From God's House to the State House:
The Importance of Faith to African American Women who run for Elected Office

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Abstract: A democracy is legitimized by the full participation of all its citizens. However, when discussing America’s political leadership, we could use more women in the forefront. Many studies have looked at why women run for office and the motivations behind their run. Scholars look at many different types of motivating factors. In recent years there exists a shift in the literature from treating women like men, to determining that their motivation and contributing factors look different from their male counterparts. I argue in this thesis that for African-American Women, a key motivation for their run for elected office is the influence they receive from their faith in God and the Black church.
Acknowledgements and/or Dedication:

I first thank God, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. I can literally do all things through Christ who strengthens me...even finish a thesis. I thank my patient and wise advisor, Dr. Jyl Josephson for encouraging me to finish and supporting me every step of the way. I thank my thesis committee, Dr. Kelly Dittmar and Dr. Domingo Morel for all their work and encouragement to continue my studies and research. I thank all the politicians who courageously shared their stories with me and in so doing shared their hearts. You will always be in my heart and I am so proud of the work that you do to better this world. To my son, Mark DesVignes for thinking his mother is the smartest person in the world and constantly praying for me. Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my Mother Beverly Jenkins for being my biggest cheerleader. For all your prayers and love and believing your daughter can do what God has called her to do.
From God’s House to the State House: The Importance of Faith to African American Women who Run for Elected Office

Introduction

In March of 2013, as I sat in the Run-Sister-Run campaign training event held for Black women by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), I was intrigued to hear some of the panelists talk about their faith in God leading them to run for elected office. Although a campaign training event might not be the place one would expect to hear someone openly discuss God, it was not out of the ordinary to hear Black politicians use religious jargon and terms when discussing politics. What was intriguing was the way they framed their faith and the church as instrumental and the motivating factor for their run for elected office.

It was endearing to hear the women discuss the influence of their faith and the church on their run for elected office. Faith in God and the church had motivated some of the women on the panel to pursue elected office, and they were open and forthcoming with that process as if testifying in a traditional Black church service. Why was this not news to me as a Black woman listening to other Black women discuss their road to elected office as being an act of faith in God? Why were others in the room and I not surprised at their genuine belief that they were serving a higher purpose in serving their constituency and the broader community?

This was not a surprise to me, mostly because of the fact that I had heard it all before. I expected to hear it at least from some of the panelists. Faith and the Black
church play an important part in the lives of Black women; therefore, the Black church would play an important part in Black women’s decision to run for elected office. Black women’s political leadership is informed by the teachings of the Black church which suggests that one’s faith can, and in the case of Black women, does have political implications.

The church’s influence on African-Americans is well documented and makes them unique as an ethnic minority in America. This religious identity is more pronounced in African-American women as they are seen as the backbone of the Black church. This is special given the fact that African-American women are among some of the most religious (defined through church attendance, and avowed fundamental beliefs demographically in the US). This intersectionality of religion, gender, and race has not been explored in depth for its political ramifications i.e. voting behavior, policy/legislative support, party affiliation/devotion, public opinion, and especially as a reason or influence to running for political office. In this thesis I further explore this area and draw on the interviews of thirteen African-American women politicians in New Jersey. I use intersectionality as an analytical tool to explore the complexities of what it means to be a Black woman who is a public official. I approach the research within the relationally embedded candidacy model as a qualitative methodological approach.

Building on this model, I theorize that faith as experienced within the Black church is a key motivating factor and influential relationship for African-American women who

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1 Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Fredrick C. Harris, Betty Colliier-Thomas, Milton Sernett
2 Higginbotham
3 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life- A Religious Portrait of African-Americans
have run for elected office. My thesis project tests this question empirically, using qualitative analysis of the interviews that I conducted.

In the next section, I briefly review the history of the Black church and analyze the literature that discusses the importance of the church to the black community both historically and in the present. In section three, I further explore the role of Black church women and their activism as it has been influenced by the Black church through a particular understanding of their faith. In section four, I survey and review the relevant literature on the motivations that lead women to run for elected office. In section five, I raise my research question and discuss how I collected data. In section six, I explore my findings and give an exhaustive analysis of the data collected. I conclude in section seven, naming the importance of the research to the political scientist and those interested in encouraging women of color to run for elected office. I conclude with offering recommendations for further studies on this topic.
Chapter 2: History of the Black Church

There is no secret that the church has played a pivotal role in the lives of Black people in America. Whether it is the organization and leadership that came from the church to spur the civil rights movement, to the enduring liberation theology, to the schools and Universities, and social networks and social justice oriented organizations; the church has been the center of the Black community. This legacy dates back to slavery and has strong roots in African-American culture. The church gave enslaved Africans in the Americas a hope for salvation: the belief in a loving God that would save them from their earthly sins and from eternal hell. The church also gave a literal belief in freedom from the physical chains that bound the enslaved through American slavocracy. Said another way, enslaved Africans in North America understood the love of God to have liberating power — a power to save them from the injustice, oppression, and brutality they faced each day. Out of this ethos grew a strong Christian community with a deep-rooted sense of social justice and equality, and a commitment to communal flourishing that still stands today.⁴

The strength of the church stems from the dual need of African-Americans to have a spiritual and moral direction but also to have a clear political and social purpose. This political and social agenda is concerned with the needy, the poor, and the less fortunate and is sensitive to civil rights, justice, equity, and community. As a working definition for this thesis, I define the “Black church” in part as those denominations formed out of a need to serve African Americans, for example, the African Methodist

⁴ Sernett, 4
Episcopal (AME) Church and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC). It also includes those denominations and churches that are predominately African-American, for example, Baptist churches and non-denominational churches and those with majority Black congregations. But also, the “Black church” encompasses the religious ideology of Black people in North America. So as scholar Nadia Brown explains, “the Black church is both a real and symbolic space and place.” The concept of the Black church denotes the theological commitment that God is a liberator, a helper to the oppressed, ushering in communal flourishing; and those who worship this God are committed to the same.

In the Black church teaching and preaching tradition, social justice with an emphasis on communal thriving is paramount and understandably so being birthed in the time of American slavery. The church has played not just the role of spiritual authority in the Black community but also acts as the political and social mobilizing headquarters of the community. As Harris writes, “Secular political and civil rights organizations cannot match the organizational resources of African-American churches, which consistently provide Black communities with the kinds of social capital needed for political mobilization”. Synthesizing its unique role in the community as first a place of spiritual guidance and second as socio-political informant and teacher, the Black church has taken on a special and unique role in the lives of many African Americans.

Harris further explains how the Black church in its primary role as spiritual guider lives into its secondary role of social-political informant:

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5 Brown, 123
6 Harris, 32
“African-American religious worldviews have provided actors in Black communities with an oppositional culture through which to articulate grievances, opportunities, and collective identities during episodes of protest and electoral activism. Scholars of social movements call these articulations collective action frames- emergent action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns”. 7

Out of this pairing of spiritual and political duty comes forth an identity for many Protestant Black Christians as church affiliated and politically inclined active. As history has shown and continues to show, many of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were either leaders in the Black church themselves or were outspoken about the role their spirituality played in their political involvement. Many social justice and reform organizations were birthed out of the Black church or started and led by leaders within the Black church. In his writings Harris reflects on this relationship of the Black church with democratic norms and how it has been studied and named, “Scholars use the term civil religion to connote the sense of social cohesion and commitment to democratic norms”. 8 This spiritual and political relationship found in the Black church is strong and broadly recognized.

This rich history of church affiliation and political/social activism has not waned for the black community in modern day North America. Scholars such as Mark Silk and Charles Reagan Wilson assert, “The Black church-thought of in terms of the broad historical development of African American religion-has been and remains,...

7 Harris, 36
8 Harris, 38
inseparable from the African-American people, to a degree unlike any other Christian religious group in the country.”  

Black people have historically viewed religion as pinnacle to their daily lives and continue this tradition to the present. The Black church was in the past and continues to be as scholar Nadia Brown puts it, “the cultural womb of the Black community.”

Religion, faith, and the church are important to the Black community. With roots drawn from slavery, the journey of Africans and Christianity in America has also been a story of the coming of age of what some scholars refer to as the “Black church”. The history of the Black church is important and paramount to understanding its effect and key role in the Black community today.

*Slavery and the Invisible Institution*

Although slavery in the Americas was uniquely a form of racial bondage, and this bondage was given a biblical and God proven justification, as historian Paul Harvey put it: “Religion created race, and race thereafter shaped religion.” Harvey shows how oppression in the form of racism was baptized by religion but the concept of religion was further informed in North America by the insidious nature of slavocracy. Harvey continues in this vein stating that, “If only Christians were truly human- and Christians were white- then where did that leave people of African descent?”

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9 Silk, 80
10 Brown, 123
11 Harvey, 17
12 Harvey, 19
Christianity was heavily shaped and formed by the need to rationalize the North American slave experience.

However, even with the demonic ways that American Christianity as a whole condoned slavery and the belief that God deemed Africans and their descendants inferior; Harvey asserts “African Americans experienced Christian conversion in America. From the pre-civil war era enslaved Africans developed a strong Christian ethos. Although Catholic missions dominated Christian conversion in most of the world, America was founded by mostly Protestant denominations. Harvey further explains, “The hope of many white ministers was that Christianity had the potential of creating obedient, humble and respectful servants.” Nonetheless, the conversion of African Americans to Protestant Christianity was a seminal moment in Black American History, one that is salient to this day. Harvey goes on, “A small minority of blacks converted to Christianity, but they established a religious culture and a set of institutions that defined much of African -American religious life and social life to come.” Black Churches, although very guarded by white clergy, allowed African- Americans places of communal gathering and fellowship. The church became an important component of the budding Black community in North America.

From the 1740s to 1831, African -American Christianity took on three forms, as black Americans adapted, shaped, and changed it to match their beliefs and circumstances. In the South, whites and blacks attended biracial churches with white

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13 Ibid
14 Harvey, 29
15 Harvey, 30
ministers and segregated seating. A second formation took root in the North and in some Southern urban areas prior to 1831. There, free Black churches such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, organized in 1816, provided and independent religious denomination for black Christians. A third kind of black religious expression was covert. Separate and apart from the official churches, slaves conducted secret religious ceremonies in the slave quarters and in “brush harbors,” the name given to small gatherings spots in the backwoods protected by canopies of tree branches. In these secluded places, which slaves sometimes referred to as “hush harbors” because of their secrecy, black ministers preached in a manner they could not display in front of whites.\textsuperscript{16} In each form that Christianity was displayed, African-Americans made the religion their own, synchronizing their lived experienced with their faith, and allowing their faith to inform their rejection of the lie that God had ordained their status as slaves.

Slaves adopted Christianity enthusiastically and challenged the premise that their race and blackness made them inferior which was a blueprint for how the enslaved would understand their faith and allow it to motivate them toward social and political ends for generations to come. As Harvey shows concerning the slave rebellions, and in particular Nat Turner’s rebellion; “In the nineteenth century, slave rebels employed biblical reasoning to instigate uprisings. That history culminated in the actions of Nat Turner, whose religiously inspired visions compelled his furious and murderous resistance to the deplorable condition of slavery”.\textsuperscript{17} In understanding the Nat Turner’s rebellion, a lay preacher, an enslaved person, and social/political radical; one can begin to understand

\textsuperscript{16} Harvey asserts these three dimensions, as do many others scholars.
\textsuperscript{17} Harvey, 30
the interaction between religion and race for many slaves that led to a certain social and political ideology. In the case of slave revolts and rebellion, this spiritual impotence framed their social/political realities and spurred decisive action. They understood their condition as slaves to not be mandated by God, but man, and rebellion with its most violent results was a suitable means of ridding themselves of their chains. This history of political uprisings/slave rebellions employing biblical and spiritual reasoning is central to the gospel in the Black church. This reasoning is germane to the continued political and social activism of the Black community and is a key idea for the political and social agenda of the future Civil Rights Movement. Spiritual commitments will lead to social/political action.

