful here to note that hardly anyone would have conceived of Bill Richmond or Tom Molineaux as political activists at the time, especially given the structural constraints they operated under. This notwithstanding, I argue that their actions impacted racial politics at least gradually and opened the door for more such political engagement in the decades to come. Thus, Bill Richmond and Tom Molineaux deserve to be credited not just as two of the first Black sports stars, but also as two of the first Black athletes that affected racial politics in the United States and abroad.

⁵ Some have claimed that he gained his freedom by winning a specific boxing contest, resulting in his enslaver freeing him. While this story has continued to be popular, no historical evidence exists to undoubtedly back up this claim (Gorn 2012, Wiggins 2018). Even so, he did gain freedom by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Born out of coercion rather than choice, Black boxers existed on plantations across the South, and some eventually competed as free men in the North as well. Even though hardly anyone would have conceived of these Black athletes as political activists, they had a profound impact on future Black boxers. As I explain in the following sections, the boxers of those subsequent times, alongside other Black athletes, started to have tangible impact on racial politics in the United States. Because plantation owners trained some of their enslaved people as boxers, upon the end of slavery, a number of highly skilled Black boxers entered the scene in the late nineteenth century, which coincided with the slow legalization and corporate promotion of prizefighting. Even though few stood any chance of being featured in a prominent fight, it allowed some young Black men to pursue boxing as a career, eventually bringing forward superstars such as Jack Johnson and Joe Louis. What started as a decision by enslavers to create entertainment for themselves unintendedly ended up paving the way for boxing to become one of the most symbolically meaningful arenas of social and racial power dynamics in the early twentieth century.

Apart from boxing, horse racing was the second sport enslaved Black people regularly participated in. Black race horsemen, together with Black boxers, were the most advanced form of Black athletes at the time. They served as trainers, groomers, and, most importantly, jockeys (Wiggins 2018, Mooney 2014, Hotaling 1999). In fact, the Southern horse racing industry, often regarded to be the first American spectator sport, was almost exclusively run by enslaved Black people – so much so that in the first Kentucky Derby in 1875, ten years after the Civil War, 14

out of 15 jockeys were Black. Somewhat paradoxically, some Black jockeys would also compete in races that were specifically promoted as politically charged North-South contests (Davies 2017). Thus, despite little agency, Black jockeys were part of politics intersecting with sports very early on in the United States, competing in a matchup of ideologies around the oval.

These race horsemen often enjoyed privileges unfathomable to other enslaved people, in some cases even leading to pay and freedom. They rose in prestige as horse racing became increasingly important to the Southern gentry, allowing race horsemen to raise their value in society. By creating value for their enslavers on the racetrack, race horsemen ensured themselves a degree of comfort and a reputation as quality servants (McDaniels 2013). Black jockeys early on thus followed a similar path to the one that intellectual leader Booker T. Washington would eventually advocate for: a focus on hard work, developing vocational skills, and respectability (Washington 1895). One particularly instructive example comes from Charles Stewart, who gave a firsthand account of his experience as an enslaved race horseman. He reports of his travels, the money he got paid for his services, and most notably, his perceived freedom as he was “just as free and independent as any gentleman in the land” (Steward 1884, p. 735). Other formerly enslaved people remembered staring at enslaved horsemen in awe as kids, perceiving of them as community heroes (Mooney 2014).⁶

Another enslaved Black jockey of note was Austin Curtis. Just as the first big boxing fights in America had been between Black boxers, Curtis took part in “the biggest showdown in

⁶ The relationship between Black star athletes and the Black community is discussed in more detail later on in this dissertation. This is an early example of Black athletes functioning as role models in the Black community, a dynamic that persists until today.

eighteenth century American sports” when he competed against another Black jockey in 1773, both riding on behalf of their respective enslavers, with an unprecedented wager of 147,000 pounds of tobacco on the line (Hotaling 1999). Curtis won, becoming the only jockey to ever beat his rival’s horse. Regarded as the best jockey and trainer of the late eighteenth century and America’s first truly great professional athlete, Curtis travelled anywhere his enslaver Willie Jones did, made a name for himself through his competence and accomplishments, and eventually gained his freedom after Jones officially released him from bondage in 1791. At the end of his life, Curtis had accumulated enough wealth to buy and emancipate his son and provide for his other children (Mooney 2014).

As was the case with Black boxers, people certainly did not conceive of Black jockeys as political activists at the time. Indeed, enslaved race horsemen existed in a particularly complex form of subordination. They were simultaneously recognized for their individual athletic ability and subjected to perceived racial inferiority. Nevertheless, the race horsemen of the earliest generation, and especially Austin Curtis, paved the way for other Black race horsemen of comparable skill to follow in their footsteps in subsequent generations. Furthermore, by virtue of their outstanding knowledge of horse breeding, racing, and running a stable, Black horsemen offered a glimpse into Black peoples’ abilities – in line with the kind of vocational skills development and building of respect that Booker T. Washington would preach in the late 19th century. Often omitted by historians, Black people’s knowledge was just as important to the survival of Southern colonies as was their labor – especially for tasks white men were incapable

of doing (Hotaling 1999). In this case, it was Black horsemen's knowledge of horses that proved to be indispensable to many Southern plantation owners.

After emancipation, many Black people used the experiences and achievements of Black jockeys to "tell a heroic story that promised a better future" (Mooney 2014, p. 14). The emergence of Black jockeys ready to claim freedom, respectability, and equality after the Civil War – and more importantly the inspiration they provided for many other Black people to reject their subordination – frightened white people enough to force them out of the profession with the emergence of Jim Crow. Tracing the history of Black jockeys, then, is but one example of the ways in which ideas about racial politics have played out in sports from the onset of the republic.

Overall, then, as early as the late eighteenth century, athletic ability was a way to secure more freedoms and material benefits for a few Black athletes than were granted to most others within the Black community. Even though few, if any, of the enslaved athletes had any form of political rebellion on their minds when engaging in athletic competition, the mere fact that they did compete, often successfully, proved meaningful. It instilled in many other Black people a sense of inspiration and hope for a better future, as evidenced by the sparse available reports of enslaved people. Moreover, it instilled an uneasiness, if not outright fear, among some parts of the white population once they realized what the possibility of a Black boxing champion or star jockey might indicate about racial hierarchies in the United States.

As the remainder of this chapter shows, Black athletes' use of athletic ability and accomplishments to challenge ideas of racial politics, albeit with little positive progress during the early periods of the republic due to extreme structural constraints, is a recurring theme across

generations. Yet, even at this early stage, Black athletes were not totally void of agency. By sticking to the sets of rules that governed the environment and letting their conduct speak for itself, Black athletes displayed some agency in their behavior. While it did not lead to immediate changes, it provided a foundation for the next generation of Black athletes to build upon – which some of the most prominent ones did during Reconstruction and the onset of Jim Crow segregation.

Reconstruction and beyond (1865-1910)

The Reconstruction period is rather difficult to address as concerns Black athletes, for a multitude of reasons. One difficulty is the shortness of the era. Officially, Reconstruction only lasted from 1865 to 1877. Relatedly, there are hardly any important Black athletes that exclusively competed in this period. All of them either competed before 1865 already and have been mentioned in the previous section, or they continued to compete after 1877 behind the walls of segregation, or both. Moreover, it can be hard to delineate when exactly the post-Civil War period ends and segregation begins – depending on the locale, there may have not been any non-segregation period in between at all. Therefore, I expand the discussion of this time period beyond actual Reconstruction, to include the rest of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. Doing so allows me to highlight some noteworthy Black athletes that competed freely, that is, without institutionalized segregation in their sport, immediately after the Civil War but eventually were impacted by the color line drawn across American sports, and American society more broadly.

After the Civil War, Black athletes from both the North and South briefly started to get involved in more highly structured and organized forms of sports. They owned their own gyms, participated in team sports – particularly basketball and baseball – and continued to excel in individual sports such as boxing, horse racing, and pedestrianism alongside white competitors. Still, Black athletes were competing on an unlevel playing field (Wiggins 2018). Despite the freedom to participate, many leagues and organizations were dominated by white people who continued to discriminate against Black athletes. As a result, at the amateur level, Black people established their own Black clubs, teams, and training facilities. Nevertheless, organized professional sports provided an opportunity for some of the most talented Black athletes to compete against white athletes at the highest level of competition and, oftentimes, emerge victorious.

Horsing became a method of social and economic mobility for some Black people. Many prominent Black jockeys enjoyed high status in society, buying houses and sending their kids to college, depicting the material benefits that many hoped would come with freedom, thereby also giving some validation to Booker T. Washington's viewpoints on how to achieve Black equality (Davies 2017, Wiggins 1997). Isaac Burns Murphy was perhaps the most well-known of them all. Often considered the best jockey of all time, Murphy for years was the highest paid athlete in America, regardless of race, making around \$20,000 a year (Hotaling 2005, Wiggins 1997). He was successful on the track, winning the Kentucky Derby thrice, but what made him famous initially was a lengthy interview he gave to a national publication. In the

interview, Murphy displayed tremendous understanding of jockeyship and race craft (McDaniels 2013, Hotaling 1999).

Like Tom Molineux, Murphy thus became known for both his athletic ability as well as his knowledge of the sport. In addition, Murphy fended off countless corruption attempts, which were prevalent in horse racing at the time. Further positioning himself as one of the sport's truly great athletes, Murphy gained a reputation for honesty and integrity that mattered greatly to turfmen. As such, similar to Bill Richmond, he also displayed a form of respectability politics as a successful Black man of good character, as recommended by Washington. Murphy's career coincided with a brief period of increased capacity for agency for Black star athletes, though it would not last long.

Murphy's integrity and athletic prowess would inspire other young Black kids to follow his example. The previously mentioned Austin Curtis had a large influence on this development already. Isaac Murphy and many other Black jockeys tended to look back to Curtis for inspiration and continued forging the path the latter created (Mooney 2014). One other notable Black jockey that followed in Curtis and Murphy's footsteps was Jimmy "Wink" Winkfield.

Jimmy Winkfield, a member of the first free generation of his family, did not only follow Murphy's path metaphorically; Murphy directly gave advice to a young Winkfield when they were both residing in Lexington, Kentucky. As was common among Black horsemen, the older generations regularly served as models for upcoming young riders. Stories of successful Black jockeys gave Winkfield the conviction that he, too, would make it (Hamburger 2006, Hotaling 2005). However, when Winkfield became increasingly successful himself, including winning the

Kentucky Derby twice, Black people had already been largely pushed out of horse racing as racial lines hardened in the United States (Wiggins 2018). Winkfield's second consecutive Kentucky Derby win in 1902 remains the last victory by a Black jockey at the event to this day.

Early on in his career, Jimmy Winkfield had comparable influence on the Black community as Murphy did. Nevertheless, one crucial difference between the two remains. Given the changing political landscape at the turn of the century, Winkfield's connection to the Black community in the United States lessened after he traveled to Europe in the early 1900s to make more money and avoid the racial discrimination and segregation he was subjected to at home. Initially, Winkfield voiced his frustrations about increasing segregation to Black newspapers, noting that race prejudice was the only thing keeping him from securing contracts at home (Mooney 2014). As his salary in Europe increased, he lost interest in finding races across the Atlantic. Upon his brief return to the United States in the 1930s, Winkfield was unable to give to young Black jockeys what Murphy gave to him: by the 1910s, horseracing had virtually no Black jockeys anymore, ousted by a combination of factors – most influentially the rapid onset of segregation (Hotelling 1999). Thus, over the course of Winkfield's career, increasing structural constraints once again severely limited Black athletes' transformative capabilities and possibilities for social progress.

Isaac Murphy grew up in the shadows of slavery and much of his experience as a jockey and the people he surrounded himself with early in his life led to a clear understanding of the fragile nature of freedom. At the same time, Murphy also had a good sense of the unprecedented possibilities that freedom and successful horseracing allowed for. He had inspired a new

generation of young Black jockeys to follow his example and gain economic security through professional advancement (Mooney 2014). Consequently, many observers saw in their elevated status a preview of a racially integrated America, one where equality would prevail. Once more, these horsemen did not see themselves as intentional political activists. In fact, Murphy never directly spoke about what being Black and a sports star meant to him (Wiggins 1997). Instead, their actions constantly fueled a political process in the 1880s during which Black jockeys pushed against racial boundaries, imagining a more just future. They showcased the potential of Black people to develop into a powerful body politic, one that challenges existing racial hierarchies and could significantly alter the composition of American politics in the future. This pushback against structural constraints would not immediately be permanent, but it created meaningful precedents for future generations to refer to.

Another Black athlete at the top of his sport in the late nineteenth century in the United States who decided to leave for Europe as racial discrimination intensified was bicyclist Marshall “Major” Taylor. Cycling became a popular, rapidly emerging sport in the 1880s and 1890s, drawing crowds at least as big as baseball, horseracing, and boxing (Ritchie 1988). Amid cycling’s ascend, Taylor quickly became an extraordinarily successful figure, winning the world championship and breaking various world records along the way, making him one of the wealthiest Black people in the country at the time (Richie 1994). His world championship win in 1899 made him the second Black world champion in any sport, preceded only by George Dixon’s bantam-weight boxing title. However, much of Taylor’s success in the latter half of his

career came in Europe as he tried to avoid increasing racial hostility at home – notwithstanding the fact that many of the European competitions were also more prestigious.

In terms of his own politics, Taylor appears to have followed parts of both Booker T. Washington's and W.E.B. Du Bois's versions of Black political thought (Kranish 2019). He agreed with Washington's approach of improving one's abilities to be more accepted by (white) society, impressively doing so as a cyclist (Washington 1895). At the same time, Taylor also strongly endorsed Du Bois's call for full racial equality, rather than accepting a segregated system (Du Bois 1903). His decision to compete in Europe during the latter half of his career was informed by both of these convictions: the best competition and thus the highest chances for improvement existed in Europe, while European societies also promised fairer treatment.

Like other prominent Black athletes of the late nineteenth century, Taylor did not make many direct political statements. However, by virtue of his athletic accomplishments, his life and career itself turned into a decisively political statement of racial politics, constituting a major milestone of Black integration into modern sports (Ritchie 1988, 2004). Cycling was largely a white, middle-class sport but Taylor was beating white riders at will. Despite his success, the League of American Wheelman (LAW), America's oldest and largest cycling organization, refused to accept any Black members into its circles in accordance with many other segregationist policies around the country. Taylor's entries into prestigious Southern races regularly were rejected, his life was threatened, and at least once, a white rival physically assaulted him after a race (Kranish 2019, Ritchie 2004). Thus, Taylor's superiority on a bicycle stood in stark contrast to the instituted social hierarchies of the 1890s; this contradiction was not

lost on many in the Black community and drew the ire of white competitors alike. The racial symbolism of his races may have often gone unstated but was obvious for all to see.⁷

Ultimately, Taylor's career was symbolic of the wider ongoing social and political debate about race at the time – and provided evidence that Black people in the United States are a reality, despite society's best attempt to deny their existence, and deserved human rights (Ritchie 2004). Major Taylor fought his way to the top of his profession against various institutional barriers. His symbolic power cannot be understated, especially because he differed in one aspect from boxers and jockeys: Taylor notes in his autobiography that he had to blaze his own trail because he did not have any other Black athletes in his sport to look up to or ask for advice (Taylor 1928).

Taylor paved the way for many other Black athletes, across sports, to come. He competed at a time when commonly referenced influential Black athletes such as Jack Johnson were still a decade away. He was a pioneer of standing up to and beating segregated institutions in America, even though he used only modest words – his actions spoke for him. As the great Black sports historian Ed Henderson (1938, p. 371) suggests, Taylor's efforts on behalf of racial justice were “as valiant a struggle as that of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, or Frederick Douglass.” Importantly, however, both Taylor and Winkfield went overseas eventually, fleeing segregation in the US and combating it with their athletic achievements abroad. This also underscores the fact that Black athletes' political role at the time was less about any overt activism, but rather their athletic

⁷ The importance of symbolism in politics is discussed toward the end of this chapter.

achievements, which had predominantly symbolic political meaning and continued to reinforce a foundation for other Black athletes to build on.

There is, however, one notable exception to this. In 1908, Fleetwood Walker, the first Black major league baseball player, published a political pamphlet titled “Our Home Colony: The Past, Present, and Future of the Negro Race in America.” Walker had played catcher on major league teams since the early 1880s until he was pushed out of professional baseball by the “gentlemen’s agreement” that effectively segregated baseball for the next half century in 1889 (Zang 1995). In his book, Walker (1908) fervently advocates for all Black Americans to emigrate to Africa. The work is richly based in race theory and contains some radical arguments, including the notion that even forced emigration would be better than a continued comingling of races in America. Moreover, Walker positions himself and his wife as the leaders of the exodus.

The pamphlet breaks with the traditional approach of Black athletes at the time. As discussed, athletic achievements and masterful knowledge of their respective sports tended to be the strategy of choice to undermine racial discrimination at the beginning of the twentieth century, following the general recommendations of Booker T. Washington’s intellectual approach. Walker’s work is a rare exception at the time and can be considered one of the first intentional, overt forms of political activism by a Black athlete, closer to the ideological approach W.E.B Du Bois advocated for, even though the push toward emigration to Africa did not follow Du Bois’ thinking. He also took on a level of agency rarely seen before by a Black athlete in U.S. history. While his political views did not receive widespread support, and he had not been a professional athlete anymore for almost 20 years at the time of publication, the book

is a hint at what was going to become more prevalent in the decades after segregation. Increasingly, Black athletes started to engage with racial politics more directly, albeit in very moderate ways at first. A century of successful Black athletes had paved the way for the following generation to stake their claims.

Undoubtedly, the end of slavery and the post-Civil War period brought about significant structural changes. The sets of rules that shaped society were markedly different than before, especially regarding the freedoms for Black people to participate in sports and the ability to establish own athletic institutions, even though many structural constraints remained that discriminated against Black people in society and sports. Black athletes did not necessarily cause any structural transformations at the time, instead operating within the new structures that larger political and social dynamics had provided. Still, Black athletes again had some agency in their ability to adapt to the new sets of rules that Reconstruction presented and use the resources that previous Black athletes had created in this new context.

In sum, the foggy time period between the end of the Civil War and institutionalized segregation brought along another generation of noteworthy Black athletes. Their achievements during this time may have done little to improve white racial attitudes, yet they served as crucial symbolic inspirations for the Black community (Wiggins 1997). As Katherine Mooney (2014, p. 202) poignantly observes, despite daunting political, social, and economic circumstances, Murphy and other Black athletes “remained a symbol of the intangibles that were an integral part of the struggle for African American citizenship.” In addition, Fleetwood Walker offered the first direct form of political activism by way of his radical pamphlet, more in line with the thinking of

Du Bois. Imposed racial hierarchies gradually continued to lose credibility as more Black athletes dominated in sports such as horse racing, cycling, and boxing, but almost all Black athletes were pushed behind walls of segregation amid their success. The next section deals with those athletes that were confronted with the “color barrier” in sports throughout their careers, facing significant structural constraints that impaired their capacity for agency and thus their ability to engage in any transformative action.

Jim Crow / Segregation (1910-1945)

The Jim Crow era led to organized sports across the United States excluding Black people from participating in interracial sporting events for the first four decades of the twentieth century (Riess 1995). Many Black athletes formed their own teams, leagues, organizations, and events in response to this development. The Negro Leagues in baseball are one such example, although I do not discuss them in detail here.⁸ Instead, I discuss three Black athletes that had a particularly meaningful connection to racial politics in the first decades of the twentieth century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Jesse Owens. All three of these athletes produced outstanding athletic achievements during their careers. The timing of their success, amidst deeply institutionalized racial segregation, made their careers especially politically significant. Sports offered these Black athletes an opportunity to challenge racial stereotypes and create hope during

⁸ For the (political) importance of the Negro Leagues to the Black community, see Davies 2017, Wiggins 2018, Lanctot 2004, and Luke 2009.

a grim racial landscape that other societal barriers might be challenged one day as well (Miller 2004).

The most common justification for preventing Black athletes from competing with whites, as well as excluding Black people in society in general, was a perceived inherent inferiority of Black people. If Black athletes were allowed to compete in interracial contests and win, a foundational basis of white racial dominance would crumble (Walter & Iida 2010, Hietala 2002). Boxing in particular, with its inherent imagery of strength and violence, held incredible symbolic power among the Black community throughout the twentieth century. Many have alluded to the practical implications and representational importance of victorious Black boxers (Gates 2000, Wiggins 2018). After years of Black boxers trying to get a shot at the heavyweight championship, Jack Johnson was the one to finally get a chance.

Until 1908, all white heavyweight champions refused to fight Black challengers. The heavyweight championship, more than any other sports competition, stood for white supremacy; a white fighter losing the championship would fundamentally shake the social order to its core (Moore 2017, Gems 2006). It was simply too sacred to take the risk. After plenty of financial and psychological goading, reigning champion Tommy Burns finally agreed to fight the “colored heavyweight champion” Jack Johnson in Australia. Johnson won handily, becoming the first Black heavyweight champion.

Throughout his life, Jack Johnson refused to submit to the white power structure, purposefully violating many racial norms during the heyday of segregation (Ward 2004, Wiggins 2018). He showed off his wealth, married three white women, displayed unlimited confidence,

and loved to mingle among the high society of the early twentieth century. This extravagant lifestyle, coupled with his athletic success, made Johnson Public Enemy Number 1 among large parts of white America.

As a direct result, the white world started searching for a Great White Hope – any white boxer that could beat Johnson. He easily defeated five more challengers after his initial heavyweight bout until undefeated former heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries came out of retirement to try and restore the racial order on July 4, 1910. Choosing Independence Day as the date of the event was no coincidence. Dubbed the “Fight of the Century”, the preservation of Black inferiority rested heavily on the outcome of the fight (Gates 2000). It was, by any account, the most politically important sporting event in American history (Roberts 2004). Johnson beat Jeffries soundly, kicking off a wave of racially motivated white violence across the country as Black people collectively celebrated Johnson’s win (Hietala 2002).

In terms of political engagement, Johnson generally followed the modus operandi of Black athletes of previous generations. He did not participate in organized efforts for greater racial justice, but his feats carried symbolic importance. To echo David Wiggins (1997, p. 209), Jack Johnson “protested discrimination by proving himself as a Black man and an American. His triumphs in the ring and his refusal to accept any limitations were Johnson’s statement on behalf of racial justice and civil rights.” Despite many structural constraints placed on him, Johnson’s pushing of boundaries gradually forced American society to speed up considerations of racial integration (Gems 2006).

As such, Johnson followed in the footsteps of some of the greatest Black athletes that came before him – just not in the way he imagined as a teenager. Both Isaac Murphy and Marshall Taylor were Johnson’s idols; growing up he gave jockeying and cycling unsuccessful tries before turning to boxing. Although he failed in their respective sports, Johnson succeeded in having an even bigger impact on racial politics by virtue of his athletic accomplishments than his two childhood idols (Ward 2004). Boxing, rather than government, church, business, or higher education all of a sudden was heralded by some as the harbinger of a more just society (Hietala 2002). The win against Jeffries held immeasurable symbolic significance that transcended various aspects of Black life, with Black elites and the common Black population alike recalling where they were the day of the fight for decades to come.⁹

Johnson also operated along the fault lines of Black political thought at the time. Unlike Marshall Taylor, who was sympathetic to parts of both Booker T. Washington’s and W.E.B. Du Bois’s philosophies, Johnson squarely fell into Du Bois’s camp. Johnson’s behavior and lifestyle seriously troubled Washington, who feared that Johnson’s conduct risked alienation for all Black people as it did not conform with what white society perceived as acceptable (Morgan 1999). Johnson’s antics were in direct opposition to the respectability politics that Washington advocated for and that other prominent Black athletes such as Bill Richmond and Isaac Murphy had displayed in the past. In contrast, Du Bois embraced Johnson’s symbolic impact and refusal

⁹ Notably, Johnson’s quick downfall after 1910, in parts due to his lavish lifestyle but more importantly because of countless attempts by white elites and the U.S. government to discredit him, also had negative implications for the Black community. After his victory over Jeffries, Johnson had been bound closely to his race, and vice versa, not least because of white society’s broad generalizations about a group based on an individual’s conduct. His personal tumble simultaneously meant that, in the short term, the doors that seemed to open for the Black community partially closed again (Hietala 2002).

to conform to white society. Du Bois located white Americans' disapproval of Johnson less in his lifestyle or behavior, but rather as a result of his athletic success and a perceived offense of "unforgivable blackness" (Du Bois 1914).

Two decades after Johnson's heyday, another Black boxer made a name for himself. Joe Louis became the second Black heavyweight champion in 1937 and held it for eleven years. Apart from their boxing skills, Joe Louis and Jack Johnson could hardly have been more different. Louis's two Black managers did everything in their power to construe him as the polar opposite to Johnson in public life – no lavish lifestyle, no controversial public appearances, no pandering to racial stereotypes (Marren 2013, Hietala 2002). In fact, Johnson did not even see Louis as a worthy successor, regularly betting on Louis's opponents (Edmonds 2006).¹⁰ Despite Johnson's lack of confidence in him, Louis fought and beat multiple former white heavyweight champions, eventually setting up a bout with former champion Max Schmeling in 1936.

Similar to the Johnson-Jeffries fight, the fight against Schmeling had clear political undertones. It was not, however, solely about a Black man fighting a white one. Equally as large loomed the fact that Louis represented America against Schmeling, who represented Nazi Germany. Louis lost the fight, temporarily putting a dent in his hopes of becoming Jack Johnson's heir and in America's superiority over Nazi Germany. Two years later, Louis got a second chance to fight Schmeling, this time as the reigning world heavyweight champion.

¹⁰ Joe Louis later returned the favor, making equally disparaging remarks toward Muhammad Ali early in the latter's career.

The second matchup was arguably even more politically loaded, with war in Europe imminent and the world looking to Louis for hope (Wiggins 2004). He delivered, knocking out Schmeling in the first round. Overnight, Louis became the savior of the Black community, America, and indeed the entire Allied world. The political significance of Joe Louis' win against Max Schmeling for the Black population can be derived from many accounts at the time. To many Black Americans, Joe Louis was the most important public figure of their lifetime (Edmonds 2006). Marcus Garvey pointed to the necessity of Black newspapers covering the achievements of Black athletes, especially those of Black boxers, to combat ideas of Black racial inferiority (Garvey 1937). Others suggested that Louis's win was not only a victory over whiteness per se, but specifically over the idea of Aryan superiority. In Harlem, Black people took to the streets by the tens of thousands and celebrated a symbolic holiday from segregation, yelling "Heil Louis!" in the process (Wright 1938).

As was the case with Johnson two decades earlier, political concerns in large parts allowed for these boxing fights to become as big as they were. The reaction to Louis's win, in contrast to Johnson's, was markedly different among the white population. No race riots broke out; most offered muted support. They were happy about the symbolic victory over Nazi Germany yet were still uneasy that it took a Black man to bolster America's political image. For white people, then, Louis's political impact was mainly one of foreign affairs. Among the Black population, Louis's win was widely celebrated as yet another important symbolic win for the advancement of racial equality, both in the United States and in relation to Nazi Germany's Aryan worldviews. By following Washington's assimilation approach much more than the more

militant approach that Du Bois proposed – and Jack Johnson lived – Louis enjoyed much broader support in his community. Unlike Johnson, who had angered parts of the Black community with his controversial behavior, Louis became a universal icon of race pride. In an America that lacked Black government officials, major league baseball players, and serious Black actors, Joe Louis was a consummate hero to the Black community (Robinson 1973). He bolstered the United States as a global superpower – one that rested on Black power. Perhaps prematurely, Louis himself proclaimed after his victory against Schmeling that race relations in America were lightening up (Hietala 2002).

Joe Louis finally managed to win over many white Americans for good when he enrolled in the army in 1942. To many white people, Joe Louis symbolized the cherished American values of patriotism, freedom, and democracy during World War II (Wiggins 2004). He gave a memorable patriotic speech at Madison Square Garden in 1942 during a World War II rally, donated most of his fight purse to the armed forces, and fought various exhibition matches at military bases.

While serving, Louis also started to carefully speak out against institutional racism in the armed forces (Edmonds 2006). During basic training, Louis got his commander to admit a fellow Black soldier to the white camp baseball team. That fellow soldier was Jackie Robinson (Hietala 2002, McRae 2002). Likewise, he arranged for Black soldiers, including Robinson, to attend officer training school and protested the policy that Black soldiers had to sit at the end of the buses in Southern military camps. After Louis reported racial discrimination at various military bases he travelled to, the army passed a resolution banning all racial segregation within the

institution. A military official later proclaimed that it was all due to Joe Louis (McRae 2002). Louis thus gradually pushed back against institutional constraints and forced some meaningful policy changes, opening new avenues for Black athletes' agency along the way. He therefore also started to believe more in Du Bois' ideas later in life, at least much more so than he did early on in his career.

Another Black athlete had a comparable symbolic, political importance around the same time that Louis did. Jesse Owens, a track and field athlete who was the grandson of enslaved people, won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin – with Hitler in attendance. In a way, Owens “saved” Black America by winning at the Nazi Olympics shortly after Joe Louis's loss to Schmeling (Baker 1986, Hietala 2002). Owens's victories seriously damaged Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy and restored the Black community's belief in their ability to combat racial prejudice (Wiggins 1997). Like Joe Louis, Owens lived a virtuous life, making him an ideal role model for the Black community in the eyes of many observers, especially those that followed Washington's ideology.

Owens's decision to compete at the 1936 Olympics at all was a point of controversy within the Black community. Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, urged Owens not to participate, pointing out the dire consequences both for Hitler's power and race relations at home should Black Americans fail to succeed (White 1935). Owens and other Black athletes went anyway; the opportunity to prove their ability against white competitors was too big to pass up.

After his active career, Jessie Owens became a more active participant in politics, albeit not in the way that many Black people had hoped for. Owens followed the political ideology of his long-time idol Booker T. Washington, advocating for old gradualism, individualism, and assimilation (Baker 1986, Dyreson 2006). He refused to support civil rights activists in the 1960s and heavily opposed the 1968 Olympics protest by Black athletes. Almost ironically, he criticized them for politicizing sports, claiming that politics had no place in the athletic world. Moreover, he endorsed reactionary conservative Barry Goldwater in 1964 and increasingly alienated himself from large parts of the Black community (Gates 2000, Davies 2017).

As such, Owens's legacy on behalf of racial politics, unlike that of Joe Louis and Jack Johnson, is severely limited by historical context. His Olympic victories redeemed Louis' loss to Schmeling and provided the United States with plenty of propaganda in its fight against fascism. His role in the historical arc of Black athletes impacting politics for racial equality is more complicated. Unlike most other politically influential Black athletes before and during his time, Owens did not emerge as an idol to consult for advice. Instead, he actively advocated against a new generation of Black athletes fighting for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s. Owens's example neatly depicts both the continuity and discontinuity of Black athletes' political engagement I set out to explain in this chapter. On the one hand, it speaks to the ongoing, continuous nexus of Black athletes and politics in the United States. On the other hand, it also speaks to the differences in tactics, goals, and outcomes of Black athletes' political engagement. In other words, while the interrelation of Black athletes and politics is continuous, its implications for racial progress are not.

Boxing played arguably the most important role in the intersection of sports, politics, and race during the Jim Crow era. Both Jack Johnson and Joe Louis figured prominently in the aspirations of the Black community and persevered as fixtures in Black folklore. The heavyweight championship became a surrogate public office for Black boxers (Hietala 2002). The ability of the Black community, and Black athletes in particular, to once again readapt and mobilize resources under new rules hints at the continued existence of agency in these processes even at times of heavy constraints.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the white fright that especially Johnson's success created increased the political saliency of Black athletes. It triggered a string of political decisions, from court rulings to Congress attempting to ban the dissemination of the Jeffries-Johnson film. The institutional response on the part of government to the "wordless activism" by a Black boxer speaks volumes – and in many ways gives it its true political meaning. A white dominant culture, afraid to lose its status in society, reacting to a successful Black athlete in this way suggested to those paying attention that Black athletes' actions indeed could cause political changes, even if they were not immediately positive. The fact that the political system felt compelled to react, rather than treating a sporting event as a mere afterthought, gave the Black community some confidence that athletic achievement could indeed be a possible foundation to build on for future political progress. Even white people realized what kind of alternative cognitive structures Black athletic success might create.

A couple of decades after Johnson, Joe Louis and Jesse Owens continued the gradual rise and political importance of Black athletes in the United States. They were celebrated for their success on the international stage, beating surrogates of fascism and Nazi Germany. As was the case for Johnson, these sporting events derived a lot of their political meaning from the structural environment in which these events took place. A big part of their political relevance was based on foreign politics, which nevertheless was crucial for the Black community in general and for following generations of athletes to become more politically impactful domestically. Henderson (1939) suggests that the victories likewise reduced adherence to Aryan philosophies among Germans and provided hope for oppressed groups in Germany that a racial brotherhood would be created that could overcome the dire current situation. At the same time, Owens and Louis continued to experience racial discrimination at home.

Their success against German foes brought increasing attention to the similarities of Nazi Germany's and America's racial politics. The visibility and worldwide attention these sporting events commanded aided in raising awareness about racial inequalities among white Americans, including across white newspaper editorials (Wiggins 1997). It seemed that the *Crisis* was correct when it posited that watching Black athletes compete would provide more "interracial education" than any written text on race philosophy ever could (Crisis 1935).

Some scholars suggest that the changing response to successful Black athletes by whites in the 1930s was indicative of the gradual evolution of Americans' sense of racial equality (Kaliss 2012). While I do not mean to outright discredit this view, I find it important to offer some contextual disclaimers. Joe Louis and Jesse Owens operated very much within norms that

the white dominant culture deemed acceptable – a fact that followers of Du Bois’ philosophy of racial equality found questionable to say the least. Their uplift was reflective of the patronization of a few successful Black athletes as “honorary whites”, capable of delivering national prestige, while the racism within America remained intact (Hain 1982).¹¹ Although neither of them abandoned the larger Black population at the time of their success, Louis and Owens often subtly framed their complaints of racial discrimination in ways that were acceptable to white society.

