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“Who Runs the World? Girls!” A Case Study on the Role that Stacey Abrams Has Played in Changing the African American Political Voice and American Political Realm as a Whole

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ABSTRACT

Stacey Abrams is one of the most prominent up-and-coming politicians in America. From her controversial gubernatorial race in 2018 to her post-election voting rights efforts, she is consistently at the forefront of many political discussions and debates. Nonetheless, with all this notoriety, there has not been much research on her life and impact relative to her peers or predecessors. What makes Stacey Abrams as popular and accepted as she is to the public? How is she the same as other American politicians, both male, and female? Who is Stacey Abrams? This study focuses on answering these questions through a case study built on numerous sources and articles. The goal was to build means of comparison with Abrams at the center. Through this study, I was able to dissect the life of Ms. Abrams on many points that would allow for both the study to be done and for readers to learn about her origins. In the end, my main hope is that readers will be able to learn, understand, and appreciate how amazing Stacey Abrams is and take heed to the many efforts she is taking to make America a better place.

INTRODUCTION

For as long as it can be recollected, Black women have played an enormous role in many prominent political movements throughout American history. Figures such as Angela Davis, Shirley Chisholm, and now Vice President Kamala Harris, the position of Black women within American politics is moving forward swiftly. With that being said, my research question is: What unique challenges have Black women faced as political leaders, and what strategies have they used to achieve their goals? In search of an answer to my question, I intend to examine the various political triumphs of black women and the negative push back received via sexism, classism, and racism (intersectional attributes). Currently, one very prominent figure from this long lineage of politically active Black women is Stacey Abrams. Rising to political celebrity following the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election, Ms. Abrams has become one of the most influential figures in the Democratic Party. Her efforts not only helped President Biden secure the State of Georgia (a feat not accomplished by a Democratic nominee since Clinton in 1992) but also flipped the U.S. Senate through the election of two Democratic Senators. Ivy League trained and already have over ten years of elected official experience, Ms. Abrams presents us with a fascinating case of study.

For this reason, I plan to do a case study centered around what makes her different from her peers and what makes her approaches to reaching her constituents so unique. From preliminary research and looking at some statistics, I hypothesize that I will find that Ms. Stacey Abrams is a very influential democratic leader in the South and a crusader in the ongoing fight against social inequality. Through various sources, I want to track the life story of Ms. Abrams, her education, her media perception, and everything in between to build a story that can give fullness to her story. From seeing how impactful she was in this past year alone, I believe that

there is plenty of evidence that could support my hypothesis and assertions. Through this research paper, I hope that I can create a better appreciation for the considerable role that Black women have taken up not only as it pertains to their specific demographics but the most important demographic of all: that of being American.

BACKGROUND

I think it would be very beneficial to begin from the very beginning of America's independence, where we see the foundation being set early for Black women in political movements. Here, we see the prominent African American women involved in the fight for African American rights and the freedom of the American people from the British Empire. One significant Black woman to examine here is Phillis Wheatley, not only for her contributions in the literary arts (being the 1st African-American regardless of gender to publish a book of poetry) but her efforts to raise support for the cause during the Revolutionary period. As noted by Eleanor Smith, from her beginnings to adulthood, Phillis ultimately "grew to be the only representative black woman generally recorded as a product of the Revolutionary Period" (Smith 401). As we move from the Revolutionary period to the period preceding and including the Civil War, we now have to start looking at figures such as Maria Stewart, Harriet Tubman, Mary Prince, Sojourner Truth, and Sarah Mapp Douglass. As noted from a research series done by Libertarianism.org, "Black women are in the forefront of abolitionist lecturing and writing" (Presley). Each of these women, amongst many others, played very integral roles in the abolitionist and equality movements of the 18th and 19th centuries. As I am not looking to downgrade the advancements that men such as Fredrick Douglass have helped with during this time, I feel that Black women played a very unacknowledged role. To add on, as we moved