*The Black church and the Commitment to Social Justice through Political Engagement*

In the early twentieth century, the then-called “Negro Church” was the source of hot debate among African-American scholars. Some saw the church as a problem and a hindrance in the fight against racial inequality.¹⁸ The scholars charged that black churches were not doing enough to use all their resources to uplift black communities and to fight against racial, economic, and political oppression. Prominent African-American intellectuals weighed in on the discourse: W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, and Benjamin Mays were among the voices in this crescendo. They were all concerned with the political implications they felt should accompany Black church life and called for reforms to the church as to make it more politically engaged and communally relevant.

¹⁸Barbara Dianne Savage makes this point in her book, *Your Spirit Walks Beside Us*
They were concerned that they did not see the Black church politically involved as to make lasting change to the plight of Black peoples economic, educational, and civil status.

It goes without saying that these scholars brought to their critiques of the church in the African-American community a standard that they felt the church should be living up to and exemplifying. They saw the church as the center of Black life, one that should address the needs of the black community holistically, and who should rightfully take this role. In his analysis of the Black church, Harvey cites Black intellectual Martin Delany who wrote in 1849 about the role of the Black church to the African-American community:

“Among our people generally the church is the Alpha and Omega of all things, the black intellectual, abolitionist, and nationalist Martin Delany wrote in 1849. It is their only source of information-their only acknowledged public body-their state legislature-their only acknowledged advisor. Delany was a keen observer of the role of the black church in providing a public forum for a people generally enslaved, ignored, or scorned by white Americans.”\(^{19}\)

It was understood by the leaders within the Black community that the church’s role was to be the progenitor of social uplift for the formerly enslaved Africans in North America and as the custodian of the Black community, the church should seek its flourishing in all realms possible, especially politically.

\(^{19}\) Harvey, 1
The Black community took its spiritual and moral convictions about how to interpret race in America from the Black church. “The endorsement of a social as well as a spiritual gospel was a familiar trope within the framework of the Black church during the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{20} This role extended powerfully to future generations with the main model of the intersections between faith, the church, and political action being displayed in the Civil Rights Movement of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The social political mobilization of Black church leaders, but also of rank and file Black churched people, is one that has been named and studied by social movement scholars, political scientists and theologians alike.

\textit{The Black Church and the Civil Rights Movement}

In Doug McAdam’s book, \textit{Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970}, McAdam is mostly concerned with understanding the Civil Rights Movement in terms of its implications for social movements. McAdams develops a social movement theory, called Political Process Theory, using the Civil Rights Movement as a case study. He concludes, that certain political opportunities must be available in the form of an open window in politics to allow for the enactment of widespread change from a social movement.\textsuperscript{21} Although McAdams discusses the Black church and its leaders as being influential to the Civil Rights Movement, he attributes the success of the movement on its utilization of the political process. “Even while criticizing various aspects of the urban black church, numerous authors have acknowledged a

\textsuperscript{20} Moody, 65
\textsuperscript{21} Doug McAdams develops his theory throughout his book.
greater propensity for social action among such churches.”

McAdams may attribute the power of the Civil Rights Movement to the Political Process Theory, but he also does not underestimate the role the Black church played in undergirding the movement and propelling its efficacy.

Others scholars such as Barbara Dianne Savage see the Civil Rights Movement more as a religious rebellion than a part of the political process and puts the Black church and its leadership at the forefront of, not just Black history, but American history. “It was on this historical stage that black churches were spotlighted for their substantial role in the black freedom epoch unfolding at the time- and it was a role that shifted perceptions in the minds of many about the potential political significance of black churches.” Savage names the role that Black churches played and continue to play in the American political arena through the substantial gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

When mentioning civil rights activism and mid-twentieth century south, one inherently thinks of Black churches and Black church leaders. With its most prominent leader, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. being a Baptist minister, the Civil Rights Movement was in many ways a movement that was birthed in the Black church, supported and nourished in the Black church, and still gives a sense of the moral obligation and legacy to future African-American Christians and to the Black church leadership. The Civil Rights Movement, with its protest, boycotts, and sit-ins was just as much a social movement and rebellion as it was a political change agent and social equalizer. It made visible the moral and social justice importance of the Black church on

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22 McAdams, 98
23 Drew Smith, 1
a political level. This movement had far-reaching national and international effects that are still rippling and being felt to this day.

In his 1963 sermon ‘A Knock at Midnight’, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gives an account of the role of the church as he saw it:

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause men everywhere to say that is has atrophied its will.  

In the Civil Rights Movement we see the role of the Black church move from not just having the potential to be the source and enact real social justice reforms for the Black community, but the potential is realized in the Civil Rights Legislation of the 1960s. These legislative acts substantially changed the social and political life of many black and poor people for generations to come. Through the effective tools deployed by the Black church and Black church leaders the Civil Rights Movement positively changed life for many in the black community and beyond.

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24 King Jr., “A Knock at Midnight” (1963)
The political power of the Black church was expressed through the Civil Rights Movement. Understanding this history for many African-Americans shapes their politics and their religion in ways that it may not shape other ethnic groups in the United States.

With the church being a spiritual tutor, it teaches about spiritual and other worldly matters; especially social-political matters. With this spiritual teaching of how to live out scripture, application is given for earthly matters. Part of that application is the concern for the less fortunate, which lends itself to a strong social justice commitment by those who are African-American and Christian. Therefore, in many African-American churches you will see this commitment to social justice applied to political life. The fact that the Black church has remained such a rich source of spiritual, social, and political capital for the African-American community is not just a historic account, but one that remains in the twenty-first century. We see this commitment lived out most notably today through Black church women.
Chapter Three: African American Women’s faith: Christian Activism Leads to Political Involvement

The role that faith plays in the lives of Black Women is well-documented and undeniable. Starting with the crucial role that the Black Church has played in the lives of enslaved persons, to the pivotal role the Black Church played in the struggle for Civil Rights, to the continuing legacy of the Black Church, there is no doubt that the Black Church as an institution has been a driving force for African Americans. The church’s teachings of social justice fosters an enactment of faith that has led Black Women to fight against injustice in their churches, communities and in the political arena. Black Women have been on the forefront of this perennial struggle for the liberation of their people and have enlisted their understating of Christianity and faith as motivation, inspiration, and fuel to be social and political activists and leaders.

The Black Church and Women

The majority of Black church attendees are made up of Black women. As with most churches, women are the most devout members of any church. “Black Women, then as now, constituted the majority of black church members and were among the most devoted supporters of the churches, as is generally true in American Protestant churches.”25 Black women are the backbone of the church and it most adherent supporters.

25 Savage, 23
Devoted Black church women have always been convinced of the importance of social uplift for their communities as well as the men of their race. Black Christian women understood the need to combat the residual effects of racism and classism that was rampant in the black community and saw it as a spiritual imperative to engage in overcoming these challenges. Rosetta Ross states in her book, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights*, “From the period of slavery through modern times, many black religious women in the United States practiced racial uplift and social responsibility as a means of fulfilling what they understood as their duty to God”.  

Black women assumed leadership roles out of a need to perform good works to God on behalf of their communities. Ross asserts that Black women, “attending especially to overcoming racial impediments to African American well-being, reflect virtues attendant to survival and well-being, practices to ensure survival and general well-being, attention to ‘the least’ in their communities, and community-building/community-sustaining activities”.  

Black Christian women allowed their religious convictions to take on the form of civic engagement to aid in the uplift of their race.

In her book, *If It Wasn’t for the Women...*. *Black Women’s Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes examines the role of Black church women in the Black community and how that role has led to church leadership, political efficacy, and social activism. In explaining the problems that Black church women combatted in America, Gilkes describes a complex set of issues that stem from the country’s institutions. “African-American women have been the victims of the

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26 Ross, 5
27 Ross, 6
longest, most sustained cultural assault experienced by any racial-ethnic-gender group. They have been victimized by institutionalized racism as practiced in the United States in its tri-dimensional expression: economic exploitation, political exclusion, and cultural humiliation."28 Not only did Black women have to fight against racism and classism, they also had to address sexism and tackle the complex way that all of these “isms” intertwined and present themselves in interconnected and interrelated ways.

Unfortunately, sexism was found in the very churches that the Black Christian women were so dedicated and consistently faithful in loving. Although they had to fight sexism in the church community, Black women used all the tools available to them to demonstrate their competency, courage, and strength. Gilkes asserts, “It was biblical feminism that insisted that women had a right to engage in ‘all honest labor. Thus, what began as women’s insistence concerning their right to participate fully in their churches emerged as a full-blown support for the alternative model of womanhood based on black women’s historical experience and for black women’s full participation in society”.29 Sexism and all the other challenges that the women faced in a complex interlocking web were fought using all tools available to the women. This included both spiritual tools like the Bible and prayer, but also more political tools like fighting for the right to vote, voting, and organizing in their counter-attack to racist and sexist oppression.

Black Christian women were true to their religious understandings and channeled that spiritual strength and dedication into a social/political efficacy. Gilkes explains however, “community workers have less access to power in Black religious institutions

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28 Gilkes, 196
29 Gilkes, 112
than in broader Black communities or the larger society. In Black religious institutions their work often is identified with or overshadowed by male leaders, and in spite of their functions in religious institutions, community workers encounter ‘unyielding male authority’ and ‘ideological and theological ambivalence’ about women’s roles.”

For some Black Christian women, it is actually more efficacious to fight against oppression outside the church, than it is inside the very churches they love and serve.

Although we can name many prominent Black men as leaders of the church and the movements most notably connected to the church, it was and remains the women who are at the forefront of her financial health, communal sustainability, and the ones that carry her teachings most readily into everyday circumstances with real world applications. These real world applications include the political sphere. As Savage notes, “One constant, however, is that black women, who constitute a majority of the black electorate and black congregations. Remain the largely unseen force in both arenas.”

Black Women are co-currently the backbone of the Black church, and while utilizing a social gospel faith that will have real world applications, are also social/political actors as well. This type of commitment has meant that Black women are armor bearers for the church and deeply believe in taking the teaching of the church to the broader society.

Black Women believe in taking their faith to the streets. In other words, Black women understand their faith to be communal and in this community sense, needs to positively affect the communities in which they belong. In her book, “Jesus, Jobs and Justice”, scholar Betty Collier-Thomas reflects on how the roles religion and politics

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30 Ross, 11
31 Savage, 279
plays in the lives of Black women. “The relationship of religion and politics in the lives of black women is extremely important.” The faith requires this type of active community engagement. The teachings of the Black church, born in the crucible of slavery, with the emphasis on freedom and the struggle and fight for justice emphasizes these tenants among its members. Moody confirms, “The endorsement of a social as well as a spiritual gospel was a familiar trope within the framework of the Black church during the twentieth century.” This gospel has its good news deeply seated in the liberation and deliverance of all people. When it comes to the Black church it has been rightly occupied with what justice and civil rights look like for Black people in America. This enactment of faith with its real world consequences and ideals has undoubtedly led Black women to seek real world societal solutions. The political realm has been one arena to secure the type of world that the tenants of the Black church calls forth. Collier-Thomas further reflects on how Black women have lived out their faith using the political sphere. “Religion was not viewed by black women as a barrier to political involvement. African-American women leaders reasoned that as Christians it was their duty to see that justice was done, and there was no better way to do that than to become involved in politics.” Black Women have been making a difference in American society and politics with strong Christian conviction stemming from the Black church. This type of faith naturally leads to forms of social involvement that often times has overt political implications.