It is far more likely that other factors outside of the control of these Black athletes, and not solely the increased capacity for agency, aided them in their transformational impact. In particular, the two world wars bookending their period of success undoubtedly assisted their cause and the magnitude of their political impact. Especially because Owens and Louis portrayed themselves as model citizens – in contrast to Johnson’s lavish lifestyle that led to his orchestrated downfall – the structural context of war and Black soldiers fighting in them offered these Black athletes an increased opportunity to claim their rights to full citizenship and racial equality.¹² Grounded in the idea that one’s place in a hierarchical society is defined based on relative social standing, Owens and Louis used their athletic success against representatives of hostile countries, combined with their impeccable conduct and – especially in Louis’s case – their military service, to demand a basic level of respect and request full citizenship rights (Shklar 1991, Kaliss 2012).

¹¹ The idea that successful Black athletes are treated as “honorary whites” as long as they refer from speaking out politically is not solely confined to this era. To the contrary, observers suggest that it continues to be a dominant theme in professional sports to this day (Bryant 2020).

¹² For elaborate discussions of Black people’s use of war and military service as a means to gain full citizenship rights, see Parker 2009, 2012; Klinkner & Smith 1999; Dudziak 2011; Higham 1997; Kryder 2000.

Following in the footsteps of most other influential Black athletes up to this point, the politically impactful Black athletes of the Jim Crow era continued to largely avoid intentional, overt activism given the structural context they operated under. The political and racial symbolism of their actions, bolstered by the environment of the time, was the political message. As the following section shows, this dynamic started to slowly shift after World War II and during the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement. Just as Joe Louis, toward the end of his career, gradually started speaking out against racial discrimination within the armed forces, a few other Black athletes felt compelled to speak out more forcefully against racial injustice in America.

Post-WWII / Lead-Up to Civil Rights Movement (1945-1960)

The conclusion of World War II constituted a new era of Black athlete activism. All Black athletes discussed so far – with the exception of Fleetwood Walker, who did not become involved politically until after baseball banned him – competed in individual sports. Individual athletes impacted racial politics due to their athletic achievements that were conceived of as symbolic and representative of the entire Black community. This dynamic shifted in the mid-1940s. The growing importance of the Black vote in urban areas outside the South, along with Black military service during World War II, a concerted effort by Black sports writers, anticipated competitive advantages, and business considerations provided an environment ripe for sports' slow integration; notably, more progressive values and beliefs of racial equality were

not at the forefront of this decision (Rader 1983; Wiggins 1997, 2018; Miller 2004; Reese 1998; Moore 2021).

Professional sports organizations started to integrate Black players, formally ending half a century of segregation in American sports.¹³ Crucially, this meant that some Black athletes now played on formerly all-white teams. Black team sport athletes became a focal point of racial politics after World War II. Moreover, a few Black athletes started to speak out against racial injustice much more directly than previous generations had dared. The one that arguably had the biggest political and social impact was Jackie Robinson.

On April 9, 1947, the Brooklyn Dodgers officially signed Robinson, making him the first Black player in modern professional baseball. The fact that it was Robinson, specifically, was hardly a coincidence. He displayed all the characteristics that Branch Rickey, the orchestrator behind the deal that first brought Robinson to Montreal and then to Brooklyn, was looking for: he grew up poor, worked his way up through school and college alongside athletic achievements, and was honorably discharged from the military after serving as a lieutenant during World War II (Broom & Selznick 1973). In other words, Robinson perfectly fit the bill of a “good American,” worthy of elevated status. Once more, respectability politics and assimilation was the strategy of choice to integrate baseball, following Washington’s ideological proclivities.

Breaking baseball’s color barrier made Jackie Robinson an immediate idol in Black America. After a stellar rookie season, a significant number of white Americans got on board as

¹³ Markedly, the reintegration of professional and amateur sports conversely led to the demise of many previously established Black leagues and teams, including Negro League baseball.

well (Tygiel 2004). It took more than just his individual achievements to get him there, though. First and foremost, Robinson tremendously profited from the Black baseball pioneers in the Negro Leagues that allowed many Black baseball player to compete at a high level (Heaphy 2013). Moreover, Robinson devotedly looked up to Joe Louis and Jesse Owens as sources of inspiration and pride. While serving in the army alongside Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson told him that he would not be here without Owens and Louis to aspire to (McRae 2002). During his time in the army, Robinson also directly profited from Joe Louis by having Louis successfully advocate for him to get into officer school. At the 1936 Olympics, Jesse Owens competed alongside Jackie's older brother Mack, who won the silver medal in the 200m sprint. Jackie Robinson thus was deeply entrenched within the historical tradition of Black athletes affecting racial politics in America.

More than any other Black athlete before him, Robinson also was aware of and embraced his role as a representative of the Black community. During his military service, Robinson ran into trouble multiple times for vocally and violently confronting racist practices, leading to a court martial that got dismissed. Once in the major leagues, he quickly realized his potential as a role model and a symbol for Black success (Wiggins 1997). As he suggested himself, after decades of suppression, the Black community was in dire need of "a victorious Black man as a symbol. It would help them believe in themselves" (Robinson 1972). This realization led Robinson to tame his public outspokenness against racial discrimination in his early professional years to avoid conflicts that could jeopardize his playing career. Given that Louis and Owens

were his biggest inspirations, it is hardly surprising that Robinson, too, followed a gradual assimilationist approach along the lines of Washington's ideological thinking at first.

In contrast to his military antics, Robinson would not engage with the racist abuse he faced from opposing players, fans, and officials while playing in organized baseball. Toward the end of his playing days, he spoke out against racial injustices more forcefully, including during a congressional hearing (Early 2011). Moreover, he was a pioneer of athletes' national anthem protest: with some time to reflect on his career, Robinson posited that as a Black man in a white world, he could no longer sing or stand for the national anthem (Robinson 1972). Like Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson became an outspoken conservative after his active career, following the principal assimilation ideology of Booker T. Washington. He advocated for integration through Black self-improvement and endorsed Richard Nixon's unsuccessful 1960 presidential campaign, but later also campaigned for civil rights on behalf of the NAACP and used rhetoric more akin to Black nationalism (Heaphy 2013, Lomax 2006). Robinson's personal racial politics hence were complex, if not paradoxical at times. Regardless of his policy positions, Robinson's adaptation to different structural environments early on allowed him to enjoy much more political agency later in life.

The successful racial integration of the nation's pastime was a metaphor for American society in general (Bryant 2018). If Black and white athletes could successfully play together on a team, then why should Black and white people not be able to successfully coexist in an integrated society? As it turns out, the integration of team sports was a forebearer of an integrated American society that would slowly be realized in the 1950s and 1960s. Jackie

Robinson functioned as a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement that would bring about substantial changes to American racial politics. So immense was his impact that Martin Luther King, Jr. once told an aide that “Jackie Robinson made it all possible for me in the first place. Without him, I would have never been able to do what I did” (Falkner 1995, 237).

Although not nearly as prominent and historically remembered as Jackie Robinson, various other Black athletes broke color barriers in their respective sports in the years following Robinson’s rise. Some of them have provided crucial insights into the thinking of many of the Black athletes that challenged racial norms by merely competing in formerly white-dominated sports. I briefly present a few of them here to contrast them with Robinson’s approach and analyze how they fit into the broader dynamic of Black athletes’ relationship with racial politics.

Wilma Rudolph was a Black track and field star in the late 1950s, winning a bronze medal at the 1956 Olympics and three gold medals at the 1960 Olympics, becoming the first American woman to win three gold medals at the same Olympics. While her story is rather unknown among most Americans, her impact on racial politics in her hometown of Clarksville, Tennessee was immense. Growing up, Rudolph often experienced the racial injustices other Black people faced in her hometown. Upon her triumphant return from the Rome Olympics in 1960, she demanded that her homecoming parade and banquet be integrated, otherwise she would refuse to attend. Due to Rudolph’s demands, the parade and banquet became the first racially integrated events in Clarksville’s history (Thompson 2012).

In addition, Rudolph advocated for more racial justice within the women's liberation movement of her time, criticizing existing efforts as too white, middle-class focused, and alienating of Black women in her biography (Rudolph 1977). Furthermore, her success at the Olympics against competitors from Soviet bloc nations during the Cold War was politically important for America in and of itself (Wilson 2006, Moore 2021). In short, Wilma Rudolph followed Jackie Robinson's example by using the platform her athletic success had provided to directly advocate for racial equality, following Du Bois' ideology.

The majority of Black athletes pushing into integrated sports in America were much less forward in protesting racial inequality. An instructive example of a pioneering Black athlete mediating his behavior is Nat Clifton, one of the first Black players to play in the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 1951. Reflecting on his early playing days in the league, he notes that he assimilated to the white playing style that was prevalent in the NBA at the time to avoid upsetting his teammates or coaches. A clear sense of responsibility and perceived institutional consequences shines through when he notes that "being the first in something you don't want to do anything that'll mess it up for somebody else. Maybe if I'd have screwed up some way there wouldn't be any Blacks in the NBA today. There was pressure on me" (Salzberg 1987, 136).

Chuck Cooper, another one of the NBA's Black pioneers, voiced similar concerns. Part of the reason why he did not particularly enjoy his time in the NBA was the fact that he felt there were no Black superstars allowed and he had to play in a subordinate manner. Moreover, no one asked for his input and at times his coaches switched the game plan to make sure he would not

score too many points. Nevertheless, Cooper always felt like he had to be “on a mission to succeed” as the first Black player drafted in the NBA because he carried responsibility for other Black players to come (Thomas 2002, 69). One of Cooper’s fellow Black NBA pioneers, Earl Lloyd, shared the sentiment, reflecting that the one thing he hoped he had done during his NBA career was to conduct himself in a manner that “made it easier for others” (Thomas 2002, 85). Across the board, the first Black NBA players were hyper-aware of their role in making sure more Black players could follow them into the league going forward and attempted to conduct themselves accordingly.

Althea Gibson, the first Black tennis player to participate in and win a grand slam tournament, eventually winning eleven major titles, is another viable example. In her biography, Gibson addresses the notion that many deemed her the female Jackie Robinson by specifically stating that she is not and does not want to be a racially conscious person. Unlike Robinson, who had started to speak out against racial discrimination by the time Gibson arrived on the tennis scene in 1955, Gibson confirmed that she shied away from battling racial inequality or presenting herself as a champion of her race. Instead, Gibson said that “I feel strongly that I can do more good my way than I could by militant crusading. I want my success to speak for itself as an advertisement for my race” (Gibson 1958, 159). Once again, this approach was much more aligned with Booker T. Washington’s beliefs on racial integration.

Despite her refusal to be anything like Jackie Robinson, Gibson’s historical legacy is comparable, at least for the sport of tennis. Contemporary Black tennis players, first and foremost the Williams sisters, have called Gibson “the most important pioneer in tennis” and

have credited her with “setting the stage for [their] success” through her accomplishments (Henry 2020, Pucin 2003). Katrina Adams, the USTA’s first Black president called Gibson “my greatest inspiration” (Adams 2020). Voicing similar sentiments, Sloane Stephens acknowledged that Gibson “paved the way for Americans and women and Black females like myself,” adding that continuing Gibson’s legacy was “a beautiful thing. 65 years later here we are, and I am very proud to be here” (Sharp 2021). Another pioneering Black tennis player that I discuss below, Arthur Ashe, admitted “I would not have had the chance to do what I have been able to do if Althea Gibson had not blazed the way for me” (Lapchick 2008).

Taken together, these statements underscore the crucial impact that Althea Gibson had on other Black tennis players, racial politics, and, by extension, on American society in general – even if she did not mean to do so intentionally. Once again, this highlights that even if the development of overt Black athlete activism and its impact on racial progress as such are not linear, the existence of Black athletes entangled with politics indeed is continuous – intentional or not.

Overall, as the examples of this era show, even though Robinson had a monumental impact on racial politics in America, he was somewhat of an outlier of his generation when he started to address racial discrimination in a more vigorous, Du Boisian way toward the end of his career. Most Black athletes who integrated sports preferred to not address or even acknowledge any impact they may have had on America’s racial politics. These athletes curbed their actions to not cause any potential controversies. They squarely fell into the category of intentionally

“depoliticized” athletes, thereby subduing their potential political agency (Reese 1998). For some, this fear of overstepping boundaries and accidentally closing the door on future Black athletes again even transcended potential political statements and dictated the way they played their sport.

Implicit in many of these statements, however, is an acute awareness of the ways in which their actions might reflect on the Black community in general. Black team sports pioneers’ realization of their potential as role models and symbols for the Black community quickly led them to tame public outspokenness against racial discrimination. They were keenly aware of their role in making sure more Black players could follow them into the leagues going forward. As such, many of the Black athletes in the mid-twentieth century followed a notion that many previous Black athletes had alluded to before: they recognized a strong sense of group consciousness, realizing that their individual actions would likely have consequences for all Black Americans.

In other words, Black athletes during this era often based their decisions on and off the field on what they perceived best for their racial group rather than for them individually, even if it meant forgoing a preferred playing style or keeping a rebuttal to a racialized comment on the back of their tongue. These statements by Black athletes of the 1940s and 1950s also followed the long history of Black athletes impacting politics through their athletic achievements rather than overt political speech or action. The frequency of direct political statements gradually started to increase with Jackie Robinson and Wilma Rudolph and significantly escalated in the 1960s as more and more Black athletes swapped symbolic action for outright protest.

Black Power & End of Civil Rights Movement (1960-1975)

Starting in the late-1950s and early 1960s, Black athletes no longer just let their athletic accomplishments speak for themselves. Instead, overt political speech and action became the new norm, constituting the next development in Black athlete activism. As such, Black athletes in this era also started to subscribe much more to the Du Boisian position on how to fight for racial equality. Whereas generations of Black athletes up until the 1960s had built a foundation of political relevance through athletic accomplishments and, for the most part, conduct deemed acceptable by the white dominant culture, the 1960s saw the emergence of an unprecedented era of Black athlete activism. At least two developments made this era unique: first, Black athletes spoke out and engaged in political activism much more openly, seemingly unafraid of the consequences; second, the number of Black athletes speaking out increased dramatically. Instead of a handful of Black athletes carefully pushing the boundaries of racial politics, the 1960s saw a wide variety of Black athletes across many sports advocate for racial equality much more militantly, thereby substantially pushing back against existing structural constraints and increasing their capacity for political agency. Perhaps the most influential athlete of the time was Muhammad Ali.

Early on in his career, nothing indicated that Muhammad Ali would become one of the most prolific Black athlete activists of the twentieth century. After winning an Olympic gold medal in Rome in 1960, he assured a Soviet reporter that the U.S. had qualified people dealing with racial prejudice at home (Rader 1983). His thinking would change drastically in the

following years. In 1964, Ali converted to the Nation of Islam after becoming close friends with Malcolm X. In doing so, he renounced not only his former name but also drugs, liquor, and violence. The repudiation of violence meant that Ali refused to be inducted into the military to serve in the Vietnam War in 1967. At this point, Ali had become a cultural symbol of Black resistance and an example many other Black athletes at the time looked up to – even though not everyone was comfortable joining his militant form of protest right away.

In many ways, Muhammad Ali rang in a new era for Black athlete activism. There was a strong contrast between how Muhammad Ali and other Black athletes of previous generations had handled political activism. Ali specifically contrasted himself with Joe Louis, pointing out that nothing had changed since Louis's days, so he saw no benefit in taking the same approach as him (Zirin 2008; Marqusee 1999). Ali channeled the ghost of Jack Johnson, who had laid the groundwork for Ali's approach to fame and success (Gems 2006). No Black athlete since Jack Johnson caused so much rage among the white population with his behavior and opinions (Early 2006).

Not only was Ali more outspoken, but he also advocated for radically different ideas. Most notably, he argued for racial separatism instead of integration. Similar to a substantial portion of Black activists that became disillusioned with the Civil Rights Movement's moderate, integrationists approach to Black equality and subscribed to a more radical, militant version of activism in the late 1960s, Ali, too, decided to follow a much more militant ideology. Likewise, Ali's refusal to join the military seemed to go against the strategy that Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis had taken. Their military service earned them the respect of white Americans.

Unsurprisingly, Robinson and Louis did not approve of Ali's decision to refuse military service (Zang 2004, McRae 2002). Despite disagreeing with his stance on military service and his showboating during fights, Jackie Robinson supported Ali publicly, defending him against criticism from the press and relating to Ali's struggles by pointing to his own experiences during his career (Robinson 1967).

Nevertheless, Ali had an immeasurable impact on other Black athletes of his generation, drawing many of them toward more political activism. He served as an inspiration for athletes of different ages, sports, and levels of competition. As such, Ali not only had an impact on future generations of Black athletes, but also within his own generation (Wiggins 1997, 2018). Ali gave these other Black athletes the power to speak out, to believe in their convictions, and to fight the system that oppressed them (Moore 2021). Ali represented a new form of self-confidence, racial pride, and activism to many Black people; he acted as a spokesperson of Black America's new political endeavors against racism at home and colonization abroad. To Black athletes, Ali gave a new form of dignity, one that eventually made him a beloved figure in America based on his intelligence, capacity to articulate thoughts, and moral commitments to justice and equality (Gates 2000).

Muhammad Ali did not only influence other Black athletes; his enormous political impact transcended the athletic world. Martin Luther King, Jr. referenced Ali when the former announced his opposition to the Vietnam War, stating that "as Muhammad Ali has said, we are all victims of the same system of oppression" (Marqusee 1999). At the same time, King was suspicious of Ali's other racial policy positions such as his stance on racial separatism, which

King strongly opposed because he felt that this was the exact thing him and other civil rights activists had been trying to fight for years (Moore 2021).

Ali also became a hero of young Black and white Americans alike through his willingness to push back against government authority and speak out on social issues. Ali's message resonated with young people advocating for an end to the Vietnam War and a more just society (Wiggins 2018). For young Black people in particular, Ali's comments also stood out as a refusal to send yet another generation of Black men into combat for the country without receiving equal treatment at home. This popularity among young Americans was no coincidence. Ali toured colleges to talk about his beliefs and policy stands, drawing in many antiwar students across campuses (Davies 2017). These college lectures also improved his image among the general population. As racial tensions eased and public support for the Vietnam War vanished, Ali became a beloved figure later in life and abandoned the idea of racial separatism, instead supporting integration and the democratic process.

Another seismic instance of Black athlete activism in the 1960s was directly influenced and supported by Muhammad Ali. A group of Black athletes and coaches at San Jose State University, led by sociologist Harry Edwards, formed the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) in 1967. One of their immediate goals was to instigate a boycott by Black athletes of the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City to highlight America's failed racial politics and the exploitation of Black athletes. Their demands included the restoration of Muhammad Ali's world heavyweight boxing title and the banning of apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia from the

Olympics (Edwards 1969). Another Black athlete that feverishly supported the boycott was Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the best college basketball player at the time. Explaining that he “felt no part of the country and had no desire to help it look good,” he stayed home to protest the systematic discrimination all Black people felt every day (Abdul-Jabbar 1983, 171). In addition, he dispelled the myth of a politics-free Olympics, noting that “pious denials notwithstanding, the Olympics has always been a highly political and politicized event” (Abdul-Jabbar 1983, 170).

The OPHR’s Olympics boycott did not materialize, despite Edwards garnering the support of civil rights leaders. Various Black athletes ended up travelling to Mexico, partially because the IOC banned South Africa at the last minute and partially because many athletes simply did not want to miss out on the biggest competition of their lives (Moore 2021). Abdul-Jabbar, however, did not go, becoming one of the few Black athletes that followed through with the boycott. Even without a full boycott, the 1968 Olympics would become a memorable venue of Black athlete activism. After finishing first and third, respectively, at the 200-meter sprint event, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in the air, covered with a Black glove, during the playing of the national anthem while bowing their heads and wearing no shoes. The moment was seen around the world and the OPHR had left a lasting impact on the history of Black athlete activism. As momentous as the protest was and continues to be, what is even more striking is how it came to be and the reactions that followed.

John Carlos and Tommie Smith’s black glove protest on the medal stand may have been a spontaneous decision, but it was not one that occurred out of thin air – it was the result of years of organizing and other athletes paving the way for this to happen. In fact, one needs to go back

to Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics to grasp the full picture. Jesse Owens and his success at the 1936 Nazi Olympics started a slow process that saw an increased presence of Black athletes on the U.S. Olympic team. While this process moved gradually in the 1940s, the Olympics in 1956 with Wilma Rudolph and Bill Russell and the 1960 Olympics featuring gold medals from Rudolph, Ali, and others significantly boosted the status of Black Olympians on the American team (Wilson 2006).

Perhaps the clearest escalation toward a boycott came right before the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. Mal Whitfield, a multiple gold medalist in 1948 and 1952 and former member of the Tuskegee Airmen, openly called for a boycott of the games unless Black Americans were granted “full and equal rights as first-class citizens” (Whitfield 1964, 95). He pointed to the discrepancies between America treating its Black athletes as stars abroad but second-class citizens at home and called on Black athletes to finally join the civil rights fight. He decided to implore athletes because he thought it was “a chance to really give the racial problem visibility worldwide” and “there had to be more than one way to bring the racial problems forward to be reckoned with” apart from the March on Washington in 1963 that he had joined (Walter & Iida 2010, 33). Ultimately, no organized action took place that year.

Then, at the 1964 Olympics, Black athletes faced differential treatment during social activities, housing accommodations, and athletic assignments which bolstered talks of a 1968 boycott (Edwards 1969). All these events built the foundation for the protest that eventually transpired and continues to live on in the memory of many Americans, thus providing a throughline between the political meaningfulness of Jesse Owens’s success in 1936 to the highly

visible protest in 1968. Over the course of three decades, Black athletes and their increasing capacity for agency had gradually molded the structural environment enough for big, overt, impactful protests to occur.

To be clear, many people, including other Black athletes, were not supportive of Smith and Carlos at the time. Jesse Owens himself was extremely critical of the proposed boycott of the 1968 Olympics. Given his strong advocacy for a respectability politics approach during his active career and his admiration for Washington's thinking on racial equality, such criticism was unsurprising. A day after the protest, Owens flew into Mexico City as a U.S. Olympic Committee messenger to meet with the other American athletes in an attempt to stifle any more political action. When word of Carlos and Smith's expulsion from the Games reached Vince Matthews, a fellow sprinter, he put a makeshift banner calling for the IOC president's removal outside his window (Matthews 1974). According to some of the athletes present at the meeting, Owens's attempt had no influence on them, but they also did not plan to engage in any other protest activities. Regardless of his own political beliefs, Owens could not change the dynamics of history that made him the starting point of more political influence of Black Olympic athletes.

While Owens and others denounced the protests, the Black athletes participating in it became increasingly connected with important civil rights leaders. Similar to Ali's close connection to Malcolm X, the OPHR had a politically powerful supporter in their corner: Dr. King. In 1967, King met Harry Edwards and John Carlos in person and specifically asked Edwards to be the spearhead of the Olympic boycott. Carlos remembered that King felt "the boycott was a very worthy project and could prove to be a mighty platform," that "an Olympic

boycott could have a global reach,” and that it all could be done “by also adhering to the principles of nonviolence” (Carlos 2013, 81). Moreover, King offered to stage a protest march outside the Olympic stadium in Mexico City to support the athletes’ boycott. The OPHR was never able to take King up on this offer, as he was assassinated in April 1968. Nevertheless, the meeting with King inspired Carlos to become a heart and soul member of the OPHR. In addition to King’s and other civil rights leaders’ support, the OPHR took particularly strong morale boosts from the public support of the “biggest, baddest athletes on earth” such as Jackie Robinson, Bill Russell, Jim Brown, Muhammad Ali, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Carlos 2013, 85). Later in life, Smith and Carlos would agree that the former was closer to King’s political philosophies, whereas the latter followed Malcolm X’s beliefs more closely (Smith 2007).

In addition to increased high-visibility support across social domains in the United States, the increased willingness of Black athletes to act on their convictions is expressed by Tommie Smith when he explains the rationale behind his advocacy for an Olympics boycott. He takes care to note that “I am not militant. I am extremist only where a fight for my rights as a human being are concerned [...] I would be less than a man if I did not act for what I believe” (Smith 1968). The last sentence is important here, as it is instructive of the changing attitudes among Black athletes. They felt that concrete actions needed to follow their convictions; the time for simply excelling on the field of play and thereby uplifting the racial group had passed. In other words, Black athletes during this era, by and large, shifted their mindset from one that aligned with Washington’s position on the struggle for Black equality to one that was more in line with

Du Bois' more outspoken, action-based views. What exactly those actions should look like, however, differed between athletes.

Later on, Smith would reiterate this notion, stating that “if you are one of the world’s greatest in a particular field, you have an avenue, and you have a responsibility to use it, especially if you have something to say about society and how people are treated” (Smith 2007, 38). Moreover, Smith tried to reassure everyone that the proposed boycott transcended sports, promising that “our goals would not be just to improve conditions for ourselves and our teammates, but to improve things for the entire Negro community” (Scott 1968). In doing so, Tommie Smith provides another example of a Black athlete activist displaying strong racial group consciousness, connecting the individual actions and potential gains of Black athletes to the greater uplift of all Black people. Likewise, his statements indicate a much greater sense of agency among Black athletes than before.

Therefore, the 1960s did not only bring forward more outspoken and action-based Black athletes, these athlete activists also were much more closely engrained in the larger political and social movements of the time, providing them with additional leverage and influence. Likewise, movement leaders looked to athletes as important spokespeople for their cause, further establishing Black athletes’ role as political actors. Even the formerly politically cautious Jackie Robinson voiced his unwavering support, noting that after 300 years of denied equal opportunity, any means to focus attention on it was valid (Zirin 2008, Bryant 2018). Ironically, just as the white outrage around Jack Johnson allowed his fights to reach the political significance they had, the reaction by Olympics officials to expel Carlos and Smith made the impact and reach of the

protest that much bigger (Hartman 2000). In sum, the 1968 Olympics proved to be a pivotal event for Black athlete activism due to the reach of the protest and the connections it fostered, both at that time and for future generations. Although Black athlete activism would experience relative dormancy for multiple decades shortly thereafter, the foundations that Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and others built prove vital to contemporary Black athletes.

The protest at the 1968 Olympics and Muhammad Ali's strong resistance to the government are the most impactful and most remembered instances of athlete activism in the 1960s, and arguably the most visible instances of Black athlete activism in the history of sports at that time. Nevertheless, various other Black athletes likewise engaged in much more overt forms of activism during those years, in line with the Du Boisian position on the struggle for Black equality. Many of these athletes' experiences also speak to the continuing ways in which their increased capacity for agency impacted the institutional structures they inhabited, and vice versa.

Some of basketball's first Black superstars were among the most outspoken athlete activists, particularly Bill Russell and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. At least two reasons might explain why the NBA's first Black superstars, rather than the early Black pioneers, made a much more forceful stand against racial injustice: one, they simply were more talented, which allowed them to assert themselves in different ways; two, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1955 allowed outspoken players like Russell to point to the law and make their claim against racial segregation in a more convincing manner (Thomas 2002, Smith 2006).

Bill Russell was one of the most outspoken Black athlete activists of his generation and deeply involved in the civil rights struggle. Russell felt a responsibility to his community because his actions or inaction could bring about change or no change to the community (Thomas 2018). He attended the March on Washington in 1963, albeit as a spectator sitting in the second row after rejecting an invitation from Martin Luther King Jr. to speak at the rally. Furthermore, Russell led a solidarity march through a Black Boston neighborhood during the Birmingham campaign and kickstarted a campaign to include more Black people on the staff of Boston's media outlets. He used his celebrity to bring about political change in Boston at the government and grassroots level (Goudsouzian 2010). Interestingly, Russell referenced Jackie Robinson as an idol because of Robinson's no-messing-around attitude – something he shared with many other Black athletes at the time – but also had decidedly different personal politics (Thomas 2018). Russell sarcastically enjoyed those newspaper reports that described Robinson as “surly and oversensitive because he had the audacity to think he was a human being” (Linn 1964).

Still, Russell's personal ideology was much more militant and confrontational than that of Robinson. He directly combated the notion that Black people should have to appease white America, strongly advocating against respectability politics and criticizing large parts of the civil rights movement as “too tranquil, too filled with compromise” and overall stagnant by 1965 (Russell 1966, 205). Along similar lines, after Malcolm X's assassination, Bill Russell praised him for speaking “more truth, with less pretense, than any other Black leader” (Russell 1979, 185). Although he was drawn to Martin Luther King Jr. initially, Russell increasingly disagreed

with the nonmilitant approach and preferred the Black nationalist ideals of openly confronting racial injustice. Moreover, Russell also at length discusses the fraught relationship between (white) police forces and the Black community in his biographies, providing yet another example that what contemporary Black athletes are protesting against is by no means a new or recent occurrence (Russell 1966, 1979).

One of Bill Russell's fellow basketball superstars and political activists is Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Due to a lack of identification with the country and the assurance that he would become a professional NBA player, Abdul-Jabbar refused to aid the United States with his talents and became one of the few Black (college) athletes who boycotted the 1968 Olympics. Overall, he justified joining other Black athletes in their revolt by pointing out that he was not interested in integration, instead wanting to focus on his Black pride and courage (Alcindor 1969, 35). It would not be his last instance of activism throughout his life. Especially during the Trump presidency, Abdul-Jabbar has continued to be a vocal activist, and encouraged contemporary athletes to follow his example and use their platform to get people to vote and stand up for issues they feel strongly about (Thomas 2018).

Similar to many other Black athletes of this generation, Jackie Robinson was one of Abdul-Jabbar's earliest heroes. Born in New York the day after Robinson broke baseball's color barrier in same city, Abdul-Jabbar admitted that "all the courage and competitiveness of Jackie Robinson affects me to this day. If I patterned my life after anyone, it was him" (Abdul-Jabbar 1990, 190). In broader perspective, through his involvement with the OPHR and his status as the best college athlete at the time, Abdul-Jabbar changed the scope of the protest movement. He

was the first high profile college athlete to get involved, thereby drawing in many more college athletes and turning the Black athlete activist moment into a mass movement that no longer only included professional athletes and Olympians, but also student-athletes (Smith 2009).

Jim Brown constitutes another high-profile Black athlete that engaged in increasingly militant activism in the 1960s. Many consider Jim Brown the greatest running back in football history. Brown also was a very outspoken, militant activist. He demanded equal treatment and full protection of the laws while pointing out that his class status and income level would never eradicate the racial discrimination he faced. He also specifically told white people that he did not care what they thought of him, directly challenging Washington's approach and the concept of respectability politics when stating that "I do not crave the white man's approval; I crave only the right I'm entitled to as a human being" (Brown 1964, 162). Likewise, Brown pointed to the renewed urgency with which Black athletes started to demand change, saying that America "must give us the laws that make us free men, and [s]he must enforce those laws. If [s]he thinks it can be achieved gradually, he knows nothing of the modern Negro – the Negro of my generation" before adding that he's skeptical such freedom will come peacefully (Brown 1964, 165).

In addition to his outspokenness, Brown also founded the Negro Industrial and Economic Union (NIEU), which aimed to give Black people economic independence through securing loans, professional advice, and business growth. Brown strongly pushed Black leaders to embrace the capitalist message. He believed economic development was the only way to move up in America (Brown 1989). In this sense, Brown not only demanded political change, but also

contributed to Black economic independence, another key pillar of Black nationalism.

Importantly, Brown believed that it took Black athletes in particular to deliver this economic independence to poor Black communities, as he thought they were the only group that could get poor, disillusioned Black men to listen and organize their communities (Moore 2021).¹⁴ Brown also hosted the 1967 Cleveland Summit which included other outspoken Black athlete activists to offer Ali a space to justify his anti-war stance and explain his rationale. Ali was so persuasive that the other Black athletes rallied around him in his fight against the government. Brown, then, was a leading force in the development of Black athletes' increased militancy in the 1960s.

After his playing days, Brown continued to be vocal, especially in calling out Black athletes and other celebrities that he thought did not display enough social consciousness and did nothing to uplift the race (Brown 1989). Unfortunately, Brown was also repeatedly involved in controversies that included charges of physical assault against women, which severely tarnished his legacy and the willingness of other Black athletes to refer to Brown specifically as a role model, even if his political activism was noteworthy (Jable 2006). Nevertheless, Brown has had an undeniable impact on the history of Black athletes' political activism as one of the leading Black athlete activists of his generation.

One last Black athlete that requires discussion during this era is tennis player Arthur Ashe. As the first Black male tennis star, Arthur Ashe initially was unsure about his role as an

¹⁴ Once again, the persuasive nature of Black professional athletes on the Black community will be discussed in more detail later on.

activist, which caused him to engage with politics only tentatively. Early in his career, he held sympathies for Jesse Owens's refusal to take strong political positions. Ashe's first biography provides insight into this when he states that "if I angered anyone, people could shut doors" (Ashe 1967, 110). Throughout this biography, Ashe maintains a very cautious approach, even to the civil rights movement, noting that he prefers to stay in the background instead of participating in social protest, criticizing the movement for its tactics of marches and protest and instead advocating for proving oneself as a worthy individual – subscribing to Washington's racial equality approach. In a later biography, Ashe notes that he "tried at all times to do what I thought was right and appropriate, and sometimes the effort to do right, and above all not do wrong, led me to inaction" (Ashe 1993, 124). This line of thinking was very much akin to other pioneering Black athletes discussed earlier who followed Washington's ideology.

Eventually, Ashe became conscious of America's changing social and political atmosphere in the 1960s. He sensed "a rising tide of militancy, of impatience, and a lot of it started on college campuses [in the South]. A lot of the sit-in students were athletes" (Walter & Iida 2010, 126). Perceiving these structural changes, from the late 1960s onward, Ashe finally decided to engage in political activism much more publicly and fervently. In January 1968, Ashe gave his first overtly political speech, after he told a reporter that he was "getting more and more militant" (Amdur 1968). The speech ended up being fairly moderate, stressing the need for Black athletes to get involved in their communities and a disdain for any violence. He also mentioned that poverty is half laziness, thus reiterating the notion made popular by Booker T. Washington

that Black people needed to uplift themselves into economic empowerment through hard work and good behavior.

Ashe pondered joining the 1968 Olympic athletes in their boycott proposal by refusing to play in the Davis Cup or the U.S. Open, but instead decided that winning and thereby creating a platform was the better alternative (Thomas 2006, Hall 2014); he feared that “people don’t listen to losers.”¹⁵ After winning the U.S. Open as the first Black player in 1968, many Black people heralded him as a credit to the race, playing into the same symbolic importance that many other Black athletes had displayed before him. Notably, Jackie Robinson congratulated him and suggested that his success “should bridge the gap between races and inspire Black people the world over and also affect the decency of all Americans” (Hall 2014, 95).

