ABSTRACT

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The 2020 Democratic Primary field was the most diverse in history but narrowed to two septuagenarian white men, Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders, with the former winning the primary. Many candidates of color and women candidates left the race before voting began; consequently, many voters were not able to vote for a candidate who was not a white man. "Electability," a state in which a candidate is perceived to have qualities that make success in a general election likely, frequently arose in media discussions of the candidates. This thesis examines the media frames surrounding electability by analyzing the myths that explain Hillary Clinton's 2016 loss, which elevate different demographics as important for Democrats to win over for success in 2020. It then investigates how their concerns inform two contradictory prototypes for what an "electable" candidate looks like and the impact these prototypes have had on women and minority candidates.

BEATING TRUMP AS "JOB ONE": MEDIA FRAMING OF "ELECTABILITY" IN
THE 2020 DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY

By

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Table of Contents

Introduction

   The results of the 2016 election were undoubtedly a seismic shock to many

political observers and the Democratic party's faithful voters. Donald Trump's

unexpected victory and Hillary Clinton's devastating loss reverberated profoundly in

the days after November 8, 2016. Emotions ran high and protests against the

president-elect occurred in cities across the United States. In the ensuing years,

activists opposed to Trump have formed movements, like the #Resist movement on

social media, dedicated to pushing back against the administration's policies.

Beginning the day of Trump's inauguration, there has been a yearly Women's March

in Washington, D.C. in response to the policies of Trump's administration. In the

2018 midterm elections, Democrats flipped 40 Republican-held seats in the House of

Representatives, including many in districts Trump won (Timm). In short, there is

substantial civic engagement in opposition to Donald Trump. As the 2020 Democratic

primary race has gotten underway and a record number of candidates have filed to

run, one topic repeatedly emerges in conversations about each candidate—their

"electability."

   Broadly speaking, "electability" refers to a state in which a candidate has or is

perceived to have qualities that will make them successful in a general election. The

determination of who is "electable," however, is subjective and often depends on

individual perceptions of what others will want in a nominee. Consequently, such

determinations are often impacted by societal expectations and prejudices. As of this

writing, Joe Biden, Barack Obama's vice president, is the presumptive Democratic

nominee, after the race narrowed to him and Bernie Sanders, both septuagenarian

white men. Hence, the United States looks poised to add yet another white male

president in the fall, despite the fact that the field of Democratic candidates was, at its

apex, the largest and most diverse in history (McDonald). In an election where 56% of voters rank electability as their primary concern over a candidate's agreement with them on issues (Seitz-Wald), the rhetoric surrounding candidates and their electability may partially explain not only which candidates have been successful in the contests thus far but also why some candidates who ended their campaigns struggled in the polling or fundraising needed to keep their campaign going until the Iowa Caucuses in early February.

This paper will investigate the concept of electability in relation to the 2020 Democratic primary by analyzing the media frames discussing the candidates' chances in a general election against Donald Trump. These discussions of electability tend to focus on how candidates will appeal to demographic groups in the electorate, consequently prioritizing the perceived needs of different identity groups over the other. In tandem with exploring how the needs of different voters are elevated over others, I will also focus on the ways such frameworks implicitly and explicitly intersect with candidate identity; specifically, how the frames do (or do not) negatively impact the perceived electability of women and minority candidates. In doing so, I hope to provide more insight into a barrier that both women and candidates of color face when campaign for the presidency.

This paper will first analyze the political myths (following Murray Edelman) that explain Hillary Clinton's 2016 loss. These myths also explain why these voters either shifted toward Trump or did not vote, with many arguers suggesting strategies in response to these causes that Democrats should use to be successful in 2020. This paper will then investigate how these proposed strategies frame certain traits as more electable than others and how the media frames candidates who are perceived to have these traits.

Key to my analysis are two theoretical frameworks: Murray Edelman's conception of political myth, and Linda Coleman and Paul Kay's notion of prototypes. The first explains how the language used to describe political problems evokes a set of "pre-structured cues" that give simple explanations, and consequently simple solutions, for such problems (Edelman 14). This paper will investigate both the myths about Hillary Clinton's 2016 election loss (the "political problem") in addition to the myths surrounding which candidate is most electable against Donald Trump in 2020 (the solution to the political problem). This latter area of analysis will rely on Coleman and Kay's work to help explore precisely what media frames are proposing makes a candidate "electable." Using the word *lie* as an example, they argue that the checklist view of how to define semantically complex words—a finite set of features, each of which has to be met—is too restrictive, and that whether a given situation or action meets a definition instead operates on a gradient, with the degree a certain action meets the word's definition dependent on how many of the characteristics it meets (26-28). In the case of the word lie, for instance, they identify three conditions: falsity, intent to speak falsely, and intent to deceive; the degree to which different scenarios were considered by participants to be a lie depended on how many of these conditions the scenarios met (43).

This paper argues that there are two distinct media prototypes, largely at odds with one another, about which candidates are electable in 2020. The first relies on assumptions that white working-class voters can deliver Democrats the presidency and consequently rewards candidates thought to appeal to that group, while the latter views young people and people of color as the key to electoral success and tends to promote candidates who will appeal to that group. These follow from two distinct myths that emerged about the cause of the 2016 election—the first that the white

working-class defected from Obama to Trump in large numbers and the second that black voters did not turn out in sufficient numbers at the polls. The following section of this paper will overview major concepts and studies in "electability" and political identity.

Chapter 1: Electability and Identity in US Politics

For decades, "electability" has been a metric that candidates, the media, and voters alike use to describe and evaluate political campaigns during a primary election. In this context, the electability of a candidate refers to the likelihood that they will win the general election, rather than just the primary nomination for their respective party (referred to as their viability) (Rickershauser and Aldrich 372). Previous studies have found that voters' perceptions of a candidate's electability do in fact impact their preferences. Jill Rickershauser and John Aldrich, for example, found that voters presented with articles describing a candidate as "electable" rated said candidate more favorably; as voters use these evaluations to "form preferences [of one candidate over another]," (379) such perceptions, regardless of if they are accurate, are vital to a candidate's chances in a primary election. Further studies have found that candidate preference is impacted by electability; Elizabeth Simas found that research subjects consistently selected the candidate represented as the most electable by at least 12% (Simas 282) when reading news coverage of a simulated primary for a House of Representatives seat.

Other studies have further explored the impact of media framing on voters' perceptions of a candidate's chances in a potential general election. Philip Jones, Paul Brewer, and Dannagal Young, for instance, looking at the impact of media discussions of Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign, found that voters exposed to one segment of news coverage that discussed the candidate's chances against Obama favorably rated his electability higher than those who viewed news segments that did not mention the candidate's general election prospects (181-182). Hence, media discussions of electability do have an impact on voter's perceptions of candidates and are consequently worth examining. Which candidates receive positive media framing

of their electability varies, however. The next section of this paper explores the candidate qualities that impact perceptions of electability.

Ideology

Beyond how a candidate will fare in a direct match up against an incumbent, concerns about electability also focus on how they will appeal to the general electorate composed not only of that party's voters but also independent voters and moderate voters from the other party. In this facet of electability, discussions of a candidate's ideology—that is, how moderate or extreme they are perceived to be—is framed as the key to understanding their chances.

Rickershauser and Aldrich posit that primary candidates "differ little over ideology and policy stances," instead arguing that candidates work to differentiate themselves by which policies they prioritize (371). Other studies, however, take candidates varying in ideology as a given—and find that it does impact vote preference, but often in concert with electability concerns. Simas, for instance, presented her research subjects with three candidates all framed by simulated news coverage with slightly different ideologies—a moderate one (who she names "Thomas") an "extreme" candidate (she names "Williams"), and a candidate in between (she names "Johnson") . She finds that voters who preferred Johnson shifted their voting preference to Thomas when the latter was presented as more electable, but supporters of Williams, the most extreme candidate, did not move their support[1] (285). Mohammad Morhosseini analyzes the effect of ideology in context of primary voters' perceptions of the incumbent officeholder. He finds that primary voters of the non-incumbent party who believe the population median—that is, the median

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[1] The study only examines the effect of a more moderate candidate being framed as electable, not if the same holds true if the extreme candidate is presented as the most electable.

ideology of most voters in the general election—to be more in line with the incumbent party will devote more consideration to electability (469). In other words, if Democrats perceive that the median voter is more aligned with Republicans ideologically, they will become more concerned about the electability of their candidates. Morhosseini theorizes that this phenomenon could partially explain why John Kerry won the 2004 primary—voters regarded the median voter as closer to the Republican party, and so chose Kerry over Howard Dean, who was perceived as more liberal (466). The narrative surrounding Kerry did at least partially rely on his electability—over 50% of voters in several early primary states, including Missouri and Delaware, ranked Kerry's top quality as "can beat Bush" by well over 50% (Nichols). Of course, voters' perception of a candidate's electability does not mean they will win—Kerry lost both the popular vote and the Electoral College to George W. Bush. Morhosseini suggests that the same may hold true for past Republican Primaries, pointing to John McCain's appeal with swing votes as a reason why he was successful in the 2008 primary (458). Again, voters' perceptions turned out to be incorrect—much like Kerry, McCain lost the popular vote and the Electoral College.

The next section will explore how specific conversations about electability occur in tandem with discussions of candidates' gender and race. The conversation is two-fold: the media discussion often focuses on both the identity of the candidates themselves and the voters they are trying to court. The latter discussion is particularly important to the analysis in Chapter 3, as analyses of a candidate's electability both often focus on their ability to win over one or more subgroups of voters.

Gender and Electability

Candidates

There are no successful female presidential candidates that women can point

to as precedent that their own campaign will result in the presidency. Karrin Varsby Anderson has written at length about the unique rhetorical challenges that punish women when voters are concerned about electability, describing what she calls the "first-timer/frontrunner double-bind," in which women presidential candidates must have lengthy political resumes in order to be considered "serious" contenders, but are lambasted for such careers, which become framed as "antidemocratic entitlement," once they enter the race ("Presidential Pioneer" 534). Metaphors that situate a candidate's ideological moment are also further impacted by sexism. Kristina Sheeler and Anderson note that male political candidates have often benefitted from the pioneer metaphor, which posits them as a mythic hero ready to tackle unknown challenges like those of the frontier (20). However, they note such framing is more detrimental to women's candidacies because of "the way [the frontier metaphor] has been appropriated in the American psyche as something entirely masculine" (20). Rather, they note that framing women candidates as "pioneers" frames their campaigns as symbolic ones that pave the way for others—rendering them unserious candidates (17).

Political science analysts have found evidence that how voters perceive women's ability to participate in politics can impact their voting behavior. Ana Braic, Mackenzie Israel-Trummel, and Allyson Shortle, analyzing exit polls from the 2016 election in Oklahoma City and a national post-election survey (Survey Sampling International), conclude that white voters who agree with the idea that men are more suited for politics than women were more likely to vote for Trump over Clinton; in the Oklahoma City poll, this was especially true of white women, while the national survey found no gender difference (296; 299). While they did find that some non-white voters did express sexist views, they conclude that it did not impact their vote

choice; rather, the impact sexist views of women's fitness for office was limited to white voters for the 2016 election (294). What is not recorded in this study, however, is if these voters would have chosen to vote for the Democratic candidate if the candidate were a man, a detail that may be able to shed more light into the impacts of a candidate's gender on their electoral success. Further, Clinton was historically unpopular (Saad) and remains the only female presidential nominee from a major party, so it is difficult to know if the results will hold for other female nominees.