32 Collier-Thomas, xxx.
33 Moody, 65
34 Collier-Thomas, 259
Freedom Faith

In the historic 1963 March on Washington, Mahalia Jackson famously encouraged The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. to “Tell them about the Dream, Martin”. This was the dream that became the iconic “I have a Dream Speech” that was orated at the march and defined the Civil Rights movement. What is not widely held knowledge is that the premise for the “I have A Dream Speech” came from the sermon of a lesser-known Civil Rights Leader, The Reverend Dr. Prathia Hall. Hall was a giant in the civil rights movement, but as one of the women undergirding and leading from behind, many are not aware of her contributions to the movement and to Black Christianity. Hall articulated the premise by which some African American women find themselves in political leadership stemming from specific understandings of their faith being deeply connected to communal thriving and social political activism. This specific understanding of a social justice-informed, community-oriented faith was called “Freedom Faith” by Hall.

Hall’s concept of Freedom Faith is explained by scholar Courtney Pace: “The absolute, positive, without a trace of doubt, conviction that God intends this people to be free. This understanding of God as a deliverer, of Jesus as liberator, and of the Spirit as power”35 This is one of the most clearly defined ways to understand how faith motivates Black Women’s civic and political engagement. Hall’s concept of freedom faith gives a name to the way in which personal faith in Jesus Christ, leads to love for neighbor,

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35 Pace, 133
service to the community, which will have a positive effect for the world. Through her life’s work The Reverend Doctor Prathia Hall preached, expressed, and proclaimed this understanding of her faith to all.

Hall’s ethos of Freedom Faith gives language to the ways that Black women have expressed and lived out their understandings of Christianity as expressed through the Black church. These understandings have been and continue to be at the center of African American Women’s social and political activism and leadership. With the language of “Freedom Faith” I further explore the ways that black women’s social and political activism has been intricately informed by their commitment to God.

Understanding the Black women’s struggle in America has not been an easy task. Black women themselves have been trying to understand, explain, and document what has been their political, social, and especially their spiritual experiences. In their journey echoes of racism, sexism, and classism are heard. In Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights author Rosetta E. Ross gives a brilliant account of Black women’s civil rights activity looking through a womanist theological lens and asserts that these activities were influenced and motivated by a deep religious/spiritual framework.36 Utilizing a narrative approach as a methodological tool to give preference to a persons’ story (witness) as a means to obtaining knowledge, I will look closely at the leadership activities of two Black Christian women, Nannie H. Burroughs and Ella Josephine Baker.

36 Ross, (xiii) “As an exploration of religious moral practice, this book argues that Black women’s civil rights activism is their female enactment of Black religious values that reflected an internal concern for the Black community’s survival and flourishing and a related external concern to address society’s formal and conventional sources of inequality.”
In the Black church tradition it is important to have at least two witnesses or three witnesses as per scriptural imperative to establish a testimony.\textsuperscript{37} The lives of Nannie H. Burroughs and Ella Josephine Baker were picked due to their well-documented social and political activism. They represent different eras of social/political activism within the black community and church and have different cultural/geographic backgrounds. Nannie H. Burroughs and Ella Josephine Baker are two examples of Black Christian women who overcome complex challenges using their spirituality and religious beliefs. They are models to show that there exists a long tradition of African-American women who allow their commitment and dedication to the church to be a driving force to overcome the difficulties of racism, sexism, and classism to effect positive change in their communities. The strength of these Christian Black women have allowed them to be leaders in the community outlining a social/political manifesto to enact positive change. Nannie H. Burroughs and Ella Josephine Baker are by no means the only two leaders that could have been examined for these purposes, however, they are exemplary models of faith as expressed through the Black church leads to social and political commitments and activism. In their efforts they have left an amazing legacy for Black women of future generations and are an integral part of any study on the importance and effect of the church to the Black community and American culture, and especially in accessing the Black church as a motivation for African-American women to run for elected office.

\footnote{The Holy Bible: 2 Corinthians 13:1 "In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established."}
Nannie Helen Burroughs

In the “Report of the Work of Baptist Women” a piece in African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness, Nannie Helen Burroughs explains some of the overt and subversive forms of sexism, racism, and classism that she and the Black Baptist women of the early 20th Century were facing. As a leader in the Black Baptist Church, Burroughs laid out strict rules and regulations to counter the prevailing misconceptions and stereotypes of what it meant to be a Black person by the dominant culture. As a way of alleviating the suffering of her community through overt and subversive forms of white supremacy, Burroughs offered her community a set of moral/religious ways of being that would have a social/political effect. She understood that for Black people, there was a morality that was all encompassing and if used for its social and political efficacy, could have positive outcomes on the lived experiences on Black people.

Burroughs was not only trying to tell Black men and women how to live, but she was setting forth an action plan that would counter negative stereotypes about black men and women and their worth in American society. Using a spiritual/moral understanding of what it means to be a good citizen in America, Burroughs taught the community—especially the women, a social way to be and interact in the world. These teachings if applied would reshape American thought about the Black community and about Black womanhood in particular. Burroughs exhorts the clergy to “Teach them how to make their religion a real, potent factor in race regeneration.”38 Burroughs was trying to show

38 Sennett, 380
in her report and leadership practical ways to channel spiritual and religious devotion into racially uplifting practices and activities that would have social and political implications.

Burroughs also reports on the intersectionality of racism when fighting against sexism. Burroughs details the fight for suffrage and gives the reasons why so few Black women have taken up the fight. “Many white women felt that to thrust Colored women into the struggle would be to prejudice their case and deprive them of the support of the ‘Lily-white’ element.”\(^{39}\) White women did not want Black women to join the fight for women’s suffrage because it would undermine the efforts. Racism and sexism working hand in hand excluded most Black women from the mainstream white-led fight for suffrage. However, Burroughs explains how and why Black Baptist women started suffrage clubs to be a part of the power of the ballot. “Women must organize and educate.”\(^{40}\) Burroughs also gives several reasons why she feels women will be of value in the affairs of government. Of the reasons she names, Burroughs ends with, “For her sufferings, she deserves suffrage”\(^{41}\) Burroughs saw the Black women as deserving the right to vote and be included in political activity because of the suffering she had endured. She sees the political empowerment of Black women as a type of compensation/reparations for the mistreatment they have endured. Burroughs notes that “There will be a protest against ‘Politics in the Church’, but she answers with the scriptural understanding that, “Teaching them to observe all things’ is broad enough to include the affairs of the state.”\(^{42}\) She sees educating and encouraging women to

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\(^{39}\) Sernett, 392
\(^{40}\) Sernett, 394
\(^{41}\) Sernett, 394
\(^{42}\) Sernett, 395
understand and take part in political matters as appropriate functions of the church and thus encouraged political engagement for Christian Black women.

Nannie Helen Burroughs understood her role as a leader in the church to have far more implications than just inside the church building even while experiencing sexism within the church and racism outside in the broader American context. She used her deep faith and understanding of the teaching of the church to further advocate and help her community. “The Negroes must have Jesus, Jobs, and Justice, declared Burroughs, because she knew that black Americans would need more than religion to physically survive and to advance socially, economically, and politically.” ⁴³ Nannie Helen Burroughs’ example and legacy is key in understanding how and why Black women continue to synthesize their faith, church and God with their social and political activism.

*Ella Josephine Baker*

In *Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights*, womanist socio-ethnicist Rosetta E. Ross also explores the life, faith, and activism of Ella Josephine Baker. Ross examines the role Baker played in the Civil Rights Movement and focuses on Baker’s Christian background and how it influenced her activities in social justice. Ella Baker was instrumental to the Civil Rights Movement. Ross recounts that, “Baker helped found two major organizations through whose programs structure of the movement developed: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)” ⁴⁴ Baker had a firm background in the church and in the Baptist tradition. In a Baptist Women’s state convention in 1924

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⁴³ Collier-Thomas, xxxi.
⁴⁴ Ross, 32
Baker spoke on “The needs of the hour and how to meet them. She also encouraged women of the convention to reflect their faith in everyday practices. Let us stay on the job for Christ.” In Baker’s early life there was a firm understanding that she was dedicated to her church, committed to allowing her faith to be active in her community through ministry to the poor, and was always ready to encourage other Christian women to be active in the community for the Lord’s sake.

Baker was an integral part to many organizations, and like Burroughs, Baker saw the need for political efficacy in the Black community. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Baker helped to start the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The SCLC’s first campaign was the “Crusade for Citizenship” which was a voting rights program. The Crusade for Citizenship was a campaign geared at orchestrating massive voter registration drives which included instruction, transportation, and full citizenship education. Even with many successes’ in organizing multiple groups such as SCLC, SNCC, CORE, and the NAACP in an effort to combat racism and classism; Baker met consistent resistance to her apparent leadership abilities because she was a woman.

“Although she had proven organizing skills and foresight, she officially served only as ‘acting’ executive director because she was not a part of the ‘preacher’s club’ and was a woman.” In most of the organizations that she helped to start and was so instrumental in making successful, Baker held axillary titles and was not given her fair accolades because she was a woman. Baker was not deterred from leadership roles and did not diminish her abilities due to sexism and asserted her role through extraordinary activities during the

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45 Ross, 33
46 Ross, 44
47 Ross, 45
Civil Rights Movement. Her assertion that having Christian convictions precipitated and influenced her life’s work showed that she channeled her spirituality into an overarching social justice edict that fueled her social and political activism even in the face of overt and dehumanizing sexism and racism.

*Women’s political activism in New Jersey*

Christian Black women’s understanding of “Freedom Faith” has produced leaders like Nannie Helen Burroughs and Ella Josephine Baker, but it has also affected geographical areas leading to widespread political involvement among black women. In her book, *Black Women’s Christian Activism: Seeking Social Justice in a Northern Suburb*, Betty Livingston Adams recounts the history of Black women’s political engagement in Summit, New Jersey in the early 20th century. Adams tells the story of how the Black women, understanding their religion as offering a system of meaning that they could view the world, set out to reform civic institutions by placing morality and justice in the realm of public policy and politics. These women advocated for a sort of “civic righteousness” that allowed them to add politics to their Christian service.48

Adams explains in her book how these “New Jersey black church women embraced civic righteousness as the basis of their public activism.”49 The women worked first, to obtain the right to vote and then, organized to get those leaders elected whom had their best interests as political agendas. Encouraged by church leaders who proclaimed,

48 Adams, 3  
49 Adams, 73
“God is calling the Negro woman to come to a knowledge of Him and then to go into the cities and towns and help struggling humanity by fighting for right against wrong”\textsuperscript{50}, the women in Summit, New Jersey became a political force to be reckoned with an understating that their inspiration and motivation came from God. This type of civic righteousness was strong among the Black church women of New Jersey in the early 1900’s and no doubt did not die with that generation of women. In the generations of black women that follow them we see this legacy continue, namely taking the form of motivation to run for elected office. Black Church women are important to the church and to the broader communities that they are a part. Whether we call it “Freedom Faith” or “Civic Righteousness”, Black women understand their political and social engagement and leadership as an outpouring of their faith and belief in God. This type of faith has led many Christian Black women to be politically involved and social activist and advocates for generations. It is still motivating Black women to this day.

