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Angele Delevoye

Yale University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, angele.delevoye@gmail.com

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Abstract

Leading From the Margins: the WNBA and the Emergence of a New Model of Sports Activism in the
United States

Angele Delevoye

2022

After a first wave of activist athletes influenced the 1960s Civil Rights debates and faced negative professional and personal consequences, activist athletes largely disappeared from the American Politics landscape. The return of athlete activism in the last few years has been widely covered by journalists and scholars alike. In this dissertation, I argue that this trend is not a return to the activism of the past, but the emergence of a new model of sports activism. Building on recent developments in the persuasion literature, I show how in this new model, some leagues and athletes are in a unique and unprecedented position to generate business growth because, not despite, of their political activism.

The dissertation defines the new model through the league that exemplifies it the most, the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA). In doing so, it improves our understanding of the mechanisms of persuasion by non-political messengers. While some leagues operate in this new model, others remain left in a model where activism often comes at a cost or fails to yield results. This explains the backlash faced by Colin Kaepernick after he knelt during the national anthem and the limited findings from the recent experimental research focused on the NFL. The dissertation explores the conditions under which this new model of mutually beneficial business and political successes can emerge for athletes and leagues.

The new model, as defined throughout the dissertation, has three key characteristics: (i) it is emerging in leagues composed of largely minoritized athletes whose existence as athletes, because of their race, gender, or sexual orientation, is inherently political; (ii) it provides opportunities for business and political successes to feed each other, but only when leagues fully embrace their political nature; and (iii) it both relies on and generates an alignment between the athletes' and fans' values.

Chapter 1 introduces the new model and examines how it compares to the traditional model of sports activism. I discuss whether and how much a model emerging in the United States, and largely driven by women's sports, can extend to other leagues and countries.

Chapter 2 describes the recent business and political successes of the WNBA and documents how they only came after the league fully started acknowledging its players' identities. This case study provides the groundwork for understanding the connection between the business and political models of sports leagues and how they are moderated by the identities of players and fans.

In Chapter 3, I use survey experiments to show that persuasive arguments from WNBA players can change minds on policy issues, including voting rights and transgender inclusion, but only among people whose values are not in opposition to the ones carried by the WNBA. I also find evidence that the players' arguments convince a larger audience when the identity of the players is not emphasized. When group cues are introduced, respondents in the identity-unaligned groups often end up supporting the policy less. When respondents see both persuasive information and group cues, the polarizing effects of group cues appear to overcome the “parallelizing” effects of persuasive information.

While Chapter 3 focuses on athletes' influence on political opinions, Chapter 4 investigates their impact on actual political events. I explore the role played by the WNBA in the 2020 Georgia Senate race through the lens of campaign donations, Twitter, and media coverage data. I find evidence that the WNBA had a short term effect on donations and served as an echo chamber, helping to keep the story of the race on issues that were favorable to Warnock, especially social justice.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I use survey experiments to show that this commitment to activism does not come at a cost for the WNBA. I provide evidence that activism has the potential to bring new, like-minded fans to the league, while generating few risks of losing existing fans. This is especially true when players emphasize their identities and values, which suggest a trade-off in how players highlight their identities in this new model of sports activism. If the goal is to change as many people's minds on the issues as possible, Chapter 3 shows that activist athletes are better off not emphasizing their identities, but, if the goal is to bring in new fans into the league, Chapter 5 shows that players are better off if they do. The reason for this trade-off is straightforward and well-grounded in the persuasion literature: there are more progressives to turn into new WNBA fans than there are WNBA fans to turn into progressives.

Leading From the Margins: the WNBA and the Emergence of a New Model of Sports Activism in the
United States

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
Of
Yale University
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By

Angele Delevoye

Dissertation Directors: Jacob Hacker, P.M. Aronow and Alexander Coppock

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Writing a doctoral dissertation in my second language during a pandemic was hard. Finishing it while navigating the very stressful U.S. immigration system and in a heavy geopolitical context brought additional challenges. I could not have done it without the continuous support of family and friends, podcasts to remind me to stop asking for directions to places they have never been, and a lot of Brandi Carlile's music.

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really helped but whose existence is enough. Finally, the ability to run, push people around and trash-talk twice a week kept me sane (sometimes even young) during these five years, and I am grateful to the Yale Women Club Basketball Team for allowing me to do so.

This dissertation would probably look very different if not for the events of the summer of 2020. Looking back, it feels inevitable that I would write a sports and politics dissertation. My French friends thought I was working on a sports PhD, I wrote my master's and bachelor's theses on sports activism topics, and I still do not hate my dissertation, at a stage where I probably should. But it is not the route I started the PhD program on, and I am very grateful to the athletes for the reminder and for providing such a rich roadmap and research material. The intuition that started while watching A Touch More on Instagram in the very early days of the pandemic turned into a conviction as I watched the athletes react to the events of 2020 in their respective bubbles. When Raphael Warnock won the Senate and athletes kept pushing to redefine the boundaries of their activism, I knew I had a dissertation.

Looking back on these five years, I am mostly grateful for the relationships I built and for having been given the time, resources and freedom to think about the world. I am grateful I was able to use this time and freedom to write a dissertation that tells a hopeful and positive story, in a world that often feels anything but. May we keep writing such stories!

Chapter 1

Introduction

Only broken horses know to run.

- Brandi Carlile

1.1 The emergence of a new model of sports activism in the United States

When athletes enter the political arena, two main questions of interest for social scientists are (i) whether athletes can actually change political minds or events, and (ii) what consequences they face for speaking out. Many historical accounts document athletes' political influence, from Jesse Owens discrediting the Nazi narrative of aryan and white superiority during the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games (Boskin 1987; Schaap 2015) to Muhammed Ali, Bill Russell, Lew Alcindor and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar shaping the national conversation during the Civil Rights Era (Gorsevski & Butterworth 2011; Goudsouzian 2017). However, recent survey experimental evidence, largely focused on NFL players, has generated mixed evidence for the ability of athletes to change attitudes on issues such as Black Lives Matter, immigration or gay marriage (Harrison & Michelson 2017; K. Wilkinson Betina, Kiang, & Cousin 2012; M. M. Wilkinson Betina Cutaia & Webster 2021).

A broader consensus exists around the risks athletes take when they speak out, with many scholars documenting the negative consequences activist athletes have faced. In the United States, the athletes involved in Civil Rights advocacy all faced negative consequences, professionally and personally (Gorsevski & Butterworth 2011; Goudsouzian 2017; Hartmann 1996). After Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists and bowed their heads while accepting medals at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics to protest social injustice for example, the International Olympic Committee insisted that they be banned from future Olympic competition. Both athletes have recounted losing friends, facing tensed family dynamics, receiving death threats and feeling largely ostracized by the U.S. sporting establishment upon their return to the United States (Hartmann 2003).

Activist athletes all but disappeared following the end of the Civil Rights Movement (Candaele & Dreier 2010). From the 1970s to the 2010s, most professional athletes stopped using their platform to advocate for political change. Part of the reason why athlete activism stopped was that Civil Rights were not at the forefront of the national conversation anymore, but another key reason was that athletes started facing higher stakes and had more to lose. Professional sports in the United States started generating enormous revenues. Athletes were receiving record contracts and sponsorship deals, and they did not want to risk jeopardizing

these gains by speaking out. High financial stakes have traditionally incentivized the sports industry to actively maintain sports as an apolitical cultural form, in order to avoid alienating fans through partisan politics (McAllister 1998; Roach 2002). Michael Jordan famously said that “*Republicans buy sneakers, too*” to justify not taking a political stand and refusing to endorse Harvey Grant, a Black Democrat challenging Jesse Helms, a Republican who had opposed the Civil Right Acts and Voting Right Acts, in the 1990 Senate race in North Carolina. Team management explicitly discouraged athletes from taking up political causes, and athletes feared the public criticism, lower salaries, loss of endorsement deals, blacklisting, threats, and in-game abuse from teammates and opponents if they spoke out (Henderson 2009; Kaufman 2008).

The return of athlete activism in the last few years, and especially since 2020, has been widely covered by journalists and scholars alike. In this dissertation, I argue that this trend is not simply a return to the activism of the past, but the emergence of a new model of sports activism. Building on recent developments in the persuasion literature, I show how in this new model, some athletes and leagues are in a unique and unprecedented position to generate business growth because, not despite, of their political activism.

While some leagues operate in this new model of sports activism, others remain left in the past, where activism often comes at a cost or does not yield results. This explains the backlash faced by Colin Kaepernick after he knelt during the playing of the national anthem, as well as the limited findings from the recent survey experimental research focused on the NFL. The dissertation explores the conditions under which this new model of mutually beneficial business and political successes can emerge for athletes and leagues ¹. The new model only exists because sports in America today are much more diverse than they were in the 1960s. I show how sports leagues composed of athletes who are largely minoritized, because of their gender, race or sexual orientation, are inherently political. When these leagues try to grow using the traditional development model used by mainstream sports leagues, they fail, as I document in Chapter 2. In many ways, these leagues are too unconventional to attract mainstream sports fans, and they do not offer something different enough to attract new fans. As I show in Chapter 2, these leagues only found their place in the sports and political landscapes when they started affirming the identities and values of their players and fully acknowledging their political nature. Because politics and identity are so integral to the growth and branding of these leagues from the ground up, they are in a unique position to speak out (see Chapter 2), convince people, especially those sharing their values and identities (see Chapters 3 and 4), and capitalize on this to bring in

¹I often use the terms “leagues” and “players” equivalently in this dissertation, except when I specifically discuss the dynamics and tensions between the players and their leagues or organizations. These dynamics are complex and could fill another dissertation. I am aware of the simplification I sometimes had to operate, but it is not the goal of the present dissertation to explore these dynamics.

new fans (see Chapter 5). Because they never attracted the fans they could have lost through their activism, they face limited backlash from fans they would have never attracted in the first place (see Chapters 3 and 5). This, of course, limits the potential for growth for these leagues, but as Chapter 5 shows, they are still far from having reached their ceiling. The recent history of these leagues (see Chapter 2), as well as findings presented in Chapter 5, show that any attempt to return to a mainstream, apolitical position would cost them more fans than they could hope to gain by adopting such a strategy.

In order to define and illustrate this new model of sports activism, the dissertation explores its development and dynamics in the league that exemplifies it the most: the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA). The new model relies on largely minoritized athletes. Chapter 2 shows that no league covers a broader range of gender, racial and sexual orientation identities than the WNBA. It also relies on leagues and athletes making a conscious decision to put politics and identity at the center of their growth strategy. Chapter 2 documents the strategic shift operated by the WNBA a few years after its creation in 1996 and the decision to embrace the players' identities and politics. The model both relies on and generates an alignment between the athletes' values and identities and those of the fans. Chapter 5 shows that WNBA fans are more liberal and diverse than fans of any other leagues tested in this dissertation, including another women's league, the National Women Soccer League (NWSL). Finally, the model predicts that business and political successes can more than coexist—they can feed each other. Chapter 2 describes the recent business and political successes of the WNBA and how they only came after the league fully started acknowledging its players' identities. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 leverage different empirical strategies to explore the causal relationships and interconnections between the league's identity, business, and political successes.

In Chapter 3, I use survey experiments to show that persuasive arguments from WNBA players can change minds on some policy issues, including voting rights and transgender inclusion, but only among people whose values are not in opposition to the ones carried by the WNBA. I also find evidence that the players' arguments convince a larger audience when the identity of the players is not emphasized. When group cues are introduced, people in the identity-unaligned groups often end up supporting the policy less. When I present respondents with both persuasive information and group cues, the polarizing effects of group cues appear to overcome the “parallelizing” effects of persuasive information.

While Chapter 3 focuses on athletes' influence on political opinions, Chapter 4 investigates their impact on actual political events. Chapter 4 explores the role played by the WNBA in the 2020 Georgia Senate race through the lens of campaign donations, Twitter, and media coverage data. I discuss the causal inference challenge and the impossibility of knowing the outcome of the race in a counterfactual world in which

the WNBA never got involved. I find evidence that the WNBA was an significant part of the story of the campaign, both on Twitter and in traditional media. The WNBA appears to have served as an echo chamber, helping to keep the story of the race on issues that were favorable to Warnock, especially social justice.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I use survey experiments to show that this commitment to activism does not come at a cost for the WNBA. I provide evidence that activism even has the potential to bring new like-minded fans to the league, while generating few risks of losing existing fans. This is especially true when players emphasize their identities and values, which suggest a trade-off in how players highlight their identities in this new model of sports activism. If the goal is to change as many people's minds on the issues as possible, Chapter 3 shows that activist athletes are better off not emphasizing their identities, but, if the goal is to bring in new fans into the league, Chapter 5 shows that players are better off if they do. The reason for this trade-off is straightforward and well-grounded in the persuasion literature: there are more progressives to turn into new WNBA fans than there are WNBA fans to turn into progressives.

1.2 The new, more diverse landscape of sports allowing this new model to emerge

After the first wave of activist athletes participated in the Civil Rights fights of the 1960s, most athletes stepped out of the political arena, mostly because of the increased financial stakes they were facing. This has changed in the last few years, and has become particularly obvious since 2020, in the wake of the resurgence of a new social movement for racial equality launched in 2013: the Black Lives Matter movement. Leagues, athletes, and brands have started to be much more willing to express political opinions.

A large portion of today's athlete activism follows the blueprint of the initial model of the 1960s, with athletes using similar strategies and facing similar consequences. Athletes today use many of the same tools and strategies that their predecessors did during the Civil Right Era, engaging in silent but visible protests through their body language or clothing: they wear tee-shirts bearing the phrases "Black Lives Matter", "I can't breathe" or "Change Starts with Us", or they kneel for the anthem. Just as athletes in the 1960s lost jobs, income and personal connections because of their activism, some athletes today face similar consequences: kneeling during the playing of the National Anthem in 2016 effectively ended Colin Kaepernick's NFL career, and scholars have found consistent evidence that college football and NFL teams risk losing fans, viewers, and sponsors when they speak out (Druckman, Howat, & Rothschild 2019;

Lacina 2019; Niven 2020a; Watanabe & Cunningham 2020). Even in leagues with more progressive fanbases, financial stakes still appear to limit the range of topics athletes are willing to address. After then-Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey tweeted on October 4, 2019, his support for protesters in Hong Kong, LeBron James criticized Morey, arguing that Morey had been “misinformed” and “not educated about the situation”, and that he had not considered the timing of his tweet, with teams on their way to play a game in China. LeBron James claimed he did not think he was personally educated enough to speak on the topic: “*I felt like with this particular situation, it was something that not only was I not informed enough about, I just felt like it was something that not only myself and my teammates or our organization had enough information to even talk about it at that point in time, and we still feel the same way*”². Players have argued that they cannot speak for events they are not familiar with, that do not reflect their own personal experiences and that happen in other countries. This has prompted accusations that they shy away from the issues because of the financial stakes involved. LeBron James, for example, has been accused of shying away from criticizing China, prompting Enes Kanter Freedom, a player for the Boston Celtics known for his vocal opposition to China’s Xi Jinping and Turkey’s Erdogan³ to tweet “*Money over Moral for the King*” in November 2021.

Some key differences exist between the two waves of athlete activism, however, opening the door to a new model of sports activism. First, today’s athletes can build on the gains made by their predecessors and go beyond what previous generations could afford to do. The first wave of activist athletes mostly used their voice to shed light on issues. The current wave seeks to go beyond merely voicing their opinions. They see themselves as full activists, with a role to play in society and committed to complementing their words with actions. They organize Get Out the Vote efforts, open and fund public schools, or campaign with candidates for local and national offices (Coombs & Cassilo 2017). When the Milwaukee Bucks boycotted a playoff game in the 2020 NBA playoffs or when Maya Moore gave up her WNBA career at her peak to fight for criminal justice reform, they formulated specific demands aimed at producing direct, specific actions. The Milwaukee Bucks asked that the Wisconsin State Legislature reconvene after “months of inaction” and called for the legislature to “take up meaningful measures to address issues of police accountability, brutality and criminal justice reform” following the shooting of Jacob Blake by a police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in August 2020. They also asked to talk to the Wisconsin Attorney General while in their locker room during the boycott. Maya Moore walked away from her sport and devoted her money, time, and fame to the cause of criminal justice reform, especially for cases involving Black men. She started her own organization, Win

²LeBron James, October 15th , 2019

³Enes Kanter Freedom’s political activism and its consequences was documented in a 2019 E:60 ESPN documentary called “Enemy of the State”

with Justice, to bring attention to issues of prosecutorial malfeasance. 21st century activist athletes know they are standing on the shoulders of the giants of the past, and are trying to move the ball forward on what athletes can afford to say and do in the political arena. They want to go beyond words and take a more holistic, action-based approach to activism. The Athletic has documented this ambition in an article called “Inside the WNBA’s evolution from a league of activists to a league of organizers”⁴, building on a quote from Layeshia Clarendon⁵: *“people don’t realize the difference between activists and organizers. And we are organizers. Activism is bringing light to an issue, talking about it. It’s not just fluff, but you know, it’s like you raise awareness, tell people they should vote, and that’s it. Organizing is that tee-shirt [pointing to the Vote Warnock tee-shirt worn by one of their teammates]. Organizing is getting behind a candidate. Organizing is texting people, asking them to come out, putting actions together. Organizing is hard effing work. There’s a reason people don’t sign up to be organizers.*

Second, athletes today can harness the power of social media to reach their millions of followers, making the same strategies used 50 years ago much more efficient. Not only does social media increase the reach of players, it also provides fans with ways to hold the leagues accountable. Because they derive direct and indirect revenues from social media, sports leagues officials and players care deeply about the content of the engagement with their accounts. This sometimes empowers fans to pressure leagues into implementing change. For example, the backlash from fans largely contributed to the WNBA rescinding the fines it had initially imposed on players for openly supporting the Black Lives Matter movement in 2016⁶. Similarly, public outcry behind the “Equal Play, Equal Pay” motto played a crucial role in pressuring the U.S. Soccer Federation to consider more equal treatments for the women’s and men’s national teams in 2022⁷.

Third, the first wave of activist athletes were mostly Black athletes, and they still comprise the majority of activists today (Niven 2019). But a more diverse group of athletes have joined the fight in recent years. White players or coaches, such as Kyle Korver, J.J. Redick, Steve Kerr, Gregg Popovich, Josh McCown, and Chris Long, have been reliable allies to their Black teammates.

Finally, the rise of women’s sports, bolstered by increased investment in and viewership of women’s leagues and athletes, has led to the emergence of women’s activist athletes. Billie Jean King provided a blueprint

⁴The Athletic’s Chantel Jennings, October 15, 2020

⁵The Evolution of the WNBA social justice movement. The Undeclared. September 21, 2020.

⁶WNBA withdraws penalties for players’ Black Lives Matter protests, Nick Ellerson, Washington Post, July 23 2016.

⁷U.S. Soccer and women’s players agree to settle equal pay lawsuit, Andrew Das, New York Times, February 22, 2022

for female activist athletes, as well as for the new model of sports activism, in the 1970s. She showed how business and political successes could be connected in a virtuous cycle that allowed women's tennis to make significant financial progress while contributing to gains in gender equality (King 2021). She contributed to the passage of Title IX in 1972, a law largely credited for revolutionizing the landscape for women's athletes in the United States by requiring institutions of higher education to provide equal opportunities for men and women, including in athletics (J. D. Elizabeth Sharrow & Rothschild 2019; T. N. Elizabeth Sharrow Jill Greenlee & Rhodes 2018). Today, athletes such as Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka, Maya Moore or Megan Rapinoe carry the legacy of Billie Jean King and routinely claim they see themselves as much as activists as they do athletes. In this new landscape, the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA) is widely recognized as the leading league in sports activism.

1.3 How unique is this model to the United States and to women's leagues?

The new model of sports activism is emerging in the United States, and is largely driven by women's sports⁸. Several findings in this dissertation provide answers for why women's sports are driving the change. First, the mere existence of female athletes is political, which has forced them into acknowledging their political nature. Second, there was never a non-political way for these leagues to exist or grow. Third, they can often rely on a more homogeneous fan base, that is usually aware of their political nature and is even often driven to the league because, not in spite, of it. Finally, because the political nature of the league is so ingrained in its make-up, fans that would have been motivated to leave because of activism were usually never fans in the first place.

Of course, the ability and willingness of female athletes and leagues to commit to this model exist on a spectrum. Some female athletes and leagues are still committed to a more traditional, apolitical model. Anecdotally, it is worth noting that the women's leagues more committed to the apolitical model, or those that have been reluctant to commit to the political model, such as the National Women Soccer League (NWSL), the many attempts at women's football leagues, or even the WNBA in its early days, have struggled to find an identity and fan base and to generate financial growth. Meanwhile, women's leagues and athletes

⁸I use expressions such as "female athletes" or "women's sports" throughout the dissertation for lack of a better term. These terms are inclusive of the growing number of non-binary and transgender athletes participating in "women's sports". An ongoing conversation in the women's sports world is aiming at coming up with a more inclusive term, but no such term has emerged yet.

that have committed to put activism at the center of their identity and brand, such as the WNBA starting in the mid-2000s, the Premier Hockey Federation, the Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT), and many tennis players including the Williams sisters and Naomi Osaka, have consistently shown they can generate both political and business successes under the new model.

Whether the model can generalize to men's leagues will require further research. Some findings in this dissertation, such as the importance of the players' identities as marginalized actors in society, their clear commitment to activism, and their alignment in values with their fans, can be extended to some men's leagues. The NBA, for example, is composed of 83% of players of color; 75% of the league is Black players⁹, a lot from disadvantaged backgrounds¹⁰. I also show in Chapter 5 that NBA fans tend to be more progressive than fans of most other leagues. Other findings in the dissertation, however, are unique to women's sports, such as the political positioning of the league and athletes from the ground up. The NBA was a thriving league before it became an activist league, and therefore needs to incorporate activism into an existing identity, while having more fans to lose.

Further research will also be required to know how much of this new model of sports activism is generalizable to other countries besides the United States. The dissertation provides insights as to why this model is emerging in the United States, such as the special place sports hold in American culture. The broader cultural and societal acceptance of athletes and sports in the United States provides athletes with a more legitimate voice and platform than in countries where athletes are considered less legitimate social and political actors. In Chapter 2, I mention the importance of athletes' education in their ability to lead and implement political change. The collegiate nature of the organization of sports in the United States likely provides athletes with more tools to articulate opinions and implement change. Other factors, such as the grassroots nature of activism in the United States or recent progress in athletes' empowerment vis-a-vis leagues and owners, are also likely to be at play. The culture of sports and activism in the United States undoubtedly allowed this new model to emerge. How much it can be exported to other countries is an open question that will require further research.

⁹2021 Racial and Gender Report Card, NBA. The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.

¹⁰In the N.B.A., ZIP Code Matters. Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, The New York Times, November 2, 2013.

Chapter 2

“Society is catching up to us”: how finding its identity put the WNBA on the path to business and political success

2.1 Representing the margins: an identity revolution for the league

Before the WNBA found its voice, it first needed to find its identity. After its creation in 1996, the WNBA initially tried to carve a place for itself in the sports world by selling traditional gender roles and emphasizing the femininity and sexuality of its players. In 2008, Renee Brown, the league’s Vice President of player personnel, acknowledged in the Chicago Tribune that “womanhood” was important when it came to marketing the league at its beginnings. The league made concerted efforts to describe players as “women first”, who just happened to play sports¹. Sue Bird, a WNBA star who entered the league in 2002, has looked back on how the league has evolved: *“I think early on, in terms of marketing, there was just this push, you know, to be super feminine or maybe to be a bit more girly. And if you are those things, that’s great. But if you are not, now there is a space for you to be yourself. And that’s a big difference, especially in my time, early on to now”*². Breanna Stewart, a 2018 WNBA MVP who entered the league more recently in 2016, is aware of how far the league has gone: *“In the beginning, the league was trying to have players fit the image they weren’t. And it was because the league thought that’s what was best for the league. I remember Sue [Bird] and Dee [Diana Taurasi] telling me: if you don’t feel comfortable doing a photo shoot, don’t do it. There are pictures of them wearing things that they wouldn’t wear. Back then, they weren’t able to be the exact person they are”*³. After Brittney Griner, the first overall pick in the 2013 WNBA Draft, declined the makeup application class offered during the WNBA’s rookie orientation, she prompted journalists to report that a third of the league’s two-day orientation training at the time was dedicated to makeup, hairstyle and fashion tips⁴.

This initial marketing strategy for the league failed in generating loyalty and engagement from both players and fans. The league struggled to find an audience. In the middle of the 2000s, the players started becoming more comfortable expressing their true identities. The league, recognizing the inevitability of letting them be who they are, followed the players’ lead. The WNBA found itself - and its fans - in the middle of the 2000s by fully embracing what it was: a league with 80% Black women, many gay players, very much involved in most social, political, and racial battles. In 2001, the Los Angeles Sparks was the first professional sports team to acknowledge and celebrate a Pride Month. Sue Wicks became the first openly gay active player in 2002. Sheryl Swoopes, a three-time Olympian gold winner and basketball Hall of Famer,

¹Banking on Beauty, Shannon Ryan, Chicago Tribune. May 04, 2008.

²Courtside with Sue Bird, Courtside Podcast, Lyndsey D’Arcangelo. June 4, 2021.

³Don’t look away, Kate Fagan, Sports Illustrated. May 13, 2021.

⁴How slam-dunking, gender-bending WNBA rookie Brittney Griner is changing the world of sports, Laurie Abraham, Elle, November 4, 2013

was one the highest-profile active athletes to date to come out as a lesbian in 2005. She had been playing in the league since its creation in 1996 and had made a point to get back to the court six weeks after giving birth in 1997, wanting to set an example for female athletes who did not want to sacrifice their careers to have children. After the Orlando Pulse shooting in 2016, WNBA teams wore warm-up tee-shirts addressing gun violence and raised money for local charities and victims. In 2020, Layshia Clarendon became the first WNBA player to come out as transgender⁵. Sue Bird sums up the identity of the league: *“we’re obviously women and we’re gay, and we’re Black. That’s like a large percentage of our league and there is some sort of makeup there. And who are these issues all affecting, especially right now? Black women. And that is our league. That is literally who this league is”*⁶.

2.2 From surviving to thriving: 25 years of business success

Coinciding with this stronger identity foothold has been increased business success for the league. The WNBA is the longest standing women’s league in the United States and has survived where many other women’s leagues failed, including the American Basketball League in 1998, the Women’s United Soccer Association in 2003, the Women’s Professional Softball league in 2001 and the Women’s Professional Soccer in 2012. In recent years, the WNBA has seen most meaningful business metrics skyrocket: social media impressions, TV ratings, merchandise sales. In 2021, the WNBA delivered its most-watched season since 2008 for its television partners, with viewership up 51% over the 2020 season. The league’s signature orange hoodie, popularized by Kobe Bryant and many NBA players, was the top-selling item on the Fanatics website across the summer of 2020. Google searches for WNBA jerseys doubled from 2020 to 2021, following the reveal of new uniforms in April 2021. For the first time, each WNBA team received three new jerseys, including Rebel and City editions designed to be meaningful and speak to the history of the league, the cities, and the empowerment of women across the country. The Washington Mystics’ Rebel edition jersey, for example, echoes the 2017 Women’s Marches and features words from the 19th amendment (which granted women the right to vote in 1920), an artistic version of the path often taken by marches through the streets of Washington, DC, and the word “Rise” preeminently displayed at the front of the jersey instead of the team’s name. WNBA merchandise on WNBAStore.com saw record growth in 2021 with a 50% increase over 2020. The league also set records for social media engagement with 135 million video views and 14.5 million

⁵“The Power of Layshia Clarendon”, Katie Barnes, ESPN Cover Story, June 24, 2021.

⁶“Inside the WNBA’s evolution from a league of activists to organizers”, Chantel Jennings, The Athletic, October 15, 2020.

actions across Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok in 2021. Such good performances in most relevant business metrics attracted big name sponsors to the league. In 2020 and 2021, the league signed landmark sponsorship deals with AT&T, Deloitte, Google, Amazon Prime or Dick’s Sporting Goods.

This business success translated into improvements to the players’ working conditions. In 2020 the league and players signed a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) under which the average player can earn a six-figure salary and the maximum salaries climb to \$215,000, up from the previous maximum of \$117,500. The deal also includes performance bonuses and sharing team marketing deals, which means a 53% increase in total cash compensation for the players and the possibility to reach \$500,000 for the best players. The CBA also includes full-paid maternity leave, improved travel arrangement and increased investments in marketing. The relative low salaries in the WNBA have for long forced WNBA players to play year-round. Players would stay in the United States and play in the WNBA during the summers and would spend the rest of the year playing for much higher-paying teams in Europe and Asia, often with very limited breaks. The league is hoping that these increased benefits, along with other efforts from other basketball stakeholders in the United States, will allow more players to stay in the country year-long. Players will be paid more during national team training sessions, for example, and will be financially penalized if they report late to the first day of WNBA training camps. The launch of a new women’s winter basketball league in the United States, Athletes Unlimited, should also contribute to providing more financial incentives and opportunities for players to stay in the country. Under this new model, players would probably be more rested, which could ultimately improve the quality of play in the WNBA. Another, indirect consequence of this trend could also be increased time for WNBA players to devote to non-basketball endeavors, such as their political activism.

2.3 Showing the way: a leader in activism

In addition to its growing business success, the WNBA has been at the forefront of athlete activism. In 2016, the Minnesota Lynx was the first sports franchise to react to the police killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, before Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem. The Lynx wore black warm-up tee-shirts that read “Change starts with us - Justice and Accountability” on the front, while the back featured the Dallas police shield, in recognition of a recent killing of Dallas police officers, the names of Sterling and Castile, and the phrase “Black Lives Matter”. The team also held a rare pre-game news conference in which team’s captains Maya Moore, Seimone Augustus, Rebekkah Brunson and Lindsay Whalen spoke about police brutality and systemic racism. Wearing these messages and speaking out on these issues, actions considered mainstream and widely accepted today, was perceived as overly provocative

at the time. Four off-duty Minneapolis police officers working security at the Lynx arena walked off the job in reaction to the team wearing the tee-shirts. In solidarity, teams and players throughout the league started kneeling during the national anthem (Kelsey Bone, Mistie Bass), wearing similar tee-shirts (Phoenix Mercury, Indiana Fever and New York Liberty) or holding coordinating media blackouts, refusing to discuss basketball and talking only about policy brutality and systemic racism (New York Liberty, Washington Mystics, Indiana Fever, Seattle Storm). The league initially fined each team \$5,000 and each player \$500⁷ for taking political stands, but then rescinded the penalties less than two days later following an outcry from players and fans⁸. 2016 is widely recognized as a foundational moment for the league's activism: *"I think that was part of our growth, for sure. I think that step was really important in understanding how to approach everything, and understanding what activism looks like"* (Elizabeth Williams). An WNBA superstar and two-times MVP, Maya Moore walked away from basketball in her prime to advocate for criminal justice reform in 2018. Seimone Augustus, a Minnesota Lynx star, led a campaign against the proposed Minnesota constitutional ban on gay marriage in 2012. The Seattle Storm held a Planned Parenthood rally before a nationally televised game in 2017. Later in 2017, after Donald Trump called Colin Kaepernick and other NFL players who took a knee during the national anthem "sons of bitches", the Los Angeles Sparks refused to come out onto the courts during the national anthem before WNBA Finals games.

These past efforts and experiences meant the league and players were ready for the events of 2020. They dedicated their 2020 season to racial justice issues and to amplifying the stories of Black women killed by law enforcement behind the "Say Her Name" motto and advocating for justice for Breonna Taylor, fatally shot by the police during a home raid in Louisville in March 2020. When Jacob Blake was shot by the police on August 23rd, 2020, the WNBA was in the middle of the season in their Covid-19 protected Bubble in Bradenton, Florida. The Washington Mystics were scheduled to play that night, but instead of playing players and coaches linked arms and knelt while wearing tee-shirts that spelled Jacob Blake's name in the front and that featured seven blood-soaked bullet wounds, one for each shot fired at Blake, in the back. Later that night players had tensed discussions in a player-only meeting where they debated what to do with the rest of the season⁹. The debate in the WNBA Bubble paralleled similar discussions happening at the same in the NBA Bubble, following the Milwaukee Bucks' decision to boycott their playoff game against the Orlando Magic. Some WNBA players argued that contrary to NBA players, whose voice carry weight

⁷ESPN.com reported that the average uniform violation fine was usually \$200 at the time.

⁸WNBA withdraws penalties for players' Black Lives Matter protests, Nick Ellerson, Washington Post, July 23 2016.

⁹144, ESPN Films, produced by Chiney Ogumike

regardless of whether they are on the court or not, WNBA players' platform only exists if they play and stay on national TV. Other players were worried about the financial ramifications and argued that they could not afford to sacrifice the season's paycheck. Ultimately the players decided to sit out two days of games and resumed playing, but expressed the importance of being together in this moment for mental reasons as well as to be able to present a unified front. A vigil was held in the Bubble the night of the Jacob Blake shooting and the following day all 144 players came out to the gym to kneel and present a common message on national television: *"we just wanted to make sure everybody understand this is not just about basketball. We are not just basketball players. And just because we are basketball players does not mean that's our only platform. We need to understand that when most of us go home, we still are Black, in the sense that our families matter"* (Ariel Atkins). Some players, like Natasha Cloud, Tiffany Hayes, and Renee Montgomery, decided to opt out of the 2020 season altogether, to focus on organizing and advocacy efforts around social justice and inequalities in their communities¹⁰. Cloud led marches in Washington DC and spoke on panels and news shows across the country. Hayes worked to register voters at the gym she owns in Atlanta. Montgomery worked as a grassroots organizer, handing out water bottles to protesters¹¹.

In the summer of 2020, WNBA's Atlanta Dream team owner Kelly Loeffler criticized the Black Lives Matter protests and the WNBA players' support of it, arguing that sports should remain apolitical. Loeffler was also the incumbent United States Senator from Georgia and was running for reelection in 2020. In response to her remarks, the players organized in support of one of her Democratic opponents in the Senate race, Reverend Raphael Warnock. The Warnock campaign saw a significant increase in donations and credited the WNBA for playing a turning point in the campaign, a claim I investigate further later in the dissertation.

This time, the league fully backed the players' political efforts. In response to the players deciding to sit out games, WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert affirmed that *"we absolutely support them. We know this is a very emotional time, a very divisive time in our country. And what we're trying to do is unify, come together with them, help facilitate some conversations with social justice activists, to help them strategize about how they can have an impact"*. The league announced the formation of a first-of-its-kind collective, the WNBA Changemakers, hoping to redefine the relationship between investors and the athletes they sponsor. The WNBA Changemakers' stated goal is to create a new model of sports sponsorship, with companies such

¹⁰Why Natasha Cloud decided to opt out of the 2020 WNBA season, Aaron Dodson, The Undefeated, July 24, 2020.

¹¹It's in our DNA: WNBA Players' record of activism, Lindsay Gibbs, Global Sports Matters. April 9, 2021

as AT&T, Deloitte and Nike committing to not only financially supporting the league, but also to lift the league and players through marketing amplification and improved branding and players and fans experiences.

In 2021, the league and players continued their efforts by partnering with the ACLU, NAACP and local voting groups to advocate for voting rights and voting access and to encourage people to vote. Several players and coaches, including Napheesa Collier, Cheryl Reeve, Brittney Griner and Layshia Clarendon, spoke out against the attempts in many state legislatures to ban transgender youth from participating in team sports¹². Some called on the NCAA to take urgent action by pulling its championship events from states adopting such policies¹³. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the players and the league donated \$25,000 to the Black Women’s Health Imperative, whose mission is to help protect and advance the health and wellness of Black women and girls. When vaccine hesitancy among Black communities became a threat to public health efforts, the WNBA became the first professional sports league to reach a 99% vaccination rate among its players¹⁴. Star players such as A’ja Wilson and Layshia Clarendon also made public service announcements encouraging Black women to get vaccinated.

In 2022, the league continued to put activism at the core of its growth strategy. In January, the league announced the largest-ever capital raise for a women’s sports property. The league raised \$75 million from investors such as Condoleezza Rice, Stanford University affiliate and 66th US Secretary of State, and Pau Gasol and Baron Davis, NBA legends. When announcing the historical investment, Cathy Engelbert emphasized the league’s deep roots in activism and explicitly linked the activist identity to the business success of the league: *“Our strategy is to deploy this capital to continue to drive the league’s brand as a bold, progressive entertainment and media property that embodies diversity, promotes equity, advocates for social justice, and stands for the power of women”*.

The WNBA embodies the willingness of 21st century activist athletes to go beyond words to take a more holistic, action-based approach to activism. In an article called *“Inside the WNBA’s evolution from a league of activists to organizers”*¹⁵, The Athletic’s Chantel Jennings documents how *“WNBA players changed the interpretation of where sports fit in American culture”* and how players are intentional in developing

¹²Opinion: Texas Bill could subject transgender athletes to bullying, assault, Brittney Griner and Layshia Clarendon. NBC News. August 14, 2017

¹³Top WNBA, NCAA Coaches and players call on NCAA to take urgent action against anti-transgender legislation, Wyatt Ronan. Human Rights Campaign Press release. April 9, 2021.

¹⁴How the WNBA became the world’s most community focused sports league, Jessica Toomer, Uproxx. August 19, 2021

¹⁵The Athletic, Chantel Jennings, 2020

coordinated action plans to generate change on their political priorities: voting rights and mobilization, LGBTQ+ rights, and women’s rights.

2.4 Identity, business and political successes: correlation or causation?

2.4.1 Players draw a direct connection between their identity and their activism

When asked why the WNBA has been able to be a leader among sports leagues in political activism, players and observers usually argue that speaking out is a natural consequence of being a woman, often Black and queer, in sports, echoing Kavitha A. Davidson’s argument that *“the very act of being a female athlete is radical”*. Around 67% of WNBA players are Black (83% are persons of color)¹⁶, and even if statistics on the sexual identities of players do not exist, a substantial proportion of WNBA players identify as LGBTQ+. The 2019 All-WNBA first team, which includes the five best players in a WNBA season, as voted by the media, consisted entirely of women who identify as LGBTQ+ (Courtney Vandersloot, Brittney Griner, Chelsea Gray, Natasha Howard and Elena Delle Donne). Half of the six players on the WNBA player association leadership team, Delle Donne, Sue Bird and Layshia Clarendon, identify as LGBTQ+. Over 25% of the players playing in the 2021 WNBA playoffs were out as LGBTQ+ athletes¹⁷.

These identities mean that WNBA players have never had the privilege of not being political, as Sue Bird explained in a The Undefeated documentary¹⁸: *“All they want to do is talk about the fact that we are women, that we are Black, and that we are gay. That’s all people want to talk about. So, we’ve had to defend ourselves. And the irony of people asking us now to stick to sports - we would have loved to. Nobody has allowed us. And so here we are. We’ve been doing this; this is no different than any other time in our league. It just happens to be the moment when the world has caught up with us”*. WNBA players have always recognized the *“fundamentally political nature of their existence”* (Lindsay Kagawa Colas). They have argued that their personal connections to the issues, combined with their platform, makes them ideal spoke-persons: *“while living at those intersections of identity serves as a hindrance for Black women’s advancement in all sorts of*

¹⁶The 2019 racial and gender card, WNBA, Dr. Richard Lapchick, The Institute For Diversity and Ethics in Sport

¹⁷“At least 25% of the players in the WNBA Playoffs are LGBTQ and out”, Cyd Zeigler, *outsports.com*, September 23, 2021

¹⁸“The Evolution of the WNBA social justice movement”, The Undefeated, 2020

pursuits, it also automatically sets you up to be more aware” (Layshia Clarendon), *“many of the people in the league experience multiple layers of marginalization. So, you understand what it is like to not have all the privileges that are conferred upon other people in our society”* (ESPN’s Katie Barnes). They see themselves as part of a broader trend in societal change: *“Think about history in general. It’s usually Black women who are leading these marches and movements”* (Elizabeth Williams). The players are not the only ones to recognize the strong connection between their identity and their activism. Raphael Warnock, Democratic Senator from Georgia whose 2020 campaign is covered in Chapter 4 of the dissertation, emphasized how the players’ identities bolstered their ability to influence his Senate campaign: *“It is not surprising to me that athletes who experience the intersectionality of oppression - race, gender and sexual orientation - would be leading the way in this regard. I think it’s the ways in which they experience marginalization in so many ways that gives them a unique perspective and, yet again, a kind of courage and voice that is really leading the way for other athletes”*¹⁹.

The players are very aware of who they represent and of how their personal identities merge into a broader representation for marginalized people: *“we know what it feels like to live on the margins, even within the sports community”* (Layshia Clarendon), *“Black women are always in the back end of everything, and I think with this sport, we’re able to uplift exactly this part of society that has been overlooked so many times”* (Satou Sabally), *“every direction we turned, we were walking into a wall for representing the folks at society’s margins”* (Sue Bird). Representing, and often being, “people at the margins of society” has in some ways freed the players to speak out and lead the way: *“if anything, WNBA players give other professional leagues a space to say: it’s ok to speak out, it’s ok to be unliked. Because we’ve been unliked for 23 years by mainstream America. And we’re saying you can survive not being liked for saying something that’s right”* (Dawn Staley). Somewhere along the way during their identity and political evolutions, WNBA players have realized that their differences can be a strength: *“people think you’re supposed to look and talk and be a certain way, but the WNBA blasts all of those things out of the water. And you should want that. We are standing on the shoulders of women who didn’t back down just because casual sports fans didn’t think they were worthy. That’s what makes our league better: because we have faced those hurdles. I can’t think of another league that gets hit with every single last knock, and I don’t see that going away, but we’re not going to let that stop us”* (A’ja Wilson).

From most accounts, WNBA players would have spoken out on political issues regardless of the consequences for them or the league, because of who they are. For a young league still struggling to find its footing

¹⁹Interview of Raphael Warnock in “Inside the WNBA’s evolution from a league of activists to organizers”, The Athletic, Chantel Jennings, 2020

in the world of sports business, however, this activism could have had disastrous consequences and led to the failure of the league. If Michael Jordan could not afford to lose potential Republican customers in the 1990s, how can a young, financially insecure league survive its players' activism? This dissertation explores how the WNBA benefits from a tighter alignment between its potential fan base and its political activism. The WNBA was probably never going to attract the fans it initially targeted by selling the "womanhood" and sexual attractiveness of its players. Most fans who could be convinced by such a strategy will probably never be interested in women's sports. They also often happen to be the ones most likely to be turned away by political activism. The initial marketing strategy failed before the players even started speaking out, which means the league never attracted the fans it could have eventually lost because of its activism. For this reason, observers have argued that women's leagues are wise to seek out a different audience than the one long-standing men's leagues have, and should give up on people who are not going to become women's sports fans: "*a man who doesn't like women's sports in general, I don't think you're going to convince them to become a fan*" (David Berri)²⁰. The National Women's Hockey League (NWHL) made news in 2021 by turning down a Barstool Sports endorsement, citing Barstool's history of racism and misogyny as the reasons why the league refused the partnership. The NWHL was a new league with only six teams and small salaries (\$7,500 on average for a season until the 2021-2022 season, when average salaries will rise to \$15,000). It broadcasts its games on Twitch, an online platform usually used to stream video games. An association with Barstool, a sports media giant, and its 66 million unique monthly visitors, could have considerably broaden the league's following - but at the risk of losing and compromising the league's values. Both the WNBA and NWHL have made a conscious decision to fully embrace their progressive values and to make it part of their marketing appeal. They did it in part because there is business sense in building a base of solid, devoted fans, connected to the league by strong shared ideological values, rather than trying to find more moderate fans who might not be open to women's sports to begin with. After the league found its identity, it started finding its fans, and these fans are usually likely to be receptive to the league's activism. In this context, the political acts of the players probably increase the women's leagues appeal and help get more attention to them, a claim I investigate in Chapter 5.

Of course, it helps when a broader span of society is ready to hear the message. The league and observers are attributing part of the recent business successes of the league to "*society's margins reconfiguring themselves*" and the world catching up with the WNBA: "*for nearly a quarter century the WNBA has been rowing against the headwinds of racism, sexism and anti-LGBTQ sentiment. Today everyone inside the league feels similarly: that the world has finally caught up, that a movement has met its moment*" (Sports

²⁰The Sports league that refuses to court certain fans, Maggie Mertens, The Atlantic, February 27, 2021.

Illustrated's Kate Fagan)²¹. The WNBA is benefitting from recent progressive gains in some corners of society in part because *"we were once seen as outsiders, but society caught us with us"* (Sue Bird). The example of the National Women's Football League (NWFL), a league created in 1974, shows how progressive leagues like the WNBA benefit from recent societal progress. De La Cretaz and D'Arcangelo (2021) documents how the NWFL and its players never shied away from embracing their identities as mostly working class players who rarely adhered to traditional femininity standards, many of them queer and Black. The authors describe the conflicted relations between NWFL players and the 1970s women's liberation movement, mostly led by white, heterosexual women from privileged backgrounds. But as the authors argue, *"whether or not the women of the NWFL identified with the word "feminism" or with the larger movement for women's liberation, they were unwittingly part of it, simply by living their truths. They may have been threatening the status quo in some ways, but not in any real way, they seemed to be saying. But change happens because everyday people refuse to cave to societal expectations"*. The league eventually folded in 1988 because of a lack of support from society and sponsors. In their book, Britni de la Cretaz and Lyndsey D'Arcangelo argue that *"players were depending on Title IX and society catching up with what they were doing, trusting that the public was on the verge of being ready for something progressive like a women's football league"*. Society did not catch up in time for the NWFL, but it did for the WNBA and other progressive sports leagues today. Gwen Flager, a former NWFL player, even makes the direct comparison to the WNBA when interviewed in De La Cretaz and D'Arcangelo (2021): *"You look at women's tennis, the WNBA - put women in front of it and all of a sudden it's a whole other demon. And nobody wants to support. Obviously, things have changed, but good gravy it's been forty years and we're still banging on that door. If we had had Nike or even a sporting goods store in town to back us, gosh anybody, where would we be? None of that was available"*.