Slowly, Ashe realized that simply excelling at sports was no longer enough if he wanted to make a real political impact. He got involved with the National Urban League and admitted his earlier mistakes, saying “I’ll be the first to admit that I arrived late. I’ve got a backlog of unpaid dues” when discussing his social activism (McPhee 1969, 146). In 1969, when Ashe was denied entrance to South Africa to play in a tournament, it created a perfect situation for him to use his highly visible stature as a professional tennis player to speak out against South Africa’s apartheid regime, a catalyst for more social activism on his part and more chances to make his strong personal views on racial justice public (Davies 2017, Whitfield 2010). His own experiences with segregation growing up in Virginia served as a strong motivation for his involvement in anti-apartheid work around South Africa.

¹⁵ As I discuss below, the exact same rationale was used by a different tennis player, at the same tournament, five decades later.

However, he was more comfortable advocating for the more traditional civil rights movement approach, which by that time was losing popularity with many Black activists, so despite his willingness to get more involved, he now had to navigate increasing militancy. Ashe reported that he had spoken with Stokley Carmichael multiple times and was impressed by his courage but was also intrinsically uncomfortable with Black militancy and felt like it did not influence race relations in the best way (Ashe 1993). Eventually, his involvement in anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa were directly motivated by his lack of involvement in the civil rights movement. It was a way for him to be socially active but still not adhere to Black power ideology by using an integrationist approach in South Africa (Ashe 1993).

After his playing career, Arthur Ashe became a strong advocate for Black athletes' involvement in politics. In particular, he pointed to the potential for Black athletes to act as role models in their communities, urging Black athletes to “stay connected, in more than just a tangential way, with their minority community. [...] I would ask that they specifically get involved in some projects, especially with minority youth who are woefully short of live role models” (Walter & Iida 2010, 130). Moreover, he showed great awareness of the centuries of other Black athletes that came before him and established societal change along the way, pointing to their profound and indelible influence.

In sum, Ashe is a prime example of the evolution of Black athlete activists throughout the 1960s. While as late as 1967, Ashe proclaimed that he preferred leading by example of achievement over direct activism, he changed his mind toward the end of the decade. As a “quiet militant”, he often struggled to find his place between the more moderate civil rights movement

and the more abrasive Black power movement (Thomas 2006). He was socialized into an extreme form of respectability politics, especially in an elitist, white sport such as tennis. Heavily influenced by Stokely Carmichael and other Black Power activists, Ashe eventually started to develop a Black identity for himself (Moore 2021). He started to fully embrace the notion that Black athletes should be activists and advocated loudly for civil rights, although he never completely shed his respectability politics approach (Hall 2014).

Although the focus of this chapter, and indeed this entire dissertation, is on Black celebrity athletes, I would be remiss to not at least briefly mention other Black non-athlete celebrities that played important roles in the struggle for Black equality throughout American history. Especially starting around the time of the Civil Rights Movement, Black entertainers such as Harry Belafonte, Nina Simone, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Nat King Cole, Dick Gregory, Sidney Portier, Sammy Davis, Jr., Diahann Carroll, Aretha Franklin, and Sam Cooke engaged in crucial political advocacy work. Many of these Black entertainers were deeply involved in multiple facets of the Civil Rights Movement, especially around developing its financial infrastructure and mobilizing constituents through activities such as planning and attending the March on Washington, speaking up publicly, raising money for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legal defense fund, connecting with regular activists on the ground to boost morale, and leading membership drives for the NAACP (Raymond 2015, Ward 1998).

They filled an important niche as well-connected spokespersons and fundraisers, similar to some of the Black athletes discussed above. These entertainers drew in audiences with their

performances that they then could use to publicize movement ideas, as well as generate funds for the movement. Moreover, some of them used their personal connections to give the movement access to politicians, such as Harry Belafonte and Sammy Davis, Jr. with John F. and Robert Kennedy, or acted as intermediaries between different strains of activists, such as Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee connecting Malcolm X and the Black Panthers with more mainstream groups. Furthermore, these Black celebrities also gave mainstream legitimacy to the movement, including among segments of the white population (Raymond 2015).

Undoubtedly, these Black non-athlete celebrities made important contributions to the Civil Rights Movement specifically and to the struggle for Black equality more broadly. I do not mean to discredit or minimize their efforts and impacts in any way here; in contrast, I find it important to explicitly position those Black entertainers as part of the narrative as well. In fact, Black athletes and non-athlete celebrities often comingled, including with movement leaders. On the night of Ali's upset heavyweight championship victory in 1964 in Miami, his entourage famously included Jim Brown, Sam Cooke, and Malcolm X (Solly 2021). However, for reasons elaborated on in more detail below, I believe that Black athletes were, and still are, particularly impactful, above and beyond the important and meaningful influence of other Black celebrities.

Boycotts became one key tactic of Black athlete activism in the 1960s. Within a decade, Black athletes shifted their focus from fighting for integration into American sports to boycotting events (Davies 2017). This radical shift in strategy and its respective goals, in part, resulted from more and more Black athletes connecting their struggle to those of other civil rights and Black

power leaders and organizations and seeing themselves as a direct part of these movements (Leonard 1998). In addition to the changes in tactics, there are two other significant changes that happened in this era of Black athlete activism: the scope and interconnectedness of athlete activists. It was no longer only a few isolated athletes that took an activist stance; instead, a critical mass of Black athletes engaged in disturbances that created a collective sense of racial pride and political awareness among these athletes. The shared realization that athletic achievements alone could never fully eliminate discrimination because the status of individuals in the U.S. depended heavily on group affiliation led these Black athletes to conceive of their activism much more as a collective struggle than previous generations (Wiggins 1997, Edwards 1969).

Related to the collective scope of their activism, Black athlete activists also became increasingly interconnected during this period. Black athletes engaging in political activism generally were aware of other Black athletes speaking out and used it to their advantage: they openly engaged with and supported each other in their fight for racial equality. Furthermore, many of these athletes had close connections to civil rights leaders such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Stokely Carmichael, or directly got involved in civil rights movement events such as Bill Russell, John Carlos, and Tommie Smith. The interconnectedness between different Black athlete activists, civil rights leaders, and an increased racial and political group awareness continues to be a defining feature of contemporary Black athlete activists, whom I briefly turn to for the last part of this section. Before doing so, a notable, temporary course reversal must be acknowledged.

The Dormant Years (1975-2010)

After the early 1970s, athlete activism largely disappeared for decades. This disappearance correlated with an exponential growth of revenue in the sport industry due to TV money and endorsement deals, suggesting that as material wealth increased, the willingness to speak out on social injustices receded. Instead, a “Nike culture,” which promoted becoming a brand over becoming a political activist, manifested (Zirin 2015). Perhaps the most prominent example of this is former basketball superstar Michael Jordan. As arguably the most recognized and prominent American athlete at the end of the twentieth century, Jordan had the platform to reach a wide audience on political issues. Instead, he decided to stay neutral in all matters political and racial. Critical observers argue that Jordan had the ability to stay neutral because he did not have to fight against segregation and quotas anymore. He decided to assimilate and gain wealth for himself instead of making use of an abundance of resources available to him to push for progress for the entire Black community (Rhoden 2006). Unsurprisingly, the previous generation of Black athlete activists did not think highly of this decision (Leonard 1998).

The example of Michael Jordan makes clear that not every high-profile Black athlete automatically turns into an activist. To a degree, choosing not to participate in protests or speak out on social issues can be a political stance in and of itself, prioritizing materialism, conformity, and assimilation over community loyalty, protest, and progressive change. A variety of factors

might contribute to this decision; my work does not focus on this aspect in much depth.¹⁶

Although this period constitutes an intriguing temporary course reversal, it plays only a minor role in my discussion here since the chapter is concerned with the historical throughline of Black athletes engaging in politics, not the lack thereof.

Nonetheless, even this dormant era did not experience a total lack of political activism by Black athletes. Examples such as Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf protesting during the national anthem or Etan Thomas's anti-war efforts suggest that even in this period of relative dormancy, there is a continuum of the synergy between Black athletes and politics (Farmer 2016). Once more, this underlines the historical continuity of Black athletes' connectedness to politics, despite changes in tactics, structural environments, magnitude, or racial progress that comes from it.

Furthermore, it is crucial to realize that a lack of political outspokenness among the most prolific Black athletes at the time was not equivalent with an absence of racial politics in sports. Most notably, *Sports Illustrated* writer Martin Kane (1971) renewed a century-old debate about the alleged athletic superiority of Black athletes when he claimed that Black athletic performance stemmed mainly from racially specific biological traits, thus fanning the flames of scientific racism. Similar debates happened during this time in a misguided attempt to explain discrepancies in the racial composition of head coaches and front office administrators across American sports as due to lack of ability (Casselberry 2012). The relative dormancy of politically engaged Black athletes ended in the early 2010s, ringing in a new era of Black athlete activism.

¹⁶ For discussions about some of the factors that might lead athletes to become politically mobilized, see Agyemang et al. 2010, Cunningham 2007, Hartmann 2019, Jackson 2020, Kaufman & Wolff 2010, Powell 2008, and Serazio 2019.

Contemporary (2010-present)

Over the past decade, a stark reversal to increased Black athlete activism has occurred. The contemporary period does not have an exact start date, but the murder of Trayvon Martin, to whom many have referred as this generation's Emmet Till, is often considered the first catalyst of this renewed activism (Onwuachi-Willig 2019, Zirin 2021, Kornfield 2022). This resurgence culminated in Black athletes being at the forefront of protests surrounding the violent murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others in the spring of 2020. After yet another instance of police brutality toward a Black man in Kenosha, Wisconsin in late August 2020, the protests of the sports world came to its most visible instance when athletes decided to boycott games across five major American sport leagues for multiple days, following the Milwaukee Bucks' initial decision to boycott their playoff game. The recent outburst of athlete activism surpasses the efforts of the 1960s, from size, to diversity, to reach, making the current moment an unprecedented evolution in the history of sports, politics, and race in America (Radnofsky & Beaton 2020, Streeter 2020, Sullivan 2020). Even the previously apolitical Michael Jordan began to speak out in recent years and vowed to donate 100 million dollars to organizations fighting for racial equality (Cohen 2020).

At this point, attentive readers may ask a valid question: how come Black athletes renewed their political activism in recent years, given that the material incentives that made athletes of the previous generation reluctant to speak up did not disappear? While my dissertation neither focuses on this aspect in detail, nor tests the motivations empirically, I want to briefly offer some potential factors that may have led to this renewed political involvement.

One crucial change is the lowered financial risk that comes with political activism in contemporary times. Especially in 2020, but even already in the years prior, dozens of companies and brands joined the public outcry for racial justice. Many of these companies pledged to help fight racial injustice by donating to organizations involved with the cause (whether this is true support or strategic public relations management on the part of brands does not really matter here – the important part is that athletes’ activism is less likely to jeopardize their relationships with these brands). Although some individual players still suffered financial consequences, such as being cut from their teams, the overall risk has diminished significantly since the 1970s. Nike’s decision to use Colin Kaepernick as the face of their “Dream Crazy” advertisement campaign in 2018 – a move that benefited both the athlete and the brand – is indicative of this shift (Pengelly 2018).

The Trump presidency might have played a significant role in renewed athlete activism as well. Over the course of his presidency, Donald Trump openly attacked many Black athletes on Twitter and at press conferences (Lipsyte 2018). In response to Trump’s criticism, a number of athletes such as LeBron James, Stephen Curry, and Colin Kaepernick began to push back against his remarks (Powell 2018, Reid 2017). The political climate Trump’s administration produced and the threat it posed to many people of color likely served as a catalyst for some Black athletes’ sense of civic responsibility and social consciousness, leading to more political activism (Kaufman & Wolff 2010).

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic which accompanied the renewed Black Lives Matter protests created a situation in which professional sports came to a standstill. With no

games being played for a couple of months, there were few sports-related stories to distract from athletes speaking out on social justice issues, especially given the fact that the pandemic disproportionately affected communities of color (Ford et al. 2020). Athletes no longer just “stuck to sports’ or focused on their games because there were simply none to stick to. By the time professional sports leagues started again, athletes had already spoken out in such numbers that the leagues could no longer ignore their activism.

The political activism of Black athletes in contemporary times is well documented by popular news outlets. My goal here is not to recall every possible instance of Black athlete activism that has occurred in the last decade. After all, the purpose of this chapter is to analyze the history of Black athletes’ political engagement leading up to the latest installment, whereas the impact of contemporary activism will be the subject of following chapters. Instead, I seek to connect some select contemporary instances of Black athlete activism with those of the past here. To do so, I will focus on a few instances in which current Black athlete activists have directly alluded to previous generations of activists, or to their contemporaries, in how they have influenced, inspired, and educated them. Overall, these accounts show that contemporary Black athlete activism is rooted in the historical legacy of previous Black athletes’ engagement with political issues while also continuing to navigate the dynamic between structural constraints as well as athletes’ capacity for agency.

LeBron James, arguably the biggest Black athlete in recent decades, has long engaged in activism on and off the basketball court. His activism, however, did not develop in a vacuum. As James reports, he is “inspired by the likes of Muhammad Ali, inspired by the Bill Russells and

the Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the Oscar Robertsons — those guys who stood when the times were even way worse than they are today. [...] Hopefully, someday down the line, people will recognize me not only for the way I approached the game of basketball, but the way I approached life as an African-American man” (Martin 2020). James is keenly aware of the generations of Black athlete activists before him, the possibilities they created for him, and strives to continue this legacy for generations to come. If other current athlete activists are any indication, he is doing just that.

Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton and WNBA legend Sue Bird (whose idea led to WNBA players wearing “Vote Warnock” warmup shirts in the wake of the 2021 Georgia Senate race) both referred to LeBron James as an inspiration and figurehead for their own activism, much like past athlete activists considered Muhammad Ali to fulfill that role for them. Bird mentioned that “when you have somebody of LeBron’s stature setting the tone, it makes it that much easier for everyone to get on board” while Hamilton added that “when I saw across the pond that another top athlete was also fighting for similar causes, I knew, O.K., I’m not alone here” (Gregory 2020). James, then, seems to have created an environment that gives other athletes more confidence in their own capacity for political agency.

Many athletes have also heralded Colin Kaepernick as a similar role model and inspiration for athlete activism as LeBron James and Muhammad Ali. In fact, Kaepernick has inspired athletes across professional sports, college sports, and high school sports to engage in activism for racial justice since he first took a knee during the national anthem in 2016 (Zirin 2021). Harry Edwards directly linked Kaepernick to Ali, pointing out that just as Ali was the

“godfather of the militant athlete activist movement in the 1960s,” Kaepernick now fulfills that same role for his generation (Thomas 2018, 213).

During her championship-winning run at the 2020 US Open, Naomi Osaka wore seven different masks, each with a different name of a Black victim of police brutality. After winning the title, she admitted she was unsure whether or not to play at all, and that she felt immense pressure to win the tournament to make her activism meaningful (Osaka 2021). This is a striking similarity to Arthur Ashe’s decision to play the US Open in 1968 despite pondering a boycott, and his respective feeling that he needed to win to make a meaningful impact and use of his platform. Moreover, Osaka also directly refers to Billie Jean King as one of her biggest idols as an athlete activist, creating a direct connection between past and present athlete activists (albeit not between Black athletes in the case of King). In another op-ed, Osaka refers to LeBron James as the person that first drew her towards activism, as well as the historical legacies of Muhammad Ali, John Carlos, Tommie Smith, and Colin Kaepernick (Osaka 2020).

A Black athlete activist that drew particularly strong connections to previous iterations of athlete activism is football player Michael Bennett. Throughout his book, authored toward the end of his playing career, references to previous athlete activists abound. He uses quotes by Bill Russell and Jackie Robinson to open his book. He references Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, and Jackie Robinson as the biggest idols of the Black community of the last century. Most poignantly, he stipulates that he is “for Black Lives Matter because of the memory of athletes past” (Bennett 2018, 147). Moreover, he conceives of Muhammad Ali as his hero and says he drew a lot of inspiration for his own activism from him. Additionally, the Ali summit in 1967 and the

importance of solidarity across sports & athletes is a driving principle for Bennett's activism. Once again, Bennett, as a contemporary activist, displays strong ties to and knowledge of previous generations of Black athlete activists.

Collectively, contemporary Black athletes follow the overt, radical strategy of the 1960s generation, which aligns more closely with Du Bois' approach, much more so than strategies of earlier generations that focused on symbolic gestures and respectability politics. Additionally, Black athletes are now expanding the boundaries and raising the ceiling of their activism, thereby taking the next step in the development of Black athletes' political engagement that can be traced back all the way to the beginning of the nation. With the awareness of the foundations that previous generations of athletes have built in mind, contemporary Black athletes are expanding their reach and influence on American politics, creating new, improved foundations for the next generation and increasing the capacity for agency of Black athlete activists along the way.¹⁷ If history is any indication, the next generation of Black athletes will continue to use these foundations and add to the political significance and capacity for agency of Black athletes themselves, which will further mold the structural environment in which Black athletes operate.

¹⁷ Although this dissertation focuses on professional Black athletes, I find it necessary to briefly mention the Black student-athlete protest movements that have taken place on college campuses in recent years. The resemblance and connection to the college student-led Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) protests is simply too clear to ignore. As one observer points out, the OPHR produced a "militant atmosphere" that, going forward, allowed college students to advocate for themselves and protest their grievances. It gave Black student athletes a new platform to speak, to challenge the status quo, and tools to refer back to in their demand for social change (Moore 2021). The student-athlete protests occurring in recent years, such as the Pac-12 #WeAreUnited movement and the #NotNCAAProperty movement directly benefited from the impact these student-led movement had in the 1960s.

Summary of Historical Analysis

The contemporary iteration of Black athlete activism undoubtedly has most in common with that of the 1960s. It is overt, intentional, and does not hide behind athletic performance. Many have been quick to draw parallels, and rightfully so. However, the full story of Black athlete activism in the United States offers much more than this temporally limited comparison. The throughline to today does not originate in the 1960s. It stretches all the way to the founding days of the nation. Multiple previous generations of Black athletes shaped, informed, and made the activism of the 1960s possible.

It is true that the approach has changed over time: from one that was heavily structurally constrained, favored symbolic politics and respectability politics, and provided little capacity for agency to the athletes to one that offers much more capacity for agency, embraces resistance, and fosters public protest. In a way, then, Black athlete activism has transformed alongside broader currents in Black intellectual discourse – from Washington’s gradualism and assimilation tactics to Du Bois’ vocal protest. Throughout it all, these Black athletes have displayed strong awareness of the ways in which their actions reflect on the Black community in general, but also how they can use their platform to advocate for progress for that community. This profound sense of group consciousness is one of the most dominant throughlines in the history of Black athlete activism in the United States.

In sum, sports is inherently intertwined with politics across time and space, from the ancient Olympics to contemporary American sports. In the American context, race is also inherently related to sports and politics, from segregated leagues to player activism. This chapter

provides ample evidence of Black athletes engaging in political activism and impacting racial politics in myriad ways throughout American history. As such, it becomes obvious that the contemporary political activism by Black athletes is neither an anomaly nor out of place. The notion that recent instances of athlete activism are an atypical politicization of sports or the disturbance of a “safe space” from politics, then, does not align with reality. Those that try to separate sports, politics, and race fall victim to a myth, as the three are, and always have been, deeply intertwined (Zirin 2008).

Based on the historical patterns presented in this chapter, the balance of this dissertation will investigate the political consequences of Black athlete activism. Prior to engaging in empirical analysis, however, it is necessary to discuss the existing state of the scholarship and lay out my theoretical expectations going forward.

VI. Theoretical Expectations

Public Opinion & Athletes' Elite Celebrity Status

Relevant literature shows that the mass public tends to be influenced by elite opinion and that elites can shift opinion by promoting certain policies (Zaller 1992, Lenz 2012, Achen & Bartels 2016, Schneider & Ingram 1993). The public receives information from elites and forms considerations in response to elites' discourse. Elite discourse can activate identities, move policy, and inform voting behavior (McGraw et al. 2015, May & Czymara 2024).

In this dissertation, I focus on a specific subset of elites: celebrities. According to Mills (1956), celebrities constitute one of the six distinct groups of “power elites” that exist in

America. Although celebrities do not “run things” as much as other elites (such as politicians, military officials, or corporate moguls), the increased public interest in and media coverage they receive nevertheless makes celebrities an integral part of the power elite (ibid 1956).¹⁸ This is because they possess enormous amounts of social capital and thus retain the ability to influence society because people listen to them or try to imitate their habits. For instance, when a celebrity testifies before Congress, people tend to adopt the celebrity’s policy position as their own and voice it to their representatives (Demaine 2009). Consequently, celebrities are considered a new elite in the modern information society (Grinin 2011).

Celebrities are broadly defined as people who are popular due to their work in entertainment and sports (Majic, O’Neill & Bernhard 2020). They are known for their “knownness,” and are usually recognized by their name alone (Boorstin 2012, Mills 1956). In more specific terms, celebrities are widely known, receive ongoing media recognition, and tend to have a commercially valuable image.¹⁹ The political impact of celebrities has increased in recent decades. A cultural shift toward demanding more public engagement from celebrities led many celebrities to establish a political persona that uses their resources to engage in political activism (Cashmore 2006, Collins 2007, Wheeler 2013). As a result, celebrities quickly established autonomous power in the political arena when supporting social causes and shaping public opinion (Rabidoux 2009). Because political authority is increasingly delegated to individual,

¹⁸ See Alberoni (1972) for a critical assessment of including celebrities in the group of power elites, arguing that their actual institutional power is limited.

¹⁹ Commercial marketability, in particular, sets celebrities apart from being merely famous (Jenner 2019, Majic, O’Neill & Bernhard 2020, Marshall 2014, Turner 2014).

elite actors in the current political context, celebrities are in a unique position to mobilize their resources and engage in politics (Majic, O’Neill & Bernhard 2020).

Athletes established themselves as a subset of American celebrities in the early 20th century. Multiple scholars trace the emergence of the modern celebrity athlete back to Babe Ruth (Barthel 2018, Leavy 2018). Using the emergence of the entertainment media and merchandise to his advantage, Ruth secured multiple product endorsement deals, the first of his kind to do so, and ended up making more money off the field than on it. Today, celebrity athletes are integral to sports’ commercialization because they generate media interest and sponsorship revenue (L’Etang 2006).

Importantly, athletes constitute a unique kind of celebrity. Athletes are among the highest paid celebrities in the world (West & Orman 2003, Greenburg & Lafranco 2020). The 25 highest-rated broadcasts in American television history include 22 sporting events (Serazio 2019). Consequently, media coverage of athletes often significantly outweighs that of other celebrities. Furthermore, the success that sports celebrities embody creates a unique, desirable aura of “winning” around them. Political actors such as the president, who regularly invites championship-winning teams and athletes to the White House, seek after their presence for this very reason (Duberstein 1989).

Athletes have a particularly strong ability to draw in an almost cult-like following of supporters (Grinin 2011). They develop incredibly loyal fan bases and are able to form lasting emotional bonds with their supporters quite easily. At least in part, this is because athletes, unlike most other celebrities, usually work in a live setting. The product of their labor is neither

consumed at a later date, nor are the outcomes scripted – the meaning of sporting events to audiences cannot be ordained by creative authors or media pundits (Gorn & Oriard 1995). Athletes and supporters alike share moments of joy and pain simultaneously, creating an even stronger bond and perpetuating a source of identity for many fans (Wakefield 2007, Vallerand et al. 2008, Wann & James 2019).²⁰ Just as religion provided meaning, congregation, and a collective conscience in times of uncertainty in the past, sports takes on this role for many in contemporary American culture (Serazio 2019, Wann & James 2019).

The idea that professional athletes are a subgroup of celebrities is not new—neither is the idea that they are elites. After all, professional athletes gain notoriety because they compete at an elite level that differentiates them from most other people. However, it is necessary to also identify them as potential *political* elites to correctly assess the agency and influence they possess. Such an assessment is crucial to our understanding of the contemporary political process. Below, I theorize why we should pay particularly close attention to the possibility of Black athletes functioning as political elites in the Black community. First, however, a discussion of the social-psychological basis for elites, and by extension (Black) athletes, acting as cue-givers in the persuasion context is needed.

²⁰ Wakefield's (2007, 37) assessment is particularly instructive here: "If you are highly identified with a team, you feel good when the team wins, and bad when the team loses. You believe the team is a representation of who you are to yourself and to others. You practically feel as though you are part of the team."

Persuasion & Source Credibility

Generally speaking, attitude change stems from the thoughts a message recipient generates in response to a message received (Greenwald 1968). When asked about their opinions, people respond based on their most dominant thoughts at that moment – which are often influenced by elite discourse (Zaller 1992). In other words, people support or oppose any given policy depending on the mix of positive and negative considerations they give to the issue prior to answering. Considerations flow from predispositions, prior engagement with, and awareness of certain issues. Notably, considerations can have cognitive and affective components.

Elites can influence mass attitudes in multiple ways. Petty & Cacioppo (1986) specify two different strains of persuasion: central and peripheral. The central route to persuasion is the result of a person's careful consideration of the true value of all the information received in support of a certain cause. In contrast, the peripheral route is the result of a simple cue in the persuasion context, often absent any scrutiny of the relevant information presented by the source. An important underlying tenet here is people's general motivation to hold correct attitudes (Festinger 1954). However, the majority of people either do not wish to or do not possess the ability to engage in careful enough elaboration of the issue-relevant information to make a fully informed decision. In other words, a person's motivation and ability to evaluate the presented communication determines the likelihood of elaboration (Petty & Cacioppo 1986).

As the literature suggests, the nature of the message source can significantly impact the level of persuasion and, by extension, the recorded attitudes. There is a positive relationship

between source credibility and attitude change: the more credible a source is perceived to be, the more likely it will induce persuasion, and the stronger the attitude change is going to be (Andersen & Clevenger 1963, Littlejohn 1972, Petty & Cacioppo 1986, Pornpitakpan 2004, Johnson et al. 2019). Consequently, athletes likewise must be perceived as favorable in order to persuade people with their advocacy and shape public opinion. Attributes such as attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness are all components of credibility that are positively linked to persuasion (Wiener & Mowen 1986, Sternthal et al. 1978, Kelman & Hovland 1953).

Because the central route to persuasion requires a high level of motivation and ability to process issue-relevant arguments, many people are more likely to be persuaded via the peripheral route.²¹ It is precisely in these instances of low elaboration likelihood that source credibility becomes increasingly important, since low involvement leads to more heuristic processing (Axsom et al. 1987, Chaiken 1980, Chaiken & Maheswaran 1994, Hovland & Weiss 1951, Wood et al. 1985).²² In short, I expect athletes to be particularly effective in their persuasion efforts if they are perceived favorably and their issue stance is used as a heuristic by the general public.

Research on celebrity influence in general suggests that celebrities are capable of capturing attention when advocating on political issues and are perceived as credible when engaging in public advocacy. Furthermore, the literature notes that celebrities can be more

²¹ Notably, research shows that systematic and heuristic processing of issue-relevant information can co-occur; source credibility as a cue can also affect persuasion by reducing the willingness to process systematically (Zaller 1992, Chaiken, Lieberman & Eagly 1989, Chaiken & Maheswaran 1994). If a source is perceived to be highly credible, it can affect the cognitive process by decreasing motivation to develop counterarguments (Benoit 1987).

²² In fact, when the elaboration likelihood is low, the likeability, trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, and overall credibility of the message source become important attitude determinants, regardless of the quality of the argument presented. In contrast, people with high levels of elaboration tend to be mainly persuaded by the argument's quality (Chaiken 1980, Petty & Cacioppo 1986, Petty, Cacioppo & Goldman 1981).

credible, persuasive, and reach a wider audience than many politicians (Harvey 2017, Gunter 2014, Frizzell 2011, West & Orman 2003). Likewise, the public affords a level of expertise and authenticity to celebrities who have close personal identification with specific issues.

Additionally, athletes also have the ability to make unpopular statements more palatable and increase the level of agreement with already popular opinions (Jackson & Darrow 2005).

Building on this existing research, I focus specifically on Black athletes and their ability to influence political participation and policy preferences. As discussed above, athletes have a particularly strong capability to create lasting emotional bonds and identification with their supporters. These dynamics should play out to Black athletes' advantage in the persuasion context. Thus, I expect Black athletes who raise awareness and increase the saliency of an issue – especially on topics that directly affect them, and that likewise affect the people who they attempt to persuade – to positively impact the attentiveness and responsiveness of the public (Soroka & Wlezien 2009, Zaller 1992). Put differently, I posit that Black athletes can influence public attitudes and the willingness to participate politically through persuasion, capturing attention, and increasing saliency. For reasons I discuss in the following paragraphs, this ability should be particularly strong within their own racial group.

Black Athletes, Race, and Persuasion

The literature finds that race is a powerful determinant of public opinion (Gilens 1999, Banks & Valentino 2012, Dawson 1994, Bobo & Hutchings 1996, Kinder & Sanders 1996).

Other research propounds that elite cues are particularly effective among Black people,

especially when the cue-giver is Black as well (Kuklinski & Hurley 1994). This is true specifically for Black celebrities as well (McClerking et al. 2019). As social identity theory posits, out-group minorities tend to exert less influence than in-group minorities (Tajfel 1978, Tajfel & Turner 1979, Turner 1987). People tend to trust others with whom they identify with more than people who seem “different.” In fact, the research on source credibility suggests that in-group minorities are perceived as more credible than out-group minorities, even when the topic of contention is not directly linked to the minority’s social category (Clark & Maass 1988). Therefore, I expect Black athletes’ persuasive impact on attitudes and political engagement to be particularly strong vis-a-vis other Black people that strongly identify with their race.

For a long time, Black celebrities have assumed, and continue to assume, political roles within the Black community, often unintentionally (Sklaroff 2018). Relatedly, Black Americans tend to place more trust in celebrities’ product endorsements and buying choices than white Americans (Piacenza 2020). This translates specifically to Black athletes as well. That is, sports tend to command more importance among the Black community than the white community, and, by extension, Black athletes tend to play a bigger role in their community than white athletes do in theirs (Rudman 1986, Phillips 1976, Cashmore 1982, Carrington 1986). Why is this the case? There are at least two existing theoretical explanations that can provide insights into the significance of sports and Black athletes within the Black community: economic motivations rooted in self-interest and cultural motivations rooted in symbolic politics.

Proponents of self-interest claim that individuals base their behaviors, attitudes, and policy preferences on rational choice. In this view, individuals are primarily motivated by a wish

to maximize their own material benefits, and they act accordingly in their political, economic, and social behavior (Downs 1957, Schwartz 1986, Zaller 1992, Miller 1999, Rapoport et al. 2003). This belief in the explanatory power of self-interest often holds up even if faced with evidence to the contrary (Critcher & Dunning 2011). Scholarship that follows this line of argumentation posits that self-interest can explain a wide variety of behaviors and attitudes, including preferences for the size of government and redistributive policies (Meltzer & Richard 1981), collective action and free riding problems (Olson 1965), altruism (Batson 1991), the willingness to engage in deliberative action (Afsahi 2021), committing crimes (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990), and the promotion of diversity (Gardner & Ryan 2020), among others. In short, the self-interest model emphasizes rational cost-benefit calculation as the basis for most, if not all, human behavior.²³

In contrast, the symbolic politics literature states that affective reactions based on symbolic predispositions determine behavior, attitudes, and policy preferences more than rational self-interest. Symbols play an important role in political life and are vital to the operation of the political system (Lasswell et al. 1965, Arnold 1962, Boulding 1961). Edelman (1964, 5) suggests that the very core of politics itself is deeply rooted in symbols, referring to politics as a “passing parade of abstract symbols.” Symbolic politics posit that politics is best understood as “arational” – political actions and reactions arise from affectively interpreting pieces of information rather

²³ Over time, however, more and more research questions self-interest’s true impact on political behavior as more empirical evidence becomes available (Sears 1997, Citrin & Green 1990, Dion & Birchfield 2010, Green & Shapiro 1994, Mansbridge 1990). Ultimately, self-interest mainly appears significant when it is associated with extraordinarily clear and strong personal stakes (Sears & Funk 1991).

than systematic analysis or pure impulse (Elder & Cobb 1983). Thus, the two crucial factors in the theory of symbolic politics are predispositions, which are underwritten by individuals' respective socializations, and the role of emotionally driven affect.

David Sears' (1993) symbolic politics model builds on these foundational assumptions and proposes that symbols evoke strong emotions which are usually rooted in some enduring predispositions rather than on tangible costs and benefits of the matter to which the symbol refers. This symbolic processing is automatic and affective. Long-standing values about society and polity inform an individual's attitudes. Once a symbol becomes salient, it triggers a predisposition and evokes a swift, reflexive, affective response to a remote attitude object rather than a response created by calculations of probable costs and benefits. Research has used the symbolic politics approach to explain a multitude of behavioral and attitudinal dynamics, such as health insurance coverage (Reny & Sears 2020), support for guaranteed jobs (Lau & Heldman 2009), voting in presidential elections (Sears et al. 1980), criminal justice policy (Marion & Oliver 2009), anti-immigrant activism (Schnakenberg 2013), and corporate governance (Kahan & Rock 1997).

The two theoretical approaches laid out above are traditionally seen as competing explanations for the formation of attitudes and political behavior more broadly. Indeed, many studies directly compare the two concepts and their respective explanatory power to each other – with varying results (Bobo 1983, Bobo & Tuan 2006, Crano 1997, Lau & Heldman 2009, Sears et al. 1980, Sears, Hensler & Speer 1979, Wolpert & Gimpel 1998).²⁴ In similar spirit, this

²⁴ Some studies' findings (Bobo 1983, Crano 1997) suggest that self-interest and symbolic politics can, in fact, coexist and are not necessarily mutually exclusive explanations for behavior and attitudes. Further, Bobo & Tuan

dissertation considers both approaches to test which can explain the impact of Black athlete activists as elite political cue givers in their community. Based on the long history of Black athlete activism documented above, as well as additional considerations presented below, both approaches have merit. Black professional athletes might be persuasive, trustworthy, and credible among the Black community because they serve as role models in either a material or cultural way.

