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The Political and Social Advancement of Divine Nine Sorority Women.

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What motivates Divine Nine sorority women to be high-achieving politically and socially?

The Political and Social Advancement of Divine Nine sorority women.

Honors Research Project

Department of Political Science

The University of Akron

Simara Vines

INTRODUCTION

African American women are the least represented in any executive office. Only 5.4% of African American women are a part of Congress, (CAWP). However, 75% of Congressional members are white – which is more than their 59% share of the population, (Schaeffer, 2023). Despite this, the election of President Joseph Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris (the first African and Asian American woman elected to vice presidency), there has been an increase in African American women running for government positions. African American women ran and won a remarkable number of Congressional seats in 2020, the year Kamala Harris was elected vice president. Of the 30 women elected to Congress, 25 of them are a part of Divine Nine sororities.

Although African American women’s political participation might not appear to be a major issue, there are several components that influence minority women’s political motivations. Before running, many African American women require support, leadership, and civic engagement opportunities, all of which are benefits of being a member of a Divine Nine organization. Within the National Pan-Hellenic Council, nine historically Black Greek Letter Organization(s), (BGLO), form the Divine Nine, (also known as Divine 9 or D9). There are five fraternities within the Divine 9: Alpha Phi Alpha, Inc. (1906), Kappa Alpha Psi, Inc. (1911), Omega Psi Phi, Inc. (1911), Phi Beta Sigma, Inc. (1914), and Iota Phi Theta, Inc. (1963). Additionally, the Divine 9 is home to four sororities: Alpha Kappa Alpha, Inc. (1908), Delta Sigma Theta, Inc. (1913), Zeta Phi Beta, Inc. (1920), and Sigma Gamma Rho, Inc. (1922), all of which presently have many 34 Congressional members, (Shelton, 2021). Divine 9 women and political office are intricately linked because these organizations prioritize service, community,

and scholarship. There is a severe underrepresentation of African Americans in politics; with 53 African Americans in the House and 3 in the Senate, compared to 313 White Americans in the House and 88 in the Senate, (Schoen & Dzhanova, 2020). Of the number of African Americans in the legislative branch, only 5% of African American women hold Statewide, Congressional, and Executive positions, (CAWP). It is necessary to close this gap to advance the representation of African Americans in politics.

Quality research on African American women was scarce until the 2018 midterm elections known as “The year of the Black woman,” (Haines, 2023) by researchers due to the five record-setting African American women elected to Congress. With tremendous progress, there are currently 31 African American women in the federal legislative branch – including 28 members of the U.S., 2 Delegates, and 1 Senator. Nonetheless, academic research indicates that there are numerous steps a Black woman must take to feel comfortable running for an elected position. 75% of African American women in Congress have held elected office at the local or state level prior to running for Congress (Haines, 2023). According to author Glynda Carr, “Black women are taking chances when there is an opportunity,” and “There’s an acceleration of the pipeline.” (Haines, 2023). While studies show that African American women are gradually gaining representation in Congress, few studies examine the connection between the support that Divine 9 sororities provide and the resources necessary for African American women to seek public office. However, due to the election of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, Inc. Member, Vice President Kamala Harris, researchers have been capable of determining how much support a Divine 9 organization provides for its members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Divine Nine was established to support and elevate African Americans pursuing higher education. Due to prejudice early members faced, the organizations have been rooted in unity. The Divine Nine enables members to develop their leadership skills, gain a network of support, and building connections within the African American community – numerous Divine Nine leaders from the past and present have exhibited this.

THE CREATION OF THE DIVINE NINE.

In the early 20th century, many African American college students experienced exclusion and removal from various social groups. Therefore, African American college students founded Black Greek Lettered Organization(s) (BGLO) or Divine 9 to combat social and racial isolation and to build a support system for one another. Before the founding of the first Black Greek Lettered Organization (BGLO), Alpha Phi Alpha was founded in 1906; Alpha Kappa Nu attempted to become a BGLO in 1903 but quickly disbanded due to membership issues and racial tension. Originally founded at Cornell University, Alpha Phi Alpha was intended to be a study group for African American males. Due to the lack of African Americans at predominantly white institutions, the men created the group to help them decompress from their hardships. More sororities and fraternities emerged, which led to the founding of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) in 1930. The Divine 9 is composed of nine fraternities and sororities – with the last fraternity founded in 1963 – at various Historically Black College and Universities (HBCU) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWI).