\textsuperscript{50} Adams, 72
Chapter 4: Literature Review

The concept of representation is important in a democracy. In other words, who are the people who represent the people? Those elected to represent any given community and constituency should be able to do so legitimately. Scholars of political science have studied and analyzed different approaches to representation in the American democracy. One such form is that of descriptive representation. Descriptive representation within a democracy refers to elected officials sharing similar characteristics with the electorate. “In ‘descriptive’ representation, representatives are in their own persons and lives in some sense typical of the larger class of persons whom they represent.” Some of these similar characteristics include, but are not limited to, gender and race. Descriptive representation is important to American democracy because it lends legitimacy to the electoral process. Who represent the people is important for the people to be truly represented.

Currently in the United States the numbers are far from equal when discussing descriptive representation. According to the Center for American Women and Politics,

“In every Presidential election since 1980, the proportion of eligible female adults who voted has exceeded the proportion of eligible male adults who voted. The number of female voters has exceeded the number of male voters in every presidential election since 1964.”

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51 Mansbridge, 629
52 Ibid
53 “Descriptive representatives, that is, individual who in their own backgrounds mirror some of the more frequent experiences and outward manifestations of belonging to the group.” (Mansbridge, 628)
54 CAWP fact sheet
Although female voters have exceeded the number of male voters for decades, the numbers don’t seem to translate to representation within the government. Only eighteen percent of those elected to congress are women. At the time of my original interviews in 2012, women held only 1,752 state legislative seats, which is about 23.7 percent of all seats throughout the United States.\textsuperscript{55} The United States ranked 85\textsuperscript{th} in the world for Women in National Legislatures, far behind Rwanda and Sweden which ranked first and second respectively.\textsuperscript{56} Today, women make up 31 percent of state legislators nationwide. Why we have so little descriptive representation when it comes to women has puzzled scholars for a generation. When it comes to electing more women to all levels of government and especially to our Congress and state legislatures the United States of America has a lot of work to do. When it comes to women elected officials in the United States the country is lacking in the number needed to truly be representative of the people. Even bleaker is the descriptive representation of black women in elected positions throughout the country.

Since women of color are part of the electorate, their presence at the decision-making table is important along with all women. The need for descriptive representation that is substantive is essential.\textsuperscript{57} We can understand and see an issue with women being underrepresented, but by taking a closer look to further probe how well the United States

\textsuperscript{55} Center for American Women and Politics Fact Sheet: Gender Differences in Voter Turnout (2011)
\textsuperscript{56} Lawless & Fox, 21
\textsuperscript{57} Race and Gender Matter : Refining Models of Legislative Policy Making in State Legislatures, pg. 104 “ Although African American women in elected office are not represented in proportion to their numbers in the general population, since the 1970’s they have composed a higher proportion of African American elected officials at all levels of government.
does at representing women of color when it comes to elected offices, we will see that the situation is dire.

The numbers are bad for women in elected office in the United States, but they are worse for women of color. At the time I first conducted my research in 2012, 1,752 women serving in state legislators around the country only 349 were women of color. That number 349 represented 4.7 percent of the total 7,382 people serving in state legislators. Only 4.7 percent of women of color were included as elected officials in our government.\textsuperscript{58} Today, women of color make up 8.2 percent of state legislators. This is an improvement from the numbers of 2012, but not on par with what one would expect when discussing descriptive representation for the United States of America. As Susan J. Carroll and Kira Sanbonmatsu note “The persistence gender imbalance in office holding raises questions about democratic legitimacy and the inclusivity of American politics, and the quality of political representation.”\textsuperscript{59} The effect of the race imbalance and gender imbalance for black women not being represented fully in our electorate sheds doubt on the American claims to a representative democracy, especially as a descriptive representation of the polity.

In the article, \textit{Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent “Yes”}; political theorist Jane Mansbridge lays out the costs and benefits of descriptive representation in the American political arena. Mansbridge notes that descriptive representation allows the electorate, “Easier communication with one’s representative, awareness that one’s interest are being represented with sensitivity, and

\textsuperscript{58} CAWP Fact Sheet
\textsuperscript{59} Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2
knowledge that certain features of one’s identity do not mark one less able to govern all contribute to making one feel more included in the polity.”  

Mansbridge is concerned with how descriptive representation can enhance the substantive representation of Black people and women, meaning that having more representation actually makes a positive difference for the group being represented. Mansbridge acknowledges some pitfalls to the concept of descriptive representation that would nullify the effect; “In practice, however, disadvantaged groups often need the full representation that proportionality allows in order to achieve several goals: deliberative synergy, critical mass, dispersion of influence, and a range of views within the group.” Mansbridge’s article highlights the argument that descriptive representation for the constituency is important and that descriptive representation assists in maintaining the legitimacy within a democracy. Bottom line, we need more Black women to be elected to political office.

But with scholarship showing the importance of descriptive representation on substantive outcomes for persons historically underrepresented in our American democracy, such as women and black people, and especially women who are black, the numbers of black women elected officials is dismal to say the least. Political scientists ask the questions: why women don’t run for office, and what has to be done to get them to run for office? One such scholar in the field concerned with women as political candidates is Jennifer Lawless. Lawless has written prolifically on the topic of women as

60 Mansbridge, 651
61 Mansbridge, 636
62 “Seeing proportional numbers of members of their group exercising the responsibility of ruling with full status in the legislature can enhance de facto legitimacy by making citizens, and particularly members of historically underrepresented groups, feel as if they themselves were present in the deliberations.” (Mansbridge, 650)
emerging candidates for elected office. In her book that she co-authored with Richard Fox, *It Still Takes A Candidate: Why Women Don’t Run for Office*, Lawless continues to research candidacy emergence among women using the traditional political ambition theory. For a long time, political ambition theory seemed to be one of the more acceptable and widely used frameworks for why women don’t run and one of the main frameworks that scholars like to employ to argue that more women can run if they become more politically ambitious.

"Despite similarities in levels of political participation, proximity, and interest, eligible women candidates are less politically ambitious than men. Women are not only less likely than men to consider running for office, but they are also less likely than men to enter actual political contests."\(^63\)

Under this framework and assumption, political ambition therefore must be ignited in women to motivate them to run for office. Joseph Schlesinger and his theory of political ambition outlined in his 1966 book, *Ambition and Politics*, ascertains that a person will run for office when they are responding to a political opportunity. Schlesinger’s "rational choice paradigm, conceptualizes political ambition as primarily a strategic response of a person, to a political opportunity. Candidates are more likely to seek office when they face a favorable political structural circumstance."\(^64\)

The traditional political ambition framework focuses on the candidate having a prior inclination to run for political office, and then when the political climate is

\(^{63}\) Lawless & Fox, 45
\(^{64}\) Fox & Lawless, 644
conducive, i.e. an open entry level elected position, running for office. Pauline Terrelonge Stone has researched the effect of political ambition theory for Black Politicians. Stone found that “all black politicians are not alike in their motivations to seek office, and that these differences in office aspirations are not randomly distributed.” Stone took into account the sex of the black politicians which led to her conclusion. For Stone, political ambition theory for Black politicians was not well suited as a model to understand candidacy emergence because her research found a selection mechanism perceived by officeholders that caused them to self-select out of the public domain. Stone realized that more data needed to be collected over time to truly realize black politician’s office goals. In essence, to understand the emergence of Black political candidates other factors needed to be considered and studied.

Research by Susan J. Carroll and Kira Sanbonmatsu offers an alternative framework to the political ambition theory for women. In their book, More Women Can Run: Gender and Pathways to the State Legislatures, the authors argue for an examination of a new model they call “relationally embedded candidacy”. They believe that this model, “relationally embedded candidacy”, better describes women’s emergence as candidates than a traditional political ambition model.

The relationally embedded candidacy model means that:

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65 Lawless & Fox, 645
66 Ambition Theory and the Black Politician: Western Political Quarterly; Mar 1, 1980; 33, 1. Stone, 107
67 Stone, 101
68 Stone, 107
69 “For many men, and for some women, the initial decision to run for office is adequately captured by a traditional ambition framework. However, we find that a relationally embedded model of candidacy better explains women’s decision making about running for office.” (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 124)
“Women’s decision making about office holding is more likely to be influenced by beliefs and reactions, both real and perceived, of other people and to involve considerations of how candidacy and office holding would affect the lives of others with whom the potential candidate has close relationships. The candidacy decision-making process takes place in the context of a network of relationships and is deeply influenced by relational considerations”. 70

The scholars further show, with their research and interviews, that this model better explains women’s pathway to elected office. They offer a solution and/or suggestions of how to get more women to run for office, “we conclude that increasing women’s representation also depends greatly upon encouragement and support for women candidates”. 71 This encouragement and support can come from a variety of sources such as elected officials, political parties, family, but what is essential is that it exists. 72

What the scholars observed is with women in general, party recruitment seems to be a major relationship that leads to recruitment, but this is not true for women of color. “We can say with certainty that the “recruited pathway is less likely to characterize minority women’s entry into elective office; women of color are less likely than white women to arrive at the legislature because of party recruitment”. 73 This does not mean that the relationally embedded candidacy model does not apply to African-American women. On the contrary, it may be more important for African-American women due to

70 Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 17
71 Ibid
72 Ibid “The relationally embedded candidacy model suggests that organizations, elected officials, political parties, and even family members can persuade a woman to enter a race, regardless of whether she has previously thought about candidacy.” Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 62
73 Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 105
their perceived un-electability as both women and minorities. As Dr. Carroll and Dr. Sanbonmatsu have concluded; that although political party recruitment and encouragement may not be the pathway for African-American Women” relationally embedded candidacy model may still be at play and fully applied.

My thesis reflects on the relationally embedded candidacy model as an explanation for the emergence of Black Women as political candidates but wants to study them on their own terms. In particular my thesis question asks, what if other organizations/ institutions, especially religious, may be the recruitment pathway for African-American Women utilizing the relationally embedded candidacy model. More specifically: is the Black Church as a social, cultural, and political epi-center of black life more important to African-American women than political parties in their decision to run for elected office? Could the Black church as the progenitor of black life be informing Black Women’s political inclinations and inspiring them to run for elected office? Could the way that Black Women perceive their role in their community, which was shaped in the Black church be motivating them to become political leaders?

Carroll and Sanbonmatsu conclude that, “There has been remarkably little research examining how the intersectional identities and histories of women of color affect their pathways into elective office”. 74 Through their research the scholars make note of the rise in Women of color in the Democratic Party. They also acknowledge that the combined effects of gender and racial inequality arguably put women of color candidates at a greater disadvantage compared with white women and minority men”; 75

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74 Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 100
75 Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 99
thus alluding to the complexity of intersectionality for Black women political candidates. The scholars notice that women of color have stronger educational and occupational credentials before running for office which may suggest that black women are held to a higher standard than other candidates who run for office. The aim of this thesis is to fill some of this gap in the research surrounding African-American women’s pathway to office by building on the concepts of intersectionality and relationally embedded candidacy emergence all while interrogating the role of the church on African American women’s Political inclinations.