Obviously, even today not all of society is catching up and not everybody will be drawn to the WNBA's identity and activism. The progressive gains in some corners of society are generating backlash from other corners. However, the WNBA might have more to gain from gains in some corners than it has to lose from backlash in other corners. The league and players have always had less to lose from their activism than bigger leagues with fans spanning a larger portion of the ideological spectrum. As larger corners of society are catching up and the league's fan base is growing, the main question is how far the league can keep growing and how far this alignment between the fans' values, the league's identity and its activism can take it. How much of society can the WNBA attract to its corner, and when does activism start hurting the league, will be a central question throughout this dissertation.

²¹Don't Look Away, Kate Fagan, Sports Illustrated, May 13, 2021.

2.4.2 Solving collective action problems: size, institutions and education

The second reason often mentioned for why the WNBA is so efficient at speaking out is the small size of the league (12 teams, 144 players). According to players and observers, this size is a strength when it comes to organizing and presenting a united front: *“looking back to 2016, we weren’t as organized as we were this year [2020], but we kind of had to go through that in a way to understand, wow, we’re organized and we’re all on the same page, the platform is bigger, the voice is louder. Fast forward to the summer of 2020, that moment was heightened emotions, it was happening in real time. There’s a lot of people with a lot of opinions, rightfully so. The good news is that we’re all on the same page from a values standpoint. But there’s the conversation of how, how we are going to do it? I think what we learned from 2016 is, when we’re organized with it and we’re all on the same page, it’s much more powerful”* (Sue Bird). The players have actively looked for ways to articulate personal and group needs: *“you find your way in it, in a way in which it speaks to your own authenticity as an individual. But then also you find a lot of strength and we’re able to speak out collectively, as we demonstrated in the past few years and most notably this [2020] season”* (Nneka Ogwumike). Because of the size of the league, their agreement on core values and their ability to cooperate and compromise, WNBA players have checked many of the boxes identified by social scientists as required to solve collective action problems and have been able to carry their message and translate it into action. Another well-known solution to collective action problems is the creation of institutions to overcome the inertia of groups trying to make decision. WNBA players, with the help of their union (the WNBPA), have created the institutions to help, such as the Social Justice Council. The goal of the council is to educate, amplify and mobilize for action to *“address the country’s long history of inequality, implicit bias and systemic racism”*. It is led by six players, league senior officials, and outside advisors such as Carolyn DeWitt (President of Rock the Vote), Kimberle Crenshaw (Co-Founder of the African American Policy Forum and Professor of Law at UCLA and Columbia), or Alicia Garza (co-creator of the Black Lives Matter Global Network). Terri Jackson, WNBPA executive director, summarizes how the size of the league can be such an advantage when she says *“we are small enough to organize, and then we’re large enough to make a statement. I think that is the beauty of our league”*.

Another, often overlooked, reason for why WNBA players have been efficient at speaking out and at building the infrastructure to back up their words is their education. Because of the age minimum to enter the WNBA (22 years old for American players), most players have had at least three years of college education when they enter the league. In contrast, men’s players can enter the NBA at 19. Moreover, the lesser financial gains for women’s players make it less likely that they will want to become professional as soon as they can. The lesser financial incentives make it more likely that women’s players will value their education, as they

know basketball is unlikely to financially sustain them throughout their lives. These differences in incentives can explain why a player like Imani McGee-Stafford decided to step away from the Dallas Wings for two seasons to pursue a law degree, or why other players rely on online programs to receive master's or other graduate degrees during their season. Angel Robinson, a Phoenix Mercury player, was studying for her second master's degree during the 2018 season, Aari McDonald had two semesters left to finish her master's degree when she started her WNBA career with the Atlanta Dream in 2020, and Kelsey Mitchell earned her master's degree in her third season with the Indiana Fever. Players such as Diamond DeShields, Kelsey Mitchell and Mercedes Russel postponed their entry into the league until after they graduated from college, despite being projected in the first few picks of the WNBA draft at the end of their junior seasons. Not only do women's players tend to stay in college, but they also tend to study topics that are relevant to their activism. Her Hoop Stats gathered the college majors of 133 out of 150 WNBA players in 2020²². They found that social sciences majors were by far the most common (43.61% of the players), followed by Journalism/Communications (20.30%), Business (13.53%) and Law, Politics and Society (9.02%), including 10 players (7% of the league) having majored in Criminal Justice Studies. This educational background undeniable helps WNBA players engage with the issues and chose the right levers to push and create change. Whether it is to decide what organization to partner with, how to speak out on an issue, or what candidate to support in a race, WNBA players constantly emphasize the need to educate themselves on an issue before making any decision: *"we don't do it because it's trendy. We educated ourselves and we try our best to do what we can to push the dial, to be on the right side of history and to make progress, so all we ask is for everyone else to do the same"* (Nneka Ogwumike).

2.4.3 An empirical exploration of these connections

Looking back at its 25th first years, three trends emerge as undeniably true for the WNBA: the league ultimately found a strong identity after a few years of initial confusion, the league is widely recognized as a leader in sports' activism, and the league seems to be growing on most important business metrics. The next three Chapters in this dissertation leverage a variety of empirical methods to explore how inter-related and connected these three trends are. How much of these dynamics are happening in parallel, almost by chance, and how much are they causing each other to happen? The players make a direct connection between their identity and their activism. The fact that their identity makes them want to speak out is undeniable. What needs a deeper and more rigorous investigation is whether and why their identity makes them more efficient, or more convincing, activists.

²²What did WNBA players study in college?, Jacob Mox, Her Hoop Stats. May 21, 2020

The connection between social activism and business success is a complex one. As discussed throughout this dissertation, there is a fine line between using politics to attract and retain like-minded fans, and alienating current or potential fans. Women's leagues might be in the unique position to have more to gain and less to lose than men's leagues that target a broader audience. But as women's leagues grow their business and audience, they will eventually have to find an equilibrium and an optimal line to grow while keeping their values.

Finally, the connection between the players' identity and the business success of the league is rarely mentioned. This connection is probably mostly indirect, and mediated by the players' activism. However, there is growing interest in WNBA players as cultural and fashion leaders, which introduces a direct link between the players' identities and their business successes. Since 2018, social media accounts like MadeForTheW, WNBA Kicks and LeagueFits have highlighted the lifestyle and fashion choices of today's biggest WNBA stars. Many WNBA players, including Brittney Griner, Lexie Brown, Cappie Pondexter, Skylar Diggins-Smith, Sue Bird and Tamera "Ty" Young, are rapidly emerging as style influencers²³. Similar to what we observe on the activism front, players directly tie their fashion success to their ability to be themselves: *"Early on, I was trying to be a little too much, let's just say not myself. Trying to dress a certain way, act a certain way, and present a certain way. Through the years, you get to know yourself a little better, you figure out your style, and now we're at a point - which is amazing for me - I always joke I've been waiting literally 15-20 years for sneakers to become a thing. For it to be like the cool thing to wear, even with a dress or even with a suit, whatever the case may be. So, for me, that's been the transformation and now, I like to say I'm like somewhere in a tomboy chic category - probably a little more tomboy than chic, but I'll take it"* (Sue Bird) or *"I think the key word is expression. I think we all as athletes, whether on the court or off the court, doesn't matter, you're expressing yourself in these ways, and you have to have the tools to do it. And for a while, we didn't really have, for female athletes, the proper tools, right, to really fully express yourself. Like, maybe some people did, but for me personally it just didn't exist. So to have companies start to kind of see that and see that spectrum, that there are a lot of different ways as us as female athletes to express ourselves, and now we are starting to get the tools. It just, there's something genuine about it and it's really cool to be a part of it"* (Sue Bird). For obvious reasons, the fashion and cultural impacts of the WNBA are out of the score of this dissertation. The dissertation focuses more on whether a direct line can be drawn between the player's identities, their successes in activism and their successes in business.

²³Women are changing the game: the WNBA's fashion evolution, Khristina Williams, Just Women's Sports. September 8, 2021 and WNBA Game-Day Fashion deserves recognition, too, Rose Minutaglio, Elle. July 8, 2019.

Chapter 3

**Group cues and persuasion from
non-political actors: can WNBA
players change minds on the issues?**

3.1 Motivation and literature

3.1.1 Distinguishing the information from the messenger: group cues, persuasive information and affective evaluations

When a messenger makes a political argument aiming at persuasion, for example when they come out in favor of Equal Pay for women’s athletes, three different things happen. First, people use what they know (or can infer) about the messenger as a heuristic to ascertain what they think about the policy (Brady & Sniderman 1985; Nicholson 2012; Popkin 2020). If people like the messenger, or think that they like them, they will infer that the policy is good because messengers they respect are in favor of it. On the other hand, people who assume or think that they do not like the messenger are likely to like the policy less when a messenger they dislike is advocating for it. This first dynamic is called a “group cue” and is widely covered in the persuasion literature (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman 2011; Nyhan & Reifler 2010; Zaller et al. 1992). In the presence of group cues, we expect polarized reactions to an information treatment.

The second dynamic is that the messenger provides factual, persuasive information when they speak on a political issue. They might explain, for example, that Equal Pay is not about paying women’s athletes as much as men’s athletes, but is about investing in women’s sports in ways that can help grow the sports and ultimately generate revenues, or that it is about providing equal opportunities for girls and boys to play sports. According to Coppock (2021 (Forthcoming)’s “Persuasion in Parallel” and Page and Shapiro (1992)’s “Parallel Publics” theories, as long as the information is delivered without group cues, we should expect all respondents to be persuaded and to update their attitudes in parallel when presented with factual, persuasive information. According to this parallel publics theory, everyone responds to persuasive information by updating their views in the same direction and by about the same amount, even when respondents start with very different baseline attitudes on the issue. Evidence in favor of this theory has been found on climate change (Huxster, Carmichael, & Brulle 2015), defense spending (Eichenberg & Stoll 2012), welfare spending (Enns 2007), or busing (Kellstedt 2003) policies.

The first two dynamics focus on whether advocacy can change political attitudes. It is also possible that when a messenger takes a political stand, they change people’s attitudes on the messenger. People who know nothing about the messenger can end up liking them more (or less) when they are made aware of the stances the messenger is taking. Hearing people make arguments with which one disagrees makes one like them less, at least a little. This dynamic is called affective evaluation. A given piece of information can have a positive effect on policy support but a negative effect on affective evaluations: a conservative seeing a call for transgender inclusion, for example, could be slightly persuaded on the issue but also dislike the messenger

more. This Chapter only focuses on the effects on policy attitudes (through the group cue and persuasion mechanisms), and not on the affective evaluation consequences of activism for messengers.

The Chapter makes two main contributions to the study of persuasion. First, most of the existing work looks at group cues and persuasive information in isolation. Persuasive information tends to convince all respondents in the same direction, while group cues generate polarized reactions depending on the receiver's attitude towards the messenger. In this Chapter, I also look at the combination of group cues and factual information, and at what happens when a respondent receives both. I investigate the "interaction effect" from the combination of group cues and factual information. Second, most of the work on group cues uses political actors as messengers, such as politicians with an explicit partisan affiliation. Respondents are able to connect the partisan messengers to the political message they carry, and update their opinions accordingly. When a Democrat provides an argument in favor of gun control for example, a conservative respondent immediately identifies gun control as a liberal issue, makes the connection with the Democratic messenger, and will be less favorable to gun control because of the group cue. In this Chapter, I use non-political messengers: female athletes. I investigate if group cues from non-political messengers are as polarizing as group cues from political messengers, or if non-political actors are able to "transcend" traditional political frameworks and generate responses closer to the parallel reactions that persuasive information usually produces.

3.1.2 The WNBA as a credible, relevant non-political messenger

Three main reasons drove the choice of the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA) and its players as the non-political messengers for this project. First, the WNBA is widely recognized as the leading league in athletes' activism by other athletes and observers. The league has a history of speaking out and is committed to putting activism at the heart of its identity and strategy, as evidenced by the timeline of their actions in recent years (see Figure 4.1). This commitment to activism makes the WNBA a credible, realistic messenger for political messages.

Timeline of activism in the WNBA

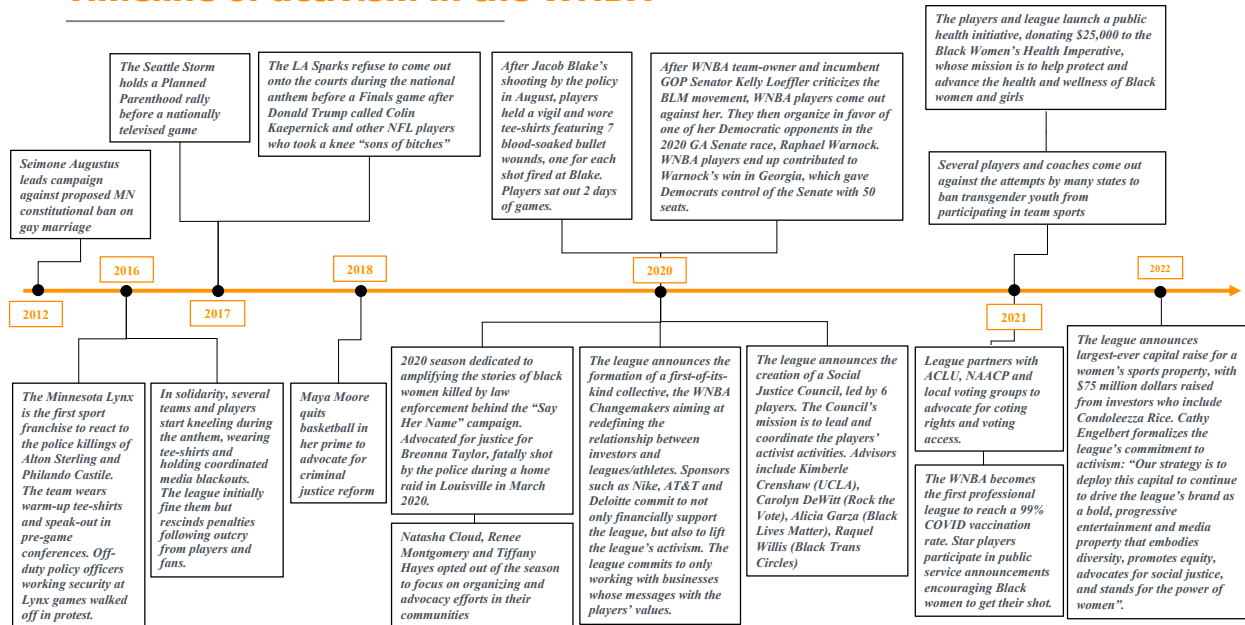


Figure 3.1: Timeline of WNBA activism

Second, most of the research on activist athletes and persuasion has focused on Social Justice issues, and more specifically on support for Black Lives Matter in the last few years (see next section). Social Justice is one of the main issue of focus for athletes, but in recent years they have started speaking out on a broader range of issues, including gender equality, LGBTQ rights, voting rights. I wanted to test the ability of athletes to change opinions on this broader range of topics. I also wanted to ensure that the arguments used on each policy are realistic and reflect what athletes say in the real world. WNBA players have explicitly put the three policies I explore in this Chapter (Equal Pay, Transgender Inclusion in sports, Voting Rights) at the center of their activism strategy. Third, most of the research on activist athletes (see section below) has focused on Black NFL players. The new wave of activist athletes is defined by the larger diversity of athletes speaking out. In trying to reflect the increasing diversity of activist athletes, the Chapter focuses on female athletes. No league covers a broader range of identities than the WNBA. Around 67% of WNBA players are Black (83% are person of color)¹, and even if official numbers on the sexual identities of the players do not exist, a substantial proportion of WNBA players identify as LGBTQ+.

¹The 2019 racial and gender card, WNBA, Dr. Richard Lapchick, The Institute For Diversity and Ethics in Sport

3.1.3 Closing gaps in our understanding of athletes' ability to impact political attitudes

By using WNBA players as non-political messengers, this Chapter also contributes to the literature on the ability of athletes to shape political attitudes. Most of the existing literature has focused on male athletes, especially Black NFL players, and on one issue, support for Black Lives Matter, with mixed findings around the ability of such athletes to change minds.

Two-thirds of Americans identify as sports fans ², and 93 of the 100 most-watched television shows in 2015 were live sports broadcasts ³. Sports play a significant role in American life, and, as athletes become more vocal, it is important that we understand how they influence political attitudes. The sports-specific literature builds on a much larger literature on the effect of elite rhetoric on public opinion. We know since Philip et al. (1964) and Zaller et al. (1992) that elite rhetoric plays an important role in structuring mass public opinion. Scholars have applied this framework to celebrities such as Bono or Angelina Jolie and show that they can influence opinion by their ability to (i) spotlight the issues and (ii) persuade audiences (Becker 2012, 2013; Harvey 2017; Nownes 2021).

This framework has been applied to the early waves of activist athletes. Scholars have documented how athletes were able to influence the national conversation on racial justice in the 1960s, by making the issues more visible and by providing a voice to otherwise powerless racial and ethnic minorities (Edwards 2017; Hartmann 1996; Wiggins 1992). These accounts tell comprehensive stories of how athletes can influence political attitudes. They also discuss the potential mechanisms through which it can happen. However, athletes' activism also coincided with broader societal shifts and opinions changes at the time. We know little about the causal effect of activist athletes on political opinions. One of the reasons for this gap in our knowledge is that athletes' activism disappeared at the same time the credibility revolution started in the social sciences. Scholars have documented how activist athletes disappeared from the 1970s to the 2000s, notably because of increased financial incentives, which made it costlier for athletes to speak out and risk losing endorsements or contracts (Candaele & Dreier 2010; McAllister 1998; Roach 2002). Over the last few years however, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, activist athletes are making a come-back.

This new wave of activist athletes provides us with an opportunity to more rigorously assess the ability

²As Industry Grows, Percentage of U.S. Sports Fans Steady, Jeffrey M. Jones, newsgallup.com, June 17, 2015

³Sports spending not on pace with economic growth, Rich Luker, Sports Business Journal, February 22, 2016

of athletes to change political attitudes. Harrison and Michelson (2017) document the ability of NFL elites to shift public opinion on same-sex marriage. The authors find that statements from NFL elites influenced attitudes about same-sex marriage, but only when the recipient of the message was a fan of professional football or the specific football team primed by the messenger. They also attribute the strength of their findings to the dissonance of the message, in that elites affiliated with a heteronormative sport like professional football would stereotypically be expected to oppose marriage equality. M. M. Wilkinson Betina Cutaia and Webster (2021) extend Harrison and Michelson (2017) by looking at immigration issues, still using messages from NFL players. They find mixed evidence on the ability of NFL players to change people's attitudes on immigration even among NFL fans, but do find evidence that messages from an in-group player (based on race) can convince people when this message is surprising or counter-stereotypical. K. Wilkinson Betina et al. (2012) test the ability of athletes from several leagues (NFL, WNBA, MLB) to change minds around the social justice issue and find limited evidence that athletes' pro-BLM statements were able to change minds. Finally, Alrababah, Marble, Mousa, and Siegel (2019) shows how exposure to a Muslim soccer star can reduce prejudice toward Islamophobia.

Athlete activism is now a much broader and more complex reality than it was in the first wave of the 1960s: white and Black athletes, stars and role players, males and females, increasingly speak out. We have a limited understanding on whether and how this increased diversity might have changed the nature of athletes' activism. Current research on the question has almost exclusively focused on NFL players, notably because the NFL remains the most popular, and therefore potentially the most influential, league in the country. But we need to extend our understanding of activism to other leagues and players.

Moreover, athletes now speak out on a broad diversity of topics. While the first wave of activist athletes focused almost exclusively on civil right issues, current athletes advocate on topics as diverse as social justice, criminal reform, voter suppression, gender pay gap, or LGBTQ+ rights. The existing experimental research on the question focuses on broad issues, such as support for the Black Lives Matter movement, on which attitudes are hard to change. When it focuses on smaller, more specific issues, such as LGBTQ rights or immigration, scholars find more evidence that athletes can change attitudes. But they test it on combinations of athletes and issues that rarely occur in the real world: it is very rare for NFL players to advocate for LGBTQ or immigration rights, for example.

3.2 Research design

3.2.1 Survey sample

A representative experimental sample (3,110 respondents) was recruited through Lucid. Respondents had to pass a basic attention check at the beginning of the survey to be able to move on to the survey questions. 70% of the respondents passed the attention check. The survey was run in December 2021. Research has shown that the Covid-19 pandemic has not posed a fundamental threat to the generalizability of online experiments, including ones run on Lucid (Peyton, Huber, & Coppock 2020).

3.2.2 Covariates and measurement scales

The covariates used in the analysis are: baseline interest in men’s and women’s sports, education level, partisan orientation, ethnicity, income, sexual orientation, gender, where the person lives (city, rural area, town, or suburbs), religiosity, former participation in organized sports and age.

We expect in-group to matter to how people react to a political stand by the WNBA. As a building block for this Chapter, it is important to try to define who the in-group for the WNBA is. Little demographic data on who current WNBA fans are is publicly available. WNBA demographic research indicates the average crowd at a WNBA game is comprised of 75% females⁴. Analysis of social media data by Zoomph shows that WNBA fans are between 2 to 6.6 times more likely than an average sports fan to be interested in politics, and especially women’s rights⁵.

Ideally, we need to rely on a concept that goes beyond simple demographics. Players have provided indications on who they feel they represent in multiple interviews: “*people who live on the margins of society*” (Layshia Clarendon), “*the part of society that has been overlooked so many times*” (Satou Sabally), “*people who have been unliked by mainstream America*” (Dawn Staley), or “*people who don’t look and talk like they’re supposed to*” (A’ja Wilson). Two dimensions appear key in what the players are trying to formulate: race and gender roles - as well as their interactions. Social science provides frameworks as well as measurement scales to define and measure these dimensions. Intersectional theories posit that social positions that exist on a hierarchy of social power are not independent, but rather that they shape human experience jointly. Individuals have individual identities that intersect in ways that impact how they are viewed, understood and treated. A combination of racial and social identities can compound discrimination. The concept has been applied to Black women in the US (Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1990), and extended to a wide

⁴A coming out party for professional sports, Wayne Drehs, espn.com

⁵2020 Women sports beverage report, Zoomph

range of intersections of race, gender, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation (Bowleg 2012; Hancock 2007). WNBA players themselves have acknowledged how they and their league fit into the intersectional framework. Sydney Colson evoked not having a name for it until she met with Kimberle Crenshaw, who first coined the term intersectionality, and then spent time studying her work⁶. Layshia Clarendon learned about intersectionality during her undergrad at Berkeley, where she majored in sociology.

The uptake of intersectional theories in quantitative social science research has been recent and originally focused on measuring someone's intersectionality "level" (e.g., how to interact individual race, gender and other identity coefficients) or discrimination level (Bauer et al. 2021; Else-Quest & Hyde 2016; Hancock 2007). Greenwood (2008) developed an intersectional political consciousness scale to measure the degree to which a respondent's political consciousness reflects intersectionality. The scale is heavily theoretical and mostly targeted at feminist activists. In this Chapter, I use Curtin, Stewart, and Cole (2015)'s Intersectional Awareness (IA) scale. It builds on Greenwood (2008)'s work and broadens her scope by arguing that even individuals who do not identify with or belong to a particular social group may still have an intersectional perspective. The authors argue that IA can be conceptualized as a social-cognitive variable that assesses the degree to which individuals view different social hierarchies as intersecting. They adapt Greenwood's scale to include new items that allow the scale to be suitable for non-activist samples of women and men. They came up with a 13 items scale that include questions such as *"People don't think enough about how connections between social class, race, gender and sexuality affect individuals"*, *"while there are important differences in how different kinds of oppression work, there are also important similarities"*, or *"people who belong to more than one oppressed social group (e.g., lesbians who are also ethnic minorities) have experiences that differ from people who belong to only one such group"*.

Intersectional awareness measures how much respondents agree that interactions between race and gender roles matter. Besides the interactions between them, it is useful to have measurements on the two individual dimensions: gender roles and race. The heteronormative ideology has been defined as an ideology operating to justify social hierarchical structures, preferential treatment of dominant group members, and individual prejudices or stigma toward "subordinate" or minority group members (Herek 1986, 2016; Herek & McLemore 2013; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin 2006; Sidanius, Liu, Shaw, & Pratto 1994). In the United States, heteronormativity can be conceptualized as an institutionalized social force that dictates acceptable behaviors based on the assumption that heterosexuality is normal (Habarth 2015; Kitzinger 2005; Yep 2003). It defines boundaries of "normality" and sets expectations for men and women to behave and express them-

⁶At the WNBA, the fight for racial justice goes way back, Alexandra E. Petri, The New York Times. August 31, 2020.

selves in accordance with traditional gender norms (Habarth 2015). I use a short version of Habarth (2015)'s 16-item heteronormative attitudes and beliefs scale (HABS), a self-report measure that assesses traditional attitudes and beliefs toward sexuality and gender. The scale contains items such as *“all people are either male or female”*, or *“in intimate relationships, people should act only according to what is traditionally expected of their gender”*.

Many quantitative measurements exist around the racial dimension, whether it is attitudes toward Black people and integration, modern racism, white racial identity or white privilege and antiracism (see Schooley, Lee, and Spanierman (2019) for a systematic review of measurement instruments). I use the measure of racial resentment that has been used in the ANES survey since 1986, based on four statements: *“Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Black people should do the same without any special favors”*, *“Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Black people to work their way out of the lower class”*, *“Over the past few years, Black people have gotten less than they deserve”*, and *“it’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Black people would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites”*.

I therefore rely on three main scales in this survey: intersectionality awareness (IA), racial resentment and heteronormativity. Lower levels of racial resentment, lower levels of heteronormativity, and higher levels of intersectional awareness are generally thought to be the more progressive positions and to be more closely aligned to the WNBA's values and identities. In order to have the three scales moving in the same direction, where lower levels on the scales can be associated with a closer alignment with the WNBA's identities, I recoded the intersectionality awareness scale into an “intersectionality unawareness” (IU) scale. Moreover, each scale tells its own story, and results are always presented along the three dimensions. But people on the same ends of the three scales tend to respond similarly to the questions and treatments. For clarity sake, when discussing the results, I will sometimes use “identity-aligned” to refer to people in the low ends of the scales, i.e. people with low intersectional unawareness, heteronormativity and racial resentment (because they are aligned with the WNBA's identities). People in the middle tiers in the three scales will be referred to as “identity-neutral”, and people on the higher end of the scales will be referred to as “identity-unaligned”.

3.2.3 Treatments

Respondents were assigned to one of three policies (Equal Pay, Transgender Bills ⁷ and Voting ID bills) and one of three ways to be provided information (Persuasive information only, Group cues only, Both). All respondents, including a control group who saw information on an unrelated topic, were asked about their attitudes on all three policies. The three policies were chosen because they reflect priorities that have been explicitly laid out by WNBA players, who regularly speak out on these issues, and because they are specific enough that attitudes might be easier to move than on more settled or less specific issues, such as support for Black Lives Matter.

Each of the policies can be directly connected to an identity trait shared by most WNBA players: Equal Pay is directly connected to their identity as women or non-binary people, Transgender Bills are connected to the large number of queer players in the league, and Voting ID bills are connected to the large number of Black players. When they speak out on these issues, however, WNBA players rarely directly connect their advocacy to their own identity (*“as a woman, I advocate for Equal Pay”*). Rather, in most cases they use their identities as people living at the “margins of society” to advocate for other people who are marginalized by society. I use the latter approach in the survey (see below for exact wording), emphasizing how the issue connects to a general feeling of knowing what it means to be overlooked rather than to a specific identity.

The group cue treatment informed respondents about the WNBA and its players advocating for one side of the issue. On the Transgender Bills issue for example, the first vignette informed participants that *“In 2021, lawmakers in 36 states have filed over 75 bills that would ban transgender youths from school-sponsored sports consistent with their gender identities. In nine states, these bills have become law. The players of the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA) have been advocating against these bills, calling for the NCAA to take action and withdraw all competition from states considering such bills”*. In the second vignette, respondents saw more on the connections between the issue and the players’ identities: *“Amari Cooper, a WNBA player, has explained how the players’ involvement on this issue directly stems from their identity: ‘As a Black, gay woman, playing in a league that is 70% African-American and with a lot of queer players, I know what it is to live at the margins of society. I want to uplift exactly all the parts of society that have been overlooked so many times. This is why I am fighting against these transgender bills”*. Both vignettes included pictures of groups of WNBA players, featuring Black and white players.

The persuasive information treatment uses factual arguments that WNBA players (or close allies and

⁷“Transgender Bills” refer to the bills introduced in many state legislatures in 2020 and 2021, aiming at preventing transgender youth from participating in team sports

partners) have used on the issue, but respondents were not told these arguments came from WNBA players. The arguments were provided using Chong and Druckman (2010)'s model of "strong frames". I presented respondents with a series of arguments in favor of the policy. I also follow the authors' practice, based on the psychology literature, to increase the impact of a message by asking respondents to evaluate each statement according to the extent to which it decreased or increased their support for the policy (online processing of messages). These evaluations are not used as outcomes or as ways to measure the quality of each argument (the Appendix presents descriptive results on how respondents evaluated the strength of each argument), but as ways to anchor the respondent's attention to the message. On the transgender bills issue for example, the first vignette read *"In 2021, lawmakers in 36 states have filed over 75 bills that would ban transgender youths from school-sponsored sports consistent with their gender identities. In nine states, these bills have become law. We are testing materials for use in a study that is related to the kinds of opinions people form about public policies. Along these lines, we would like you to read a series of statements taken from recent news coverage of these transgender bills. Please read the following statements and, for each, rate the extent to which the statement decreases or increases your support for the bills banning transgender youths from participation in sports teams. After you read and rate all of the statements, we will ask you for your overall opinion about the transgender bills (i.e., the extent to which you oppose or support the bills aiming at banning transgender youths from participation in sports teams)"*. Each following vignette introduced an argument on the issue, such as *"Research shows that playing sports helps fight depression, build community and cultivate self-confidence. These bills deprive trans kids of these benefits, when 85% of trans youths feel unsafe at school, they are more likely than other students to be harassed and physically attacked, and nearly half attempt suicide."*, and asked participant to rate to what extent does this statement decrease or increase their support for the bills aiming at banning transgender youths from participation in sports teams.

Respondents assigned to receiving both persuasive and group cue information received a combination of both treatments. The first vignette they saw emphasized the WNBA support for the issue, with the quote tying the advocacy to the players' identities shown above. All factual arguments were then presented as quotes from players and, when possible, re-framed in a way that emphasized how personal the argument was to the player, or how it came from their lived experience. The re-frames were minimal, however, so as to not compromise the comparison to the persuasive information treatment. Changes often consisted in grammatical switches of pronouns (a "they" into a "we") or subjects ("athletes" into "my teammates and I"). All vignettes and arguments can be found in the Appendix.

3.2.4 Methods and outcomes

The outcomes of interest in this survey are measures of support for three policies: Equal Pay, Transgender Bills and Voting ID bills. I first ask respondents how much they support each of the three policies. Two of the three policies, Transgender Bills and Voting ID Bills, are policies WNBA players advocate against. I recoded each response in the survey so that policy support goes in the direction of the WNBA’s activism. For example, someone who responded that they strongly support the Transgender Bills was recoded into the “strongly oppose” category, since they oppose the preferred-policy of the WNBA on this issue.

Second, I set aside 500USD to give out as charity donations and told respondents they were in charge of deciding which charity would receive the money. In order to limit strategic voting from respondents, I asked them to rank their preferred charities and told them that I would donate 350USD to the charity ranked first overall and 150 to the second-ranked charity. Some of the charities are official partners of the league through its Social Impact Fund. I use one charity for each of the policy topics tested in the experiment (Rock the Vote, Equal Pay Today, National Center for Transgender Equality) and two unrelated charities on more politically-neutral neutral topics (Cancer Research Institute and Children’s Defense Fund).

Finally, I also presented respondents with a set of characteristics, including activist, liberal, queer, honest, and “similar to me”, and asked them to what extent do their believe each characteristic describe the players of the WNBA.

To assess the overall manipulation and spillover effects of information on other policy topics not directly manipulated, I conduct a Wald tests of the hypothesis that coefficients for the set of relevant outcomes are all equal to 0. I use seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) with a robust variance covariance matrix to conduct these tests. The model includes three regressions, one for each policy topic. SUR accounts for the possibility that the equation errors across the three regressions can be correlated. The model can be formalized as:

$$Y_{equal} = \alpha + \beta_{11}info_{type_{equal}} + \beta_{21}info_{type_{trans}} + \beta_{31}info_{type_{voting}} + \theta_1 X + \epsilon$$

$$Y_{trans} = \alpha + \beta_{12}info_{type_{equal}} + \beta_{22}info_{type_{trans}} + \beta_{32}info_{type_{voting}} + \theta_2 X + \epsilon$$

$$Y_{voting} = \alpha + \beta_{13}info_{type_{equal}} + \beta_{23}info_{type_{trans}} + \beta_{33}info_{type_{voting}} + \theta_3 X + \epsilon$$

where X is the covariates matrix, Y is one of the outcomes (support for policy, donations to charity related to policy, or perceptions of the WNBA), and “information type” is a factor variable for the information received on the issue (no information, group cue only, persuasion only, both). In order to test the effectiveness

of the information treatment across policy areas, I run a Wald Chi Square global test to determine if $\beta_{11} = \beta_{22} = \beta_{33} = 0$. This global test returns a p-value of 0.0021 for the persuasion treatment, suggesting that the information treatment works across policy areas. To test for spillovers, i.e., whether receiving information on one of the three issues changes respondents' opinions on the other two issues, I test if $\beta_{ij} = 0, \forall i$. This test returns a p-value of 0.55, suggesting no spillovers. Receiving information on Equal Pay does not appear to change respondents' attitudes on transgender or voting ID bills, for example. This result is in line with Coppock and Green (2017)'s finding that the extent of dynamically constrained ideological thinking in the mass public is limited. Even among respondents whose belief systems are highly constrained in the static sense (i.e., respondents whose political views "go together"), a change in one attitude need not precipitate change in related attitudes.

I then look at results within each policy area. In the results sections that follow, I report both group means and covariate-adjusted OLS estimates of average treatment effects.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Average Treatment Effects

Across all respondents, the persuasion treatment is the only one to move opinions in the direction of the argument. It only does so on two issues: Transgender Bills and Voting Rights (Figure 3.2). Opinions are much harder to move on the Equal Pay issue. Because I framed all policy issues as being connected to a general experience of living at the margins of society, rather than linking them to a specific identity as a woman, Black or queer person, I do not believe the differences in reactions can be explained by how much respondents are able to connect WNBA players' identities to the issue. Moreover, if results had been driven by how much respondents assume the issue is personal to the player, we would expect attitudes on Equal Pay to move the most, as this is the easiest-to-assess identity trait shared by all WNBA players. I believe opinions on Transgender Bills and Voting Rights move more because of two reasons: Equal Pay is a well-known issue on which opinions are already set, and average baseline opinions are already close to the target, WNBA-preferred position on the issue. Indeed, the average level of support in the control group for Equal Pay is already over 1.5 on a -3 to 3 scale for support, which is likely to produce ceiling effects. Everybody who can be convinced on this issue appears to already be convinced, suggesting that the barriers to policy gains on this topic are not public opinion but other institutional roadblocks. Importantly, the outcome question in the survey explicitly asked about Equal Pay for women's athletes, not about a more general Equal Pay for

women in society. We would expect higher levels of support for Equal Pay for women in general than we do for women in sports, as structural differences in sports such as differences in revenues and media attention are often used to argue against Equal Pay. But the high levels of baseline support for Equal Pay were reached asking explicitly about women's athletes. In both aspects (high levels of set opinions and ceiling effects), Equal Pay is similar to the Social Justice/Black Lives Matter support that is tested in most other projects on activist athletes. Like those projects, I find a null effect for the information on opinions about Equal Pay. But arguments on the Transgender Bills and on Voting ID Bills can clearly move people in the direction of the arguments, by 0.5 point on a 6 points scale. Group means plots provide a key explanation, showing that opinions on transgender bills and voting rights in the control group are very far from the WNBA-preferred position, suggesting significant room to move when presenting with new information.

Another clear result for the ATEs is that people are only convinced by the persuasive arguments. No statistically significant effect is found in the Group Cue or Group Cue + Persuasion arms, and the coefficients are smaller. This is consistent with Coppock (2021 (Forthcoming)'s Persuasion in Parallel theory: people are usually convinced by the factual arguments, but introducing signals as to who is advancing those arguments can blur and counter the messaging. The Group Cue + Persuasion treatment group saw the exact same arguments as the Persuasion-only treatment group. The only difference is that the arguments in the former were explicitly presented as coming from WNBA athletes, and as being connected to their identities. Among the general population, this introduction of a group cue clearly diminishes the effectiveness of the argument. I look at whether this is true of every group of people in the next section on heterogeneous treatment effects.

Effect of information provided on support for policy
Coefficients and Group Means

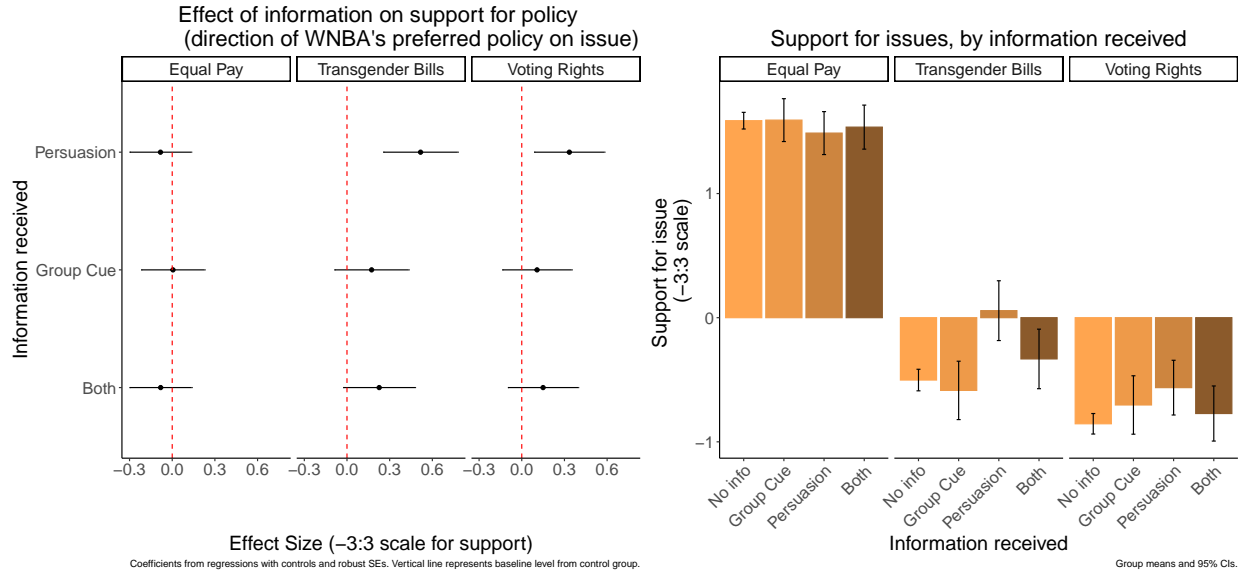


Figure 3.2: Effect of information provided on support for policy

Understanding the reasons why the introduction of group cues diminishes the effectiveness of the arguments is a hard exercise, one for which we cannot rely on experimental evidence. I do have evidence that seeing the group cues, whether on their own or coupled with the persuasive argument, changes respondents' perceptions of the WNBA (Figure 5.13). Respondents see the WNBA as significantly more activist, liberal and queer after seeing the group cues. We cannot know for sure if this change of perceptions is the mechanism through which persuasive information becomes less efficient. But it is possible that respondents assume that WNBA players are biased, advocating for themselves more than for the general good and that they cannot be neutral when they argue for their preferred positions, making the arguments less strong than when they come from a neutral, even unidentified, source.

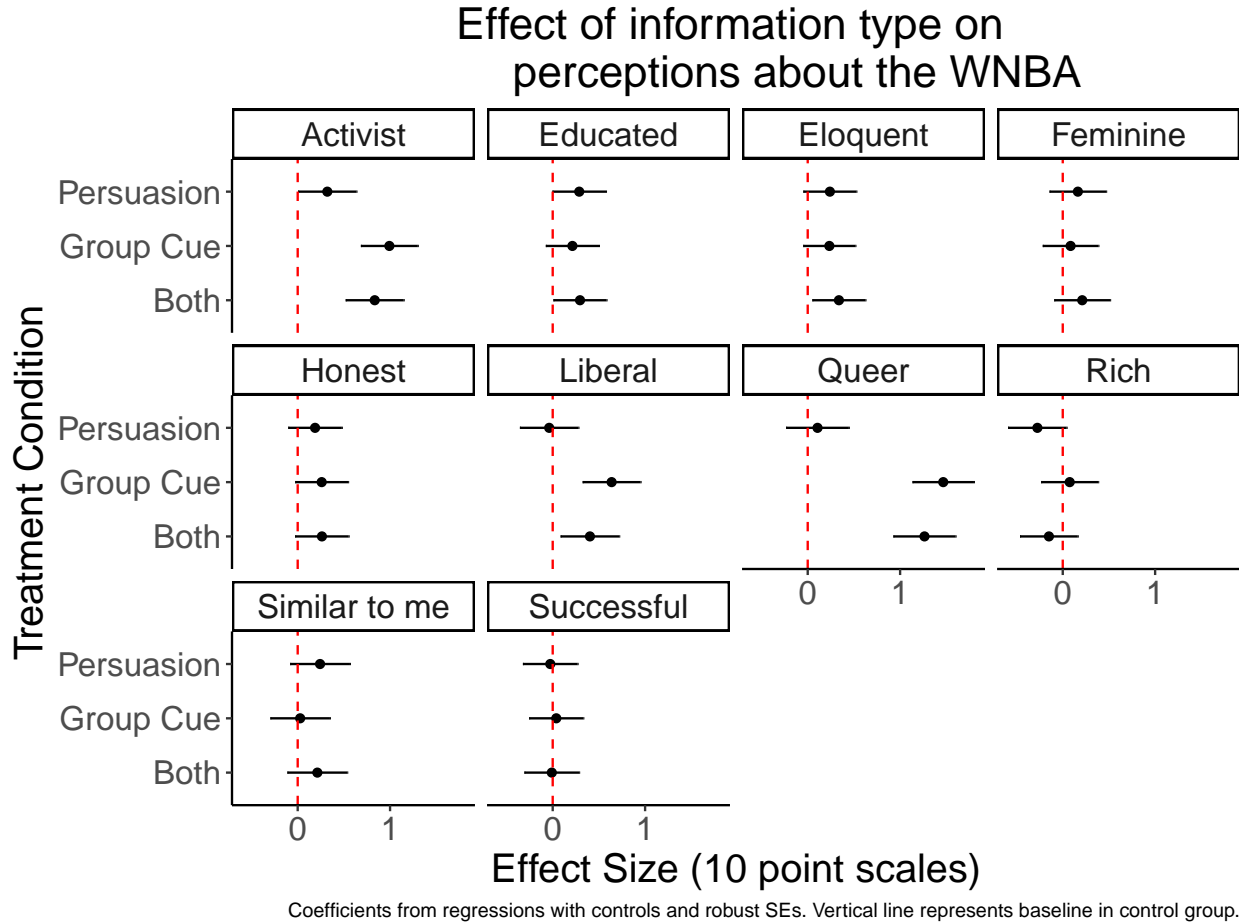


Figure 3.3: Effect of information on perceptions about the WNBA

The effectiveness of the persuasion treatment does not appear to translate into concrete actions, however. Figure 3.4 shows that no treatment significantly changed the ranking of the charities by respondents. A possible explanation for this finding is that it would take a longer exposition to the arguments for respondents to change their behaviors and adapt their donation preferences. The average donations rank for each charity was: Equal Pay Today (2.97), National Center for Transgender Equality (3.91), Rock the Vote (3.52), Cancer Research Institute (2.32), Children’s Defense Fund (2.26). Based on the commitment made to the respondents, I made a \$350 charity donation to the Children’s Defense Fund and a \$150 donation to the Cancer Research Institute.

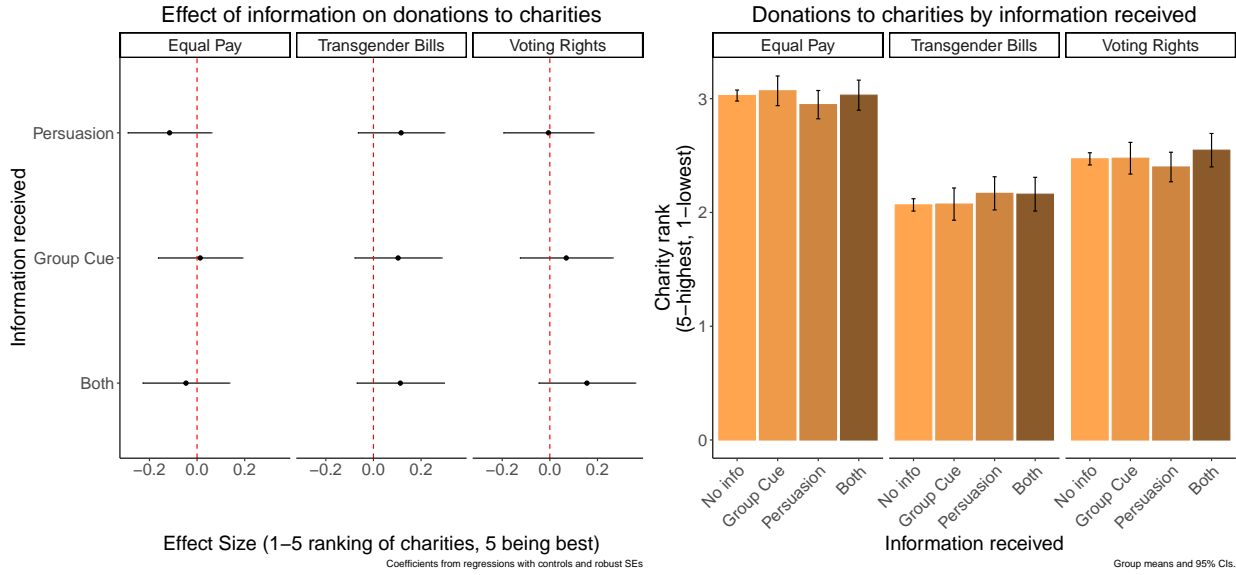


Figure 3.4: Effect of information on donations to charities

The results in this Chapter also confirm Graham and Coppock (2021)’s insight that asking respondents how information changed their attitudes (“*does information X make you more or less supportive of policy Y?*”) exhibits poor measurement properties, notably because subjects engage in response substitution. When asked how their attitudes changed, people often really report the level of their attitudes rather than the change in them. As a way to ensure respondents paid attention to the arguments presented in the survey, I asked them to rank each argument they saw based on the extent to which it decreased or increased their support for the policy. Detailed scores and arguments can be found in the Appendix. On scales from 1 (decreases a lot) to 7 (increases a lot), the average grade for Equal Pay arguments was 4.85, for Transgender Bills was 4.12 and for Voting Rights 4.35. If we stopped at asking people what arguments convinced them the most, we would conclude that people are more likely to be convinced on Equal Pay issues, then Voting Rights, and finally Transgender Bills. The experimental results lead to opposite conclusions. Instead, respondents’ evaluations seem to reflect their baseline attitudes on the issues more than the actual changes in opinions. Similarly, the average grade for persuasion-only arguments was 4.38, while it was 4.54 for persuasion and group cue arguments. Respondents claim they are more convinced by arguments when they come with the group cue, whereas experimental results clearly show the opposite is true.