However, other studies find further evidence that preexisting notions about women and leadership impact voters' perceptions of women candidates. Bligh et. al had participants complete a questionnaire about their perception of women in leadership prior to reading either a positive or negative article about Senator Barbara Mikulski—those who came in with more negative views tended to rate Mikulski's competence more negatively those who held positive ones (573). Interestingly, however, no difference was found in the participants' rating of Mikulski's likability (573). The researchers did find, however, that participants who read positive news articles about Mikulski rated her more highly on warmth, likability, and competence (575). The primary focus of this paper is not to research how gendered terms like "likability"[2] have been applied to female candidates in the 2020 cycle; however, electability concerns are often grounded in how voters believe others will react to candidates. Given that the most recent presidential election featured a woman candidate who was consistently disparaged by voters and often the media as "cold" and "unlikeable,"[3] concerns about the sexism of the electorate impacting perceptions of female candidates invariably rise in discussions of electability.

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[2] Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* explores how these terms and others like them are disproportionately applied to women and consequently place women candidates in difficult rhetorical situations.
[3] See the Korecki piece cited later in this paper for one example.

Voters

The so-called "gender gap"—that is, the number of women who voted for a candidate minus the number of men who voted for the candidate—has long been a way analysts examine horse race coverage in elections, despite the fact that it is less of a factor in determining election outcomes than other factors like race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Ford 86). Despite the fact that gender is less predictive than other demographic types, Lynne Ford contends that analysts continue to group women as a cohesive voting bloc because of their large size and high rates of turnout, and because the idea of "a political 'war of the sexes' is more socially acceptable than war between the races or economic classes" (90). References to the gender of women candidates' supporters is also common. In her analysis of eight campaigns, Erika Falk found that media frames highlighted the gender of women candidates' supporters more often than they did the gender of the supports of the male candidates who were most similarly situated in the polls (132).

That said, there has been research that in some circumstances, women voters do support women candidates at larger rates than men—a 2004 study of data on 300 House of Representatives races by Craig Brians found that Republican women were more likely to vote for a Democratic woman, but Democratic women were less likely to cross party lines and do the same (367). Congressional races, where those elected serve in deliberative bodies, may not be equivalent to presidential or gubernatorial races where the candidate is elected to an executive position. Only 44 total women have ever been elected governor in the United States (Rutgers University), however, making studies on a similar scale to House races impossible.

Race and Electability

Candidates

Frames surrounding voters and their racial identity also tend to group black

voters into a monolithic bloc with disparate interests from those of white voters (and vice-versa). Perhaps unsurprisingly, references to race have been found to arise more often in articles about elections where at least one candidate is non-white, as opposed to elections where all candidates are white (Caliendo and McIlwain 64). Caliendo and McIlwain, in their analysis of news frames in nine 2004 Congressional races, conclude that such media frames may be reporters' ways to make a race feel "newsworthy," especially if it is uncompetitive (65). Catherine Squires and Sarah Jackson's analysis of media frames in the 2008 primary find that racial references often referred to identity groups in blocs that focused on how the group would vote as a whole, rather than individual voter behavior—mentions of black voters in the early 2008 primary for instance, focused on themes like if voters considered Obama "black enough" (386). They further find that the mention of black voters was more frequent during early primary season—once white voters began voting for Obama (thus demonstrating that he was not only a candidate for the black community), the reference to black voters dramatically decreased (380).

Voters

Scholars have also concluded that a candidate's race impacts how voters perceive their ideology—and consequently, their electability. White voters, for instance, have been shown to perceive black candidates as more liberal than white ones, especially in low-information elections where they may be unaware of the candidates' platforms (McDermott 912; Lerman and Sadin 158). Amy Lerman and Meredith Sadin found that black voters, by contrast, particularly black conservatives, are more likely to project their own ideologies onto black candidates (158). In races where ideology plays a key role in narratives about which candidate is "electable," then, the race of the candidate may subsequently impact voters' perceptions of their

11

chances in a general election. Black identity, of course, is not the only identity that impacts vote choice—voters' whiteness also has an effect. Gregory Petrow et. al, for instance, studying voter data from five elections, including both presidential elections where Obama was on the ballot, found that black candidates on the ballot (e.g. President Obama, Deval Patrick, governor of Massachusetts) cue white racial identity as a group, resulting in less white voters choosing the black candidate (217).

These academic understandings of electability will help inform the subsequent analysis of why specific candidates are centered in media frames as particularly "electable." The context of the 2016 election is equally important for understanding why specific candidates are highlighted as particularly electable; narratives about why Donald Trump won, many of which feed into the academic understandings of electability above, further inform the modern-day debate about who can defeat him in 2020. The next section of this paper analyzes the predominant media frames in the 2016 election in order to give context for the media frames surrounding electability in the 2020 primary.

Chapter 2: The 2016 Election Narrative

Like all elections, the 2020 election is not a singular, isolated event; much of the discourse surrounding which candidates are most suited to win the general election includes discussions of what happened in 2016. For many Democrats (and arguably, some independents and moderate Republicans), 2016 was a devastating loss; not only did Hillary Clinton, the first female presidential nominee from a major party win the popular vote but lose the Electoral College, she did so to Donald Trump, whose campaign was dominated by flagrant prejudice against a myriad of groups. That Trump's win came as he lost the popular vote by nearly 3 million votes (46.4% of the electorate to Clinton's 48.5%), the largest margin since Rutherford B. Hayes lost the Electoral College but won the popular vote by 3% in 1876 (Krieg), further imprinted the devastation of the loss.

Polling and media coverage of the race in the months leading up to Election Day undoubtedly played into this shock, repeatedly framing Clinton as the probable victor; major outlets repeatedly gave her between a 60 and 85 percent chance of winning the election (Valentino, King, and Taylor 110). Moreover, news frames repeatedly emphasized the probability of a Clinton win, with analysists in major newspapers, like James Hohmann of the *Washington Post*, proclaiming in October that "Trump has little or no room to grow" in support and that popular vote polling suggested he was going to face "a landslide loss in the electoral college." Many analysts also gave Clinton a high probability of winning the election—Reuters declared two days before the election that she had "a 90% chance" of winning (Tamman), and FiveThirtyEight, a site that specializes in analysis of polling, had the most conservative estimate, but still showed Clinton with a 72% chance of winning the presidency (FiveThirtyEight, "2016 Election Forecast").

In the weeks and months after the election, experts proposed various explanations about why Trump's win was so widely unpredicted; the narratives that formed in the wake of these explanations play a large role in determining which candidates are labeled "electable" the 2020 Democratic primary. These narratives contain two basic elements that contribute directly to conceptions of electability: 1) who the voters that chose Trump (or stayed home) were and 2) why they voted for Trump over Hillary Clinton (or chose not to vote).[4] The following section explores the media frames that contributed to these narratives and what they suggest to voters about the ideal candidate for 2020.

Methodology

Post-mortems of 2016 arguably continue today; however, my primary analysis will focus on articles and opinion pieces that appeared in major national newspapers (e.g *The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN*) from November 9, 2016, the date of the election, to December 31, 2017—once 2018 began, political analysis began focusing more heavily on the impending midterm elections.

Those voting in the Democratic primary (and thus those whose decisions may be impacted by discussions of Democratic candidates' electability) are largely either Democrats or Democratic-leaning independents. Only seventeen states allow for open presidential primaries, where anyone, regardless of party affiliation, can vote in either parties' primary, compared with twenty that have closed primaries (voters must be registered with a party to vote in their primary) and eleven that have partially open (only unaffiliated voters and voters registered with that party can vote in a primary) (Su and Panetta). I am focusing primarily on how these discussions have impacted the

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[4] There are also voters who left the presidential contest blank, but they do not appear to generate much media interest and consequently are not analyzed here.

perceptions of the Democratic voters in the primary electorate, and so have chosen not to include media frames from right-wing sources that such voters tend to disregard as unreliable and likely do not factor into their decisions, including *Fox News*.[5]

Articles for this section were found via searches of both news websites and the internet at large for articles during the above time frame that contained the terms "why Clinton lost," "why the Democrats lost," "why Trump won," "Trump won because," and "Clinton lost because." Once I identified both myths analyzed below, I searched for additional articles via the search terms "white working-class voters Trump [or Clinton]," "Midwest voters Trump [or Clinton]," "black voters turnout," "low minority turnout Clinton [or Trump]" to further explore the discourse surrounding these understandings. The pieces selected are examined primarily through linguistic and rhetorical methods, including close reading, that focus on how word choice and article structure frame the reasons for Clinton's loss in 2016. The following section explores two distinct myths for Clinton's loss—the first is primarily advocated by white journalists and commentators, while the second includes both non-white and white journalists and pundits.

<p align="center">White Working-Class Voters</p>

The first and arguably most dominant myth to emerge was that white working-class voters handed Trump a decisive victory. Clinton won the nationwide popular vote by 2.76%, nearly three million votes (Krieg). She lost the Electoral College, however, by roughly 80,000 voters in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, all states she lost by less than one percent and that would have given her an Electoral College victory had she won them (Bump "80,000 People"). During the immediate

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[5] A Pew Research Study found that 77% of liberal Democrats and 48% of moderate/conservative Democrats distrust *Fox News* (Jurkowitz et. al).

post-mortem analysis of what happened to Clinton's campaign, many analysts focused on a large subsection of voters in those states: white working-class voters without a college degree. Democratic candidates have lost that group of voters before and still won presidential races—among all whites without a college degree, 2012 GOP nominee Mitt Romney won this demographic by a margin of 61-36%; however, Trump won their support by 66-29% in 2016, a marginal improvement that contributed to his electoral college win (Bump "Central Question 2020"). The media frames that emerged most quickly after the election, however, not only cemented this group as an identity bloc much like the analyses above discuss for minority candidates, but as *the* determining factor for Trump's success and consequently the only voters who matter for the 2020 general election.

Headlines in the days after the election repeatedly framed white working-class voters as the definitive reason Trump won:

1) How Trump Won: The Revenge of Working-Class Whites (*Washington Post*)
2) Why Trump Won: Working-Class Whites (*The New York Times*)
3) Yes, Working-Class Whites Really Did Make Trump Win. No, it Wasn't Simply Economic Anxiety (*The Washington Post*)
4) Huge Margins Among Working-Class Whites Lifts Trump to a Stunning Election Upset (*ABC News*)

Each of these headlines (none of which refer to opinion pieces) posits "working-class whites" as a monolithic group whose choices directly contributed to Trump's success, absent any other explanation for the election results. In doing so, especially immediately after the election, the frames work to cement the "white-working class" as the group that definitively handed Trump the election—and consequently, the group that Democrats need to persuade in 2020 in order to win the White House.