There is a wealth of literature on the concept and analytical tool referred to as intersectionality. The term “intersectionality” itself was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw when she discussed issues of black women’s employment in the United States. Many studies using intersectionality as an analytical tool discusses what it means to be African-American and female in America. “Intersectionality is the analytical tool developed by feminists of color in their continuing struggle to correct the omissions and distortions in feminist analysis caused by failure to investigate the structuring powers of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality.” This analysis mainly covers race and sexuality understanding that the processes of racialization and gendering are specific

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76 *Intersectionality*. Polity Press: Cambridge, 2016. “Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.” (Collins & Bilge, 2)


78 Hawkesworth, 207
yet interrelated. 79 However, not many studies employing intersectionality cover the church as a structuring power and organization to be investigated for its effect on and around race-gendering.

In their book, *Intersectionality*, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge discuss the long history of the term intersectionality and present some of the ways the term has been used, can be used and ways it has been deployed as an analytical tool. “Ordinary people can draw upon intersectionality as an analytic tool when they recognize that they need better frameworks to grapple with the complex discriminations that they face.”80 For African-American Women the Black church is a unique institution that influences their political participation. In some cases a high level of political commitment that has been influenced by the Black church leads to running for an elected office. The Black church as an institution of power, influence, but also the site of discrimination and subjection for black women leaves a distinct web of complexity. The intersectionality of race, gender, and religion is therefore an important analysis to examine for its’ political ramifications especially the decision of some African-American women to run for political office. Thus Intersectionality is a useful heuristic or problem-solving tool to understanding a range of social problems; my contribution is to look at race, religion, and gender together in decisions to run for political office.81

In her article, *Disappearing Acts" Reclaiming Intersectionality in the Social Sciences in a Post-Black Feminist Era*, Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd cautions against the

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79 Hawkesworth, 214
80 Collins & Bilge, 3
81 Collins & Bilge, 4
misuse/abuse of Intersectionality by researchers. She suggests, focusing on illuminating women of color as political subjects, centering the voices of Black women in the research, and focusing on narrative as the basis of interpretive and qualitative methodology. With these suggestions in mind, this research project illuminates the experience and motivations of Black women who hold/have held elected office by using ethnographic interviews that gives preference to their narrative and interprets those stories using a qualitative methodological approach. I will center the voice of the Black women I interviewed by giving preference in directly quoting them when applicable and sharing multiple quotations from each of their interviews.

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life shows that nationally “Women are more likely to be affiliated with a religion than men (86 to 79 percent), to have an absolutely certain belief in God or a universal spirit (77 to 65 percent) to pray daily (66 to 49 percent), to say religion is very important in their lives (63 to 49 percent), and to attend worship services at least weekly (44 to 34)” (See figure 1). Across the nation no matter your race or ethnicity, women are considered more religious then men. In the black community this is more pronounced (See Figure 2). African American women tend to be even more religious than white women. Black churches in the United States attract and retain the support of the vast majority of black women, and they tend to be filled largely by women and children and much less by men. The current Pew Poll research shows the high percentage in Church attendance among female African-Americans:

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“African-American women also stand out for their high level of religious commitment. More than eight-in-ten black women (84%) say religion is very important to them, and roughly six-in-ten (59%) say they attend religious services at least once a week. No group of men or women from any other racial or ethnic background exhibits comparably high levels of religious observance.”

Just like the Pew Poll of African American Women, my interviews show that 11 out of 13 or 84.62% of those interviewed show high levels of religious commitment. In line with the national percentage, about 84% of respondents in the interviews showed high levels of devout faith. Just like all African American women nationwide, African-American women in elected office overwhelmingly express high levels of religious commitment.

In the Church, African-American women are a majority and a vital part of the functions of the Black Church. As laborers, caretakers of their families, and sustainers of community life, black women filled many roles that needed to be filled. Their role as “doers” and “carriers’ in African-American life is particularly evident in their unfailing devotion to black churches.”83 As explained by scholars, African-American women are doers when it comes to the church and are an important part of the institution. Similarly, many of the respondents to the interviews currently hold some official role in the church leadership. Therefore, the religious commitment of African-American women goes beyond just weekly service attendance, but also gives way to action in the form of some

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83 Harris, 155
public service either to the church, or in the case of my respondents, service in the form of elected office.

A lot has been written and explored about the Black church as an agent for political and social change in the black community and the expressed teaching of a social justice gospel. In the book *Between Sundays*, author Marla Frederick takes an in depth look at the role that spirituality played in the lives of political activists in North Carolina. “Spirituality provides a space for creative agency, which gives voice to the multifaceted ways in which women interpret, inform, and reshape their social conditions.”

What Marla Frederick further states is paramount to understanding the influence of faith and the church in influencing African-American women:

> Spirituality is specific to particular groups-such as these African American women-when it is informed by shared historical or ritual experiences. It is informed first by an individual relationship with God-nurtured by religious doctrine, Holy Scriptures, pastors, televangelists, and other mediators of faith. It is further informed by historical traditions-learned understandings of what it means to serve God. Finally, spirituality is informed by social relations-one’s positioning in society, which in the United States is inevitably raced, classed, and gendered. These three contributing elements form vast and complicated systems through which women navigate their spiritual experiences.

Armed with a personal relationship with God, informed by a church with a historical tradition of social justice, Black Women’s Freedom Faith, further backed by a keen

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84 Frederick, 9  
85 Frederick, 12
understanding of their position in society; Black women pursue political leadership as a way to help their communities and live out their Christian faith as public servants.
Chapter 5: Research Question & Data Collection

Using the relationally embedded candidacy model as expressed by doctors Susan Carroll and Kira Sanbonmatsu, I explore this question surrounding the role of faith in God and the Black church in the motivation for African American women to run for political office. In the relationally embedded candidacy model (here to called RECM) the scholars show that relationships matter to women. Organizations can persuade/encourage women who have never thought of running for office to run. My research question asks, what role does faith and the Black church have on Black women who run for elected office.

Even though relationships and organizations matter, and the scholars explain this throughout their book, they also note, for women of color being recruited by a political party is less likely. Therefore, for women of color, what if another organizations/institutions, especially religious, may be the recruitment pathway utilizing the relationally embedded candidacy model. Put another way, is the Black church as a social, cultural, and political epi-center of black life motivating and inspiring African-American women to run for elected office? What role is the church playing in the incredibly important decision of Black Women to run for political office? What effect does the relationship, exemplified through a deep faith in God, have on Black Women who run for office? Using the RECM, I explore these questions.

86 Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 105
I use intersectionality as an analytical framework to interrogate how structuring powers are specific yet interrelated. Namely, how religion, race and gender are working in concert with each other to motivate Black women to run for elected office. How do Black women apply their faith? Will this application have political implications and will they lead to running for political office? I utilized an ethnographic interview protocol and style as a qualitative means of data gathering and analysis. Examining the behavior of the respondents through their voiced responses. This is a subjective endeavor but it also privileges the voices and experiences of Black women who are historically and currently a marginalized group because of both their gender and race. Letting the women speak for themselves was important to me as the researcher and as a member of the respondents race/gendered group. Many quotes were retained directly from the respondents for further aid in the ethnographic nature of the analysis.

I conducted verbal in-person interviews with thirteen current or former elected officials. The thirteen African American women were all either currently holding office in New Jersey (eleven) or previously held elected office in New Jersey (two). They represent the New Jersey state senate, New Jersey state assembly, the New Jersey Boards of Chosen Freeholders, city mayors, and city council members. Unfortunately, at the time of these interviews, there were no African-American women represented on the federal level in the New Jersey delegation in Congress. The interviews were conducted over a period of two months, from December of 2013 through February of 2014. Each

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participant was selected due to her willingness and availability to participate in the study. All interviews were conducted voluntarily and with the written consent of the participant.

The identity of the respondents will remain anonymous. The respondents will be referred to with codenames. Interviews were audio taped (with the exception of one where field notes were taken), transcribed, and analyzed. The audio taped interviews range in time from twenty minutes to one hour. I analyzed the interviews through a three-phase process which I describe below.

Process One

First, I looked at each interview in its totality and searched for the appearance of key words, phrases, and concepts to identify the religiosity of each respondent before her run for elected office. In the first process I wanted to establish the role God, faith and the church had in the lives of the respondents before they ran for political office. Specific questions were asked of each participant to establish this baseline for their faith in God and religious commitment/activity in the Black church. 88 Special attention was given to such phrases as “child of God,” how the words Christian and Bible were used, and if the respondent quoted scripture. I also paid particular attention to the emergence of a Christian ethos or spiritual theme in each interview. I noted where there was a high frequency of these key terms and themes whether or not the respondent expressed being a part of church leadership or wanting to be involved more in church. I evaluated the respondent’s overall religious participation, noting if the respondent mentioned praying

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88 See Appendix 1 for the interview protocol
daily, reading the Bible or biblical text such as the daily word or online publications, and/or listening to sermons or other spiritual audio recordings.

I coded each interview based on the following measures: high findings are coded as devout Christian (DC), those interview participants who made more than five concrete references to their faith and more than one mode of religious participation (reading the Bible, Prayer, attending religious services), low finding were coded as Christian or spiritual (CS), those interview participants who made less than five references to either their faith or religious participation in any way.

Of the 13 interviews: Eleven (11) respondents were coded as devout Christian (DC). This code was attributed due to interviews that had one or more attributes: quoting of scripture in answering one or more questions, being a part of the church leadership at the time of running for office, reporting the necessity for daily prayer /reading the bible or biblical text. Two (2) respondents were coded as Christian/Spiritual (CS) because one did not identify as “Christian”, but said that she is a spiritual person, believes in God, does not attend church, but follows many tenants of Christianity and the other because she no longer attends service, did not mention reading the Bible or prayer.

Process One acted as a barometer to see if high levels of religiosity, as explained through activities and statements around reading the Bible, prayer, attending religious services or being actively involved in church or assuming a leadership position in church where prevalent in the respondent before her run for office. It was important to note if the women who I was interviewing showed the same levels of religious commitment as one
would expect from Black women in the United States who had not run for elected office.\textsuperscript{89}

\textit{Process Two}

Second, I asked questions that was specifically probing the connection of the women’s faith to their run for office. These responses are essential in determining whether Faith and/or their church had a direct influence on their decision to run for elected office. I asked two questions to each elected or formerly elected official to determine her spiritual level and commitment before she ran for office.

I asked each interview subject, “What or who were some of the major influences in your decision to run for office? In what ways?” The answers of all respondents can be broken down into three broad categories: (1) purely political reasons, such as being involved in partisan politics then being asked to run for office or political ambition and/or thinking one had something to contribute to the community by holding elected office; (2) coming from a political family and having someone who was an elected official in their family whose legacy they wanted to continue; or (3) being inspired to run through the church. Five of the thirteen respondents answered in a purely political way. Four of the thirteen respondents explained that they wanted to continue a familial political legacy. Four respondents named their relationship in God and the church as being a major influence on their decision to run for elected office.

\textsuperscript{89} See the pew poll national data that shows 84\% of black women show high levels of religiosity.
Also, in investigating my respondents’ paths to political office, I asked specifically about the purpose of their run for elected office. I asked, “What was the purpose of your run for elected office, what did you want to achieve by running?” With this question again was looking to see if any of the respondents would explicitly link their run for office to a spiritual mandate or Christian principle. Nine of the thirteen respondents answered in a way that spoke of overall service to the community and their constituency. Three respondents named their family and fulfilling that political legacy. One person answered in a purely political way.

Process Three

Lastly, I ascribed a thematic overtone to each interview based on whether the respondent summarized an overall understanding that her faith played an important role in her run for office or whether another key theme emerged, such as family and familial ties (or party activity). In others words, what did the respondents view was their rationale in for running for office? I looked at the full interviews of all 13 respondents to process a theme for what influenced their run for office and their primary motivating factor for running for elected office.