3.3.2 Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

The plots below show Conditional Average Treatment Effects (CATEs). CATEs measure how people from different demographic groups respond to the treatment. The goal is to identify demographic groups with more "room to grow", i.e. more likely to be convinced by the argument and change their minds on the policy. Seeing arguments about the policy, or seeing group cues about who is making this argument, can make some people like the policy more (positive CATEs) and other people like it less (negative CATEs, i.e., backlash). Some people will be unlikely to be moved by the treatment (null CATEs). Importantly, some people will not be moved by the argument: their opinions about the policy are already set, for example, and they have little room to like the policy more (ceiling effects) or less (floor effects). This section does not identify the demographics groups or sports fans who like the policies the most. Such descriptive results can be found in the Appendix. It identifies demographics groups most likely to be convinced by the arguments about policies.

Each plot below shows the coefficients from three covariate-adjusted regressions. The dependent variable in each regression is the level of support for the policy, in the direction of the preferred policy positions for the WNBA. Each plot shows how much people in each group were convinced based on the treatment they received: the control group, represented by the vertical red line, the Persuasion only group, the Group Cue only group, and the Group Cue + Persuasion group. Figure 3.5 shows results based on the heteronormativity levels of the respondents, Figure 3.6 based on their intersectional unawareness levels and Figure 3.7 based on their level of racial resentment. Respondents in the "low" racial resentment, heteronormativity and intersectional unawareness are considered to be identity-aligned with the WNBA.

The first thing to notice is that on most issues, respondents in the identity-aligned groups are the ones most likely to be convinced by the arguments and change their minds on the issues. The exception is the Equal Pay policy, an issue on which no group shows positive CATEs. The most likely explanation for this absence of positive CATEs are ceiling effects: the group mean plots show very high levels of support for the Equal Pay issue in the identity-aligned groups, with an average level of support of 2 on a [-3:3] scale, leaving very little room to increase their support for the policy. Baseline levels of support for transgender inclusion and voting rights in the control groups are much lower, even among identity-aligned groups of people, with averages below 0 on a [-3:3] scale, suggesting much more room to convince identity-aligned people on these issues.

Second, negative CATEs are mostly found when group cue are introduced, with or without persuasive arguments, and only among identity-unaligned groups, which is consistent with group cue theories that posit

that the introduction of group cues can introduce biases in how people assess a policy argument. Even when the message comes from a non-political messenger, people are still able to map the messenger back onto a political framework and adjust their reactions accordingly. Negative CATEs are not found on the Transgender Bill issue, possibly because this is a less well-known issue and an issue on which minds are more likely to be open to change. Negative CATEs are found on Voting Rights among people with high heteronormativity levels, and on Equal Pay among people with high racial resentment levels.

Third, adding group cues to the persuasive argument almost never out-performs the persuasion-only arguments, even among identity-aligned groups. In a lot of cases, the “Persuasion only” and “Persuasion and Group Cue” treatment arms convince people in the identity-aligned groups in similar ways and amounts. But mentioning that those arguments came from WNBA players, and connecting them to the players’ identities, does not increase the support even in those groups. Since we have already established that introducing group cues also tend to generate negative CATEs in other groups, this explains why the net effects of the Group Cue and Group Cue + Persuasion treatments were null on average. When combining both group cues and persuasive information, the polarizing effects of group cues appear to overcome the “parallelizing” effects of persuasive information.

I rely on the three scales to study heterogeneous effects in this Chapter because they make theoretical sense and they provide clearer results. CATEs based on demographic subgroups can be found in the Appendix. They provide similar results and lead to similar conclusions. In no demographic subgroups does the addition of group cues generate higher positive CATEs than the persuasive arguments. No demographic subgroups would be more convinced from seeing that the arguments are articulated by WNBA players and from hearing how connected the arguments are to the players’ identities than they are by the factual arguments.

Finally, the results are largely consistent with the Persuasion in Parallel theory. In some cases, the persuasive arguments are able to move all demographic groups in the direction of the argument, even people in the identity-unaligned groups. It is most clearly the case on the Transgender Bill issue - probably the issue on which minds are less settled.

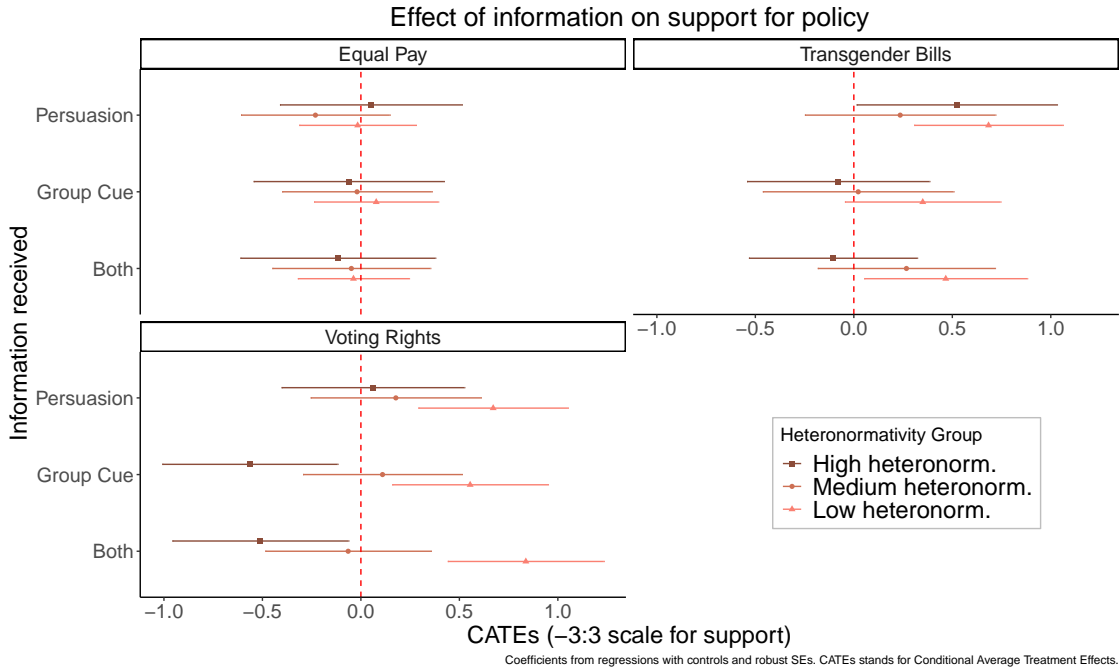


Figure 3.5: Effect of information on support for policy, CATEs by heteronormative level of respondent

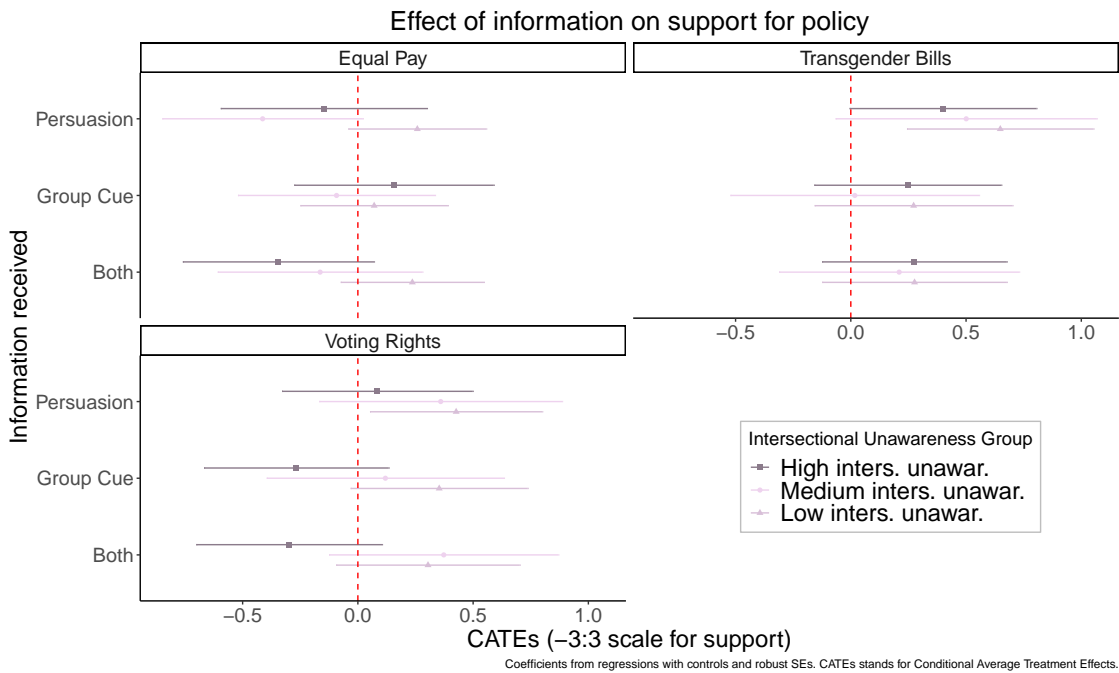


Figure 3.6: Effect of information on support for policy, CATEs by intersectional unawareness level of respondent

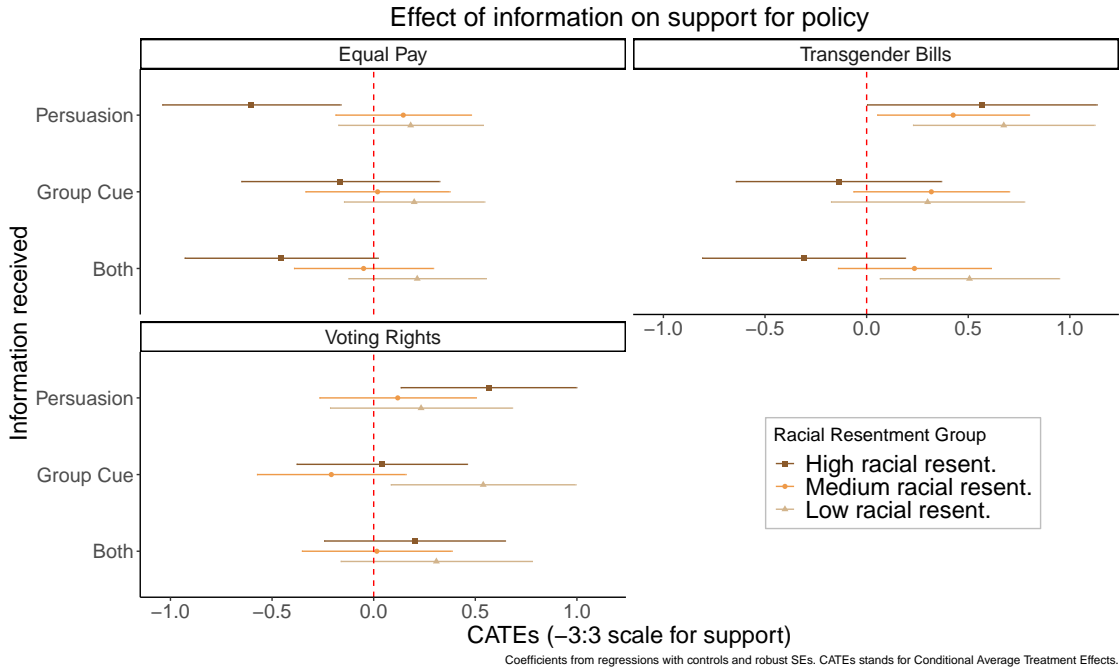


Figure 3.7: Effect of information on support for policy, CATEs by racial resentment level of respondent

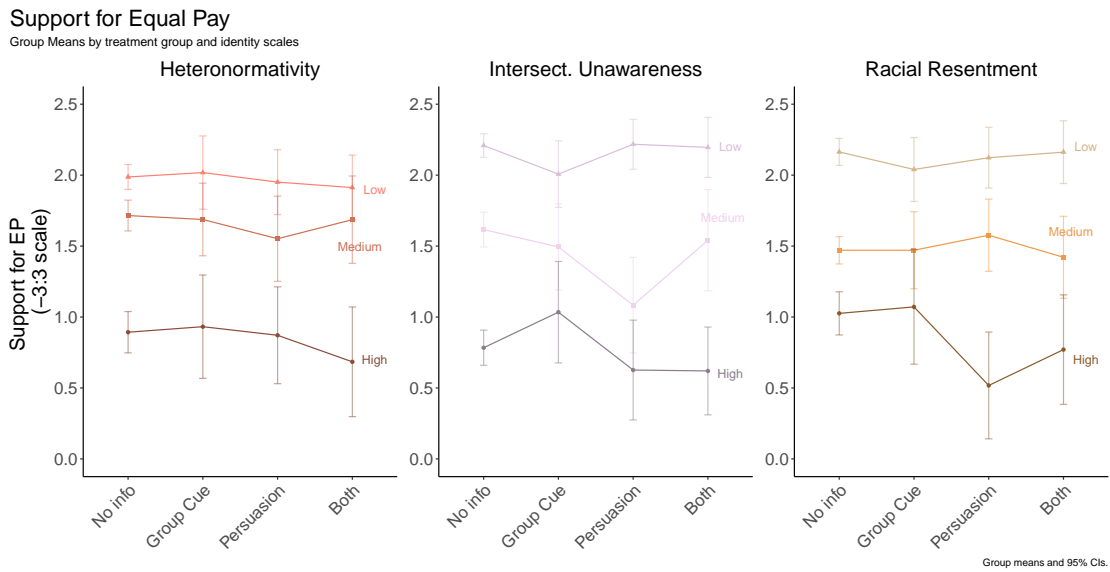


Figure 3.8: Support for Equal Pay: Group Means by treatment group and identity alignment with WNBA

Support for Transgender inclusion in sports

Group Means by treatment group and identity scales

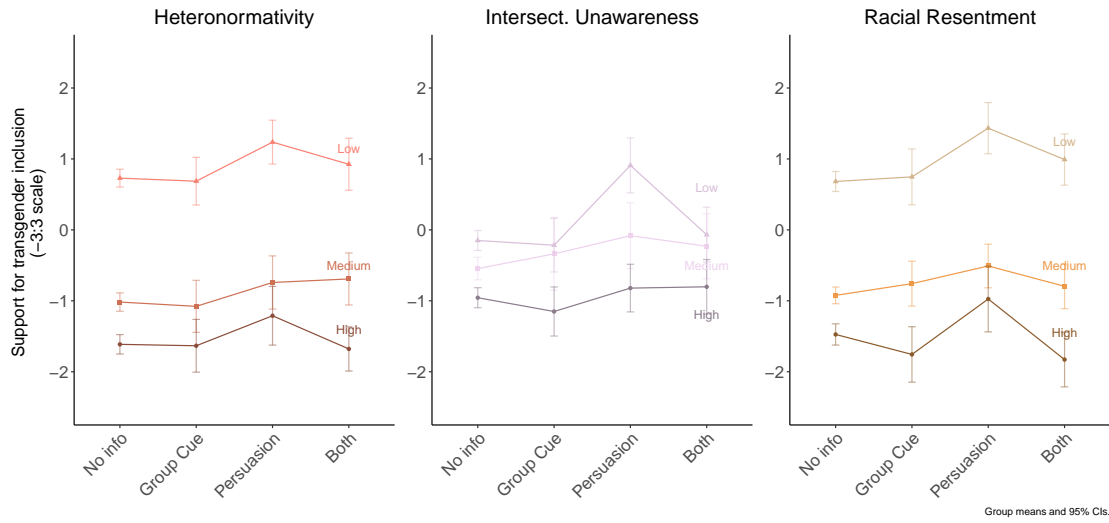


Figure 3.9: Support for Transgender Inclusion in sports: Group Means by treatment group and identity alignment with WNBA

Support for voting rights

Group Means by treatment group and identity scales

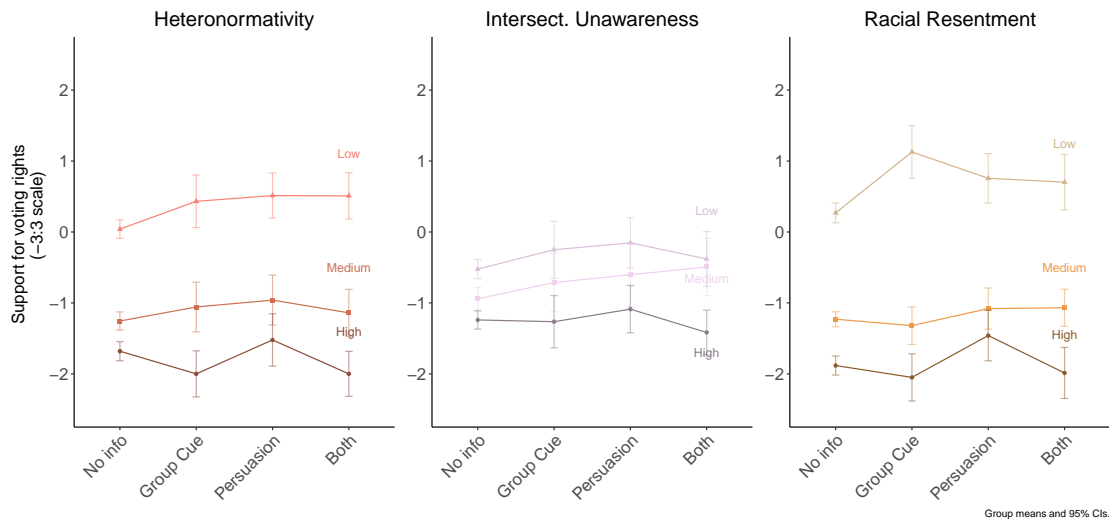


Figure 3.10: Support for Voting Rights: Group Means by treatment group and identity alignment with WNBA

3.3.3 Discussion on the implications for WNBA political messaging

The results suggest that WNBA players' personal and "lived-in" connections to the issues do not contribute to their ability to convince people. At best, they can convince people in some demographic subgroups

as well as factual arguments would. At worst, they can fail to convince people or even generate negative reactions among other demographic subgroups that would be convinced by factual arguments. One of the treatment arms in the survey effectively primed respondents to connect the issues to the players' identities. Respondents assigned to the "persuasion" and to the "persuasion and group cue" treatments saw the same factual arguments. The only difference is that arguments in the second group were explicitly attributed to WNBA players and connected to the players' identities and lived-in experiences. Results clearly show that the "persuasion and group cue" treatment almost never generates higher CATEs than the "persuasion" treatment, even in identity-aligned groups. It can, however, generate lower, sometimes negative, CATEs in identity-unaligned groups. This suggests that priming the identity of the players and their connections to the issues at best brings no added value compared to the factual argument, and at worst can generate backlash and weaken the efficiency of the message.

It is important to note, however, that the factual arguments are not the only relevant comparison point on this question. Factual arguments are almost never presented in a vacuum like they are in this survey. They are often carried out by a messenger, and group cues are very often included in the message people receive. Another way to look at the results would be that among some groups of people, the group cue and persuasion treatment convinces respondents as much as the persuasion only treatment. More research will be needed to answer this question, but it is possible that no athlete or celebrity can be a more efficient messenger than a blank, unrealistic persuasion-only treatment, and that most would not be able to match this persuasion-only treatment even in identity-aligned groups. This hypothesis needs to be tested in further work, but it might be the case that in the real world where messages are always carried out by messengers, WNBA players could be more efficient than most other messengers among identity-aligned groups.

Without follow-up surveys we can only make conjectures on this question. There is descriptive evidence that the WNBA might be in a unique position when it comes to carrying out political messages. Descriptive results in the Appendix show that WNBA fans in the control group are much more supportive of all policy issues (Equal Pay, Transgender Inclusion, Voting Rights) than fans of other leagues, including another women's league, the NWSL. On one hand, this could limit the ability of WNBA players to convince people on the issues: people more likely to be convinced by a WNBA player priming their identity and their connection to the issue, according to group cue theories, are WNBA fans. But these same people are already almost entirely convinced, likely producing ceiling effects. When they speak out on an issue, WNBA are more likely to convince politically-aligned people to become fans of the league (as shown in Chapter 2) than they are to convince people to change their minds on the issue. This is simply because there is a larger reserve of progressives to turn into WNBA fans than there is of WNBA fans to turn into progressives. This

could suggest a trade-off for players and the league when it comes to connecting their identities to the issues. If the goal is to extend the fan base through politics, Chapter 2 showed how players can grow interest in and loyalty to the league by connecting their activism to their identities. However, if the goal is to convince as many people as possible, this Chapter suggests that players should resist making the issues personal. On the other hand, this alignment between the league’s political priorities and its fans’ opinions probably provides WNBA players and the league with more freedom to speak out and articulate arguments without risking losing fans.

Another reason why WNBA players might be more equipped to change minds than other athletes and celebrities is that they are perceived to align more closely to what people expect from an effective athlete activist. As shown in Chapter 2, WNBA players are perceived as more honest, educated, more eloquent, less rich, and more “similar to me” - all traits people associate with more efficient activists. People also perceive WNBA players as being more queer, feminine and Black than NBA players. Very few other potential elite messengers, including other athletes, actors or politicians, would be able to connect the issues to their own identities and lives as well as WNBA players can. This is likely to improve WNBA players’ abilities to change minds relative to other elite messengers.

This is a hard proposition to test or prove through a survey experiment, since disentangling the messenger from their identities is not always possible. One would either need to use the same identity primes for all messengers, or not use identity primes at all. In the first case (same identity primes), one would need to emphasize how the other athlete, actor or politician is tuned into the issue because they know what it means to “live at the margin of society”. This is probably much less true on average for most other elite messengers compared to an WNBA player, making the treatment less truthful and, more importantly, artificially reducing the difference between WNBA players and other potential elite messengers. In the later case (using no prime), one would take away a critical piece of information in how respondents assess an argument and would need to trust that respondents can infer enough about the WNBA and other messengers on their own. The treatment would also be less realistic, since in practice WNBA players often use the connection between the issue and their identities in their activism.

3.4 Conclusion

First, the factual arguments used by athletes and their allies can convince people, at least on less covered and more specific issues such as transgender bills and voting ID bills. This Chapter suggests the importance

of looking at other issues beyond support for Black Lives Matter or Equal Pay if we want to understand the extent to which activist athletes can change minds. Moreover, the factual arguments often convince most people, regardless of their baseline opinions on the topic and of their level of identity alignment with WNBA players. This result is in line with the Persuasion in Parallel theory.

When group cues are introduced, with or without persuasive arguments, people in the identity-unaligned groups often end up supporting the policy less (negative CATEs). This is in line with group cue theories. This Chapter shows that the consequences of introducing group cues also apply to non-political messengers. Respondents seem to be able to map the messenger back onto a political framework and adjust their reactions accordingly. People in the identity-aligned group react positively to the argument and adjust their opinions even in the presence of group cues, but rarely more so than when they only see persuasive arguments.

When respondents see both group cues and persuasive information, the polarizing effects of group cues usually overpower the “parallelizing” effects of persuasive information. The fact that group cues do not out-perform persuasive arguments in identity-aligned groups and generate negative CATEs among identity-unaligned groups explains why we only see positive ATEs for the persuasion arguments. This suggests that WNBA players have little incentive to connect the issue to their identities and “make it personal” when they make a policy argument. Compared to using factual arguments only, they would gain little extra support in the identity-aligned groups, and would risk generating backlash against the issue among identity-unaligned groups. Similar conclusions can be drawn when looking at smaller demographic groups beyond the intersectional, racial resentment and heteronormativity scales, suggesting that no level of micro-targeting would justify opting for a different, identity-oriented message.

Of course, persuasive arguments are rarely delivered in a vacuum. WNBA group cues might not out-perform persuasion-only arguments, but they might out-perform group cues from other potential elite messengers, such as NBA players, actors or politicians. Some descriptive evidence points to elements that could contribute to WNBA players being more equipped to convince people on issues. Their perceived identities match with characteristics respondents associate with good activists, their identities make them uniquely positioned to make the issues personal, and their fanbase is uniquely aligned on the issues, which means they are taking less risks when speaking out. On the other hand, the same people most likely to be convinced by a WNBA player speaking out according to group cue theories, the WNBA fans, are already largely convinced on most issues, providing little room to grow. More experimental evidence will be needed on this question. It will have to disentangle the messengers from their identities, in ways that are both realistic and truthful. The close alignment between their identities and the issues they advocate is unique to WNBA players, and

any treatment comparing WNBA players to other elite messengers will need to account for this difference.

Coupled with the results from Chapter 5, this Chapter suggests that WNBA players might face a trade-off when advocating on policy issues. Chapter 5 establishes how connecting their identities to their activism can help bring in new fans to the league. In this Chapter, I show that the same identity priming can limit the ability to convince as many people as possible on the issues. The reason for this trade-off is clear: there is a larger reserve of progressives to turn into WNBA fans than of WNBA fans to turn into progressives.

Chapter 4

**When athletes shape political events:
the WNBA's impact on the 2020
Senate race in Georgia**

4.1 Athletes and politics: impact on attitudes and beyond

From the research on how athletes influenced the conversation around Civil Rights in the 1960s (Edwards 2017; Hartmann 1996; Wiggins 1992) to the current research on athletes' ability to shape the debate around Black Lives Matter K. Wilkinson Betina et al. (2012), immigration (M. M. Wilkinson Betina Cutaia & Webster 2021) or sex-same marriage (Harrison & Michelson 2017), most of the work on athletes and politics focuses on the impact athletes can have on opinions. Less work exists on the ability of athletes to shape actual, specific events in the "real world", such as elections, mobilizations, or protests. Of course, opinions are a key mechanism through which athletes can change political events. For social scientists, opinions and opinion changes are also much easier to rigorously measure and quantify. Therefore, we focus on the single mechanism we can rigorously study (changes in opinions), confident in assuming that they lead to harder-to-quantify actual changes in the world. However, athletes can influence political events through other mechanisms, such as donations, coverage of the race, turnout or even actual votes. But these mechanisms are much harder to measure. The effect of celebrity endorsements on political outcomes such as votes and financial contributions in a campaign, for example, is notoriously hard to study (Garthwaite & Moore 2013; Stratmann 2005). Finding measures of an endorsement's impact that are uncorrelated with the underlying level of support for the candidate and other race dynamics is often a very challenging task.

This situation leads to a growing corpus of research about the causal impact of athletes' activism on opinions on one side, and to mostly historical accounts of how athletes have been able to shape events in the real world on the other side. Jesse Owens is often credited for slowing down the demonstration of German force and Nazi racial superiority in the 1936 Berlin Olympics (Boskin 1987; Schaap 2015). A ping pong match between China and the U.S. is credited for having facilitated Richard Nixon's historic visit to Beijing to meet with Mao Zedong in 1971 (Griffin 2014; Hong & Sun 2000; Kobierecki et al. 2016). African countries boycotting the 1976 Olympic games brought worldwide attention to the apartheid policies in South Africa (Bersell 2017; Houlihan 2014). The South African rugby team winning the World Cup in 1995 sped the post-apartheid reconciliation in the country (Giesler 2016; Steenveld & Strelitz 1998). Soccer rivals were able to put their opposition aside in an extraordinary truce aimed at unifying their efforts against their governments during the Arab Spring in 2011 (Dorsey 2012).

This Chapter explores a more recent example in the United States: the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA)'s involvement in the 2020 Georgia Senate race. It also attempts to go beyond an historical account of what happened. It leverages quantitative observational data to try and understand, if not fully identify and isolate, how the WNBA impacted the race. As for most examples in history, the

WNBA's impact is hard to isolate from other factors in the race. The many challenges to identification will be discussed throughout this Chapter. It should be noted, however, that some specific characteristics of the event studied in this Chapter, such as the fact that the WNBA got involved early in the campaign, and that the involvement can be linked to very specific dates, can help achieve partial identification.

4.2 The WNBA's involvement in the 2020 Georgia Senate race

4.2.1 The WNBA's longtime commitment to activism

The WNBA is widely recognized as the leading league in athletes' activism by other athletes, leagues and the media. The league has consistently demonstrated its commitment to activism in recent years, as evidenced by the timeline in Figure 4.1.

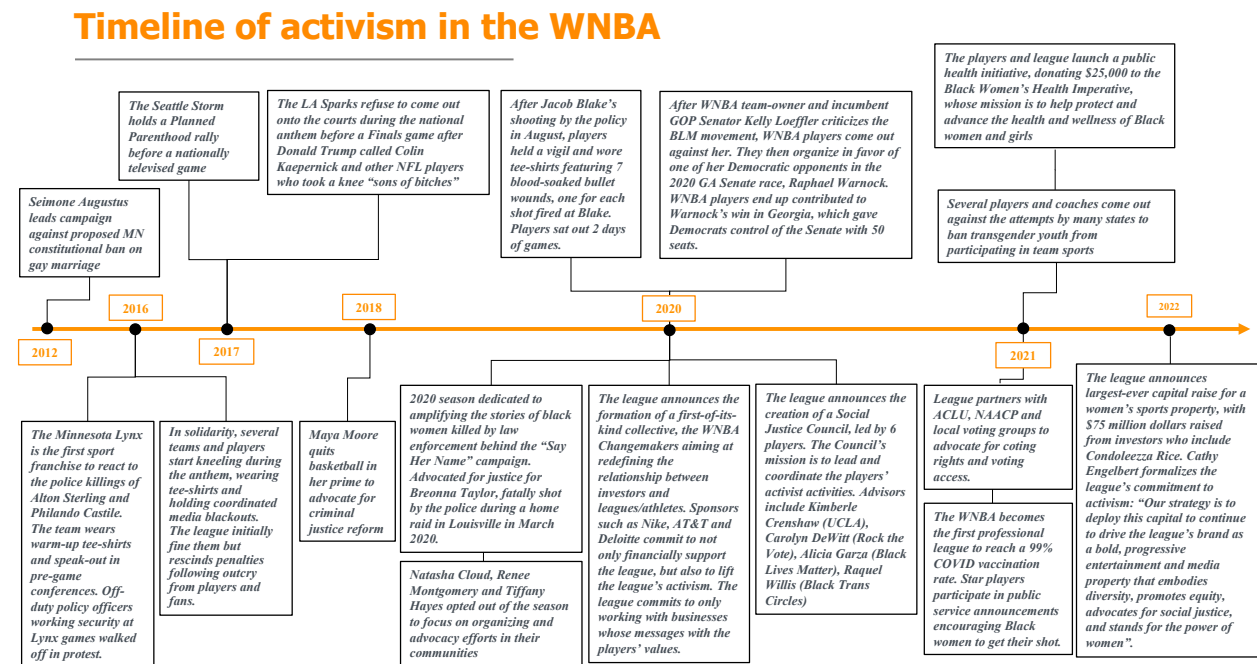


Figure 4.1: Timeline of WNBA activism

When the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 ignited a summer of protests and hard discussions throughout the country, WNBA players had the voice, structure and experience to speak out. Many players have also emphasized the importance of being physically together for four months in a single site during the 2020 season. The setting allowed players to coordinate, debate and strategize together, as shown in the 2021

ESPN Film “144”, produced by Chiney Ogwumike. The unique setting played a key role in the ability of players to develop and adapt strategies around the 2020 Senate race in Georgia.

4.2.2 The WNBA and the 2020 Georgia Senate race

Going into the summer of 2020, the Georgia Senate race featured four main candidates: two Republicans (Doug Collins and Kelly Loeffler) and two Democrats (Matt Lieberman and Raphael Warnock). According to the Georgia election rules, a candidate needs 50% of the votes to be elected. If no candidate manages to clear that threshold in the November election, a runoff is organized between the top two candidates having received the most votes. Against most odds (see polling numbers in Figure 4.2), K. Loeffler and R. Warnock ended up in a runoff election in early January 2021. Warnock eventually won the runoff, which, along with Jon Ossoff winning the other runoff election held in Georgia in January 2021, gave Democrats 50 Senators and control of the Senate for the next two years. The results in the 2020 Georgia Senate election were widely considered to be surprising, since the last two Democrats to represent Georgia in the Senate had left office in January 2003 and January 2005.

The Warnock and Ossoff wins also proved crucial for the Democrats and the Biden presidency. Because of their majority in the Senate, Democrats were able to pass a 1.9 trillion USD Covid relief bill, the American Rescue Plan, widely celebrated in progressive circles for its focus on poverty reduction, especially child poverty (Vox called it “The Second War on Poverty”). Congress also passed a 1.2 trillion USD Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021. The Senate confirmed a new progressive judge to the Supreme Court in 2022 following the retirement of Stephen Breyer. Regardless of any normative judgment on the Biden Administration’s accomplishments, it is undeniable that without control of the Senate, much less would have been accomplished from a progressive standpoint.

The WNBA started to get involved in the race at the end of June 2020. K. Loeffler, the incumbent Republican senator, was the owner of the Atlanta Dream WNBA team at the time. After George Floyd’s murder at the hands of the police in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, the country erupted in an unprecedented wave of protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. On June 24, 2020, Loeffler criticized the Black Lives Matter movement for being a “very divisive organization” promoting “violence and destruction across the country”. On June 29, a widely-circulated Yahoo sports article ¹ asked “Why Kelly Loeffler [was] still a WNBA co-owner” after the comments she made, pointing out the significant gap in values between

¹“Why is Kelly Loeffler still a WNBA co-owner - despite 'Donald Sterling Vibes'”, Yahoo Sports, 06/29/2020

the league and the Dream owner and Senate candidate. Star players from the league, including players from the Atlanta Dream, asked Loeffler to step down from her role in the league and reemphasized the league's commitment to dedicate its 2020 season to the "Say Her Name" campaign and to Breonna Taylor - a campaign very much aligned with the values and goals of the BLM campaign. In response, the Loeffler campaign sent a formal letter to the WNBA Commissioner, Cathy Engelbert, expressing her opposition to the league's plans for players to wear warmup jerseys with "Black Lives Matter" on the front and "Say Her Name" in the back, arguing that politics should be kept out of sports. Contrary to what had happened in 2016, the league immediately supported the players' political efforts. The Loeffler campaign's letter led to an official statement from the league in which the league reiterated its commitment to *"use our platforms to vigorously advocate for social justice"* and emphasized that *"Sen. Kelly Loeffler has not served as a Governor of the Atlanta Dream since October 2019 and is no longer involved in the day-to-day business of the team"*. The WNBA player union tweeted *"ENOUGH! OUT!"*. WNBA stars including Candace Parker, Breanna Stewart and Sue Bird also explicitly called for Loeffler to be expelled from the league.

However, the players soon realized they were playing into Loeffler's hands by criticizing her. Sue Bird recounts realizing that *"Senator Loeffler was really just trying to make a political move and was using us as a pawn"* ², *"and that political move was to prove how 'Trumpy' she was by standing up to a league full of Black women who were trying to say Black Lives Matter"*. Sue Bird continues, *"I was like 'oh man', and it really hit. So the louder we are, and the more we bark at her, that's actually playing into her political strategy. Obviously there's irony all over that considering her letter to Cathy [Engelbert] was telling us to keep politics out of sports. From there, I started googling and very quickly I found who her competition was on the Democratic side"*. As the Vice-President of the WNBA players union, Sue Bird worked with the union's executive committee and the league's social justice council to vet Loeffler's Democratic opponents through a series of Zoom meetings with different Democratic candidates. They eventually settled on R. Warnock as the candidate they wanted to support. The connection between the league and the campaign was facilitated by a few overlapping key actors. Lisa Borders, a WNBA's former president, was a close friend of R. Warnock and was helping with his campaign. Stacey Abrams, who had already endorsed Warnock and is a key player in Georgia's progressive politics, was on the WNBA player association's board of advisors. In an interview to The Athletic's Chantel Jennings³, Warnock recognized not knowing what to expect from the call the players organized with him, and having gone into the call expecting to express his support of the players in using

²By backing Raphael Warnock against Kelly Loeffler, Sue Bird and the WNBA helped flip the Senate. The Seattle Times, Jan 16, 2021.

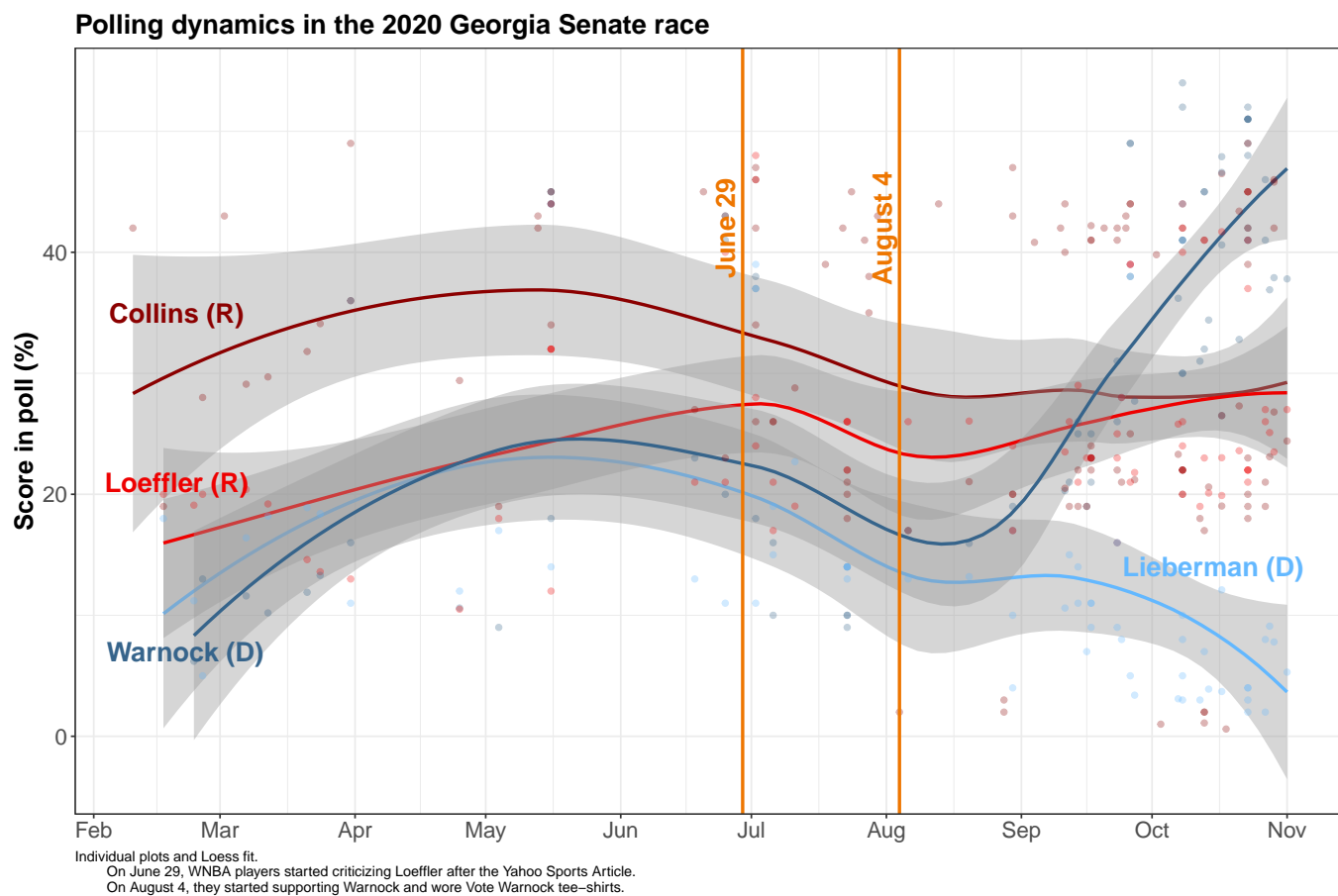
³Inside the WNBA's evolution from a league of activists to organizers, The Athletic, Chantel Jennings, 2020

their voices and platform. He acknowledged having been surprised when instead the players asked about his platform, with questions including whether he was an ally of the LGBTQ+ community, what life experiences helped shape his political viewpoints, what was his record on reproductive health issues, or what were his thoughts on criminal justice and police reform.

On August 4, 2020, WNBA players shifted their strategy from criticizing Loeffler to supporting Warnock. Most of the league wore “Vote Warnock” tee-shirts on national television and discussed their reasons for supporting him in many interviews from August to election day. Players’ testimonies, as well as the “144” documentary, show how being together in the single-site bubble helped players come up with a common strategy, coordinate Zoom meetings to vet several potential candidates, and organize the logistics of ordering and distributing the tee-shirts. Warnock’s polling and donation numbers started rising over the summer, until he forced Loeffler into the runoff election of January 2021, which he won. In February 2021, Loeffler sold the Atlanta Dream to a three-person investor group that includes former Dream star Renee Montgomery, who had opted out of the 2020 WNBA season to focus on social justice activism. In her attempt to become an owner, Montgomery received help from LeBron James’ More Than a Vote organization, which connected her to potential investors to take over the team.

Poll numbers tell a story of substantial changes in the race over the course of 2020. Using 538’s database of polls, Figure 4.2 shows polling numbers for Collins (R), Loeffler (R), Lieberman (D) and Warnock (D) from February 2020 to Election Day (November 3, 2020). The two vertical lines in Figure 4.2 show the two main dates of WNBA’s intervention in the race: June 29, when star players started criticizing Loeffler and calling for her to step out following the Yahoo Sports article, and August 4, when the league pivoted to supporting Warnock and wore tee-shirts. Aggregate polling numbers show that going into the summer, D. Collins was the clear front-runner, and Loeffler, Warnock and Lieberman were neck-to-neck for the second place. By the end of the summer, Loeffler and Warnock were identified as the front-runners of the race. Of course, many events contributed to why the race changed so dramatically over the summer. For example, the emergence of social justice as one of the key theme of the summer and campaign very likely benefited both Warnock and Loeffler with their respective voters.

Figure 4.2: Polling numbers in the 2020 Georgia Senate race



4.3 Causal inference challenge, gaps in the literature and goal for the Chapter

Warnock credited the WNBA for his performance in the race. He said the WNBA’s decision to support him was a “turning point” in his campaign, noting that his campaign raised \$183,000 and attracted 3,500 new grassroots donors in the 48 hours following the WNBA’s tee-shirt campaign on August 4. However, caution should be applied when looking at these raw numbers: many things started going right for Warnock during the summer aside from the WNBA’s support and could also have driven his donations numbers up. Warnock’s platform centered on health care and civil rights during a pandemic and a renewed reckoning with race in America. Democrats in general were having good news cycles, good polling numbers had come out, the election was getting closer, and donor groups were getting more active. Loeffler was already in the news for her anti-BLM statements before the WNBA picked up the fight. On July 30, Warnock received

national attention when he delivered the eulogy at John Lewis' funeral. Finally, Georgia had not elected a Democrat in a statewide election since 2006 (when four incumbents won down-ballot statewide elections), but the state, thanks in part to Stacey Abrams' efforts to mobilize voters, was clearly trending purple. All these events likely also drove donations and votes to Warnock, regardless of the WNBA's impact.

Studying the impact of the WNBA on the 2020 Senate race in Georgia addresses multiple gaps in the literature. First, most existing research on sports and politics focuses on the impact athletes can have on opinions, often for good reason: this impact can be tested at any time and through more rigorous, survey experiments. More qualitative, historical accounts of the role athletes played on specific political events exist and document the role athletes have played in generating political change. This Chapter combines qualitative descriptions with observational quantitative methods. Second, the study of activist athletes has mostly focused on the impact of Black, male athletes speaking out on social justice issues. However, athletes' activism is now a much broader and more complex reality: white and Black athletes, stars and role players, men and women, increasingly speak out on topics as diverse as social justice, criminal reform, voter suppression, pay gap, or LGBTQ rights. This Chapter explores the ability of female athletes to shape the discourse around an election in the United States.

The goal of this Chapter is to investigate the impact of the WNBA through three key mechanisms that undoubtedly impact a political race: political donations, traditional media coverage, and social media coverage of the race. In the sections below, I present data sources and descriptive results for each of these mechanisms.

4.4 Political Donations

I use publicly available donations data from the FEC. In order to understand what happened in the race, multiple comparison groups can be used. First, I could compare Warnock's donations numbers to his opponents' in his race: Lieberman (D), Loeffler and Collins (R). This would give an interesting view of the dynamics of the race - the Appendix shows results using these campaigns as the comparison group. However, it is possible that if the WNBA influenced the Warnock's campaign, it also influenced the other candidates in the race (spillover effects): Democratic donors could have chosen to give to Matt Lieberman in opposition to Loeffler, for example. Another potential comparison point would be the candidates in the other Senate race in Georgia in 2020, Jon Ossof (D) and David Perdue (R). The Appendix shows results using this comparison group. However, spillovers risks also exist for Ossof and Perdue, as the extra attention on Warnock could

have also led people to pay more attention to both Senate races in Georgia. To account for those potential spillover effects, I build a control group of Democrats in similar races in other states, i.e., running in races classified as toss-up races by the New York Times. This composite control group was composed of S. Bullock (MT), C. Cunningham (NC), S. Gideon (ME), and T. Greenfield (IA). Results below focus on this composite group.