forward from this time, many black women were involved in equal rights and suffrage movements of the early to mid 20th century. Suffrage champions such as Mary-Ann Shadd Cary, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Mary Church Terrell all played a vital role in the suffrage movement, and their involvement helped create a stronger foundation for women to be involved with other rights movements that would come forward. Those predecessors helped open the door for Civil Rights activists and literary giants such as Ella Baker, Angela Davis, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dorothy Height, Diane Nash, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison. As we see all of these foundational building blocks set by women through the decades, we begin to see this transform into more active political involvement. The energy placed heavily in these movements had now spread into efforts to gain political capital in spaces on the local, state, and federal levels. In 1969, we saw the first Black woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives with Shirley Chisholm. In 1973, Yvonne Brathwaite Burke became the first Black woman from the largest state in the Union to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives (1972). We then saw that in 1992, Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois became the first black woman to be elected to the United States Senate. All and all, we see a large number of black women across the nation holding significant political positions from mayors of major cities to state legislators, to now the Vice President of the United States. For the sake of this research project, a big chunk of the analysis must come from looking at these triumphs and the time map of the progression of Black women as it pertains to building a path for Ms. Abrams. From there, we can now go into the next part, which focused on understanding the effects of oppression and intersectionality on the progression of Ms. Stacey Abrams through the ranks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Coles et al. define internationality as “a theory that provides an approach for examining how a group such as Black women experiences unique consequences as a function of their race and gender” (Coles et al. 1). Considering this definition, this would mean that when analyzing the totality of the obstacles faced by women, we have to look at how they were affected by sexism from Black men (and other races of men) while concurrently facing discrimination based on their race. For example, let us use the women’s suffrage movement. When the argument of women’s right to vote came up, there was a massive debate as to instead this would include Black people. The battle ended up coming down to whether women or Black men would gain the right to vote first, both sides having excluded the demographic of Black women. This issue persisted well throughout history and many movements, including (but not exclusive to) the Civil Rights Movement and Women’s Rights movements of the mid 20th century. As per Webster, “Despite the cohesion within the Black community and the effort to eliminate racial segregation, the Civil Rights movement was still compromised by intense internal sexism... this was especially the case, given that many men believed that addressing sexism within the Black community would deter followers from the goals of Black empowerment and civil rights, in addition to the eroding unity within the community” (Webster 2-3). A big piece of the story must include how the resilience of Black women played considerable dividends in their long-term increase in political/social status. Ironically, Black women have been disenfranchised by the very movements that they played prominent roles in. For the sake of addressing the possible obstacles that Ms. Abrams had to face in her climb to where she currently stands, I want to focus heavily on her dynamic with Southern politics and the role that her intersectional attributes played in her 2018 gubernatorial loss to Gov. Brian Kemp.

As previously stated, the third step of my analysis would be where I look at where Stacey Abrams currently stands in America as it pertains to societal standards and political capital. I have listed various modern examples but have also chosen to leave out a few more critical points for this very part. First, I would like to do further analysis of the organizations Ms. Abrams has created, her fight against voter suppression, her current campaign to run for Governor of Georgia again, and her voice as a political powerhouse on the national stage. To add on, there must be a bigger examination centered on what could affect her campaign and her viability as a candidate for a position on the national stage. Also, for the sake of dissecting her overall scope of social influence, I want to examine the relationship and rapport that she has built with many social movement organizations. I think this piece will be the most important. Whether we are looking at movements such as Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo movement, or the beautiful political job that Stacy Abrams did to flip Georgia in the 2020 Georgia US Senate race via her initiative (Fair Fight 2020), I want to go into these topics and use them to build as solid a foundation for my hypothesis as possible. While I do not know the exact extent that I can answer my question, I genuinely feel that through this project, I will be able to provide at least a small image of what Ms. Abrams has become to this country.

METHODS

To answer the question and test the validity of my hypothesis, I have chosen to do a literary case study on Stacey Abrams. Through the use of media sources, scholarly/academic articles, and even her own words, I want to build up a solid understanding of her as a figure in a way that can be presented to others. My case study will examine three distinct periods of Stacey Abrams's life: (1) Early Life, Education, and Pre-Political career, (2) Political career, early exploits, and elections won, and (3) Her contributions after her 2018 Georgia gubernatorial

election. In each of these sections, I want to present the facts about her life and compare and contrast how her experiences and exploits align next to her peers (most notably other women and women of color). Within these comparisons, I aim to not only focus on the tangible attributes of all parties (i.e., education, political experience) but the various societal ideologies that play prominent roles in the careers of the examined parties. These societal ideologies will include but are not exclusive to sexism, racism, and colorism. Another significant factor I want to examine is the prevalence of Ms. Abrams's social media presence. All in all, the goal of my case study is to build up a holistic narrative that addresses my questions and hypothesis.