The primary influence for five of the respondents can be best described as political. Either someone asked them to run for office or they wanted to run for office. Family or familial ties was the primary influence to run for office for five of my interview respondents. These respondents either ran to continue the legacy of a family member or were influenced to run because a parent had previously held a political
position. Finally, three respondents answered in an overtly Christian way. These three respondents named that they believed that God and their faith in God led them to run for political office.
Chapter Six: Research Findings and Analysis

In More Women Can Run: Gender and Pathways to the State Legislatures, Dr. Carroll and Sanbonmatsu acknowledged in their study and in the political science literature as a whole that little research has been done on how and why women of color run for office. The scholars state, “There has been remarkably little research examining how the intersectional identities and histories of women of color affect their pathways into elective office.”\textsuperscript{90} What is known is that the identity and history of women of color, including African-American women, has not garnered sufficient study thus far to explain their pathway into politics. In light of the fact that African-American women have not been studied, especially in light of their robust history in America, “we suggest that a fruitful way to move forward in the study and practice of women and politics is to consider women on their own terms.” \textsuperscript{91} The scholars feel that women should be studied on their own terms. Here, I investigate Black women’s pathways to elected office on their own terms, recognizing the unique political motivations that stem from Black women’s faith and the history and tradition of the black church.

In their research, Dr. Carroll and Dr. Sanbonmatsu are able to show some distinctions in women of color’s pathway to elected office in contrast to their white counterparts and explain, “we can say with certainty that the recruited pathway is less likely to characterize minority women’s entry into elective office; women of color are less likely than white women to arrive at the legislature because of party recruitment.”\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{90} Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 100
\textsuperscript{91} Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 11
\textsuperscript{92} Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 105
Women of color are less likely than their white counterparts to be asked to run for office by political elites. However, I surmise that the relationally embedded candidacy model is still at play in Black women’s pathway to elected office. One crucial organization will be the Black Church and those religious leaders associated with the church. African-American women have strong connections to their churches and faith that is deep and historical in nature. Thus through the pastor, understandings of missional/community engagement, theological ideology that sets forth a social justice gospel, and the historical effect of the Civil Rights Movement stemming from the organization and motivation of the Black church; relationally embedded candidacy model will still characterize African-Americans women’s run for elected office…it will include in its definition, the Black church as a leading motivating organization and Black women’s faith as a crucial relationship that helps to motivate their run.\(^93\)

After interviewing 13 current or former African-American women elected to public office I now look to the women’s reflections and assertions about how the relationally embedded candidacy model (hereafter called RECM) was at work in their run for political office. Through these ethnographic interviews, I will ascertain motivations and support in line with the (RECM) as described by Dr. Carroll and Sanbonmatsu.

*Process One*

In process one of the interview analysis, I ascertained each women’s level of religiosity before her first run for elected office. Eleven respondents were coded as

\(^{93}\) The Relationally Embedded candidacy model suggests that organizations, elected official’s, political parties and even family members can persuade a woman to enter a race, regardless of whether she has previously though about candidacy. (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, p.62.)
devout Christian (DC), due to their references to scripture, prayer, church leadership and attendance, and overall understanding and belief of God leading them to run for elected office as captured in the transcripts of their verbal interviews. Process one, reflecting the first portion of the interview protocol is to show the context, motivations and ethos of each respondent before her first run for elected office. The questions of process one are generally reflected in the General Questions portions of the interview, namely looking at the background. However, answer to questions around goals and purpose of their political office run also offered statements that referenced scripture, prayer, church leadership and church attendance. Overall, I reviewed each interview for the statements of the women’s church and religious involvement. The complete interview protocol is located in Appendix 1.

In her interview, Ann, who was currently serving in her elected position stated that “I am a child of the King.” Raised in a Christian home, Ann says, “It was expected that we would portray those values in public. What I do is based on my love of public service, but it is truly based on my love of God.” Referring to the book of Esther in the Bible, Ann states, “I do believe that I was born for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). She says, “I’ve seen what the favor of God can do for an underdog. I give him all the glory.” As a person who reads the Bible regularly, Ann told me her favorite Bible verse (1 Chronicles 7:14) and quoted it verbatim. Ann discussed having a father who was both Christian and political and that example was of great importance for her. Ann states, “I love God with all my heart and soul.” Ann’s responses reflect one of the most devoutly Christian responses, complete with quoting scripture twice and with an overtly stated
connection between her run for elected office and her faith. Ann made references to God, Church, scripture, and prayer over ten times during our interview.

Like Ann, Chris was currently serving in her elected position and was part of her church’s leadership at the time we met for an interview. Raised in the church, Chris continues in that legacy and found it important. However, Chris states, It was not her faith that led her to run for office, but circumstances. The opportunity came, so I ran. In addition to being part of the church leadership, Chris is a part of a daily prayer line. She states, “I pray over hard decisions, marriage equality was a hard decision.” In Chris’s interview, again, I found a strong connection to the church as an organization and a commitment to community that stemmed from the teachings of the church, but unlike Ann, Chris did not run for office explicitly because of the church. In Chris’s case, the (RECM) further helps to explain Chris’s overall entrance to the political arena, but the model must take into account the role that the Black church and her faith interplays in that decision as well. Chris made numerous references to God, Church, scripture and prayer during our interview and as a person serving in the leadership of her church, takes her faith seriously.

Daria is currently serving in her elected position and states, “I’ve always had very strong faith, so that has not wavered in any way. I’ve always believed that there isn’t anything I can do without God.” Daria states, “I pray usually before I vote on bills because I don’t want to make the mistake of making decisions based purely on what I think.” Daria speaks about the issues she raises as an elected official, “I know that’s my purpose because someone needs to be talking about them, and someone needs to be fighting for them. I feel so strongly about them…, I know it’s coming from God.” Daria
states for her, “Prayer is the greatest resource, I pray several times a day, every day. I read scripture as much as I can.” Daria’s faith plays an important part of her life so there were multiple references to God, Church, scripture and prayer throughout our interview.

Like Chris, Elle did not feel that her faith explicitly led to her run for elected office. She stated, “My faith did not play a part per se in me running for office; however it has been a big part of my compass since I’ve been in office. I was baptized, and I’ve been a member of the church that I currently attend forever it seems like.” Elle explained how she sees her role as a public official: “You say every day when you wake up thank you Lord for this opportunity. Then you go out and see how you can help somebody.” Elle recognizes, “the churches have been huge resources, they always are.” In showing how her faith informs her life overall and especially her decisions as a public servant, Elle said, “One of the things I do is I try to read scripture every day. That kinda jump starts my day. Someone in church leadership always states that Elle is “a saved elected official” and her reply is “thank you so much for that, it was really nice to hear.” Like Chris, Elle made numerous references to God, Church, scripture and prayer during our interview.

Fran was currently serving in her elected position and was part of her churches leadership and made the strong connection to her faith and her role as an elected official. Fran stated, “I am involved; I am a tithing member, a regular church attendee.” Fran quoted from the book of James 1:27 saying, “the Bible speaks of taking care of the widow and the child and the poor, and I think my career is in alignment with those areas.” Fran said, “God has called me to proclaim his goodness in everything I do; he has called me to show that I belong to him.” Fran reported that she prays constantly, “I pray
throughout the day, I pray in the morning, I’m grateful and I pray at the end of the night…I’m just a praying person. I pray before I go to meetings.” Fran also stated, “I try not to leave my house without reading my Bible. I don’t care if it’s just a couple of verses I think that my reading the word informs how I react during the day. It’s a reminder; this is who you are.” Fran expressed her commitment to prayer, attending church and reading scriptures and named that as regular parts of her life over ten times during our interview.

Like Fran, Gail was currently serving in her elected position and explained a strong connection between her faith and role as an elected official. Gail explained, “I am a devout Christian that has not changed. Need it more so now then previously.” As part of the churches leadership Gail stated, “I had always been involved in church.” Gail had observed others in her church from the time she was a child and said, “just that you can be a Christian and you can serve the public on a greater level and have influence in a political sphere to have a greater impact on society.” On her being in elected office Gail quoted 2 Corinthians 5:7 and reported, “I know I’m fulfilling His plan, cause it wasn’t mine. So I’m definitely walking by faith, not by sight”. About the Bible Gail explained, “To pick that scripture up and focus on that scripture and find strength in the words that were written well before our time, it’s just reassuring, its motivating, it gives me the encouragement to say ‘ok, I can tackle this’ and I can go face the battle with a different perspective.” (DC) Similar to Fran, Gail shared with me her deep faith and named reading scriptures and involvement in church as being very important in her life.

Hannah was serving in her elected position at the time of our interview and drew on the Biblical narrative and story of Moses as a leader to explain her leadership. Hannah explained, “Based in scripture, when you think about when Moses was taking the
children of Israel out of Egypt, God brought him to lead the people and then God began to set up laws for the people to be governed by.” About being an elected official Hannah stated explicitly that her run for office was a direct result of her faith in God. “I believe that it was God that was leading me to do it…, I believe God put it upon my heart and the door was opened. I believe I am doing God’s work because I’m here.” Hannah stated, “When you’re a Christian that’s your life… Who I am is who I am. My devotion is my devotion every day. I think because I have relationship with God. We must have relationship.” She explained that this sense of devotion emerged “because my faith is strong to me.” (DC) Hannah weaved together the biblical story of Moses to explain her own leadership and made numerous references to God and the Bible throughout our interview.

Inez was no longer serving in her role as an elected official when I interviewed her. Raised in the church, Inez explained, “I was always involved in things. I was involved through my church.” She affirmed that “I think you really have to have a deep faith that your steps are being ordered.” Referencing Psalm 37:23, she added, “If you are holding fast to the spiritual and religious principles that you were raised on that you really believe that what you are doing is consistent with what your God wants you to do, you can’t go wrong.” Inez asserted, “I think you have to personally hold onto your faith no matter what, and believe in God no matter what”. (DC) Inez made a couple of references to scripture and God, but over 5 statements about her church and church involvement.

Like Inez, Jan was no longer serving in her role as an elected official. Jan was a part of her churches leadership at the time of our interview, but was not when she was in
her elected position. Jan said that when she first ran for office, “I didn’t have a church, I had a spiritual life but I did not have a religious life.” Speaking about her pastor, “I was always so impressed by him, so when he invited me to church I said ok. And I have been going to that church ever since. He has continued to be an absolutely wonderful person. I’ve always been a spiritual person but I never found a church home until I found the church that I’m at now.” Inez described her own journey in faith, when she said, “I am sort of a person who falls into stuff. I feel like I am divinely guided.” (DC) Jan made multiple mentions about the role her pastor has played in her life and how committed she is to her church.

Kate was currently serving in her elected position and stated “I am a Christian.” Kate reported, “I do believe that there is a plan for us. I do believe in God’s plan, but you never know where that is going to lead.” Kate keeps a journal and says, “It begins with thanking God and it ends with thanking God, and that’s my personal thing. Kate explained, “I see my spiritual life and my Christian life connected I feel that. One of my favorite books is James, when he says to take care of widows and orphans, [referring to James 1:27] so I read that kind of scripture all the time. And I also like Timothy.” (DC) Kate mentioned God and scripture on numerous occasions during our interview.