4.4.1 Amounts and characteristics of the donations

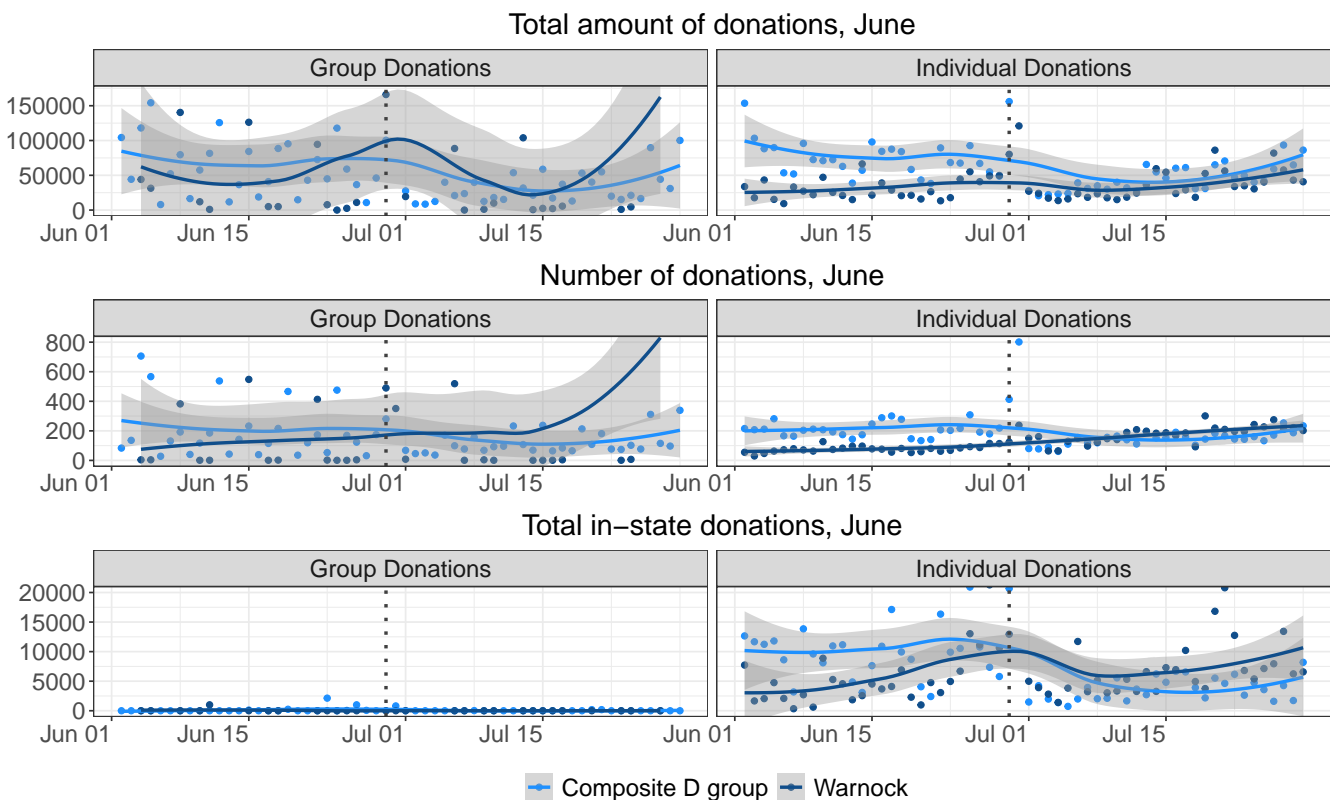
June: nationalization of the race and increases in group donations

Figure 4.3 shows the total amounts in daily donations, the number of daily donations, and the amount of daily in-state donations received by Warnock compared to the composite group of Democrats. I chose a bandwidth of 30 days before and after the main WNBA interventions on June 29 (players coming out against Loeffler) and August 4 (players wearing tee-shirts supporting Warnock). The WNBA intervention did not dramatically change the donations patterns. However, there is evidence that the WNBA did generate a short term boost in the donations to the Warnock campaign.

In June, the WNBA criticizing Loeffler for her anti-BLM statements appears to have nationalized the race and brought additional group donations (in number of donations and total amounts) to Warnock.

Figure 4.3: Donations before and after the WNBA came out against Loeffler

Donations in the GA race, before and after Yahoo Sports Article
Composite D group comparison



Outlier donations not plotted

It is true that this increase in donations could have happened without the WNBA’s intervention, since Loeffler was already in the news for her anti-BLM statements. But her anti-BLM statement happened on June 24 on Fox News, and yet most of the movement happens right after June 29, when the Yahoo Sports article came out and WNBA players started to get involved. This is evidenced by summary statistics on the daily number and amount of donations confirm that Warnock saw some PAC activity following the WNBA involvement. Looking at PAC donations (see Table 4.1), Warnock had two of his best days to date on June 29 and June 30. The only comparable day in the early days of the campaign is March 31, which is when Warnock received the support of Rep. John Lewis. Looking more closely at the donors, groups like Blue Hen Federal PAC (affiliated with Chris Coons, D-DEL), Frontline USA (affiliated with Adam Schiff, D-CA), Great Lakes PAC (affiliated with Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich) or Voter Protection Project or Act Blue drove the donations on these days - some of them donating for the first time ever to the campaign.

Table 4.1: PAC donations, top 22 days of Warnock’s campaign

	Date	Total donations	Average donation	N donations
1	2020-09-30	943536.14	457.81	2061
2	2020-10-14	551574.16	289.39	1906
3	2020-10-13	498545.19	156.63	3183
4	2020-09-20	486919.55	205.11	2374
5	2020-09-28	437437.41	247.84	1765
6	2020-06-30	404055.82	1151.16	351
7	2020-10-05	344062.12	173.77	1980
8	2020-08-10	273476.78	182.56	1498
9	2020-08-03	248734.67	146.75	1695
10	2020-03-31	243611.50	806.66	302
11	2020-07-27	240661.52	174.52	1379
12	2020-09-14	230308.82	174.48	1320
13	2020-09-03	214813.16	201.51	1066
14	2020-09-23	203996.10	300.44	679
15	2020-07-20	200126.87	179.33	1116
16	2020-10-08	187271.41	196.71	952
17	2020-09-22	181967.07	288.84	630
18	2020-09-10	180138.07	210.93	854
19	2020-09-25	173956.74	320.95	542
20	2020-10-06	172046.84	200.99	856
21	2020-08-31	172019.01	140.19	1227
22	2020-10-07	166649.53	196.75	847
23	2020-06-29	166089.55	338.96	490
24	2020-09-24	161884.27	274.85	589
25	2020-08-23	160916.27	151.24	1064

On the individual donations side, no day in June or July appears in the top days for the Warnock campaign. Figure 4.3 suggests an upward trend in individual donations to the Warnock campaign compared to the control group, but it can hardly be directly attributed to the WNBA intervention.

WNBA players were right in their assessment that Loeffler was benefitting from their opposition

Loeffler’s campaign was largely self-funded, making donations data less relevant and interesting. However, some of her best PAC donations days came following her anti-BLM Fox News appearance. June 25, the day following her Fox News statement and before the WNBA’s involvement in the race, was one of the top three days of her campaign for PAC donations (see Table 4.2). The boost she received from her statements could have been short-lived, but the Yahoo Sports and WNBA’s involvement appear to have kept the national attention on Loeffler. Both June 29 and 30 appear in the top 11 days of her campaign for PAC donations. These numbers were driven by PACs such as Winred, Continuing America’s strength (affiliated with Bill Cassidy, R-La), Swisher International INC PAC, Global Payments INC, Fraternity and sorority PAC - a lot of them first time donors to the campaign.

The WNBA’s criticism also appears to have mobilized grass-root donors in favor of Loeffler. June 29 and

30 are among the top five days of the Loeffler campaign for individual donations (see Table 4.3). No earlier date in June appears in the top 10, suggesting that it is the WNBA’s echo, rather than the initial Fox News statement, that brought individual donors to Loeffler. An anti-BLM statement made on Fox News was fairly normal behavior for a Republican candidate during the 2020 election and would probably not have been enough to attract the attention of donors. Being heavily criticized by WNBA players, however, might have been more surprising and more appealing to Republicans donors. These numbers suggest that the WNBA players were right in their assessment that Loeffler was using the WNBA’s opposition as a selling point to conservative voters and circles, and in their decision to pivot from criticizing Loeffler to supporting Warnock.

Table 4.2: PAC donations, top 12 days of Loeffler’s campaign

	Date	Total donations	Average donation	N donations
1	2020-03-31	5099611.07	268400.58	19
2	2020-09-17	5018482.06	836413.68	6
3	2020-06-25	5014490.16	1253622.54	4
4	2020-10-13	3000000.00	3000000.00	1
5	2020-09-30	427538.57	9500.86	45
6	2020-10-14	229827.04	10446.68	22
7	2019-12-19	140177.88	140177.88	1
8	2020-08-31	110458.69	22091.74	5
9	2020-06-29	84411.57	21102.89	4
10	2020-06-24	67251.00	22417.00	3
11	2020-06-30	67216.76	5170.52	13
12	2019-12-31	57791.20	4127.94	14

Table 4.3: Individual donations, top 10 days of Loeffler’s campaign

	Date	Total donations	Average donation	N donations
1	2019-12-27	5000250.00	2500125.00	2
2	2020-09-30	149626.78	1236.58	121
3	2020-06-29	101850.00	1756.03	58
4	2020-10-14	100463.50	1046.49	96
5	2020-06-30	91795.00	1240.47	74
6	2020-08-31	86071.66	1037.01	83
7	2020-09-16	72070.00	1441.40	50
8	2020-02-25	71400.00	1552.17	46
9	2020-09-09	70357.50	1563.50	45
10	2020-09-04	68645.00	1056.08	65

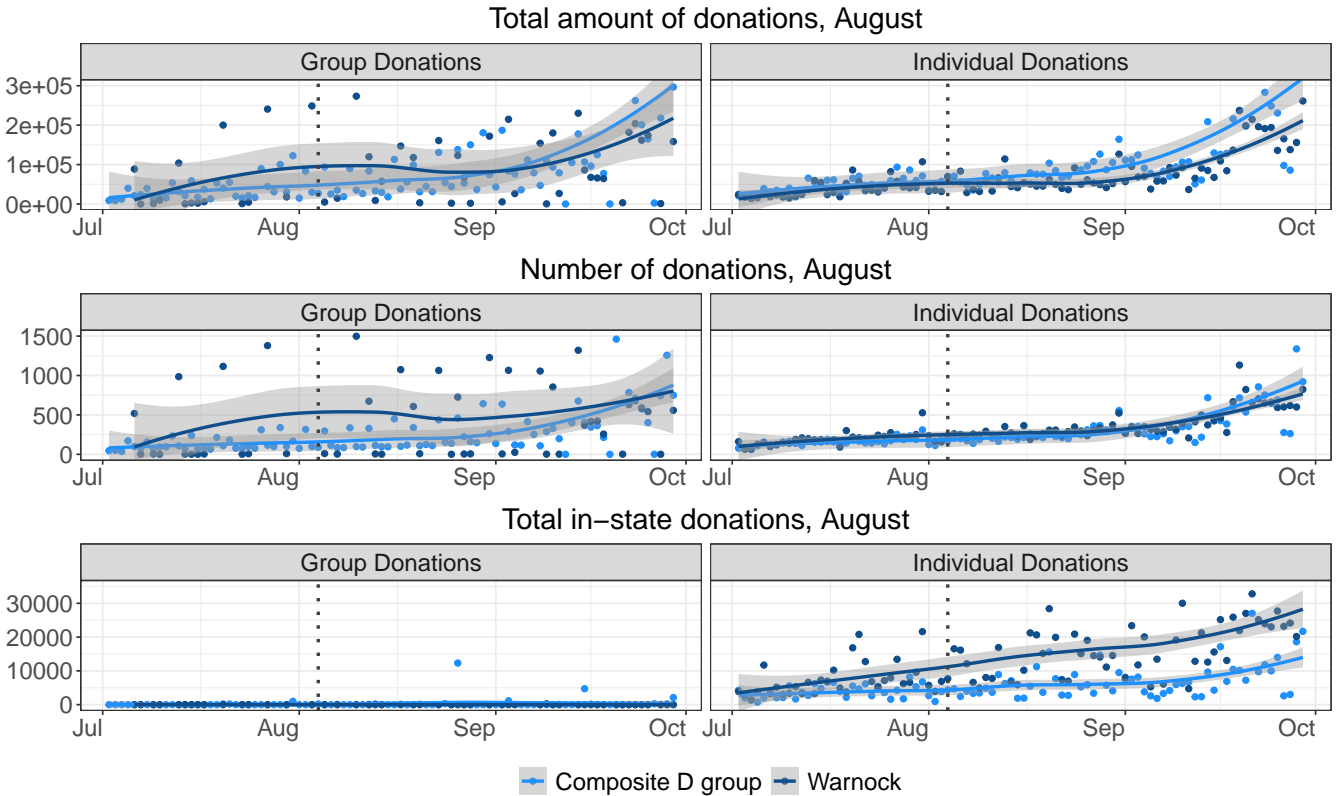
August: limited evidence of an increase in in-state individual donations

In August, when the WNBA pivoted from criticizing Loeffler to supporting Warnock, Figure 7.7 suggests two dynamics. First, there seems to be a short term boost in group donations to Warnock. But this boost seems to start in the few days before August 4. A Google search for news using the WNBA and Warnock as keywords returns no result until August 4. This suggests that unless donor groups had some inside information about the WNBA intentions, the short term boost in group donations in August cannot be

attributed to the WNBA. The increase in in-state individual donations showed in Figure 7.7 also starts before August 4, but there seems to be some evidence of a continuous upward trend that the WNBA efforts possible contributed to.

Figure 4.4: Donations before and after the WNBA started supporting Warnock

Donations in the GA race, before and after the Vote Warnock tee-shirts
Composite D group comparison



Outlier donations not plotted

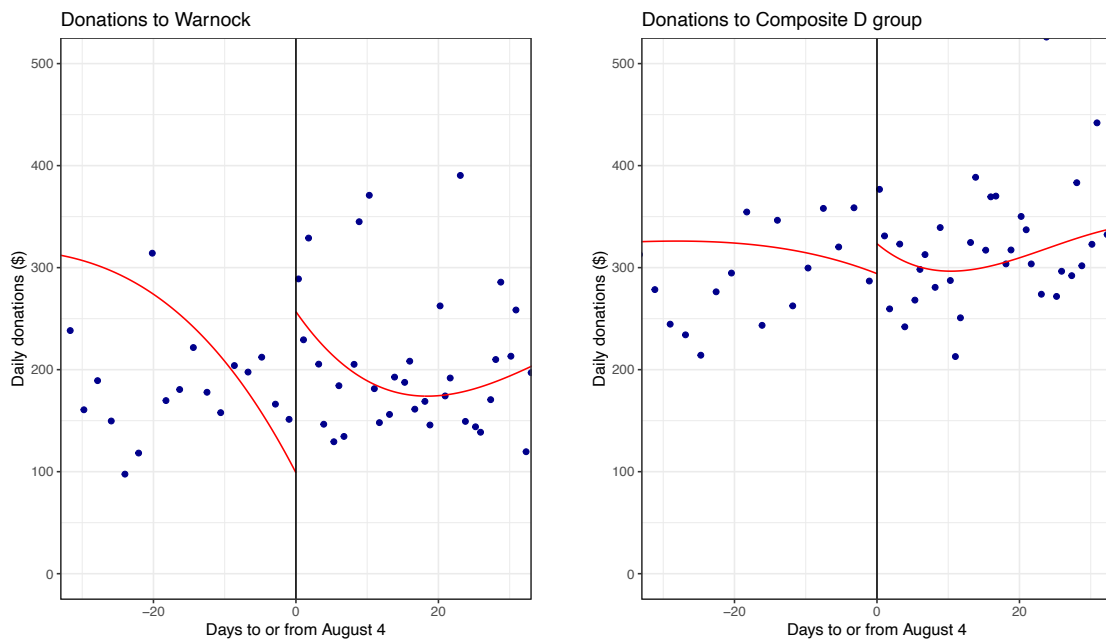
Addressing measurement challenge: using the RD approach

The daily donations descriptive statistics shown above are directly interpretable: they show what happened. However, they have limitations. The main one is that we can't quantify the "jump" in donations to Warnock. The methods used so far are not designed to detect or measure a discontinuity in a data pattern. One way to address this shortcoming is to try and measure the "jump" in an overall trend in donations before and after a given date. I use the RDrobust package to measure that jump. In this method, the choice of bandwidth (i.e., the window of days before and after the event of interest) is not chosen by the researcher. It is instead determined by the software and is a data-driven, MSE-optimizing bandwidth. Importantly, contrary to the traditional regression discontinuity (RD) set-up, the jump itself does not serve as an as-random, causally

identified measurement tool. I only use it as a measurement strategy. In order to address these causal limitations, I compare the “jump” in donations to the Warnock campaign to the “jump” in the donations to the composite group of Democrat at the same time. The “effect” of the WNBA under this model is the difference between the “jump” received by Warnock and the “jump” received by the composite Democratic group.

Figure 4.5 illustrates this approach for all donations before and after August 4. I run similar analyses for in state, out of state, individual and donor donations (and every combination) for the June and August events. I also compute a confidence interval for the difference, based on the standard errors provided by the RD package. Table 4.4 provides a summary of these findings.

Figure 4.5: “Jumps” in donations for the Warnock and Composite D group campaigns around August 4 (RD Robust)



Using this method, for example, we can estimate that in August Warnock saw in-state donations increase by \$78 on average (a statistically significant increase). At the same date, no significant increase appears in the control, composite group. Even after subtracting the non-statistically significant gains for the composite Democratic group, the Warnock campaign still saw a net increase of \$65 per in-state donations on August 4. On this date, Warnock received 61 in-state individual donations. We can therefore estimate that he received a daily boost in in-state donations of $61 \times 65 = \$3,965$ from the WNBA. In June, Warnock received

a statistically significant 304 USD boost in group donations, compared to a non-significant \$89 boost in the control group. It represents a net \$215 boost, and Warnock was receiving 490 daily group donations at the time - which sums up to a \$105,350 daily boost. Table 4.4 provides more similar results.

Importantly, the estimator provided by RD Robust is the amount of the jump in daily donations at the threshold, i.e., on August 4. RD methods do not provide information beyond what happens at the cutoff. This estimator is therefore a conservative estimate of the WNBA effect: it is likely that the WNBA kept bringing donations in the next days. But I cannot isolate the WNBA effect from other potential effects anymore.

Table 4.4: Warnock vs Composite D group, August 4

	Coeff Warnock	SE Warnock	Coeff Control	SE Control	Difference significant? (Z Test)	Daily net gain for Warnock (in USD)
All donations	94	29.6	-28.78	30	Y	33,150
Group	95	57	-71	62	N	NA
In State	78	31	13	39	Y	3,965

Table 4.5: Warnock vs Composite D group, June 29

	Coeff Warnock	SE Warnock	Coeff Control	SE Control	Difference significant? (Z Test)	Daily net gain for Warnock (in USD)
All donations	72	85	-79	45	Y	92,714
Group	304	149	89	205	Y	105,350
In State	-181	81	-13	82	N	NA

No perfect identification strategy exists to isolate the effect of the WNBA on donations in the GA Senate race. All strategies used in this Chapter have limitations, and the exact numbers estimating the effect in dollars shown in the tables above should be treated as indications more than precise estimates. However, the overall trends and substantive conclusions are consistent across methods (descriptive trends, summary daily statistics, difference in “jumps” as measured through RD tools) and across comparison groups (Ossof or composite Democratic group). The WNBA appears to have contributed to an increase in group donations in June and in in-state individual donations in August for the Warnock campaign, and an increase in both group and individual donations in June for the Loeffler campaign.

4.4.2 Characteristics of the donors

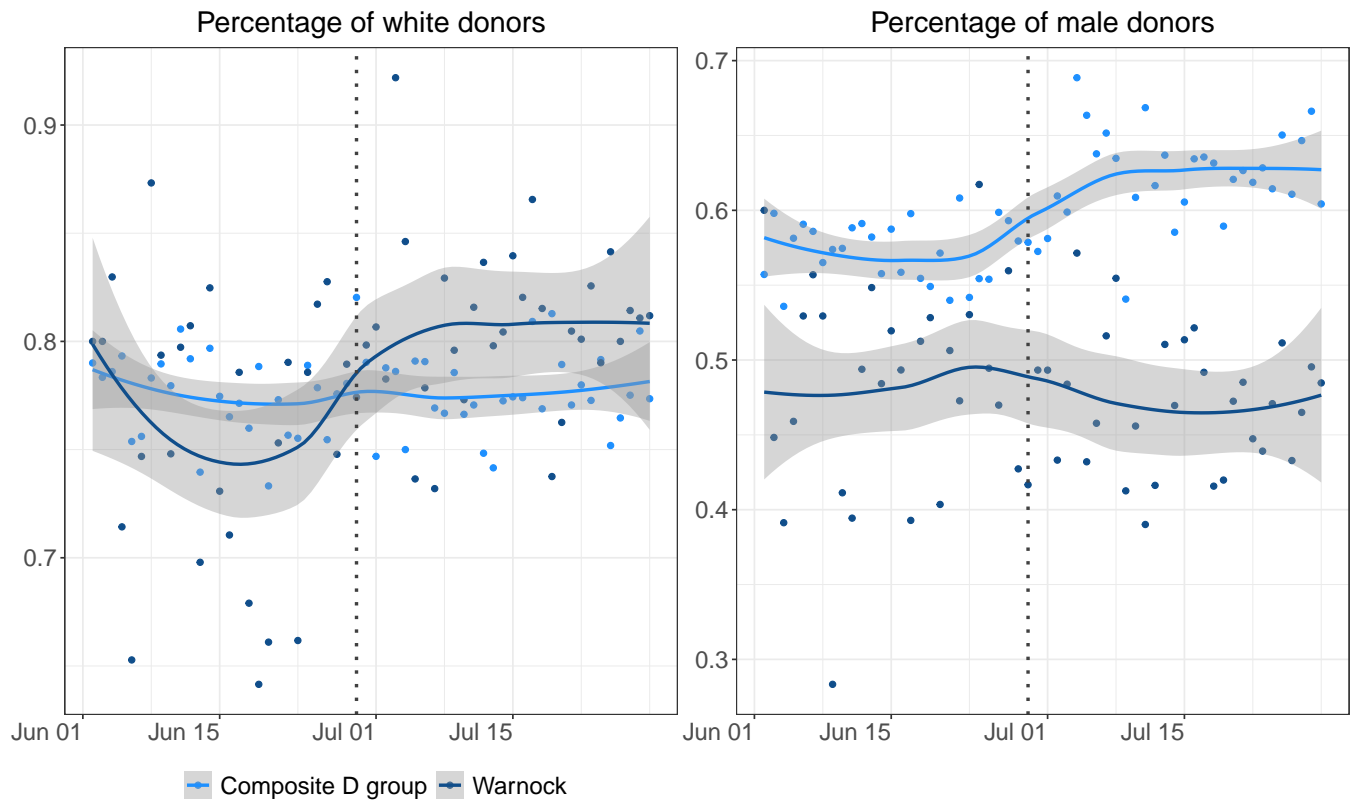
The FEC data provides information on donors’ names. In order to infer the race of each donor, I use Khanna, Imai, and Hubert (2017)’s R WRU package, which provides tools to infer the race of a person based on their

name and state of residence using Census data. I code every donor with a probability of being white above 0.5 as “white” and all other donors as “non-white”. For gender, I use Blevins and Mullen (2015)’s Gender R package which infers gender from first names based on historical datasets (Social Security Administrations baby names, IPUMS Census Data, North Atlantic Population Project, Kantrowitz (2016)’s name corpus. I am aware of the significant limitations and dangers that exist when using algorithms to assign gender and race to individuals, and when treating these variables as binary. The benefits of including such variables in a statistical analysis (as opposed to a more individual-focused analysis), in terms of our understanding of the social dynamics of donations, hopefully outweigh the dangers.

Figures below show gender and race patterns for donors to the Warnock and control campaigns before and after the WNBA’s involvement in the race. I find little evidence that the WNBA dramatically changed the identity of the donors. The slight increase in the proportion of white donors in July is likely driven by the nationalization of the race and the increased donations from groups. Donors also seemed to be slightly more female. No trend appears in the demographics of donors after the WNBA wore tee-shirts in August.

Figure 4.6: Characteristics of donors in GA race, before and after the WNBA came out against Loeffler

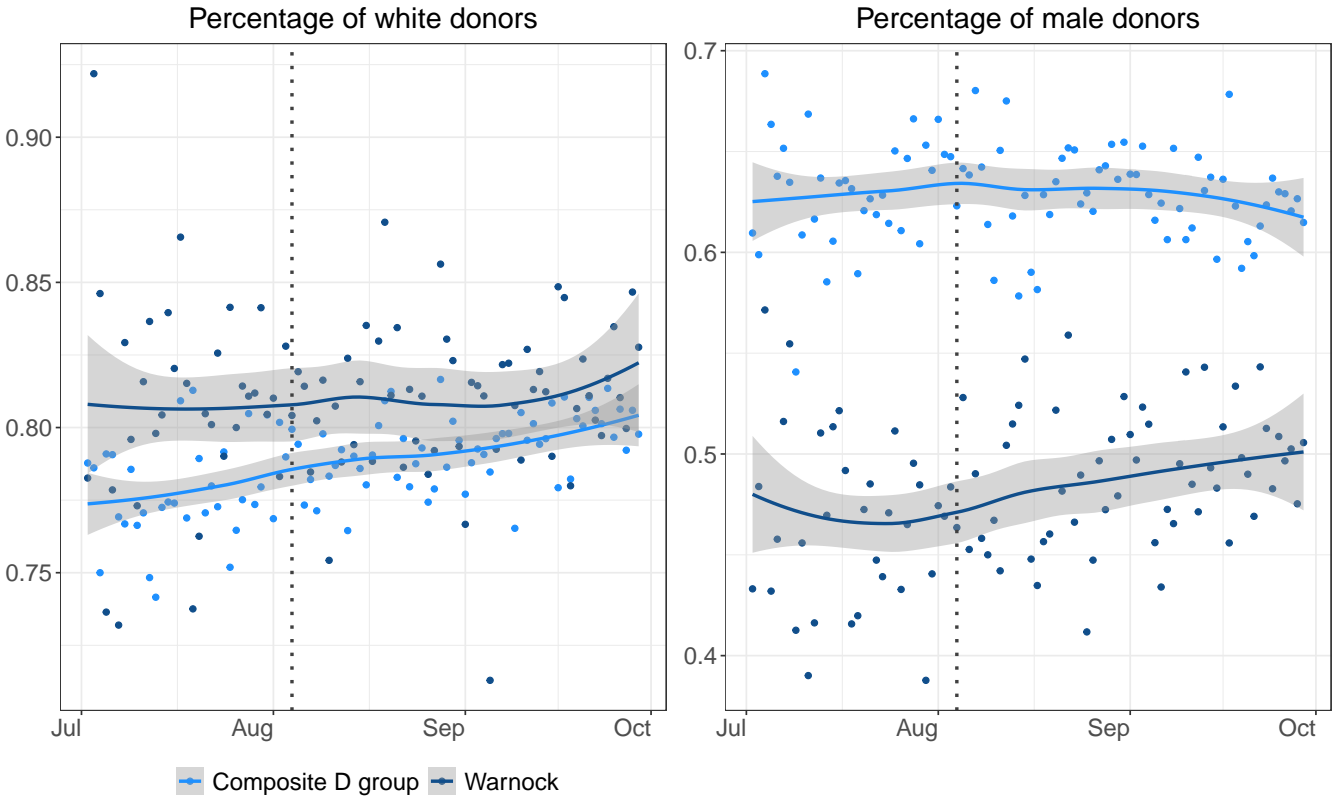
Gender and race of donors, before and after Yahoo Sport article
D composite group comparison



Loess fit

Figure 4.7: Characteristics of donors in GA race, before and after the WNBA came out in favor of Warnock

Gender and race of donors in the GA race, before and after tee-shirts wearing campaign
 D composite group comparison



Models fit with Loess method

4.5 Traditional media coverage of the race

I use the Nexis Uni database (formerly Lexis Nexis) and searched for all articles or transcripts mentioning either “warnock” or “loeffler” between June 1, 2020 and January 31, 2021. I focus on articles and transcripts in English and from the US. I filter out the mentions of “Neil” Warnock, an English football manager who made news in the summer of 2020. I end up with 7,929 articles. Most common sources are States News Services (an aggregator of local press), Newstex Blogs (an aggregator of approved, “authoritative blogs from approved sources”⁴), AP State and Local, CNN Wire, AP international, Newsweek, Politico, Forbes, CNN.com, USA Today, MSNBC, Fox News Network, CBS news transcripts (see the Appendix for a complete

⁴Newstex is owned by ACI and its mission statement is to “cut through the clutter by finding and delivering carefully chosen, superior content to people who need it”. Newstex selects entries from “experts, professionals, industry thought leaders, knowledgeable individuals and organizations”

list of sources). The average number of words in the articles or transcripts is 1,684.

I search the articles for mentions of Warnock (or Raphael or Reverand) or Loeffler (or Kelly). Following this coding scheme, 3,510 articles discuss both candidates, 1,213 discuss Warnock only, 6,693 discuss Loeffler only (23 articles cannot be matched to candidates). These articles provide a snapshot of the media coverage of the race between Warnock and Loeffler. Before diving into deeper analyses of these articles, the first finding is that 1,119 articles, or 14% of the total, mention the WNBA. This indicates that the league and its players played a non-insignificant part in shaping the story of the race.

4.5.1 Topics analysis

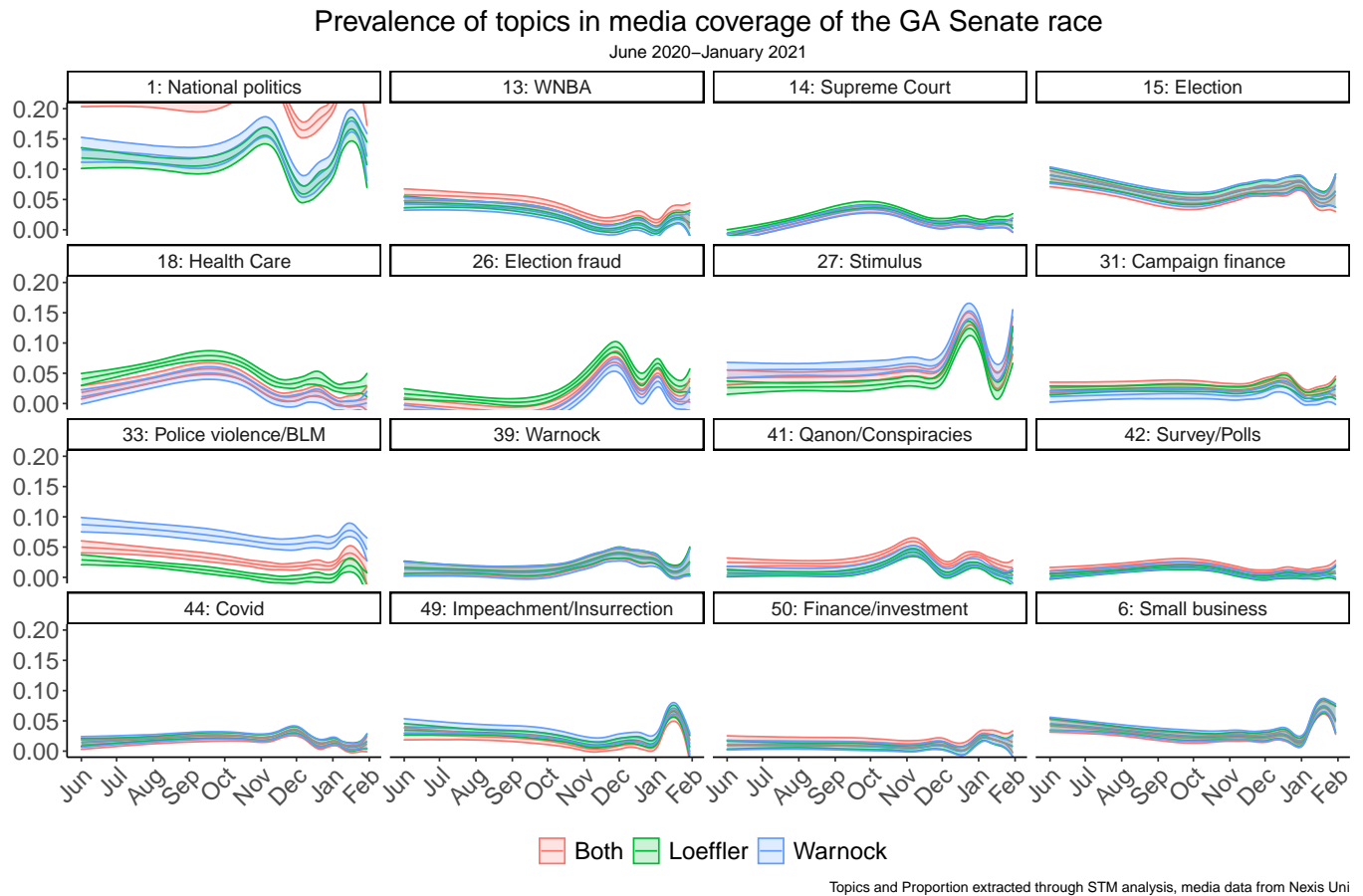
I use probabilistic topic models, which can uncover the hidden thematic structures in large corpuses of documents. Topic modeling algorithms analyze the words of the texts to discover the themes that run through them and how these themes are connected to each other. They do not require any prior annotations, data input or labeling of the documents. I use Structural Topics Models (STM) in this Chapter because they allow for the inclusion of document-level metadata. It is useful because key covariates of interest for this analysis include the date the article or transcript was published, and who between Warnock, Loeffler or both was mentioned. I use Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley (2019)'s R package for STM. Details on the most common words for a selective number of topics can be found in the Appendix.

Figure 4.8 shows the distribution of topics over time between June 2020 and January 2021. It shows that the WNBA was very much part of the conversation and coverage during the summer and well into the fall. The WNBA was as much a part of the race coverage as health care was, for example. Unsurprisingly, the relative importance of the WNBA decreased as we got closer to the election and other topics took over: the election itself, then election fraud, stimulus and finally the impeachment and capitol insurrection. Figure 4.9 shows how topics are correlated with each other - intuitively, this is based on how often topics appear together in an article or transcript. The WNBA was often talked about in articles that also mentioned BLM and Warnock. The WNBA was not the reason why social justice was such an important topic during the summer, and Warnock was primed to receive attention and good press on those topics. But this data suggests that the WNBA provided an echo chamber, another angle to amplify and talk about topics that were favorable to Warnock.

For reasons covered in other Chapters of this dissertation, the WNBA might have been in a unique position among sports leagues to provide a genuine and sustained echo chamber for the Warnock campaign.

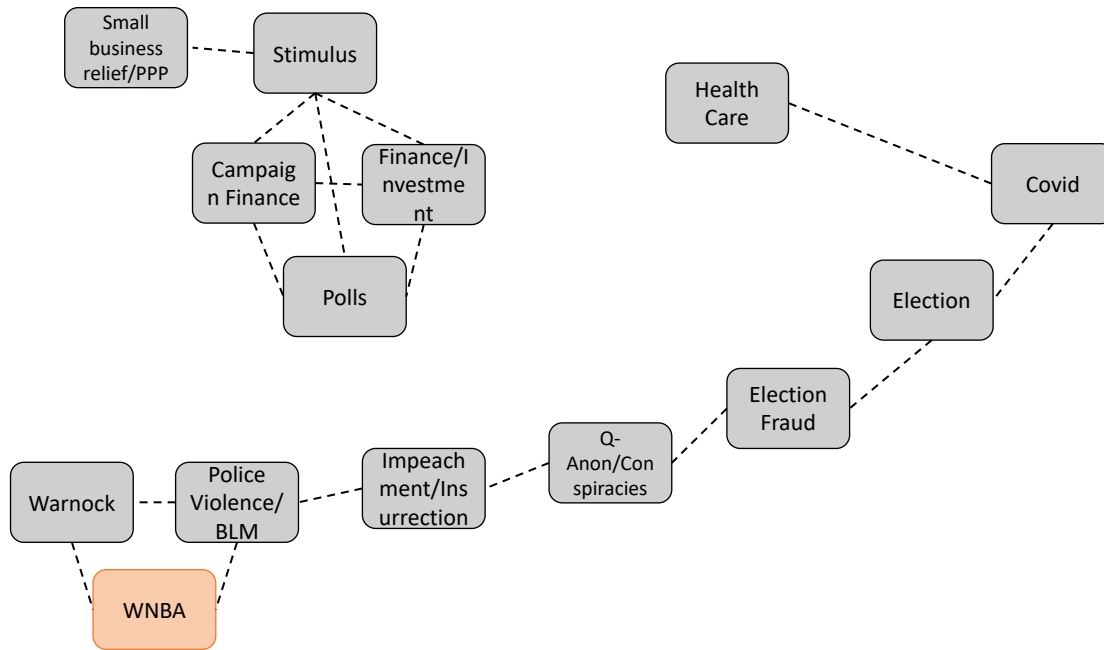
Warnock himself recognized how the identity of the players probably allowed them to be so efficient at impacting his campaign: *“It is not surprising to me that athletes who experience the intersectionality of oppression - race, gender and sexual orientation - would be leading the way in this regard. I think it’s the ways in which they experience marginalization in so many ways that gives them a unique perspective and, yet again, a kind of courage and voice that is really leading the way for other athletes”*⁵.

Figure 4.8: Proportion of topics in traditional media coverage of the 2020 GA Senate race



⁵Interview of Raphael Warnock in “Inside the WNBA’s evolution from a league of activists to organizers”, The Athletic, Chantel Jennings, 2020

Figure 4.9: Correlations between topics in traditional media coverage of the 2020 GA Senate race



4.5.2 Sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis treats the text as a combination of its individual words and the sentiment content of the whole text as the sum of the sentiment content of the individual words. Each word in an article or transcript is classified into a “negative” sentiment word, “positive” sentiment word, or neutral when the word cannot be classified. This classification is done from existing sentiment dictionaries. I use Mohammad and Turney (2010)’s dictionary of positive and negative sentiments words. I was constructed using crowdsourcing on Mturk and contains 14,182 words.

Figure 4.10 and Figure 4.11 plot the proportion of positive and negative words in the media coverage, respectively. The two plots show little evidence that the WNBA dramatically impacted the tone of the coverage for either candidate. However, Warnock did receive an uptick of positive coverage during the summer, and Loeffler’s negative coverage started increasing during the summer. It is unlikely that this change of coverage tone can be directly attributed to the WNBA. The positive coverage for Warnock is likely to be attributed to the extra attention he was receiving in the context of the social justice fights of the summer of 2020. The increased negative coverage for Loeffler can similarly be traced back to her consistent anti-BLM and provocative statements throughout the race. It is possible, however, that the

WNBA contributed to this increasing gap in coverage tone between the two candidates in two ways. First, it provided journalists with another angle to cover Warnock in positive ways and Loeffler in negative ways, increasing the gap between the two. Second, even conditioned on an existing gap in tone, the WNBA kept the attention on the race and offered more stories, providing more occasions for voters to be exposed to this gap in tones.

Figure 4.10: Daily proportion of positive sentiments - traditional media coverage of the GA Senate race

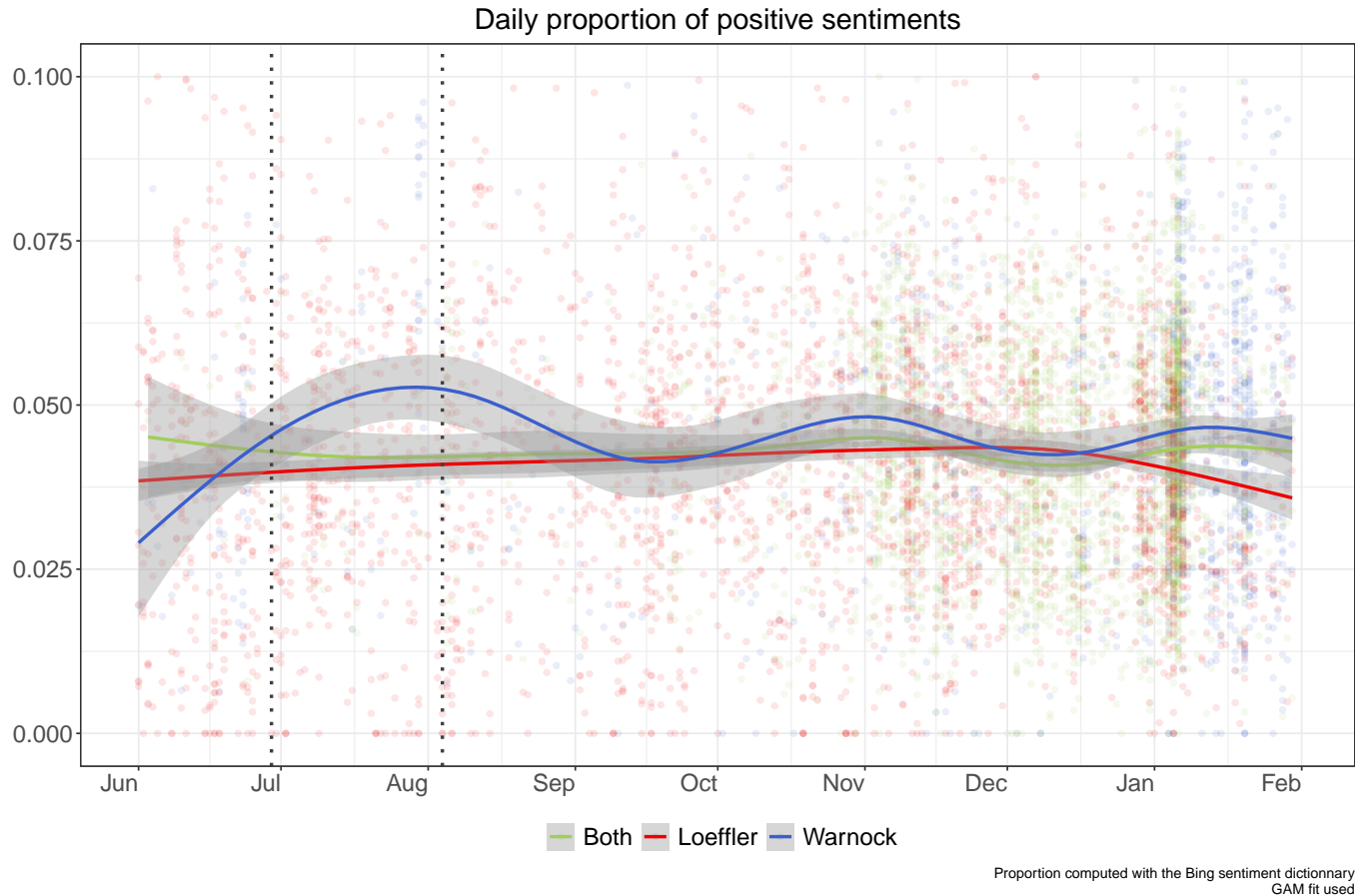
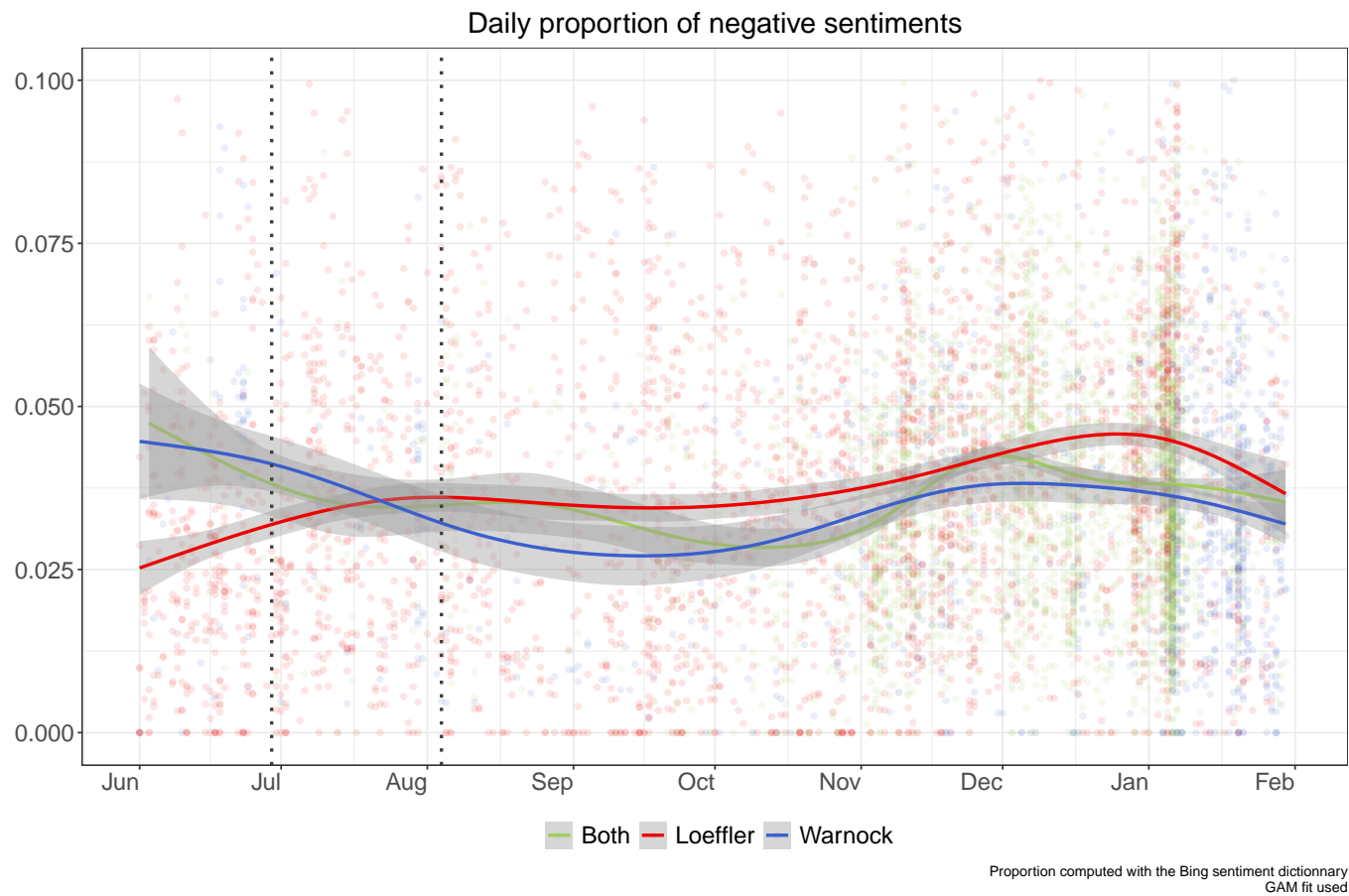


Figure 4.11: Daily proportion of negative sentiments - traditional media coverage of the GA Senate race



4.6 Twitter data

I use the Twitter API to scrape all tweets containing the words “Warnock”, “Loeffler” or “Lieberman” published between June 1, 2020 and September 30, 2020. I use a smaller window of time than for traditional media data because of the higher volume of tweets and the higher collection challenges compared to traditional media data. I initially collected 624,562 tweets, but only kept tweets in English and tweets that mentioned only one name out of the 3 (in order to be able to isolate the coverage of Loeffler from the coverage of Warnock). I end up with 451,587 tweets. After filtering out all the tweets referencing “Neil” Warnock, I eventually kept 396,108 tweets.