Such frames, of course, are not limited to the headlines alone; much of the rhetorical work developing media frames happens in the body of articles. Repeatedly,

such articles characterize Trump's win among the group as a definitive representation of a change in the electorate. *New York Times* analyst Nate Cohn, for instance, writes: "Trump won the presidency by riding an enormous wave of support among white working-class voters." The use of the phrase *enormous wave* frames Trump's support among the group as outsized and consequently extremely significant for his election. John Cassidy of the *New Yorker* echoed this sentiment:

> [Trump] achieved the Brexit-style upset he had promised, riding a surge of turnout among white working-class voters to carry the Southern states of Florida and North Carolina, put a scare in the Clinton campaign in Virginia, and then stormed across the Midwest and the Rust Belt, breaking through Clinton's so-called "blue wall," and picking up Iowa, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and perhaps Michigan [had not been called at time of article].

The vivid imagery Cassidy deploys here, presenting Trump as *riding a surge*, *storm[ing]* in states with white-working class voters, and *breaking* Clinton's "blue wall," presents Trump's win as aggressively decisive and further reinforce the idea that Trump's victory with the white-working class was so large it represented a groundswell movement, rather than the marginal victories that handed him the presidency. As mentioned above, however, group identification is just one half of the myth; news frames also explore the *why* this group voted for Trump over Clinton, forming the foundation for arguments about 2020 candidates' electability. By and large, these myths portrayed the Democratic Party as out-of-touch with the concerns of the electorate at large, represented by the concerns of these white-working class voters.

Economic Hardship

One of the most prominent frames featured in the explanations for why these voters chose Trump over Clinton, even if they had voted Democratic in the past, was that their economic situation was so dire they had no choice but to vote for the

candidate promising them "change." Jim Tankersley, for instance, then covering economic policy for *The Washington Post*, characterizes their plight by writing "For the past 40 years, America's economy has raked blue-collar white men over the coals," vivid imagery that victimizes this subsection of voters and consequently villainizes those who have contributed to the status quo (the economy) that enabled that victimization. Tankersley goes on to specifically frame Trump as the hero for these voters, calling him "the first major-party nominee of the era to speak directly and relentlessly to their economic and cultural fears," further characterizing economic policy as central to these voters' choices.

Author Sarah Jaffe, in an op-ed for *The New York Times*, connects the dissatisfaction among voters back to the 2008 financial crisis, when large banks were bailed out after financially harming the American people. Jaffe argues that this anger continued in voters who chose Trump:

> If Donald J. Trump stood out to voters from the rest of the Republican Party, aside from a willingness to say directly the kinds of things usually carefully dogwhistled, it was in his rants about trade and his lack of interest in dismantling the remnants of the welfare state. For white Americans anxiously looking at their disappearing stability, Mr. Trump was a bomb they were willing to throw at a system they felt was failing them. He emotionally echoed their outrage and gave them a place to direct their anger, the age-old right-wing populist trick of refracting it both upward at elites and downward at minorities.

Jaffe's argument here does note that Trump's racism—noted by his tendency to say things that are "carefully dogwhistled"—likely factored into voters' perceptions of Trump, the core of what she claims made Trump "stand [out] to voters" was his economic appeals via his "rants about trade." The vivid imagery Jaffe deploys here— describing Trump as "a bomb" to throw at a system the white working-class "felt was failing them"—characterizes the anger among this group as both volatile and sizeable, something that Trump was then able to manipulate because of his outsized appeal to

these voters. Jaffe goes on to argue that Trump's nomination should have made the rage "visible," but that "Clinton opened her arms to disaffected Republicans rather than wooing the disaffected within and around her own party," further framing the Clinton campaign as ignoring the needs of a key subsection of voters. She notes that what made Trump's campaign effective was its ability to "g[i]ve them a place to direct their anger," further framing direct appeals to these voters' concerns as critical to electoral success.

The idea that Clinton and Democrats at large lack an ability to connect with the white working-class is also reinforced by arguments from major Democratic players in 2016. Bernie Sanders, Clinton's opponent in the primary election noted shortly after the election that he was "deeply humiliated that the Democratic party cannot talk to the people from where I come from," referencing his own background in the white working class (*CBS News*, "Sanders"). Such phrasing reinforces the myth that Democrats lack the messaging skills needed to resonate with these voters. Similarly, Joe Biden, then the Vice President, was asked by Jake Tapper of CNN why he thought Clinton did "*so* poorly with white-working class voters," a question that presupposes that her performance among this demographic was exceptionally poor. Biden responds by arguing that the Obama administration did focus on "the real inequities that still exist for working-class and middle-class people who are left behind" but that such messaging "wasn't the central part of the campaign moving forward," again presenting the Clinton campaign as uniquely lacking in appeals to the economic concerns of these voters. He further frames the Clinton campaign as deficient by saying that he and President Obama, who successfully won election twice, did focus on such issues, tying Democratic presidential success to such appeals. Both Sanders and Biden ran 2020 presidential campaigns in which they have

separately highlighted their appeal to economically disaffected voters, suggesting that the myth of white-working class voters being a key constituency for 2020 is impacting campaigns as well as media frames.

Identity Politics as Distraction

In tandem with criticizing Democrats for neglecting the economic concerns of the white-working class, media frames also cited their focus on "identity politics" as the reason for their inability to discuss the issues that mattered to these voters. What is meant by "identity politics" in these instances, however, is not always explicitly defined, but rather seems to work as a vague referent to appeals to voters other than white, straight, cisgender ones.

For instance, in an *CBS News* panel the morning after the election, political contributor Nomiki Konst said that Clinton could have better appealed to the electorate "understanding that it's the economy, stupid," and that the Clinton campaign relied heavily on "identity politics" rather than presenting solutions "that are going to fix" people's problems, something she claims her opponent did: "Donald Trump was saying solutions. I'm not saying that they're right… but at least he was talking about them." Konst's reference to the oft-coined phrase "it's the economy stupid" evokes a phrase that organizers used in Bill Clinton's 1992 successful bid for the White House (Kelly); that Konst singles out "identity politics" as the reason Democrats were unable to focus on that winning strategy suggests that the former campaign strategies are untenable for presidential campaigns. Her use of the phrase "but at least" when discussing Trump's invocation of economic policy seems to indicate that discussing economic policies for the white working-class satisfies a bare minimum that the Clinton campaign failed to meet, further adding to the impression that the campaign did not adequately reach out to these voters. Trump, by contrast, is

presented as meeting that bare minimum—albeit not in detail, but Konst's frame here seems to suggest that merely talking about such issues is enough to appeal to these voters.

Even arguers who explicitly define "identity politics" do so by pointing to specific appeals to voters who are not the white working-class. Mark Lilla, for instance, professor of humanities at Columbia University, in an op-ed entitled "The Death of Identity Liberalism" for *The New York Times*, writes that:

> Hillary Clinton was at her best and most uplifting when she spoke about American interests in world affairs and how they relate to our understanding of democracy. But when it came to life at home, she tended on the campaign trail to lose that large vision and slip into the rhetoric of diversity, calling out explicitly to African-American, Latino, L.G.B.T. and women voters at every stop. This was a strategic mistake. If you are going to mention groups in America, you had better mention all of them. If you don't, those left out will notice and feel excluded.

Here, Lilla identifies what about Clinton's campaign was "uplifting"—appealing to shared American values—and contrasts it with appeals to marginalized groups, suggesting that the latter is not uplifting and instead divisive. He furthers this frame of divisiveness by claiming that those appealing to identity "had better mention all" identity groups. "Had better" is a phrase typically associated with warnings and threats, and its use here consequently amplifies the serious risks associated with appeals to identity. The consequence of the Clinton campaign failing to adhere to this warning—the groups not listed "will notice and feel excluded" suggests that Clinton's invocation of marginalized groups of voters not in the categories he names—which, later in the piece, he goes on to note means white men, who he characterizes as reacting to "the omnipresent rhetoric of identity." This idea of identity rhetoric as omnipresent, coupled with his description of these appeals as occurring at *every stop* suggests that these "strategic mistake[s]" were a constant theme of the Clinton campaign and contributed significantly to her loss.

Hillary Clinton as Wrong Candidate

Analysts also pointed to Hillary Clinton's unpopularity with this group as a reason for her loss, suggesting that she was fundamentally flawed and that other candidates may have appealed to the white working-class more. After discussing Joe Biden's appearance in Pennsylvania, a swing state, just before the election, Joe Scarborough of *MSNBC* (and former Republican congressman) compared Biden's favorability rating in Scranton, Pennsylvania (57%) to Clinton's (23%), going on to argue that "the wrong Democrat may have ran [*sic*]" (*MSNBC* "Joe: 2016").

Biden was not the only politician to benefit from the narrative that he could have beaten Trump among the crucial white-working class. The day after Clinton's loss, Fredrik deBoer, Writing Across the Curriculum Coordinator at Brooklyn College, wrote an op-ed for the *Washington Post* entitled "Hillary Clinton Lost. Bernie Sanders Could Have Won." After recognizing that Clinton and the Democratic party did well with black working-class voters, calling it "a credit to their party and their candidate," deBoer goes on to explain that Clinton did not inspire as much turnout as Obama in 2008 and 2012—but that Bernie Sanders would have. Noting that Michigan was the state where "Sanders pulled off his most shocking primary victory," he goes on to argue that the Vermont Senator was more suited to success among the "suburban white voters" Clinton "needed to win":

> Clinton struggled to use Trump's wealth against him, in large measure because she herself is an immensely wealthy woman… Sanders would have been able to contrast Trump's ostentatious wealth with his own shabby aesthetic. The message writes itself: Trump talks a good game about economic anxiety, but why would you trust this New York billionaire to put your interests first? The millionaire from New York with an entourage of celebrities and the backing of the Democratic money machine? Or a small-city New Deal granddad from Vermont who has spent his political life working with unions and appealing to economic justice and populism?

Here, deBoer's analysis furthers the idea that the white-working class voters felt

22

"economic anxiety" and Trump was the candidate who best catered to that anxiety. His descriptions of Trump, Clinton, and Sanders work collectively to group the former two together and distinguish Sanders from them. Both of the former politicians are described in terms of excessive wealth (Trump has "ostentatious wealth" and Clinton is "immensely wealthy") in connection with their geographic origins (he is a "New York billionaire" and she is a "millionaire from New York"). By contrast, Sanders is a "small-city New Deal grandad from Vermont," all terms that frame him as a relatable, economically progressive politician. Clinton is further maligned as preoccupied with the support of elites, represented by "an entourage of celebrities" and "the Democratic money machine," both phrases that carry sharply negative connotations. Sanders, by contrast, is described as having "spent his political life" working for better economic conditions—making him the obvious answer to deBoer's question about who would better appeal to the white working class voters that cost Clinton the election.

What all three explanations contribute to is a myth that because the Democratic campaign in 2016 failed to craft a campaign that appealed to white-working class in 2016, they lost control of the White House. This myth ignores other substantial reasons for Clinton's loss, from voter disenfranchisement to Russian disinformation to the Electoral College itself, in ways that profoundly impact conceptions of who is "electable." In all of the explanations above, for instance, the onus is placed on the Democratic party to change, rather than any of the other institutions that played a role in Clinton's loss. Further, this myth, in alleging a single cause for the Democrats' loss in 2016 (the decrease in white working-class support) proposes a single solution—to win back those voters. Consequently, the solution put forth by the myth—that Democrats must put forth a candidate who appeals to the

white-working class in the Midwest—does not include solutions to these problems in discussions about "electability," leaving structural barriers faced by voters of color (e.g. voter ID laws) either uncovered or secondary to the desires of these white voters.