Materially, becoming a successful athlete is one of the most prominent means to escape the disproportionate levels of poverty, homelessness, and lack of education that persist in the Black community. As Rhoden (2006) notes, many Black athletes hail from the most economically disadvantaged communities in the nation and managed to propel themselves from poverty to unprecedented wealth through sports. Sports is a “way out”, a dream many Black children carry with them growing up. Black youth look to Black athletes as role models and heroes (Sailes 1986). It is considered one of the few avenues for escape from traditional blue-collar occupations and inhumane treatment (Blalock 1962, Cashmore 1982, Harrison et al 2002).²⁵

Examples of Black athletes that served as economic role models to their community abound in this chapter. Recall that even in the antebellum period, a few Black boxers and

(2006) develop and test a theoretical model – group position theory – that effectively links the affective, emotional approach with the interest-based approach when it comes to racially prejudiced politics. Their results provide additional theoretical and empirical reason to believe that the two concepts might be somewhat analytically distinct yet are not really distinguishable in their practical explanatory power.

²⁵ The notion that sports is a vehicle of social mobility does not go unchallenged (comp. Edwards 1973, Eitzen & Sage 1990, Leonard 1997). While many of the concerns raised are valid, the belief that sports is a way toward prosperity remains pertinent in society.

jockeys, such as Tom Molineaux and Austin Curtis, were able to gain economic privileges not available to most other Black people at the time and were perceived as community heroes. Post-Civil War, horseracing became an avenue for social mobility for Black jockeys – Isaac Burns Murphy was the highest paid athlete in America at the time. Similarly, cyclist Major Taylor became one of the wealthiest Black people in the country during this time by way of his athletic achievements. Later on, with the emergence of endorsement deals and TV revenue in sports, Black athletes such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods became synonymous with the economic wealth that athletics can provide for some in the Black community. Indeed, underscoring his role model status, many wanted to “Be Like Mike” (Lefton 2021). In contemporary times, as multi-million-dollar contracts and endorsement deals – now even for college athletes – have become the norm, Black athletes have continued to increase their standing as economic role models, with LeBron James, Magic Johnson, and Michael Jordan even achieving billionaire status.

The number of people that actually become professional athletes is minimal. Nevertheless, the potential payoff makes it a worthwhile endeavor for many. Moreover, even if it does not result in a professional career, sports at least offers a pathway to college and other opportunities that otherwise might be foreclosed financially. Whereas many saw education as the path to the American Dream before the 1960s, sports and entertainment quickly took education’s place because mainstream American culture encouraged Black kids to enter into these fields (Bryant 2018, Harris 1997). The prevalence of wealth as a desirable characteristic, and the material self-interest associated with it makes wealthy professional athletes a blueprint for many

Black people – children and adults alike.²⁶ Because athletes achieved what many in the community dream about, it is worth listening to athletes' opinions to inform their own attitudes.

Apart from their socio-economic achievements, Black athletes also plausibly serve a cultural, symbolic role. They represent something larger than themselves. Indeed, successful Black athletes have long served as evidence that Black people, as a community, are capable enough to deserve humane treatment, citizenship, and access to historically foreclosed spaces. As such, Black athletes can serve as role models of societal status achievement. Black athletes become markers of progress, tangible proof of group-worth, evidence of a collective soul – they represent, at all times, an entire race (Rhoden 2006).

This chapter provided a host of examples of this dynamic. Consider the symbolic role that boxing victories, such as those by Jack Johnsons and Joe Louis, had for the entire Black community in combating white supremacy. Likewise, recall the symbolic importance of Jesse Owens winning four gold medals at the 1936 Nazi Olympics, as well as Wilma Rudolph's and Althea Gibson's historical legacies in creating more opportunities for Black women. Even earlier, Black jockeys were not only heralded as economic role models, but also as foreshadowers of the potential for a racially integrated society. Along the same lines, the successful integration of team sports in the 1940s and 1950s provided America with proof that

²⁶ While children tend to be more susceptible to influence by whom they consider role models, these role models can persist over time and continue to shape people's lives as they grow older. According to socialization theory, an individual experiences "impressionable years" during their childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. That period of impressionability can create considerable fluctuation in political orientations. Once a person reaches their mid-20s, however, consistency replaces impressionability, and political orientations reach relative stability. Thus, the most dominant impressions (e.g. role models) are likely to persist and stabilize (Alwin, Cohen & Newcomb 1991, Sears & Funk 1999, Jennings 2007).

society can be successful when people of different racial backgrounds work together; it foreshadowed an integrated society and directly challenged many arguments of segregation (Bryant 2018).

In general, then, Black athletes play a pivotal cultural role in American society: they embody the idea that, despite the discrimination and racism embedded in the nation's fabric, white hegemony can be challenged and overcome.²⁷ Whether an athlete is politically active or not, Black professional athletes signal to others that barriers can be broken down. They can become symbols of meaning that shape the broader political discourse. The mere fact that Black people are in such elite positions is a political statement (Raymond 2015, Sklaroff 2009). Therefore, Black athletes' cultural symbolism for the Black community cannot be overstated.²⁸

At this point, critical readers may claim that these alternative approaches could apply to any Black celebrity, not only Black athletes. Indeed, as I briefly discussed above, Black non-athlete celebrities have been equally engaged in political activism since at least the Civil Rights era. While I concede that this notion holds some value, I posit that the symbolism of winning that athletic competition offers sets Black athletes apart from many other Black non-athlete celebrities. Black athletes are “the most important, most influential, most visible” Black

²⁷ Ironically, this logic also is often used by conservatives as a counterargument to the persistence of racial inequality. Such critiques point to Black athletes and celebrities as proof that racial barriers are self-imposed and hard work is the sole determinant of success (Bryant 2018, Hartmann 2003, Rhoden 2006).

²⁸ Conversely, the same dynamic does not exist among white celebrities and their communities. Because most times white people do not think of themselves as white – whiteness is the “standard” against which all other racial groups are compared and being in positions of power is expected – white celebrities cannot depict the same racial symbolism that Black celebrities do. In fact, because whiteness is conceived of as “normal” by most whites, racial identification in general is much higher among Black people than white people (Bacon & Conroy 2020, Dawson 1994, Smith 2013, Sears & Savalei 2006, but also see Jardina 2019).

employees in the country (Blue 2018). Although entertainers such as actors or musicians can achieve similar levels of economic success, their respective professions often do not afford them the same symbolic power that athletic competitions provide (Jackson 2010). Every sporting event is also a competition; it offers a chance to win. For Black athletes, the symbolism of emerging victorious transcends the sporting world. It translates to society at large, uniquely positioning Black athletes as symbolic icons.

This specific symbolism also alleviates one of Black athletes' potential disadvantages compared to other Black entertainers: the seemingly non-political product of their labor. Although Black athletes succeeding in sports carries symbolic political meaning, the basic aspects of their labor (i.e., catching a football, dribbling a basketball, etc.) does not, by itself, constitute political content. In contrast, other Black celebrities such as musicians or actors often overtly produce political content.²⁹ Many types of music – especially its lyrics – are a form of politics, a method of resistance (Dunaway 1987, Henwood 2017). Many TV shows or movies explicitly deal with (racial) politics (Khaleeli 2017, Petrashko 2016). That is, the public is used to political content from the work of these Black celebrities. Black athletes, however, often create political narratives in much subtler, symbolic ways. For these reasons, coupled with the aforementioned unscripted, identity-building nature of sporting events, this dissertation

²⁹ Black athletes certainly produce explicit political content when they act as activists. Here, I refer exclusively to the athletic labor they produce as athletes when speaking of subtle, symbolic ways.

specifically focuses on Black athletes, rather than any Black celebrity.³⁰ Nevertheless, Chapter 3 includes tests of the respective persuasiveness of Black athletes and non-athlete celebrities.

Both the self-interest and the symbolic politics explanations provide a viable route through which Black athletes can be influential political actors in the Black community. Regardless of which approach has more explanatory power, existing evidence tentatively supports the claim that Black athletes have a significant impact on the Black community. For instance, according to a 1993 Gallup poll, 93% of Black respondents consider Black professional athletes to be influential in the Black community (Gallup 1993). Moreover, a 2004 poll reports that 12% of Black people consider athletes to be the most influential actors in the Black community, whereas only 5% think the same of politicians (BAMPAC 2004). Recent data suggests that Black athletes such as Kaepernick and James are also more popular than President Joe Biden among Black people that did not vote in 2016 and 2018 (Towler et al. 2020).

In sum, Black athletes lend themselves as leaders in their community and need to be taken serious as political elites within American politics. Black athletes' political influence on the Black community is not simply driven by their celebrity, but by their specific profession and respective role in Black culture. At least two explanations may account for this position: their

³⁰ Additionally, focusing on Black athletes may also be worthwhile due to their access to more integrated audiences. Whereas other cultural spheres in America, such as churches, TV audiences, or barbershops and hair salons remain racially segregated, sports audiences, on average, are more integrated than their cultural counterparts (Contreras 2023, Sterngold 1998, Starks 2024). Although my dissertation does not test the impact of Black athlete activism on non-Black people, it is worth noting that, if Black athletes are successful political elites in the Black community, they may also impact non-Black audiences given that they operate in an, on average, more integrated environment than many other Black community leaders.

functions as either symbolic or economic role models. Before testing these alternative theoretical approaches with the use of original survey data in Chapter 3, the following chapter explores the ways in which Black athlete activists engage in political activism in the digital sphere and how the public reacts to this online activism.

Chapter 2: Cheered On or Booed Off? The Public’s Reaction to Black Athlete Activism Online

I. Introduction

“To my brothers and sisters in sports and arts. We have incredible influence in our community. We need to use this moment to demand change. I gotta be honest...I struggle with what to demand because so damn much needs to change. But I’m starting with our right to vote.”

These words, tweeted out by basketball superstar LeBron James on June 23, 2020, reflect a growing phenomenon within the U.S. sports world. More and more athletes, and Black athletes in particular, are speaking out on political issues again. The recent outburst of athlete activism surpasses the efforts of the 1960s, from size, to diversity, to reach, making the current moment an unprecedented evolution in the history of sports, politics, and race in America (Radnofsky & Beaton 2020, Streeter 2020, Sullivan 2020).

As the previous chapter discussed, what some have labeled a newfound “politicization of sports” in reality is a resurgence. By now, the political activism of Black athletes in contemporary times is well documented by popular news outlets as well as some excellent books (Zirin 2021, Jackson 2020). However, apart from historical drawbacks, most narrators present little empirical evidence for the opinions they offer. Most existing accounts of athlete activism, and the interconnectedness of sports and politics more broadly, are mainly anecdotal and take a historical approach (Rhoden 2006, Zirin 2008 & 2013, Wiggins 2018, Bryant 2018, Harris 2019, Feinstein 2021). Indeed, the previous chapter followed a similar line of inquiry. While such descriptive accounts are useful and necessary, they remain limited in their ability to gauge the broader consequences of this activism.

In contrast, this chapter explores how the public responds to this resurgence of athlete activism, especially in the digital era, and what this suggests about athletes' ability to drive political engagement. There are two interrelated sets of research questions that guide this chapter. First, how, if at all, does the public react to Black athletes engaging in political activism online? More specifically, how do Twitter users engage with political tweets from Black athletes? Is there a noticeable difference in engagement between political and nonpolitical tweets? Second, how do Black athletes talk about politics on Twitter? What does political content by Black athletes online look like – is it limited to generic, boilerplate statements, or are these athletes deeply engaged with policy, encourage political participation, and connected to other activists? Providing answers to these questions around political engagement is a crucial first step to widening our understanding of Black athlete activists' political impact more broadly (which the subsequent chapter will do in more detail), moving on from purely anecdotal evidence.

To answer these questions, I use Twitter data to analyze the public's engagement with athletes who share political content. In particular, I analyze the Twitter feeds of prolific Black athletes that engaged in activism between May 25, 2020, and January 6, 2021. During this time frame, I categorize each tweet as either political or nonpolitical based on its content, and then examine the engagement rate each tweet garnered. Analyzing interaction rates per post is a common strategy of social media analysis (Zeller 2016). In addition to this engagement analysis, I also conduct a content analysis of all political tweets posted by Black athletes. That is, I organize all political tweets into discrete categories to gain a better understanding of the types of political content Black athletes engage with, the depth of their political engagement, and the

ways in which different Black athlete activists are connected to other athlete activists, politicians, and organizations.

The analysis reveals a pattern wherein political tweets, on average, command significantly higher absolute engagement numbers than nonpolitical tweets. Also, political content on average gets shared, or retweeted, disproportionately more than nonpolitical content. This is noteworthy, because retweeting and thereby sharing political content has a bigger impact on spreading the message and making the topic salient than simply liking a tweet. In regards to the political tweets' content, the analysis shows that Black athletes are involved in a wide spectrum of political activity. Far from only making careful, generic statements in support of racial justice, many of these athletes are deeply engaged in getting people to the ballot boxes, disseminate direct calls to political action, and are not afraid to share their own, personal connections and motivations for their activism. Moreover, many of them are connected to political organizations, and, more importantly, the vast majority of these athletes are also connected to each other, constantly supporting and amplifying each other's voices online.

Ultimately, this chapter depicts that rather than shying away from Black athletes who turn to political activism, Twitter users embrace the activism and are willing to engage with it on a higher level than they usually would with nonpolitical tweets. As such, Black athletes' activism does not simply resemble a scream into the void; it is able to gain the public's awareness, which can be considered successful activism in and of itself. Furthermore, Black athletes engage in a variety of political activism online, often releasing explicit encouragements for people to get involved politically. Judging from the elevated ratio of retweets, Black athletes' activism also

tends to trigger further action, as other people spread the message, thus increasing the reach of the political activism. Put differently, Black athlete activism fosters political participation among the public, at least in the digital sphere.

This chapter, then, builds on the historical evidence of Black athletes engaging in politics in the U.S. by providing an initial empirical baseline for Black athlete activists' potential to drive political participation. The goal is to provide a descriptive, exploratory analysis of Black athletes' political engagement that serves as an appetizer and justification for the more quantitative, causal analysis that follows this chapter and helps to create a better understanding of the salient online engagement Black athlete activism can produce. As such, this chapter constitutes an exploratory bridge between the historical throughlines presented in the previous chapter, and the quantitative survey data analysis that follows in the subsequent chapter.

To begin, this chapter reviews relevant scholarship on the public's engagement with activism online, including a special focus on celebrities using Twitter. Then, the chapter introduces the parameters of its data collection and the methods for analyzing this data. After that, I present the results of the analysis and elaborate on what these results tell us about Black athletes' ability to engage the public with their political activism. The chapter closes by discussing the implications for political activism in the digital age that flow from these results.

II. Black Athletes, Digital Activism, and Twitter

The theoretical expectations I elaborated on earlier inform this chapter's basic assumptions. To refresh the reader's memory, relevant literature shows that the mass public tends

to be influenced by elite opinion and that elites can shift opinion by promoting certain policies (Zaller 1992, Lenz 2012, Achen & Bartels 2016, Schneider & Ingram 1993). For instance, people tend to adopt a celebrity's policy position as their own when they hear the celebrity advocating for the position before Congress (Demaine 2009). I focus on a specific subset of elites, namely celebrities. Celebrities are considered a new elite in the modern information society (Grinin 2011). Athletes established themselves as a subset of American celebrities in the early 20th century. In the decades that followed, many athletes, with the help of advancing technology, exploited their athletic abilities on the field to retain the public's interest in them off the field.

The political saliency of celebrities increased in recent decades. A cultural shift toward demanding more public engagement from celebrities (including a conception of celebrities as moral authorities) led many celebrities to establish a political persona that uses their resources to engage in political activism (Cashmore 2006; Collins 2007; Wheeler 2013). Because political authority is increasingly delegated to private, elite actors in the current political context, celebrities are in a unique position to mobilize their resources and engage in politics (Majic, O'Neill & Bernhard 2020). Based on this, athletes, in addition to their elite physical ability, can be *political* elites when engaging in political activism. If this is the case, then Black athletes, in their capacity as political elites, can garner the public's attention and draw them toward the political issue they advocate for.

One medium through which many celebrities, including athletes, regularly communicate to the public is social media. Until recently, Twitter was one of the leading social media platforms that athletes and the public use to connect with each other. It had also turned into a

common locale of political deliberation and communication (Jungherr 2014, Tumasjan et al. 2010). Furthermore, political activists and the public used Twitter to inform, mobilize, and create media attention for their causes (Bennett & Segerberg 2013, Poell & Borra 2013, Tufekci & Wilson 2012). Overall, Twitter can be “a convenient source of data for users’ opinions, interactions, and reported behaviors” (McCormick et al. 2017, 394). It assists in developing a broad understanding of a population’s activities and attitudes. As such, Twitter provides a viable avenue for exploring the public’s reaction to Black athletes’ political activism in 2020.

Unfortunately, Twitter data also comes with caveats. Primarily, reliable demographic information is hard to collect on Twitter (Lazer et al. 2009, McCormick et al. 2017).³¹ Therefore, the generalizability of research findings based on Twitter data should always be scrutinized. Nevertheless, Twitter can be used as a feasible source of data for social scientific inquiry and can make important contributions to our understanding of public communication across society (Watts 2007, Lazer & Radford 2017, Bruns & Stieglitz 2014).

Elite actors in politics have integrated Twitter into their communication strategies (Stier 2016). At the same time, politically interested Twitter users tend to use the platform as a method of getting political information and interacting with political elites, expressing political convictions, and exchanging opinions about political issues.³² This relationship is quite powerful, as Twitter users tend to regularly take action on things that political elites request and users’

³¹ Generally speaking, U.S. Twitter users tend to be younger adults, live in more densely populated areas, and are more likely to identify as male (Mislove et al. 2011, Sloan et al. 2015).

³² This is especially noteworthy because many individuals receive their political news exclusively from social media sites (Kraft et al. 2020).

political views are shaped more strongly by political elites than by friends and family (Parmelee & Bichard 2012).

The public's engagement with elites' political opinion is of particular interest to my study. Existing research that analyzes Twitter users' engagement with celebrity endorsements of presidential candidates finds that tweets containing endorsements of the candidates did not receive any less engagement than nonpolitical tweets by the same celebrities (Zilinsky et al. 2019). Other research posits that opinion leaders on Twitter can positively impact individuals' political participation rates (Park 2013). Moreover, although the majority of Twitter users tend to not follow political elites, they retweet information from them, especially if the message aligns with their own policy preferences (Wojcieszak et al. 2022).³³ This chapter extends the existing research to specifically interrogate the ways in which Twitter users engage with a particular type of celebrity, namely Black athletes.

Recall that Black athletes are “the most important, most influential, most visible” Black employees in the country (Blue 2018). A 2004 poll reports that 12 percent of Black people consider athletes to be the most influential actors in the black community, whereas only 5 percent think the same of politicians (BAMPAC 2004). Black athletes, then, lend themselves as political leaders in the Black community. Therefore, focusing on Black athletes on Twitter might be especially worthwhile.

³³ This research is based on political elites in the more traditional sense, i.e., politicians, pundits, and media organizations.

As Tillery (2021) summarizes, there are at least two strong reasons why examining Twitter usage is particularly useful when studying the Black community. First, Twitter is disproportionately utilized by the Black community; Black people make up 25% of all American Twitter users and use the platform on a daily basis more frequently than their white counterparts. Second, Twitter provides Black Americans with a sphere where they can directly engage in national conversations about the meaning of race, race relations, and the issues their racial group faces in real time. The combination of these dynamics has led some observers to label this aspect of the platform as “Black Twitter” (Manjoo 2011, Florini 2013).

Indeed, a range of scholars suggest that Twitter, and Black Twitter in particular, constitutes a modern form of a counterpublic. Counterpublics are a conceptual expansion and critique of Habermas’ (1962) idea of the public sphere – bourgeois public spaces (such as coffeehouses, salons, and literary houses) in 18th-century European representative democracies where (upper-class) citizens could engage in communicative actions, thereby discussing, defining, problematizing, and solving political and social issues, away from direct state authority. Because this conception of the public sphere leaves little room for the ways in which marginalized groups may engage in communicative action, a common elaboration on the public sphere is the creation of “subaltern counterpublics” by many oppressed groups in which “members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990, p.67).

Whereas Fraser uses a feminist counterpublic to make her case, the literature also provides an array of examples of Black counterpublics. Despite Dawson’s (1994) initial

pessimism about the continuing existence of Black counterpublics after the 1970s, others have shown that those spheres continue to exist in places such as the Black church (Fitzgerald & Spohn 2005, Swain 2008), Black barbershops and beauty salons (Harris-Lacewell 2004, Wright & Calhoun 2001), Black sororities (Whaley 2010), Black bookstores (Hill 2011), and rap music (Baker 1993, Rose 1994). Even Dawson (2001) eventually conceded the potential for renewed Black counterpublics, in large part due to the emergence of new Black information networks.

A new crop of researchers points to Black Twitter as one such form of an information network and, by extension, the latest instalment of a Black (digital) counterpublic. In general, many counterpublics have moved to online, digitally networked spaces in recent years due to technological innovation and the rise of social networking websites, resulting in the formation of digital counterpublics (Penney & Dadas 2014, Hill 2018). The usage of Twitter by Black folks as a digitally networked community to actively resist hegemonic power, reassert and negotiate opposing racial identities, engage in critical dialogue distinct from the spaces of discussion occupied by dominant groups, organize politically, create alternative media representations, and contest majoritarian narratives makes the platform a key part of a new, digital Black counterpublic (Graham & Smith 2016, Hill 2018, Florini 2019, Foucault Welles & Jackson 2019). Additionally, some hint at the possibility of digital satellite publics, meaning counterpublics existing within a counterpublic, such as #BlackTransLivesMatter within Black Twitter (Dunklin & Jennings 2022).

Based on these ideas around Black Twitter and digital counterpublics, Black athlete activists making their political voices heard on Twitter may constitute a new dimension and

extension of this digital Black counterpublic. In fact, Dawson (2001) points out that Black counter-elites often fuel the content and drive discourse of Black information networks; Black athletes, in their role as Black (counter-) elites, thus should be particularly well-situated to make Twitter function as a Black counterpublic.

Ultimately, if Black athletes engaged in activism can be conceived of as political elites based on their role as celebrities, if Twitter users tend to interact with political elites to get information and discuss political issues, and if Twitter users engage with political content shared by celebrities in the form of presidential candidate endorsements just as much as with nonpolitical content, then it stands to reason that Twitter users will likewise engage with Black athletes' political activism in similar ways. In fact, given the special standing of Black athletes in their communities, the increased role of celebrity influence in politics, and Twitter users' proclivity for interacting with political elites on the platform, Twitter users might engage with Black athletes' political content more than with nonpolitical content. Moreover, because Twitter users tend to retweet political content that is shared by political elites, I expect that engagement with political content by Black athletes likewise will be qualitatively different compared to nonpolitical content. That is, Black athletes' political tweets, on average, might receive deeper engagement in the form of retweets and comments than nonpolitical tweets.

Importantly, I want to be clear that I do not expect all political tweets to get more engagement than nonpolitical tweets in absolute numbers. Certainly, some nonpolitical, "lifestyle" tweets such as a contract extension, the celebration of a championship, or the birth of a child will draw more overall attention than some political tweets. However, I suspect that the

relative distribution of engagement with a respective tweet, i.e., the relative ratio of likes to retweets to comments of each tweet, will skew more heavily toward deeper engagement among political tweets.

III. Data & Methods

To explore these dynamics, I analyzed the Twitter feeds of prolific Black athletes that engaged in activism between May 25, 2020, and January 6, 2021. These dates coincide with the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the subsequent protests, strike, and increased voter turnout efforts by many athletes, and the day after the Georgia Senate runoff races decided the final outcome of the 2020 election cycle. This time period is particularly salient because Americans' attention to and engagement with politics tends to be highest around presidential election cycles – which increases the likelihood of paying attention to and being affected by political messaging from activists (Younis 2020). January 6, 2021, of course also coincides with the attempted insurrection at the Capitol. The choice to end the data collection on this day, however, has little to do with the insurrection itself.

Instead, ending it on this day allowed for the collection of any tweets that may have responded to the results of the Georgia Senate run-offs the day prior (which did not become official until early morning of January 6, 2021). As discussed in the opening of this dissertation, the Georgia run-offs were extraordinarily important to Black athlete activists, especially to WNBA players. Warnock successfully ousted Loeffler from her Senate position and credited the WNBA's advocacy as a key turning point in his campaign (Collier 2020).

As such, ending the data collection after the Georgia Senate run-off and the official end of the 2020 election cycle makes sense based on both the heightened political awareness and engagement of the American public, as well as the specific activism around the run-offs among Black athletes. Additionally, the conclusion of the Georgia Senate run-offs constituted a notable break in political activism by many Black athletes. For example, while some athletes commented on the attempted insurrection on January 6, no sustained protests developed in response to it, nor was Joe Biden's official inauguration on January 20, 2021, given much attention. Observers such as sports journalist Howard Bryant poignantly critiqued these paradoxical developments.³⁴ This sharp drop in activism after January 6, 2021, further justifies ending the data collection at this point, given a lack of applicable data past that point.

I identified 25 professional Black athletes who publicly engaged in political activism during this time. These athletes are LeBron James, Colin Kaepernick, Bubba Wallace, Coco Gauff, Lewis Hamilton, Naomi Osaka, Elizabeth Williams, Chris Paul, Evander Kane, Mookie Betts, Maya Moore, Justin Morrow, Candace Parker, Eric Reid, Carmelo Anthony, Deandre Hopkins, Bam Adebayo, Frances Tiafoe, Steph Curry, Malcolm Jenkins, Akim Aliu, Jaylen Brown, Kenny Stills, Chiney Ogwumike, and Tyrese Haliburton. Rather than trying to include every Black athlete who is on Twitter (which seemed like an impossible undertaking given the scope and resources for this project), I chose to select a sample of athletes that differed across various dimensions such as sports, gender, and reach (i.e., amounts of Twitter followers) and had

³⁴ For Bryant's critique, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YlhygMOKr6k&list=PLhvPB4lyc4dT7zoLTGSt3d9tFT2vP93CW&index=14> (12:50-15:35min)

a track record of political involvement, as evidenced by discussions about their activism in media outlets, during sports broadcasts, or other activists highlighting them. For example, the three tennis players Naomi Osaka, Coco Gauff, and Francis Tiafoe were picked based on a story published by the US Open tournament about their activism.³⁵

Indeed, this selection constitutes a diverse set of athletes across gender, sports and leagues (including football, basketball, baseball, soccer, auto racing, hockey, and tennis), and even nationalities, as Lewis Hamilton (British), Naomi Osaka (Japanese), and Evander Kane (Canadian) are Black non-U.S. athletes that still have strong ties to sports played and consumed in the United States. Likewise, these athletes differ widely in their reach, as some have tens of millions of followers on Twitter, whereas others only have a few thousand. As such, I am confident that the selection serves as a satisfyingly representative sample of Black athletes across the sporting world, despite the potential omission of some other politically outspoken Black athletes.

I used Twitter's Rest API to collect all tweets from each athlete within the aforementioned time period. Importantly, because I am interested in the engagement of Twitter users with the athletes' tweets, I included quote retweets (i.e., a retweet that includes any form of commentary by the retweeter), but not basic retweets (retweets without any commentary) by any athlete. This is because Twitter categorizes quote retweets as original tweets by the retweeter, which means that quote retweets get their own engagement metrics, whereas normal retweets continue to only collect engagement metrics for the original publisher of the post. Engagement

³⁵ For video, see <https://twitter.com/usopen/status/1302378075192201217>.

metrics include the number of likes, comments, and retweets each individual tweet received.³⁶ Likewise, I also did not collect athletes' answers to other people's tweets, which show up as comments under the original tweeter's post. In other words, I only collected original tweets posted by an athlete to their own timeline, which includes quote retweets.

After collecting all tweets by the specified athletes during this time frame, including the engagement metrics, I hand-coded each tweet's content as either political or nonpolitical. Political tweets were coded as such when they contained any reference to racial justice activism, encouragements to (register to) vote, lobbied for the passage or stoppage of a specific bill, stated support or sympathy for activist or politicians, spread awareness of social movement issues through the use of hashtags such as “#BlackLivesMatter” and “#SayHerName”, had specific request or demands linked to social activism causes, or commented on the events that ignited the protests during that time. All tweets containing none of these elements were coded as nonpolitical.³⁷ In a second step, I categorized all political tweets along various political activity frames, as discussed below.

The entire dataset contains 2,714 tweets that were published by all 25 athletes between May 25, 2020, and January 6, 2021. Of those 2,714 tweets, 30.4%, or 825 tweets, were political in nature; 69.6%, or 1,889 tweets, were nonpolitical (see Figure 1). Individually, 16 athletes

³⁶ In recent months, Twitter has introduced another metrics feature that collects the number of views an individual tweet has received. This feature was not yet available during the time frame I am analyzing and as such is not part of this data.

³⁷ A brief note on one potentially controversial case is warranted here: I did not code references to Covid-19 guidelines, such as to wear a mask or practice social distancing, as political statements. Although the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly is heavily politicized, and its outcomes affect racial groups unequally, I did not feel like such public health concerns qualified as political activism. Overall, there were less than ten of such tweets in the entire dataset, so including them or not most likely made little difference either way.

posted more nonpolitical tweets than political ones, consistent with the aggregate distribution. Eight athletes, namely Eric Reid, Maya Moore, Justin Morrow, Colin Kaepernick, Akim Aliu, Jaylen Brown, Kenny Stills, and Malcolm Jenkins, posted more political tweets than nonpolitical ones during this time frame. Coco Gauff’s tweets were equally split between political and nonpolitical content. Given that quote-less retweets are not included in this dataset, there is a good chance that athletes shared even more political content overall, so this number should be considered a low boundary and likely underestimates the level of political engagement among the Black athletes I studied.

In order to analyze the ways in which Twitter users’ engagement with political and nonpolitical tweets by Black athlete activists differs, I calculated the absolute number of engagements for each tweet by adding together the number of retweets, likes, and comments each tweet commanded. Then, I divided the absolute number of one category by the absolute number of engagements and multiplied the result by 100 for each tweet; this allowed me to establish the engagement ratio for each engagement category in percentages per tweet.

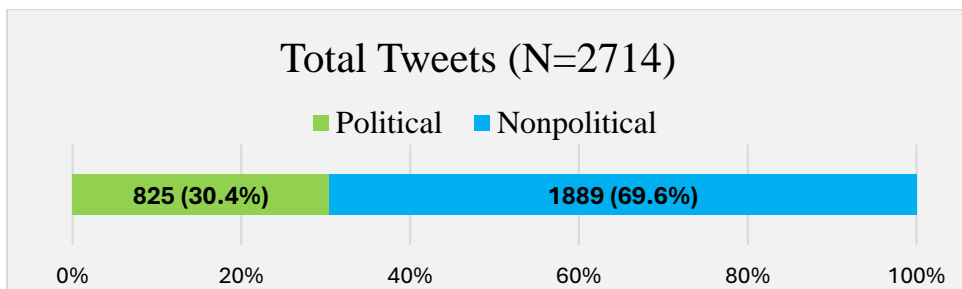


Figure 1: Corpus of Tweets Collected

One alternative way to measure the potential difference in engagement with Black athletes' political and nonpolitical tweets is Twitter's "Top tweets" function. When filtering each athlete's Twitter feed to the time period from May 25, 2020, to January 6, 2021, the most intuitive way to analyze all tweets in this time frame is to go through them chronologically, which is what I did for the previous analysis. However, Twitter also provides an alternative sorting mechanism: instead of chronologically displaying all tweets in the specified time period by clicking the "Newest" tab, one can choose to select the "Top" tab. When selecting this tab, Twitter displays all tweets posted by the Twitter user in the specified time period based on their relevancy, with the most relevant tweet at the top, and each following tweet successively decreasing in relevance.³⁸ I believe that comparing the top tweets in the specified time period of each Black athlete analyzed can provide a valuable secondary measurement of the influence political content might have on Twitter users compared to nonpolitical content.

To make use of this secondary measurement source, I filtered each athlete's Twitter feed to the time frame in question and selected the "Top" tab to display the most relevant tweets during this time first. Then, I collected the top ten tweets from each athlete's feed as presented by Twitter's algorithm. After that, I compared these ten top tweets against the full list of chronological tweets I hand-coded into political and nonpolitical content already and added the respective code to each of these top tweets.

³⁸ What, exactly, constitutes "relevance" is not entirely transparent and in large parts up to Twitter's algorithm, i.e., these lists are not manually curated by Twitter employees. However, Twitter reveals that relevance is determined "based on the popularity of a Tweet (e.g., when a lot of people are interacting with or sharing via Retweets and replies), the keywords it contains, and many other factors" (<https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/top-search-results-faqs>).

To complement the engagement analysis described above, I also conducted a content analysis of all political tweets by Black athletes during the time period under study. Doing so allows for a more substantive and nuanced understanding of the ways in which Black athletes engage with politics online. The content analysis used ten frames to categorize the 825 political tweets in the dataset. These frames were established through a hybrid method of deductive and inductive coding. While I established a few deductive codes before working through the data, based on previous exposure to athletes' political tweets (such as the GOTV and personal testimony frame), the majority of codes were established inductively throughout the two rounds of coding the data (structural coding between political and non-political tweets the first time around, descriptive coding of political tweets the second time around). Inductive coding is particularly useful when researching a phenomenon that is not yet well understood, which indeed applies to this topic.

The ten frames are as follows: Get-out-the-vote, lobbying for specific legislation, personal testimony, explicit support or disapproval for a specific politician, generic statements to spread awareness, commentary on specific events that sparked protests, a partnership with an NGO, a partnership with a corporation, support for or conversation with another activist athlete, and specific demands or calls to action unrelated to legislation and voting.

The Get Out the Vote frame was assigned to any tweet that includes a specific encouragement to (get registered to) vote. Oftentimes, these tweets included links to resources such as voter registration pages. The Legislation frame was assigned to any tweet that lobbies for the passage or stoppage of a specific piece of legislation. The Personal Testimony frame was

assigned to any tweet that includes personal stories by an athlete as to why a specific cause matters to them, why they got involved in activism, or how they have been personally affected by the social injustices they are protesting. The Endorsement frame was assigned to any tweet that specifically endorses a politician by including their name in the tweet. A few tweets also explicitly rejected politicians, most notably Donald Trump. The Generic Statement/General Awareness frame was assigned to any tweet that includes a generic statement around social justice to raise awareness, and/or the use of a prominent, yet generic hashtag such as “#SayHerName” or “#BlackLivesMatter”. This category of tweets is fairly broadly construed in that it includes tweets that use hashtags such as the aforementioned ones, tweets that only include pictures without commentary that is designed to raise awareness (such as a picture of Breonna Taylor, a sign from a protest, or sharing an inspirational quote from Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, John Lewis, etc.). Importantly, these tweets do not contain any direct calls to action. As such, this frame is most closely associated with more moderate and careful activism, given the generic nature of these tweets.