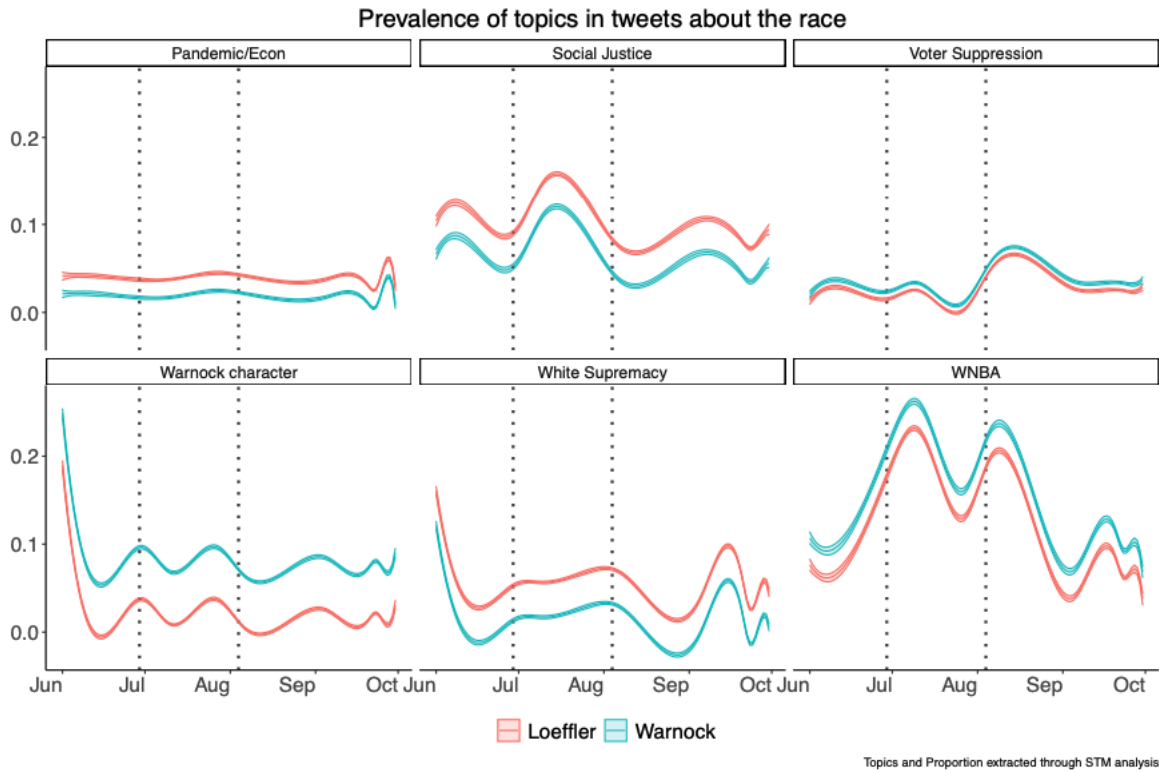
I cleaned the tweets by getting rid of common stop words as well as Twitter-specific words (“rt”, “http” and other web URLs). The first thing to notice in Table 4.6 below is that the WNBA appears in the top 10 of words mentioned in tweets about the race. “Players”, “Atlanta” and “Dream” also appear among the most mentioned words. This suggests the WNBA was a central element in the conversation about the race on Twitter during the summer of 2020. Like what happened in the traditional media coverage of the race, the WNBA appears to have provided an echo chamber on Twitter that kept the race storylines focused on social justice issues and on topics favorable to Warnock.

Table 4.6: Top 15 words in Twitter coverage of the GA Senate race, summer 2020

	Word	N
1	loeffler	206732
2	kelly	166931
3	warnock	78610
4	senate	61463
5	sen	52833
6	lieberman	46447
7	georgia	37340
8	wnba	34040
9	senator	32569
10	dream	32139
11	players	31836
12	black	31339
13	insider	30792
14	atlanta	28680
15	reminder	26692

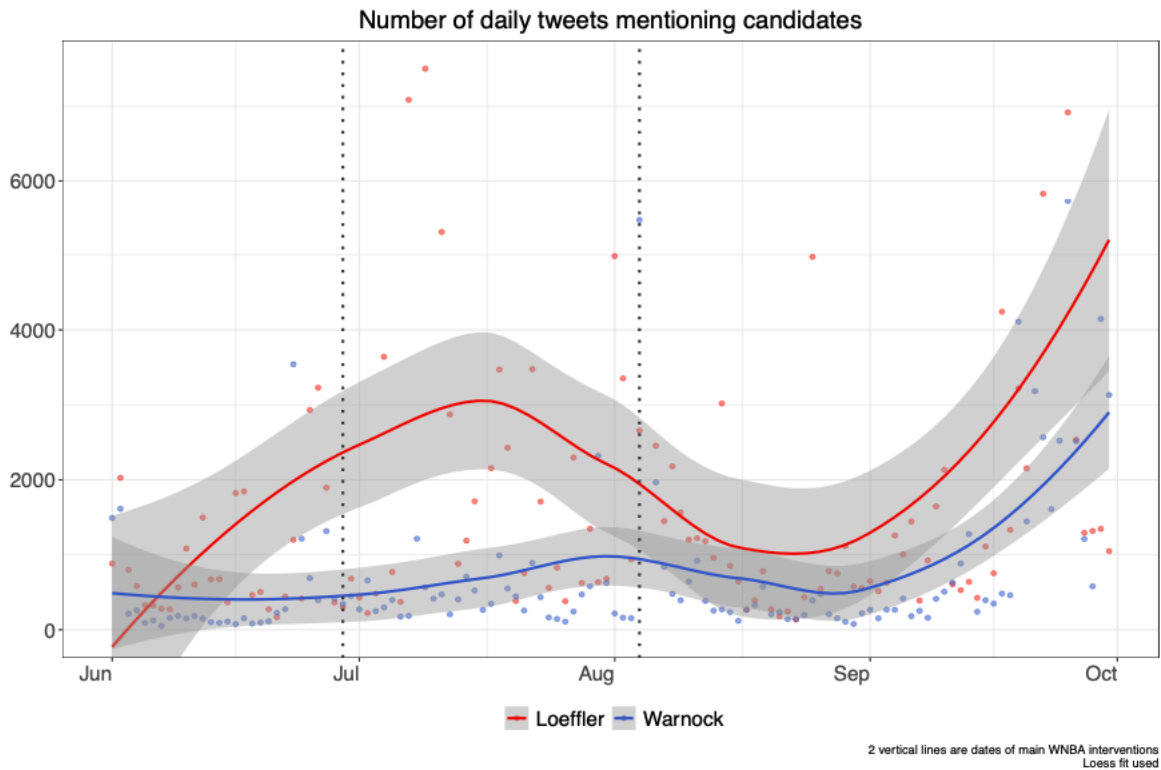
In order to better understand the Twitter discussion about the race, I turn to a STM analysis. STM is useful in this case because key metadata of interest include the date of the tweet. Figure 4.12 confirms the prevalence of the WNBA in the discussions around the race in the summer of 2020 on Twitter.

Figure 4.12: Proportion of topics in Twitter coverage of the 2020 GA Senate race



Looking at the number of daily tweets mentioning the race (Figure 4.13), there is some evidence of an increase in mentions of Loeffler in early July and in mentions of Warnock in early August. These effects, however, are short term.

Figure 4.13: Number of daily tweets mentioning candidates in the 2020 GA Senate race



I also consider the proportion of negative and positive words in the tweets mentioning either Loeffler, or Warnock in my time period. Figure 4.14 shows that the positive coverage for Warnock on Twitter increased after both the Yahoo sports article and the tee-shirt wearing campaign. It also increased for Loeffler after the tee-shirt wearing campaign - perhaps a result of a conservative backlash to the WNBA actions that did not seem to happen in the traditional coverage of the race. Figure 4.15 shows that the negative coverage increased for Loeffler after the Yahoo Sports article and her anti-BLM statements. It slightly increased for Warnock after the tee-wearing campaign - again probably due to a conservative backlash. Similar to the conclusions I drew in the analysis of the traditional media, these changes in tone cannot all be directly attributed to the WNBA. But it is likely that the WNBA acted as an echo chamber, helping increase the differences in coverage and keeping the attention on the race around storylines that were favorable to Warnock.

Figure 4.14: Sentiment analysis - proportion of positive tweets in the Twitter coverage of the GA Senate race

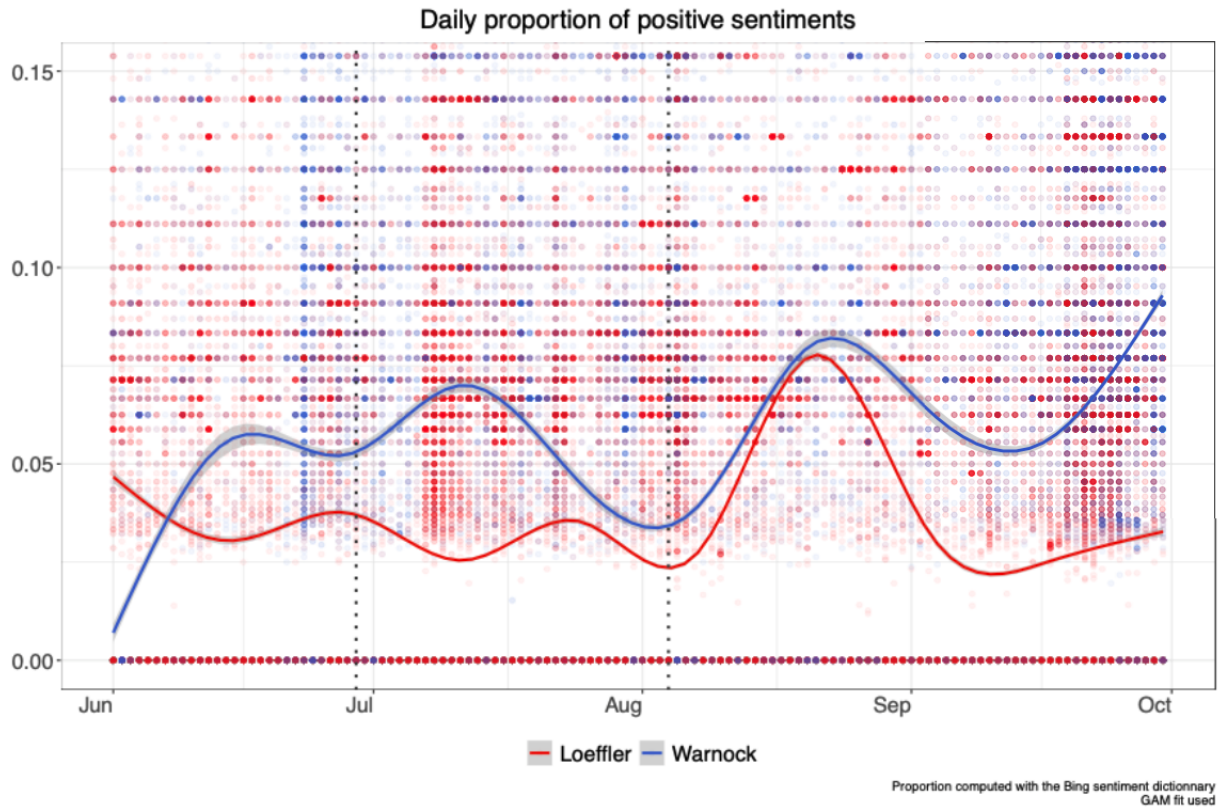
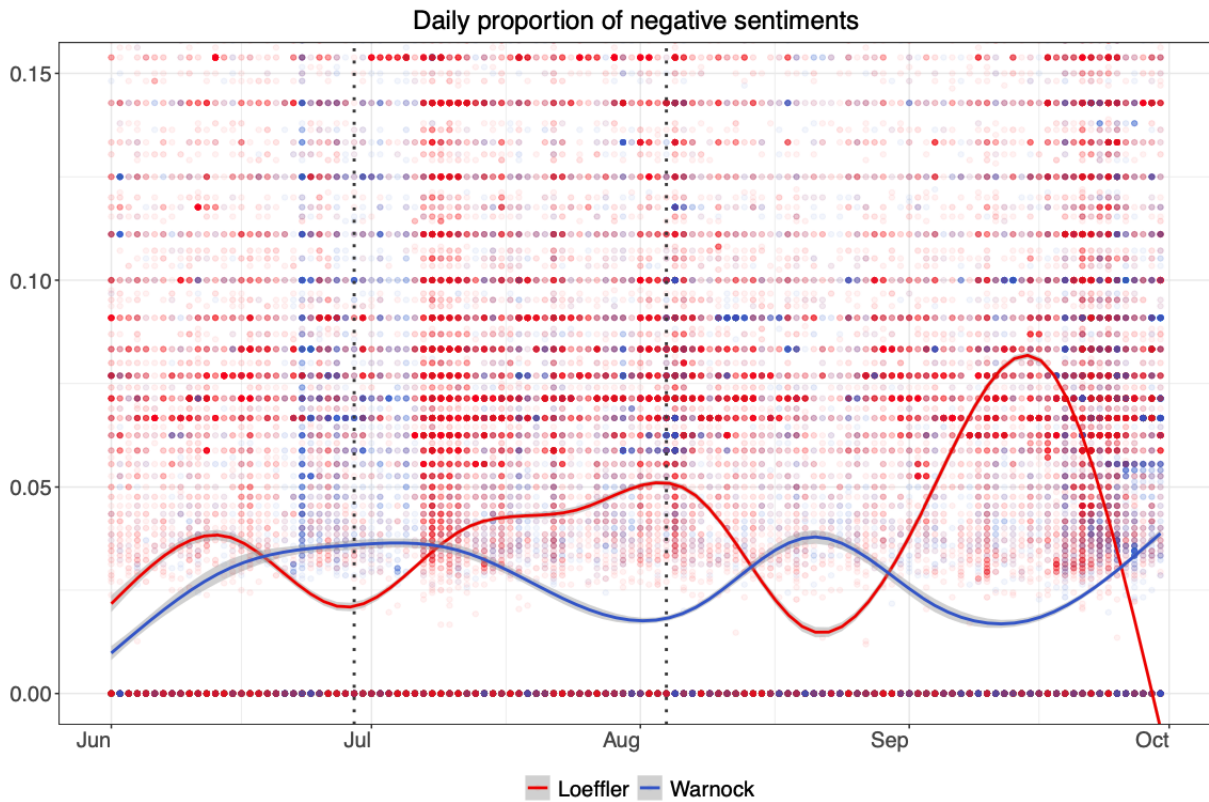


Figure 4.15: Sentiment analysis - proportion of negative tweets in the Twitter coverage of the GA Senate race



4.7 Conclusion

We will never know the outcome of the race in a counterfactual world in which the WNBA never got involved. Identification on this question is hard, and we have to rely on multiple signals from different methods and sources converging to try and understand the role the WNBA played in the dynamics of the race. I do not find any “smoking-gun” evidence that the WNBA dramatically changed the race in any of the dimensions I investigate: political donations and donors, traditional media and Twitter data. However, I find consistent evidence of smaller, more subtle potential impacts from the WNBA’s actions. After the players criticized Loeffler for her anti-BLM comments in June, PACs donations to both Loeffler and Warnock increased, indicating that the WNBA contributed to shade light on the race and to nationalize it. Some of the best donation days for Loeffler and some of the best PAC donation day for Warnock came in the days after the Yahoo Sport article came out and WNBA players mobilized against Loeffler. The donation numbers confirm

that WNBA players were right in pivoting from criticizing Loeffler to supporting Warnock in August. Loeffler was benefitting from the negative coverage she was receiving from the WNBA, and there is some evidence of a boost in individual donations coming from Georgia for the Warnock campaign after the WNBA wore tee-shirts on national television in August.

I also find consistent evidence that the WNBA was a significant part of the story of the campaign, both on Twitter and in traditional media. In both social media and traditional media, the WNBA appears to have served as an echo chamber, helping to keep the emphasis on social justice topics, providing angles to cover the race and make it about issues that were favorable to Warnock. It is hard to deny that the WNBA was very much part of the story of the race, as told in the media and on Twitter. At a minimum, this probably helped shape the race around storylines that were favorable to Warnock, centered around social justice. At best, the WNBA started and contributed to a snowball effect that, combined with many other events and mechanisms, ultimately led to Warnock's win in January.

Chapter 5

**The business consequences of
speaking out: the affective evaluation
impacts of athletes' political activism**

5.1 Motivation and literature

5.1.1 Affective evaluations consequences of political activism for leagues and athletes

Two-thirds of Americans identify as sports fans¹, and 93 of the 100 most-watched television shows in 2015 were live sports broadcasts². Sports play a significant role in American life, and, as athletes become more vocal, we are learning more about their abilities to influence political and policy attitudes (Edwards 2017; Wiggins 1992). Indeed, most of the research on the relationship between sports and politics seeks to understand whether athletes can change political attitudes or events. Scholars have documented how athletes such as Jackie Robinson, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, Muhammed Ali and Bill Russel were able to shape the debate during the Civil Rights fights of the 1960s (Gorsevski & Butterworth 2011; Goudsouzian 2017). More recently, scholars have found evidence that athletes are able to shape public opinion on issues such as immigration (M. M. Wilkinson Betina Cutaia & Webster 2021) or same-sex marriage (Harrison & Michelson 2017).

This Chapter explores a slightly different question. Using a survey experiment, I randomize whether players take political stands and measure respondents' subsequent attitudes toward the league and the players. According to affective evaluation theories (Page 1978), we should expect people's reactions to athletes' activism to be heavily conditioned by how much they agree with the activism. Hearing a messenger makes arguments with which one disagrees makes one like the messenger less. The argument is used as a proxy or heuristic to update one's attitudes toward the person voicing it. According to affective evaluations theories, we would expect progressives who know nothing about a sports league to like the league more (and conservatives less) when they are made aware of the progressive stances the players and league are taking. Importantly, a given piece of information can have a positive effect on policy support but a negative effect on affective evaluations: a conservative seeing a player arguing for Voting Rights, for example, could be slightly persuaded on the issue but also dislike the player and their league more for speaking out (Coppock 2021 (Forthcoming)). This Chapter focuses exclusively on the second part, and on how political stances change attitudes toward sports leagues and athletes.

This question is important for political scientists because understanding the business consequences of

¹"As Industry Grows, Percentage of U.S. Sports Fans Steady", Jeffrey M. Jones, newsgallup.com, June 17, 2015

²"Sports spending not on pace with economic growth", Rich Luker, Sports Business Journal, February 22, 2016

political activism can lead to more activism by the leagues and players, potentially creating new coalitions able to shape political events and attitudes. It is important to scholars of identity because, as we will see throughout this Chapter, these coalitions are likely to be anchored by the players' and fans' identities and values. If new fans can be attracted to leagues and athletes because of politics, they can help grow the league and the players' brands. Because the league and players now have a stronger business footing, they can afford to take more risks in their activism, and they have more resources to do so. Brands are also more likely to support the league and players' activism, providing an extra platform and extra resources for the athletes' political messaging. Moreover, because they have more followers, their voice carries more weight and they can reach more people.

If such dynamics exist, athletes and leagues in the 21st century have the potential to create new political coalitions, which political scientists need to understand. As we will see throughout the Chapter, this is particularly true for women's leagues, for many reasons. Several women's leagues have made their political activism and identities a core tenant of their growth model, hoping to capitalize on the alignment between the players' and fans' values, identities, and politics. This mutually reinforcing cycle between business gains and increasingly impactful activism probably only exists to some extent, however, since the reserves of fans who can be convinced through politics is a finite number. The leagues risk facing backlash if they extend their fanbases too much and start alienating their fans. Exploring the line between expanding a league through politics and being so big that the league starts facing backlash is a core goal for this Chapter.

The claim that athletes and leagues adapt the level of their activism based on the business consequences is backed up by historical precedents, as well as common sense. Scholars have documented how athletes activism all but disappeared following the end of the Civil Rights Movement (Candaele & Dreier 2010). From the 1970s to the 1990s, most professional athletes stopped using their platform to advocate for policy change, for two main reasons. First, civil rights issues were not at the forefront of politics anymore, offering less opportunities for, and putting less pressure on, athletes to contribute to the national discourse and push for change. Second, professional sports in the US became much more successful and started driving revenues in amounts never seen before. Athletes started receiving record contracts and sponsorship deals. Such financial high stakes have traditionally incentivized the sports industry to actively maintain sports as an apolitical cultural form, in order to avoid alienating fans through partisan politics (McAllister 1998; Roach 2002). Michael Jordan famously said that "*Republicans buy sneakers, too*" to justify not taking a political stand and refusing to endorse Harvey Grant, an African American Democrat challenging Jesse Helms, a Republican who had opposed the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act in the 1960s and would later oppose feminism, gay rights, access to abortion or affirmative action, in the 1990 Senate race in North Carolina. This apolitical

moment in sports appears to have come to an end in recent years, especially since 2020, with the emergence of a new social movement for racial equality: the Black Lives Matter movement. Leagues, athletes, and brands have started to be much more willing to express political opinions. Understanding why they can afford to speak out when their predecessors could not, and how far they can afford to go, is one of the goals for this Chapter.

5.1.2 The existing literature focuses on the backlash athletes risk when they speak out

Most of the existing research studying the consequences of political activism by professional athletes focuses on the backlash for leagues and athletes, not the potential gains, of speaking out. Lacina (2019) found that several star African American players in the NFL suffered a loss in popularity after the anthem protests in 2016 and 2017, with larger effects among white respondents with low levels of education. Watanabe and Cunningham (2020) show how high levels of implicit racial bias in a market led to a decline in consumer interest in attending NFL games after the players protests. Fans' reactions to athletes' activism are strongly moderated by the race and ideology of the fan, on questions such as whether college athletes should be paid (Druckman, Howat, & Rodheim 2016; Wallsten, Nteta, McCarthy, & Tarsi 2017), voice their opinions (Druckman et al. 2019), or whether NFL players should kneel during the anthem or protest (Intravia, Piquero, Leeper Piquero, & Byers 2020; Lacina 2019; Niven 2020b; Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz 2016; Sevi, Altman, Ford, & Shook 2019; Sorek & White 2016; Stratmoen, Lawless, & Saucier 2019; Stratmoen et al. 2019; Thorson & Serazio 2018). Frederick, Sanderson, and Schlereth (2017) document how white fans saw a "social identity threat" in the University of Missouri football players protesting against racial injustices in 2015 and expressed a willingness to preserve sports as "a haven free from social issues". Scholars have also documented how athletes can still fear financial and career consequences, such as losing sponsors and endorsement deals or receiving lower contracts, when they speak out on polarizing topics (Cunningham & Regan Jr 2012; Niven 2019, 2020a). It is important to note that the existing research focuses on the NFL and college football, very established leagues with relatively moderates to conservative fans. In this context, the fact that backlash is found and that no pockets of activism-inclined new potential fans can be identified is not surprising.

Scholars have posited that minority players face larger risks when they speak out (Cunningham & Regan Jr 2012). However, there is little evidence for it - probably because white athletes or women athletes only recently started being politically active, offering very few comparison points up to now. Megan Rapinoe,

a star player of the U.S National soccer team, repeatedly expressed her surprise at the heavy criticism she generated from fans and her federation when she started kneeling during the anthem. She thought that as a white athlete, she could be an ally while being relatively protected, as she points out in her autobiography³, when recounting her thought process behind joining Colin Kaepernick’s anthem protests in 2016: *“When I joined Colin’s protest, I knew that my whiteness and the whiteness of my sport in general probably offered some degree of immunity. I was also a woman - loud, yes, but small, pale, and, in the eyes of a lot of angry white men, relatively unthreatening. To his detractors, Colin was the embodiment of the racist stereotype of the aggressive Black male. To my own, I assumed I’d be little more than an irritant. In the days after kneeling, I realized I had called it wrong”*. Reactions to Megan Rapinoe’s activism might have been driven by the fact that she belongs to another minority that regularly faces backlash from speaking out: women. There is plenty of evidence of backlash over women who speak out in the political (Krook & Sanín 2020; Mantilla 2015; Okimoto & Brescoll 2010) or corporate (Brescoll 2011; Burriss 2012) spheres. The fact remains, we know very little about the consequences of non-Black football players speaking out.

5.1.3 Key gaps in the literature and research question

Athlete activism is now a much broader and more complex reality than it was during the first wave of the 1960s: white and Black athletes, stars and role players, males and females, increasingly speak out on topics as diverse as social justice, criminal reform, voter suppression, pay gap, or LGBTQ+ rights. We have a limited understanding on whether and how this increased diversity might have changed the nature of athlete activism. Moreover, most of the research on the question has focused on the political outcomes of activism, and looked at whether athletes can change minds. We know very little about the consequences for the athletes or the leagues, beyond consistent evidence of a risk of backlash among conservative fans for well-established, mainstream male leagues.

This Chapter looks at the affective evaluations consequences of political activism for sports leagues. It aims at answering the following question: what happens to the leagues’ and players’ images when they enter the political arena? From our knowledge of affective evaluation theories, we expect positive perceptions of the league to increase among people who agree with the political stands the league is taking. We also expect negative effects among people who disagree.

Addressing these gaps in our understanding of athlete activism led to the choice of the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA) as the league of interest for this project. No league covers a broader range

³“One Life”, Megan Rapinoe and Emma Brockes, Penguin Press, November 2020

of identities than the WNBA. Around 67% of WNBA players are Black (83% are person of color)⁴, and even if official numbers on the sexual identities of the players do not exist, a substantial proportion of WNBA players identify as LGBTQ+. The 2019 All-WNBA first team, which includes the five best players in a WNBA season, as voted by the media, consisted entirely of women who identify as LGBTQ+ (Courtney Vandersloot, Brittney Griner, Chelsea Gray, Natasha Howard and Elena Delle Donne). Half of the six players on the WNBA player association leadership team, Delle Donne, Sue Bird and Layshia Clarendon, identify as LGBTQ+. 25% of the players playing in the 2021 WNBA playoffs were out as LGBTQ athletes⁵. The WNBA is also at an interesting stage of its business development. At 25 years old, it is the longest standing women's sports league in the United States. After surviving, the league is now trying to grow, with a lot of room to do so. It is still expanding its fan base, and most business metrics (viewership, merchandise sales, social media activity) are showing sustained progress. The WNBA is also widely recognized as the leading league in athlete activism by other athletes, leagues and the media. For all these reasons, the WNBA offers a perfect case study to study how far activism can take a growing sports league.

I use two comparison points to explore this question. First, I look at the business consequences when the league is introduced to respondents as an “activist” league (political treatment), compared to the business consequences when it is introduced as a “growing, successful and entertaining” league (business treatment). Based on affective evaluation theories, we expect the political treatment to increase positive perceptions of the WNBA among people who agree with the political stands the league is taking. We also expect negative reactions from people who disagree. We expect less polarization of opinions around the WNBA when respondents are presented with the non-political selling points about the league. There are well-documented reasons to expect uniform gains in positive perceptions about the league from the business treatment. Players have consistently argued that the appearance of business success can increase the legitimacy of the league and can make people more likely to watch and respect it. A broader argument within women's sports claims that initial investments can provide the foundations for success and initiate a virtuous cycle in which initial investments bring more attention, legitimacy and ultimately success to female leagues and athletes. The business treatment in this project tests this theory that initial success can contribute to bringing in more fans. Second, I compare what happens to the WNBA when its players speak out to what happens when male players from a more established league, the NBA, speak out.

⁴The 2019 racial and gender card, WNBA, Dr. Richard Lapchick, The Institute For Diversity and Ethics in Sport

⁵At least 25% of the players in the WNBA Playoffs are LGBTQ and out, Cyd Zeigler, *outsports.com*, September 23, 2021

5.2 Design

5.2.1 Sample

Both representative experimental samples (1,218 and 1,950 respondents) were recruited through Lucid. Respondents had to pass a basic attention check at the beginning of the survey to be able to move on to the survey questions. 76% of the respondents passed the attention check. The first survey, comparing WNBA activism to NBA activism, was run in August 2021. The second survey, comparing business selling points to political ones, was run in December 2021. Research has shown that the Covid-19 pandemic does not pose a fundamental threat to the generalizability of online experiments, including ones run on Lucid (Peyton et al. 2020).

5.2.2 Covariates and scales to measure the in-group for the WNBA

In the first survey, respondents answered a battery of demographic and general sports participation and interest questions. The covariates used in the analysis are: baseline interest in men’s and women’s sports, education level, partisan orientation, ethnicity, income, sexual orientation, gender, where the person lives (city, rural area, town, or suburbs), religiosity, former participation in organized sports and age. In addition to these questions, the second survey included scales aiming at measuring respondents’ intersectional awareness, heteronormative and racial resentment levels.

We expect in-group to matter to how people react to a political stand by the WNBA and to how they update their attitudes about the league when encountering new information about it. As a building block for this Chapter, it is important to try to define who the in-group for the WNBA is. Little demographic data on who current WNBA fans are is publicly available. WNBA demographic research indicates the average crowd at a WNBA game is comprised of 75% females⁶. Analysis of social media data by Zoomph shows that WNBA fans are between 2 to 6.6 times more likely than an average sports fan to be interested in politics, and especially women’s rights⁷.

Ideally, we need to rely on a concept that goes beyond simple demographics. Players have provided indications on who they feel they represent in multiple interviews: *“people who live on the margins of society”* (Layshia Clarendon), *“the part of society that has been overlooked so many times”* (Satou Sabally),

⁶“A coming-out party for professional sports”, Wayne Drehs, espn.com

⁷Women’s sports beverage report, Zoomph, 2021

“people who have been unliked by mainstream America” (Dawn Staley), or *“people who don’t look and talk like they’re supposed to”* (A’ja Wilson). Two dimensions appear key in what the players are trying to formulate: race and gender roles - as well as their interactions. Social science provides frameworks as well as measurement scales to define and measure these dimensions. Intersectional theories posit that social positions that exist on a hierarchy of social power are not independent, but rather that they shape human experience jointly. Individuals have individual identities that intersect in ways that impact how they are viewed, understood and treated. A combination of racial and social identities can compound discrimination. The concept has been applied to Black women in the US (Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1990), and extended to a wide range of intersections of race, gender, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation (Bowleg 2012; Hancock 2007). WNBA players themselves have acknowledged how they and their league fit into the intersectional framework. Sydney Colson evoked not having a name for it until she met with Kimberle Crenshaw, who first coined the term intersectionality, and then spent time studying her work⁸. Layshia Clarendon learned about intersectionality during her undergrad at Berkeley, where she majored in sociology.

The uptake of intersectional theories in quantitative social science research has been recent and originally focused on measuring someone’s intersectionality “level” (e.g., how to interact individual race, gender and other identity coefficients) or discrimination level (Bauer et al. 2021; Else-Quest & Hyde 2016; Hancock 2007). More relevant to the purposes of this Chapter, Greenwood (2008) developed an intersectional political consciousness scale to measure the degree to which a respondent’s political consciousness reflects intersectionality. The scale is heavily theoretical and mostly targeted at feminist activists. In this Chapter, I use Curtin et al. (2015)’s Intersectional Awareness (IA) scale. It builds on Greenwood (2008)’s work and broadens her scope by arguing that even individuals who do not identify with or belong to a particular social group may still have an intersectional perspective. The authors argue that IA can be conceptualized as a social-cognitive variable that assesses the degree to which individuals view different social hierarchies as intersecting. They adapt Greenwood’s scale to include new items that allow the scale to be suitable for non-activist samples of women and men. They came up with a 13 items scale that include questions such as *“People don’t think enough about how connections between social class, race, gender and sexuality affect individuals”*, *“while there are important differences in how different kinds of oppression work, there are also important similarities”*, or *“people who belong to more than one oppressed social group (e.g., lesbians who are also ethnic minorities) have experiences that differ from people who belong to only one such group”*.

Intersectional awareness measures how much respondents agree that interactions between race and gen-

⁸At the WNBA, the fight for justice goes way back. Alexandra E. Petri, New York Times, August 31, 2020

der roles matter. Besides the interactions between them, it is useful to have measurements on the two individual dimensions: gender roles and race. The heteronormative ideology has been defined as an ideology operating to justify social hierarchical structures, preferential treatment of dominant group members, and individual prejudices or stigma toward “subordinate” or minority group members (Herek 1986, 2016; Herek & McLemore 2013; Pratto et al. 2006; Sidanius et al. 1994). In the United States, heteronormativity can be conceptualized as an institutionalized social force that dictates acceptable behaviors based on the assumption that heterosexuality is normal (Habarth 2015; Kitzinger 2005; Yep 2003). It defines boundaries of “normality” and sets expectations for men and women to behave and express themselves in accordance with traditional gender norms (Habarth 2015). I use a short version of Habarth (2015)’s 16-item heteronormative attitudes and beliefs scale (HABS), a self-report measure that assess traditional attitudes and beliefs toward sexuality and gender. The scale contains items such as *“all people are either male or female”*, or *“in intimate relationships, people should act only according to what is traditionally expected of their gender”*.

Many quantitative measurements exist around the racial dimension, whether it is attitudes toward Black people and integration, modern racism, white racial identity or white privilege and antiracism (see Schooley et al. (2019) for a systematic review of measurement instruments). I use the measure of racial resentment that has been used in the ANES survey since 1986, based on four statements: *“Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Black people should do the same without any special favors”*, *“Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Black people to work their way out of the lower class”*, *“Over the past few years, Black people have gotten less than they deserve”*, and *“it’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Black people would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites”*.

I therefore rely on three main scales in this survey: intersectionality awareness (IA), racial resentment and heteronormativity. Lower levels of racial resentment, lower levels of heteronormativity, and higher levels of intersectional awareness are generally thought to be the more progressive positions and to be more closely aligned to the WNBA’s values and identities. In order to have the three scales moving in the same direction, where lower levels on the scales can be associated with a closer alignment with the WNBA’s identities, I recoded the intersectionality awareness scale into an “intersectionality unawareness” (IU) scale. Each scale tells its own story, and results are always presented along the three dimensions. But people on the same ends of the three scales tend to respond similarly to the questions and treatments. For clarity sake, when discussing the results, I will sometimes use “identity-aligned” to refer to people in the low ends of the scales, i.e., people with low intersectional unawareness, heteronormativity and racial resentment (because they are aligned with the WNBA’s identities). People in the middle tiers of the three scales will be referred to as

“identity-neutral”, and people in the higher end of the scales will be referred to as “identity-unaligned”.

5.2.3 Treatments

In the first survey, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three treatment or control groups. The control group saw real Instagram posts about recent unrelated news. The other two groups saw Instagram posts that I built using an online generator. In the NBA (WNBA) treatment condition, respondents saw a picture and a quote from a made-up NBA (WNBA) player named Amari Walker, as well as a post summarizing the actions taken by the NBA (WNBA) in 2020. The two vignettes can be seen in Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2. The quotes were constructed from real quotes from real athletes, and the Instagram posts were designed to mirror real posts athletes made on these questions. All actions presented in the second post were real actions taken by both leagues. Participants were presented with a thorough debrief at the end of the survey explaining what portion of what they saw was real and what was not.

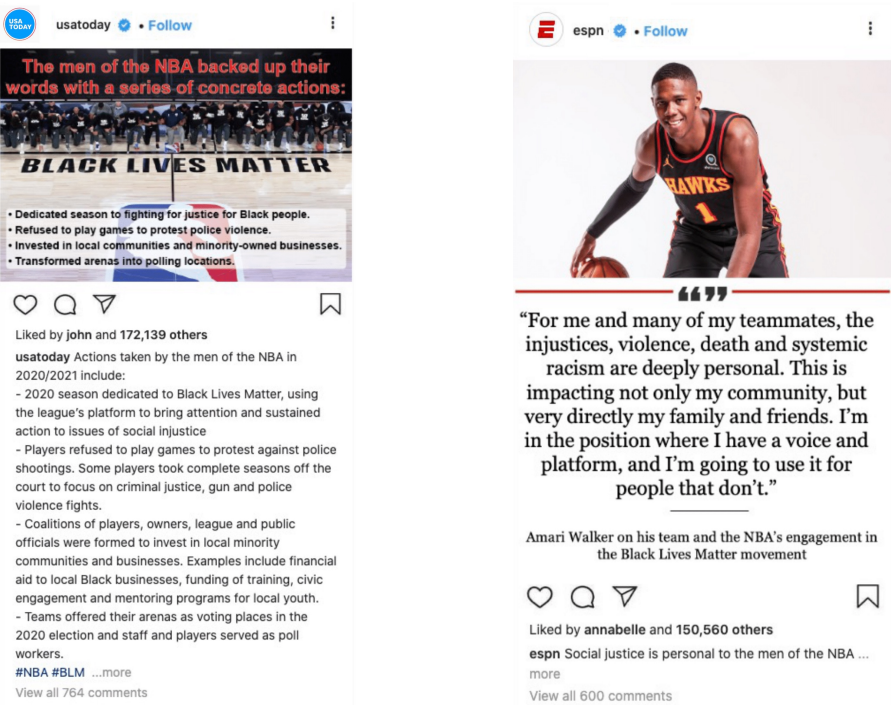


Figure 5.1: Vignette - NBA treatment group

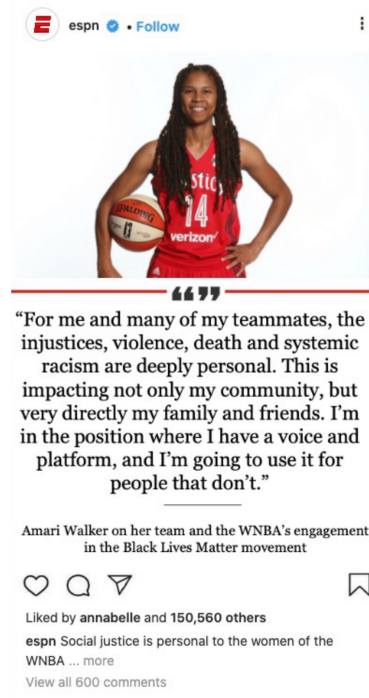


Figure 5.2: Vignette - WNBA treatment group

In the second survey, one third of the respondents were assigned to a control group and saw a video and Instagram Posts about unrelated news. Another third of the respondents were assigned to a “political” treatment group and saw a 90 seconds clip from a The Undeclared Documentary focused entirely on WNBA activism. In the clip, WNBA players discuss how committed they are to social justice and how activism has always been in the DNA of the league. Respondents in this group also saw two Instagram Posts on WNBA activism similar to the one used in the first survey (see Figure 5.3). Finally, the last third of the respondents were assigned to a “business” treatment group. They saw a 90 seconds clip produced by the league to celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2021, called “Count It”. The video celebrates the league’s business success, the quality of the basketball on the court and the personalities of its players. Respondents also saw two Instagram Posts summarizing the recent business successes of the league (Figure 5.4). The treatments in this second survey were stronger, since respondents saw both a video and Instagram Posts.



Liked by john and 172,139 others

usatoday Actions taken by the women of the WNBA in 2020/2021 include:

- 2020 season dedicated to the Say Her Name campaign, an initiative committed to saying the names and fighting for justice for Black women.
- Players refused to play games to protest against police shootings. Some players took complete seasons off the court to focus on criminal justice, gun and police violence fights.
- Coalitions of players, owners, league and public officials were formed to invest in local minority communities and businesses. Examples include financial aid to local Black businesses, funding of training, civic engagement and mentoring programs for local youth.
- Teams offered their arenas as voting places in the 2020 election and staff and players served as poll workers.

#WNBA #SayHerName ...more

View all 764 comments



“More than ever, the WNBA will continue its advocacy work in 2021. Along with our continuing commitment to social justice issues, our priorities for 2021 include protecting the right to vote, the access to safe abortions and the right for transgender kids to play sports.”

Amari Walker on her team and the WNBA's off the court priorities for 2021

Liked by annabelle and 150,560 others

esn After showing the way for other leagues in 2020, the WNBA is committed to continue its advocacy work in 2021 ... more

View all 602 comments

Figure 5.3: Vignette - Social Justice treatment group



Liked by john and 172,139 others

usatoday The WNBA is celebrating its 25th anniversary and stands as the longest standing women's sports leagues in the United States. After surviving, the league looks like it is not ready to thrive. In 2021, the WNBA set records on all the most meaningful metrics: TV ratings, merchandise sales, and social media impressions. #WNBA #SportBusiness ...more

View all 764 comments



“The quality of basketball and competition have never been better. TVs and sponsors are noticing, and our salaries have doubled in the last two years. The WNBA survived and now has a chance to thrive. It is trending in a fantastic direction, and I am very excited to see where it goes.”

Amari Walker on the WNBA's growing successes and momentum

Liked by annabelle and 150,560 others

esn The WNBA had a great 2021 off and on the court. The league is growing and is turning into a model for women's sports ... more

View all 602 comments

Figure 5.4: Vignette - Business success treatment group

Responses to the open question at the end of the survey suggest that the treatments worked as intended,

with many respondents mentioning having learnt something (see the Appendix for a complete list of quotes in which respondents emphasize having learnt something from the survey). Several people mention not liking sports but being now interested in the WNBA because of what they saw in the survey (*“At first, I looked at the WNBA like a majority of people who don’t know much about it. But after watching the videos here, I’m actually interested in learning and following it. Thank you.”*), others mention wanting to follow the players on social media (*“I am going to follow these girls on Facebook... I am going to follow them and pay attention to what they are all standing up for”*) or wanting to learn more, and others mention having been touched by the content provided (*“They are saying stuff ordinarily I wouldn’t care two hoots for. Tonight after watching this video and reading all the text here... is making me cry”*, or *“The political and social activism from the WNBA shown in the video has definitely peaked my interest in following the league/players. They gave me the warm tingles all over which I have not felt in a long time”*).

5.2.4 Outcomes

I explore two sets of outcomes. First, I look at whether receiving political or business information about the league changes respondents’ perceptions of the league and their willingness to engage with it. I ask questions such as how much people like the league, how interested they are in learning more about it, or how much they would like to invest in it. I also present people with a set of characteristics, including activist, liberal, queer, honest, and “similar to me”, and ask them to what extent do they believe each characteristic describe the players of the WNBA. In the second set of outcomes, I explore whether receiving the information about the leagues changes how respondents perceive activist athletes. I ask respondents if they think (i) activism can hurt leagues, (ii) athletes should speak up more, (iii) athletes’ voices matter and (iv) brands should support athletes in their activism. For each of the outcome variables, I report both group means and covariate-adjusted OLS estimates of average treatment effects. I dedicate the next two sections to the results on each set of outcomes. In both sections, I present the experimental results first and then discuss potential mechanisms as well as implications using qualitative data from responses to open questions in the surveys.

5.3 Results: Does activism increase respondents’ engagement with and positive perceptions of the league?

5.3.1 Average Treatment Effects

I asked respondents to rate how much of a fan of the WNBA they are, and if they would be interested in learning more about the league. Figure 5.5 shows that both the political and business treatments moved people in very similar amounts, increasing the overall appreciation for the WNBA by 0.20 point on average (on a 4 points scale), and the interest in learning more about the league by 0.22 point. Providing information about the league leads to net gains in the interest and appreciation for the league, suggesting a potential for untapped buckets of new fans. Interestingly, the WNBA generates as much extra interest and engagement when it emphasizes its business successes as it does when it emphasizes its political activism. I explore this result further in the section on treatment effect heterogeneity below.

In their answers to an open question in the survey (see the Appendix for a full list of quotes), several respondents acknowledged that activism makes them more likely to follow the league: *“the WNBA’s activism makes me want to watch sports”*, *“when leagues stand up for justice it makes me want to support them and it brings joy to my heart”*, *“the political and social activism of sports leagues like the WNBA makes me like the league more and want to support them more”*, confirming what we see in the data.