Low Turnout Among Minority Voters

A secondary explanation for Clinton's loss emerged in the media—though arguably not as quickly or pervasively as the myth that white-working class voters delivered Trump the presidency—that a lower turnout rate among minority voters in key swing states was the reason Clinton lost. The frames explaining this myth, however, are unevenly applied; some news articles render black turnout in catastrophic terms, while some frame it as inconsequential to the election results. These inconsistencies also exist in the explanations for why black turnout decreased, presenting varying explanations as the cause. Taken together, such frames present decreased black turnout as more complex than that of white working-class voters shifting allegiance to Trump, consequently making the latter the predominant frame for understanding 2016—and the voters Democrats should focus on to win the White House in 2020.

A substantial portion of the media frames focusing on lower black turnout use more neutral analytic terms that consequently decrease the emphasis on that turnout as a cause for Trump's success. The day after the election, for instance, *Vox* ran a piece entitled "Low Voter Turnout in a Few Key States May Have Helped Donald Trump" (Plumer), a headline sporting hedges—*a few*, *may*—that frame the lack of turnout as a possible, but not definitive cause of Clinton's defeat. The body of the article similarly relies on uncertain terms, noting that early voting numbers "suggest" that turnout overall "wasn't quite as high as many people expected," phrasing that frames the decrease in minority turnout as small and consequently minimizes the impact it had

on the election. A *CNN* piece the same day attributes Clinton's loss partially to "African American, Latino, and younger voters fail[ing] to show up to the polls" (Luhby), more definitive phrasing than Plumer's, but still less extreme framing than the articles focusing on the "revenge" of the white working-class. Luhby also notes that "a slightly larger share of black and Latino voters" chose Trump than Romney, phrasing that frames the decrease in minority support as minimal and consequently not particularly impactful on the election results. While most of the uncertain terminology is likely a consequence of the fact that final voting numbers took several days after the election to come in, this uncertainty is not present in media frames that focused on the increase in the share of the white-working class vote for Trump— where margins were described as "huge" and immediate post-mortems definitively pointed to these voters as the cause for Clinton's loss.

Even months after the election, some analysts' retroactive looks at the cause of Clinton's defeat downplay the effects of decreased turnout. In May 2017, for instance, the *New York Times*' analyst Nate Cohn wrote an article minimizing the impact of the decreased turnout, claiming that recent statistics on turnout indicate that minority turnout "wasn't the driver of Clinton's defeat." His analysis repeatedly downplays the impact the decrease in minority turnout had in the election results, noting that the scale of "weak Democratic turnout… among black voters… has been exaggerated," effectively minimizing the importance of reports that point to lower minority turnout as a cause for Trump's victory. Building further, he argues that black turnout was actually "roughly as we expected it," thus implying that minority turnout was not so drastically different that it can account for the discrepancies between the expected election results portrayed by media frames (Clinton wins by a large margin) with the result (Trump wins by a small margin). Consequently, he renders minority turnout

insignificant to the 2016 election before emphasizing the white working-class:

> Instead, it's clear that large numbers of white, working-class voters shifted from the Democrats to Mr. Trump. Over all, almost one in four of President Obama's 2012 white working-class supporters defected from the Democrats in 2016, either supporting Mr. Trump or voting for a third-party candidate.

Here, Cohn further frames 2016 minority turnout as inconsequential by emphasizing the importance of the shifting vote choices of white working-class voters. In describing the impact of the white working-class vote as "clear," he further frames their "large numbers" of votes as the decisive factor in the 2016 election and shifts focus away from lower minority turnout as a factor in the election results.

Some media frames do emphasize the decrease in black voter turnout as significant, however. Following the release of a Census Bureau survey in May 2017 that showed black turnout in 2016 decreased, several media outlets discussed the lack of turnout in consequential terms. *Politico*, for instance, titles their article "Study: Black Turnout *Slumped* in 2016" (Shepard, emphasis mine), while *The Hill* notes that "black turnout *fell* by seven percentage points" but overall voter turnout "*dipped* slightly" (Wilson, emphasis mine). The first two emphasized terms carry severe connotations that work to frame the decrease in black voter turnout as significant and consequently impactful on the 2016 election. That the latter article uses "dipped," a term that implies a small decrease, to describe overall voter turnout, further makes the "fall" in black voter turnout seem especially pronounced.

The solutions suggested to mitigate the problems of black voter turnout are similarly disparate—some suggest that Democrats further work on strategies that will appeal to those already in the electorate, while others emphasize working to increase turnout. The latter strategy stands in sharp contrast to the solutions suggested for the white working-class shift to Trump, which is largely unanimous in suggesting that Democrats craft policies that will appeal to that group. A May 2017 article in

26

FiveThirtyEight, which uses the results of both the 2016 election and the 2017 special election in Georgia's 6th congressional district to argue that "black voters aren't turning out for the post-Obama Democratic Party," notes that the lack of turnout may mean that Democrats may be forced to "become more reliant on whites without a college degree, Hispanics, and Asians" (Ruffini). In doing so, he renders the solution for low black turnout to focus more on the white working-class who are struggling— not only deemphasizing the importance of black voters turning out in 2016, but also minimizing the importance of Democrats making sure they do in 2020. The article in *The Hill*, by contrast, notes that Democrats can "chart a path back to political power by boosting turnout even at the margins among Hispanic and black voters" (Wilson). Here, Wilson's use of "even at the margins" suggests that small increases in turnout would deliver power back to the Democrats, framing turnout as something that can give the Democrats victory in 2020 and elevating its importance.

Failure on the Part of Black Voters

While the white working-class' support for Trump is framed as a failure on the Democratic candidate's part, the lack of turnout among black voters is often framed as a failure by the voters. The day after the election, for instance, *US News* ran an article entitled "Clinton Made Her Case to Black Voters. Why Didn't They Hear Her?" (Williams), a frame that suggests voters neglected to interact with Clinton, rather than the other way around. Adding to the considerable agency assigned to black voters by the headline, Williams goes on argue that they "didn't answer the call for Clinton, [Obama's] chosen successor." The agency assigned here to black voters further blames the election results on them rather than Clinton—"didn't answer" implies a level of culpability on the part of black voters for failing to turn out, rather than on Clinton for failing to energize them or voter suppression laws for keeping them home.

To Williams' credit, the article later points to earlier focus groups with black voters that suggest she "failed to articulate" a message that "resonated with black voters ages 18 to 37," adding complexity to the frame initially suggested by the headline. In doing so, she further presents the idea that Clinton was the wrong candidate to be successful in 2020.

Still, other news frames emphasize the decrease in turnout among black voters as particularly significant, all the while characterizing it as a failure on the part of black voters. A *PBS News* piece at the end of November 2016 reflecting on the turnout numbers and characterizing the gap between her vote totals and Obama's 2012 totals as a "chasm," notes that "black and Latino minorities did not turn out like they had for Obama and women did not show up for Clinton to the extent that many had predicted" (Regan). Much like the frame in the previous section, the minority and women voters are the agents here, responsible for "show[ing] up" for the candidate on the ballot, rather than the candidate being the agent responsible for bringing those voters to the polls. The solution implied by such frames further places the onus on black voters to vote for the nominee, again ignoring talk of structural solutions to help address barriers such voters face.

Clinton too Centrist

While black voters are sometimes framed as culpable for their demographic's decreased turnout, Clinton is also framed as the wrong candidate for them, much like she is in discussions about the white working-class. Rather than being too focused on identity issues rather than those that impact the white working-class, however, she is framed as too centrist to appeal to the needs of (primarily young) black voters. Such arguers typically emphasize the lack of black turnout, rendering it a serious issue that needs to be addressed. The *PBS* piece cited above, for instance, cites "apathy towards

Hillary Clinton's candidacy among the Democratic base" as a potential cause of Trump's victory over the former Secretary of State, implying that Clinton as a candidate did not properly inspire turnout among the voters the Democratic party relies upon.

Omri Ben-Shahar, professor at University of Chicago Law School, writing for *Forbes* a few days after the election, for instance, argues that "any Democratic candidate should have ridden a wave of anti-Trump sentiment" among the Democratic base of "urban, minorities, and more educated voters," and that Clinton's failure to do so means that the base had "a strong distaste" for her. Having framed Clinton as extremely unpopular, Ben-Shahar moves on to explain precisely *why* he feels Clinton was the wrong candidate for this election. Citing Sanders' supporters wariness of the former Secretary of State, he argues that:

> The Democratic party, by contrast, was thought to be on the verge of victory and even a sweep of the Senate because it was cold calculated, using its ironfisted internal machination to discard the populist candidate and to present the then-thought more "electable" Clinton. How wrong that perception turned out to be!

Here, Ben-Shahar frames the Democratic party as a manipulative force that promoted an unpopular candidate because she was less economically left than Sanders. The adjectives used by Ben-Shahar to characterize the Democratic party—*cold calculated*, *ironfisted*—present both the party and Clinton as a shadowy organization ignoring the real desires of the people ("the populist candidate") in favor of someone who they believed was "electable." In emphasizing "how wrong" their perceptions were, he further frames them as incompetent, consequently rendering his solution—having nominated Sanders over Clinton—the more sensible one, and as a result, a potential road to the White House for Democrats in 2020.

Even among those who find the Democratic party more at fault for the lack of

minority turnout, voter suppression is rarely discussed, despite the massive changes in voting rights before the 2016 election, most notably the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision in 2013, which struck down the provision of the Voting Rights Act that states who have historically discriminated against minorities voting must get federal approval before changing their voting requirements. A little over a year after the decision, many states, including some pivotal to the 2016 election, (Florida, Virginia, and Wisconsin) enacted new voting restrictions, chiefly in the form of voter ID laws that disproportionately harm voters of color (Brandeisky, Chen, and Tigas).

Peniel Joseph, Founding Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, adamantly pushes back against what he calls the narrative that lower black turnout in early voting was "a failure of civic action by African-Americans," instead referring to it as "a perfectly-executed voter suppression plan hatched by Republican statehouses in the wake of the *Shelby* decision." Undoubtedly, the stringent voting requirements are as Joseph portrays them—many restrictions are designed that have profound impacts on minority voter turnout. When such context is absent from the articles on the decrease in black voter turnout, however, the urgency to fix such problems is nonexistent. Not a single question on states' restrictions on voting rights, for instance, wa asked in any of the 2016 presidential debates, nor was any question asked until the debate in November 2019[6], despite the dismantling of the Voting Rights Act and repeated enactments of voter ID laws and other restrictive measures (Levine). That such media attention has been devoted to the needs of the white working-class while ignoring the very real suppression of black voters consequently means that Democratic voters concerned about electability may very well see the former as a

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[6] For full disclosure, I am the viewer who submitted the question to *MSNBC* and the DNC.

larger problem, and consequently tailor their preferences to candidates who they believe meet those needs—perhaps altogether ignoring the needs of communities of color.