The Comments on Events frame was assigned to any tweet that directly addresses an event that sparked the protests in 2020, such as the murder of George Floyd or the shooting of Jacob Blake. This frame differs from the previous one in that tweets coded as Comments include statements about the events, rather than just a hashtag or a picture. The Partnership with NGO frame was assigned to any tweet that mentions a partnership with an advocacy organization or a non-profit group. The Partnership with Corporation frame was assigned to any tweet that mentions a partnership with a company or corporation. The Connection to Other Athletes frame

was assigned to any tweet that mentions another athlete and their activism, either through a quote retweet, including their Twitter handle in the tweet, or specifically referring to them in the tweet. The Calls to Action frame was assigned to any tweet that contains an encouragement to participate in political action other than voting or the specific lobbying around legislation, such as sharing petitions to sign, inviting people to protest marches, encouraging them to donate to a political organization, or directly demanding action from politicians. Examples of each frame can be found in Appendix A.

Since this analysis seeks to explore the breadth of political engagement among Black athletes online and because many political tweets contain content that included multiple of the listed categories, 256, or 31%, of the 825 political tweets were coded to contain more than just one frame (see Appendix A for example tweets of each of these categories, including tweets containing multiple categories). Armed with this data, the next section reports the results of both my engagement analysis, as well as the content analysis of political tweets.

IV. Results & Discussion

My previous theoretical elaborations deem it likely that Black athletes tweeting political content – or, in other words, participating in political activism online – will lead to increased engagement with such content among Twitter users compared to nonpolitical content because of the special standing of Black athletes, the increased role of celebrity influence in politics, and Twitter users’ proclivity for interacting with political elites on the platform. The data shows that in terms of absolute numbers, Twitter users indeed engage with political tweets more than they

do with nonpolitical tweets. Whereas political tweets returned an average of 29,808 total engagements per tweets across all 2,714 observations, nonpolitical tweets only garnered 16,162 total engagements on average (see Figure 2).³⁹ This constitutes an average difference of 13,646 total engagements between political and nonpolitical tweets, or an 84.4% increase of total engagements among political tweets compared to nonpolitical ones. The difference in average absolute engagement between political and nonpolitical tweets is statistically significant ($p < .001$).⁴⁰

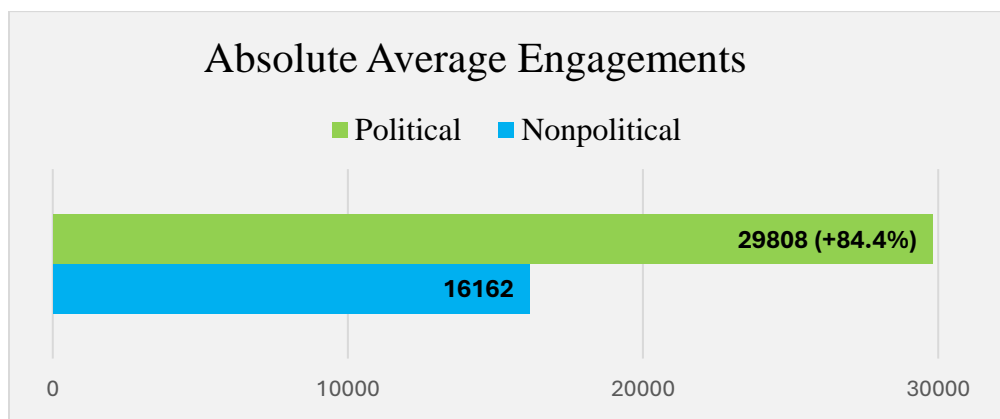


Figure 2: Comparison of Average Total Engagements with Political and Nonpolitical Tweets

This aggregate dynamic of increased engagement among political tweets is similar on the individual level for 19 of the 25 athletes that are part of this study. In six cases, namely Chris Paul, Carmelo Anthony, Colin Kaepernick, Bam Adebayo, Deandre Hopkins, and Jaylen Brown,

³⁹ All total engagement numbers are accurate as of March 15, 2023.

⁴⁰ I first performed an F-test to check the variance between the political and nonpolitical tweets' total engagement means. The F-test revealed significant difference in variance; I thus performed an independent, two-tailed unequal variance t-test. Given that the result of this t-test was $p=0.00019$ (i.e., $p<0.05$), the difference in means between political and nonpolitical absolute engagement is statistically significant.

the individual overall engagement numbers were lower among political tweets than nonpolitical ones. However, these six athletes also only combined for 516, or 19%, of all tweets collected and their political content only saw an average decrease in overall engagement of 30.4%.

Moreover, the increased aggregate engagement numbers among political tweets are consistent across all three engagement categories. Political tweets by Black athletes on average received 4,779 retweets compared to 1,434 retweets for nonpolitical tweets, 666 comments compared to 275, and 24,363 likes compared to 14,452. This constitutes a 233.3%, 142.2%, and 68.6% increase respectively (see Table 1).

The aggregate patterns of higher absolute engagement hold on the individual level among 23 of the 25 athletes for the retweet category, 18 of 25 for the comment category, and 19 of 25 for the likes category. Chris Paul and Bam Adebayo are the only two athletes who saw lower average engagement numbers across all three engagement metrics when tweeting political as opposed to nonpolitical content.⁴¹ The six athletes that saw overall engagement among political tweets decrease all had an increase in average likes and comment among nonpolitical tweets, which largely caused the overall average engagement sum to skew in nonpolitical tweets' favor.

⁴¹ This is mostly driven by the fact that the two tweets by Chris Paul that garnered by far the most engagements were nonpolitical: a quote retweet of a PGA Tour video that compared golfer Tiger Woods to his son and their shared technique and mannerisms while golfing, and a scoreboard that depicted 8-24 with a message to the late Kobe Bryant. These tweets commanded 130,390 and 125,961 total engagements respectively, while Chris Paul's average total engagement rate was 11,603 – a 1023% and 986% increase in engagements for these two tweets respectively compared to the average. Similarly, Bam Adebayo's two tweets that received by far the most attention were about his childhood home and the house he bought for his mother. These tweets garnered 83,723 and 44,089 total engagements respectively, compared to Adebayo's overall engagement average of 7,997 – a 946.9% and 451.3% increase respectively.

	<i>Nonpolitical Tweets</i>	<i>Political Tweets</i>	<i>Relative Difference</i>
<i>Retweets (ϕ)</i>	1434	4779	233.3%
<i>Comments (ϕ)</i>	275	666	142.2%
<i>Likes (ϕ)</i>	14453	24363	68.6%

Table 1: Average Total Engagement Differences by Engagement Type

These important individual caveats notwithstanding, the aggregate empirical evidence suggest that Black athletes’ political activism on Twitter, on average, leads to more absolute engagement among Twitter users than their nonpolitical tweets. Furthermore, the patterns of almost universal average increases in total retweets among political tweets across athletes suggests that a closer look at the relative distribution of engagement metrics across political and nonpolitical tweets by Black athletes is warranted, to which I now turn.

Another assumption based on existing theory posits that Twitter users’ engagement with Black athletes’ political tweets will likely be qualitatively different than with nonpolitical tweets. To explore this dynamic, I analyzed the relative distribution of each engagement metric among political and nonpolitical tweets. As it turns out, the data paints a rather clear picture: there is a distinct difference between the relative engagement with political and nonpolitical tweets (see Figure 3).

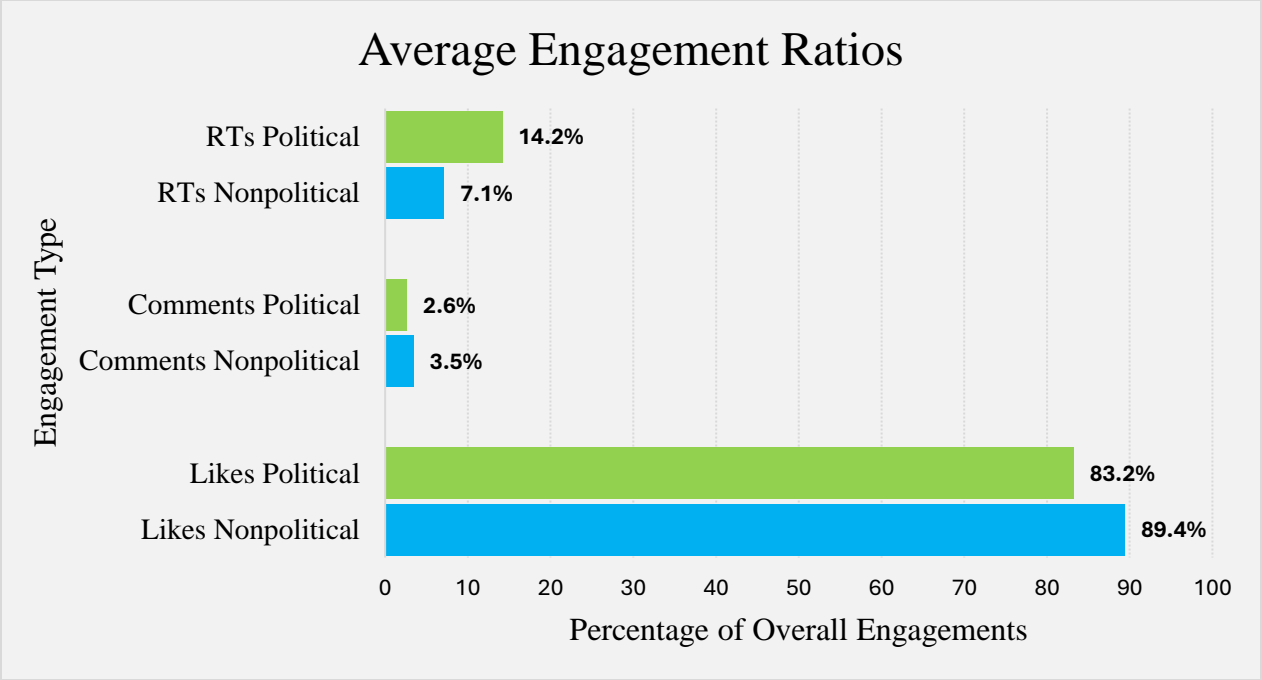


Figure 3: Comparison of Average Engagement Ratios Between Political & Nonpolitical Tweets

Specifically, political tweets receive a far higher ratio of retweets than nonpolitical tweets. In the aggregate, the average ratio of retweets as part of total engagement with a political tweet is 14.2%; retweets for nonpolitical tweets make up 7.1% of all engagements on average. This comes out to a difference of 7.1% in the mean retweet ratio between political and nonpolitical tweets. In other words, political tweets by Black athletes garner a 100% increase in retweets compared to nonpolitical ones (see Table 2). Once again, this difference in average retweet ratios is statistically significant ($p < .001$).⁴² This aggregate finding of increased retweet

⁴² Similar to the absolute engagement means, F-Tests revealed significant differences in variance between political and nonpolitical tweets' means for the retweets and comments engagement ratios. As such, independent, two-tailed, unequal variance t-test were performed for those ratio means categories. The likes ratios revealed equal variance; thus, an independent, two-tailed, equal variance t-test was performed.

activity among political tweets holds on the individual level for all 25 athletes analyzed. Even the six athletes that, in absolute terms, saw an average decrease in engagement among their political tweets had a higher retweet ratio for their political tweets than their nonpolitical tweets.

The story is a bit more ambiguous when it comes to the relative distribution of comments as part of all engagements across political and nonpolitical tweets. Across all political and nonpolitical tweets, the comment ratios are fairly similar: political tweets, on average, had a 2.6% comment ratio out of all engagements, whereas nonpolitical tweets had a 3.5% comment ratio. This 0.9% difference in comment ratios only constitutes a 25.7% decrease between political and nonpolitical tweets. Despite the comparatively small difference in comment ratios, this difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). On an individual level, this ambiguity shines through as well. Out of the 25 athletes analyzed, nine athletes' political tweets had a higher comment ratio than their nonpolitical tweets, whereas 16 athletes had a lower comment ratio among their political tweets. However, the range of average difference in comment ratios across individual athletes was also fairly narrow, with a 1% difference being the highest positive ratio, and -5.8% being the lowest negative ratio between political and nonpolitical tweets.⁴³ Overall, then, there is only a slight difference in the average ratio of comments that Twitter users post under athletes' political and nonpolitical tweets, though it skews toward nonpolitical tweets.

⁴³ The 5.8% increase in comment ratio for nonpolitical tweets is an outlier by Chiney Ogwumike; the second highest increase is only 1.9%. In fact, the aggregate difference in comment ratios is not statistically significant if Ogwumike's tweets are excluded from the corpus. Ogwumike regularly asks her followers to comment their opinions on a current issue in preparation for her *ESPN* radio show, which heavily skews the comment ratio for her nonpolitical tweets upwards. By extension, these significant outlier tweets cause the difference in comment ratios between political and nonpolitical tweets to become statistically significant at all, further highlighting the ambiguous relationship for this engagement metric.

Given that the retweet ratio of political tweets is higher, and the comment ratio is roughly similar, the likes ratio unsurprisingly skews more heavily toward nonpolitical tweets. Whereas likes, on average, comprise 83.2% of all engagements among political tweets, they comprise 89.4% of all engagements among nonpolitical tweets by Black athletes (a 6.9% decrease). This difference is statistically significant ($p < .001$). Once again, this aggregate result holds true for all 25 athletes individually as well. Overall, there is a qualitative difference between political and nonpolitical tweets as regards their retweet ratio, and, by extension, the likes ratio. The comment ratio is very similar across both groups of tweets, skewing slightly in favor of nonpolitical tweets. Therefore, Twitter users' engagement with Black athletes' political tweets is indeed qualitatively different than their engagement with nonpolitical tweets.

	<i>Nonpolitical Tweets</i>	<i>Political Tweets</i>	<i>Relative Difference</i>
<i>Retweets (ø)</i>	7.1%	14.2%	100%
<i>Comments (ø)</i>	3.5%	2.6%	-25.7%
<i>Likes (ø)</i>	89.4%	83.2%	-6.9%

Table 2: Average Relative Engagement Differences by Engagement Type

Lastly, to complement the engagement analysis so far, I also explored the top ten tweets of each athlete, based on Twitter's algorithm discussed above. This is helpful in contextualizing the previous analysis and further underscores the public's engagement with Black athletes' political activism on Twitter. Of the 250 total top tweets displayed, 99 (39.6%) were political, with the other 151 (60.4%) being nonpolitical (see Figure 4). As such, political tweets are

slightly overrepresented in the top tweets when measured against the overall distribution of political and nonpolitical tweets in the entire corpus of the study. This underscores the notion that Black athletes' political tweets do tend to stir interest among users of the platform.

At the same time, based on the significantly higher mean overall engagement numbers among political tweets compared to nonpolitical tweets that the previous analysis revealed, some might find it surprising that the rate of political tweets in the top tweets is not higher. Here, it is important to recall that, as Twitter itself declares, lots of different factors go into the decision of which tweets its algorithm puts into the top tweets list. Judging from the sample of Black athlete activists here, it seems that absolute or relative engagement alone are not strong driving factors in this decision.

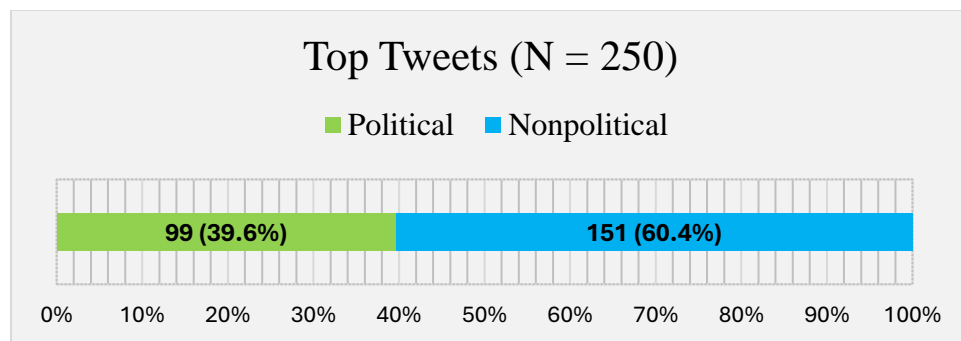


Figure 4: Distribution of All 25 Athletes' Top Ten Tweets

However, the results of the top tweets' analysis do offer some noteworthy insight. If Twitter's algorithm does not predominantly determine political tweets by Black athletes to be particularly relevant, then people are no more likely to stumble upon them by accident than they would upon other, nonpolitical tweets, as these tweets will not be pushed more than other tweets

that Twitter deems relevant. Thus, while the findings of this secondary measure might not directly suggest that political tweets by Black athletes are more relevant than nonpolitical tweets, they actually do speak to the power of Twitter users' engagement with Black athletes' political activism: the higher rates of average engagement do not seem to be something that Twitter's algorithm particularly instigated or supported, which further suggests that higher average engagement with political tweets is a rather organic process.

In sum, then, the analysis reveals a pattern wherein political tweets by Black athletes, on average, get much higher absolute total engagement numbers than nonpolitical tweets. Moreover, political tweets elicit a qualitatively different level of engagement, with retweets much more common among political tweets. In addition, political tweets are well represented among what Twitter's algorithm considers "top" tweets, further strengthening the notion that political tweets by Black athletes can have significant reach. Based on the reported results, it stands to reason that Black athletes' political activism leads to higher engagement than "everyday" tweets, which bolsters athletes' potential for impacting the public politically.

Content Analysis of Political Tweets

In addition to receiving heightened levels of engagement, the content analysis of political tweets also reveals noteworthy patterns (see Figure 5). The first of these patterns regards Black athletes' willingness to engage in deeper political advocacy.

Given their status as high-profile individuals and the public image, as well as endorsement deals and contracts, that come with this status, it should not be surprising if athletes

decide to keep their activism rather generic and moderate. That way, they could satisfy their desire – maybe even their perceived duty – to speak out against social injustices publicly while keeping their bases covered as regards their public image and pocketbooks. Although the content analysis reveals that a relative majority of political tweets (297, or 36%) indeed contain fairly generic statements aimed at spreading general awareness, the true extent of Black athletes’ political depth on Twitter is much more nuanced. In fact, only 186 (22.6%) of political tweets *only* include a generic statement to spread awareness; on the flip side, this means that more than three-quarters of all political tweets go beyond such carefully moderated activism.

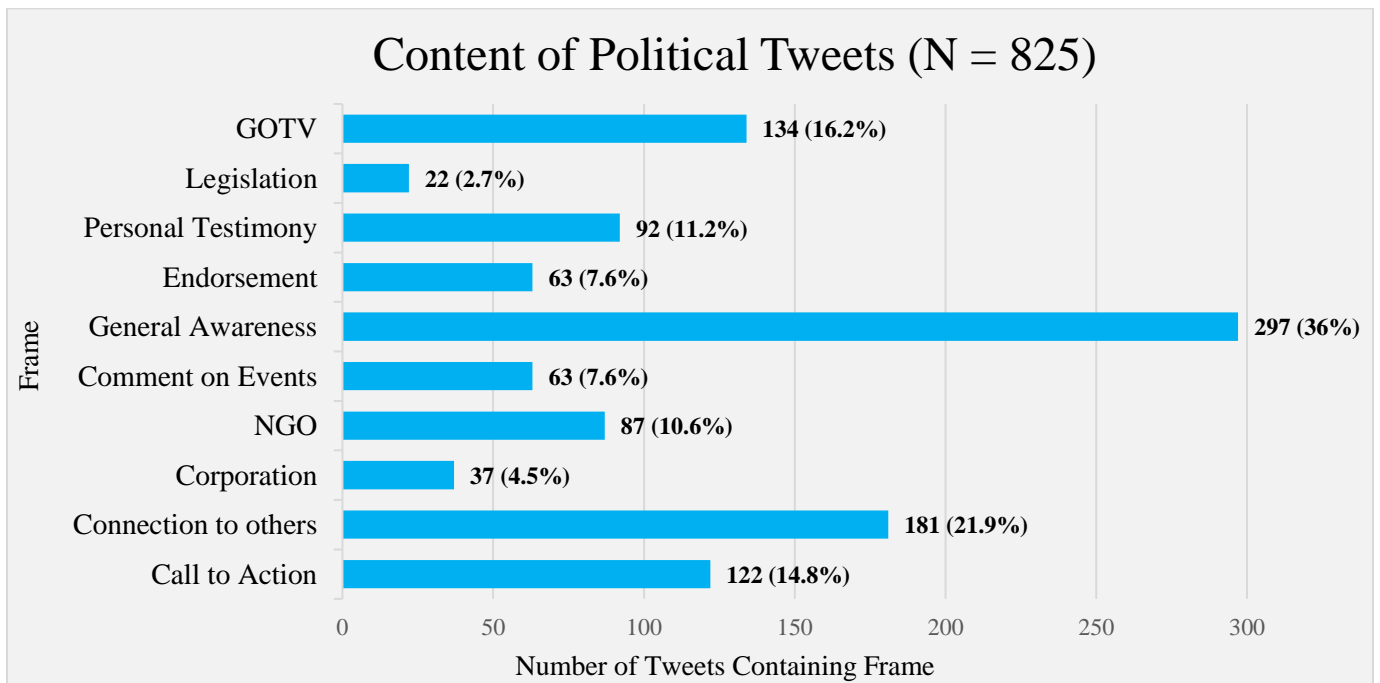


Figure 5: Overview of Content Analysis Results

Black athletes engaged in much more targeted activism and political action during the 2020 election season than solely spreading awareness.⁴⁴ To start, a total of 134 (16.2%) tweets directly contained encouragements to (register to) vote in the 2020 election. Such tweets often linked to websites that offered help in finding polling locations, links to check one’s registration status, or an overview of voters’ rights while in line at polling places. In addition to merely encouraging people to vote, athletes discussed the power and importance of voting, and the impact votes can have on society and individuals’ lives. Moreover, multiple athletes shared that they themselves had voted (some for the first time in their lifetime) in an effort to convince the broader public to turn out to vote as well and reiterated the importance of having a clear game plan for voting day, rather than just a general willingness to vote. These endeavors also aligned with the efforts by many Black athletes to turn sporting facilities such as stadiums and arenas into voting facilities in the run-up to the 2020 election, as well as the LeBron James-led “More Than a Vote” organization’s efforts to register more than 40,000 voters ahead of the election. The sporting facilities drew in almost 300,000 voters (Peter, Schad & Zillgitt 2020).

Interestingly, however, Black athletes were much less willing to endorse, or reject, specific politicians explicitly. Only 63 (7.6%) of all political tweets directly endorsed or opposed a candidate. Moreover, even this low total amount was predominantly driven by two athletes who accounted for more than half of such direct endorsement tweets: LeBron James and Elizabeth Williams. All other basketball players in the dataset accounted for another 25% of the

⁴⁴ To be clear, spreading awareness certainly constitutes an important aspect of activism, and I do not mean to discredit such efforts or make normative judgements about it here. The point instead is to simply differentiate between this form of activism and others, such as direct calls to action, to offer a more nuanced understanding of Black athlete activism.

endorsement tweets. As such, this suggests that basketball players were especially likely to not only encourage people to vote, but also give clear suggestions as to whom people should vote for – a step many other athletes mostly shied away from.

The fact that basketball players were more prone to endorsing specific candidates should not be too surprising given the strong advocacy work of the WNBA around Senator Warnock's election campaign discussed earlier, as well as LeBron James' and Steph Curry's previous feuds with Donald Trump on Twitter, in combination with the friendship Chris Paul, LeBron James, and Steph Curry have developed with Barack Obama, which they leveraged when they sought his advice during the NBA boycott in August 2020 (McMenamin 2020). Furthermore, the generally more progressive-leaning fan base of the NBA and WNBA (as compared to, for example, the NFL or NHL fan base) likely made basketball players more comfortable in specifically endorsing progressive candidates.

The analysis further shows that Black athletes did not limit their encouragements for political action to voting. Instead, they encouraged political participation in a much broader sense. Of all political tweets, 122 (14.8%) included some form of direct call to action apart from voting, such as signing petitions, donating money, volunteering, or joining a protest march. Such tweets ranged from sharing links to petition and donation websites, to sharing information about volunteering opportunities, including as poll workers, to asking followers to join the athlete during a protest in person.

An additional 22 tweets directly advocated for the passage or stoppage of specific legislation. Those bills included second-chance opportunities for imprisoned youth in Ohio,

demands for a governor's veto to a stand-your-ground law, face surveillance regulation in a police reform bill in Massachusetts, and the passage of John Lewis' voting rights amendment act. When combining these numbers with the tweets that specifically encourage voting, 273 (33%) of all political tweets aimed to push the public toward some form of political action.⁴⁵ In other words, one third of all political tweets by Black athletes attempted to persuade the public and representatives with specific calls to political action.

This suggests that Black athletes have an explicit interest in getting the public more involved in political participation, both through traditional avenues such as voting as well as through more non-traditional direct action methods. I investigate these exploratory findings in much more detail in the following chapter, where I test how successful Black athletes actually are in their attempts to persuade the public to participate politically, both as regards voting and other forms of participation. The findings of this content analysis provide ample justification for such deeper interrogation.

Another key finding of the political tweets' content analysis is the interconnection that exists between Black athlete activists. Not only do most of the athletes studied in this analysis know of each other as fellow athletes, but they are also keenly aware of the fact that they share common ground in their political activism. The previous chapter already hinted at the ways in which different contemporary athlete activists are connected to each other. The findings of my content analysis further underscore this notion: 181 (21.9%) of political tweets included a direct

⁴⁵ Five tweets were coded as containing a combination of get-out-the-vote and non-voting related calls to action. Thus, I arrived at 273 by adding the 134 GOTV tweets, the 22 specific legislation tweets (none of these overlapped with either of the other two frames), and the 122 calls to direction action tweets, and subtracting 5 tweets that were double-coded.

reference to another athlete, most commonly in support of their activism, or as part of a conversation around social justice that multiple athletes had together.

Such tweets often exist in the form of quote retweets, wherein one athlete retweets another athlete's political message with additional commentary of their own, thereby not only establishing a connection with the athlete activists who penned the original tweets but also directly aiding them in continuing to spread the political message and amplifying other athlete activists' voices to their own followers. Additionally, many athletes reported on having actual conversations with other athlete activists, either offline or on a format such as a podcast or a video stream, during which they discussed their respective motivations for getting involved in politics, the potential impact of their activism, and encouragements for others to get involved as well.

Put differently, even though tweets are first and foremost an individual way of expressing opinions to a large community, almost one-quarter of all political tweets by Black athletes contained some form of connection to other athlete activists. Thus, in line with my discussion in the previous chapter, a key component of contemporary Black athlete activism is not only its unprecedented scope, but also the ways in which athletes are continuously in conversation with each other throughout their activism.

Lastly, another noteworthy pattern in the data is an apparent lack of corporate interests that drove Black athletes' activism online. Some cynical pundits suggested that many athletes, and celebrities in general, only partake in political activism if it is profitable for them. Such voices were especially loud in the aftermath of Colin Kaepernick's 2018 "Dream Crazy" Nike

advertisement campaign (Carrington & Boykoff 2018, Thomas 2018). The reasoning, according to some, was that companies and celebrities simply tried to save their image by jumping on the popular activism bandwagon and tried to turn even these social justice protests into profit.

The results of my analysis here, in contrast, paint a different picture. While the content analysis in this chapter cannot refute these arguments in their entirety, it seems likely that corporate interests were not at the forefront of Black athletes' political activism, at least not predominantly: only 37 (4.5%) of political tweets had any connection to a corporation. Of those 37 tweets, Bubba Wallace single-handedly accounted for more than 25% (10). As such, a desire to turn political activism into profit does not appear to be a motivating factor for Black athlete activists. Quite to the contrary, the majority of athletes under study had little to no connection to any corporations as part of their political activism online. Half of the athletes included in this chapter had no connection to a corporation in their political tweets whatsoever, and only seven athletes had more than one political tweet that included a connection to a corporation.

In comparison, more than twice the number of political tweets that had a connection to a corporation, had a connection to an advocacy group or non-profit organization (87, or 10.6%). Common groups that athletes connected with were voter turnout organizations, philanthropic groups such as legal defense and youth assistance funds, and diversity advocacy alliances. This discrepancy further highlights the connection that Black athlete activists have not only among each other, but toward the larger political activist scene as well.

LeBron James' political tweets deserve special attention, as he plays a crucial role in the deeper quantitative analysis in the subsequent chapter. Therefore, let me briefly discuss what the

content of his political tweets looks like in particular. To provide some additional context, James' activism has been the focus of previous studies. Arguably the most notable one found his activism to be cautious and deliberate, with moderated messages contextualized by his brand and ambitions (Coombs & Cassilo 2017). Importantly, this study was conducted well before the time period I analyze here. Assuming the results of the previous study are correct, my analysis suggests that James' activism has shifted dramatically over the last few years.

The existing research may suggest that James' political tweets largely fall into the generic statements and general awareness category; my data does not support this narrative. In fact, only 21 (19.6%) of LeBron James' political tweets solely contain content that can be considered to aim at spreading general awareness, or a more cautious and moderated approach. Conversely, 44 (41.1%) of his political tweets either encourage people to vote or directly endorse a politician.⁴⁶ In addition, James' political tweets include some of the strongest language across the entire dataset, such as a tweet from August 28, 2020, stating "FUCK THIS MAN!!! WE DEMAND CHANGE. SICK OF IT", and a tweet from June 20, 2020, stating "Said it last week about GA. This is SYSTEMIC RACISM and OPPRESSION. So angry man. #BlackLivesMatter."

It bears mentioning, however, that James, in line with the opening quote of this chapter, indeed strongly focused his efforts on the right to vote and getting people to participate politically in this way. Only 7 (6.5%) of his political tweets encouraged the use of other avenues for political participation apart from voting. The following chapter analyzes, among other things,

⁴⁶ 31 tweets were coded as GOTV, 18 as specific endorsements, with 5 tweets receiving both codes.

if this discrepancy in strategy also leads to differing effects on his ability to persuade people to engage in various forms of political participation.

Furthermore, a closer look at James' political tweets reveals that he is not only a focal point for other athlete activists, as others like Lewis Hamilton and Sue Bird have stated (see discussion in previous chapter), but actively embraces and fosters this leadership role. 25 (23.4%) of his political tweets had a direct connection to others, supporting athletes such as Bubba Wallace, Draymond Green, and Chiney Ogwumike in their activism. As such, James appears to have a strong sense of the communal nature of his activism, connecting with athletes and activists across leagues, sports, and organizations. Once again, this depicts a departure from the much more cautious approach to his activism that previous studies report.

To tie the engagement and content analysis together, it is worth taking a look at what kinds of political content might drive the increased engagement around political tweets reported above. Unfortunately, the results do not provide a remarkably clear picture. Explicit endorsements and comments on events that sparked the protests are, on average, the strongest drivers of higher total engagement. Interestingly, however, when looking at the relative percentages of the three engagement metrics, these two categories drive engagement in different ways. While commenting on relevant events is also a main driver of increased average retweet ratios of political tweets (alongside lobbying for legislation and calls to direct action), candidate endorsements are a strong driver for a higher average likes ratio among political tweets

(alongside tweets that include a connection to other athlete activists).⁴⁷ Overall, then, there is no clear pattern as to what political content mainly drives higher engagement among political tweets, though commentary on relevant events (for overall engagement numbers and retweet ratios) and calls to direct action (for both retweet and comment ratios) seem to be the most effective ones at creating more meaningful engagement, whereas endorsements of candidates create high engagement at a more surface level through an increased number of likes.

The findings of the preceding analyses have multiple important implications. To begin, the results suggest that in a broad sense, social media, and Twitter especially, are a locale of (one form of) political activism, and importantly one that is fruitful for activism. Political content on average fosters more engagement than nonpolitical content, and it tends to get users more involved as the retweet ratio is substantially higher for political tweets. These two points are noteworthy in and of themselves.

First, social media users often do not explicitly go to these platforms to find political content, but instead happen upon it coincidentally. This, in combination with the fact that Twitter users engage with political content more than with nonpolitical content, underscores other evidence which shows that stumbling upon political content not sought out by individuals can still lead to increased perceptions of saliency of a political issue and higher levels of online political participation among those individuals (Feezell 2018, Valeriani and Vaccari 2016).

⁴⁷ I consider a frame a driver for higher overall engagement or higher engagement ratios if tweets containing that frame, on average, resulted in engagement that was more than one standard deviation above the average for all political tweets.

Second, the deeper engagements in the form of a higher average ratio of retweets that political content experiences make this activism especially worthwhile. Retweets are a form of sharing on social media, and quote retweets allow for both the sharing and commenting of other users' posts. As Wojcieszak et al. (2022, 2) point out, "sharing and commenting represent more active engagement with elite messages, are more public in nature, and hence have greater impact on the online public sphere" than simply liking a tweet or following an account. Furthermore, evidence displays that retweets usually indicate interest in the message, trust in the message source, and agreement with the message content (Metaxas et al. 2015). In addition, retweeting can be both a form of information diffusion and a means of participating in a diffuse conversation (boyd et al. 2010). In other words, retweeting does not only spread a message to new audiences but also validates and engages with other users. Increased retweet ratios are therefore particularly valuable for political activism online.

Retweeting or sharing political content is a crucial tool because a large part of the purpose behind political activism on social media is spreading a certain message and raising awareness for an issue in hopes of reaching enough people so that a critical mass demands change. This, in turn, incentivizes elected officials to act. Alternatively, when considering election endorsements, the goal might be to turn out enough people to vote representatives into office that can deliver on these policy demands. As such, the fact that political tweets on average get significantly more absolute engagement than nonpolitical tweets suggests that social media activism can indeed serve its intended purpose. The finding that users also engage with political tweets in a qualitatively different way – that is, they, on average, retweet political tweets at a

higher percentage than nonpolitical ones – further aids this purpose, as retweeting is the form of engagement that reaches most other users as compared to commenting on or liking a tweet.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the findings of this chapter also underscore the ability of (Black) Twitter to serve as a digital counterpublic. Based on Dawson’s (2001) claim that the content of Black information networks, and by extension Black counterpublics, is often fueled and driven by Black (counter-)elites, Twitter appears to function in such a way when it comes to Black athletes acting as political (counter-)elites in the digital sphere. The public reacts to and engages with Black athletes’ political discourse on Twitter – oftentimes discourse that resists hegemonic power, contests majoritarian narratives, and reasserts racial identities – thereby creating a digitally networked community that operates in a space distinct from those occupied by dominant groups. Put differently, Black athletes and their followers on Twitter constitute one form of a digital counterpublic.