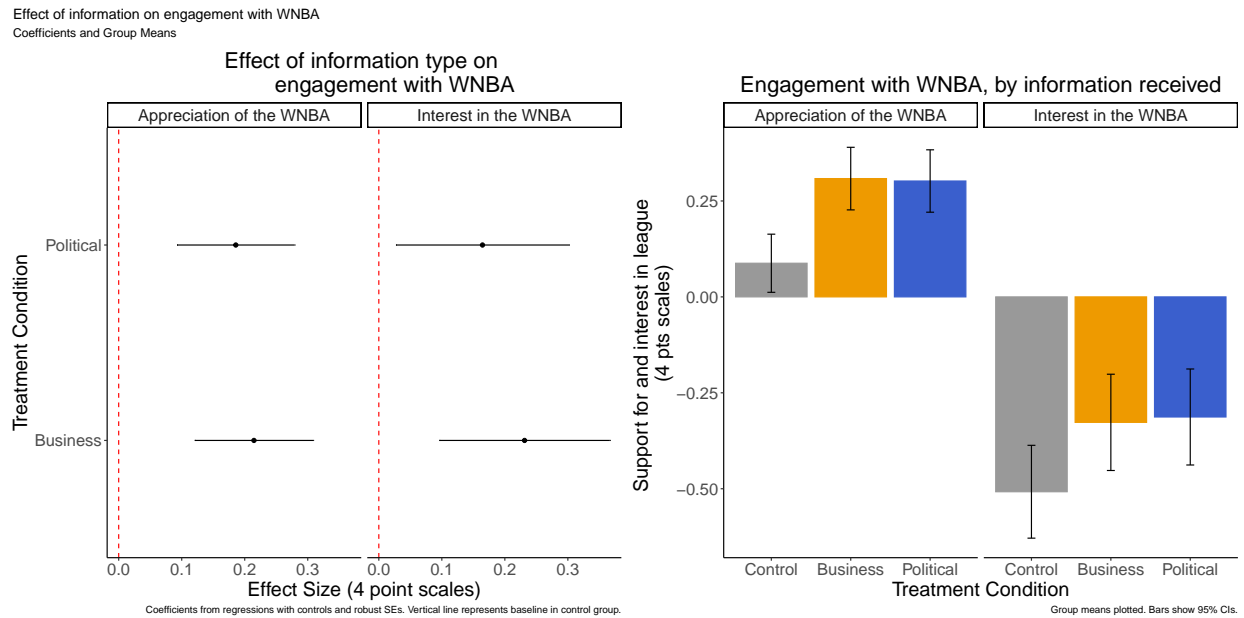


Figure 5.5: Effect of information on engagement with WNBA

5.3.2 Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

These similar results for the business and political treatments can be driven by two different dynamics. On one side, it is possible that any information moves the same people in the same direction and to the same extent. But it is also possible that the similar results are driven by different people. An extreme case would be a case in which activism generates backlash (negative reactions) among some people, but this backlash is compensated by larger gains among other groups, leading to the same overall net result than a business treatment that moves everybody in the same direction and smaller amounts. In order to answer this question, I turn to Conditional Average Treatment Effects (CATEs). CATEs measure how people from different demographic groups respond to the treatment. The goal is to identify demographic groups with more “room to grow”. Receiving information about the players’ activism can make some people want to engage with the WNBA more (positive CATEs) and other people want to engage with it less (negative CATEs, i.e., backlash). Importantly, some people will not be moved by the information provided (null CATEs): their opinions about the league are already set, for example, at such high levels that they have little room to like the league more (ceiling effects) or at such low levels that they have little room to like it less (floor effects). This section does not identify the demographics groups who like the league the most (see the Appendix for descriptive results on leagues’ fans’ demographics). It identifies demographics groups most likely to be convinced by the information about activism.

I rely on the IU, heteronormative and racial resentment scales. They heavily correlate with demographic data and provide much clearer results than presenting results based on all demographic groups. Results based on demographic groups can be found in the Appendix. For each scale, each respondent was placed into one of three groups depending on where their scores was in the distribution of all respondents’ scores: high, middle, low tiers. Respondents in the “low” groups (low racial resentment, heteronormativity and intersectional unawareness) are the ones most closely aligned to the WNBA’s identity.

A clear picture emerges from these graphs. First, the CATEs in the identity-aligned categories (people with high intersectional awareness, low heteronormativity, and low racial resentment) are positive and statistically significant. This is true for both the political and business treatments, and clearly where the WNBA can tap most potential new fans. Second, the overall similar net effects for the political and business treatments are driven by slightly different groups of people. The business treatment tends to move people in the “identity-neutral” categories more than the political treatment: CATEs for the business treatment in this category are always statistically significant, while those for the political treatment are positive but not always significant. In the meantime, the political treatment tends to move people in the “identity-aligned”

categories more than the business treatment, with higher CATEs for the political treatment than the business treatment in those groups. This result is consistent with affective evaluation theories: people who like what the league said are more likely to like the league more.

More surprising, and less consistent with affective evaluation theories, is the absence of backlash. No group ends up liking the WNBA less after seeing information about its political activism, even people in 'identity-unaligned' groups (low intersectional awareness, high racial resentment, high heteronormativity).

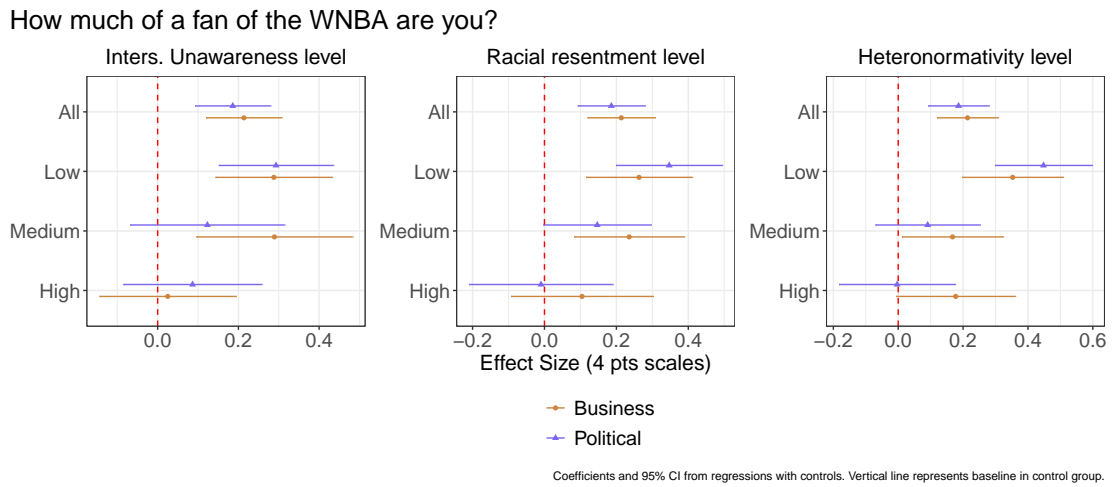


Figure 5.6: How much of a fan of the WNBA are you?

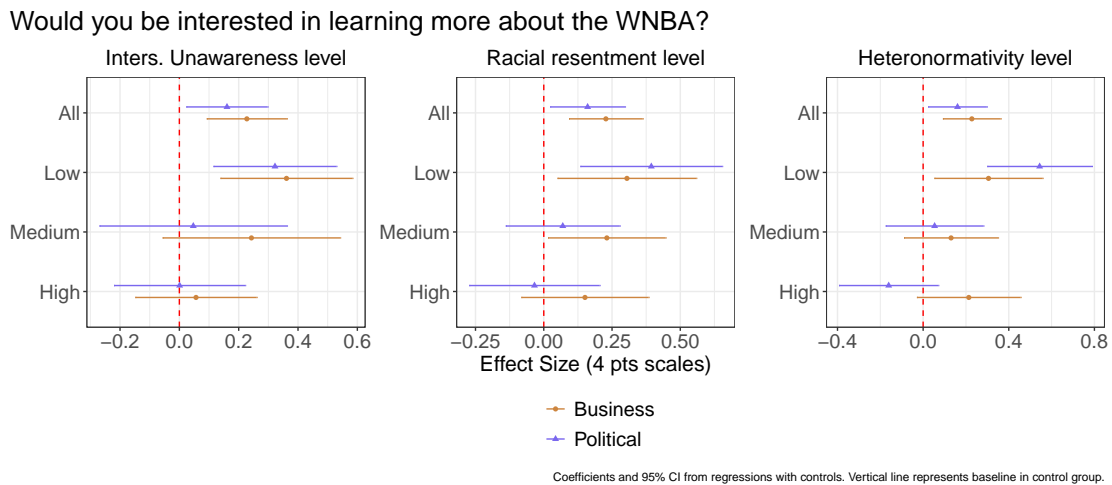


Figure 5.7: Would you be interested in learning more about the WNBA?

5.3.3 Exploring the absence of backlash

The absence of backlash is made even more surprising by the fact that people are not shy to express their willingness to stop following a league when it starts being political in their comments (see the Appendix for a full list of quotes). Some even articulate affective evaluation theories perfectly (*“I am more likely to follow a league if their political views align with my own. If they go against my views, I am less likely to support them”*). Many others are more frontal in their opposition, putting forward familiar arguments such as *“I watch sports to escape politics not to see politics”*, *“I can’t stand the other sports and their cancel culture social justice agenda”*, *“sports bring people together. Keeping politics out of the arena can help bring people together”* or *“athletes generally are too emotional to discuss issues rationally”*.

The debate that emerges in these qualitative comments between people who claim to be turned away by politics and people who claim to be drawn to a league because of politics will sound very familiar to anyone who follows sports and politics. But interestingly, turning to the experimental quantitative data, only one side’s arguments materialize, with people seemingly able to increase their positive perceptions of the league, but unable to decrease them.

The first potential explanation for this absence of backlash is likely to be floor effects. In Figure 5.8, I show baseline appreciation levels for the WNBA, using only people in the control group. I compare them to baseline appreciation levels for the NBA (Figure 5.9). For both leagues, people in the identity-aligned and neutral categories are often indistinguishable from each other. People in the identity-unaligned tiers, however, form a very distinct group who really dislike the leagues. Most people already know where the NBA stands on social issues, and they have already updated their opinions about the NBA accordingly. For this reason, the NBA provides a useful saturated comparison point, showing how high, and how low, activism can take a league. There are obviously reasons besides activism for why the NBA would have a higher ceiling and higher floor than the WNBA. But where we would expect activism to move people in the identity-aligned groups up and people in the identity-unaligned groups down, it seems like there is more room for the former than the latter for the WNBA.

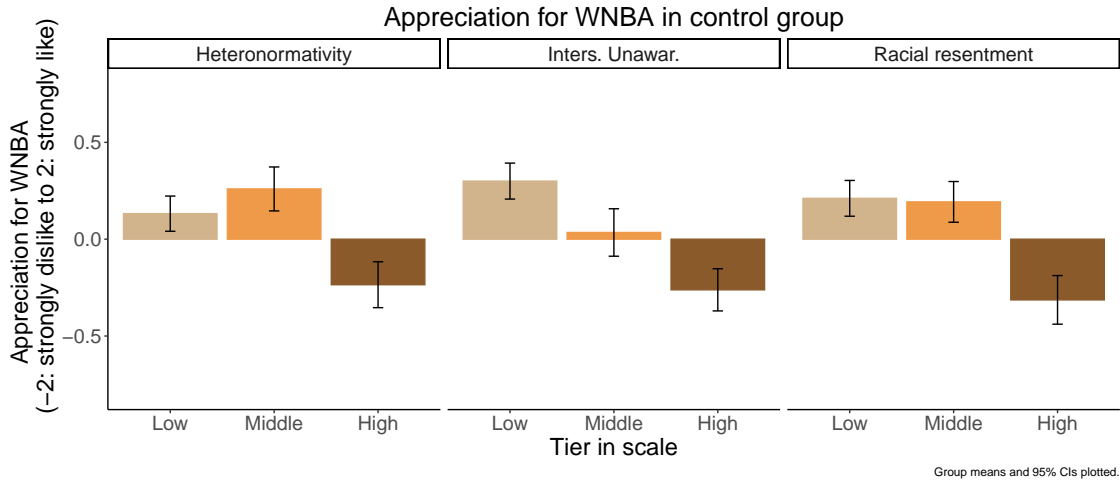


Figure 5.8: How much of a fan of the WNBA are you? Baseline levels in control groups

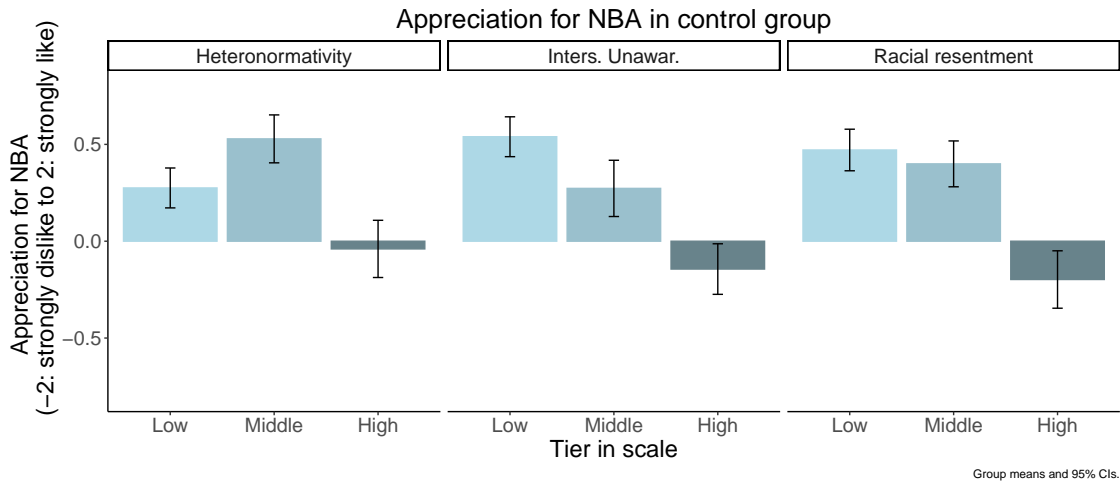


Figure 5.9: How much of a fan of the WNBA are you? Baseline levels in control groups

Another, related potential explanation for the absence of backlash is the homogeneity of the fans of the WNBA. Descriptive data on leagues' fans can be found in the Appendix. It shows that WNBA fans are much more aware of intersectional realities and tend to have less racial resentment and heteronormativity compared to fans of other leagues. They are also younger, more Democratic, richer, less straight, more educated, more female. I discuss the power of this alignment between the league, its players' and fans' identities and values further in the next section, but this relative homogeneity of the WNBA fans probably allows the league more leeway in its ability to speak out without losing fans.

5.3.4 How specific are these results to women’s leagues?

The treatments used in the first survey were not as strong as the ones used in the second, since respondents only saw two Instagram Posts and no video. The survey was also less powered in terms of the number of respondents. This is likely to make standards errors larger and estimates smaller, which can explain why I do not find significant results (Figure 5.10). However, the coefficients for the WNBA are in the right direction, and much closer to statistical significance than the ones for the NBA.

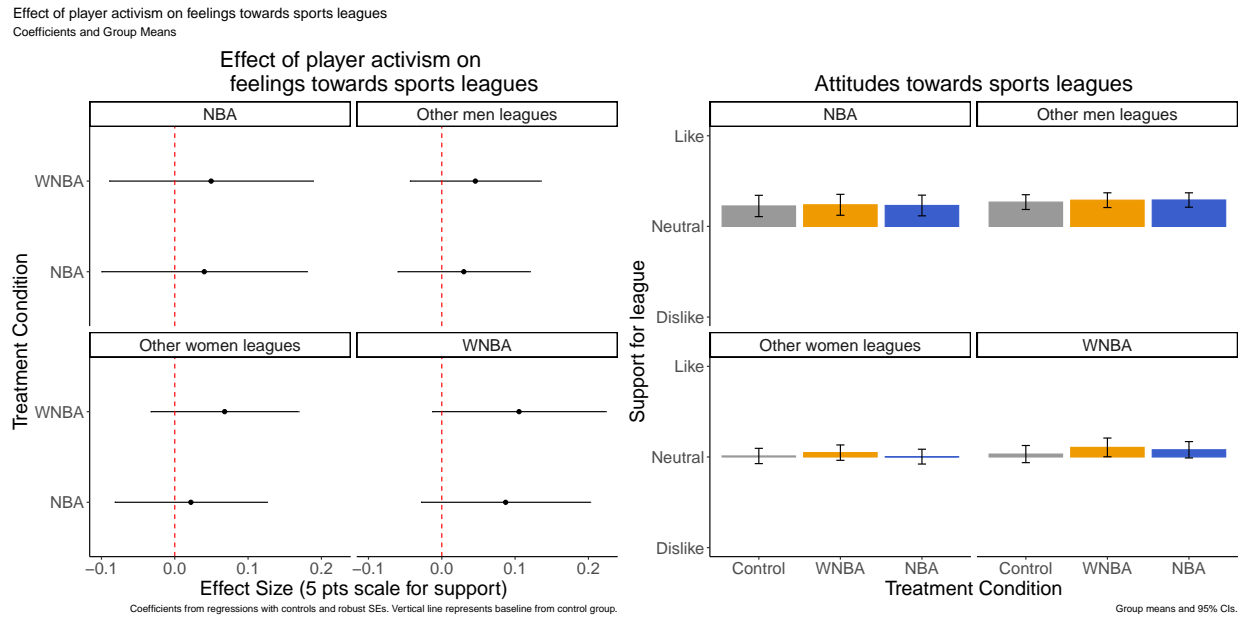


Figure 5.10: Effect of player activism on feelings towards sports leagues

The fact that the WNBA might have more room to grow than the NBA is confirmed by another dependent variable used in the first survey: I find convincing evidence that information about activism increases respondents’ willingness to invest in the league (see Figure 5.11). Seeing the posts from WNBA players increased how much people are willing to invest in the league by 2.6 percentage points. No similar effect is found for the NBA.

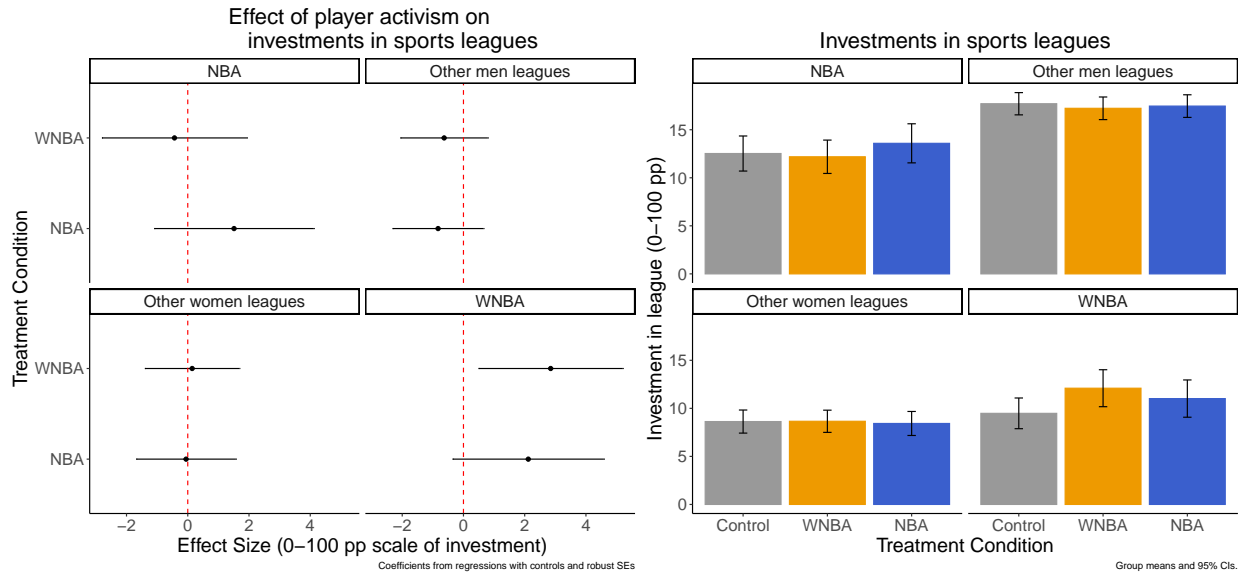


Figure 5.11: Effect of player activism on investments in sports leagues

Three main explanations can be put forward to explain why the WNBA might have more room to grow than the NBA from its activism: (i) the WNBA is not as well-known as the NBA, increasing the impact of new information, (ii) WNBA players have more of the characteristics that people tend to associate with good activists, and (iii) their identities allow them to connect to fans on a deeper level. I investigate each of these claims further in the next paragraphs.

The WNBA is not as well-known as the NBA, increasing the impact of new information

As already discussed, baseline appreciation levels for the WNBA in the control group have lower ceiling and lower floors than those of the NBA, offering them more room to go up than room to go down. People simply know more about the NBA, making it harder to move opinions when offering new information. The WNBA was born in 1996 and, even as the longest-lasting and most successful women's league in the US, it is still significantly less well-established than men's leagues. Therefore, there is a lot of room to change perceptions about the league.

In one of the outcome questions, I asked people to rate their perceptions of the WNBA and NBA on a number of dimensions. Figure 5.12 shows that respondents' opinions about the WNBA are less settled on a number of key dimensions, especially on how activist or liberal the league is. Because people are less sure

of where the WNBA stands, as evidenced by density curves with peaks around the middle score of 5, new information is more likely to move them.

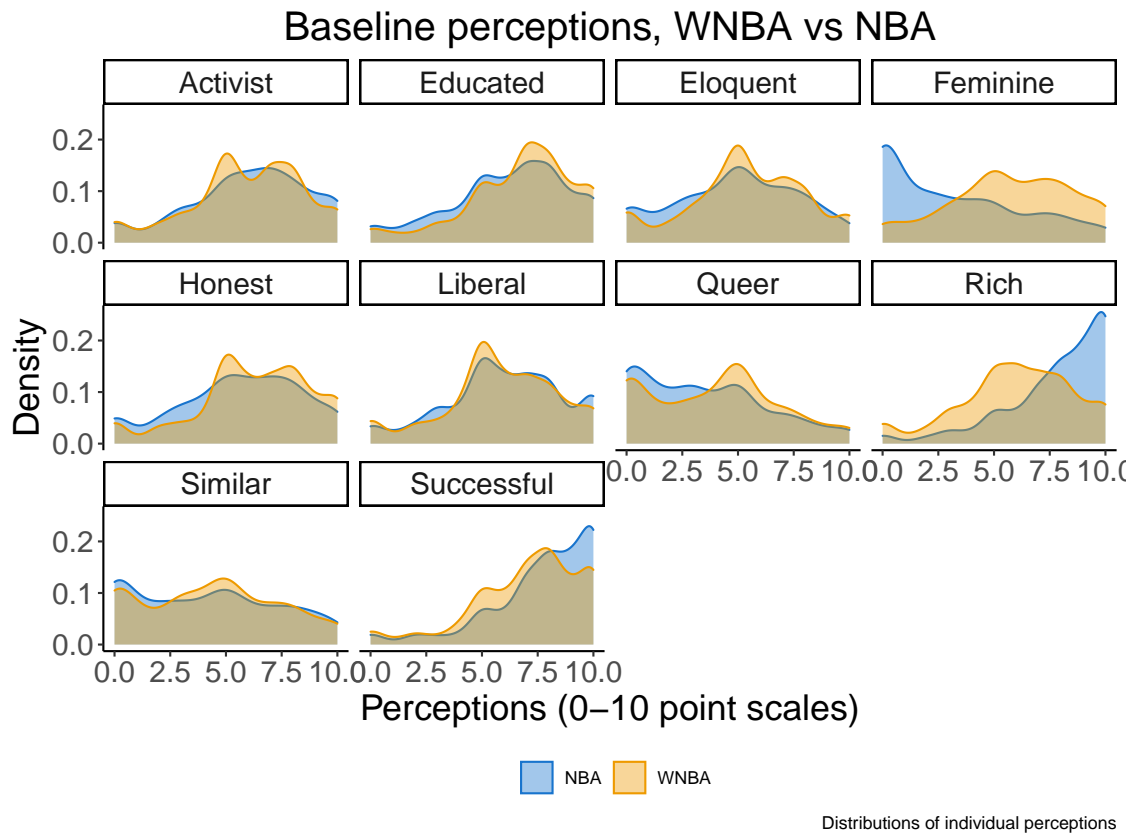


Figure 5.12: Baseline perceptions of the NBA and WNBA

WNBA players have more of the characteristics that people associate with good activists

WNBA players also fit more closely with what people expect a good activist athlete to be. When asked what makes an athlete a good activist, respondents often point out that athletes have a platform, that they know the issues because they have often personally experienced them, and that they are generally well-liked (see the Appendix for the full list of quotes). When asked what can make an athlete a poor activist, frequent answers include how rich and far from reality athletes are. Figure 5.12 shows that WNBA players are perceived as more honest, more educated, more eloquent, less rich, more “similar to me” - all characteristics that respondents say make one a better activist.

Not only are baseline perceptions of WNBA players more aligned with what respondents expect from a good activist (more educated, more honest, less rich, more similar to them) but the treatments were able

to move perceptions on these key characteristics (Figure 5.13). The activism treatment made the league appeared more activist (+13%), eloquent, queer and honest (+5%), more liberal (+12%), less rich (-3%). Seeing the business treatment made the league appear more activist (+5%), more eloquent, honest, liberal and queer (+5%), more successful and more similar to me (+3%). The treatments accomplish two things that are likely to contribute to the positives ATEs: they clarify the perceptions of the WNBA, and they clarify them in ways that make WNBA players look like better activists.

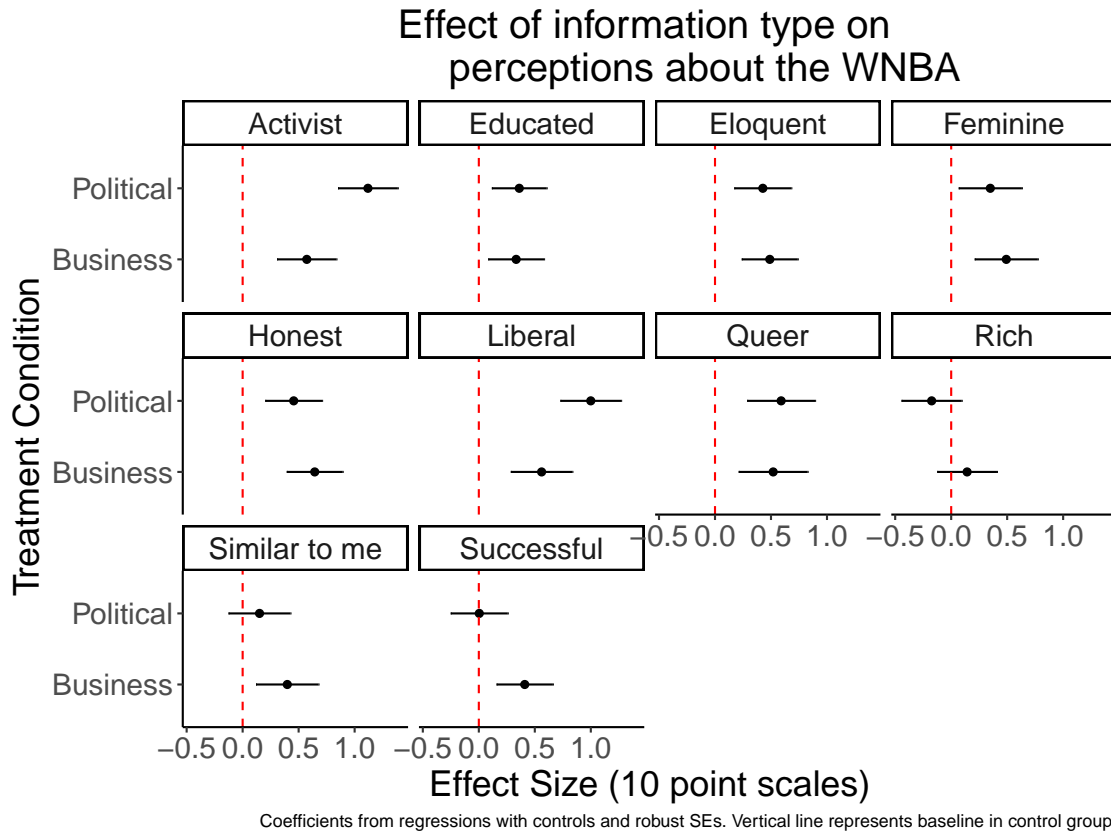


Figure 5.13: Effect of information about activism and business successes on perceptions of WNBA

WNBA players provide representation

Qualitative comments by respondents offer another key cue as to why women’s leagues might be able to gain more from their activism than men’s leagues: the representation they offer, and how aligned it is with their activism (see the Appendix for a complete list of quotes). Several respondents mentioned being drawn to the league and its activism because it represents them as women: *“when the members and players of the WNBA speak up about current issues and topics I am more likely to listen. The world is male centric. The world is white male centered. Women need to speak up and out more to get balance back to society”*;

“anytime a WNBA woman, or any woman, shows her heart, sincerity, and determination for others, risking herself personally, publicly, or politically-not for profit, ego, or recognition, then I would be more likely to follow their opinions, appearances, and events”; “the irony about the WNBA is it creates a strong and positive feminist perspective in the casual observer. It is almost similar to the women’s suffrage movement of the early 1900s. The WNBA allows a casual observer to be educated on both inequalities and possibilities. Somehow the WNBA educates while providing an entertaining product”; “people will find that these women are a lot like women they know, and share ideas that deal with all areas of like in this country.”. Respondents also recognize that the league represent them as persons of color and queer people (*“it makes me more likely to follow them, as I too, am a lesbian”, “the players I know about are mostly queer and I connect to them on that level”*). A respondent even explicitly articulates the power of the intersectional nature of the league: *“the WNBA is comprised largely of persons who are both POC and women... and their activism can incorporate a one-two punch for success”.*

WNBA players seem to be in a unique position to connect to some of their fans based on shared identities. Players often directly connect their identities to their activism, arguing that it makes them more aware of the issues (*“While living ‘at those intersections of identity’ serves as a hindrance for Black women’s advancement in all sorts of pursuits, it also automatically sets you up to be more aware” - Layesha Clarendon*), that they are the people who they are trying to help (*“I think with this sport, we are able to uplift exactly the part of society that has been overlooked so many times. And that’s why I’m proud to play in the WNBA” - Satou Sabally and “We know what it feels like to live on the margins, even within the sports community” - Layesha Clarendon*). This alignment between the players’ identities, the (potential) fans’ and the activism is likely to increase the ability of the WNBA to grow their fanbase through politics. When WNBA players speak out, they sound genuine, and most people are able to sense this. This is likely to (i) increase the ability of activism to make people in the identity-neutral and aligned groups like the league more, and perhaps even (ii) limit backlash from people in the identity-unaligned groups, as the people in these groups might disagree with the direction of the activism, but still recognize it as genuine.

5.4 Results: does their activism change how athletes are perceived?

5.4.1 Average Treatment Effects

Seeing information about the leagues changes respondents' perceptions of athlete activism (Figure 5.14). It makes respondents more likely to agree that athletes should speak out on political issues, that political activism can hurt leagues, and that brands should support athletes' activism. The effects are also substantially significant, with increases of between 5% and 7% of the likelihood to agree with the statements after seeing information about the league. However, respondents still doubt that athletes will be able to change minds on the issues. The activist message moves respondents slightly more, but the business treatment also moves respondents on all three dimensions. This suggests different, but equally efficient, mechanisms. The fact that the political treatment works could indicate that part of the initial opposition to athletes speaking out comes from a lack of knowledge about what "speaking out" really entails. Some people might be in principle opposed to athletes speaking out, but when presented with the actual actions taken, as well as the personal motivations behind them, they can change their minds. The business treatment working suggests that part of the initial opposition to athletes speaking out is a fear of consequences. When reassured that the league is thriving, people are not as opposed to athletes' activism.

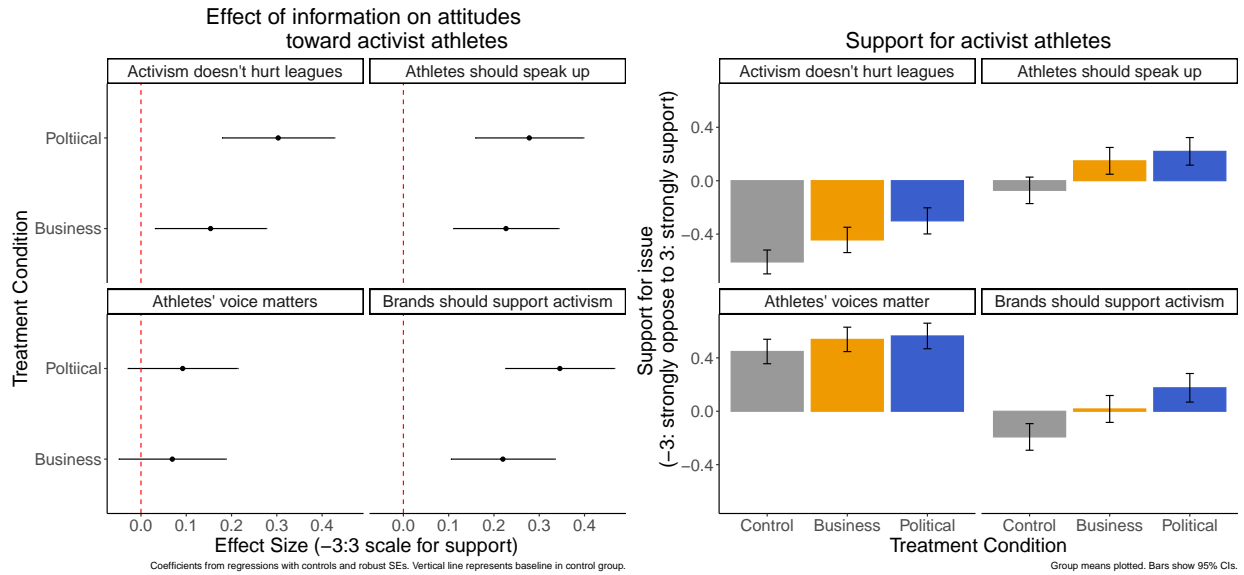


Figure 5.14: Effect of information on attitudes toward sports activism, business v political selling points treatment

Results on this question in the first survey (NBA versus WNBA) are not as strong, which confirms the relative weakness of the treatment and power for this survey. However, they clearly trend in the same direction of information being able to move attitudes on athletes' activism (Figure 5.15). On this dimension too, results appear to be stronger for the WNBA than they are for the NBA.

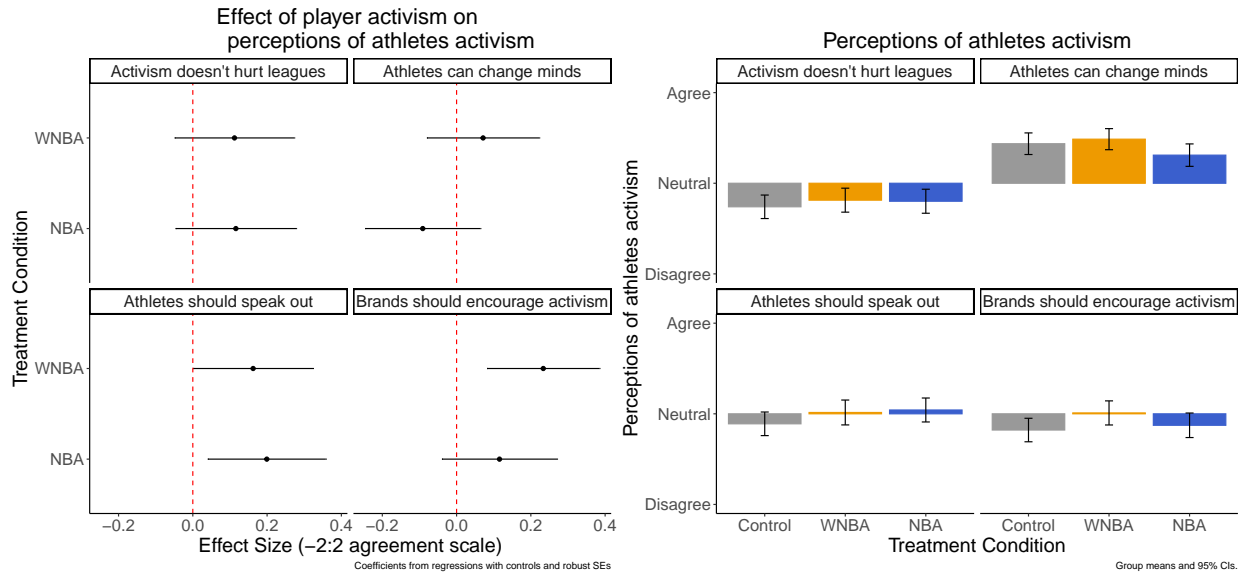


Figure 5.15: Effect of player activism on perceptions of sports activism, WNBA v NBA treatment

Heterogeneous treatment effects on this question can be found in the Appendix. Overall, positive results are again mostly driven by people in the identity-aligned categories, with significant room to convince people in the identity-neutral categories as well. On this set of questions, the political treatment seems to work slightly better than the business treatment, especially among people in identity-aligned groups. This is not a surprising result, as the outcome variable here is directly related to the activism theme. We would therefore expect the activism treatment to have a larger effect. Finally, the absence of backlash across all dependent variables is again striking, and likely to be driven by similar explanations than the ones discussed above.

5.5 Conclusion

A clearer view of the business consequences of political activism for a growing female league like the WNBA appears from the data, with three main takeaways. First, politics can help grow the fanbase - about as much as other non-political selling points. Seeing information about the WNBA increased the interest in learning more about the league by 6% and the positive evaluations of the league by 5%. This effect is the same whether respondents see information about the political activism of the league or about the business success of the league, but is driven by slightly different groups of people. The political treatment is more likely to convince people in the identity-aligned groups (high intersectional awareness, low racial resentment and

low heteronormativity) to engage with the league, whereas the business treatment is more likely to convince people in the identity-neutral groups. Whether one of these two groups of new potential fans is likely to be stronger or more durable for the league is an interesting question, one that can not be answered through a survey. Answers to open questions provide convincing qualitative evidence that the political treatment makes a stronger impression on people and is more directly aligned to the fans' and players' identities, suggesting it could have a more durable effect. Many people mention having being touched, surprised or fully convinced by the political treatment, as well as being grateful for how well they feel represented by the players. The business treatment generates fewer similar comments.

Second, the WNBA appears to have more room to grow in terms of politics bringing in new fans than the NBA (and probably most other sports leagues). This result appears to be mostly driven by three mechanisms. First, the WNBA is not as well-known as other leagues, and new information about the league is more likely to have an effect compared to better-known leagues. Second, this information also hits harder because respondents tend to attribute characteristics to WNBA players that they associate with attributes of a good activist athlete, such as honesty, education, similarity to them, and lesser wealth. Third, the players' identities are closely connected to their activism, and respondents tend to recognize that WNBA players often are who they are fighting for: marginalized people. Whether they agree with the activism or not, people recognize it as genuine. WNBA players also provide representation to people. When athletes speak out on political issues, we see significant potential for growth among people with high intersectional awareness, low heteronormativity and low racial resentment group. These people see a natural alignment with the league and the players' values, and being exposed to them make them more interested in the league, in a dynamic very consistent with affective evaluation theories. We also see some potential for growth among people in the medium tier of these scales, which probably increases the potential for growth for the league (even though these people are more likely to be convinced by non-political arguments).

Crucially, and more surprisingly, it appears the league can do this without facing too much of a backlash. Political or business messages almost never convince people in identity-unaligned groups to become fans, but these people do not appear to like the league less. This result is consistent across all dependent variables and surveys. This is a surprising result in terms of affective evaluation theories. The WNBA is probably protected from backlash by its more homogeneous fanbase, as well as floor effects. People expect the WNBA to speak out and be liberal, and players appear genuine when they do. Current fans, i.e. people that the league could lose if backlash existed, are more liberal than fans of other leagues and are very unlikely to be turned away by activism. Conversely, people in the identity-unaligned groups, the ones more likely to generate any backlash, already heavily dislike the WNBA and have little room to like it less when presented

with new information. We have solid evidence that players from other sports, especially the NFL, do face backlash when they speak out. The NFL fan base is more conservative and more heterogeneous than the WNBA's. When NFL players speak out, they can lose existing fans.

To conclude, the data in this Chapter suggests that there is room for the WNBA to safely keep growing by leveraging the alignment between the league's values and identities, and those of their fans. It is possible that in a world where the league keeps growing, it could eventually reach a point where a large, more politically diverse fanbase could start generating backlash. An interesting dynamic to keep in mind when raising this risk, however, is that most existing mainstream sports leagues built their fanbases completely separated of politics. When politics eventually entered the picture, these leagues started losing, or being at risk of losing, fans. The WNBA - and several other women's leagues - are operating under a different growth model, one in which politics are an integral part of their growth. As discussed in the introduction to the dissertation, the WNBA actually only started growing when it found its activist identity in the 2000s. Activism is baked into the business model of the league. It has to be, simply because of who the players are. As we show here, this has potential to bring in new like-minded fans while limiting the risks of losing existing fans. It certainly puts a ceiling on how far the league will be able to grow, but the league is also in a unique position to build a strong and homogeneous coalition of fans and players unified by something bigger than basketball: a shared identity and common political values and goals.

Chapter 6

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Chapter 7

Appendix

Chapter 3 Appendix

Vignettes and respondents' evaluations of arguments

Equal Pay, Persuasion only treatment group

Respondents were asked to what extent does each statement decrease or increase their support for the Equal Pay argument, on a scale from 1 (decreases a lot) to 7 (increases a lot), 4 being neutral (neither decreases or increases). The arguments below are ranked from the most efficient, according to respondents, to the least efficient. I present the means and 95% CI for each argument.

Argument 1: Female athletes acknowledge the leagues are businesses, and they are not asking to be paid the same amounts as male athletes. In many cases, female athletes do not even get the same percentage of their leagues' revenues than male players do. The 'Equal Pay' movement is about receiving the same percentages. **Mean: 5.08 [5.03;5.13].**

Argument 2: Ultimately, as many arguments as there are against equal pay for female athletes, there's only one argument for it: it's fair. It helps break the deep, self-perpetuating cycle of unfairness that characterizes women's sport, and women's place in society more generally. **Mean: 4.93 [4.88;4.99].**

Argument 3: Men's leagues generate the money they do today because of decades of investments, media coverage, storytelling. Men's leagues still get 95 percent of the sports media coverage today. When considering why the revenue is different, we have to think about what part of the revenue gap comes from discrimination and bias. The 'Equal Pay' movement is as much about investments in youth sports and coverage by the media as it is about salaries. **Mean: 4.76 [4.71;4.81]**

Argument 4: It is true that, generally speaking, men's leagues bring in more money than women's sports. But it was not always true. The NBA suffered \$20 million in losses in 1982, the NHL \$300 million USD in 2005, and most MLS teams are still not making profits. Asking women's pro sports leagues to show a profit within a matter of years after being founded holds them to standards men's pro sports leagues have not historically met. **Mean: 4.69 [4.64;4.74]**

Argument 5: The fact is, the reason why most people watch the NBA is not the athleticism of players, the dunks or the quality of play. They watch because they care about the players, their stories, their rivalries and what is at stake. When the media starts telling similar storylines for women's leagues, we see interest and viewership spike. **Mean: 4.58 [4.52;4.63]**

Equal Pay, Persuasion and Group Cue treatment group

Argument 1: "We acknowledge the leagues are businesses, and we are not asking to be paid the same amounts as our male counterparts. In many cases, we do not even get the same percentage of our leagues' revenues than male players do. The 'Equal Pay' movement is about receiving the same percentages" (Candace Wilson, Atlanta Dream). **Mean: 5.05 [5.01;5.1].**

Argument 2: "Men's leagues generate the money they do today because of decades of investments, media coverage, storytelling. Men's leagues still get 95 percent of the sports media coverage today. When considering why the revenue is different, we have to think about what part of the revenue gap comes from discrimination and bias. The 'Equal Pay' movement is as much about investments in youth sports and coverage by the media as it is about salaries." (Sylvia Cooper, Indiana Fever). **Mean: 5.00 [4.95;5.05]**

Argument 3: "Ultimately, as many arguments as there are against equal pay for us as female athletes, there's only one argument for it: it's fair. It helps break the deep, self-perpetuating cycle of unfairness that characterizes women's sport, and our place in society more generally" (Sue Smith, Seattle Storm). **Mean: 4.91 [4.86;4.96].**

Argument 4: "It is true that, generally speaking, men's leagues bring in more money than we do. But it was not always true. The NBA suffered \$20 million in losses in 1982, the NHL \$300 million in 2005, and most MLS teams are still not making profits. Asking women's leagues to show a profit within a matter of years after being founded holds us to standards men's pro sports leagues have not historically met." (Shayna Jones, Dallas Wings). **Mean: 4.75 [4.70;4.80]**

Argument 5: "The fact is, the reason why most people watch the NBA is not the athleticism of players, the dunks or the quality of play. They watch because they care about the players, their stories, their rivalries and what is at stake. When the media starts telling similar storylines about us, we see interest and viewership spike". (Theresa Thomas, CT Sun). **Mean: 4.69 [4.63;4.74]**

Transgender Bills, Persuasion only treatment group

Argument 1: Sports competition builds cohesion across different social groups. Meaningful interactions with trans youths, like those fostered on athletic teams, can expose cisgender youths to the lived experiences of trans people, reducing exclusionary attitudes and increasing empathy and acceptance. **Mean: 4.15 [4.08;4.21].**

Argument 2: The notion that the motivation of transgender athletes is to gain scholarships or a competitive advantage is simply a false narrative. Trans women don't threaten women and girls sports. They're teammates who want to play for the exact same reasons all athletes do: to have fun, to improve, to make friends, and be physically fit. **Mean: 4.08 [4.01;4.14].**

Argument 3: Many of these bills invoke spurious claims about how male athletes are uniformly more physically capable than females. They argue that transgender girls would get unfair advantages from testosterone levels. Peer-reviewed science does not support these claims. Rather, it finds that athletic performance results from a complex interaction of many factors, not just hormones or chromosomes. **Mean: 4.04 [3.97;4.10].**

Argument 4: These bills reveal that racism is entangled with anti-trans politics, as they assume White, Western standards of femininity and how women should look. These bans increase suspicion of both transgender and cisgender girls and women, especially those of color. **Mean: 3.94 [3.87;4.00].**

Argument 5: Research shows that playing sports helps fight depression, build community and cultivate self-confidence. These bills deprive trans kids of these benefits, when 85% of trans youths feel unsafe at school, they are more likely than other students to be harassed and physically attacked, and nearly half attempt suicide. **Mean: 3.89 [3.82;3.96].**

Transgender Bills, Persuasion and Group Cue treatment group

Argument 1: "The notion that the motivation of transgender athletes is to gain scholarships or a competitive advantage is simply a false narrative. Trans women don't threaten us cisgender athletes. They're teammates who want to play for the exact same reasons we all do: to have fun, to improve ourselves, to make friends, and be physically fit" (Sylvia Cooper, Indiana Fever). **Mean: 4.35 [4.29;4.41].**

Argument 2: "Research shows that playing sports helps fight depression, build community and cultivate self-confidence. These bills deprive trans kids of these benefits, when 85% of trans youths feel unsafe at school, they are more likely than other students to be harassed and physically attacked, and nearly half attempt suicide." (Candace Wilson, Atlanta Dream). **Mean: 4.35 [4.29;4.42].**

Argument 3: "I have seen how sports competition builds cohesion across different social groups. Meaningful interactions with trans youths, like those fostered with my teammates on athletic teams, can expose cisgender youths to the lived experiences of trans people, reducing exclusionary attitudes and increasing empathy and acceptance." (Shayna Jones, Dallas Wings). **Mean: 4.19 [4.13;4.25].**

Argument 4: "Many of these bills invoke spurious claims about how male athletes are uniformly more physically capable than us. They argue that transgender girls would get unfair advantages from testosterone levels. Peer-reviewed science does not support these claims. Rather, it finds that athletic performance results from a complex interaction of many factors, not just hormones or chromosomes." (Theresa Thomas, CT Sun). **Mean: 4.23 [4.17;4.30].**

Argument 5: "These bills reveal that racism is entangled with anti-trans politics, as they assume White, Western standards of femininity and how we, female athletes, should look. These bans increase suspicion of both transgender and cisgender girls and women, especially those of color." (Sue Smith, Seattle Storm). **Mean: 4.07 [4.01;4.14].**

Voting Rights, Persuasion only treatment group

Argument 1: Studies after studies have shown that the actual instance of voter fraud is extremely rare. And this is very logical: the penalties associated with voter fraud, usually felonies, far outweigh the impact that an individual or group of people might effect. **Mean: 4.48 [4.42;4.54].**

Argument 2: Voter ID laws deprive many voters of their right to vote, reduce participation, and stand in direct opposition to our country's trend of including more Americans in the democratic process. **Mean: 4.19 [4.12;4.25].**

Argument 3: Many Americans do not have one of the forms of identification states deem acceptable for

voting. These voters are disproportionately low-income, racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Such voters more frequently have difficulty obtaining ID, because they cannot afford or cannot obtain the underlying documents that are a prerequisite to obtaining government-issued photo ID card.