That even the discussions that frame lower minority turnout often came weeks or even months after the election itself further reduces the impact such frames could have on perceptions of why Democrats lost in 2016. Many of the media frames pointing to the white-working class in the previous section were published nearly immediately after the election, solidifying a perspective on the cause of the election before the voter turnout numbers could even be evaluated. That the narratives about the decrease in black turnout not only came later than those about white working-class voters but were also less unanimous consequently frames it as less important for Democrats to focus on in their 2020 election strategy. Frames surrounding the white-working class vote, by contrast, tend to be extremely similar in describing their share of the vote as dramatically influential and consequently a crucial part of how Democrats develop their strategy for the presidential election in 2020. This confusion likely allows for further promotion of solutions to help the Democrats win back voters in 2020, while other solutions about minority turnout, including how to tackle voter suppression, are viewed with less urgency because they do not meet the urgency described by the media frames of the white working-class voters.

The next section of this paper will explore the prototypes of "electability" that result from both myths that explain why Clinton lost in 2016, in context of actual discussions of the 2020 Democratic candidates. The myths outlined above are integral to these frames; the media frames analyzed below often reward candidates' perceived electability based on their presumption that they will either return white working-class voters to the Democratic nominee or will drum up enthusiasm that will increase

turnout from the minority voters that form the Democratic base.

Chapter 3: Media Framing of Electability in the 2020 Democratic Primary

As seen in the previous chapter, discussions about which candidate is suited to beat Donald Trump began immediately in the post-mortem of Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign, with many proposing that other candidates, like Joe Biden, may have beaten Trump. Electability has dominated many media analyses of the 2020 candidates, with many pundits and columnists evaluating the candidates' chances to defeat Donald Trump in November.

As the 2020 Democratic primary to replace him began in earnest and the media began evaluating the candidates, they have developed a working prototype for an "electable" candidate, repeatedly highlighting the appeal of some candidates to different subsections of the voting population. This chapter will evaluate the two most dominant prototypes. The first presents an electable candidate one who can appeal to the "median voter," often represented by the white working-class voters who the media portrayed as key to Trump's victory in 2016. The second, arguably a counter-prototype to the first, argues that an electable candidate is one who can inspire turnout among the Democratic base, often represented by non-white and young voters.

<div align="center">Candidates</div>

This section will overview the major candidates in the 2020 primary and their respective polling stances at various points throughout the primary to give a better overview of the context of some of these media discussions. The 2020 Democratic primary saw a record number of candidates—in total, there were at least 29 major candidates. The primary also saw candidates declare very early, with John Delaney of Maryland's campaign becoming one of the earliest campaigns announced (July 2017). Debates between the candidates began in June 2019, with the June and July debates each requiring two nights of debate because of the sheer number of candidates.

Because of the enormity of the race, it is helpful here to lay out a rough sketch of the race and its leading candidates. For brevity's sake, I will not list every candidate here, but rather discuss the timeline of the race and their relative standing in national polls—with leading candidates generally receiving more media discussion.

Joe Biden, Vice President to Barack Obama, consistently led polls[7] throughout the primary, even before he announced his run in April 2019. As of this writing, he is now the presumptive nominee. Bernie Sanders, the 2016 runner-up, often took second place in polls, though he lagged behind Elizabeth Warren, the Senator from Massachusetts, during the late summer and early fall of 2019 (approximately mid-July-late November). Warren's campaign ended in March 2020, shortly after Super Tuesday. California Senator Kamala Harris, who ended her campaign in December 2019, experienced a rise in polling numbers in July 2019 after confronting Biden on the debate stage about his stance on bussing students to integrate schools, but slipped back into the single digits not long after. South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg also experienced a rise in polling in late November, around the time Warren lost some (but not all) of the advantage from her summer rise and remained among the top five or six candidates. Buttigieg's campaign ended after the South Carolina primary (February 29, 2020). Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, who consistently polled in the low single digits, often behind Buttigieg and Warren, also ended her run after South Carolina.

New Jersey Senator Cory Booker, the only other black candidate to figure prominently in the race besides Harris[8], consistently stayed between 2 and 3 percent in polling averages before dropping out in mid-January. Two separate billionaires also

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[7] For consistency, all polling numbers are pulled from FiveThirtyEight's national polling aggregate (FiveThirtyEight, "Democratic Primary National Polls").
[8] Deval Patrick, former Massachusetts governor, was a candidate from November to early February, but never garnered substantial support.

entered the race—Tom Steyer and Michael Bloomberg, both from New York. The former remained in low single-digit polling for most of his candidacy and dropped out after the South Carolina Primary, while the latter, despite a lack of participation in the first four primary states, rose sharply in the polls in late December before dropping out after Super Tuesday. Not every one of these candidates is focused on in this paper—by and large, discussions of a candidate's electability tend to emerge when they rise in polling and are subjected to more media scrutiny—many of these candidates above single digits in polling and consequently were little discussed in the media.[9]

Methodology

There is an argument to be made that the 2020 primary began immediately after Trump's election, when Democrats began strategizing on how best to defeat him. However, the political media's focus arguably shifted the primary election when major candidates began announcing they were in the race. As such, I have decided to focus on articles published between December 31, 2018, when Elizabeth Warren, then the best-known candidate, officially entered the race by launching an Exploratory Committee (Linskey and Viser), and January 31, 2020, to encompass the range of early primary discussions while still stopping before the Iowa Caucuses (February 3, 2020), to avoid the impacts of those results on media discussions.

The media pieces sampled here include straight news stories, op-ed pieces, cable news analysis, and questions asked by reporters at the Democratic Debates. Like in the previous section, these pieces were found via searches of news websites, the internet, and cable news channels on YouTube for key terms that evoke electability, including "[candidate name] electable," "who is electable 2020,"

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[9] This includes the vast majority of the candidates of color, including Cory Booker and Julián Castro.

"[candidate name] can't win," "[candidate name] can win," and "who/which candidate can beat Trump." I also reviewed the transcripts of the nine Democratic debates between this time period for questions that focus on the effects of candidates' policies or appeals on voters in a general election. I have attempted to sample from a mixture of authors from different racial and gender backgrounds, though there appear to be few black women writing on the topic for major newspapers, likely in part a reflection of the lack of diversity in some newspapers op-ed columns. Throughout this paper, I have noted where the author's background may be impacting their argument and what the inclusion of these voices reveals about electability.

I continue to use primarily linguistic and rhetorical methods to examine the articles for how they frame candidate qualities and present a prototype for an "electable" candidate. Two distinct prototypes of electability are present in the news frames analyzed for this paper, and each is dependent upon a different myth of why Democrats lost the 2016 election. The first, and arguably more dominant version, takes the myth that Democrats failed to appeal to the median voters of 2016, represented primarily but not exclusively, by the white working-class; the resulting prototype of an "electable" candidate relies on qualities that appeal to those voters. By contrast, the second version of electability embraces the myth that 2016's loss resulted from a lack of turnout among Democrats' base voters, particularly African-American voters and young people, and that an "electable" candidate for 2020 is one with qualities that energize this base.

<u>Media Focus on White Working-Class</u>

The myth blaming white blue-collar voters for Clinton's loss has continued throughout Trump's first term. Several news organizations devote substantial news space to understanding the perspectives of these voters, adding to the perception that

their voices are critical to understanding the American political electorate. *AP*, for instance, has a news tab on their website labeled "Trump Country," focused on stories that predominately affect this demographic. Likewise, the *New York Times* frequently runs pieces focused on the perspective of voters in these swing states, the vast majority of whom are often white and working-class. The *Times* in particular has come under scrutiny for its repeated presentation of only the white voices in these states as representative of what the "average" voter thinks. In one particularly stark example, one of the voters the paper presented as a voter representative of the country's perception of impeachment had been to 23 Trump rallies and compiled a book of Trump's tweets (Gabriel, Healy, and Tavernise). In short, these voters are still omnipresent in political analysis, and their supposed preferences consequently feature prominently in considerations of which voters are "electable."

<center>Appeal to the "Median" Voters</center>

In this view, Democrats' best chances in the general election lie in nominating a candidate who appeals to voters in the ideological middle, often with a particular focus on moderate white working-class voters and suburban moderates. There does appear to be media recognition that black voters also constitute a portion of the country's moderate voters, but the prototype described below disproportionately rewards candidates who have little to no support from black voters but are perceived to be particularly appealing to white working-class voters.

The need to appeal to the median voter is often elevated in importance because such voters are framed as more reliable—that is, more likely to vote in the 2020 election. *Atlantic* columnist David Frum, in a January 2020 piece entitled "Bernie Can't Win," directly refutes the Sanders' campaign's argument that his candidacy will succeed by driving turnout among young people by noting the reliability of more

<center>37</center>

moderate voters. Citing Sanders' embrace of an endorsement by Joe Rogan, a left-leaning conspiracy theorist who regularly parrots racist and misogynist talking points, Frum notes that Sanders will face election weaknesses because he will struggle to appeal to the voters who turn out the most:

> The Sanders campaign is a bet that the 2020 race can be won by mobilizing the Americans *least* committed to the political process while alienating and even offending the Americans *most* committed to it. It's a hell of a gamble, and for what?

The framing here presents moderate voters as integral to winning back the presidency because they are the "most committed" to the political process. Speaking of the young voters Sanders' campaign relies on as a "hell of a gamble" further presents appeals to non-median voters as risky for success in a general election, damaging the electability of any candidate who fails to appeal to those voters. Frum does not wholly oppose Sanders' policies, noting that his emphasis on the "practical" issues (health insurance, wages) matter more to voters than "theoretical" ones (democracy, corruption), but he argues that Sanders' electoral problems lie in the fact that Sanders has failed to "establish an emotional connection with suburban women and African Americans," acknowledging these groups' integral role in the electorate.

While some arguers do acknowledge that these groups are integral to the Democratic base, their concerns are often left secondary to those of white working-class and Midwestern voters. A *Time* profile of Pete Buttigieg from May 2019, for instance, specifically points to the South Bend Mayor's appeal to white voters as a boon for his candidacy:

> As a white man, Buttigieg may appeal to more traditional voters, yet women and voters of color are the heart of the Democratic coalition (Alter).[10]

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[10] This article and quote are referenced in the Henderson article later in this paper, and I credit her for drawing my attention to it.

Here, Alter separates white men from all other voting demographics as "traditional voters"—the inclusion of *yet* separates "women and voters of color" from this first descriptor. The word *traditional* itself implies a level of stability that elevates white men's importance as a group that candidates should appeal to, while the other demographics are given the more emotional moniker of being the "heart of the Democratic Coalition." In directly tying Buttigieg's identity as a white man to success with the former group, Alter presents a candidate's identity as directly related to their performance among key demographics in the electorate.

The sidelining of black voters' interests often results in candidates who have little appeal to black voters being elevated as particularly electable. Buttigieg, for instance, has consistently polled around 0% with black voters (Hensley-Clancy and Cramer), but is repeatedly elevated as electable because of a perceived appeal to Midwestern voters. The following section explores how this focus on "median voters" create a prototype of electability that often elevates a candidates' appeal to white voters over their appeal to black voters and other voters of color.

<u>Candidate Qualities</u>

Moderate

As discussed above, if voters believe the median ideology of voters lies more with the opposing party, voters increase their focus on electability (Morhosseini 469). Because the immediate post-mortem of 2016 posited white-working class voters as the ones who turned the election, they become the "median voter" that serves as a barometer for the rest of the electorate. The voters cited in these stories tend to be ideologically moderate or conservative, rendering the "median voter" in the same ideological light. Media discussions of the white working-class voters frequently cite candidates' moderate ideology as evidence of their electability and vice-versa;

candidates with ideologies that are characterized as far left, chiefly Bernie Sanders

and Elizabeth Warren, often have their electability framed negatively. Joe Biden, Pete

Buttigieg, and Amy Klobuchar, all candidates who are typically framed as

ideologically moderate, often benefit from this frame as they are rendered palatable to

the median voter and consequently electable.