ANALYSIS

Stacey Abrams is currently the most prominent African-American woman in American politics (outside of Vice President Kamala Harris, of course). During the 2020 election cycle, through her efforts, her home state of Georgia not only sided with President Biden but 2 Democratic United States Senators were elected. These moves effectively placed the Senate in the hands of the Democratic Party, the executive branch with a Democratic POTUS. With the United States House of Representatives already holding a Democratic majority, place the power to make policy changes heavy in favor of the Left. As I intend to perform a case study on Ms. Abrams's life and exploits, I will analyze scholarly sources and writings focused on Stacey Abrams. Hopefully, these additional findings will assist in building up the validity of my hypothesis and help me build a holistic understanding of the figure that is Stacey Abrams.

Firstly, to assist in building up a background and pre-politics foundation for Ms. Abrams, I came across a book review of the Abrams memoir, *Stacey Abrams: Minority Leader*, done by Adeel Bari, which was published in the Journal of African American Studies. From the article,

the writer encompasses that in the book, “Abrams argues that becoming a leader of color is contingent upon your abilities to harness bravery, live righteously, and identify with others based upon your successes, failures, and struggles” (Bari). Throughout the article, discussions on Abrams's education, upbringing, and various events played integral parts in her development. I would like to add pieces from her biography on the FairFight website and her official candidate website to supplement this. I will use these sources as the basis for building up Ms. Abrams's biography and as a comparison tool to the paths of many of her peers in my case study.

Next, I want to focus more on the political career of Stacey Abrams. This would encompass her first steps, her original elections (and wins), and everything up to where she currently stands in politics. The first article I would like to go over is Gail McFarland titled *Stacey Abrams: Never Conquered. Always Black*. The article opens up with the line, “American politician, attorney, and author Stacey Yvonne Abrams is the undeniable object of political and social comment, both locally and nationally” (McFarland). In the subsequent lines, the writer goes into detail about some of the various accolades achieved by Stacey Abrams. For example, she was the first African American to lead the Georgia House of Representatives and the first woman (in general) to lead either Republicans or Democrats in the Georgia General Assembly.

Another major thing that the article covers is the 2018 gubernatorial election in Georgia that pitted Abrams versus the Secretary of State, Brian Kemp. The writing goes into detail about the intricacies of the election and the discussion of voter suppression (an issue that Stacey Abrams would soon aim to tackle on a national stage). Additionally, and most importantly, McFarland uses this text to examine intersectionality as it pertained to how Ms. Abrams handled the election and was treated during/after it. McFarland quotes an excerpt from the non-concession speech that Abrams gave in place of a speech accepting the violations in her “defeat”.

Abrams says, “I am supposed to say nice things and accept my fate from the speech. They will complain that I should not use this moment to recap what was done wrong or to demand a remedy. You see, as a leader, I should be stoic in my outrage and silent in my rebuke. But stoicism is a luxury, and silence is a weapon for those who would quiet the voices of the people. Furthermore, I will not concede because the erosion of our democracy is not right” (Abrams via Quartz article; Timmons). As outlined in McFarland, “The recorded moments of Abrams and her non-concession speech are laden with a surfeit of meaning, as her body, her voice, and her Blackness take on the weight of race, politics, and sociality. To fully appreciate the gravity of Abrams’ non-concession, it is important to understand how Stacey Abrams works as a fugitive and resistant object... This domain, driven by hegemony and the apparatus and technology used for production, and exhibition, and spectatorship, includes social and machine-interpretable definitions of basic political concepts of voting and representation, combined with visual and aural images of candidates and constituency, even as it contests Abrams's engagement with the aesthetics of Blackness, gender, and class.” Throughout this paper, McFarland goes through the political significance of what Abrams represents with her actions and words, especially during this time.

To add to this, I also would like to examine a few essential topics that affect the political advancement of women of minority backgrounds, including Stacey Abrams. One is the ever-present issue, for Black women in particular, is colorism. In an article titled, *The Political Implications of Colorism Are Gendered*, Danielle Caesarez Lemi and Nadia E. Brown examine this topic and the arguments. With one of the building blocks of my case study centering around comparing the paths and experiences of Abrams and her peers, this article fits perfectly as it will allow me to look into how Abrams's skin complexion affects her viability. From the article, the