Mean: 4.15 [4.08;4.21].

Voting Rights, Persuasion and Group Cue treatment group

Argument 1: "Studies after studies have shown that the actual instance of in person voter fraud is extremely rare. And this is very logical: the penalties associated with voter fraud, usually felonies, far outweigh the impact that an individual or group of people might effect." (Sylvia Cooper, Indiana Fever). **Mean: 4.48** [4.42;4.54]

Argument 2: "Voter ID laws deprive many voters of their right to vote, reduce participation, and stand in direct opposition to our country's trend of including more Americans in the democratic process." (Candace Wilson, Atlanta Dream). **Mean: 4.47** [4.41;4.54]

Argument 3: "Many Americans do not have one of the forms of identification states deem acceptable for voting. These voters are disproportionately low-income, racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Such voters more frequently have difficulty obtaining ID, because they cannot afford or cannot obtain the underlying documents that are a prerequisite to obtaining government-issued photo ID card." (Shayna Jones, Dallas Wings). **Mean: 4.43** [4.37;4.50].

CATEs among demographic subgroups

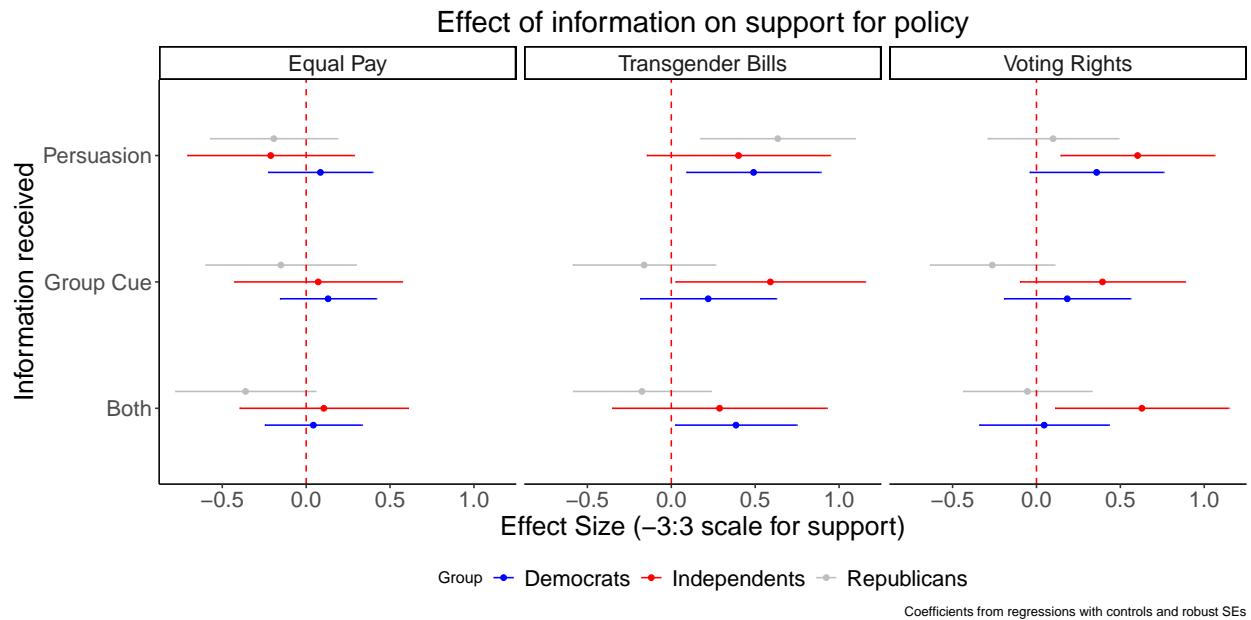


Figure 7.1: Effect of information on support for policy, CATEs by Party ID

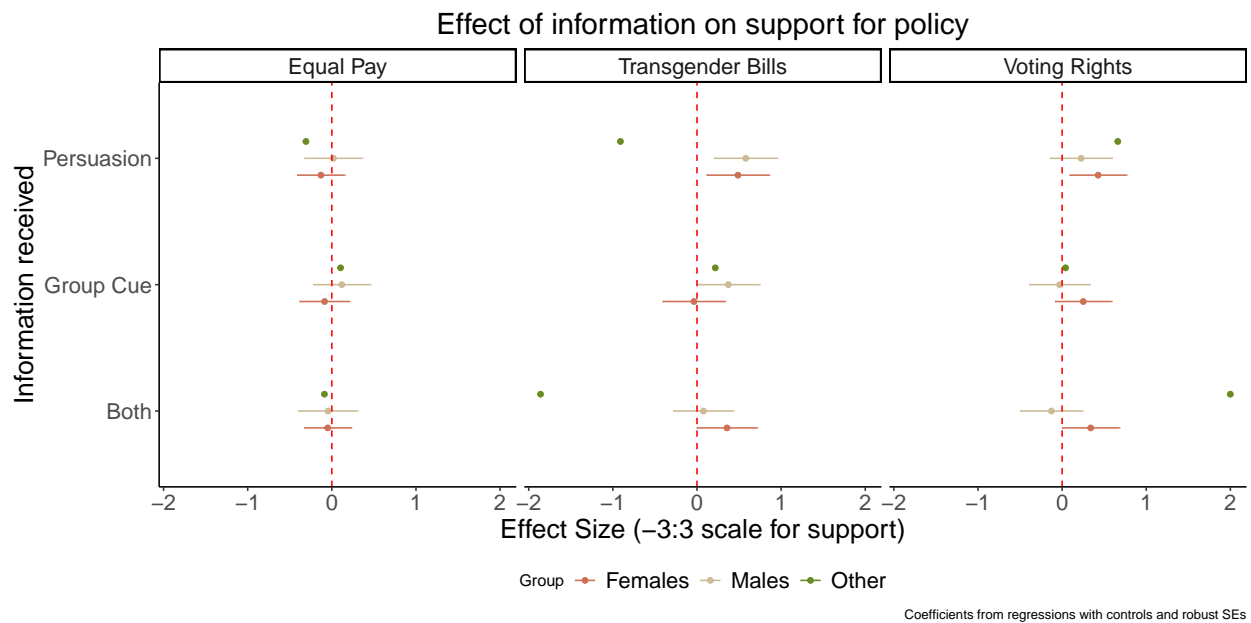


Figure 7.2: Effect of information on support for policy, CATEs by Gender

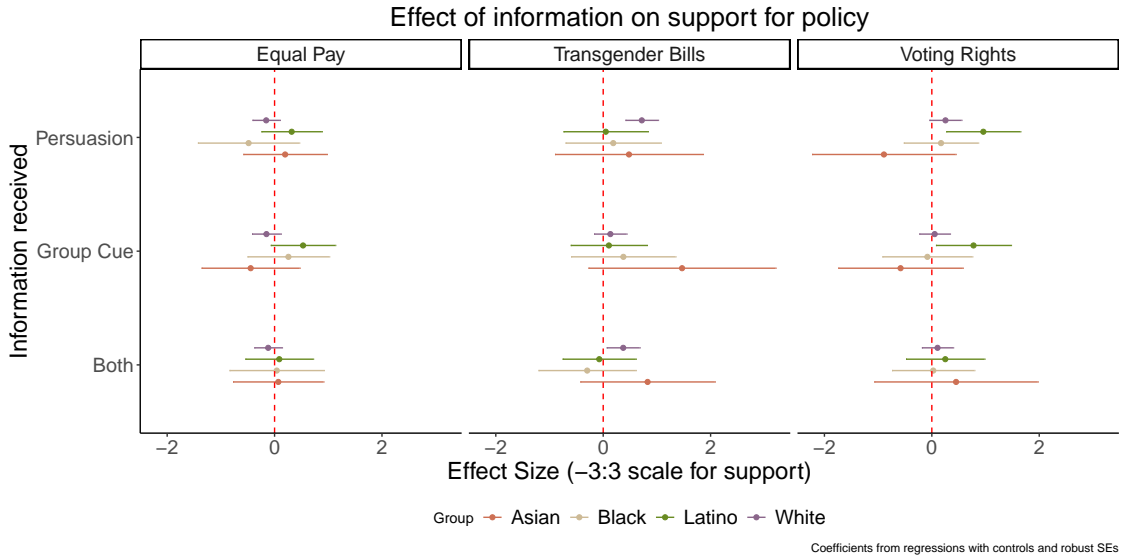


Figure 7.3: Effect of information on support for policy, CATEs by Race

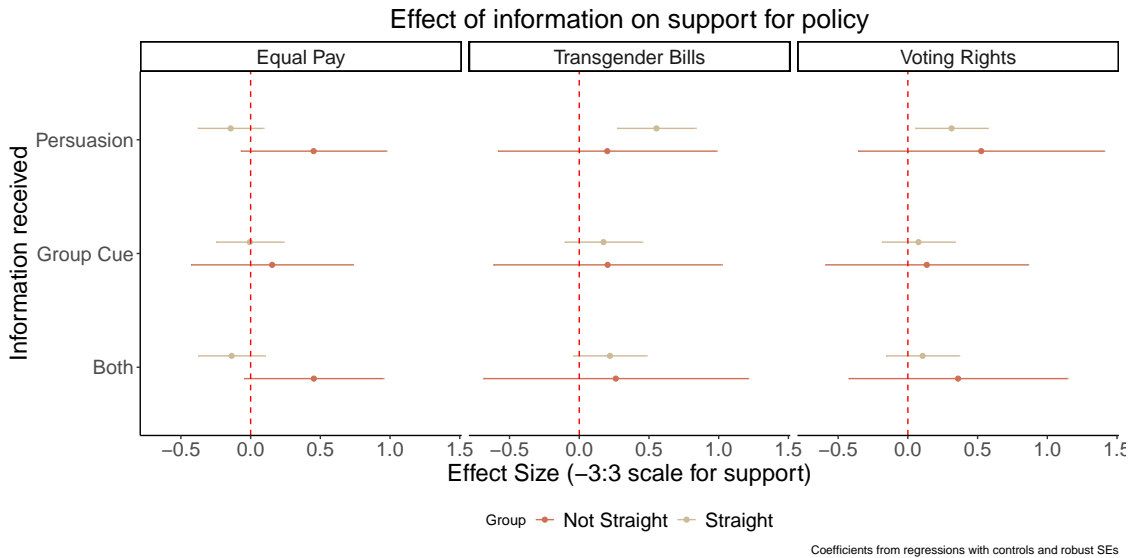


Figure 7.4: Effect of information on support for policy, CATEs by Sexual Orientation

Descriptive results, policy stances and sports fandom

Among respondents in the control group, I keep people who say they strongly like the WNBA, NBA, NFL, MLB or NWSL - people who can be considered to be "fans" of each league. Within each of these 5 fan groups, I compute the average support score on each of the three policies: equal pay, transgender inclusion (i.e. opposition to the bills preventing transgender youths from participating in team sports) and voting

rights (i.e. opposition to the Voting ID bills). The graph below shows that WNBA fans are outliers when it comes to politics, even compared to another women’s league, the NWSL. WNBA fans are significantly more likely to be in support of the three policies, while fans from other leagues are almost indistinguishable from each other.

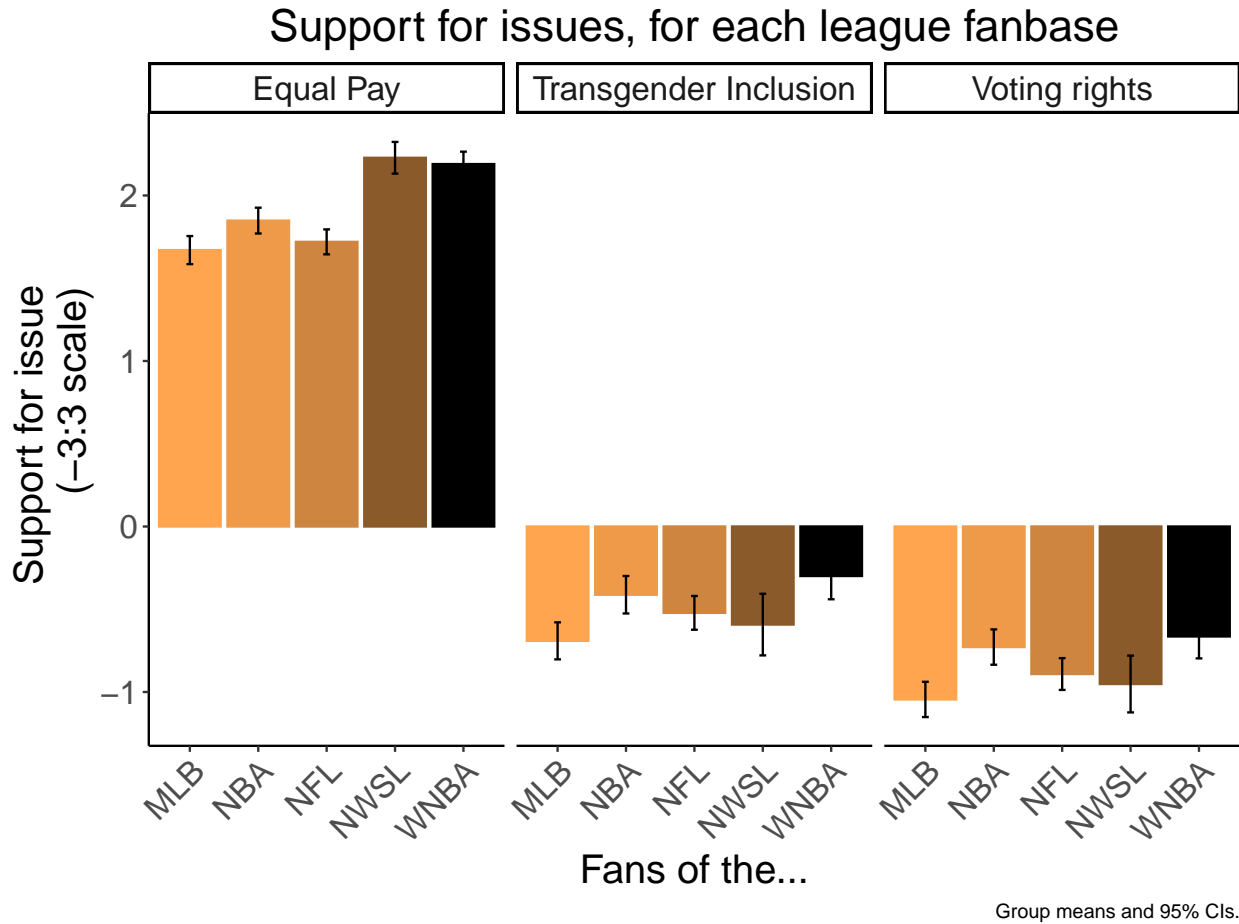


Figure 7.5: Baseline attitudes on policies, for fans of MLB, NBA, NFL, NWSL and WNBA

Descriptive results from qualitative open responses, policy stances and sports fandom

People’s take on why athletes are good or bad activists

I asked respondents to tell me why they think athletes make good (or bad) activists.

According to respondents, the reasons why athletes are not necessarily good activists are centered around the fact that athletes are rich and as such do not know the realities of American life for the average American:

- Although athletes and popular celebrities in general make good activists, I wouldn't say they are the best at representing. The main reason is that they are the lucky few who were able to rise from poverty and become who they are now; they no longer fully represent the average individual that they are supposedly an activist for.
- Athletes are terrible activists! They are skill at there sport and should stick to that. They live in a rich bubble and have no idea how the reality is for most of Americans outside their bubble
- Naw I would never listen to an athlete about their political views or personal views because they are rich and don't have the problems of regular people
- Athletes are rich narcissist spoiled-baby prima-donnas
- I believe athletes should stay out of politics an focus on the job their getting paid to play! Athletes' beliefs change when they start making a lot of money, they become rich an don't have a clue what the majority of Americans have to go through working real jobs with low pay trying to make ends meet!! They don't know what it's like having to work to make a living! It's a privilege to play sports an athletes are overpaid!! Doctors, teachers, soldiers, police an fire rescue should be paid more than athletes because it's a privilege to get paid playing sports!

On the contrary, many people argue that athletes make good activists, notably because of their platforms and because their experiences often expose them to some issues facing America today:

- I think that it is on the cusp of becoming a reality that sports figures need to help in Injustice. Because of their platform they are able to bring to light what is really happening. At first I thought it was not appropriate to disrupt the games for one person's beliefs. But as it became more evident that people were listening I started to realize this is an area where change can happen
- I think athletes are definitely in the position to be activists and advocates. Because of the makeup of teams (racially, educationally, nationality, socially, and sexuality), they have the ability to bring forward a variety of situations that are an important part of society. They also are obligated to serve because of opportunities they have achieved.
- Women's sports are a marvel of feminism and ought to be respected more. Women's leagues are often more politically active and feature more players facing multi-marginalizations. I do not think that athletes are good activists, but they are a great way to amplify the voices of activists due to their reach and influence.

- 'Athletes are people so why shouldn't they stand up for what's right and against what's wrong
- They have a platform and they should use it to make things better
- I am pleased to see athletes openly take a stand on their principles. For too long they have been seen by the leagues as meal tickets and "property". They are human beings with rights and are in a perfect position to expose what goes on in the industry while at the same time, improving the state of things.
- Athletes have an audience where their voice has the ability to reach a lot of people and make a positive difference in the world, if they use that reach in the right way
- 'I think player activism is important... these are high profile, highly compensated individuals that have huge fan bases... However I also believe that they have the responsibility to fully explain their position to their team and their fan base so there is no misinterpretation
- I believe that anyone that has a platform for positive change in the world should utilize it to its full potential
- Athletes are very influential, so when they speak, people definitely listen
- I believe regardless of how you've gained a platform, whether it was through sports or some other means, it's a very excellent thing to bring up important things such as politics. Due to the following you or your team might have, people might be more willing to listen.'
- I do not have or see a problem with Athletes voicing their political opinions when it something that directly impact them and their family or group.
- I think taking a strong stance against injustice enhances the league and promotes positive societal change. Individuals may feel compelled to learn more and voice their opinion when celebrities take a stance. Players are in a position of authority and using that authority to help others is the extremely important to the future of the league and our nation.
- Women in sports make great activists. They should young kids from all backgrounds that they can succeed no matter race, gender, sexuality, and more. They deserve equal pay.
- I'm not too sure if athletes are good activists because I don't follow sports, but if they are not, then I think they should be. Many people watch sports and look up to certain athletes. If the big name athletes stepped up and advocated for equal pay, to ban the Trans bill, and other social justice issues, I feel like they could make a huge difference and change the world to be a more equal place.

Women's athletes are in a specific position to be even better advocates, facing 'multi-marginalizations' themselves and having less to lose:

- Women's sports are a marvel of feminism and ought to be respected more. Women's leagues are often more politically active and feature more players facing multi-marginalizations. I do not think that athletes are good activists, but they are a great way to amplify the voices of activists due to their reach and influence.
- 'Athletes are people so why shouldn't they stand up for what's right and against what's wrong
- I love it when athletes use their power for good. From a business perspective it could potentially hurt a men's league. But a women's? It could only help bring attention and gain fans.
- As in all aspects of life (just my opinion) women leading can change the world because unlike men who generally react in aggressive threatening ways, women analyze and act based on facts. I remember the day the WNBA began. It along with women's soccer is a beacon of change not only our country, but especially our country needs. A woman as President would change the whole dynamic of politics over time. I am sure of it... Thank you.
- Women's sports aren't marketed as should thus not enabling many to realize the importance of their role in the many views that have been talked about globally.
- Many women's sports team go beyond the performative activism that most male teams engage in with social issues. Because of this, most women's teams are looked over by the public due to misogyny and political stances

Some people recognize the leading role played by the WNBA in matters of activism:

- The WNBA take the best stance on social issues
- I appreciate what the WNBA do as activists. I'm not a huge basketball fan, but I do occasionally watch and follow what the players have to say.
- I like how the WNBA is positively activist
- I think the women in the WNBA are positive role models for women and have a strong voice when it come to their view on social, and political events in society
- I love attending WNBA and love the activism out of many of the players. They have a voice and a spotlight and I think it should be used to good and educating

- I think the WNBA is amazing and they should be proud
- I think the WNBA and the players are doing a good job trying to make the world a better place
- WNBA's vocal support of social justice causes makes it a sports league leader in activism and other leagues should follow.
- They are the best in what they do and I love them so much for what they do and how much they have gone
- I have great respect for the ladies of the WNBA and even more respect for those who take a stand and fight for what they believe is right
- I watch the game because I love the sport. It's edgy, progressive and everything I would like to see.
- Women's basketball league is the only positive league I have seen use their platform to make a real difference.

When it comes to the WNBA and women's sports specifically, some people are also more likely to listen because the WNBA provides representation as women, POCs and queer people:

- When the members and players of the WNBA speak up about current issues and topics I am more likely to listen. The world is male centric. The world is white male centered. Women need to speak up and out more to get balance back to society
- I really appreciate the activism of the league, but I want more. All POC need any/all the help available to collectively and individually attain success. The WNBA is comprised largely of persons who are both POC and women... and their activism can incorporate a one-two punch for success.
- Anytime a WNBA woman, or any woman, shows her heart, sincerity, and determination for others, risking herself personally, publicly, or politically-not for profit, ego, or recognition, then I would be more likely to follow their opinions, appearances, and events.
- The irony about the WNBA is it creates a strong and positive feminist perspective in the casual observer. It is almost similar to the women's suffrage movement of the early 1900s. The WNBA allows a casual observer to be educated on both inequalities and possibilities. Somehow the WNBA educates while providing an entertaining product.
- People will find that these women are a lot like women they know, and share ideas that deal with all areas of like in this country.

- Hearing women speak out on the problems in the WNBA makes me want to follow the league because they are women standing up for each other
- It makes me more likely to follow them, as I too, am a lesbian
- The players I know about are mostly queer and I connect to them on that level

Chapter 4 Appendix

Results with GA comparison group

Figure 7.6: Donations before and after the Yahoo Sports article - GA

Donations in the GA race, before and after Yahoo Sports Article
Major candidates in GA

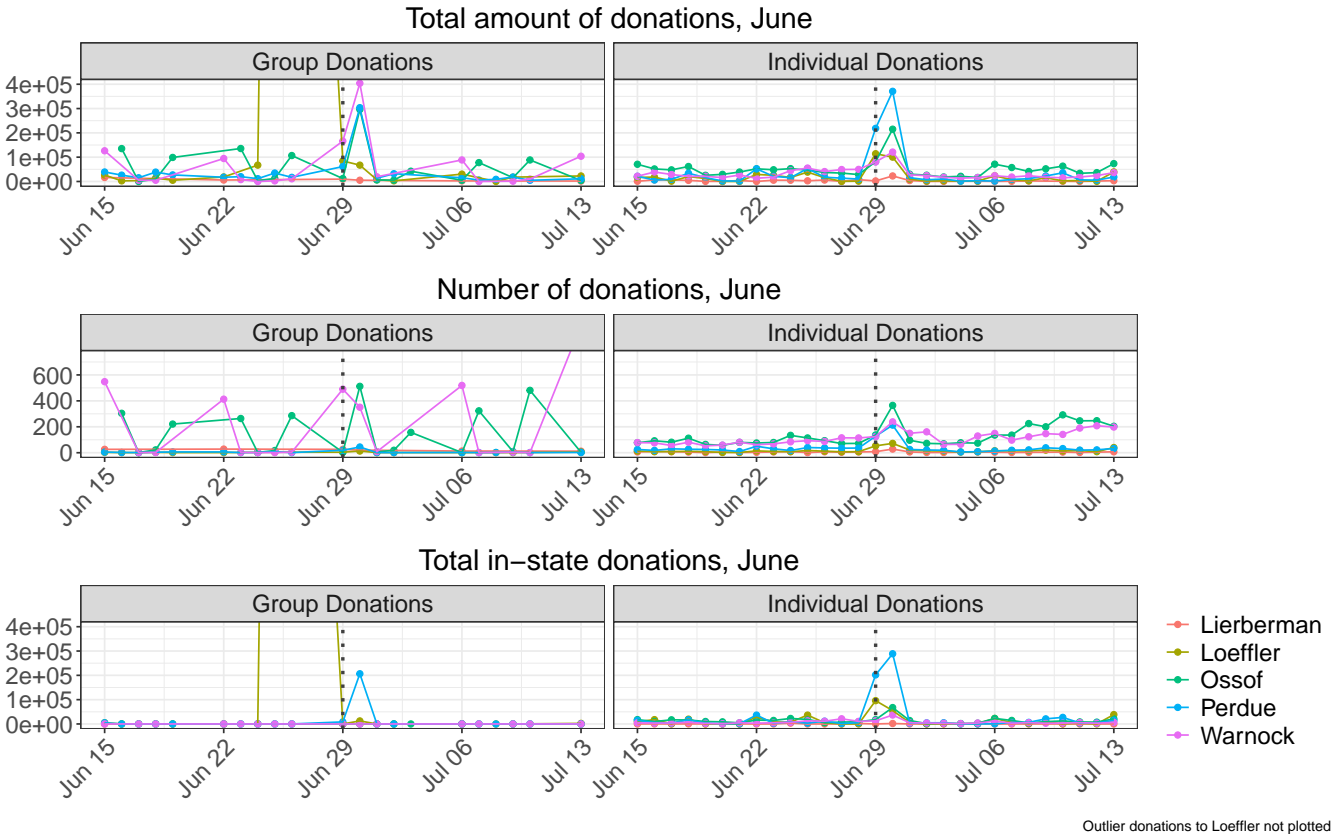
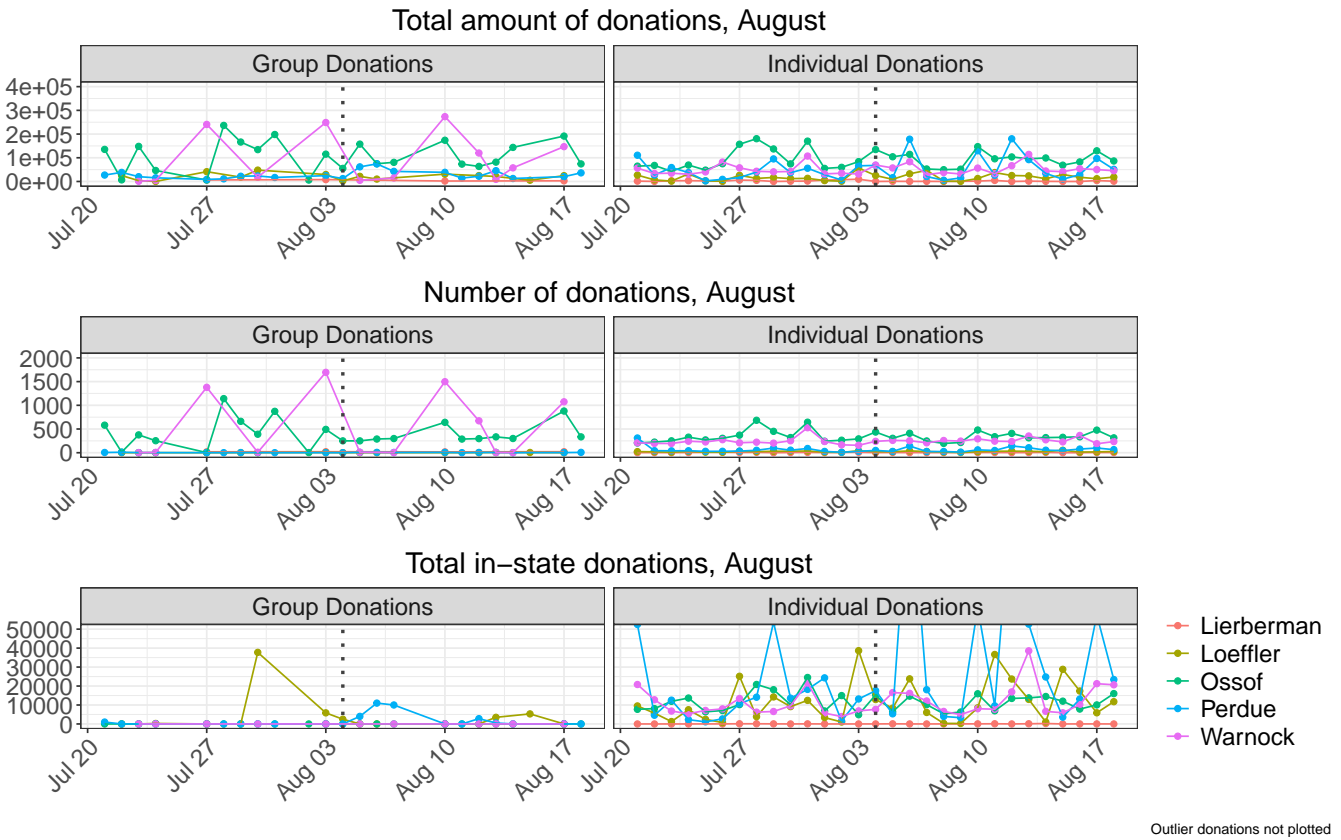


Figure 7.7: Donations before and after the Yahoo Sports article - GA

Donations in the GA race, before and after Vote Warnock tee-shirts
Major candidates in GA



Press sources

The two tables below shows the top 100 news sources used in the analysis.

	News Source	N
1	Newstex Blogs	2125
2	Targeted News Service	761
3	States News Service	548
4	CE Noticias Financieras English	375
5	CNN Wire	257
6	Congressional Documents and Publications	228
7	Newsweek.com	190
8	Associated Press State & Local	164
9	Associated Press International	130
10	The Daily Caller	130
11	Politico.com	124
12	The Hotline	123
13	News Bites US Markets	109
14	Forbes.com	107
15	The Frontrunner	81
16	US Fed News	76
17	CNN.com	73
18	AP Planner	53
19	Stillman Advance: Stillman College	51
20	The Blade (Toledo, Ohio)	51
21	USA TODAY	46
22	National Journal Daily Extra AM	44
23	Congressional Quarterly News	38
24	UPI	38
25	MSNBC THE REIDOUT 7:00 PM EST	36
26	Fox News Network FOX SPECIAL REPORT WITH BRET BAIER 6:00 PM EST	29
27	Fox News Network FOX HANNITY 9:00 PM EST	27
28	PR Newswire	27
29	Fox News Network FOX NEWS @ NIGHT 11:00 PM EST	26
30	CNN ERIN BURNETT OUTFRONT 7:00 PM EST	25
31	MSNBC ALL IN with CHRIS HAYES 8:00 PM EST	24
32	MSNBC THE LAST WORD WITH LAWRENCE O'DONNELL 10:00 PM EST	24
33	USNEWS.com	23
34	SEC Wire	22
35	The Albany Herald (Georgia)	22
36	CBS News Transcripts CBS THIS MORNING 7:00 AM EST	21
37	Atlantic Online	20
38	Fox News Network INGRAHAM ANGLE 10:00 PM EST	19
39	MORNINGS WITH MARIA MORNINGS WITH MARIA 6:00 AM EST	19
40	The Valdosta Daily Times (Georgia)	18
41	Fox News Network THE STORY WITH MARTHA MACCALLUM 7:00 PM EST	16
42	NBC News TODAY SHOW 7:00 AM EST	16
43	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 10:30 AM EST	15
44	PBS NewsHour (formerly The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer) PBS NEWSHOUR 6:00 PM EST	14
45	The BG News: Bowling Green State University	14
46	Business Wire	13
47	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 2:30 PM EST	13
48	MSNBC POLITICS NATION 5:00 PM EST	13
49	The Brunswick News (Georgia)	13
50	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 2:00 PM EST	12

Table 7.1: Top 100 news sourced used in analysis of the 2020 GA Senate race

	News Source	N
51	CNN CNN Tonight 11:00 PM EST	12
52	CNN New Day 7:30 AM EST	12
53	MSNBC MTP DAILY 1:00 PM EST	12
54	The Moultrie Observer (Georgia)	12
55	Voice of America News	12
56	CBS News Transcripts CBS MORNING NEWS 4:00 AM EST	11
57	CNN ANDERSON COOPER 360 DEGREES 8:00 PM EST	11
58	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 12:30 PM EST	11
59	CNN EARLY START 5:30 AM EST	11
60	CNN New Day 7:00 AM EST	11
61	CNN The Lead with Jake Tapper 4:30 PM EST	11
62	CNN THE SITUATION ROOM 6:00 PM EST	11
63	Fox News Network FOX AND FRIENDS 6:00 AM EST	11
64	Fox News Network TUCKER CARLSON TONIGHT 8:00 PM EST	11
65	Lou Dobbs Tonight LOU DOBBS TONIGHT 5:00 PM EST	11
66	MSNBC THE RACHEL MADDOW SHOW 9:00 PM EST	11
67	NPR All Things Considered All Things Considered	11
68	The Conversation - United States	11
69	The Cullman Times (Alabama)	11
70	TheStreet.com	11
71	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 10:00 AM EST	10
72	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 2:00 AM EST	10
73	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 9:30 AM EST	10
74	CNN CNN Tonight 10:00 PM EST	10
75	Messenger-Inquirer (Owensboro, Kentucky)	10
76	NPR Morning Edition Morning Edition	10
77	The Daily Iowan: University of Iowa	10
78	The Georgia State University: Georgia State University	10
79	Billboard	9
80	Christian Newswire	9
81	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 3:00 PM EST	9
82	MORNINGS WITH MARIA MORNINGS WITH MARIA 7:00 AM EST	9
83	The Griffon News: Missouri Western State College	9
84	American Banking and Market News	8
85	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 1:30 PM EST	8
86	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 11:00 AM EST	8
87	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 12:00 PM EST	8
88	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 4:00 AM EST	8
89	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 4:00 PM EST	8
90	CNN New Day 6:00 AM EST	8
91	CNN New Day 6:30 AM EST	8
92	CNN New Day 8:00 AM EST	8
93	CNN New Day 8:30 AM EST	8
94	CNN THE SITUATION ROOM 5:00 PM EST	8
95	Fox News Network SUNDAY MORNING FUTURES 10:00 AM EST	8
96	Investor's Business Daily	8
97	MSNBC 11TH HOUR WITH BRIAN WILLIAMS 11:00 PM EST	8
98	The Breeze: James Madison University	8
99	The Christian Science Monitor	8
100	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 3:30 PM EST	7

The table below shows the news sources that covered the WNBA the most within their coverage of the 2020 Georgia Senate race: WNBA coverage

	News Source	N
1	Newstex Blogs	93
2	CNN Wire	15
3	CNN.com	12
4	Forbes.com	11
5	USA TODAY	11
6	CE Noticias Financieras English	10
7	Newsweek.com	10
8	The Frontrunner	7
9	MSNBC THE REIDOUT 7:00 PM EST	5
10	States News Service	5
11	Connecticut Post (Bridgeport)	4
12	Targeted News Service	4
13	The Hotline	4
14	Associated Press International	3
15	Atlantic Online	3
16	Fox News Network FOX NEWS @ NIGHT 11:00 PM EST	3
17	National Journal Daily Extra AM	3
18	ABC News Transcript THE VIEW 11:01 AM EST	2
19	Associated Press State & Local	2
20	Fox News Network INGRAHAM ANGLE 10:00 PM EST	2
21	Miami Student: Miami University	2
22	MSNBC POLITICS NATION 5:00 PM EST	2
23	Philly.com	2
24	The Daily Caller	2
25	The Daily Citizen (Georgia)	2
26	The McGill Tribune: McGill University	2
27	ABC News Transcript GOOD MORNING AMERICA 8:14 AM EST	1
28	ABC News Transcript THE VIEW 11:19 AM EST	1
29	CBS News Transcripts CBS THIS MORNING: SATURDAY 7:00 AM EST	1
30	CNN CNN LIVE EVENT/SPECIAL 12:00 PM EST	1
31	CNN CNN LIVE EVENT/SPECIAL 4:00 PM EST	1
32	CNN CNN LIVE EVENT/SPECIAL 7:00 PM EST	1
33	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 10:00 AM EST	1
34	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 10:30 AM EST	1
35	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 2:30 PM EST	1
36	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 4:30 AM EST	1
37	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 5:00 PM EST	1
38	CNN CNN NEWSROOM 9:00 AM EST	1
39	CNN CNN Tonight 11:00 PM EST	1
40	CNN EARLY START 5:00 AM EST	1
41	CNN EARLY START 5:30 AM EST	1
42	CNN ERIN BURNETT OUTFRONT 7:00 PM EST	1
43	Congressional Quarterly News	1
44	Daily Californian: University of California - Berkeley	1
45	Fox News Network THE FIVE 5:00 PM EST	1
46	Fox News Network THE STORY WITH MARTHA MACCALLUM 7:00 PM EST	1
47	Inside Climate News	1
48	Lou Dobbs Tonight LOU DOBBS TONIGHT 7:00 PM EST	1
49	MSNBC MSNBC LIVE 8:00 PM EST	1
50	NPR All Things Considered All Things Considered 10:00 AM EST	1
51	NPR Morning Edition Morning Edition 09:00 PM EST	1
52	NPR Weekend Edition Saturday Weekend Edition Saturday	1
53	Politico.com	1
54	Rolling Stone	1

Table 7.2: Top news sourced citing the WNBA in their coverage of the race

Newstex is owned by ACI and its mission statement is to “cut through the clutter by finding and

delivering carefully chosen, superior content to people who need it”. Newstex selects entries from ‘experts, professionals, industry thought leaders, knowledgeable individuals and organizations. As an illustration, the two tables below shows some articles about the WNBA’s involvement in the 2020 Georgia Senate race that were selected by Newstex.

	Newspaper	Author	Headline
1	Newstex Blogs	Josephine Harvey	WNBA Players Back Kelly Loeffler's Senate Opponent With 'Vote Warnock' Shirts
2	Newstex Blogs		WNBA's Atlanta Dream Players Support Co-Owner Kelly Loeffler's Senate Challenger
3	Newstex Blogs	KJ Edelman	WNBA Players Wear Shirts Endorsing Candidate Running Against Kelly Loeffler, Co-Owner of the Atlanta Dream
4	Newstex Blogs	Kendall Baker	WNBA players escalate political protest against Sen. Kelly Loeffler
5	Newstex Blogs	Stephen Robinson	WNBA Players Rudely Use Free Speech To State Political Views Like 'Don't Vote For Racist Cartoon Villain'
6	Newstex Blogs	Vivian Kane	WNBA Players Are Actively Campaigning Against One Team's Own Co-Owner: a Racist Republican Senator
7	Newstex Blogs	Grace Panetta	What you need to know about the special election for US Senate in Georgia
8	Newstex Blogs		WNBA Players Start Full-blown Campaign For Democrat Senate Candidate
9	Newstex Blogs	Scott Lemieux	Vote the pandemic profiteer out
10	Newstex Blogs		Undoing MLK's Work: CNN's Harlow Wants People to Be Judged by the Color of Their Skin
11	Newstex Blogs	Stephen Robinson	Pam Bondi Can't Believe New York AG Letitia James. Just Can't Believe Her At All!
12	Newstex Blogs	Kristine Marsh	'View' Mocks 'Robot' 'Manchurian Candidate' Sen. Loeffler Calling Out Radical Warnock
13	Newstex Blogs		Kelly Loeffler's Racist Senate Campaign Attracts Shocking Number Of Racists
14	Newstex Blogs	Stephen Robinson	Kelly Loeffler's Racist Senate Campaign Attracts Shocking Number Of Racists
15	Newstex Blogs	Josephine Harvey	Sen. Kelly Loeffler Torched For Claiming There's 'Not A Racist Bone In My Body'
16	Newstex Blogs	Mary Papenfuss	Kelly Loeffler Poses With Former KKK Leader, Now Claims She Had No Idea
17	Newstex Blogs	Stephen Robinson	Dueling Jerks Perdue, Loeffler Get Their Racist On In Georgia Runoff
18	Newstex Blogs		Dueling Jerks Perdue, Loeffler Get Their Racist On In Georgia Runoff
19	Newstex Blogs		#KellyCantLead: Republican attacks on 'looting Kelly Loeffler' come back to haunt the Georgia GOP
20	Newstex Blogs	Mary Papenfuss	Pastors: Kelly Loeffler's Smear Of Rev. Raphael Warnock Is Broad Assault On The Black Church
21	Newstex Blogs		Conservative cred, Trump fealty Loeffler's calling card in Senate runoff
22	Newstex Blogs	Associated Press	Kelly Loeffler's wealth, Donald Trump loyalty face scrutiny in Georgia
23	Newstex Blogs	Scott Lemieux	Why do all these white supremacists keep showing up in my photo ops?
24	Newstex Blogs	Jay Maxson	NYT's Sports Year In Review Heavy On Social Justice Movement, Few Accomplishments
25	Newstex Blogs		Trump loyalist Perdue fights for not just his seat but the future of the GOP
26	Newstex Blogs		Who's in Georgia's US Senate Election Runoffs?
27	Newstex Blogs		Mark Hayes: We Must Save Ourselves
28	Newstex Blogs	Elwood "Sandy" Sanders	Dr. Walter Block's Answer to Those who Want to Boycott the Georgia Elections!
29	Newstex Blogs	Dave Zirin	'Sports Illustrated' Chose the Wrong Activist Athletes
30	Newstex Blogs		Even Atlanta Dream Players Wore 'Vote Warnock' Tshirts For Photo
31	Newstex Blogs	Grace Panetta	Two runoff elections in Georgia will determine control of the US Senate
32	Newstex Blogs	Dave Zirin	WNBA Players Just Showed Their Political Power
33	Newstex Blogs	Douglas A. McIntyre	America's Richest Senator, Worth \$1 Billion, Is Thrown Out of Job
34	Newstex Blogs	Liz Dye	Can You Hear Stacey Abrams Now??? ... GOOD.
35	Newstex Blogs	Vivian Kane	'Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell' Has Such a Nice Ring To It
36	Newstex Blogs	Jay Maxson	Caretakers of Democracy? Jemele Hill Tells WNBA To Oust Former Senator Loeffler
37	Newstex Blogs	Kristine Marsh	GMA Gloats Over WNBA Team Pushing 'Villain' Loeffler Out of Office
38	Newstex Blogs	Fisher Jack	Ex-GA Senator Kelly Loeffler is Selling WNBA Team After Controversial BLM Comments
39	Newstex Blogs		LeBron James Reveals His WNBA Plan After Raphael Warnock Defeats Kelly Loeffler
40	Newstex Blogs	Jenna Amatulli	LeBron James Reveals His WNBA Plan After Raphael Warnock Defeats Kelly Loeffler
41	Newstex Blogs	Mary Rose Corkery	LeBron James Floats Buying Sen Loeffler's Basketball Team
42	Newstex Blogs		Georgia GOP Senate candidates embrace law-and-order message
43	Newstex Blogs		The Jolt: In Georgia, the culture wars ramp up but without Donald Trump
44	Newstex Blogs		WNBA, Shannon Sharpe Outraged Over Atlanta Owner's Opposition to BLM
45	Newstex Blogs		Cancel News Network: CNN's Harlow Urges WNBA to Oust GOP Owner
46	Newstex Blogs		USA Today Sports Writer Tells GOP Senators to 'Shut Up and Stick to Politics'

Table 7.3: Selection of articles about WNBA’s involvement in the GA Senate race used in the analysis

	Newspaper	Author	Headline
47	Newstex Blogs		MSNBC Assists in Trying to Cancel WNBA Owner for Defending American Values
48	Newstex Blogs	David Burn	WNBA Connects with Today's Social Movements and A White Lady Doesn't Like it
49	Newstex Blogs	Dave Zirin	WNBA Players—Again—Show the Meaning of Radical Dissent
50	Newstex Blogs		Loeffler hopes her WNBA criticism rebounds to November support
51	Newstex Blogs		The Jolt: Behind the WNBA fight that Kelly Loeffler sought
52	Newstex Blogs		Kelly Loeffler Wants Atlanta Dream WNBA Team To Shut Up, Dribble, Maybe Tap Dance A Little
53	Newstex Blogs		WNBA Players Call For Senator Kelly Loeffler To Be Booted From League
54	Newstex Blogs	Nina Golgowski	Sen. Kelly Loeffler: Supporting Black Lives Matter Could Alienate Sports Fans
55	Newstex Blogs		Loeffler opposes WNBA's plan to spread 'Black Lives Matter' message
56	Newstex Blogs	Josephine Harvey	Sen. Kelly Loeffler Mocked For Claiming She's Been 'Canceled'
57	Newstex Blogs	KJ Edelman	Former NBA All-Star Baron Davis Offers to Buy Sen. Loeffler's Share Of WNBA Team: 'She's Gotta Go'
58	Newstex Blogs	Jacob Knutson	Georgia Sen. Kelly Loeffler urges WNBA to scrap pro-Black Lives Matter jerseys
59	Newstex Blogs	Leia Idliby	Sen. Kelly Loeffler, Co-Owner of WNBA Team, Objects to League Plan For Black Lives Matter Warmup Jersey
60	Newstex Blogs		#GASen: Loeffler releases 2 ads exposing Warnock as 'A Radical's Radical'
61	Newstex Blogs		Kelly Loeffler Not Familiar With So-Called 'Access Hollywood' Tape, Grab Them By The Who What Now?
62	Newstex Blogs		Democrat Raphael Warnock Just Advanced to the Georgia Senate Runoff
63	Newstex Blogs		Deadspin/DemocratSpin Assures Georgians Conservative Sen. Loeffler Remains Terrible
64	Newstex Blogs		Perdue and Loeffler's Well-Timed Stock Trades Give Georgia Democrats an Opening
65	Newstex Blogs	John Crump	Georgia's Must-Win U.S. Senate Election Guide 2020 ~ VIDEO & Volunteer Links
66	Newstex Blogs	Grace Panetta	How to vote in Georgia's US Senate runoff elections in January
67	Newstex Blogs		Georgia Senator David Perdue Privately Pushed For A Tax Break For Rich Sports Teamowners
68	Newstex Blogs		Georgia Senator David Perdue privately pushed for a tax break for rich sports teamowners
69	Newstex Blogs	by Robert Faturechi and Justin Elliott	Georgia Senator David Perdue Privately Pushed for a Tax Break for Rich Sports Teamowners
70	Newstex Blogs	Nina Golgowski	Everything You Need To Know About The Georgia Runoff Elections
71	Newstex Blogs		Georgia's two Senate seats still up for grabs as David Perdue Jon Ossof await a January runoff
72	Newstex Blogs	Kendall Baker	How the election could change sports
73	Newstex Blogs		'We Shall Overcome': Raphael Warnock's (Not-So-Long-Shot) Bid to Be Georgia's First Black Senator
74	Newstex Blogs	Josephine Harvey	Kelly Loeffler Panned For Insensitive Video Of Trump 'Beating' COVID-19 In A Brawl
75	Newstex Blogs		Appointed incumbent Kelly Loeffler tacks right in fractured Georgia Senate race
76	Newstex Blogs		Senator Kelly Loeffler flops trying to clean up her attacks on Black Lives Matter
77	Newstex Blogs	Matt Shuham	Sitting Senator Kelly Loeffler Gets Endorsement Boost From QAnon Candidate Greene
78	Newstex Blogs	DownWithTyranny	Georgia GOP Turns Into A Political Madhouse At Exactly The Wrong Time
79	Newstex Blogs		Georgia Might Go Blue
80	Newstex Blogs	Scott Lemieux	I'm never gonna know you now, but I'm gonna love you anyhow
81	Newstex Blogs	Ron Dicker	Barack Obama Congratulates Lakers; Donald Trump Does Not
82	Newstex Blogs		Media Darling WNBA Discounted Due to Race, Seattle Player Charges
83	Newstex Blogs	Dan Christensen	'The scandal is what is legal': How the very rich spend as much as they want to control our politicians
84	Newstex Blogs		'NBA 2K21' Introduces First-Ever WNBA Career Mode Called 'The W'
85	Newstex Blogs		Breanna Stewart Salary: WNBA Finals MVP Earns Less Than NBA Rookie Tyler Herro
86	Newstex Blogs		Sen. Kelly Loeffler Roasted For Ad Saying She's 'More Conservative Than Attila The Hun'
87	Newstex Blogs	David Dayen	Ultra-Rich Sen. Kelly Loeffler's Family Has Taken In \$3 Million in Farm Subsidies
88	Newstex Blogs	Marisa Fernandez	GOP Sen. Kelly Loeffler compares herself to Attila the Hun in campaign ad
89	Newstex Blogs	Chelsea Steiner	Republican Doug Collins Excoriated for Gloating Over RBG's Death
90	Newstex Blogs	Bekah Lyons	Your Mission Should You Choose To Accept It: Vote Red To Save The Republic - Senate Round-Up
91	Newstex Blogs	Stephen Robinson	GA Sen. David Perdue Might Have To Dump Trump Like A Bad Stock
92	Newstex Blogs	Stephen Robinson	Look At These White Football Coaches Believing Black Lives Matter, Is That Even Legal?
93	Newstex Blogs		Washington Post Maligns Conservative Owner As WNBA's 'Archenemy'

Topic Analysis

The word clouds below show the main words associated with each topic in the Structural Model Analysis (STM) of the media and Twitter coverage of the 2020 Georgia Senate race. As a reminder, I did not select or group together these words myself, the STM algorithm did. I named the topics (such as Warnock, WNBA, Covid) based on the words selected by the algorithm.