This perspective on electability often characterizes the progressive voters of

the party—and their preferred candidates—as too idealistic to win against Trump and

that in order to recapture the White House, the nominee must be moderate

ideologically. In an April 2019 *Washington Post* column titled "Joe Biden is the Best

Candidate to Beat Trump," for example, David Ignatius writes that:

> Progressive activists within the party are generating ideas and energy that
> could galvanize a country that wants a fairer economy and a cleaner
> government. But none of these ideas will matter unless a Democrat wins. The
> damage Trump would do in a second term might not be undone for decades. In
> thinking about their party's nominee, paradoxically, Democrats must put the
> country first... The need to replace Trump ought to transcend party and
> ideology.

Here, Ignatius divides progressive activism from the success of the Democratic

nominee, suggesting that the two are incompatible. While he praises the goals of

progressive activists, his use of the contradiction *but* implies that the positive ideas

alluded to in the first half of the passage—the ideas that could "galvanize a

country"—cannot be rectified with "a Democrat win[ning]." In including the

"damage" that "might not be undone for decades" in a second Trump term, Ignatius

implicitly connects the candidates progressives prefer with a Trump victory and

further harm. His closing line similarly solidifies that idea; by stating that beating

Trump "ought to transcend… ideology," he further suggests that those focused on a

candidates' progressivism (or lack thereof) are placing those qualities before their

ability to beat Trump, and that the inverse should be true for success in 2020. He

closes the piece by arguing that "Biden looks most like the person who could beat Trump. And that's Job One," suggesting that the candidates' electability is the single most important factor in a candidate, and that those who want a progressive candidate need to compromise for the sake of the general election.

The phrase "too far left" is one that has been frequently deployed against Democrats at large and individual candidates within the party by analysts, Republicans, and moderate Democrats alike. Discussions about whether Democrats are "too far left" regularly occur in cable and print discussions of Democratic candidates. A *Washington Post Magazine* piece from November 2019, for instance, announces that "The Democrats are Moving Left. Will America Follow?" While many of the commentators argue in favor of leftward policy shifts,[11] the piece takes as its core premise that Democrats are ideologically further left, noting in the introduction that the party has "shifted in fundamental ways since the last presidential election" (Just), and inviting commentators to discuss the potential merits and consequences of the policy shift.

Questions about ideology have featured in official polls of Democratic voters; in October 2019, for instance, a Quinnipiac University poll found that 47% of self-identified Democrats felt that the party was too far left, compared with 37% of self-identified Republicans who felt the party was too far right (Cillizza). *CNN* analyst Chris Cillizza argues that these poll results look at a phenomenon that is "less well-covered" than Republicans shifting rightward, speaking to its importance. He goes on to use these results to argue that:

> [The results] should be worrisome for a Democratic Party establishment already worried that several of their leading presidential candidates are too liberal for the country at large. Remember that the positions that one or several

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[11] Supporters are often arguing the moral benefits of such polices or pointing to how such a platform would be considered centrist in other economically developed countries, rather than explicitly tying such policies to electability.

Democratic candidates for president had advocated for during the primary
season so far include:
Eliminating all private health insurance in favor of a single, government-run
system
The "Green New Deal," a massive (and massively expensive) overhaul of the
way in which we consume and think about energy in this country
Mandatory buybacks of AR-15s and AK-47s
Decriminalization of illegal immigration
These are not views that a majority of the country holds… In some cases --
Medicare for All's elimination of private insurance, for example -- what these
Democratic candidates are for are [*sic*] not even supported by a strong
majority of Democrats.

Here, Cillizza frames the ideology of several leading Democrats (he names Warren
and Sanders early in the piece) as an election liability by putting their perspectives at
odds with the general electorate. That he claims the Democratic establishment
themselves are concerned that "several" candidates are "too liberal for the country at
large" suggests that the ideology of such candidates is so distant from the average
voter that the leadership of their own party is worried about winning the election. The
language he uses to frame each of the policies he describes—"eliminating,"
"massive," "mandatory," and "decriminalization" of something "illegal"—all work to
characterize these policies as extreme ones, further adding to the perception of the
candidates as outside of the mainstream. He further punctuates the list of policies by
noting that "these are not views the majority of the country holds," again placing the
views of Democrats at odds with the American people. His last sentence extends this
sense of ideological alienation by noting that not only are the current candidates'
views at odds with the electorate in general, but also with members of their own party.

Discussions of ideology in relation to this concept of electability often frame
many of the policy proposals put forth by the candidates, particularly Sanders and
Warren, as too far outside of the mainstream to result in success in the general
election. Sanders' self-identification as a Democratic Socialist is often framed as

problematic for his electability.[12] Particularly in recent years, Socialism has been

unpopular with the American electorate at large, with only 39% favorability in 2019

(Jones and Saad). In the first July Democratic Debate, for instance, moderator Jake

Tapper noted that voters prefer a candidate who can "beat Donald Trump" over one

who "agrees with them on major issues" before referencing an ad by then-candidate

John Hickenlooper decrying socialism as a way "extremes [could] give Trump four

more years." He then asked if the Colorado Governor thought "Senator Sanders was

too extreme to beat Donald Trump." In asking whether Sanders is "*too* extreme,"

Tapper's question presupposes that Sanders is in fact extreme, framing as distant from

the median voter.

Hickenlooper's response furthers the frame that the progressive policies put

forth by other candidates pose a risk during the general election:

> I'm saying the policies of -- this notion that you're going to take private
> insurance away from 180 million Americans who, many of them don't want to
> give -- many of them do want to get rid of it, but some don't -- many don't. Or
> you're going to -- the Green New Deal make sure that every American's
> guaranteed a government job if they want, that is a disaster at the ballot box,
> you might as well FedEx the election to Donald Trump.

Here, Hickenlooper's relies on descriptions that frame the policies favored by

candidates like Sanders and Warren as extreme changes to current policies—*take*

away from *180 million* Americans, *every American's guaranteed* a government job.

His final sentence frames Trump's reelection as a foregone conclusion if a progressive

is the nominee. Not only does he call the policies a "*disaster* at the ballot box," but

says that the election can be "FedEx[ed]" to Trump, framing such policies as so

damaging to Democrats' support that an entire general election fight would not be

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[12] The US does have a history of an active socialist party; in the early 1900s, they were successful in
electing multiple mayors and congressmen and ran Eugene Debs as a candidate for president five times
(McArdle). However, the Socialist Party's anti-war stance during World War I caused Debs to be jailed
(McArdle). Socialism is often also conflated with communism, which became particularly unpopular in
the US after the Cold War with the Soviet Union (Montanaro and Liasson).

able to change the results.

Much like liberal columnists regularly write about on the fitness of Republican nominees and officials, conservative voices also feature in discussions of electability in 2020. *Washington Post* columnist Jennifer Rubin, for example, regularly addresses the electability of the 2020 field in her columns. In a September 2019 column describing her opinion of Joe Biden's appeal, she writes:

> Biden shows reverence for the most popular Democrat around, former president Barack Obama; others find fault in everything from the Affordable Care Act to immigration policy. Biden does not bombard voters with a torrent of multi-part plans; he gives them a few basic positions and defends them. Biden does not campaign from the neck up; he campaigns with his heart on his sleeve. Biden is deeply optimistic; his opponents think Americans are the problem, not Trump. (I don't suggest that his opponents are wrong, merely that their stance apparently isn't as popular as they thought.) Biden wants normalcy plus reform; his opponents want a peaceful revolution. Biden knows people want to be heard and seen; his opponents (with the exception of Sen. Kamala D. Harris) don't fully grasp this. They want to "help," to pepper people with ideas and a to-do list, while Biden takes the time to listen to them. (Think of the well-meaning friend who has a thousand suggestions when you are grieving and you'd rather they just shut up and commiserate.)

In the above passage, Rubin contrasts Biden with his opponents to frame him as more in line with what the average voter believes about various issues—and consequently, more able to win their votes in a general election. The attributes she assigns the other Democratic candidates frame them as out-of-touch and therefore potentially alienating voters in the general election. By characterizing them as "finding fault in everything," Rubin portrays the other Democratic candidates as overly critical ones, in sharp contrast to the hopeful tone she presents Biden as providing voters. Her statement that Biden "*knows* people want to be heard and seen" in contrast to his opponents who "don't fully grasp this" portrays the former Vice President as possessing a political knowledge the other candidates do not, a trait that speaks positively to his ability to challenge Trump in a general election. The fact that she further describes the other candidates as *pepper[ing]* voters, a phrase that carries a negative connotation, coupled

with her comparison of them to a friend offering "a thousand" suggestions when someone is grieving, further presents everyone but Biden and Kamala Harris as isolating to voters and consequently raises doubts about their electability.

Rubin further links the other Democratic candidates—most notably Warren and Sanders—to radicalism that makes their campaigns non-viable. Warren's presidential campaign has been marked by the candidate's release of a litany of detailed plans to solve issues facing society; Rubin here characterizes candidates releasing plans as *bombarding* voters, a term that implies such plans are being forced upon and overwhelming the electorate. By contrast, she frames Biden as "giv[ing] a few basic plans," in sharp contrast to the "torrent of multi-part plans" Warren is framed as overwhelming voters with (the Warren campaign's unofficial slogan was "Warren has a plan for that"). Sanders' campaign is also implicitly referenced by the phrase "peaceful revolution"—his campaign explicitly advocates for a political revolution, primarily to end the economic disparities between the extremely wealthy and the working class—still, "revolution" carries strong connotations of dramatic change, generally perceived negatively. The words she uses to describe Biden's campaign—"normalcy plus reform"—both carry more positive connotations and consequently Biden's campaign as the more palatable one for a wider variety of voters.

Likewise, Lloyd Green, former opposition research counsel to George H.W. Bush's campaign in 1988, wrote a column for *The Guardian* arguing that Biden's lead in polls is "because electability is a real thing." On Biden's ideology, he argues that:

> On the issues, Biden is a mainstream economic liberal, not a wild-eyed would-be revolutionary. Stridency is not his thing. He is not looking to recreate the world anew, and that is reassuring in a world buffeted by Trumpian tweetstorms.

Green's choice of descriptors here work to frame progressives as far outside the

mainstream: the use of *wild-eyed*, *would-be revolutionary*, and *stridency*, a word that

carries negative connotations, all create a sense of extremity that sharply contrasts

with Biden's "mainstream economic liberal[ism]." The sense of normalcy Green

applies to Biden is furthered by his description of the political landscape under Trump

as "*buffeted* by Trumpian *tweetstorms*," descriptions that convey a sense of relentless

chaos. Hence, both Trump and the progressive candidates in the race are framed in

similar chaotic terms, while Biden is presented as "reassuring" and "mainstream,"

distinguishing his candidacy as uniquely different from Trump's.