The second important implication is directly connected to the first implication, and to the broader motivation for this dissertation – this significant political activism was not carried out by “random” political activists, but by Black professional athletes. Therefore, given that their political activism on Twitter elicits meaningful responses, Black athletes can indeed be considered political elites when they participate in political advocacy: their activism commands attention and mobilizes engagement on the part of the public.

⁴⁸ A retweet will always show up on followers’ timelines, whereas a liked or commented-on tweet only shows up sometimes, based on each user’s specific algorithms.

To be clear, I have no reason to believe that this type of heightened engagement with political content online is exclusive to Black athletes, but for reasons alluded to earlier, they are especially well-positioned to attract such engagement. The point this chapter, and the dissertation at large, aims to make is not that Black athletes are unique in their ability to elicit high engagement from Twitter users when participating in political activism online. Rather, the noteworthy finding here is the mere fact *that* they foster such engagement, given that sports is often framed as a reprieve from politics, athletes are often told to be apolitical and – despite their status as celebrities – are usually not considered influential political actors.

The finding that the public does not shy away from Black athletes when they participate in political activism online and, in fact, seem to embrace such activism ties in nicely with other, emerging work on the political role of Black athlete activists. Existing research shows that politically active Black athletes are capable of convincing people in their communities to get more involved politically; they can offer a powerful mobilizing force for Black Americans (Towler et al. 2019). Similarly, Black athletes such as LeBron James and Colin Kaepernick enjoy a much higher approval rating in the Black community than Joe Biden and other politicians, especially among people that tend to not be politically involved much (Towler et al. 2020). Consequently, Black athletes might reach a subset of the population politically that traditional politicians fail to connect with.

The results of my analysis here complement these findings insofar as Black athletes' political tweets (due to their increased ratio of retweets and subsequent reach) can similarly draw more people into political activism and thus increase political engagement, which is a positive

effect not only for Black Americans, but for democracy as a whole. If Black athletes can foster more political engagement through their activism among the politically uninterested, they might be uniquely situated to draw people into political participation that stumble upon their political content online by accident. Even though I am unable to confirm the demographics of the Twitter users that most heavily engage with Black athletes' political content online, the findings of this chapter underscore this general dynamic, especially given the prevalence of "Get Out the Vote" tweets as part of the political tweets analyzed.

In fact, as the results of the content analysis of political tweets show, Black athletes actively encourage political participation across a range of avenues, whether it be registering people to vote, contacting elected representatives, donating, volunteering, or turning people out to protest marches. This constitutes a qualitative change in athlete activism from previous generations, and arguably even from the approaches many athletes took prior to the last ten years. Based on my content analysis, athlete activists pursue a much more aggressive, overt agenda in their activism compared to the often more cautious, moderated approach taken before, as chronicled in the previous chapter.

LeBron James presents a prime example of this shift, not only compared to previous generations, but as an example of the shift that has occurred even among contemporary activists. James changed his approach to activism from cautious and moderated to much more aggressively calling on the public and politicians to demand change, as well as establishing an extremely successful voter registration organization. That is, James' shift in modes of activism is indicative of the larger changing nature of Black athlete activism and its specific contours. On

top of this, James' connection to other athlete activists is equally indicative of the increased interconnection of athletes, across sports and leagues, engaging in political activism that the content analysis of political tweets depicts. This creation of a community of athlete activists creates certain protections for individual athletes as it reduces the potential risks that come with participating in such activism if a critical mass of athletes engages in it. By extension, this increased alliance also further bolsters their potential role as opinion leaders for the mass public that the subsequent chapter investigates.

I do want to offer a cautionary note here as regards the focus on online activism. First of all, online activism is by no means the only form of activism many of these Black athletes engage in. As such, only analyzing the engagement around their activism on one social media platform likely undervalues the potential overall impact that Black athlete activism can have. At the same time, Black athletes themselves are aware of the potential issue that if all their activism does is lead to more retweets, the real-world implications might be severely limited (Sullivan 2022). Put differently, the real-world solutions that athletes advocate for often take more than simple tweets to be implemented. This chapter does not address the issue of online vs. real-world activism here, but the following chapter aims to construct much more causal connections with the help of experimental survey data. Based on the variety of calls toward political participation that the content analysis revealed, in combination with the fact that tweets containing calls to direct action are a driver of heightened retweet ratios, I have ample reason to believe that Black athletes can indeed succeed in encouraging the public to vote and engage in other forms political participation.

A third major implication concerns the backlash to their activism that many Black athletes have received from (mainly) conservative spheres in recent years. Ever since Colin Kaepernick started kneeling during the national anthem in 2016, varying opinions about the validity of such protest surfaced. While some people applaud athletes using their platform to engage in politics, many others think that sports should be kept as a sanctuary away from America's divisive political discourse (Whitlock 2017). Despite the historical interconnection between sports and politics, skeptical voices continue to consider the "recent" mingling an undesirable development. Notably, these critiques largely stem from the conservative side of the political spectrum. Fox News host Laura Ingraham infamously told LeBron James to "shut up and dribble" after he discussed the current political climate in an *ESPN* interview (Sullivan 2018). Another conservative pundit suggests that "infiltrating" sports with politics is a mechanism of the political left meant to spread progressive propaganda and undermine the unity sports provide (Travis 2018). However, this argument omits the fact that the political right also uses sports for conservative purposes.

This apparent hypocrisy notwithstanding, when considering the results this chapter reports and how much online engagement Black athlete activism causes, chiefly in support of progressive racial justice policies, the conservative backlash might be logical based on another rationale. It might be less of a normative concern that sports and politics should not mix to preserve the sanctity of sports, and much more of a strategic opposition from a policy preference standpoint. If Black athletes have this kind of influence on social media and beyond, and they tend to advocate for progressive politics, then maybe it is entirely rational for conservative

voters, pundits, and politicians alike to feverishly oppose athlete activism: they have a direct incentive to contest athletes that are successful at pushing policy positions that they fundamentally oppose. Also, this concern is perhaps even more justified given that this chapter only analyzed online activism on Twitter. Other forms of activism, such as speaking on political issues on live television, during media availabilities, or at public events, lobbying elected representatives, or campaigning with political candidates in the field might magnify the impact of this activism even further.⁴⁹

Lastly, another implication of these findings, albeit minor, relates to the Black non-U.S. athletes that were included in this analysis: Lewis Hamilton (British), Evander Kane (Canadian), and Naomi Osaka (Japanese). This study is very U.S.-centric, as are the majority of celebrity studies in general. With the important caveat in mind that these three athletes only accounted for 434 observations (16%) in the overall sample, it is noteworthy that the aggregate patterns held true for all three athletes. This at the very least hints at the possibility that celebrities, and athletes in general, can be meaningful political actors outside of the U.S. context as well and that the dynamic of Black athlete activism fostering increased engagement among the public is not a purely U.S.-based phenomenon.

V. Conclusion

This chapter examined the public's engagement with Black athlete activism on the social media platform Twitter. I wanted to know how the public responded to the recent resurgence of

⁴⁹ Kelly Loeffler's Senate runoff loss in 2021 comes to mind as an instructive example here.

Black athlete activism, especially in the digital era, and what this suggests about athletes' ability to influence politics. Specifically, I wanted to know how, if at all, the public reacted to Black athletes engaging in political activism online between May 25, 2020, and January 6, 2021, and how Twitter users engaged with political tweets from Black athletes as compared to nonpolitical tweets? Moreover, I set out to analyze what types of political content Black athletes share online and how different forms of political content may affect the public's engagement with these political messages.

Previous research finds that Twitter users' engagement with celebrity endorsements of presidential candidates did not receive any less engagement than nonpolitical tweets by the same celebrities (Zilinsky et al. 2019). Moreover, Twitter users tend to retweet information from political elites, especially if the message aligns with their own policy preferences (Wojcieszak et al. 2022). In addition, research shows that Black athletes lend themselves as political leaders in the Black community (Blue 2018, Gallup 1993). This chapter built on this existing research by specifically interrogating the ways in which Twitter users engaged with a particular type of celebrity, namely Black athletes, and their specific political activism. The analysis reveals a pattern wherein political tweets by Black athletes, on average, got much higher absolute total engagement numbers than nonpolitical tweets. Further, political tweets elicit a qualitatively different level of engagement, with retweets much more common among political tweets. That is, the findings suggest that Twitter users on average engage with political content by Black athlete activists at higher rates and in more meaningful ways.

To supplement the engagement analysis, the results of a content analysis of all political tweets report a wide variety of types of political content that Black athletes post online. Far from being cautious activist mostly concerned with preserving their public image, many of the Black athletes in this study are more than willing to take explicit, potentially controversial stances on relevant political issues, push for direct action, and encourage others to make their voices heard. Black athletes played a crucial role in registering people to vote during the 2020 election, calling on the public to participate politically through alternative avenues other than voting, and used their platforms to share personal stories and commentary on relevant societal events. This is a stark contrast to how many observers have characterized athlete activists in the past.

These findings squarely put Black athlete activists into the realm of political elites. Given that their activism on Twitter elicits meaningful responses, Black athletes should be considered political elites when they participate in political advocacy: their activism commands attention and mobilizes engagement on the part of the public. This complements existing research which shows that politically active Black athletes are capable of convincing people in their communities to get more involved politically (Towler et al. 2019).

Similarly, the findings suggest that on a broader scale, Twitter is a viable locale for social activism as far as spreading awareness and getting more people involved in a movement is concerned. Of course, if activism stops after a retweet, the real world consequences of such activism remain questionable. Nevertheless, it is one key step to getting more people involved, who then can get involved in other forms of activism as well. The findings also underscore the robust interrelation between sports, politics, and race that has existed throughout American

history. In particular, the findings presented in this chapter offer a possible explanation for why, despite the longstanding interconnectedness, this recent resurgence of athlete activism was met with so much opposition from the conservative political spectrum. Critics of Black athletes' political activism have an obvious incentive to contest athletes that are successful at pushing policy positions that conservatives fundamentally oppose.

Of course, this chapter has its limitations. One easily identifiable limitation that I touched upon already is the sole reliance on Twitter data. Despite the importance that Twitter plays for many athletes to express themselves, it still is only one of many potential outlets for activism. Relatedly, the lack of demographic data on Twitter makes it nearly impossible to determine which groups of people, exactly, are most drawn to engage with Black athletes' political activism online. Another potential limitation is the unique, context-specific circumstances under which the athlete activism studied in this chapter occurred. The spring, summer, and fall of 2020 included a virtually unprecedented combination of a global pandemic, the biggest social justice movement in a generation, and a seminal presidential election. There is a possibility that under different circumstances, Black athlete activism would not have had the same effect.

In addition, the uncertainty of causal impacts in the real world constitutes another limitation of this chapter. The findings show that Black athletes certainly are very successful at garnering activist engagement from Twitter users online. Likewise, the voter turnout (especially among the Black population) in the 2020 election, athletes' push to convert sports facilities into voting centers, as well as the successful campaign to get Democrats elected to the Senate in the Georgia runoff all suggest that Black athletes' political activism potentially did make a crucial

difference in swinging the election. Nevertheless, as far as the scope of this chapter goes, these are mere correlations.

A final caveat regards the changes that the (former) platform Twitter, now X, has experienced. After billionaire Elon Musk took over and rebranded the platform in 2022, the social media site underwent significant changes to its functionality and usage. In particular, the community-building aspect of Twitter that many enjoyed got lost, including its use for (Black) activism (Conger 2023). As such, Twitter / X is no longer functioning as it used to when the political engagement studied in this chapter occurred, leaving its future as a potential site for political engagement by Black athletes in question.

Ultimately, the findings in this chapter establish a baseline that the public in fact pays attention to Black athlete activists, and that Black athletes are capable of mobilizing other people toward more activism, at least in the digital realm. As such, this chapter functions as a justification for further research into this rather niche topic in political science and into the understudied nexus of sports, politics, and race more generally. The following chapter does precisely that: it engages in a deeper, quantitative analysis of Black athletes' political impact by bringing experimental survey data to bear on these dynamics. Therefore, the subsequent chapter aims to expand the findings in this chapter by providing better causal relationships between online activism and real-world political outcomes.

Chapter 3: Home Field Advantage: Black Athletes' Impact on Political Participation and Policy Preferences in the Black Community

I. Introduction

So far, this dissertation has used historical evidence to show that Black athletes have been deeply connected to American politics over the course of the nation's history. There is a clearly recognizable throughline, from the antebellum period to today, that connects Black athletes' importance in the quest for racial equality. Although the specific goals and tactics have changed over time, in part determined by structural constraints and limits on Black athletes' agency, these athletes continuously displayed strong awareness of the ways in which their actions reflect on the Black community in general, but also how they can use their platform to advocate for progress for their community. As I alluded to before, contemporary iterations of Black athlete activism have most in common with that of the 1960s, yet exceed anything we have seen before in size, diversity, and reach (Radnofsky & Beaton 2020, Streeter 2020, Sullivan 2020).

Further, I illustrated in the previous chapter that Black athletes command strong engagement from the public when they participate in online activism. In addition, Black athletes participate in a wide variety of types of political content online. Far from being cautious activists mostly concerned with preserving their public image, many Black athletes are more than willing to take explicit stances on relevant political issues, push for direct action, and encourage others to make their voices heard. Striking as these findings may be, given their exploratory nature, they do not yet allow me to make any causal or generalizable claims about

Black athletes' actual, real-world political impact apart from increasing online engagement with political content.

In the present chapter, I therefore explore the more explicit consequences of Black athlete activists engaging in political conduct. What impact, if any, do Black athletes have on Black politics? Do they shape Black people's attitudes and policy preferences? Do they provide elite cues to the masses? Further, can Black athletes encourage other Black people to get more involved politically, through both traditional and non-traditional avenues of political participation? With the help of a more rigorous quantitative analysis, based on my theoretical elaborations presented earlier, I gain leverage on these questions. Doing so allows me to make more causal claims, with more confidence, than I have been able to make so far in this dissertation. As such, this chapter presents a crucial addition to a comprehensive understanding of the political impact of Black athlete activism.

Ultimately, I demonstrate that Black athlete activists can influence Black public opinion on voting rights reform policies and can successfully mobilize the Black community to participate politically. However, my findings also show that these dynamics are not always as straight-forward as one might expect, as some of the outcomes of my analysis produce a rather complex set of results. To arrive at these conclusions, I employ original survey data, including a survey experiment, collected in fall 2022 as part of the Black Voter Project's nationally representative survey panel of 1,213 Black individuals. Thus, this chapter produces much-needed quantitative empirical evidence of Black athlete activism's real-world consequences for the political arena.

The balance of this chapter proceeds as follows. First, I briefly reiterate the key aspects of the theoretical basis for my interrogation of Black athletes' political impact on the Black community and state the claims this chapter tests. Then, I discuss the data and methods employed to arrive at my analytical results. I finish with a report and discussion of my findings, as well as some concluding remarks about the implications of Black athletes' role in mobilizing the Black community politically.

II. Black Athletes as (Political) Role Models in the Black Community

This chapter's quantitative analyses are rooted in the theoretical assumptions to which I alluded in a previous chapter in much more detail. Recall that Black athletes constitute a specific category of celebrity, and that celebrities are considered elites who can shape political behavior and public opinion, especially in contemporary times (Zaller 1992, Lenz 2012, Mills 1956, Wheeler 2013, Majic, O'Neill & Bernhard 2020). Athletes are also a unique kind of celebrity in that they are able to form lasting emotional bonds with their supporters, work in an unscripted, live setting, and can perpetuate lasting identities with their fan bases (Grinin 2011, Gorn & Oriard 1995, Wakefield 2007, Serazio 2019). In short, I contend that Black athletes can be influential political elites when they engage in political advocacy.

Furthermore, recall that the credibility of the message source can be a crucial factor in the social psychology of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo 1986, Pornpitakpan 2004, Johnson et al. 2019). Especially through the peripheral route to persuasion, where a simple cue from a credible source often determines behavior or attitudes, elites such as Black athletes can be particularly

impactful (Chaiken 1980, Wood et al. 1985, Hovland & Weiss 1951). Moreover, cues by Black elites are particularly effective among other Black people (Kuklinski & Hurley 1994).

Therefore, I posit that if Black athletes are perceived favorably and the Black community uses an athlete's issue stance as a heuristic, these athletes can influence public attitudes and the willingness to participate politically.

Finally, recall that sports, and by extension Black athletes, tend to attract more importance in the Black community than sports and white athletes do in white communities (Rudman 1986, Phillips 1976, Cashmore 1982). At least two existing theoretical explanations exist that have the potential to explain the heightened role of sports and Black athletes within the Black community: economic motivations rooted in self-interest and cultural motivations rooted in symbolic politics. These two theoretical lenses are traditionally seen as competing explanations for the formation of attitudes and political behavior (Sears et al. 1980, Bobo 1983, Crano 1997, Lau & Heldman 2009, Wolpert & Gimpel 1998). Whereas proponents of self-interest claim that individuals base their behaviors, attitudes, and policy preferences on rational choice, advocates of the symbolic politics approach suggest that affective reactions based on symbolic predispositions determine behavior, attitudes and policy preferences.

Relatedly, Black athletes lend themselves as community leaders due their status as role models. This status can be rooted in either of the two previously mentioned theoretical explanations: they can function as economic, materially oriented or symbolic, culturally oriented role models. Both provide a viable route through which Black athletes can be influential political actors in the Black community. Which of these approaches may have more exploratory power is

a question I test with the help of the survey experiment discussed below. Each celebrity treatment (LeBron James, Colin Kaepernick, and Jay-Z) functions as a proxy for one of the role model versions. Overall, then, both self-interest and symbolic politics provide theoretical avenues through which Black athletes can have a persuasive effect on the Black community in their capacity as political elites.

Grounded in my theoretical priors, discussed in detail in a previous chapter and summarized above, I derive three hypotheses. The balance of this chapter tests these hypotheses and discusses the results in the subsequent sections. The hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Given their status as role models in their community, Black athletes are effective in influencing Black public opinion on racial policy issues. As such, their advocacy has a significant, independent impact on individuals' policy positions.

Hypothesis 2: Given their status as role models in their community, Black athletes are effective in mobilizing Black individuals toward political participation. As such, their advocacy has a significant, independent effect on Black individuals' willingness to engage politically.

Hypothesis 3: Given their special status as role models in their community vis-à-vis other Black celebrities, Black athletes are more effective in mobilizing Black individuals toward political participation and influencing Black public opinion than Black non-athlete celebrities.

III. Data & Methods

A range of previous surveys included questions on how people perceive recent instances of athlete activism. Not a lot has been done beyond that, however. That is, we know whether or not people support the activism of athletes, and which individual characteristics might predict support or opposition of athlete activism. Opinions on athlete activism are strongly divided along partisan and racial lines, with white Republicans most likely to oppose it (New York Times/Siena College Research Institute 2022, Quinnipiac University Poll 2016, Tennery 2020). Unfortunately, we know little about the impact that the activism itself has on other attitudes and policy positions of the mass public, let alone in the Black community, which often is underrepresented in surveys to begin with.

To gain a better understanding of these potential impacts, I collected original survey data on Black athlete activism and its implications for public opinion and political participation in the Black community as part of the 2022 National Black Voter Project Panel Study.⁵⁰ The project collected data from an online questionnaire administered by Dynata, a non-partisan, survey research center with access to mobile panels for market and academic research. The survey was administered online based on randomly selected email addresses from lists of panel respondents who identify as African-American or Black. An online questionnaire was fielded throughout the months of October and November 2022, surveying respondents around the 2022 midterm elections. A total of 1,213 Black respondents were interviewed, and the survey had an

⁵⁰ The Black Voter Project is directed by Dr. Christopher Towler (Principal Investigator). I am grateful for his work and assistance in designing the survey instrument, as well as collecting the survey data.

average interview length of 24 minutes. The survey was stratified across age, education, and gender, collecting a nationally representative sample of respondents from all 50 states.

My main outcome variables of interest are a set of variables measuring respondents' willingness to participate politically, and a set of variables measuring respondents' policy positions on voting rights reform. The participation variables are measured on a scale from 0 (not likely) to 10 (highly likely), asking respondents how likely they are to engage in eight different forms of participation, respectively. Those modes of participation are as follows: vote in the 2022 midterm elections, vote in local elections, sign a petition, participate in a boycott for political reasons, participate in a political protest or march, attend a political meeting, contact a politician or civil servant to express their views, and donate money for a social or political activity.

The voting rights policy reform variables are measured on a scale from 0 (strongly oppose) to 100 (strongly support), asking respondents how much they support or oppose the following voting rights reforms: "making Election Day a federal holiday", "expanding automatic voter registration", and "expanding same-day voter registration", "expanding access to vote by mail", "expanding access to early voting", "making it illegal to prevent someone from registering to vote", "prohibiting a partisan gerrymandering, the act of manipulating electoral districts to give an advantage to a particular political party", and "requiring that states with a history of voting rights violations in the past 25 years to first get permission from the Department of Justice or U.S. District Court before making any changes to voting practices." Many Black athletes have been particularly vocal about the importance of voting in their recent

burst of political activism, and making access to voting easier has been one of the main action items of many Black athlete activists, not least through the LeBron James-led “More Than a Vote” organization. For the purpose of my analysis, I combined these voting rights policy items into a voting rights policy reform index.

The centerpiece of my dataset is an experiment designed to capture causal mechanisms of the potential impacts of Black athlete activism. I use a priming experiment in which I randomly assign respondents to one of four groups: three treatment groups and one control group. The three treatment groups all received an alike vignette, attributed to one of three different Black celebrities, respectively. The control group received no statement. The vignette reads as follows: “In November 2020, more than 298,000 people voted in over 40 different arenas or stadiums across the country. Celebrities played a huge role in not only securing the stadiums as polling places, but also voicing the importance of voting and participating in politics. [NAME] once said, talking about his voice in politics, “We just wanted to educate you, enlighten you and empower you. And let you know how important your right is.” [NAME] added that his efforts are also about wanting people “...to know how important it is not only to change what’s going on in America, but change what is going on in some of their communities.”

Three Types of Black Celebrities and Experimental Conditions

My ensuing analysis first and foremost investigates whether or not Black athletes truly function as elite political cue givers in the Black community. In addition to this more general dynamic, I also analyze if there indeed is a difference between the persuasiveness of the

culturally motivated symbolic politics approach and the economically motivated self-interest perspective when it comes to Black athletes engaging in political advocacy. Lastly, I also interrogate if Black athletes are truly more persuasive than other Black non-athlete celebrities. To interrogate these potential differences in persuasiveness, the experiment attributes the above statement to one of three different Black celebrity elites, each of which stands in as a proxy for one of these theoretical claims given their position as role models in the Black community: Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, and Jay-Z.

One treatment group receives a statement attributed to Colin Kaepernick, the former NFL quarterback that started kneeling during the national anthem before games in 2016. He represents the culturally oriented approach to the Black athlete as a role model. Perhaps the most direct reference to his status as such comes from activist Shaun King, who declared Kaepernick a “cultural superhero in the Black community” (King 2016). Others have pointed out that Kaepernick, through his leadership role in activism, has come to represent much more than just himself. Tellingly, one activist declared that Kaepernick *symbolizes* everything about the Black Lives Matter movement, comparing him to civil rights icons of the past such as Rosa Parks and Muhammad Ali (Reid 2017). Sports historian Harry Edwards suggests that Kaepernick fulfills the same role as “godfather of the militant athlete activist” in contemporary times as Muhammed Ali did for his generation (Thomas 2018, 213). Kaepernick’s status as cultural role model is further underscored by the fact that many people within the Black Lives Matter movement pay close attention to him; many even would like for him to be the face of the movement as a national leader (Towler et al. 2019, Tillery 2017).

Using the cultural capital he accumulated, he has also ventured into publishing an edited volume – together with esteemed scholars Robin Kelley and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor – that defends the existence of Black Studies against government censorship (Zirin 2023). Moreover, through media involvements such as his biographic Netflix series “Colin in Black & White” and a graphic novel based on his teenage years, he publicly grapples with his racial identity, in large part to inspire those who struggle with similar cultural issues (Fuller et al. 2023, Olcese 2021). Of course, Kaepernick also lost his job over his activism, and to this day remains unsigned as a football player. Thus, it is hardly his economic success that makes him a role model in the Black community, but rather his ideological, intellectual, and cultural leadership. As such, I expect Kaepernick to have a significant effect on Black political behavior.

In contrast, LeBron James, the 4x NBA champion and global basketball superstar that has turned his success on and off the court into a more than one-billion-dollar wealth portfolio, represents the materially oriented approach to the Black athlete as a role model. A second treatment group thus receives the statement above attributed to James. Apart from being one of the greatest basketball players of all time, LeBron James also is one of ten Black billionaires in the United States. This achievement in and of itself makes him an economic, materially oriented role model to many. To be clear, he has not merely accumulated wealth for himself: James from an early age has given back millions of dollars to his community through education initiatives, building public infrastructure, and providing other economic resources to underserved communities (Schneider 2021, Bechtoldt 2018).

Nevertheless, these community initiatives are strongly rooted in James' material success, making him an economic role model. Consider, for example, his appearance at the Bloomberg Global Business Forum, joining prominent politicians and business leaders such as Bill Gates, Emmanuel Macron, Bill Clinton, Tim Cook, and Justin Trudeau (Green 2017). Contrastingly, it is hard to imagine Colin Kaepernick among this group. In other words, LeBron James is a billion-dollar brand, not just an athlete. Some have noted that this also translates to his activism, leading to a careful, calculated, deliberate style – all of which falls squarely in line with a rational self-interest approach (Coombs & Cassilo 2017).⁵¹ In fact, he even has a distinguishable, significant positive economic impact on the cities he plays in (Shoag & Veuger 2017, Gregory 2014). LeBron James, then, is the archetype of the Black athlete as economic role model and I expect him to have significant impact on Black political behavior.

The third treatment group's statement is attributed to Shawn Carter, better known by his stage name Jay-Z. Carter is a Black rapper, producer, and entrepreneur, representing a Black non-athlete celebrity. This third treatment serves to test whether or not any Black celebrity can successfully influence Black political participation, or if Black athletes indeed have a superior ability to do so. Undoubtedly, Jay-Z is also seen as a role model by many in the Black community – one that is much more akin to the materially oriented role model that James represents than the cultural role model Kaepernick represents. Like James, Jay-Z grew up in an impoverished neighborhood and has made it to billionaire status. Jay-Z, in pivoting from rapper to entrepreneur, has accumulated a net worth of more than 2.5 billion dollars, positioning him as

⁵¹ It is worth reiterating here that, as I have shown in the previous chapter, James seems to have changed his style of activism in recent years to a more confrontational and militant one at times.

an even bigger economic role model than LeBron James (Francisco 2018). Observers have specifically pointed out his impressive business skill set, including his leadership style and entrepreneurial prowess (Wingard 2019).

Despite his impressive economic success and the material role model status that has come from it, Jay-Z has often been criticized, at times heavily, by parts of the Black community. A common critique is his perceived lack of investment in the community, instead only deliberately engaging in whatever protects and benefits his economic interest, even if it means making morally questionable corporate bedfellows – in other words, being a “sellout” (Muhammad 2019, Overs 2023, Gee 2019). The late civil rights activist and fellow entertainer Harry Belafonte sharply criticized Jay-Z (and his wife Beyoncé) for what he perceived as a lack of social responsibility, instead only taking safe political stances and prioritizing business interests (Zawia 2012). Markedly, even though LeBron James at times has taken a similar approach, public critiques of his style of activism have been notably fewer. Given these dynamics, and the general differences between Black athlete and non-athlete celebrities to which I alluded before, I expect Jay-Z, as a non-athlete economic role model, to have less of an influence on Black political behavior than Black athletes.

By introducing the aforementioned statement, attributed to the respective Black celebrity, the topic will be made salient to survey respondents before answering questions about their willingness to participate politically and their racial policy preferences shortly thereafter. Following the idea that the mass public samples issue positions based on the mix of positive and negative considerations from the “top of a person’s mind” at the time of questioning, the

statement might crucially affect these considerations (Zaller 1992). After survey participants receive the statement (if they are assigned to a treatment group), they are asked about their policy preferences and willingness to engage politically.

If my hypotheses about the political influences of Black athletes are correct, I expect respondents in the treatment groups to be more likely to be willing to participate in political engagement than those respondents that receive no such statement (HP1). Likewise, I expect respondents in the treatment groups, on average, to support progressive voting rights policy positions more so than those in the control group (HP2). In other words, if there are differences in response means between the control group and the treatment groups on how participants feel about policy issues and their willingness to engage politically in the future, then it stands to reason that the treatment was effective. Moreover, I expect respondents that receive an athletes' statement to have, on average, a higher willingness to engage politically and higher support of progressive voting rights policy positions than those respondents that receive the statement attributed to Jay-Z. That is, based on my third hypothesis, I expect Black athletes, on average, to be more persuasive than a Black non-athlete celebrity. As such, these treatments also constitute my main explanatory variables.

In addition to the survey experiment, the data also includes a set of variables that directly ask respondents if LeBron James' or Jay-Z's political actions ever inspired them to do one of the following: vote in a local, state, or national election, donate to a political campaign or cause, participate in a boycott of any professional sports, attend a protest or march, and post or comment on social media. In other words, while the survey experiment is designed to measure

more subconscious influences by Black celebrities on political participation, these questions ask about more conscious influences that LeBron James and Jay-Z may have had on Black people's political behavior. If a substantial number of respondents self-report that they have been politically influenced by either of these Black celebrities before, it stands to reason that a (potentially even larger) number of people will be influenced by their political messaging without being explicitly aware of it.

In any case, these more observational, yet direct, questions about Black celebrities' influence on Black respondents' political participation and policy preferences present a helpful additional measure of Black celebrities' persuasion potential. They complement the survey experiment in at least two ways: they are less temporally bound, and they may tell us more about the overall ability of Black celebrities to make political content salient. Regarding the first aspect, the experiment specifically measures Black celebrities' potential impact on the willingness to participate in the 2022 midterm elections. In contrast, the exploratory questions ask about *any* influence at *any point* in the past. Thus, this measure should be able to tap into a longer time frame of potential influence, especially around the 2020 presidential election.

Regarding the second aspect, reporting on whether or not one has been inspired politically by a celebrity before may also tap into some inherent connections respondents make between Black celebrities and political engagement more generally. In other words, this survey battery may also provide insight into Black celebrities' ability to raise the salience of political engagement and establish a connection between themselves and political advocacy. That, in turn, may lead respondents to attribute some of their own political actions to this celebrity

advocacy. Using both the experimental and observational parts in the survey allows me to investigate Black celebrities' political persuasion in a slightly broader way than simply through the subconscious priming of respondents in the survey experiment.

Moreover, the data includes feeling thermometers to investigate how favorable, or “warm,” the Black community feels toward LeBron James and Jay-Z, but also key politicians. Scores range from 0 (not feeling favorable, or warm, toward item at all) to 100 (very favorable / warm). Apart from measuring approval of individuals and groups, feeling thermometers are a useful method to determine preference orders (Weisberg & Miller 1979). As such, this allows me to analyze who different respondents approve of more than others (e.g. Black athletes versus other Black celebrities versus politicians). Measuring relative preferences toward elite actors also allows me to draw preliminary conclusions about the potential persuasiveness of Black athletes. Measuring how warm respondents feel toward Black celebrities that are not athletes, compared to Black athletes, also functions as a preliminary check of a celebrity effect more generally.

Along with the already discussed variables, the dataset contains various other variables, some of which I use in my analysis below. They include, but are not limited to, measures of items such as linked fate, sports fandom, approval of James', Kaepernick's & Jay-Z's activism, political trust, racial and political efficacy, past voting behavior, approval of Biden's job performance, and the prospect of Black equality, all of which may have an effect on the willingness to engage in political participation. Voting behavior in previous elections is a particularly warranted variable to include given that past behavior, generally speaking, is one of

the strongest predictors of future behavior, be it for voting or other behaviors (Gerber et al. 2003, Ouellette & Wood 1998, Bentler & Speckart 1981). These variables and their respective coding can be found in Appendix B. With the key explanatory and outcome variables introduced, I now turn to the discussion of my analysis and its findings.

IV. Results & Analysis

To begin, it is useful to establish a general correlation between athlete activism and heightened political participation. To do so, I first explore how favorable the Black community feels toward Black celebrities in general, as well as in comparison to some high-profile politicians. To refresh the reader's memory, respondents were asked to report how favorable or unfavorable they feel toward an individual on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 means not favorable at all and 100 means very favorable. Perceptions of general favorability, or positive feelings toward a message source, are a crucial aspect of a message source's ability to persuade people. The results of the feeling thermometer measurements provide a few noteworthy patterns.

Overall, respondents on average feel fairly similar toward LeBron James as they do toward President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. James, on average, scored a 64 rating (out of 100), compared to 66 for Joe Biden and 64 for Kamala Harris.⁵² Jay-Z, on the other hand, only received a mean score of 55, a statistically significant ($p < .05$) 9-point

⁵² Across all subsections discussed here, Biden and Harris received almost identical average favorability ratings (within 2 points), suggesting that any difference between Biden and James and/or Jay-Z is not mainly due to race. Harris receiving lower favorability ratings due to her gender, however, remains a possibility.

difference in average warmth felt toward the entrepreneur. Put differently, the feeling thermometer results suggest that LeBron James, as a proxy for Black athletes, enjoys similar popularity as the leading politicians in the country, whereas Jay-Z, as a proxy for Black non-athlete celebrities, does not. The overall trend of Jay-Z receiving lower favorability ratings than James, Biden, and Harris holds true across a range of subsections of the Black respondents surveyed, such as people that voted in 2020, and people that reported to be likely (>70% likelihood of voting or participating in non-traditional political action) to participate in the 2022 midterm elections. Black athletes, then, initially appear better situated to function as political cue-givers when compared to Black non-athlete celebrities given their higher popularity within the Black community.