writers note, “A person’s skin color continues to shape Black Americans’ socioeconomic status, professional lives, romantic choices, and family relationships...Here, we see colorwork in tandem to marginalize dark-skinned Black people” (Lemi & Brown). For my study, I want to focus on some parallels, or lack thereof, between Ms. Abrams and Vice President Harris, not in a way to be divisive, but as a measure to consider the effects colorism has on a candidate. Next, I want to look at the simple effects of race and gender on Ms. Abrams regarding her political career. I am utilizing a book titled *Sister Style: The Politics of Appearance for Black Women Political Elites* by Nadia E. Brown and Danielle Casarez Lemi. On the second page of Chapter 7, the writers raise the question, “What is the effect of variation in skin tone and hairstyle on evaluations of Black women candidates” (Brown & Lemi). The chapter brings the difference that Stacey Abrams represents from the conventional Black woman politician, much less the average woman politician. As Abram notes, in an excerpt in the book, “They do not think I am viable, because I am a Black woman with natural hair and no husband” (Brown & Lemi). This proclamation pushes forth a newer approach for women in politics and society: The unapologetic nature of being oneself while embracing your differences out loud.

For the last part of my case study, I want to focus on the exploits of Ms. Abrams after the 2018 election. Seeing that this period is what shot her, not another stratosphere, this is an integral part of my project. The first article that I came across presents readers with a deeper view of how Black women have played an instrumental part in fighting for voter rights for decades. In the article, *Working the Democracy: The Long Fight for the Ballot from Ida to Stacey*, the writers provided a historical lineage of African American women who fought hard for voters' rights since the beginning of the suffrage movements. Abrams represents the new leader of this movement and is carrying the torch from her predecessors. Using such an article will allow

additional insight and comparison on what has paved the way for Ms. Stacey Abrams to do the things she is doing now.

Another article I think adds to this part very well is *The Changing Political Dynamics of Georgia: The Stacy Abrams Phenomenon*. In the text from the Political Science Department at Albany State University, Kwame Dankwa goes through the political history of the State of Georgia. Going as far back as the Civil War, Dankwa examines the transition of Georgia from being a Democratic state (mainly due to pro-slavery sentiments) to a big takeover by the Republicans to the surge of Democrats in Georgia election led by Stacey Abrams. As noted from the abstract, Dankwa writes, “The sudden surge of Democrats in the 2018 mid-term elections in Georgia has come as a surprise to most political observers. While many attribute this to the steady diversification of the state’s population, others credit the robust campaign of the party’s candidate for governor, Stacey Abrams.”

RESULTS

Through my case study and previous review, I compiled an incredible amount of information on Ms. Abrams and comparative data on her predecessors and peers. In the first part of my analysis, I focused on pre-political career attributes: education, early organizing, upbringings, and all things that would fall under this category. Having graduated from Yale Law School in 1999, Stacey Abrams becoming an attorney is one of the significant points that perfectly fit the political world. In comparison to members of the 116th Congress, 161 members of the House of Representatives and 53 members of the Senate have law degrees (Membership of the 116th Congress). In a more specific sense, of the 24 African American women who served in the House and served in the Senate (Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee[UVA], Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton [Yale], Rep. Stacey Plaskett [American University], Rep. Terrycina Sewell [Harvard],

and former Sen. Kamala Harris [UC-Hastings] were the only Black women with law degrees with only two others holding Ivy League law degrees. In addition to her law degree, Ms. Abrams also received a Masters in Public Administration from the University of Texas-Arlington. From the Black women who received a law degree, the only other women who held Master's degrees were Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton and Rep. Terrycina Sewell. Off of these two criteria, Ms. Stacey Abrams has already placed herself in a tiny group of Black women in politics. It is also worth noting that of the three women, both Ms. Abrams (Georgia) and Rep. Sewell (Alabama) have roots in the South.

Another significant thing to consider in Ms. Abrams's academic journey is that she was also selected as a Harry S. Truman scholar. A very prestigious and competitive accolade to attain, of the current members of the 117th Congress, only 4 Representatives and one Senator have received the award, none of which are minority or female. Considering that many former scholars have become heads of federal agencies/departments, been a part of many presidential administrations, and even one becoming a Supreme Court Justice (Neil Gorsuch), with this honor, Ms. Abrams has further distinguished herself from her peers.