The discussions of electability in relation to candidates' ideologies also

typically presumes that there are voters who would support a Democrat but would

vote for Trump if the nominee were too liberal. Neera Tanden, president of the liberal

think tank Center for American Progress, writing for *Washington Post Magazine*,

points to Democratic successes in the midterm elections as a model for the 2020 race:

> In 2020, Democrats can — and should — turn out their base, while
> simultaneously making their case to swing voters. That's precisely what
> happened in 2018. Participation rates among millennials and people of color
> soared, with the number of Latino voters nearly doubling from the previous
> midterm elections in 2014. But persuadable Trump voters played the more
> important role: According to Catalist, a progressive firm that tracks voter data,
> "Democratic gains were … largely driven by voters who voted for Trump in
> 2016 and voted Democratic in 2018.

Here, Tanden frames white Trump voters as a key demographic the Democratic

nominee must appeal to. While she notes the importance of young voters and minority

groups to the 2018 midterm results, her use of the conjunction "but" separates Trump

voters from these groups—in essence, noting that such voters are largely older and

white. That she elevates this latter group as "more important" to Democrats' electoral

success frames their concerns as paramount. The final paragraph of her piece goes on

to argue in favor of a health care plan[13] distinct from Medicare for All. Citing the plan's appeal among Iowa Democrats, she claims policies like it help build the "broad coalition" needed to "beat Trump," further highlighting the concerns of voters from a predominately white state as integral to Trump's defeat.

During Elizabeth Warren's surge over the late summer of 2019, *The New York Times* ran a piece that claimed while "Democrats love [her], they also worry about her." Many of these "worries" cited are ideological in nature; reporter Jonathan Martin writes:

> Ms. Warren is facing persistent questions and doubts about whether she would be able to defeat President Trump in the general election. The concerns, including from her admirers, reflect the head-versus-heart debate shaping a Democratic contest increasingly being fought over the meaning of electability and how to take on Mr. Trump… These Democrats worry that her uncompromising liberalism would alienate moderates in battleground states who are otherwise willing to oppose the president.

By labeling the debate one of "head-versus-heart," a phrase that implies what the party at hand (the Democrats) want—in this case, Elizabeth Warren, who is "love[d]" by them—is at odds with the logical choice for the nomination, Martin frames Warren's candidacy as idealistic, rather than a realistic approach to successfully beat Trump in the general election. Martin's use of *uncompromising* to describe Warren's liberalism, coupled with the potential added effect that it would "alienate moderates" who "are otherwise willing to oppose the president"—in other words, votes that would normally go to a more moderate Democratic candidate—further frame her as too liberal to win against the incumbent president in a general election.

The entire premise of the article—that while Democrats love Warren as a candidate, they do not see her campaign as a viable one—carries vestiges of the pioneer candidate metaphor discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume. In particular, the

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[13] Proposed by her own think tank.

characterization of her run for president as one of "heart" (that is, an emotional appeal to supporters) rather than "head" (that is, a logical choice about who is best suited for the nomination) frames her candidacy as a symbolic one that appeals to the emotions of a subgroup of voters (Democrats) rather than appealing broadly to the electorate at large.

Somewhat paradoxically, the view that moving too far left economically will lose votes seems to contrast with the narrative that Trump's voters chose him because he promised them a better economic future—many of the policies Sanders and Warren are criticized for being "too far left" on are economic ones that would deliver relief to these voters if enacted. However, much like Lilla's op-ed in the previous chapter declared that white voters felt left out when other marginalized groups were mentioned, many decrying these candidates' policies note that Midwestern voters do not believe they will benefit from them. Claire McCaskill, for instance, the former Missouri Senator who lost reelection in 2018, frequently discusses Midwestern voters' preferences in her current role as an *MSNBC* contributor. In a post-debate panel on the second night of the July 2019 debate, in which several candidates on stage, including Montana Governor Steve Bullock and Ohio Congressman Tim Ryan, characterized plans like Medicare for All as unrealistic, McCaskill noted that:

> America is generally not as far along the left line as Bernie and Elizabeth. Free stuff from the government does not play well in the Midwest, because they're just convinced that they're not the ones getting the free stuff… If you start saying we're going to let folks coming across the border have no criminal penalty… and access to free healthcare through Medicaid programs, then you are going to lose a whole slew of voters that are not crazy about Donald Trump but are not going to go there… It would be a very difficult thing to overcome in states like Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania… the states we really need to win.

McCaskill's core argument here—that the liberal economic policies put forth by the "left line" candidates "do not play well in the Midwest"—serves to refute any talking

points made by the candidates that their economic policies will bring back voters who believed in Trump's economic message because they do not see themselves represented in the policies. Such framing echoes the sentiments seen in the explanations of Trump's win—he gave a voice to the white working class' hardship—while still denying that candidates proposing sweeping economic change are the solution. McCaskill further trivializes these policies by referring to them as "free stuff from the government," framing them as unrealistic giveaways rather than policy proposals designed to help communities. The word *stuff* in particular, which is often used as a casual referent to describe objects that carry little meaning, serves to characterize the promises being made by these candidates as trite. That McCaskill further characterizes these programs as going to "folks coming across the border [with] no criminal penalty," explicitly touching on the cultural flashpoint of immigration, further separates these programs from the white working-class and therefore untenable solutions for the Democrats in 2020.

McCaskill further presents the electoral consequences of these policies in drastic terms, saying that nominating a candidate with these views will "lose [Democrats] a whole slew of voters that are not crazy about Donald Trump," implying that, though there are candidates who dislike Trump and could vote for a Democratic nominee in November, a large margin of these voters would not support a candidate who embraced such policies. Her particular focus on Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, all three states that delivered Donald Trump the presidency, frames Sanders and Warren's strategies as inadequate in precisely the areas that Democrats need to win, consequently rendering their campaigns untenable in a general campaign.

Success in Red or Midwestern States

Much like the long-standing myth that a candidate's vice-presidential pick will

deliver their home state's electoral votes to the ticket (Kopko and Devine), candidates from traditionally Republican states also enjoy an advantage in the media's framing of their electability, based on a presumption that they will be able to court voters in the states that Clinton lost. Such candidate success is often treated with a kind of reverence that suggests the ability to win over these voters is a kind of political genius needed to guarantee the Democrats' success in 2020.

Steve Bullock, for instance, the Montana governor whose presidential campaign lasted from May to December, was lauded by *Politico* as the "red-state savior Democrats don't want" (Lizza). The use of the term *savior*, which carries highly positive connotations and implies a sense of reverence, elevates Bullock's candidacy. Lizza further adds to this impression by continually framing Bullock in highly positive terms—saying that he has "arguably the most impressive governing credentials in the race," noting that the governor could "brag about re-authorizing Medicaid expansion, freezing in-state college tuition in his state, and vetoing a slew of conservative bills sent to him by his Republican Legislature." The use of the phrase *most impressive*, which carries highly positive connotations, coupled with Lizza's assertion that Bullock could *brag*, suggesting that his accomplishments—all ones that satisfy some kind of general Democratic priority—are worth boasting about, all frame the governor as uniquely successful in Montana and therefore able to extend that success nationwide in a general election.

Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota also benefits from this qualification of electability. While not one of the states Trump narrowly won in 2016, Minnesota is geographically and demographically similar to Michigan and Wisconsin—specifically Midwestern, the region treated in the previous section as the definitive reason for Trump's success. Klobuchar's success there is often touted as a boon to her

electability; *Washington Post* columnist David Byler, making a case for the "second-tier" candidates' electability, notes that Klobuchar boosts "eye-popping margins" there that warrant her attention from electability-minded voters.

Following the December 2019 debate, Matthew Yglesias, senior correspondent at *Vox*, ran an article entitled "Amy Klobuchar Deserves a Closer Look from Electability-Minded Democrats," arguing that Klobuchar's record in her midwestern state speaks positively to her electability in a general election.

> The fear that haunts Democrats is that even with Trump unpopular, they could beat him by 3 or 4 percentage points in the nationwide vote total and still lose if he does well enough in the Midwest, specifically in Wisconsin… Democrats don't currently have a candidate in the field who has run and won in Wisconsin… Minnesota is, of course, adjacent to Wisconsin… The sensibilities are similar. All things considered, you'd expect any Democrat to do better in Minnesota than in Wisconsin. But you'd expect a Democrat who does unusually well for a Democrat in Minnesota to also do unusually well for a Democrat in Wisconsin. And Klobuchar does very, very well in Minnesota.

Here, Yglesias highlights the centrality of Wisconsin, one of the three states Trump won by small margins, to considerations of electability, noting that even a Democrat who wins the popular vote by "3 or 4 percentage points" could lose the Electoral College because of the state, making the nominee's appeal there crucially important. That he describes Klobuchar as "do[ing] very, very well in Minnesota," a state with "similar sensibilities" to these crucial states, consequently frames her as a potential solution to this "fear that haunts Democrats" and gives strong credence to her electability in a potential general election competition against Trump.

The Midwest is not exclusively white, but the voters and candidates focused on for this prototype of electability are predominately so. This extensive focus on white voters and their wishes likely owes to the fact that the prototype takes as its premise that the party needs to win the support of the white working-class and Republicans wary of Trump, the latter group also being overly white. Consequently,

candidates who lack support from black voters—Klobuchar and Buttigieg for instance, have both consistently polled near 0% with black voters for the entirety of their runs—have been bolstered[14] by discussions of their electability with little regard for the damage their liabilities with black voters pose in their path to the nomination and in a general election where turnout among black voters is key to success.

Appeal to the Democratic Base

Almost in direct opposition to the previous prototype of electability, this prototype of electability looks for a candidate who can energize the Democratic base to turn out in high numbers that override Trump's voters. Unlike the previous section, midwestern voters are not presented here as the key to success in the general election—rather, young voters and black voters, both key constituencies for the Democratic Party, are centered. Focusing primarily on the drop in turnout among African-Americans from Obama in 2012 to Clinton in 2016 (the second myth evaluated in Chapter 2 of this volume), proponents of this perspective argue that an "electable" candidate will appeal to these constituencies so much that their turnout will be enough to tip the election. While those focused on a candidate's appeal to swing voters treat "electable" traits as innate and therefore unchangeable, the rhetoric sampled here tends to focus on whether a candidate will be able to build and sustain their appeal to voters across the length of a general election, presenting a more malleable conception of electable traits. Proponents of this view of electability tend to tend to be younger and more liberal and are more likely to be non-white. This prototype largely functions as a counter-prototype to the first one, in that it is often used to frame Joe Biden's electability negatively rather than advocate for a specific

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[14] Klobuchar in particular was endorsed by over a dozen editorial boards (which also largely consist of white people), including a joint endorsement with Elizabeth Warren from *The New York Times* (Golden).

candidate.

In direct contrast to the first electability prototype, proponents of this prototype often actively push back on the notion that Democrats must court white voters to win. Ibram Kendi, Director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, labels African-American voters "the other swing voter" in a January 2020 column for *The Atlantic*. Noting that there was a drop in young black voters in 2016, Kendi delivers a blunt refutation of the idea that white voters are the only swing voters in an election:

> The common conception of the swing voter is one who shifts between voting Republican and voting Democrat. These center-right or center-left voters are typically white and older. Meanwhile, people of color and young people, and especially young people of color, are more likely than white people and older people to swing between voting Democrat and not voting (or voting third party). These are America's *other* swing voters. Othered because they are typically young and not-white. Othered because they are hardly recognized at the table of political agency. Othered because they are primarily recognized at the table of political shame when they don't vote. Othered because Americans refuse to recognize how voter suppression and depression affect their agency. Quietly, though, they are voicing their agency, declaring the Democratic Party irresponsible for the candidate choices it makes, swinging, and deciding elections.