LeBron James' favorability among a couple of crucial subsections of the Black population, however, deserves special attention (see Figure 1). Among people with low political trust, LeBron James has by far the most favorable mean rating between himself, Jay-Z, Biden, and Harris. Even though James' average favorability (48 out of 100) is low among people with low political trust, it is noticeably higher than the ratings for Biden (39), Harris (41), and Jay-Z (41). The difference between James' and Biden's favorability among respondents with low political trust is statistically significant ($p < .05$). As such, despite this subsection of the Black population, on average, feeling slightly unfavorable toward LeBron James, they feel significantly better toward him than toward President Joe Biden, which may bode well for James to politically connect with those in the Black community that generally do not trust politics or politicians.

Additionally, among respondents that did not vote in the 2018 midterm elections, LeBron James, on average, scored the most favorable rating (55), whereas Biden and Harris barely scored favorable ratings at all (51 each), and Jay-Z received an unfavorable average rating (49). The difference in means between James and Jay-Z is statistically significant ($p < .05$). This difference is particularly interesting in that the 2018 election was the last one before the heightened athlete activism of 2020. James, then, seems to have been in a significantly more favorable position to convince 2018 non-voters to turn out in 2020 than Jay-Z, and slightly more favorable than the presidential candidates on the Democratic ticket themselves. To further underscore this dynamic, when grouping all respondents that did not vote in 2018 into those feeling warm toward an individual (50-100) and those that feel cold toward an individual (0-49), 53% and 51% of respondents felt warm toward Joe Biden and Jay-Z, respectively, whereas 61% of respondents felt warm toward LeBron James – another advantage for the Black athlete’s persuasion potential within this group.

In sum, then, an exploratory analysis of feeling thermometer rankings suggests that LeBron James is at least as popular as Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, more popular than these politicians among certain subgroups of the population that are particularly disillusioned with politics, and more popular than Jay-Z, a Black non-athlete celebrity, across the board. Black athletes, it appears, are comparatively well-situated to be able to persuade members of the Black community toward political action based on their heightened favorability as a message source.

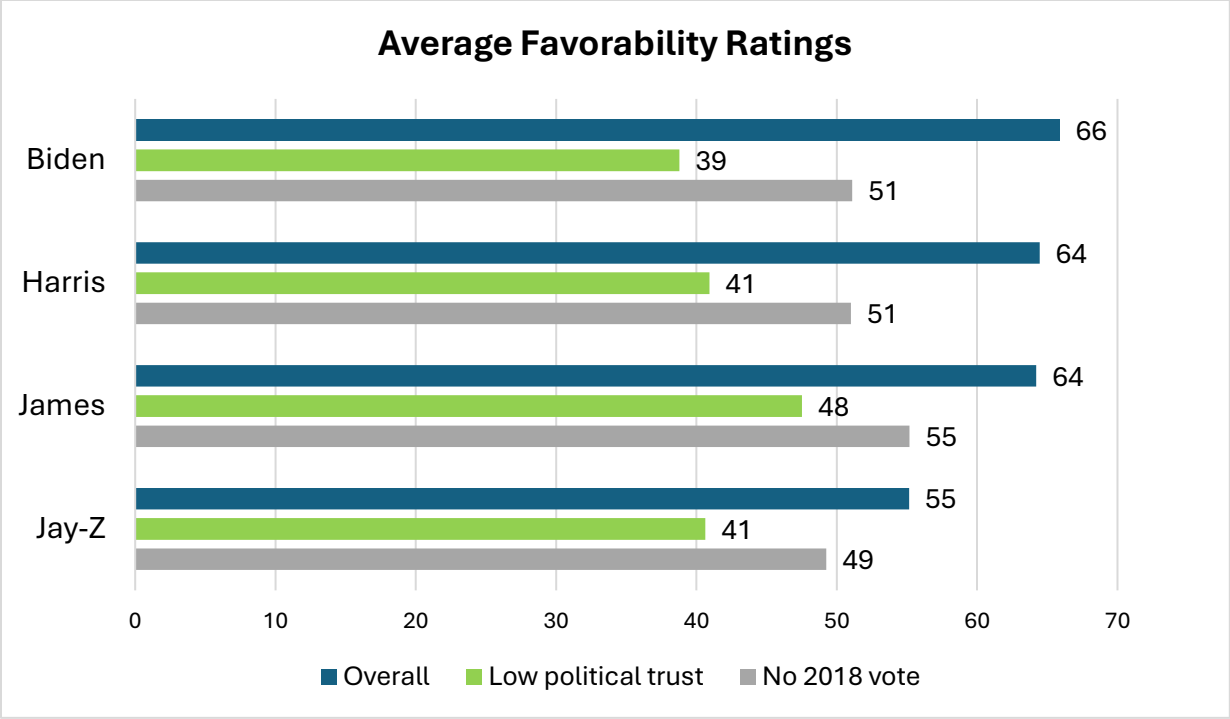


Figure 1: Average favorability rating among groups of respondents

There is, of course, a chance that Black people simply feel more favorable toward Black athletes like LeBron James due to their celebrity and their value as entertainers, but want nothing to do with their political activism. Therefore, a look at the ways in which the Black community perceives of political activism by Black athletes, and celebrities more generally, is warranted. After all, a general fondness of Black athletes’ activism is a necessary condition for the potential effectiveness of such activism and for Black athletes to persuade their communities on political issues. There was no explicit measurement of approval for Colin Kaepernick’s activism included in the survey instrument, but approval of kneeling during the national anthem as a form of protest was measured. Given that Kaepernick started this protest movement, and

was the personification of kneeling during the anthem for years, it stands to reason that this measurement serves as an adequate proxy for approval of Kaepernick's activism.

As it turns out, kneeling during the national anthem as a form of protest receives widespread support throughout the Black community – 82% of all respondents support such protests. This number remains steady across multiple subsections of the population, such as 2018 non-voters, as well as those with low political and racial efficacy or low political trust. Perhaps the most noteworthy finding as regards Kaepernick's anthem protest is that even 52% of Black Republicans support the anthem protest, despite the fact that the vast majority of Republicans across the country do not. In short, then, kneeling during the national anthem – a form of protest that Colin Kaepernick pioneered in 2016 – enjoys approval across large parts of the Black community.

Unlike approval for Kaepernick, the survey directly measured approval of LeBron James' and Jay-Z's activism.⁵³ The results suggest that their activism is even more popular than kneeling during the anthem. In fact, both of these celebrities received almost identical support for their activism: 93% of all respondents approved of James' activism, whereas 91% approved of Jay-Z's activism. These approval ratings remain consistently high among various subsections of respondents. Compared to kneeling during the anthem, James' and Jay-Z's activism surprisingly is even more popular with Black Republicans: 74% of them support James'

⁵³ Half of respondents were randomly assigned to receive a question about their approval of LeBron James' activism, the other half received a question about their approval of Jay-Z's activism (for question and coding, see Appendix B).

activism, 72% approve of Jay-Z’s activism.⁵⁴ One noteworthy outlier in this general pattern is that, among people with low political efficacy, 65% *strongly* support James’ activism (compared to 56% for Jay-Z’s activism and 50% that strongly approve of kneeling during the national anthem). As such, LeBron James’ political activism seems to resonate particularly well with people that feel like they have little say about what their government does – and therefore may initially stay away from politics.

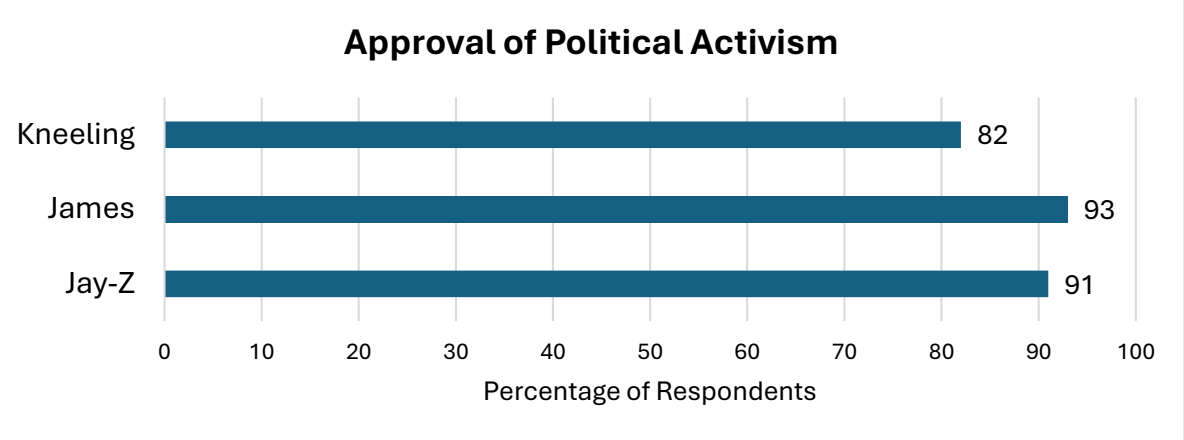


Figure 2: Approval of political activism by different Black celebrities

Across the Black community, LeBron James and Jay-Z thus, on average, enjoy a 9- to 11-point higher approval rate of their activism than Kaepernick’s kneeling does. Overall, both Black celebrity athletes and non-athletes seem poised to have enough support for their political activism to also have a substantial impact on the Black community’s political participation. At the very least, judging from the approval their activism receives from groups with low political

⁵⁴ I concede, however, that the observations for James’ and Jay-Z’s activism approval among Black Republicans are rather few, with N=19 and N=25, respectively. As such, these results should be considered with some caution.

efficacy or interest, they seem to be capable of drawing the attention of people to politics and raising the salience of certain issues. Nevertheless, high approval of Black athletes' activism does not indicate anything about tangible political consequences so far – which is precisely why I turn to a more rigorous analysis of the causal mechanisms below. Before doing so, however, there is one last measurement in the survey instrument that provides valuable insight into the potential effects of Black athlete activism on the Black community's political engagement: self-reported participatory inspiration as a result of celebrity activism.

The survey directly asked respondents whether LeBron James' or Jay-Z's political actions, respectively, ever inspired them to vote in an election, donate to a political cause, participate in a boycott of a professional sports, attend a protest march, or post a political commentary on social media.⁵⁵ Among all participants, 38% reported to have been inspired to vote by LeBron James, 20% to donate to a political campaign, 18% to boycott a professional sport, 18% to attend a protest or march, and 24% to post on social media. Conversely, of those asked about Jay-Z's influence, 40% reported to have been inspired to vote, 19% to donate to a political campaign, 17% to boycott a professional sport, 18% to attend a protest or march, and 25% to post on social media by the musician. Across people that voted in 2020, the results look very similar (see Table 1). In other words, both Black celebrities have had roughly equal levels of impact with their political activism, at least according to respondents' own perception.

⁵⁵ Respondents received the political inspiration questions based on which celebrity they randomly got assigned to for the activism approval question, i.e. someone who received the question about approval of LeBron James' activism also received the battery of questions about being inspired toward political action by James.

	All Respondents		2020 Voters	
	<i>James</i>	<i>Jay-Z</i>	<i>James</i>	<i>Jay-Z</i>
Vote	38%	40%	42%	44%
Donate	20%	19%	22%	21%
Boycott	18%	17%	20%	17%
March	18%	18%	19%	19%
Post	24%	25%	25%	26%

Table 1: Self-reported inspiration by Black celebrity activist toward political participation

When specifically looking at people that reported that they did not vote in 2016 but did vote in 2020, 46% said that LeBron James inspired them to vote, while 37% said the same about Jay-Z, though both groups constitute a relatively small sample size in the data (N=44 and 49, respectively). Likewise, among those that did not vote in the 2018 midterm elections but reported to be likely to vote in the 2022 midterm elections (>.67 on scale of 0-1), 51% said James inspired them to vote, with 46% saying the same about Jay-Z, although the sample size once again is low (N=53 and 50, respectively).

Nevertheless, this subset may present a particularly interesting group for the purpose of studying the political impact of Black athletes and celebrities, as successfully getting people to vote that did not do so in the past is arguably one of the hardest, yet most impactful pieces of political activism. Since Black celebrities’ political activism was exponentially greater before the 2020 election than the 2016 one, any respondents that voted in 2020 but did not vote in 2016 (or planned to vote in 2022 as opposed to 2018) and claimed to have been inspired to vote by a Black celebrity before most definitely referred to the two most recent elections. Based on these

self-reported results, both Black athletes and non-athlete celebrities may have played a substantial role in this development given that roughly half of the people that did not vote before 2020 affirmed being inspired to vote by either LeBron James, and more than one-third by Jay-Z.

These results also slightly complicate the feeling thermometer findings; while LeBron James' high favorability seems to have led to successful persuasion, there is no noticeable self-reported difference between his persuasion and that of Jay-Z, who received lower average favorability ratings. In other words, the results here suggest that Black athletes are indeed capable of influencing levels of political participation among the Black community, which constitutes a strong baseline for my first two hypotheses on the ability of Black athletes to impact politics, yet the theorized difference between Black athletes and non-athlete celebrities does not bear out in the data so far. Importantly, this measure in the survey relied on self-reported inspirations, which is also open to a variety of potential biases (Bernstein et al. 2001, Brenner & DeLamater 2016).

Therefore, it is even more important to follow up on these self-reported results with a more rigorous analysis, one that taps into much less conscious behavior (at least to the extent that it does not directly ask respondents about a celebrity's impact on their behavior, but rather covertly measures their behavior based on being subjected to a celebrity's activism), controls for a variety of potentially mitigating variables, and allows for more causal claims. With the help of the survey experiment described above, I now set out to do just that and fully test my hypotheses by way of multivariate regression analysis.

In this next step, I test the treatment effect of receiving a statement from either LeBron James, Jay-Z, or Colin Kaepernick, compared to not receiving such a statement, on respondents' likelihood to participate politically and on their preferred position regarding voting rights policy. First, I use a multivariate regression model to test the treatment effect on political participation. The outcome variables I test are the likelihood of engaging in each of the eight forms of political participation (vote in the 2022 midterm elections, vote in local elections, sign a petition, participate in a boycott for political reasons, participate in a political protest or march, attend a political meeting, contact a politician or civil servant to express their views, and donate money for a social or political activity) discussed earlier.

Overall, the results are, dare I say, underwhelming. Given that the treatments were randomized, I start by simply regressing the different treatments on the likelihood of participating politically, without any covariates. The only Black celebrity that has a statistically significant (at the $p < 0.1$ level) influence on participants' political participation likelihood is LeBron James, and his influence is limited to getting people to vote in the 2022 midterm elections; LeBron James' endorsement does not have an independent effect on any of the other seven forms of political participation, including the likelihood to vote in a local election. Colin Kaepernick's and Jay-Z's endorsements fail to have any measurable impact on any form of political participation.

These results hold true even when using a more specified model, one that includes covariates such as previous voting behavior, political efficacy and interest, linked fate, approval of Biden's job performance, sports fandom, party affiliation, and standard sociodemographic

measures (see Table 2). As such, LeBron James, who functions as a proxy for the materially oriented Black athlete role model, appears to be the only Black celebrity having any influence on the Black community’s willingness to participate politically – and even his influence is limited to voting behavior in a national election.

	Model 1	Model 2
Kaepernick Treatment	0.007(0.027)	0.021(0.023)
Jay-Z Treatment	0.011(0.027)	0.022(0.024)
LeBron Treatment	0.045* (0.027)	0.041* (0.024)
Voted in 2020		0.339*** (0.026)
Political Efficacy		0.029(0.026)
Political Interest		0.186*** (0.031)
Approval of Biden		0.031(0.031)
Linked Fate		0.029(0.027)
Sports Fandom		0.059** (0.023)
Gender		-0.027(0.019)
Age		0.114*** (0.027)
Income		0.072*** (0.026)
Education		0.027(0.028)
Democrat		0.044(0.040)
Independent		-0.009(0.041)
Constant	0.743*** (0.019)	0.173*** (0.054)
Observations	1,158	787
R ²	0.003	0.382

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
 Cell entries are linear regression coefficients.

Table 2: Determinants of Voting in National Election

There are, however, two subgroups of respondents that deserve special mention as regards Black celebrities’, and especially James’, influence on their voting likelihood: sports

fans and those people that did not vote in the previous election. When only measuring the treatments' impact on respondents that indicated to be sports fans, without any additional covariates, James' impact is significant (at the $p < 0.1$ level). His impact is even more pronounced among those that did not vote in the previous election, with James' treatment significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. When testing the treatments' impact on these subgroups with the more specified model, James' impact remains significant (at the $p < 0.1$ level) for both groups, while Kaepernick and Jay-Z remain without impact in any of these models (see Appendix C). Therefore, it appears that James is particularly capable of persuading sports fans and previous non-voters to vote in national elections. In contrast, Colin Kaepernick, the culturally oriented Black athlete role model, and Jay-Z, the Black non-athlete celebrity, fail to have any persuasive effects on respondents' willingness to participate politically.

Lastly, I test Black celebrities' impact on policy preferences around voting rights reform, measured by the index of the eight voting rights reform policies discussed earlier. The results are arguably even more underwhelming than the previous ones. When simply regressing the treatments on respondents' voting rights policy preferences, there are no statistically significant effects for any of the three Black celebrity treatments.⁵⁶ In a more specified model, LeBron James' endorsement is once again the only treatment that has a statistically significant impact (at the $p < 0.1$ level), whereas Kaepernick's and Jay-Z's endorsements again fail to produce any meaningful independent effect on Black people's likelihood of supporting progressive voting rights reforms, despite being primed about the importance of voting by either Black celebrity

⁵⁶ This holds true for the index of all eight voting rights policy items, as well as for each individual policy item.

(see Table 3). In sum, LeBron James is the only Black celebrity across both political participation likelihood and voting rights policy preferences to have any measurable persuasive impact on the Black community. For the balance of this chapter, I discuss the implications of my findings below.

	Model 1	Model 2
Kaepernick Treatment	1.051(1.962)	1.882(2.205)
Jay-Z Treatment	-0.053(2.011)	1.292(2.249)
LeBron Treatment	0.914(1.986)	3.805* (2.203)
Voted in 2020		8.728*** (2.314)
Political Trust		13.342*** (3.379)
Political Interest		14.483*** (2.802)
Racial Efficacy		-7.649* (4.193)
Sports Fandom		-1.388(2.210)
Gender		-0.224(1.788)
Age		7.621*** (2.502)
Income		5.321** (2.432)
Education		3.903(2.648)
Democrat		16.349*** (3.461)
Independent		9.960*** (3.687)
Constant	71.704*** (1.399)	31.227*** (5.444)
Observations	1,068	639
R ²	0.0005	0.238

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
 Cell entries are linear regression coefficients.

Table 3: Determinants of Supporting Progressive Voting Rights Policy

V. Discussion

The results of this study paint a complicated picture about the impact of Black athlete activists on Black political behavior. At first glance, Black celebrities, and Black professional

athletes in particular, seem to operate under a variety of advantageous conditions in order to influence political activity in their communities. Black athletes enjoy high levels of favorability among vast sections of the Black community, which also, by and large, supports celebrities' political activism and feels positive toward such political advocacy. Perhaps most notably, plenty of people in the Black community self-report that they have been previously inspired by a Black (athlete) celebrity to vote and engage in other, more non-traditional forms of political participation. All of these findings are consistent with the sporadic previous research that exists.

Despite these more than favorable conditions, the results of the survey experiment show only very limited actual impact of Black athletes on Black political engagement. In fact, only LeBron James' endorsement has any measurable impact on the likelihood to vote in a midterm election and the support of more progressive voting rights policies, while Jay-Z and Colin Kaepernick appear to have no impact on Black political behavior or policy preferences at all. To a degree, it makes sense that if any of the Black celebrities included in the survey experiment was to have an impact, it would be LeBron James, the more materially oriented Black role model. He consistently scored higher levels of favorability and approval of his activism across respondents compared to Jay-Z, the non-athlete celebrity, and Colin Kaepernick, who functioned as a proxy for the more culturally oriented Black role model.

Given that there is a significant treatment effect for LeBron James in a couple of instances and none for Jay-Z at all, these results provide some slight evidence to confirm my hypothesis that Black athletes can be more impactful than non-athlete celebrities, as well as the

general fact that Black athletes can influence Black political behavior. At the same time, however, I readily concede that the effects are much smaller and more limited than expected.

In particular, the fact that Kaepernick's endorsement failed to produce any significant results partially thwarts my confidence and makes me hesitant to confirm my third hypothesis in its entirety. Rather, my findings hint at the possibility that a specific type of Black athlete, namely the economic role model version, is capable of influencing Black politics, whereas the more symbolic, culturally oriented Black athlete role model is not. Of course, the fact that Jay-Z, who is much closer to LeBron James than to Colin Kaepernick in his status as an economic role model, also failed to produce any significant results further complicates this dynamic. On the one hand, the economic role model seems to have a larger political sway on the Black population than the symbolic role model, yet the athlete economic role model also outperforms the non-athlete economic role model.

Therefore, it is plausible that LeBron James may constitute a unique person capable of influencing Black politics. That is, James potentially taps into both the economic and the symbolic role model categories, although this is not a claim tested here and instead fodder for future studies. As discussed above, James undoubtedly fits the materially oriented role model category. However, it is reasonable that he also serves as a cultural role model for many people. After all, James, especially in recent years, has engaged in much community work, building schools for underserved youth, founding community organizations, and shifting some of his activism approaches to more militant, less "corporate" activism (as shown in the previous chapter). This notion is in line with previous research that suggests that, in fact, symbolic

politics and self-interest are not necessarily mutually exclusive motivators but can coexist (Bobo 1983, Crano 1997, Bobo & Tuan 2006). James, then, may be a prime example of this coexistence, but more research is needed to fully test this claim.

His influence among non-voters and sports fans further boosts James' potentially unique role as a political elite. Even among the subset of respondents that reported to not have voted in the previous election, James' endorsement has a significant impact on their willingness to vote in the next election. In other words, James seems uniquely popular and persuasive in his political activism – leading him to mobilize a group that is usually particularly hard to get to turn out. Indeed, this finding alone may be one of the strongest indicators of James' capability to act as a political elite. Moreover, his influence among sports fans suggests that there may indeed be something uniquely special about sports, and athletes' ability to connect with and act as persuasive elites toward fans, compared to other forms of entertainment or celebrities. In short, it may be the case that very popular Black celebrity athletes, such as LeBron James, influence the Black community politically, but it's harder to generalize this impact to *any* Black professional athlete based on the findings of this chapter.

Overall, the findings provide some evidence that confirms all three of my hypotheses to an extent. LeBron James, as one example of a Black athlete activist, has a significant impact on the Black community's willingness to participate politically by voting in national elections and sways Black policy preferences on voting rights reforms, which confirms hypothesis 1 and 2. In addition, since James' endorsement is the only one that results in any measurable impact, he also outperforms Black non-athlete celebrity Jay-Z, thus providing evidence to confirm

hypothesis 3. At the same time, given that the other Black athlete's endorsement in the experiment did not produce any significant results, and given that James's impact is both small and limited, I am hesitant to fully confirm any of the three hypotheses without caveats.

The findings around LeBron James' influence notwithstanding, the apparent discrepancy between the high self-reported inspiration to engage in political behavior that Black people received from Black athletes and non-athlete celebrities (around 40% of respondents reported to have been inspired to vote by them before, for example) and the lack of much measurable impact in the survey experiment, which tapped into more subconscious effects of elite persuasion, remains particularly puzzling. I offer three possible explanations for this discrepancy below.

One potential explanation is that, while Black athletes did indeed inspire a large number of Black people to engage politically before, much of this may have already happened in previous years, especially during the 2020 presidential election cycle. That is, the timing of the survey in the fall of 2022 constitutes a potential shortcoming of this study in that many people may have already been highly mobilized by Black athletes after the 2020 election cycle, which may have limited the effect that any celebrity priming treatment had on their willingness to participate politically and on their voting rights reform policy preferences.

As such, respondents may "correctly" report to have been inspired by the likes of LeBron James or non-athlete celebrities like Jay-Z in the past, but the timing of this inspiration did not align with the experiment during the 2022 midterm elections. For example, athletes specifically advocating for voting rights have enjoyed consistently widespread support, even outside the

Black community, since 2021 (Bansil & Guskin 2023). In other words, a lot of the respondents may have previously been inspired to engage politically by Black celebrities – which could at least partially explain why the experimental results are as limited as they are, while self-reported prior influence remained high. The finding that James’ endorsement had a measurable impact on previous non-voters’ willingness to vote in the 2022 midterm elections provides evidence, however, that this mechanism does exist in general – and constitutes one of the most politically meaningful impacts of Black athlete activism that this chapter produced.

Another potential explanation is that Black celebrity athletes may have a political impact on the Black community, which most of the exploratory results of this chapter confirm, but it does not necessarily translate to voting or other forms of political participation specifically. That is, Black athlete activism, more than anything else, may impact and increase the salience of certain political issues, or the salience of political engagement in general among the Black community, but it does not result in specific, measurable political action, especially voting behavior, right away. It is possible, however, that the heightened salience that Black athlete activism creates leads to political action in combination with other factors, which respondents then “wrongly” attribute to Black athletes – in other words, there may be some overreporting about the true mobilizing impact that Black athletes have had on them; athletes’ activism may have caused an initial increase in salience and awareness, but other factors pushed respondents toward actual political participation.

A third explanation is that some respondents simply falsely reported to have been previously inspired to participate politically by a Black celebrity. Of course, this is not

necessarily the respondents' fault, but rather human nature: correctly attributing one's own actions to specific inspirations or individuals is a difficult undertaking that is often subject to errors such as misremembering or misattribution, as well as a general overreporting on political activity. Therefore, without any tangible proof that respondents actually engaged in these forms of political participation, let alone as a direct result of being inspired by the likes of LeBron James or Jay-Z, the results of the self-reported inspiration measures should be approached with some caution. At the same time, however, the fact that people do attribute their political actions to the inspiration by Black celebrities further underscores the point made in the previous paragraph that these Black celebrities are at least capable of raising the salience of political action and making people pay attention to politics more.

This chapter cannot confirm or reject either of these three explanations with any certainty. At the same time, these potential explanations do not substantially undercut the importance of Black athletes as political actors, should either be correct. Instead, they simply suggest that another mechanism is, or has been, at play when it comes to Black athletes' ability to mobilize the Black community. Therefore, more research is needed to gain a better understanding of the impact of Black athletes on Black political behavior, especially given the seemingly contradictory dynamics between self-reported and more covertly measured influences.

Furthermore, another result that is not the focal point of my analysis warrants brief discussion here as it is inherently connected to the role of sports in politics, as well as the interrelation of the two issue areas: being a sports fan appears to be an independent predictor of ones' likelihood to vote, based on the regression results (see Table 2). This points to yet another

potential relationship between being involved in sports and political participation. It provides a fruitful basis for Black athletes to be political elites if their audiences are inclined to participate in politics; there also is a chance that Black athletes have actively fostered this environment over the last years and decades. While this chapter does not investigate this particular dynamic further, the results provide reason to believe that is a worthwhile endeavor for future research.

Likewise, a surprising result that I mentioned above, but do not expand on much in this dissertation, is that a majority of Black Republicans supports and approves of Black athlete activism. As discussed before, the conventional wisdom on approval for athlete activism is that it is heavily split along racial and partisan lines, with Democrats and non-white people, on average, being much more likely to support athlete activism, whereas Republicans and white people, on average, are more likely to oppose such activism. Even though Black Republicans constitute only a small subset of the survey sample, the findings warrant further research into this subject matter. From a preliminary point of view, it seems that when it comes to approval of Black athlete activism, race trumps partisanship among Black Republicans.

VI. Conclusion

Black professional athletes have significantly ramped up their political activism over the course of the last decade, culminating in an outburst of activism in the summer of 2020 that surpassed any previous instances of athlete activism in size, diversity, and reach. While we have a solid understanding of who does and does not support such activism by (Black) professional athletes, little is known about the actual impact that such activism may have on political

behavior. This chapter set out to gain a better understanding of these potential impacts and test if Black athletes are capable of influencing Black political participation and policy positions. To do so, I collected original survey data on a nationally representative sample of Black Americans, including a survey experiment.

The findings of this chapter are twofold; the contradictory nature of some of the findings complicate the dynamic between Black athletes and their political influence in the Black community. On the one hand, I find that Black celebrities, and Black athletes in particular, are largely seen as favorable among their communities, and that the vast majority of the Black community supports Black celebrities' political advocacy. More importantly, a substantial number of Black people report that they have been inspired to engage politically by such celebrity activism, both from Black athletes and non-athletes. All of this suggests that Black athletes can indeed function as political elites in the Black community. These findings also largely align with and expand on what the few existing studies on Black athlete activism suggest.

On the other hand, when testing the effects of Black celebrities' political influence in regression models, their impact appears to be rather slim: only LeBron James' endorsement has any significant impact on Black political behavior, and notably only on the likelihood to vote in national elections and support for progressive voting rights reform. As such, while these results confirm my hypotheses that Black athletes can be influential political actors in the Black community and are able to be more influential than Black non-athlete celebrities to a degree, the

limited nature of this impact prevents me from making sweeping conclusions about the validity of my claims.

Instead, the results of this chapter, above all else, confirm the need for much more research that investigates the role that Black athlete activists can play in American politics, and the ways in which sports, politics, and race are intertwined more broadly. The findings here present plenty of evidence that Black athletes at least *can* play a role in American politics, and future research should more finely tease out what exactly these roles may look like. Specifically, investigating which type of Black athlete may be particularly well-situated to persuade the Black community, or even the country at large, appears to be both a necessary and insightful endeavor. Moreover, studying other groups of athlete activists and their influences on other populations might further help us understand the impacts that athletes and sports can have on political behavior more broadly. It presents a worthwhile field of examination, for if history is any indication, the connection between sports and politics is not going anywhere anytime soon.

Conclusion

Senator Warnock's surprising win in the 2021 Georgia Senate runoff election, the Democrats consequently taking control of Congress, and the Biden administration being able to push forward their agenda as a result of it all received plenty of media attention in recent years. The role that Black athlete activists, especially those of the WNBA, have played in the outcome of this election and the subsequent political direction the United States headed toward has received significantly less attention during that time. That omission, however, is part of a notable pattern: the intersection of sports and politics has historically received little scholarly attention, especially such that goes beyond mere anecdotes.

This dissertation sought to offer a more complete comprehension of Black athlete activism, and the interrelation of sports, politics, and race more broadly, than political science scholarship has produced so far. Although examples of Black athletes getting involved in political advocacy work abound in recent years, the discipline has been slow, at times even reluctant, to investigate these dynamics and make use of the many intriguing research topics that the intersection of sports and politics provides. Whereas other academic disciplines, such as history, anthropology, or sociology have produced a decent amount of descriptive, anecdotal research on the intersection of sports and society, little empirical evidence has been presented for the political consequences of this symbiosis. My hope is that the previous pages have contributed to filling this gap in our knowledge and motivate further research into this relationship within political science and other disciplines.

In particular, I engaged in a thorough social-scientific inquiry into the political consequences of Black athlete activism – an endeavor that few, if any, political scientists before me have participated in. Nevertheless, as my work has shown, such an inquiry is both warranted given the results of my research, as well as needed to fully understand contemporary American political behavior, especially as regards Black political behavior and the role that Black athletes play in shaping such behavior. That is, Black athlete activism has practical, real-world implications for American politics.

Some of the key questions this project aimed to answer were: What impact, if any, do politically mobilized athletes have on politics? How does the public engage with politically active Black athletes in the digital sphere? Are Black athletes capable of persuading the mass public? Do Black athletes shape people's attitudes and policy preferences? Do they provide elite cues to the masses? Can Black athletes encourage people to get more involved politically? To gain leverage on these questions, this dissertation took a multitude of approaches to build an overall understanding of Black athlete activism and its political consequences, both historically and contemporarily.

First, I drew on primary and secondary sources to develop a historical throughline of the ways in which Black athletes have engaged in politics over the course of American history. Contrary to what some recent observers have opined, Black athlete activism does not constitute an example of a recent politicization of sports. Instead, sports, politics, and race have historically always been intertwined, particularly in the United States. Even though the ways in which Black athletes engaged in politics have differed dramatically over time, often due to structural

constraints, these athletes nevertheless continuously had an impact on (racial) politics in the United States. Many generations of Black athletes have listened to, learned from, engaged with, and utilized previous generations' political engagement in their own quest for racial justice, continuing the long struggle for equality that Black athletes have fought since the antebellum period.

Developing this historical throughline of Black athlete activism in the United States expands the existing accounts on Black athletes and their experiences (e.g., see Wiggins 2006 & 2018, Zirin 2008, Henderson 1939, Edwards 2017) by focusing in more detail on the political aspect of their experiences and impacts, such as their social activism, political symbolism, and broader societal importance. Moreover, through a combination of both personal accounts by the athletes involved as well as reporting on the athletes by contemporaries and other scholars, I paid close attention to the ways in which structural constraints and personal agency fluctuated among these athletes across different eras, which constitutes another expansion of the existing historical accounts on this topic.

Rooted in this renewed and increased understanding of the historical connections between Black athletes and racial politics in the United States as well as existing scholarship, I then presented my theoretical expectations for the political role of Black athlete activists. By positioning Black athlete activists, as a subgroup of celebrities, within the literature on elite-driven public opinion and persuasion research I posited that different Black athletes serve as differing forms of role models to the Black community. Namely, I suggested that they can serve as either a self-interest driven, economically motivated role model, or as a more symbolic,

culturally oriented role model. Through either avenue, Black athletes are particularly well situated to be influential political actors in their communities, especially given the importance of sports to the Black community and the emotional bonds that sports create between athletes and spectators.

Next, I explored the ways in which Black athlete activists participate in political activism in the digital sphere, how the public reacts to this online activism, and what this suggests about athletes' ability to drive political engagement. These analyses further advanced our understanding of Black activism in the digital sphere, namely on Twitter, which existing scholarship had identified as a leading platform for political deliberation and communication and an overall viable option for exploring the public's engagement with activism before the platform's recent demise (Jungherr 2014, Tumasjan et al. 2010).