In the next part of my study, I focused my analysis on the political career of Ms. Stacey Abrams. In 2002, she serviced her hometown of Atlanta, Georgia as deputy city attorney. Her very first election was when she ran for Georgia House of Representatives in 2006. Abrams ultimately won the election in a landslide victory by winning over 51% of the vote while her two opponents (both men) split the rest. Her fellow Democratic peers elected her to serve as House minority leader in 2010. She served in this capacity until 2017, right before she was set to prepare for the 2018 gubernatorial election (against Secretary of State Brian Kemp) in Georgia. Taking these steps into account, I compared the political moves by Ms. Abrams to her peers

using the same pool of people as I did for the education analysis. Through this examination of women and specifically African-American women, I found a broad, expansive array of political careers across the board. For example, with VP Kamala Harris, she served as the Attorney General of California before becoming a United States Senator. From Ms. Abrams's home state of Georgia, US House Rep. Nikema Williams started as a member of the Georgia State Senate and then served as the Chair of the Georgia Democratic Party.

On the other hand, Ms. Abrams does present us with a different aspect. From the list of women that we have outlined, Ms. Abrams is one of the few who has received nation popularity while holding a state-level office and one of the only women in this realm who ran for governor. I believe a massive part of this comes from Abrams's strong social media presence. As it currently stands, she boasts 2.6 million followers on Twitter and 2 million followers on Instagram. With these figures, Stacey Abrams holds more social media followers and engagement than figures such as U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, 2020 Presidential candidate Amy Klobuchar, US Senator Mitch McConnell, and Rep. Ilhan Omar, to name a few. There are only a small number of figures that have more followers than she does (ex. Barack Obama, AOC, VP Harris, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, Sen. Bernie Sanders); however, these are all figures that have served on the federal level for years, and most have ran for President. This should stand as a testament to the level of influence and likeness that Ms. Abrams holds.

Lastly, I took to examining the efforts Stacey Abrams took part in after the 2018 gubernatorial election. To add context, as she ran against Secretary of State Brian Kemp, there were huge issues that raised flags of voter suppression. First of all, while running for the Governor of Georgia, Kemp held onto the Secretary of State spot, a position that is responsible for running election proceedings. This presented substantial evidence of conflict of interests and

was labeled by Charles Bullock (professor of political science at UGA) as being “not common” (Lee). In addition to him holding the position, his history in the role has also been questionable. For example, since 2010, he was responsible for canceling over 1.4 million voter registration applications and almost 700,000 in 2017 alone (Niesse). As studies have shown that a vast majority of these applications came from minorities and lower-income citizens, this represented a fringe attempt to suppress the whole vote of Georgia, especially in the year that Stacey Abrams ran against Kemp. While not conceding due to her very valid arguments towards the conflict of interests stances, Ms. Abrams moved towards preventing similar forms of suppression from occurring. While as Governor of Georgia, Kemp pushed forward legislation that would make increase risks of voter suppression (making it illegal to give voters food/water while they wait in line, making it harder for mail-in ballots), Abrams started Fair Fight Action in 2020 to help assist in combatting voter suppression acts across the country, and specifically in the South. While Abrams has taken the fight against voter suppression to new heights, historically, she is following a path taken by many African American women before her. The fight for equal voting rights (specifically for black women) saw figures such as Mary Church Terrell (1st President of the pro-suffrage National Association of Colored Women) and Adella Hunt Logan (Black Tuskegee Women's Club) all played highly prominent roles in assisting Black people in their efforts to attaining voter equality (Lockhart). Abrams's efforts, and the paths of many of her political peers, come as manifestations of the work their ancestors did through the decades. Her renewed commitment to fight voter suppression is similarly a renewed ideal that has been around since the earliest of suffrage movements.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

From my case study, I believe I could compile a good amount of data and comparisons about Stacey Abrams' life. In multiple facets, she has separated herself amongst her contemporaries while also building on a legacy put forth by her ancestors. To an extent, I was surprised at how popular she is relative to people who have been in many national races, especially the 2020 presidential race. In conclusion, through my project, I intended to detail and discuss the various sources that help build a deeper understanding of what Ms. Stacey Abrams stands for. Discussing Stacey Abrams and everything that goes into her political career is a vast topic of discussion. From her educational achievements to be the 1st African American woman to give a rebuttal to the President's State of the Union address, she continues to be a trailblazer and crusader for the disenfranchised. This is the main reason why I chose to focus my project on her. In a course that monitors intersectionality and the effects of discrimination through its various elements, Stacey Abrams is a great example to utilize. I genuinely believe that we are only seeing the beginning of her exploits. While only time can tell what her next steps will be, as the data shows, these steps will be done to make the lives of all Americans better and more equitable.

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