Lisa was currently serving in her elected position and speaks about how she has reconnected to her faith, noting, “[Running for Office] as a point when I started recommitting to a church and my faith”. Lisa accounts the encouragement she received when running for office, “Because of the words of folks who really allowed us to understand that when we put our faith in God that all things are possible (referring to Matthew 19:26), and to really believe that and understand that and not say it ceremonially
but truly walk that every day.” About gaining spiritual inspiration Lisa states, “I really have enjoyed the Daily Word.” (DC) Lisa named her faith and church as being important to her life along with referencing scripture throughout our interview.

Beth and Mary’s interviews were the two interviews whose participants were found to have low findings, less than 5 mentions as far as religious participation (reading the Bible, Prayer, attending religious services) low finding were coded as Christian or spiritual (CS).

Beth was also serving in her role as an elected official at the time of our interview and said “I’m not very devout”. Beth stated that, “The faith might be installed in me, I was born and raised in the church…., Churches definitely play a major role in political life, from a political standpoint we always visit church, but aside from that …” Beth stated, “In politics we respect the church, we go to church”. Speaking of one church in particular Beth stated, “It’s an amazing church, anytime I have a chance to go there; I go, because of its amazing Pastor. Although Beth has stated she “is not very devout,” she explained: “The thing about church is the role that it plays for the social environment that no one else can play. Because they have such a power, if they only knew that they have that power. It’s like invincible…it’s a source of inspiration for me. I go to churches as much as I can.”(CS)

Mary’s interview analysis was deemed spiritual. Mary was currently serving in her elected position at the time of our interview and stated, “I would describe myself as a spiritual person.” Speaking about her grandparents, “both believed very strongly that religion and the way it was practiced kept black people down. They were very strong in
their belief. They were Christian in terms of how they interacted, but they believed that education, after family, education was the most important thing.” Speaking on her own spiritual identity, Mary explained, “Each of us finished, became confirmed then went on like a journey to see what made sense to us.” (CS)

The results of the first process and the overall overt Christian response found in the interviews and coded/analyzed affirms what we already know about the religious life and commitments African-American Women.

Just like the Pew Poll of African American Women, my interviews show that 11 out of 13 or 84.62% of those interviewed show high levels of religious commitment giving them a code of devout Christian or DC. In line with the national percentage, about 84% of respondents in the interviews showed high levels of devout faith. Just like all African-American women nationwide, Black elected women in my study overwhelmingly expressed high levels of religious commitment.

In the Church, African-American women are a majority and a vital part of the functions of the Black Church. As laborers, caretakers of their families, and sustainers of community life, black women filled many roles that needed to be filled. Their role as “doers” and “carriers’ in African-American life is particularly evident in their unfailing devotion to black churches”. As explained by scholars, African–American women are doers when it comes to the church and are an important part of the institution. Similarly, many of the respondents to the interviews currently hold some official role in the church leadership. Therefore, the religious commitment of African-American women goes

94 Harris, 155
beyond just weekly service attendance, but also gives way to action in the form of some public service either to the church, or in the case of my respondents, service in the form of elected office.

Therefore in the first process of my analysis, I have discovered that there is no divergence in the religiosity of African American women office holders in my study and the general population of African American women. African American office holders exhibit the same high levels of religious commitment and devotion as do the rest of their unelected counterparts. African-American women are among the most religious group of people in the country and this same commitment extends to those who hold elected office.

In thinking about the (RECM), the scholars assert: “The relationally embedded candidacy model suggest that organizations, elected officials, political parties, and even family members can persuade a woman to enter a race, regardless of whether she has previously thought about candidacy.”95 In this definition, the church as an organization, and one’s relationship with God was named as one of the motivations for a women’s run for office. Showing the importance of religion to African–American women, adding the church would be a positive expansion of the (RECM) when considering the emergence of Black women as candidates for elected office.

95 Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 62
Process Two

In process two, I was trying to find a direct link between the faith of the elected officials and their run for office. Namely, as I have set forth in the concept of “Freedom Faith,” do the subjects understand their faith in a way that may lead to running for political office to affect good in the community/world? To do this, I looked at the interview questions that would expose the elected officials understanding of her faith and how that may/or may not have contributed to their motivation for running for political office. I then looked specifically at question #2 of the interview in the background section: What/Who were some of the major influences on your decision to run for office? In what ways? Did Pastor, Spiritual Leadership/ Fellow Christians encourage you to run? Lastly, I analyzed the responses to question #3 of the interview, “What was the purpose of your run for elected office, what you wanted to achieve by running?” The results of process two are as follows.

Throughout the interviews multiple elected officials described their familial connections to the church, noting how they were quite literally raised in the church. Some respondents named family members who served as leaders in the church and others confessed to being in the church leadership themselves. Both Chris and Daria had fathers who were ministers in their respective churches, and Inez talked about growing up in the church with her grandfather as her minister. For example Ann said, “I was reared in a Christian home,” and Elle stated: “I was baptized when I was fourteen years old. So I’ve been a member of the church that I currently attend, forever it seems like. (Going to Church) was what you did, and thereby became a part of who you were. What it did was
it caused you to have a compass. It did not ensure that you would not fall off the straight and narrow, but you weren’t gonna go too far.”

Some respondents expressed lesser levels of church involvement/organizational religious affiliation. Jan expressed not going to church but being spiritual, as did Mary. Kate and Lisa stated how they are on a journey to “recommiting to the church.”

Again, the Pew Poll research reflects the high religious commitment of African-American Women. “Black women, then as now, constituted the majority of black church members and were among the most devoted supporters of the churches, as is generally true in American Protestant churches.” (Savage, 23) Black women show a high level of commitment to their churches, and this devotion is apparent in African-African women who hold elected office as well as the general population of African-American women. This religious commitment is a type of “Freedom Faith” which seeks to love God and love neighbor by being actively involved in one’s community and the world more broadly. Ann said it best: “I was reared in a Christian home. It was expected that we would portray those values in public. We were brought up under Christian values and married to that was public service. What I do is based on my love of public service but it is truly based on my love of God.” Ann’s proclamation encapsulates what it means for many of the elected officials.

Question #2 of the interview asks the subjects directly, what or who was a major influence on their decision to run for office. Four interview respondents explained their path to political office as being influenced by a family member who had been political who either encouraged them to run or whose legacy they wanted to continue. Chris,
Daria, Elle, and Fran, said that their family circumstances or a family member heavily influenced their decision to run for office. Chris and Daria both ran due to their husbands passing in office. Elle and Fran ran because a parent wanted them to run for office. For these four women, family heavily influenced their run for office and was the major contributing factor for their decision to run.

Five of the respondents - Ann, Beth, Jan, Kate, and Mary - answered the question about what was the influence for their seeking elected office in what is best described as purely political. These political responses of the women ranged from Mary’s-“we got ourselves elected to some leadership positions,” to Jan’s experience- “And eventually someone came to me and said, ‘we’d like for you to run for office’.” This difference in motivation to run and influence has been analyzed by many different scholars in the political science literature, with one dominant theory of political ambition trumping them all.

Finally, four respondents answered in a way that shows that membership to a church that merged/ married politics to a Christian ethos or “Freedom Faith” gave them ease in transitioning into political office. The influence that the church had on their understanding of politics made them willing to take the challenge of running for office. These respondents - Gail, Hannah, Inez, and Lisa – answered the question about their decision to run for elected office directly referencing their faith, God or church. Hannah said, “I believe it was God,” Gail referenced her church and it’s political activism. Inez received direct encouragement from church leadership and members to run for elected
office. Lisa spoke about the role the teaching of her church gave her on worldly matters and also referenced the way that the church encouraged her all the while naming that it was the church that ultimately go there elected. These four respondents expressed their motivations coming primarily from the belief that God was authorizing their run for office, or that they were part of a church that married the political and social welfare of the community to the church’s mission and expressly encouraged them to run for political office.

Lastly for process two, in investigating how the faith of my respondents directly influenced their run for political office, I also examined specifically the purpose of their run. I asked, “What was the purpose of your run for elected office, what you wanted to achieve by running?” With this question I was looking to see if any of the respondents would explicitly link their run for office to a spiritual mandate, Christian principle, or draw upon the concept of “Freedom Faith.” Nine respondents answered in a way that spoke of overall service to the community and their constituency and wanting to help the community as being the motivating factor. Three respondents gave answers with a familial/political motivation and one respondent answered in a purely political way.

My findings show that the line drawn for community and political answers for the reason the elected officials ran for office is very blurred. Many of the political reasons the respondent gave were actually informed by some community concern. Likewise, those who were committed to running for office to positively affect their community came to office in very mainstream political ways like being asked to run for office or being involved in political organizations. This question and its answers may be more complex and more nuanced given the high level of the subject’s faith and how they understand
their faith to operate in the world as expressed in process one. Namely, the subjects may not overtly see their faith as contributing to their run for political office because they may be compartmentalizing what is political and faith based. However, in their understanding of what faith does and is…it is apparent that they see their faith and church commitment as being married to their activism. Thus, those that answered with a community and constituency commitment rationale for running may actually see the community and their neighbors as important and worthy of their service due to their deep faith, church, and spiritual beliefs.

For example, when Ann said, “I made a commitment; I said we need to elect a female, an African-American female. So I went home and I said to my husband, I’m gonna run… I knew the kind of elected person I wanted to be. Running for office, the end result for me was not being a political entity; it was being able to serve people,” much of what she understands is who she will be as a person running and serving. There was a need and she was willing to fill it due to her faith and how she saw herself as a woman of faith in the community.

In understanding the complexity of Ann’s response, we must also understand what she sees as the role of women and minorities as stakeholders and power brokers in the community and how that understanding may also come from her faith and church teachings. Ann may see an African-American women running for office as essential because of what she feels that person will bring to the office. A sense of genuine concern for the community and for the people they serve. In this way, naming a political purpose for running for office does not fully capture what Ann is expressing as her rationale for running for office.
Multiple respondents show these kind of cross-sectional contributing factors in their answers. Beth stated initially that she got involved politically as a member of the board of education to assist her kids and children in general. Although specifically seeking out an elected office may fall in the lines of a political reason to run for office it can also be said that Beth was interested in the educational system for the well-being of her community so much so that she was willing to sacrifice her time and energy to help and change her community for positive ends. In process one, Beth has already shown her deep level of commitment to church and thus could be motivated to help her community because of the teachings she received.

Likewise: Elle, Fran, Hannah, Inez, Jan, Kate, Lisa all expressed wanting to help their community in some form or another as the reasons they ran for office. But in each answer, there was also the sense that helping the community was part of their religion. It was a life ethos that was strong enough to lead them to do something serious for their community. Elle stated, “For us to be able to legislatively to do something to help the human condition. As legislators you can pass laws, you vote, you can set up different kinds of things and then fund them. So there are so many things you can do to help.”

The subjects saw their run for elected office and gaining political power as the way they could be in service to their communities/neighbors. It was a way for them to help their community, which many of them overtly stated, and is stemming from the way they understand their faith and how they see that operating in the world. Kate said it best, “There were a few things I ran on. One was more transparency and openness in government. Also to provide constituent services…and that comes from and that’s part of my Christian ethos and really that’s to help the poor.”
Chris further blurred the lines to what made her run for office by naming both wanting to help her community as her motivation for running for elected office, but also wanting to continue her husband’s legacy of community service through political office. Again, the nuance of wanting to help the community is present within a person who exemplifies a strong faith as examined in process one. For Chris, the added familial/political connection was also a motivating factor to her run for office.

Daria, like Chris wanted to continue their husbands’ political legacies. Whereas Gail saw her run as continuing her family legacy of politically involved Christians. The legacy of being an elected official was a way to help in the community and was the motivating factor for Gail’s run for office.