There are currently 2.5 million NPHC members worldwide. According to a 2019 study, 4 million African Americans – 10% of the total African American population belong to the

Divine Nine, (SBA). Many undergraduate and graduate African American students join the Divine Nine because it is depicted as part of the “Black experience,” in many films, television shows, and literature. The Divine Nine is a lifetime commitment that enables members to leave a legacy. It is common for members’ children to be encouraged to join the same or another Divine Nine organization to continue the tradition. Many Divine 9 sororities have notable principles that have strengthened the Black community and paved the way for several African American women to participate in movements, run for public office, and simply be confident in themselves.

Alongside advancing the knowledge of its members, the Divine Nine works to enhance the knowledge of the entirety of the African American community. *The Ivy Reading AKAdemy* was created by members of Alpha Kappa Alpha to advance literacy from kindergarten to grade school. Since the Divine Nine was founded, the organization has made it a priority to improve African American voting education and empowerment. Members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority were among the first African American women who took part in the Women’s Suffrage March in 1913, (Brown, Parks & Phillips, 2012). These organizations informed and unified African Americans after major events and wars, (Parks et al., 2014).

DIVINE NINE’S INFLUENCE ON MODERN POLITICS.

Many HBCU graduates decide while in undergrad their want and need to be civic leaders; Divine Nine organizations give undergraduate students a platform to execute leadership skills, (Harris 2021). A few of the most significant members of Divine 9 sororities are:

- Coretta Scott King, a civil rights leader and a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

- Hattie McDaniel, a member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., and the first African American to win an Oscar for her role in *Gone with the Wind*.
- Zora Neale Hurston, a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., and a renowned writer, filmmaker, and anthropologist; she is widely recognized as one of the greatest African American writers of the 20th century.
- Marcia Fudge, the current US Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., a former chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, and a former representative for Ohio's 11th Congressional district.
- Kamala Harris, a prominent member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and the first African and Asian American woman to be elected to Vice President, former California Attorney General, and Senator.
- Ketanji Brown Jackson, a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and the first black woman to serve as a Justice on the United States Supreme Court.
- Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to Congress and the first to run for president on a majority party ticket, and a notable member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. A woman who has paved the way for most African American women in Congress.

African American women have continued making progress in political movements because of Shirley Chisholm. Shirley Chisholm used unique campaign tactics to mobilize voters during her time in politics, (Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023, p. 4), and became a leader for African American women in politics. Research found that during a non-election year, African American women organized and submitted ballots for highly competitive races in Virginia, New Jersey,

and Alabama. Currently, in the extreme political climate, African Americans' tireless and brave work has made political changes. Because of their unwavering dedication, black women are important to any potential advancement in politics. Furthermore, Shirley Chisholm's influence throughout her term in office is the foundation of this commitment. Chisholm was elected to Congress in 1968, the height of anti-war protests and racial tensions, (CAWP, p. 1). For most of Chisholm's tenure, she advocated for women, minorities, and access to higher education and jobs for veterans. Due to Chisholm's monumental efforts decades prior, 2018 was a historic year for African American women in politics. At the start of 2018, less than 5% of African American women were elected to statewide executive offices, Congress, and state legislatures, and only five of them were mayors of the 100 most populous cities, (CAWP, p. 3). In addition, African American women made up less than 1% of all statewide executive officials, (CAWP, p. 3). Only 12 African American women had ever been elected to an executive statewide position and no African American women had ever been elected governor, (CAWP, p. 3). Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm stated, "At this time, our country needs women's idealism and determination, perhaps more in politics than anywhere else," after being elected to Congress. Due to Shirley Chisholm's efforts, which established the foundation for many current African American women in politics, these women have become more persistent in their demands for political representation, while simultaneously strengthening their advocacy, leadership, and community service.

REPRESENTATION WITHIN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY.

As previously stated, African American women consistently encourage one another while striving to increase representation in public office. Generally, when another African American is

running for a position, African Americans are more likely to vote, support, and become mobilize; this was demonstrated in the campaigns of President Obama in 2008 and Vice President Harris in 2020. Historically, African American have shown greater unity when another African American is running for office. For instance, during the 2008 election – the year of Obama’s presidential campaign – 2 million more African Americans voted, (Pew Research Center, 2009). This demonstrates how important representation is to African Americans, and how they are more likely to unite when one of their own is on the ballot. In general, African Americans are more likely to interact with anything when it is run by a fellow African Americans, such as media outlets. Roughly, 68% of African Americans agree that it is important to seek news outlets that cover stories about fellow African Americans, (Pew Research Center, 2020). Additionally, 38% of African Americans agreed it is important to have representation in media coverage, (Pew Research Center, 2020). Ultimately, African Americans desire representation all aspects, including the media and politics, as it is comforting to see another Black person in these roles. African Americans have a true sense of unity through common struggle, which resulted in much support in the 2020 Presidential Election.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS WITHIN THE DIVINE NINE.