The analysis revealed a pattern wherein political tweets, on average, receive significantly higher absolute engagement numbers than nonpolitical tweets. Likewise, political tweets get retweeted disproportionately more than nonpolitical tweets. Furthermore, the content analysis suggested that Black athletes engage in a variety of political activism online, often releasing explicit encouragements for people to get involved politically. In other words, Black athlete activism fostered political participation among the public, at least in the digital sphere. These findings underscore and expand the existing scholarship on celebrity political communication on Twitter that finds that the digital public does not shy away from political tweets by celebrities and that such activism can, in fact, positively impact political participation rates (Zilinsky et al. 2019, Park 2013). Based on my findings, the same is true for Black athletes. This exploratory

analysis of the salient Twitter engagement that Black athlete activists command provided a baseline and justification for the quantitative, causal analysis that followed in the last substantive chapter.

Finally, I directly tested Black athletes' ability to shape Black people's political attitudes and mobilize their communities toward more political participation by employing original survey data, including a survey experiment, which allowed me to make more causal claims about Black athlete activists' potential for impacting American politics. I found that Black celebrities, and Black athletes in particular, are largely seen as favorable among their communities, and that the vast majority of the Black community supports Black celebrities' political advocacy. More importantly, a substantial number of Black people reported that they have been inspired to engage politically by such celebrity activism, both from Black athletes and non-athletes. All of this suggests that Black athletes can indeed function as political elites in the Black community. As such, these findings confirm and expand on the few studies that have investigated athlete activism and its political consequences in general and found similar general patterns (Towler et al. 2019, Harrison & Michelson 2017, Alrababa'h et al. 2021). This dissertation is, to the best of the author's knowledge, the first work to provide some experimental empirical evidence on this dynamic for Black athletes advocating for political participation among their communities, offering important new insights.

However, when testing the effects of Black celebrities' political influence in regression models, their impact appeared to be rather slim: only LeBron James' endorsement had any significant impact on Black political behavior, and notably only on the likelihood to vote in

national elections and support for progressive voting rights reform. The findings presented plenty of evidence that Black athletes at least *can* play a role in American politics, but the limited nature of this impact suggests that more investigation into these dynamics is needed, especially around which type of Black athlete may be particularly well-situated to persuade the Black community and under what circumstances.

Ultimately, this dissertation displayed that the study of Black athlete activism offers crucial insights into the politics of the Black community, and American politics writ large. Apart from offering a historical throughline of Black athlete activism that runs counter to notions of a recent politicization of sports, I showed that Black athletes are involved in a wide range of political activism online and receive strong engagement from the public, making it a viable avenue for Black athletes' political activism. Moreover, I demonstrated that at least some Black athletes can successfully influence policy preferences and mobilize the Black community to participate politically, including those subsections of the community that previously did not get involved in politics. As such, Black athlete activists can function as elite political actors.

This also constitutes one of a variety of important implications that the results of this dissertation bring with them: Black athletes need to be taken seriously not just as elite performers on the field or court, but also as elite actors in the political sphere. While many pundits have opined about Black athletes' role in politics without much evidence to back up their claims, with some directly discouraging such involvement, the findings of this dissertation suggest that Black athletes can have significant political impacts and, at the very least, should be encouraged to embrace political advocacy if they choose to engage in it.

Based on the survey data results, it may be the case that only superstar athletes such as LeBron James have a measurable independent effect on political participation and policy preferences. At the same time, the Twitter engagement analysis of a variety of Black athletes, both world-famous and from niche sports, suggests that Black athletes across the board command heightened interest in and engagement with their political personas. Therefore, especially in the digital sphere, Black athletes have a huge potential to at least raise awareness and make political issues, as well as political participation, more salient among the (Black) public. Thus, Black athletes should feel confident in their ability to shape politics, and politicians or activist groups should continue to seek out the support and endorsements from these athletes if they want to succeed politically.

This realization is particularly important given the noticeable absence of (Black) athlete activism around the 2024 election so far. Especially compared to the previous one, this election cycle has seen very little get-out-the-vote efforts, let alone direct endorsements, by Black athletes at the time of this writing. It remains to be seen if the swap in presidential candidate by the Democrats will change this, but based on the results this dissertation has produced, Kamala Harris would be well consulted to connect with Black athletes and use their help to foster more political participation, especially as regards voter registration and turnout, in the Black community by November.

On a broader scale, this dissertation rests on the shoulders of crucial work by scholars, journalists, and activists who have identified the important nexus between sports, politics, and race through various different perspectives. Howard Bryant, Dave Zirin, and Scoop Jackson are

amongst the journalistic writers that have been particularly influential for my own thinking and writing, as well as historian David Wiggins. While these authors look at the intersection of sports, politics, and race from a mainly anecdotal and narrative-driven viewpoint, their work has nevertheless laid the foundation for many of my curiosities and the empirical inquiries that stemmed from them. In addition, on the social-scientific end, there are a handful of scholars that have heavily influenced my thinking – first and foremost Christopher Towler, but also Harry Edwards, Betina Wilkinson, and David Niven, all of which have worked on the intersection of sports, politics, and race to some degree.

The way I see it, one of the broader implications of my dissertation is that this work, whether social-scientific or anecdotal, has an undisputable place in academia, and in political science in particular, given the impact that Black athletes can have on American politics, and the impact that sports have on politics in general. Despite the fact that political science has been slow to embrace any scholarship on this topic, my dissertation builds on the few other works that exist in this realm to make the case that the study of sports in the social sciences, and especially in political science, is warranted from an academic perspective and produces meaningful results and crucial new insights into our understanding of (Black) politics, activism, and political behavior. Put differently, an important implication of this dissertation is to encourage more work in this rather niche field of political science and fostering more acceptance of the study of sports as a valid academic pursuit.

To some observers, the findings presented in this dissertation may also raise normative questions. If Black athletes, in their function as unelected and largely unaccountable political

actors, have the power to persuade a constituency on political issues, is the democratic process flawed? I suggest that just the opposite is true. For example, if athletes can draw people's attention to important political issues and have the ability to positively affect political engagement in communities that are largely isolated from politics, the result is likely positive for the democratic process. This is especially noteworthy because disadvantaged groups tend to be less politically engaged through "traditional" avenues in part due to active measures to keep them disengaged (Carpini & Keeter 1996). Thus, if Black athletes can increase the saliency of political issues and the political engagement in their communities, then Black athletes are uniquely situated to play a crucial and positive role in fostering democratic participation and the democratic process writ large.

Moreover, in line with research on celebrity influence that shows that celebrities obtain more credibility than politicians that support the opposition party (Harvey 2017), the fact that Black athletes command support even from Black Republicans is encouraging. In effect, Black athletes may play the role of mediator in political discourse, at least among the Black community. Put differently, Black athlete activists seem to have the ability to foster political discourse and engagement across party lines, thereby bolstering the democratic process. This suggests that, if anything, Black athletes are not only political actors but also proponents of democracy, rather than "just" sports icons. As such, they can play a crucial part in upholding democratic ideals in the United States. Nevertheless, more research into this is necessary, which I discuss in more detail below.

Of course, no study is without its limitations, and the present one is no exception. As alluded to in the respective chapters, both the digital engagement and survey data chapters have limitations. The former's sole reliance on Twitter/X data, combined with the platform's development around its ownership and business model since the takeover by Elon Musk have made the platform rather defunct as a site of social activism. Moreover, because the Rest API and other functionalities are now defunct, reproducing or expanding this part of the study will be challenging, if not outright impossible.

The latter chapter also has a couple of easily identifiable shortcomings around its sample size and the timing of the survey. Although the sample size is decent, the analysis would have benefited from an even larger one, especially given the four experimental conditions. Similarly, a larger sample size likely would also have produced larger crucial subsections in the data that ended up showing very interesting results, such as Black Republicans or previous non-voters that indicated their likelihood to vote in 2022. Unfortunately, funding limitations did not allow for a bigger sample size. Furthermore, many people may have already been highly mobilized by Black athletes after the 2020 election cycle, which may have limited the effect that any celebrity priming treatment had in 2022. Both these limitations, however, imply that my findings may actually underrepresent the true impact of Black athlete activists on the Black community. Whether or not this is the case is not something I can answer with any certainty here, but provides grounds for future research, with larger samples.

Another potential limitation is the unique, context-specific circumstances under which some parts of the athlete activism studied in this dissertation, especially the online engagement,

occurred. The spring, summer, and fall of 2020 included a virtually unprecedented combination of a global pandemic, the biggest social justice movement in a generation, and a seminal presidential election. There is a possibility that under different circumstances, Black athlete activism would not have had the same effect. In fact, the limited findings of the survey data analysis in 2022, albeit during a midterm rather than a presidential election cycle, offer a hint at this possibility, as does the rather sparse levels of Black athlete activism in the 2024 election cycle so far.

These limitations notwithstanding, this dissertation provided ample evidence that the study of (Black) athlete activism, and the intersection of sports and politics, is more than worthwhile. Indeed, many of the limitations discussed above could be alleviated with more research into some of these dynamics. A few specific research topics appear particularly noteworthy and warrant future work.

As mentioned above, expanding the current study to a bigger sample size alone may lead to more significant results. However, there are additional avenues for future research into the political consequences of athlete activism beyond simply increasing the sample size. For example, increasing the scope of the project is one clear objective that should follow the results of this dissertation. While there were solid theoretical reasons to limit the analysis to Black athletes' impact on the Black community, expanding the inquiry to respondents and athletes of other races, and to athletes of higher and lower popularity and in different sports, should provide us with a significantly better overall picture of the ability of athletes to influence political behavior and policy preferences.

Apart from studying athlete activism specifically, the intersection of sports and politics offers a variety of other worthwhile inquiries for scholars of political science and related disciplines. These investigations are not just warranted purely for the sake of academic discourse, but also for a better understanding and handling of the role that sports can play in politics more broadly and the real-world political issues that stem from this intersection and will continue to shape American politics in the years and decade to come. I will discuss some of these viable areas of potential research in the following.

One area in which the intersection of sports and politics is becoming increasingly notable, although it has existed for a long time, is college athletics. Discussions around the amateur status of student-athletes and their lack of pay, racial exploitation, the arguable monopoly status of the NCAA that was protected by the courts until recently, and Title IX protections have happened amongst journalists, pundits, school administrators, conference executives, and students for a long time. Given recent Supreme Court rulings, lawsuit settlements, the rise of Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) deals for students, and the first successful unionization of college athletes, politics has never been so obviously at the center of college athletics as it is in contemporary times. While this dissertation heavily focused on professional sports and athletes, the politics of college athletics offer a host of research topics that should be of paramount importance to political scientists and sports scholars alike.

Another topic that this dissertation only touched on very briefly, but deserves much more scholarly attention, is the politics of sports fandom, for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the survey data revealed that being a sports fan is an independent predictor of one's willingness

to participate politically. This dynamic alone makes researching sports fans worthwhile, especially to figure out if there is something intrinsically political about being a sports fan. Put differently, might there be proclivities among sports fans that directly translate to more willingness to participate politically? Or, have athletes, particularly through their renewed activism in recent times, fostered this political awareness and willingness to participate among sports fans, which now has developed into an independent characteristic of being a sports fan? Ultimately, these are empirical questions that future research should address.

On the other hand, though connected to the first aspect, sports fans have increasingly taken part in the politics of sports in recent years. Around the world, this dynamic has received some attention for a while, such as rugby fandom and racial integration in South Africa, the role of soccer ultras in the Arab Spring, or fan protests around planned soccer reforms in Europe. In the United States, the politics of sports fandom is attracting renewed attention through issues such as fan protest around the selling of the Oakland A's baseball team and other grievances that fan bases have developed with sports team owners.

Once again, additional research is needed to investigate if the political activities of sports fans are connected to athlete activism and other political developments within sports in contemporary times. At the same time, it might be the case that getting involved in smaller-scale politics, such as the politics of your club or your sport, serves as a form of socialization into more political activity on a larger scale, such as the government. Therefore, studying not just the athletes, but also those that participate in sports more passively (although many fans would

rightfully posit that their participation is anything but passive) presents an equally interesting line of inquiry for scholars of the intersection of sports and politics.

In addition to these avenues for future research into the activism-related intersection of sports and politics, there are at least two other issue areas among this nexus that, despite not being directly connected to my research here, deserve scholarly attention given their political salience, as well as their potential for athlete activism going forward.

Especially in the United States but also in other countries around the world, sports are currently at the forefront of debates around transgender rights and inclusion. Many leagues, conferences, and organizations are grappling with questions around how to best include (or exclude, depending on one's political ideology) transgender people in sports. Many of these discussions in the United States happen at the state level and are thus an integral part of both state politics and federalism. At the same time, many of the existing and newly created laws and guidelines for transgender athletes are actively being challenged in the courts – both sides, for example, try to claim Title IX protections as a prominent argument for their cause – and therefore will also turn into national political issues sooner rather than later. Overall, especially given the fast-moving nature of these debates and the relatively new attention that the topic has received politically, this is another issue area within the intersection of sports and politics where political scientists should find ample material for investigation.

A second prominent issue in sports in contemporary times that is closely connected to politics is sports gambling. After the Supreme Court decision in *Murphy v. NCAA* in 2018 struck down the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act (PASPA), the majority of U.S. states

have enacted some form of legalized sports gambling. Surprisingly, sports gambling constitutes one of the few policy areas in the United States that currently receives overwhelming bipartisan support; both Democratic- and Republican-led states have legalized sports gambling. Of course, any legalization of gambling comes with questions around morals and ethics, potential health issues, possible regulation of the market, and other issues. This alone offers political scientists plenty to investigate. To me, however, the most interesting aspect of this development is the bipartisan agreement around legalizing sports gambling and why it is happening now. Of course, the Court's decision opened the door for most states. Yet, given the bipartisan agreement, it is not entirely clear why states did not push to repeal the 1992 PASPA sooner. As such, sports gambling, with all its political facets, constitutes another topic within the field of sports and politics that is ripe for academic research.

Although both of these issue areas, so far, are not directly related to the kind of athlete activism I investigated in this dissertation, I believe scholars should keep a close eye on developments around these topics due to the potential for activism in the future. That is, some athletes, coaches, and officials have already begun to speak out in favor of and in opposition to transgender athlete inclusion in their respective sports, both at the college and professional level. Similarly, because of the dangers that gambling presents to athletes, including multiple athletes receiving long bans for participating in sports betting themselves, there are already campaigns by athletes and other sports administrators to influence political decision-making on this topic, especially regarding its regulation. Therefore, depending on how the discussions and decisions around these topics play out politically over the next few years, this may constitute a

new avenue for athlete activism in the future, and issue areas that athletes will attempt to persuade the public's opinions on.

As the above examples demonstrate, opportunities for the study of sports and politics abound. This dissertation presents merely a small inquiry into the nearly boundless world that constitutes the intersection of the two subjects, not just in the United States but around the world. I am optimistic that my research will help to further our understanding of this intersection in the specific aspect of Black athlete activism and its political influences on the Black community. At the same time, I remain mindful of all the things about this intersection that we have yet to discover. The prospect of continuing to learn about the interrelation between sports and politics is a strong motivating factor for my future career. It is my hope that this dissertation inspires others to join me in this endeavor, for it is a worthwhile topic to study and produce fresh knowledge about.

Bibliography

Introduction

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Appendices

Chapter 2:

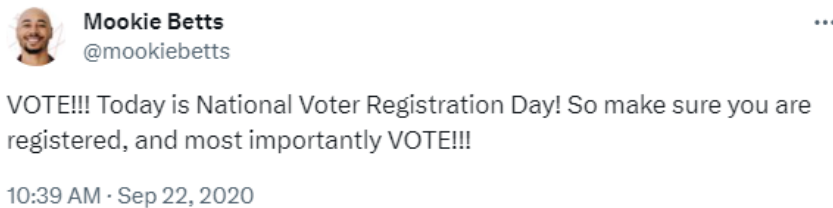
Appendix A: Content Analysis of Political Tweets

In order to analyze the content of political tweets by Black athlete activists, I used the subset of the entire corpus of Twitter data that I hand-coded as political (as opposed to non-political), and categorized each of these 825 political tweets into one or more of the categories below. Example tweets of each category are also included, as well as some illustrative examples of tweets that were coded to contain more than one frame. The following frames were used to categorize political tweets:

1) Get Out The Vote

Any tweet that includes a specific encouragement to (get registered to) vote. Oftentimes, these tweets included links to resources such as voter registration pages.

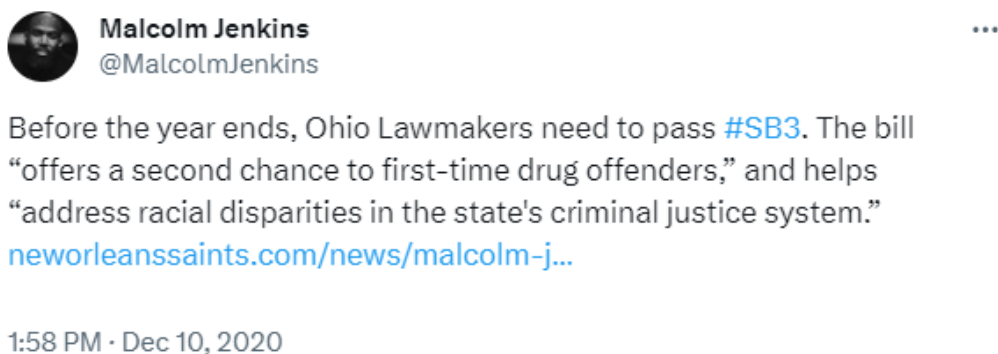
Example:



2) Legislation

Any tweet that lobbies for the passage or stoppage of a specific piece of legislation.

Example:



3) *Personal testimony*

Any tweet that includes personal stories by an athlete as to why a certain cause matters to them, why they got involved in activism, or how they have been personally affected by the social injustices they are protesting.


Example:




4) *Endorsement and/or rejection of politicians*

Any tweet that specifically endorses a politician by including their name in the tweet. A few tweets also explicitly rejected politicians, most notably Donald Trump. Examples of both are included below.

Example endorsement:


 **Stephen Curry** ✓
@StephenCurry30

Amazing speech! Supporting you and [@KamalaHarris](#) all the way!

 **Joe Biden** ✓ @JoeBiden · Aug 20, 2020


.@StephenCurry30 and @ayeshacurry: Thank you for your support. When I'm president, you and your family are welcome at the White House any time.

And, Riley and Ryan, the Vice President will be @KamalaHarris. I think you'll really like her. #DemConvention




8:24 PM · Aug 20, 2020

Example rejection:

 **Eric Reid**
@E_Reid35

You were singing a different tune when you rejected our peaceful protest at the 49'ers vs Colts game, wasting tax payers' money to stage your publicity stunt.

 **Mike Pence** ✓ @Mike_Pence · May 29, 2020

Replying to @Mike_Pence

We believe in law and order in this Country. We condemn violence against property or persons. We will always stand for the right of Americans to peacefully protest and let their voices be heard.

5:11 PM · May 29, 2020

5) *Generic statements / general awareness*

Any tweet that includes a generic statement around social justice to raise awareness, and/or the use of a prominent, yet generic hashtag such as “#SayHerName” or “#BlackLivesMatter”.

Example:



6) *Comments of events that sparked protests*

Any tweet that directly addresses an event that sparked the protests in 2020, such as the murder of George Floyd or the shooting of Jacob Blake.

Example:



7) *Partnership with advocacy organization / NGO*

Any tweet that mentions a partnership with an advocacy organization or a non-profit group.

Example:



Maya Moore
@MooreMaya



My heart:

Justice youtu.be/A14THPoc4-4

Let's keep growing 🙏:



From [eji.org](https://www.eji.org)

9:40 AM · Jun 9, 2020

8) *Partnership with corporation*

Any tweet that mentions a partnership with a company or corporation.

Example:



I've teamed up with [@BenAndJerrys](#) to serve up joy on the journey to justice!

Today, we're excited to introduce Change the Whirled, a new non-dairy flavor that hits shelves in early-2021!

100% of my proceeds will go to [@yourrightscamp](#) with matching support from Ben & Jerry's

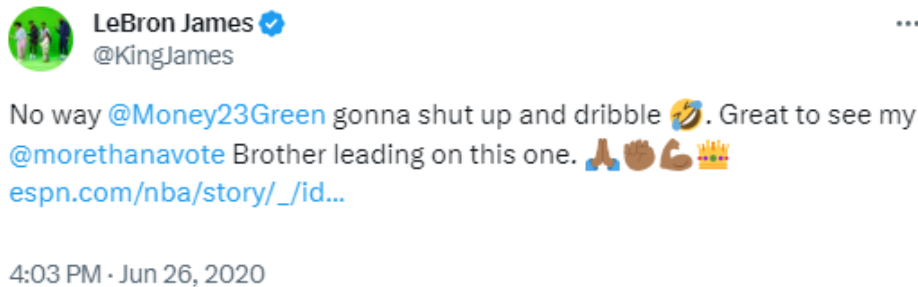


6:05 AM · Dec 10, 2020

9) *Connection to other athletes*

Any tweet that mentions another athlete and their activism, either through a quote retweet, including their Twitter handle in the tweet, or specifically referring to them in the tweet.

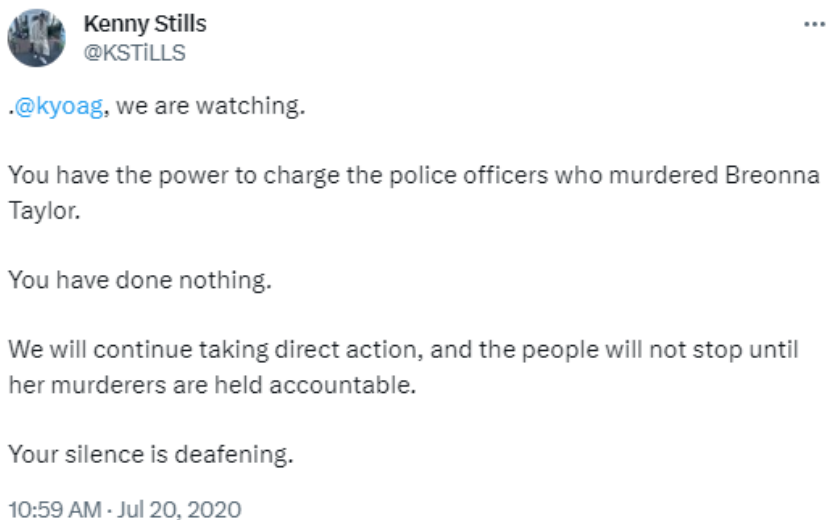
Example:



10) *Calls to direct action*

Any tweet that contains an encouragement to participate in political action other than voting or the specific lobbying around legislation, such as sharing petitions to sign, inviting people to protest marches, encouraging them to donate to a political organization, or directly demanding action from politicians.

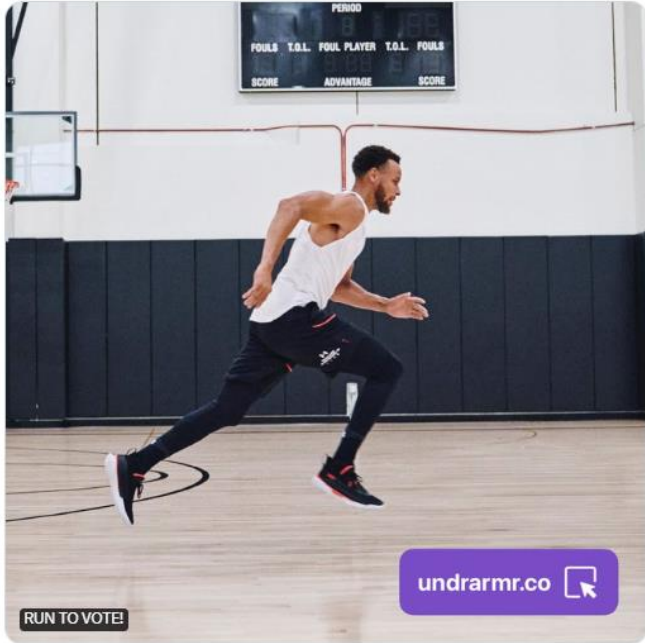
Example:



Examples of tweets coded to contain multiple frames:

 **Stephen Curry** 
@StephenCurry30 ...

Winning is all about doing the prep. And TODAY is prep day. Make sure you're [#VoteReady](#) by clicking the link 🗳️🗳️🗳️. Check out [@UnderArmour](#) [#RunToVote](#) to do your part on Nov 3rd. Let's do this! [#NationalVoterRegistrationDay](#)



From [underarmour.com](#)

8:20 AM · Sep 22, 2020

Frames 1 (GOTV) & 8 (Corporation)



Chris Paul ✓
@CP3



.@JoeBiden great to be with you back home last week in NC!!
@stephencurry30 missed you but you know what had to stop by your gym! The election of our lifetime. Vote for @joebiden and @kamalaharris
!! iwillvote.com



3:15 PM · Oct 8, 2020

Frames 4 (Endorsement) & 9 (Connection to another athlete activist)



Colin Kaepernick ✓
@Kaepernick7



In fighting for liberation there's always retaliation. We must protect our Freedom Fighters. We started a legal defense initiative to give legal representation to Freedom Fighters in Minneapolis paid for by [@yourrightscamp](http://yourrightscamp)

For representation or to donate



From knowyourrightscamp.org

9:57 AM · May 29, 2020

Frames 7 (NGO) & 10 (Call to direct action)

Chapter 3:

Appendix B: Variable Description & Coding

Dependent Variables

Political Participation measures:

Willingness to participate politically was measured by: “As the 2022 midterm elections approach, please rank on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is not likely at all and 10 is extremely likely, how likely is it you will participate in the following political acts.” Participants were offered eight different action items:

- 1) “Vote in the 2022 midterm elections”
- 2) “Vote in local elections”
- 3) “Sign a petition”
- 4) “Participate in a boycott for political reasons”
- 5) “Participate in a political protest or march”
- 6) “Attend a political meeting”
- 7) “Contact a politician or civil servant to express your views”
- 8) “Donate money for a social or political activity”

All variables were recoded to a continuous scale from 0-1. Also created an index of all eight participation variables, as well as one of the two voting variables and one of the six non-traditional participation variables.

Voting Rights policy reform:

Policy preferences on voting rights reforms were measured by: “To what extent do you support each of the following:”

- 1) “Making Election Day a federal holiday”
- 2) “Expanding automatic voter registration”
- 3) “Expanding same-day voter registration”
- 4) “Expanding access to vote by mail”
- 5) “Expanding access to early voting”
- 6) “Making it illegal to prevent someone from registering to vote”
- 7) “Prohibiting a partisan gerrymandering, the act of manipulating electoral districts to give an advantage to a particular political party”

- 8) “Requiring that states with a history of voting rights violations in the past 25 years to first get permission from the Department of Justice or U.S. District Courts before making any changes to voting practices”

All variables were coded on a continuous scale from 0-100, where 0=strongly oppose and 100=strongly support. Also created an index of all eight policy variables.

Experiment

Treatment groups in the priming experiment were presented with the following vignette: “In November 2020, more than 298,000 people voted in over 40 different arenas or stadiums across the country. Celebrities played a huge role in not only securing the stadiums as polling places, but also voicing the importance of voting and participating in politics. [NAME] once said, talking about his voice in politics, “We just wanted to educate you, enlighten you and empower you. And let you know how important your right is.” [NAME] added that his efforts are also about wanting people “...to know how important it is not only to change what’s going on in America, but change what is going on in some of their communities.” Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups:

- 1) Statement attributed to LeBron James

Coded on a dichotomous scale (0-1), where 1= LeBron James treatment received

- 2) Statement attributed to Colin Kaepernick

Coded on a dichotomous scale (0-1), where 1= Colin Kaepernick treatment received

- 3) Statement attributed to Jay-Z

Coded on a dichotomous scale (0-1), where 1= Jay-Z treatment received

- 4) Control group (no statement)

Coded on a dichotomous scale (0-1), where 1= no treatment received

Other variables

Approval of LeBron James’ activism:

Approval for LeBron James’ activism was measured by: “Based on what you have heard, do you approve or disapprove of LeBron James and other professional athletes advocating for social justice?” Approval was coded on a four-point scale (0-1), where 0= strongly disapprove and 1= strongly approve.

Approval of Jay-Z's activism:

Approval for Jay-Z's activism was measured by: "Based on what you have heard, do you approve or disapprove of Jay-Z and other celebrities advocating for social justice?" Approval was coded on a four-point scale (0-1), where 0=strongly disapprove and 1=strongly approve.

Approval of kneeling during national anthem:

Approval of kneeling during the national anthem was measured by: "How appropriate do you think any of the following actions are as a means of protesting injustice? 1) Athletes kneeling during the national anthem." Appropriateness was coded on a four-point scale (0-1), where 0=never appropriate and 1=always appropriate.

Inspiration by LeBron James:

Inspiration by LeBron James to engage politically was measured by: "Has LeBron James' political action ever inspired you in any of the following:"

- 1) "To vote in a local, state, or national election"
- 2) "To donate to a political campaign or cause"
- 3) "To participate in a boycott of any professional sports"
- 4) "To attend a protest or march"
- 5) "To post or comment on social media"

Inspiration for each variable was recoded on a dichotomous scale (0-1), where 1=yes and 0=no / don't know.

Inspiration by Jay-Z:

Inspiration by Jay-Z to engage politically was measured by: "Has Jay-Z's political action ever inspired you in any of the following:"

- 1) "To vote in a local, state, or national election"
- 2) "To donate to a political campaign or cause"
- 3) "To participate in a boycott of any professional sports"
- 4) "To attend a protest or march"
- 5) "To post or comment on social media"

Inspiration for each variable was recoded on a dichotomous scale (0-1), where 1=yes and 0=no / don't know.

Linked fate:

Attachment to one's racial group, or linked fate, was measured by: "Do you think that what happens generally to African Americans will have something to do with what happens in your life?" Linked fate was coded on a four-point scale (0-1), with higher values corresponding to higher levels of linked fate.

Sports Fandom:

Sports fandom was measured by: "Do you consider yourself a sports fan?" Responses were coded on a three-point scale (0-1), where 0=No – I'm NOT a sports fan and 1=Yes – I'm a big sports fan.

All participant not responding with no were presented with a follow-up question: "Do you consider yourself a football fan, a basketball fan, or both?" Responses were recoded into three categories, fans of both ("big" or "somewhat" fan of both), football fans ("big" or "somewhat" fans of both & "big" or "somewhat" fans football), and basketball fans ("big" or "somewhat" fans of both & "big" or "somewhat" fans of basketball).

Political Trust:

Political trust was measured by: "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" Responses were coded on a four-point scale (0-1), with 0=none of the time and 1=just about always.

Political Efficacy:

Political efficacy was measured by: "Do you agree/disagree with the following: I don't have any say about what the government does." Responses were coded on a five-point scale (0-1), with 0=strongly agree and 1=strongly disagree.

Racial Efficacy:

Racial efficacy was measured: "Please answer the following:"

- 1) "How often would you say public officials work hard to help Black people"

- 2) “How often would you say Black people have a say in how government handles important issues?”
- 3) “How often would you say Black people elected to office can make changes for Black people in the community?”

All three variables were recoded on a five-point scale (0-1), where 0=never and 1=all the time. Also created an index of all three variables.

Political Interest:

Political interest was measured by: “In general, how interested are you in news about what’s going on in government and politics?” Responses were recoded on a five-point scale (0-1), with 0=not interested at all, and 1=extremely interested.

Previous Voting Behavior (2020, 2018, 2016, 2012):

Voting behavior during the 2020 election was measured by: “Did you vote in the 2020 Presidential election?” Responses were coded on a dichotomous scale (0-1), with 1=Yes.

Voting behavior in 2012, 2016, and 2018 was measured by: “Now, thinking about past elections, did you vote or not?” Responses were coded on a dichotomous scale (0-1) for each of the three elections, with 1=Yes.

Approval of Biden’s job performance:

Approval of President Biden’s job performance was measured by: “Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way Joe Biden is handling his job as President for the American people?” Responses were recoded on a five-point scale (0-1), where 0=strongly disapprove and 1=strongly approve.

Age:

Age was measured by: “In what year were you born?” Responses were recoded on a four-point scale (0-1), with age groups as follows: 18-29 (0), 30-49 (.33), 50-64 (.67), 65+ (1).

Gender:

This variable assesses a respondent's self-identified gender. It was recoded as a dichotomous variable (0-1), where 0=female (incl. transgender female).

Education:

Level of education was measured by: "What is the highest level of education you completed?" Responses were recoded on a four-point scale (0-1), with 0=High school or less and 1=post-graduate degree.

Party ID:

Party identification was measured by "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or what?" Recoded into three different dummy variables (0-1), with Democrat=1, Republican=1, and Independent/Other=1, respectively.

Income:

Household income was measured by: "What was your total combined household income in 2021 before taxes." Responses were recoded on a four-point scale (0-1), where 0=less than 20K and 1=more than 80K.

Appendix C: Regression Tables for Subsets of Respondents

	Model 1	Model 2
Kaepernick Treatment	0.004(0.030)	0.027(0.026)
Jay-Z Treatment	-0.007(0.031)	0.002(0.027)
LeBron Treatment	0.051* (0.031)	0.052* (0.026)
Voted in 2020		0.310*** (0.031)
Political Efficacy		0.025(0.029)
Political Interest		0.197*** (0.036)
Approval of Biden		0.043(0.037)
Linked Fate		-0.002(0.030)
Gender		-0.015(0.019)
Age		0.095*** (0.031)
Income		0.079*** (0.029)
Education		-0.009(0.031)
Democrat		0.045(0.044)
Independent		-0.001(0.045)
Constant	0.788*** (0.022)	0.254*** (0.062)
Observations	763	575
R ²	0.006	0.326

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Cell entries are linear regression coefficients.

Table C1: Determinant of Voting in National Election among Sports Fans

	Model 1	Model 2
Kaepernick Treatment	0.094(0.060)	0.060(0.079)
Jay-Z Treatment	0.083(0.061)	0.075(0.088)
LeBron Treatment	0.202*** (0.063)	0.152* (0.080)
Political Efficacy		-0.252*** (0.092)
Political Interest		0.365*** (0.097)
Approval of Biden		-0.016(0.105)
Linked Fate		0.010(0.094)
Sports Fandom		0.161** (0.076)
Gender		0.038(0.065)
Age		-0.188* (0.099)
Income		-0.037(0.088)
Education		0.065(0.097)
Democrat		0.061(0.107)
Independent		-0.026(0.107)
Constant	0.275*** (0.043)	0.196(0.155)
Observations	196	108
R ²	0.051	0.363

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Cell entries are linear regression coefficients.

Table C2: Determinant of Voting in National Election among previous Non-voters