Figure 7.8: STM analysis: WNBA word cloud



Figure 7.9: STM analysis: Social Justice word cloud

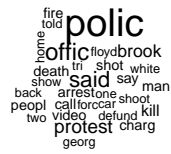


Figure 7.10: STM analysis: Warnock word cloud

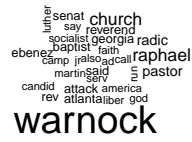


Figure 7.11: STM analysis: Covid word cloud

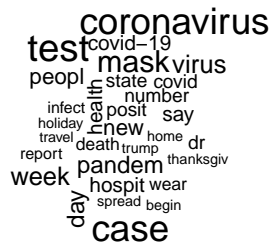
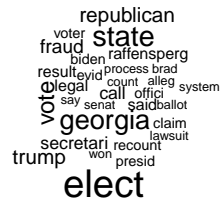


Figure 7.12: STM analysis: Election fraud word cloud



Chapter 5 Appendix

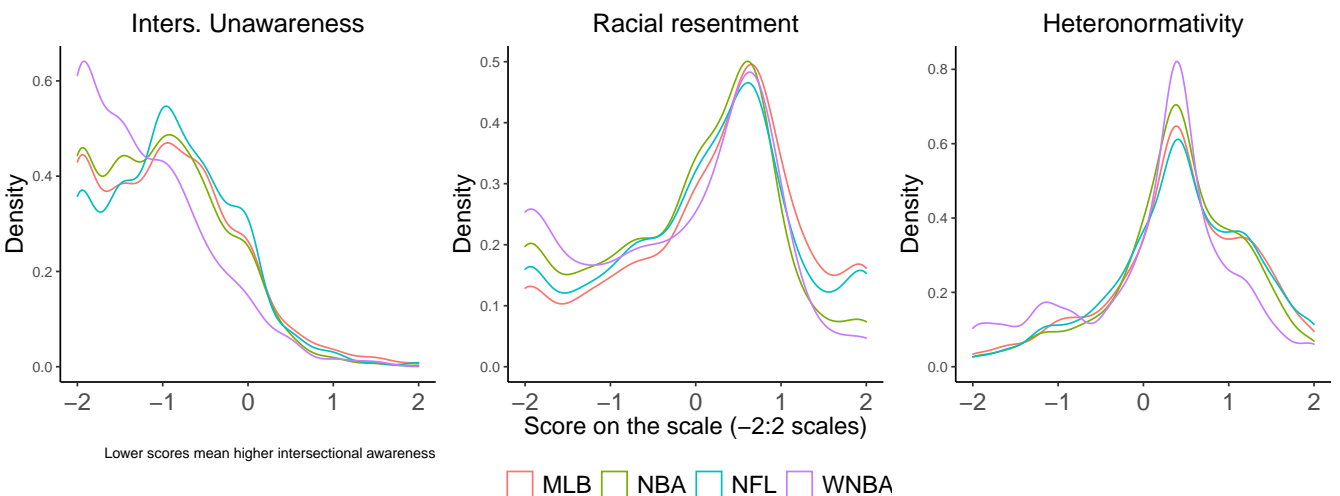
Describing the leagues' fans

The analysis in the main paper focused on the causal effects of seeing the Instagram posts. In this appendix, we present descriptive results of who watches and who wants to invest in the leagues more. These results have value because we lack a basic understanding of these questions for women sports. Note that because we asked participants about how much they want to invest in the leagues after they saw the treatment, some of the results might be biased by our treatment (i.e. driven by the treatment, and therefore not describing a reality without it). For this reason, we only use the control group responses to show the demographic distributions of the willingness to invest. Participants in the control group were not biased by our treatment. For the frequency of watching games on TV, we rely on a pre-treatment question asking how many games of each league had the respondent watched over the past 12 months. For the sake of clarity, results are presented for 3 leagues: the WNBA and two of the most comparable leagues (for different reasons), the NBA and NWSL.

I use data from multiple surveys (total respondents of 5,060) for the graphs and tables below. I keep respondents who said they strongly liked a league, which means I end up with 493 WNBA fans, 833 NBA fans, 771 MLB fans and 1,167 NFL fans. I first look at how these fans are distributed on the IA, racial resentment and heteronormative scales. The most striking result is how much more aware of intersectionality WNBA fans are compared to fans of other leagues. WNBA fans also tend to have less racial resentment and less heteronormativity than fans of other leagues.

Figure 7.13: Distribution of fans' scores on the heteronormative, intersectional awareness and racial resentment scales - by league

Distribution of fans' scale scores by league



Total N: 5,060. Number of fans: WNBA (493), NBA (833), MLB (771), NFL(1,167)

Then, I look at how leagues' fans are distributed among a number of key demographic characteristics: age, income, sexual orientation, gender, religiosity, education, partisanship, and race. WNBA fans tend to be younger, richer, less straight, more educated, more female and more Democrats.

Figure 7.14: Distribution of fans' incomes and ages - by league

Distribution of fans' incomes and ages by league

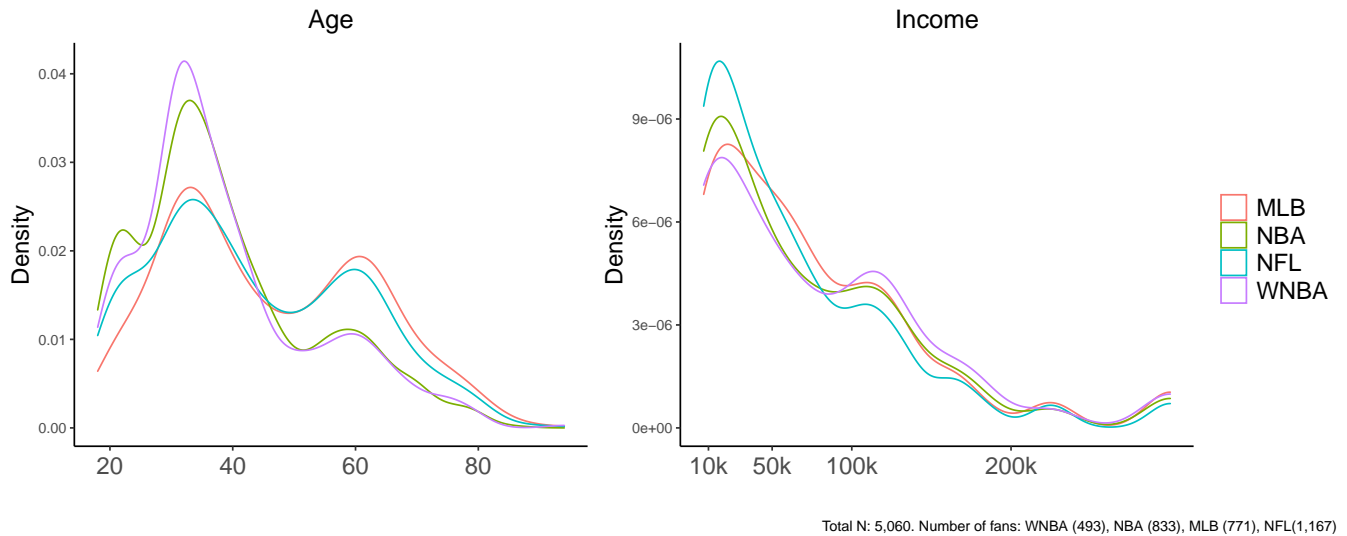


Table 7.4: Sexual orientation, race, education, party ID, gender and religiosity characteristics, fans of each league

	WNBA	NBA	NFL	MLB
% Straight	84	90	92	92
% Religious	78	80	75	78
% White	59	50	64	70
% Educated (BA or more)	56	53	47	54
% Republican	17	20	31	38
% Male	55	65	61	60

Engagement with the WNBA: CATES by demographic groups

Figure 7.15: How much of a WNBA fan are you: CATEs by demographics groups (race, party ID, gender and sexual orientation)

How much of a WNBA fan are you?

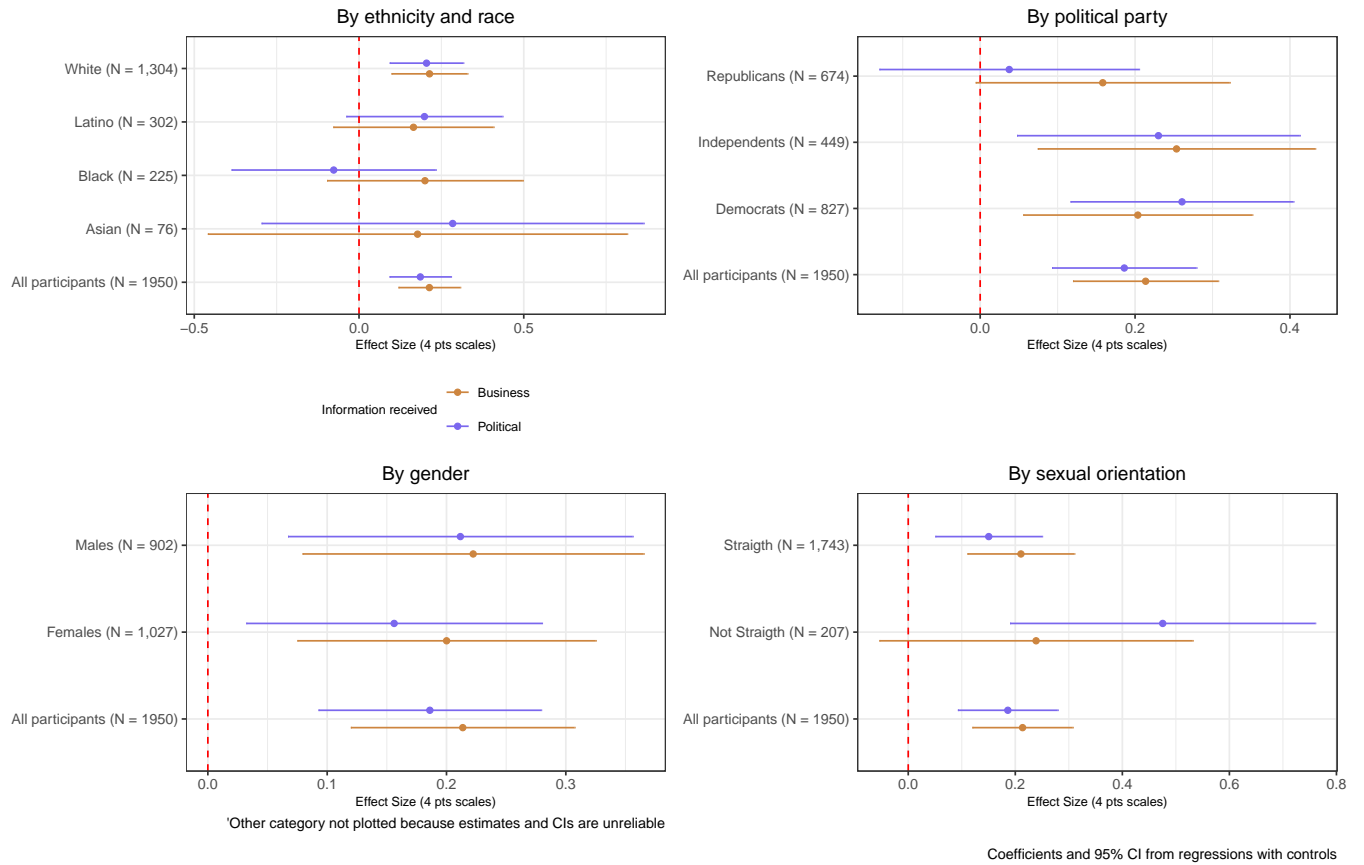
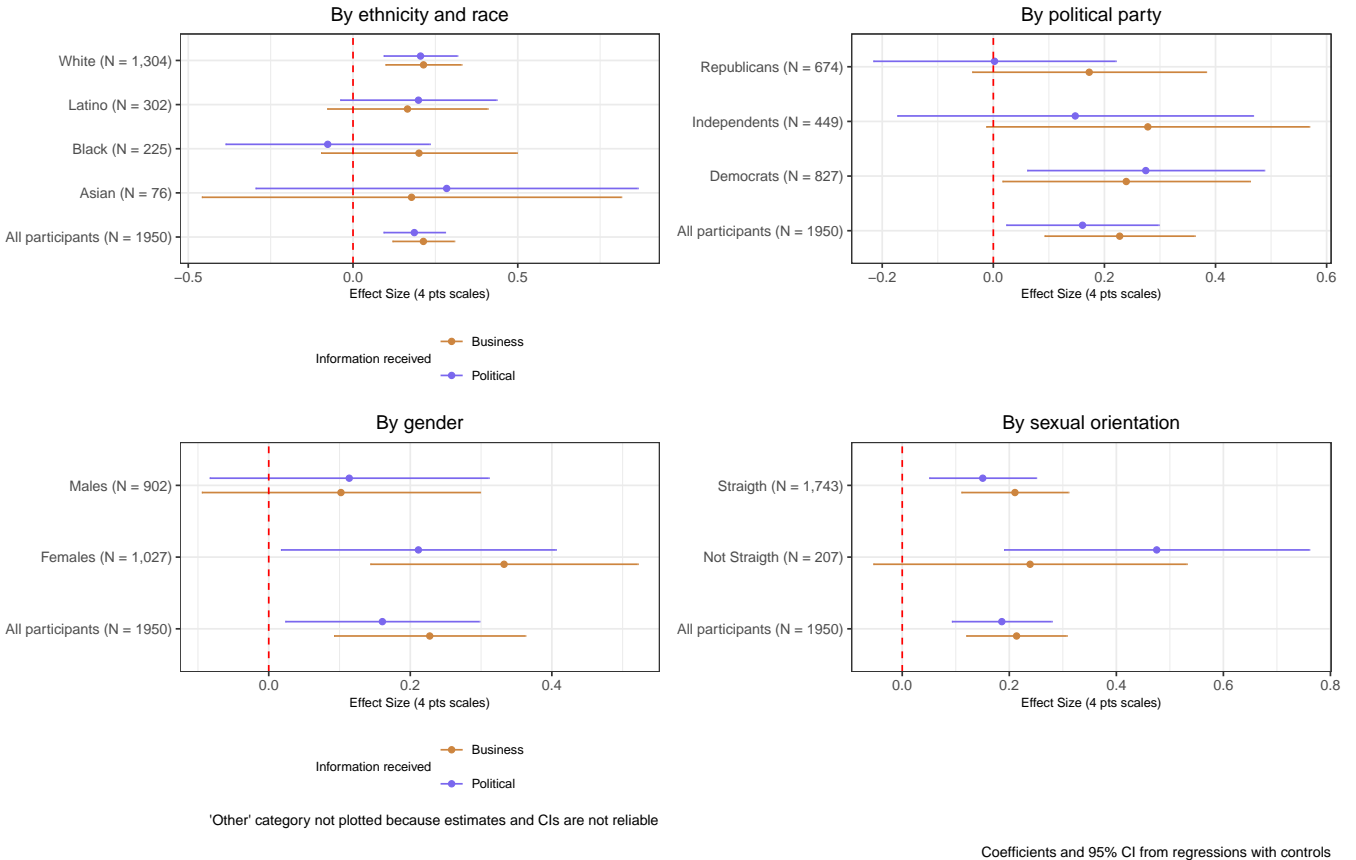


Figure 7.16: Would you be interested in learning more about the WNBA: CATEs by demographics groups (race, party ID, gender and sexual orientation)

Would you be interested in learning more about the WNBA?



CATEs on perceptions of activist athletes

Very similar dynamics emerge when looking at the effects of the treatment on respondents' perceptions of athletes's activism. Overall, the results seem to be again mostly driven by people in the identity-aligned categories. The small difference is that the overall effects tend to be slightly larger for the social justice treatment, driven by the fact that people in the identity-aligned groups move so much after seeing the social justice treatment.

Brands should encourage activism

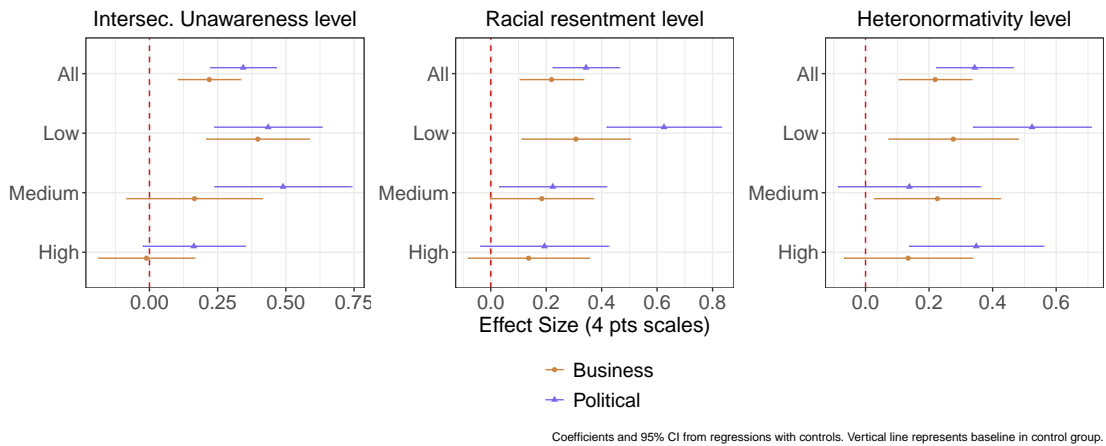


Figure 7.17: Brands should help athletes in their activism: CATEs by demographics groups (race, party ID, gender and sexual orientation)

Athletes should speak out

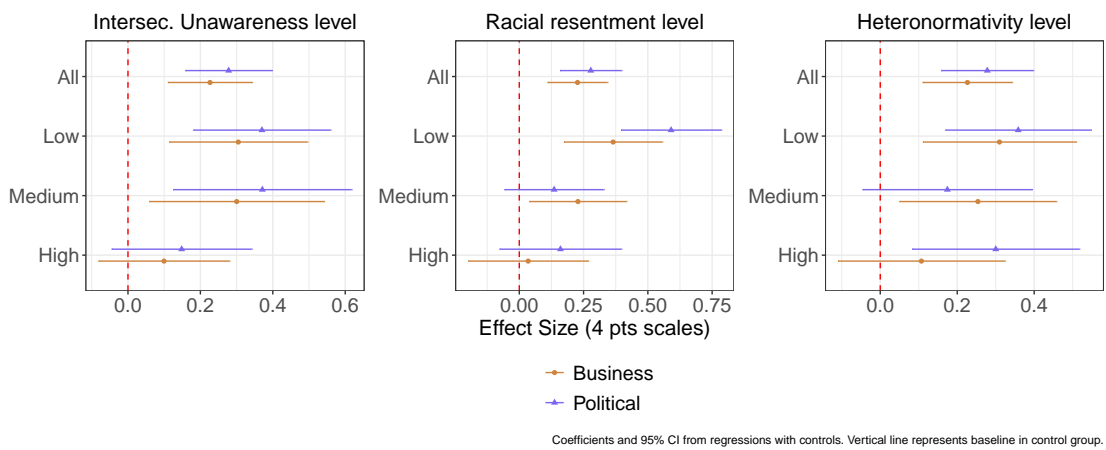


Figure 7.18: Athletes should speak up on political issues: CATEs by demographics groups (race, party ID, gender and sexual orientation)

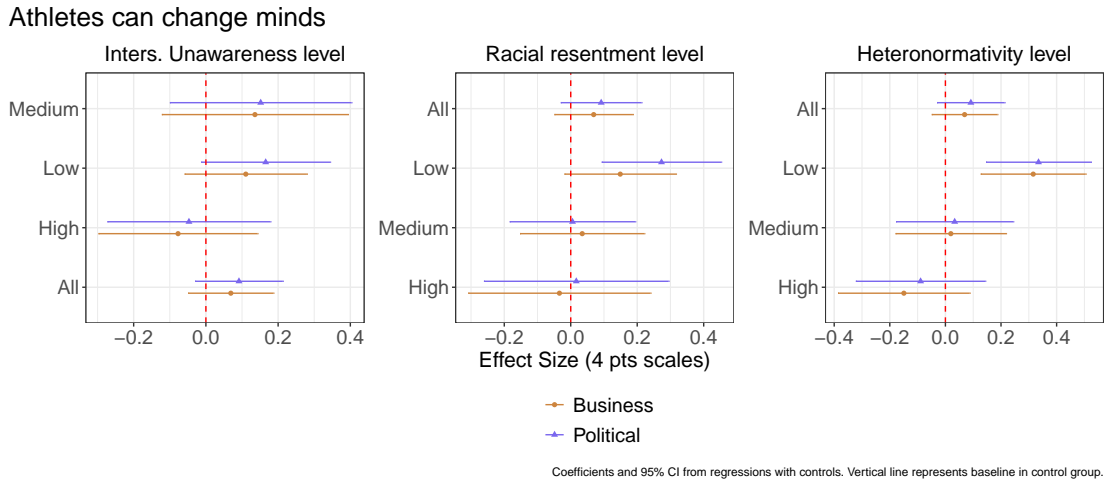


Figure 7.19: Athletes can change minds when they speak out: CATEs by demographics groups (race, party ID, gender and sexual orientation)

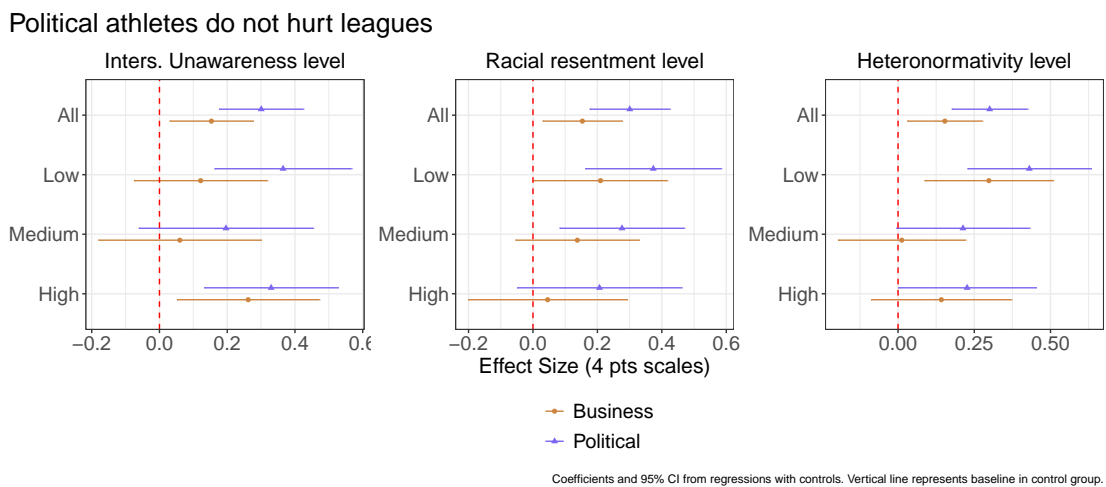


Figure 7.20: Athletes do not hurt leagues when they speak out: CATEs by demographics groups (race, party ID, gender and sexual orientation)

Responses to open questions

People more or less likely to watch a league because of its politics

When asked if political activism make them more or less likely to follow a sports' league and its players, people advance the usual arguments (see below for a representative sample) and are unexpectedly almost equally divided between those who say that politics made them give up on sports and those who say that they love sports more because of politics. Interestingly, only one side of this - people liking the leagues more - appear in the data.

On being turned off because of activism (from sports in general or the WNBA specifically):

- I watch sports to escape politics not to see politics.
- I can't stand the other sports and their cancel culture social justice agenda
- It's the one least likely to contain "social warriors"
- The other organizations are either degenerate or run by women
- I used to be a huge NBA fan until the latest BLM movement. More blacks are killed by other blacks and more whites are killed by justified police shootings than blacks. If they (the NBA) want social justice, why aren't their starting lineups more diverse?
- I completely disagree with the NBA and NFL taking political stands. I watched those sports in the past for entertainment, not to have a political ideology shoved down my throat. This behavior should not be condoned. I'm boycotting these sports until things change.
- What these leagues and athletes fail to understand is that sports is supposed to be a diversion, a safe haven for fans to get away from all the political rhetoric, the political correctness, the biased news coverage, etc. People need a break from that. But when these leagues and the athletes start joining in and mouthing off - and most of the time they don't know what they're talking about - then it becomes a major turnoff for fans. It is because of this country and its values that these athletes can earn the money that they do - more than most people will ever earn in a lifetime. And yet they hop on the "trash America" bandwagon. Disgusting.
- Sports bring people together. Keeping politics out of the arena can help bring people together. Even people who hate each other can find common ground over a sport they love but only if the sport is neutral.
- Most of the players are way too liberal for my taste and think they are owed much by society plus at least 1/3 seem to be lesbian - there is no place for the LGBTQ community in this world - period.
- The liberal, socialist, lesbian lifestyle turns me off... completely. It starts in high school with the coaches usually and works up thru college. It's a pathway to destruction, but they would never agree. One day they will see...but it may be too late. I pray for their souls.
- Women in the WNBA have much to be proud of and serve as inspirations to young girls. Political and social activism only ruins that. Many people no longer follow the NBA or NFL because their

players are so crude and disrespectful to anyone with an opposing view. Same with actors and other entertainers. WNBA players should play ball and continue to build self esteem in younger girls. I admire them, but I don't want to know their politics.

- The activism makes me way less likely to follow the league. These women absolutely disgust me and do not represent me in any way.
- Athletes generally are too emotional to discuss issues rationally.

On the contrary, other people affirm being more likely to follow and appreciate the leagues because of their activism:

- I appreciate what the WNBA do as activists. I'm not a huge basketball fan, but I do occasionally watch and follow what the players have to say.
- Their actions make me want to follow them more closely, but it makes me most interested if I support the issue
- The WNBA's activism makes me want to watch sports
- Both WNBA and women's soccer are more important to me because of them speaking out
- When leagues stand up for justice it makes me want to support them and it brings joy to my heart.
- I am not a basketball fan, but I respect the difference the WNBA has made in the lives of people who are.
- Whether "activism" makes me more or less likely to follow a player is entirely dependent on the kind of activism that is being done. Generally, the activism of the WNBA has made be more likely to follow them.
- I am not a sports watcher in general, so I am not more likely to watch due to activism. I am, however, more likely to have a positive opinion of the sport or league.
- Yes the political and social activism would make a difference in following the league
- I am more likely to follow a league if their political views align with my own. If they go against my views, I am less likely to support them.
- I think the political activism makes me more likely to watch. I like knowing the athletes care about issues.

- Political and social activism within the sport definitely makes me want to follow the league more closely in the news. I think it is so important for those with large platforms to use them to facilitate change.
- I would definitely be more interested if the league sparked political debate. The fact that they have a platform and choose to use it to speak up and advocate for real world issues means a lot. I don't like when someone has a platform and doesn't do anything of importance with it
- The political and social activism of sports leagues, like the WNBA, makes me like the league more and want to support them more.
- I am more likely to be more engaged with WNBA if they continue to speak their minds and address issues. Especially the disparity between NBA and WNBA as well as social issues
- I hardly follow sports anymore - WNBA players activism are the only reasons I've heard of the league
- In general, I do not care for organized sports. I DO support the WNBA players activism and their passion. Oh, and they should be paid equitably.
- It would make me follow WNBA more because it would actually give them character and individualism
- The political aspect when it reaches the news makes me want to watch the WNBA to see what's going on
- In my personal experience, I don't have that much knowledge about the WNBA. I would like to read and learn more about them before providing an opinion. I would probably follow the league and its players because they seem to be involved in social and political issues that affect real people. Fans are real people and some of them have gone through some type of social issues.
- I would be more likely to follow the WNBA after learning about their social activism.
- Not a fan of basketball in general, but the activism of players would interest me.
- Watching these women voice their opinions on matters that are important to them makes me more likely to follow the league.
- I would follow the league because they are clearly trying to be positive role models for people. By standing up and being supportive to whats happening in our world today.

When it comes to the WNBA and women's sports specifically, some people are also more likely because the WNBA provides representation as women, POCs and queer people:

- When the members and players of the WNBA speak up about current issues and topics I am more likely to listen. The world is male centric. The world is white male centered. Women need to speak up and out more to get balance back to society
- I really appreciate the activism of the league, but I want more. All POC need any/all the help available to collectively and individually attain success. The WNBA is comprised largely of persons who are both POC and women... and their activism can incorporate a one-two punch for success.
- Anytime a WNBA woman, or any woman, shows her heart, sincerity, and determination for others, risking herself personally, publicly, or politically-not for profit, ego, or recognition, then I would be more likely to follow their opinions, appearances, and events.
- The irony about the WNBA is it creates a strong and positive feminist perspective in the casual observer. It is almost similar to the women's suffrage movement of the early 1900s. The WNBA allows a casual observer to be educated on both inequalities and possibilities. Somehow the WNBA educates while providing an entertaining product.
- People will find that these women are a lot like women they know, and share ideas that deal with all areas of life in this country.
- Hearing women speak out on the problems in the WNBA makes me want to follow the league because they are women standing up for each other
- It makes me more likely to follow them, as I too, am a lesbian
- The players I know about are mostly queer and I connect to them on that level

People also notice how the reach of the league and its activism could broaden with more coverage from the media:

- I think that women's sports are an important part of society, giving women opportunities to show off their athletic abilities and follow their dreams. However, there is significantly less coverage on these leagues and athletes, likely due to the sports world being predominately male. For many people like me, who aren't avid sports fans but wouldn't mind watching sports if it somehow got my attention, political and social activism would definitely make me more likely to follow the league and its players. For example, the US women's soccer team garnered a lot of fans for both its success and activism of players.

- I'm for what the WNBA is doing, but the media and tv stations are not helping at all. Hardly ever see games promoted and/shown because there's money in it and that's what all these tv and cable owners care about. Hard to get your point across when the people upstairs won't help.
- WNBA athletes are starting movement that is overlooked and has been happening for many years. As the country preaches of equality, we sure lose sight of that message because the difference is between skin color, gender, sexuality, and race.
- Women's sports seem to have turned a corner, as far as public acceptance. some of the astigmatism, have been removed from the athletes, as the quality of the games have risen. It seems that they will improve when sponsorship improves. The games have become more exciting, even at the high school level and pre teen levels.
- I've never really watched WNBA games, but if it's true that ESPN, etc don't share narratives about players, then that has to contribute largely to the lack of fair play and interest.

People's take on why athletes are good or bad activists

I also asked respondents to tell me why they think athletes make good (or bad) activists.

The reasons why athletes are not necessarily good activists are centered around the fact that athletes are rich and as such do not know the realities of American life for the average American:

- Although athletes and popular celebrities in general make good activists, I wouldn't say they are the best at representing. The main reason is that they are the lucky few who were able to rise from poverty and become who they are now; they no longer fully represent the average individual that they are supposedly an activist for.
- Athletes are terrible activists! They are skill at their sport and should stick to that. They live in a rich bubble and have no idea how the reality is for most of Americans outside their bubble
- Naw I would never listen to an athlete about their political views or personal views because they are rich and don't have the problems of regular people
- Athletes are rich narcissist spoiled-baby prima-donnas
- I believe athletes should stay out of politics and focus on the job they're getting paid to play! Athletes' beliefs change when they start making a lot of money, they become rich and don't have a clue what

the majority of Americans have to go through working real jobs with low pay trying to make ends meet!! They don't know what it's like having to work to make a living! It's a privilege to play sports an athletes are overpaid!! Doctors, teachers, soldiers, police an fire rescue should be paid more than athletes because it's a privilege to get paid playing sports!

On the contrary, many people argue that athletes make good activists, notably because of their platforms and because their experiences often expose them to some issues facing America today:

- I think that it is on the cusp of becoming a reality that sports figures need to help in Injustice. Because of their platform they are able to bring to light what is really happening. At first I thought it was not appropriate to disrupt the games for one person's beliefs. But as it became more evident that people were listening I started to realize this is an area where change can happen
- I think athletes are definitely in the position to be activists and advocates. Because of the makeup of teams (racially, educationally, nationality, socially, and sexuality), they have the ability to bring forward a variety of situations that are an important part of society. They also are obligated to serve because of opportunities they have achieved.
- Women's sports are a marvel of feminism and ought to be respected more. Women's leagues are often more politically active and feature more players facing multi-marginalizations. I do not think that athletes are good activists, but they are a great way to amplify the voices of activists due to their reach and influence.
- 'Athletes are people so why shouldn't they stand up for what's right and against what's wrong
- They have a platform and they should use it to make things better
- I am pleased to see athletes openly take a stand on their principles. For too long they have been seen by the leagues as meal tickets and "property". They are human beings with rights and are in a perfect position to expose what goes on in the industry while at the same time, improving the state of things.
- Athletes have an audience where their voice has the ability to reach a lot of people and make a positive difference in the world, if they use that reach in the right way
- 'I think player activism is important... these are high profile, highly compensated individuals that have huge fan bases... However I also believe that they have the responsibility to fully explain their position to their team and their fan base so there is no misinterpretation

- I believe that anyone that has a platform for positive change in the world should utilize it to its full potential
- Athletes are very influential, so when they speak, people definitely listen
- I believe regardless of how you've gained a platform, whether it was through sports or some other means, it's a very excellent thing to bring up important things such as politics. Due to the following you or your team might have, people might be more willing to listen.'
- I do not have or see a problem with Athletes voicing their political opinions when it something that directly impact them and their family or group.
- I think taking a strong stance against injustice enhances the league and promotes positive societal change. Individuals may feel compelled to learn more and voice their opinion when celebrities take a stance. Players are in a position of authority and using that authority to help others is the extremely important to the future of the league and our nation.
- Women in sports make great activists. They should young kids from all backgrounds that they can succeed no matter race, gender, sexuality, and more. They deserve equal pay.
- I'm not too sure if athletes are good activists because I don't follow sports, but if they are not, then I think they should be. Many people watch sports and look up to certain athletes. If the big name athletes stepped up and advocated for equal pay, to ban the Trans bill, and other social justice issues, I feel like they could make a huge difference and change the world to be a more equal place.

Women's athletes are in a specific position to be even better advocates, facing 'multi-marginalizations' themselves and having less to lose:

- Women's sports are a marvel of feminism and ought to be respected more. Women's leagues are often more politically active and feature more players facing multi-marginalizations. I do not think that athletes are good activists, but they are a great way to amplify the voices of activists due to their reach and influence.
- 'Athletes are people so why shouldn't they stand up for what's right and against what's wrong
- I love it when athletes use their power for good. From a business perspective it could potentially hurt a men's league. But a women's? It could only help bring attention and gain fans.
- As in all aspects of life (just my opinion) women leading can change the world because unlike men who generally react in aggressive threatening ways, women analyze and act based on facts. I remember the

day the WNBA began. It along with women's soccer is a beacon of change not only our country, but especially our country needs. A woman as President would change the whole dynamic of politics over time. I am sure of it... Thank you.

- Women's sports aren't marketed as should thus not enabling many to realize the importance of their role in the many views that have been talked about globally.
- Many women's sports team go beyond the performative activism that most male teams engage in with social issues. Because of this, most women's teams are looked over by the public due to misogyny and political stances

Some people recognize the leading role played by the WNBA in matters of activism:

- The WNBA take the best stance on social issues
- I appreciate what the WNBA do as activists. I'm not a huge basketball fan, but I do occasionally watch and follow what the players have to say.
- I like how the WNBA is positively activist
- I think the women in the WNBA are positive role models for women and have a strong voice when it come to their view on social, and political events in society
- I love attending WNBA and love the activism out of many of the players. They have a voice and a spotlight and I think it should be used to good and educating
- I think the WNBA is amazing and they should be proud
- I think the WNBA and the players are doing a good job trying to make the world a better place
- WNBA's vocal support of social justice causes makes it a sports league leader in activism and other leagues should follow.
- They are the best in what they do and I love them so much for what they do and how much they have gone
- I have great respect for the ladies of the WNBA and even more respect for those who take a stand and fight for what they believe is right
- I watch the game because I love the sport. It's edgy, progressive and everything I would like to see.
- Women's basketball league is the only positive league I have seen use their platform to make a real difference.

People's interest in the league being sparked by the information provided in the survey

In the quotes above, some people acknowledged being more interested in the league because of activism and provided reasons for why female athletes might be good activist. As an illustration of how seeing activism can change people's minds about the league, the following quotes show how the treatments provided in the survey (a 1min30 video and/or Instagram Posts with quotes and details on the league's activism) changed people's perceptions of the league:

- The political and social activism from the WNBA shown in the video has definitely peaked my interest in following the league/players. They gave me the warm tingles all over which I have not felt in a long time
- I am going to follow these girls on Facebook ...I am going to follow them and pay attention to what they are all standing up for and stand beside these girls .they are saying stuff ordinarily I wouldn't care two hoots for. Tonight after watching this video and reading all the text here...is making me cry
- I have a strong dislike for sports, but the information in this survey has made me appreciate the WNBA and what it stands for. It's heartening to know the league cares so much about activism and standing up for women's rights, trans rights, gay rights, BIPOC rights.
- Honestly with the activism in the WNBA, it makes me much more likely to follow the league and its players. Before this survey i barely knew anything about the WNBA but being queer myself and seeing them support LGBTQ+ and BLM that means a lot to me
- At first, i looked at the WNBA like a majority of people who don't know much about it. But after watching the videos here, I'm actually interested in learning and following it. Thank you.
- After reading and viewing the video I'm really interested and intrigued in learning who they are as a person I can see myself looking up to them as role models
- The WNBA's positions really caught my attention. They are quite committed
- I'm not a sports fan, but the survey told me something I didn't know was going on in the sports world.
- I liked it, I learned something new today
- I like this survey because I am not really athletic and don't follow sports to much. I was interested in finding out that these teams are standing up for what is right. I don't think I would have even known this had I not done your survey.

- I think this was a nice survey that opened up my mind. I only like watching sports and I am not too invested in the players' daily lives.
- The survey was interesting, and made me aware of 2 or 3 leagues that I didn't even know existed. I believe activism on the part of athletes is a good thing, as long as it is done in the right way (such as asking people to vote but not supporting a particular candidate).
- Interesting survey. Really enjoyed it and enjoyed learning about the good that the WNBA is creating in the world, which I did not know about before. Thank you.
- Thank you for this survey. Now I want to find out more about the WNBA.
- It's nice to know that they are out here advocating for a true cause.
- Very interesting... made me kinda want to know more
- This survey was interesting it gives insight on some things I did not know.
- I've never really watched women's sports, but from what I have seen in the video they are doing a great job and I hope they continue and people become more aware.
- I am more likely to follow the WNBA after learning about their background, struggles and positivity in the survey.
- I love the political and social activism of the WNBA! I had no idea about the personal life of the different players - very interesting!!
- I totally support these women in the WNBA and the causes they stand up plus speak up for. I don't follow/never fully understood nor played the sport of basketball... However, my interest in it has now been sparked. They are using their voices upon their pedestal platform positively, not just solely to benefit for themselves but to improve circumstances for all who exist as female gender human beings.
- Thank you I loved this survey and I now want to learn more information on the WNBA
- The survey was good in getting to know a little more about the WNBA and some of its accomplishments.
- It makes me more likely to follow them. There were some really great points made in that video.
- I appreciate the information concerning the WNBA and their commitment to justice. Thank you for bringing this to my attention.

- Very interesting survey, don't think I've taken one before that dealt with such serious issues at this depth. It actually made me think afterwards, and to go with that, provided resources. Way to go.
- Seeing the information in this survey makes me want to follow the team
- Inspiring to hear from the women of the WNBA, knowing they face the same if not more prejudice and have been a voice in matters before they became mainstream
- Interesting. Caused me to think about the league in a different way.
- Under appreciated, They are out there, people like me don't know much about it. They use a lot of resources but still aren't well known.
- I'm very interested and open to learning more about the league
- The WNBA seems like a great role model. From what I saw in the video they support some wonderful issues.
- I don't generally follow women's sports but this is interesting
- I thought this survey was informative. I have to say as an NBA/NCAA hoops fan I am moved. I listen to Candice Parker speak out about these equality situations a lot. I love her for what's she has done for her sport and how educated she is.
- I think the survey was good. It informed me of some of the things I never knew
- I would like to see more interviews with these athletes would be helpful by showing how they feel about causes they support and would help shine a light on them. I don't know who these athletes are, but would like to know them.
- It was a very educational piece of information. It is something I will think about.