The 2020 Presidential election demonstrated the reliability of Divine 9 members. Numerous Divine 9 members united in support of then-Presidential candidate Joe Biden and his running mate, Kamala Harris – a proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Having been initiated in 1986, Kamala Harris has been in this sisterhood for over 30 years. As Biden’s African American running mate, Harris faced a lot of criticism. News outlets characterized Harris as unprofessional and angry; former President Donald Trump even called Harris, “nasty,

mad, and angry, (Nee, 2022; Parry-Giles, 2021). Stereotyping African American women is common, particularly when they hold office – the racism encountered is arguably the most difficult aspect of being an African American candidate. Critics contested Kamala Harris' vice presidency, arguing that she was not eligible because both of her parents were immigrants. Harris encountered similar comparable controversies to those faced by Barack Obama during his campaign for presidency, (Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023, p. 5).

It is not unusual for successful African American women to be dislike. Kamala Harris was subjected to intense scrutiny and continuous media attention during the 2020 Presidential campaign. Some articles even went as far as to criticize her after the vice-presidential debate, focusing more on her facial expression than her actual points, (Waymer & Hill, 2023). Many African American women encounter bigotry, misogyny, and barriers in society, just like Kamala Harris did. Nonetheless, Harris relied on community and support from the Divine Nine throughout her candidacy. Members of the Divine 9 sororities and fraternities were among the most influential individuals in the 2020 presidential election. Many Divine 9 organizations endorsed Joe Biden and Kamala Harris because of the advancement of Divine 9 members' support through the media.

During the campaign, Kamala Harris united and connected with educated African Americans, like the efforts made by Shirley Chisholm. Harris intentionally used these strategies to mobilize the 825,000 Divine Nine sorority women worldwide. Alpha Kappa Alpha has 1,026 chapters and 300,000 members (Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023, p. 3), – a substantial amount of support for Biden and Harris. Research has indicated that the Divine Nine incorporated strategic planning in support of Kamala Harris in the 2020 Presidential Election. Alpha Kappa Alpha

sponsored an event a Black History Month event titled, *The Divine Nine and When We All Vote*, highlighting the historic importance in voting and the influence of the 2020 election, (Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023, p. 9). Members utilized images and quotations of Dr. Martin Luther King, a late Alpha Phi Alpha member, to emphasize the importance of voting. Also, the Divine Nine worked with other organizations to secure the support of Biden and Harris' campaign. Atlanta Greek Picnic – a popular Divine Nine social event – included an element on the significance of voting in the 2020 Presidential Election. Sorority members even incorporated *Stroll to the Polls*, wearing Chucks and Pearls to visually support Harris, (Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023, p. 8). Divine Nine members – especially women – demonstrated the importance of voting, which can be interpreted as a primary factor in the victories of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. This election exemplified the urgency and unity African American felt: “For the Black vote, we're (Black women) the ones who mobilize because we don't just go on our own, we take our families, our friends, and communities with us. We lead, not just vote,” (Ryan, 2020 p. 33).

HYPOTHESIS

My hypotheses are as follows:

1. Divine Nine women are more politically and socially advanced (having more connections and more inclined to run for office), because their organizations have equipped them with the tools necessary to take on leadership roles in their community.
2. Divine Nine women are more politically and socially advanced (having more connections and more inclined to run for office), because their organizations encourage them to continuously serve the community by participating in a civic life.

3. Divine Nine women are more politically and socially advanced (having more connections and more inclined to run for office), because their organizations provide them with a wide range of contacts, a continuous network of support, and opportunity to gain knowledge from other members.

HYPOTHESIS CONCLUSIONS

I conclude that there is a positive correlation between the independent variable, women who join Divine Nine sororities, who are my research subjects, and the dependent variables: success, leadership, knowledge, and connections. The goal of BGLO's is to provide safe spaces and support for African American professionals and students, (Yes Prep). Therefore, people who join these organizations are more likely to acquire and benefit from these skills because of the exclusivity of these organizations.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to test my hypothesis, I decided to interview four politically and socially advanced Divine Nine sorority women who have impacted the local community. The following are the selected interviewees:

- Congresswoman Emilia Sykes – the first African American elected to serve as a representative for Ohio's 13th Congressional district. She is a lifelong member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and a current member of Zeta Theta Omega, Akron's graduate chapter of AKA. Congresswoman Sykes studied at Kent State University and the University of Florida.
- President Councilwoman Margo Sommerville - the current representative for Ward 3 and president of the Akron City Council. After attending Lincoln University, President

Councilwoman Sommerville joined Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., at the graduate level through Zeta Theta Omega in 2003. She then continued her education at the University of Akron.