Out of the thirteen respondents Mary is the one who answered in a purely political way. Mary stated about her current office, “I only ran because I was asked to.” Mary ran for office because she was asked to do so by those in political leadership thus further confirming the relationally embedded candidacy model. It is also of note that she was asked because she had been working tirelessly until that point for her neighbors and for the improvement of the lives of minorities and children in her community. She was selected and asked to run because of her expressed, apparent, and active commitment to the community that she was a part of.

Again, it is evident that the lines between what constitutes as a political reason for the women running for office and a community reason is blurred due to how they see their faith operating in the world. What is clear is all of the women’s commitment to public service by running for office to help and better the condition of their communities.
As Marla Frederick explained, it is a vast and complicated system through which African American women navigate their spiritual experiences. If these women are politically engaged as a form of service to community or church is hard to say because the women see their political engagement in the community as service to God and the church and an overt expression of their deep faith in God.

All the respondents exhibited the sense of helping others, even when they held a clear political goal, further showing the complexity of the question. This influence is tied to a sense of Christian service, community involvement, and “Freedom Faith.” For African-American women elected officials, their political service can also be understood as fulfilling their Christian mandate to make sure they possess a living faith that had a positive effect in the community/world.

In process two, I asked questions of the participants to probe what was influencing their run for office. In line with the (RECM), motivations such as being asked to run by political leaders, having family members who were previously elected officials also played a factor. But in expanding the model, faith and the church also emerged as a motivator for some of the women. This demonstrates how the (RECM) is at play for candidacy emergence among African-American women, with the addition of the church and faith in God as motivating factors.

Process Three

Process one looked at the overall Christian faith and commitment of each subject before her run for political office, while process two examined the role of that faith in the respondents run for office drawing out the major influence on the decision to run and
their purpose for running for office. In process three, I looked at the complete interviews of all 13 respondents to process a theme for what influenced their run for office and a primary purpose or what they sought to get accomplished through being elected to a public office. In looking at the overall interviews I take into account what the subjects state was influencing their run for office, but also look at all the other questions to determine if themes or patterns emerged. As a result, I conclude the primary influence for five of the respondents can be best described as political. Either someone asked them to run for office or they wanted to run for office. Family or familial ties was the primary influence to run for office for five of my interview respondents. These respondents either ran to continue the legacy of a family member or were influenced to run because a parent had previously held a political position. Three respondents answered in a way that clearly shows that the church influenced their run for office or their faith led them to run.

Beth, Inez, Jan, Kate, and Mary’s overall interviews are best described as political. Each subject expressed either wanting to run for office or being asked by someone to run for office. Beth’s interview expresses her motivation to help her community. The springboard to her pursuing elected office can best be described by political means because she was asked by someone to run for the school board. Inez decided to get politically involved because she saw problems in her neighborhood that needed to be tackled. She explained, “if you think somebody ought to do something about something maybe you should be the one” which lead her to run for office. Jan worked in politics and said, “I knew early on that I could do better than they could.” Like Jan, Kate had also worked in politics and had made a name for herself in the community. When wanting to unseat an incumbent who some in the community felt was not doing a good
job, she said… “So we decided that the only person that would have a good chance against ____ would be me.” Mary started small and involved others in her initial run for office: “And so I recruited my next-door neighbor and we started organizing parents. And we got ourselves elected to some leadership positions in the PTA and we started doing simple things.” Throughout each interview there was a sense that each subject wanted to help her community in some way and understood getting involved politically as a way to meet that goal effectively.

For Ann, Chris, Daria, Elle, and Fran running for elected office was in part to fulfill the family legacy of someone who was an elected official. In the beginning of Ann’s interview she discussed her father and how that model of him being a politician was important to her in her thought process and decision to run for elected office. She also stated when asked: Describe the ways you feel that you were suited for elected office? Likewise, early in Chris’s interview she expressed that it was the circumstances surrounding her husband’s passing that led her to run for his unexpired term. Daria stated clearly, “Actually when I decided to run …the first time, my goal at that time was to finish what my husband had started.” Both Elle’s mother and father was involved in politics and were major inspiration for her decision to run. Fran also noted about her father, “I just felt that was a way of honoring his legacy. His passing and knowing that he always wanted one of us to run for (office), where the principle motivations for me to seek elected office.” For each of these respondents, having a family member who was political led them to want to follow in their footsteps.

Lastly, Gail, Hannah, and Lisa overtly named the church and God as being their rationale for their run for political office. Gail talked about many political role models
who were Christians and about her involvement that was political in nature, in her church. The overwhelming theme of her interview was “I am a part of the church leadership and I have been…So my foundation is rooted there. The church is the place that provides that wholeness and understanding to get you to the next day. It’s the hope that you need and just the spiritual piece that is needed. Politics can’t fix it. So when it’s all said and done that’s where it is.” Gail also states, “I think my journey as I said, I know it was predestined (by God)”

Like Gail, Hannah attributes her run for elected office to God. Hannah stated, “I believe that it was God that was leading me to do it (run for office). Before I never thought about political office. Let me state that. I never thought about it. I was just thinking about helping people in different arenas. But I never thought about me running for political office. (Giving a specific date) the spirit of the Lord spoke to me and told me he was going to do something with my life outside of the Church.”

Lisa also attributes her faith to her decision to run for office. “I would say it was faith based because it was truly one that was based on the foundation of believing in oneself. Believing that God has a plan for each person.” For Gail, Lisa, and Hannah; their run for office was explicitly motivated by the church, faith, and God.

Each evaluative process honed in on different aspects of the interviews and thus rendered some differing outcomes. Overwhelmingly, eleven out of thirteen respondents showed high levels of commitment to God and church in process one. In process two, I looked at the questions that allowed the respondents to expressly name their rationale for running for office. Whether it was the family, the church, or more political reasons; each
women explained a desire to help her community. In the last evaluative process, I again saw the theme of Family and Politics outweigh overt expressions of the church leading the subjects to run for political office. But with each respondent, there again was the assertion that she was running for political office to help her community and to be a change agent for her constituency.

Overall, my analysis is that the desire to help one’s community is inspiring black women to run for elected office. That Black Women are being motivated to enter the political realm and run for office due to their willingness to make positive change in their community through governmental leadership. For these women, sometimes having someone in their family who was previously an elected official helps, but ultimately they want to be a leader in seeing their community flourish.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Politics, race, gender and religion make for an interesting combination. At the intersection of each of these areas, is the Black woman as politician. These women bring with them all that it means to be black and women in America into the political sphere. What is not often addressed is how the church, as experienced in the black community, is informing some of their political motivations and aspirations. When a Black woman who is a politician says she has entered the political arena to help the community or to be a voice for those who are in need, is this being informed by a type of faith that emphasizes one’s service and love of neighbor/community in addition to the adherents’ personal relationship with God? Is the key relationship that is motivating African American Women to run for elected office and emerge as political candidates the one they have with the church?

In looking at the relationally embedded model for candidates, I assert that more women can and should run for elected office. For African American women it would serve us all well to more closely study the way that faith and the church inherently help to motivate them to run as public officials. To do this, political theologians and theologians along with political scientists can probe what effects the social justice gospel and the teachings of the Black church have on political involvement and activism. Much study has been done on the rise and implications of the so-called religious right, scholars are just starting to deeply probe the concept of the “religious left”. In this probing and research, more study can be devoted on progressive forms of Christianity and how Black women articulate progressive democratic leanings and their faith. Lastly, deeper
conversation can be maintained between church leadership and theological thinkers and political scientist and public policy analysts. Merging the differing fields in more substantial ways will give rise to more synergy in the focus area, namely how religious beliefs and affiliation have political implications.

After interviewing thirteen Black Women who are current or former elected officials in New Jersey, it is evident that more research needs to be conducted specifically looking at the role that faith and the black church play in the political lives of Black Women. As I interviewed each of the women, I was intrigued by their stories and the willingness to tell them, their desire to see the best for their communities and neighbors, and their boldness to run for elected office to see their desires fulfilled. Whether our communities are aware or not, they are all the better with Black Women’s political leadership.
Appendix 1

PI: Crystal DesVignes - Verbal interview protocol

General Questions (To both groups)

First I am going to ask some questions about what led you to run for office.

Background:

1. Describe your level of commitment as a Christian to your Church before you ran for political office?
   ✓ Would you describe yourself as a devout Christian?
   ✓ Did you have a Church that you attended regularly, or Pastor that you consulted regularly?

2. What/Who were some of the major influences on your decision to run for office? In what ways?
   ✓ Did Pastor, Spiritual Leadership, Fellow Christians encourage you to run?
   ✓ Did anyone pray for you, assist in campaigns, hold coffee clutches, fundraisers from your Church?

3. What was the purpose of your run for elected office, what did you want to achieve by running?
   ✓ Three main goals or agenda’s in office?
   ✓ What was your passion or desire that led you to seek elected office?

Questions (Group #1, Those currently in elected office)

Now I will ask questions specifically about the Goals, Purpose, and experiences related to your elected office.

Goals/purposes/experiences:

1. What is your goal as an elected official, what do you hope to achieve overall through your position?
   ✓ Do you feel you are fulfilling God’s plan for your life, are you doing God’s work?

2. Are there other ways you thought about fulfilling the goal you planned to achieve in elected office?
   ✓ Did you ever have aspirations of going into ministry or be a part of Church Leadership?
✓ What are other ways outside of your elected office that you have tried or would like to try to obtain those goals?

3. What are some of the resources that assist in achieving your goals/purpose that you have while in office?
   ✓ How does the Church, Pastors, Fellow Christians continue to assist you?

4. What do you do regularly for inspiration specifically about duties within your position?
   ✓ Daily prayer, reading of the Bible, regularly attending religious services?

5. Describe the ways you feel that you were suited for elected office?
   ✓ Do you believe God gave you specific gifts and talents that made elected office you’re calling in life?
   ✓ Life events-trials and tribulations, that equipped you for the office you currently hold?

Questions (Group #2, Those retired from elected office)

Now I will ask you to reflect on your time as an elected official and the purpose, goals, and experience you had.

Goals/purposes/experiences:

1. What were your goals as an elected official; did you accomplish your goals while in office?
   ✓ Did you feel you were fulfilling God’s plan for your life, were you doing God’s work?

2. What/Who were some of the resources that assisted in you achieving your goals/purpose while in office?
   ✓ How did your Church, Pastors, Fellow Christians assist in those endeavors?

3. What made you choose a political office as a means to effect change verses community involvement such as a non-profit organization or the Church?
   ✓ Did/ Do you have aspirations to go into ministry or to be a part of Church Leadership?

4. What institutions/organizations do you now hold office or play important roles?
✓ Are you active in religious organizations that also have a social service and social justice ethos?

5. In looking back on your time in elected office, do you believe that the Church played an important part in making your goals/purpose materialize?
✓ What did Church, Pastor, Fellow Christians do to encourage and support you while in office?

General Question (To both groups)

1. **Conclusion:**
   Explain the ways that Faith/Church played a role in your decision to run for elected office.
   ✓ Politics and Government has been said to be raced (it has largely excluded minorities) and gendered (it is for men), therefore being an African-American women we are seen as doubly disadvantaged in the political sphere; with this sexist and racist view still prevalent in some people’s minds—whether it be colleagues or constituents explain your determination and perseverance to overcome these adversities and challenges.

2. Would you like to share anything else about what motivated you to run for office and how you made your decision to run for elected office?
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