- Councilwoman Meredith Turner – the current councilwoman for Cuyahoga County’s ninth district. She joined the Greater Cleveland Alumni chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., after attending Chicago State University. She continued her education at Cleveland State University.
- Dr. Leah Shaw – a director at Kent State University and the current president the graduate chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., in Akron – Zeta Theta Omega. Dr. Shaw attended Bowling Green State University where she joined AKA in 2004, she later attended Kent State University and Ashland University.

SAMPLING AND QUESTIONS

I selected purposive sampling – a non-probability research method – to conduct my research. In doing so, I relied on my personal familiarity with the candidates for the selection process. I decided to use non-probability sampling because I had control over the selection process, choose women who had a local impact, and include important factors in my questions that were pertinent to my hypothesis. I have chosen a qualitative research approach; it allows me to understand the interviewees individually, not as a generalized group. During the last few weeks of October, I had in-person interviews with: Dr. Leah Shaw, Councilwoman Turner, and President Sommerville. Congresswoman Sykes and I corresponded virtually. During these interviews, I decided to incorporate questions regarding

public service, networks, and the unique characteristics of being a member of a Divine Nine organization. The questions are as follows:

1. What skills did your sorority give you to best prepare you for a career in public service?
2. Has your participation in your organization shaped your identity, and what do you think of your civic obligations?
3. How has your membership shaped your network and connections?
4. Have your connections influenced your ability to run for office or to serve effectively after being elected?
5. How do you think participation in the Divine Nine organizations is different from other types of Greek organizations? What are the major benefits or differences between these sororities and fraternities?

VARIABLES

The independent variable I used were the four women who joined Divine Nine sororities. While choosing local candidates, I found that many of these women belonged to Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. With 355,000 undergraduate and graduate members worldwide, AKA is the Divine Nine's biggest sorority. Furthermore, with 350,000 undergraduate and graduate members, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., is the second largest Divine Nine sorority. When choosing interview candidates, I found that more well-known local women who are involved with the Divine Nine, belonged to one of these sororities. Since these women have all attained high levels of success in politics and/or in society, my hypotheses sought to determine whether their accomplishments were aided by their membership. The dependent variables in my original hypotheses were connections, knowledge, leadership, and

success. Following these interviews, I found the common dependent variables were career preparation, public service, networking, sisterhood, and commitment.

FINDINGS

Public Service

Upon being asked, “What skills did your sorority give you to best prepare you for a career in public service?” every woman responded in a similar manner, explaining their sorority equipped them with abilities to become a leader within their communities. The women said they were all able to unite with other women who shared a passion for giving back to their communities through their respective organizations. During her time as an undergraduate student and leader within her sorority, Dr. Leah Shaw stated, “I came to understand my leadership goals through my sorority.”

Their organizations not only helped them develop as leaders, but they also prepared them for their individual careers. Councilwoman Turner stated, “Delta Sigma Theta provided me opportunities to build my confidence as a leader.” Additionally, she mentioned she gained knowledge from her sorority that she uses in her career, such as using Robert’s Rules of Order, conducting meetings, and making motions in her sorority meetings that she also uses in her career. Ultimately, the women thanked their sororities for giving them the chance to become leaders in their communities. One quote that President Councilwoman Margo Sommerville shared with me that stuck with me was, “Being a leader is about giving a voice to those who don't have the loudest voice in the room.”

Identity and Involvement

A reoccurring theme in my second question, “Has your participation in your organization shaped your identity, and what do you think of your civic obligations?” was community, civic engagement, and involvement. As explained by Congresswoman Emilia Sykes, AKA’s mission statement, “Service to all mankind,” has influenced who she is. According to these women, being a part of these organizations has given them the skills to be civic-minded and flexible to help others. "My membership reminds me that I have a responsibility in the community," Dr. Leah Shaw said. She continued by saying, “Since AKA is based on service, any member must have a civic mindset.” President Councilwoman Sommerville connected her involvement as a councilwoman to her civic engagement in her sorority. She explained that she constantly looks for sisters whom she can discuss and share various viewpoints with, which is comparable to legislation, which involves community collaboration and ideas. Councilwoman Turner explained that Stephanie Tubbs-Jones, a former Delta member, taught her the value of social action. She was mentored by Tubbs-Jones, who taught her the principles of being a Delta woman. She explained that many of her coworkers, who were also Deltas, had embraced her. She gained insight on how to become a civic leader during these experiences. She stated, “I am the people I serve.”

Connections and Support

After my third question, “How has your membership shaped your network and connections?” I realized that these women were so advanced because of their connections and network. Every woman explained that they can find a Soror (someone in the same sorority) or another NPHC member almost anywhere they go. Congresswoman Sykes explained that some of the first people she contacted during her campaign were sorority members. Like Dr. Shaw, who

encounters NPHC members in many aspects of higher education. She stated, "I belong to numerous subgroups of the Divine Nine, which gives me the chance to network. Whether it be at Akron or BGSU, I am always a resource for other AKA's or NPHC members." Councilwoman Turner explained that she views the connections made through her sorority in a similar way. She said she rarely encounters someone she doesn't know in a professional setting. She stated, "There are a few people I do not know, a fellow Delta will always find me." She said that her sorority has enhanced her relationships both personally and professionally and that her sorority relies on one another and supports one another.

Connections and Influence

My third question was directed at the three women in political office: "Have your connections influenced your ability to run for office or to serve effectively after being elected?" They all acknowledged that their sororities have powerful networks. According to Councilwoman Turner, she has continued to expand her network because she collaborates with several Divine Nine members, allowing them to strengthen their unity. She mentioned that she is a part of many group chats with fellow Divine Nine social action chairs. She said " My commitment to the community is demonstrated by my work with fellow Divine Nine organizations, such as the IOTAs, as I collaborated with them in assisting single mothers and their families. I also helped the Alphas with their food pantry by giving them \$20,000, which was my work as a Councilwoman." She continued, "The lines between my career and Delta are blurred." Congresswoman Emilia Sykes explained that she and fellow Divine Nine members who work in Congress with her now benefit from the extra connections, mentorship, advice, and guidance their respective organizations have provided. In her role as Councilwoman, President

Councilwoman Sommerville emphasized the value of these connections. She stated, “Sorority connections definitely help to have members who volunteer and people to count on.”

Additionally, she has the chance to support her sorority and engage with other members via social committees.

Difference between the Divine Nine and other organizations

"How do you think membership in the Divine Nine organizations differs from other types of Greek organizations? What are the major benefits or differences between these sororities and fraternities?" were my last questions. These questions allowed the women to emphasize the advantages of belonging to a sorority. They all acknowledged the importance of commitment, unity, and sisterhood. Congresswoman Sykes explained that while it can be intimidating working in a male dominated field, Divine Nine organizations provide African Americans with a safe environment to develop support, grow, and inspire one another. Councilwoman Turner shared a powerful quote defining the benefits of the Divine Nine as a whole: “To be in a frat or sorority creates a unique perspective and world view to trauma – to be in a shared trauma creates the desire to succeed.” According to Dr. Shaw, “AKA is a lifetime commitment.” She explained that although she was a part of Dance Marathon and AKA as an undergraduate, she realized that AKA was more significant than these groups after undergrad. She has been an AKA for 20 years, and only 2 of those years were spent as an undergraduate. Additionally, she stated her sorority provides many opportunities such as conferences, seminars, workshops, and many other events that support her personal relationships, development, and growth. In agreement, President Councilwoman Sommerville explained that being a member of a Divine Nine sorority has taught her how to be a leader. She stated, “Personally, the sisterhood is real. Being a leader is not easy,

so it's critical to surround yourself with supportive and reliable individuals. For everything—events, highs, and lows—that the sisters will always be there for.” She said that the network, contacts, inspiration, and knowledge are the best aspects of being an AKA.

Conclusions

In summary, my research has supported my hypothesis. These Divine Nine women have acknowledged that their sororities have given them access to a variety of skills and connections, so they are politically and socially advanced. These women have explained what their sororities have provided them with: a lifetime of sisterhood, networks, support, leadership abilities, and encouraging their community involvement. My understanding on this subject has increased because of these interviews, which has demonstrated the connection between Divine Nine women and female leaders.

I used a specific research group, which could be a potential flaw; if I used random sampling, I might have gotten a different result. Nevertheless, qualitative research requires participants to be asked to describe their experiences, (Austin & Sutton, 2014). Consequently, a thorough understanding of the independent variable has led to the results. In the future, researchers should survey and interview African American women who are and aren't members of Divine Nine. Furthermore, if non-members are reluctant about participating in civic engagement and politics, it would further confirm the hypothesis that Divine Nine women are politically and socially advanced; having more connections and more inclined to run for office. Connecting African American women in politics with these resources and highlighting the organizations that support them – is the best way to continue to support them. In addition to skill sets, these organizations also boost these women's confidence. Research on this specific topic is

scarce, but more avenues for African American women in politics could exist if there was more focus on this topic.

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