The reasons Kendi lists for why these swing voters are othered—they are not granted "political agency" by dominant groups, they are shamed for not voting, and the barriers to their voting are not a priority—all speak to institutional prejudices against racial minorities, something that likely plays to voters' feelings of "white guilt"—that is, white voters' guilt at the oppression people of color have gone and continue to go through. The *New York Times*' Astead Herndon noted in October 2019 that explicit attention to racial issues is a salient factor for white voters in the primary, even in predominantly white states like Iowa and New Hampshire (Herndon). That framework of guilt is further impressed by Kendi's description of these voters declaring the Democratic party "irresponsible" for its choice of candidates, suggesting

that should the Democratic party fail to nominate someone who speaks to the needs of the African-American community, it risks losing the election by not encouraging them to turn out.

<div align="center">Candidate Qualities</div>

Ability to Energize Key Democratic Constituencies

One of the key qualities arguers in this group emphasize is a candidate's ability to excite voters about their campaign and consequently encourage them to turn out to vote in a general election. These voters are typically (though not exclusively) represented by the subgroups that form the base of the Democratic party—young voters, African Americans, Latino voters, and similar groups—overriding the need to cater to Republicans and conservative-leaning independents. Arguments supporting this prototype of electability tend to rely on the same schema—VOTERS ARE INERT AND NEED TO BE ENERGIZED TO VOTE. Candidates are subsequently framed based on their perceived ability to drive this energy among the groups constituting the Democratic base.[15] David Byler's column calling attention to the electable qualities of the then "second-tier" candidates singles out Harris and Booker as electable because of their "strong ties with black voters" that could "reenergize Obama voters who stayed home in 2016," speaking to their ability to turn out the voters who helped propel the last Democratic president into office.

In May 2019, Bakari Sellers, a political commentator and former member of the South Carolina House of Representatives, proclaimed Kamala Harris to be the "the real electable Democrat." He first decries the framing of electability as one that presents "the white male candidate" as "best suited to defeat Trump," calling that

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[15] This schema also allows for the possibility that voters can be energized *against* a candidate, as was likely the case for some 2016 voters on both sides—both candidates were historically unpopular (Saad). The authors sampled here, however, largely judge candidates on their ability to give voters something to vote *for*.

perspective "precisely the wrong way of looking at things." He confronts the idea of

which voters matter directly, noting that thoughts of "winning back Trump voters"

being enough to swing the election are "mistaken" and that "Democrats simply won't

stand a chance in 2020 if we can't energize African American voters," framing the

demographic as critically important to victory against Donald Trump and contrasting

the narrative that the white working-class voters are the key to the election. He goes

on to cite the previous electoral importance of black voters in previous elections as

evidence that Harris' appeal with the group will bring victory in November:

> The truth is, too many voters who supported President Obama in 2008 and
> 2012 made a choice to stay home in 2016. In Wayne County, Michigan –
> home of Detroit, where Kamala Harris gave a speech addressing the
> "electability" conversation on Sunday – 37,000 fewer voters turned out in
> 2016 than 2012. The county is 40% black. Given that Hillary Clinton lost
> Michigan by fewer than 11,000 votes, it is reasonable to assume this turnout
> drop cost Democrats the state. It's worth remembering that the last "electable"
> Democrat won by energizing African Americans, young voters, suburban
> voters, progressives, and Latinos. He was uniquely positioned to make the
> argument most central at that time: We need change. He also was a black man
> named Barack Hussein Obama.

Here, Sellers first relies on statistics from 2016 that contradict the dominant narrative

that Clinton lost midwestern states because of the shift among white working-class

voters; rather, he highlights credible statistics that demonstrate the fall in black

turnout may be responsible for Trump's victory. His choice to describe that lower

turnout as the consequence of voters who "made a *choice* to stay home" relies upon

the schema identified above, framing black voters' decisions as not of who to vote for,

but of whether to vote at all—choosing not to turn out if both candidates fail to

energize them. In doing so, he frames the key to Democratic success as nominating a

candidate who can inspire and drive turnout among black voters, rather than focusing

on ones who can recover the white working-class. Throughout his piece, Sellers notes

Harris' repeated appeals to these voters, implicitly tying her to the constituency he has

framed Democrats as needing to win back the White House. The reference of

Obama's full name serves to remind audiences that candidates whose candidates who

may seem to flout common sense about electability have won before—Obama's

middle name is also the last name of the Iraqi president when Bush started the war in

Iraq.[16] In doing so, he positively frames the electability of not only Harris, but all of

the non-white, non-male candidates in the race.

In an opinion piece for *The Guardian* in which he argues that "Trump will run

rings [a]round Biden," Nathan Robinson, author of *Why You Should Be a Socialist*,

compares the enthusiasm of Biden's voters to that of the incumbent president:

> At the same time, compared to Trump, Biden has:
> No money
> No voter enthusiasm
> No organization
> No agenda
> Ask yourself: how likely is such a candidate to win? Look at the enthusiasm
> Trump gets at his rallies. It is real. Trump has fans, and they're highly
> motivated. How motivated are Biden's "fans"? Is Biden going to fill stadiums?
> Are people going to crisscross the country knocking on doors for him? Say
> what you want about Clinton, but there were some truly committed Clinton
> fans, and she had a powerful base of support. By comparison, Biden looks
> weak, and Trump is savagely effective at preying on and destroying
> establishment politicians.

From the beginning of this section, Robinson directly frames a potential Biden

campaign as ineffectual against Trump, which serves as a direct counternarrative to

the idea that Biden is the most electable. By first listing a litany of areas where the

campaign lacks any infrastructure, he negatively portrays the campaign before listing

the rhetorical question—"How likely is such a candidate to win?"—which, in light of

the opening lines, is designed to be answered "no" by the reader. Robinson uses

Trump as an example of someone who successfully energized voters, relying on the

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[16] Bush made Hussein the public-facing villain during the war; for more context, see George Lakoff's
"Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf."

schema above; by repeatedly noting the "enthusiasm" Trump has generated among them and how "motivated" they are to support his candidacy for the White House. If Biden indeed has "no voter enthusiasm," his ability to energize voters—and consequently win the election—is doubtful. The series of rhetorical questions that follow, all of which presuppose that the reader will answer negatively, all further build upon the ways campaigns who energize voters can motivate others to vote for their candidate (campaign rallies, knocking doors for the candidate)—Robinson frames a Biden general election campaign as unable to rely on these. Robinson's use of violent imagery—painting Trump as *savagely effective* and *preying* on the former Vice President—applies a metaphor of predation to the general election, whereby candidates who struggle to use these tools to motivate voters are particularly vulnerable.

Progressive

Ideology also serves as a quality for this facet of electability, though at the opposite end of the spectrum from the previous prototype. Building upon the schema that VOTERS ARE INERT AND NEED TO BE ENERGIZED TO VOTE, arguers who note a candidate should be progressive note that members of the Democratic base are energized by progressive policies and will not only be more reluctant to vote on Election Day if the nominee does not offer an agenda that inspires them, but will also be more susceptible to propaganda encouraging this lack of turnout.

In the second night of the July Debates, moderator Jake Tapper furthered the frame of Biden's candidacy as unappealing to progressives. He first noted that "there is a big debate… about the best way Democrats can win back Michigan," and that the night before, Elizbeth Warren had advocated for "big, structural change." He then went on to ask Biden:

> What do you say to progressives who worry that your proposals are not ambitious enough to energize the progressive wing of your party, which you will need to beat Donald Trump?

The latter half of Tapper's statement directly acknowledges that Democrats cannot "beat Donald Trump" without the support of the progressive wing. Relying on the presentation of voters as inert via the word *energize*, Tapper's question works to present concerns about Biden's ability to act as the catalyst for voter turnout needed to be successful in the general election.

Russian disinformation was also used to target voters who did not feel motivated to vote for Clinton—Kendi, the American University professor quoted at the beginning of this section, directly addresses the possibility of such disinformation occurring again in a second *Atlantic* piece entitled "Why I Fear a Moderate Democratic Nominee." He notes that the Senate Intelligence Committee found that black Americans were targeted the most by Russian propaganda, specifically with posts that advocated for them to either stay home or vote for Jill Stein, the 2016 Green Party candidate whose candidacy may have contributed to Clinton's loss—if every Stein voter had voted for Clinton in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan, the former Secretary of State would have won those states and consequently, the election (Golshan).

> Democrats should be more worried about a moderate nominee being out of touch with winnable voters. Eighty- three percent of Obama-to-Trump swing voters who switched back to the Democratic Party in 2018 support Medicare for All, nearly mirroring the overwhelming support among other swing voters who voted Obama, didn't vote in 2016, and then voted for Democrats in the 2018 midterms. These two groups also opposed Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement, supported a $12 minimum wage, and backed a millionaire's tax at similarly high rates. These two seemingly distinct groups of swing voters (one prototypically white, the other prototypically young and black)… may be most closely aligned with progressive candidates. This pumps the heart of electability—any progressive nominee would have clear pathways to two of the most important groups of swing voters whom Democrats lost in 2016.

Kendi begins his framing here with a warning to Democrats, noting that they "*should*

be more concerned*" about nominating a candidate who does not appeal to "winnable"

voters—that is, voters who can be persuaded to vote for the Democratic nominee. The

perception of such voters is at the core of all of the electability arguments sampled in

this paper, as each arguer makes the case that their preferred candidate will better

appeal to the most voters; by leading this passage with an appeal that Democrats are

in danger of nominating someone "out of touch" with these voters, Kendi makes a

very explicit argument that what follows may help Democrats win the election. The

two groups he identifies both voted for Democrats in the 2018 midterm elections—

primarily white voters who voted for Trump in 2016 and predominately black voters

who did not vote in 2016—speak to groups who are typically framed in disparate

terms with different desires from a nominee. That Kendi gives a litany of policy

issues on which these groups agree, from Medicare for All to a wealth tax, frames

them as jointly "winnable" by a candidate who supports these policies—in this case, a

progressive. Kendi's use of metaphor in the last line, saying that understanding the

appeal of progressive policies to these groups "pumps the heart of electability"

renders the nomination of a progressive candidate central to winning the presidency in

2020.

Withstand Trump Attacks

Often pointing to the chaotic disinformation of the 2016 election and the way

Trump and the media manipulated Clinton's email scandal to the level of a criminal

conspiracy, many argue that the nominee must be able to withstand such rhetorical

falsehoods to succeed in the general election. This electability criterion is generally

framed as a reflection of a candidate's response to campaign challenges, rather than

their innate appeal to various subsections of the population. Sellers' piece on Kamala

Harris, for instance, notes that her prosecutorial skills, leading to impressive questioning of administration witnesses in the Senate, demonstrates that she can "take the fight directly to Trump," positively framing her electability because of her potential to challenge the incumbent on a rhetorical level in the general election.

This prototype also presumes that the media landscape will fundamentally change from the primary to the general election, and that the candidate Democrats choose should be the best prepared for that rhetorical shift. Hence, the prototype rewards candidates like Harris who demonstrate skills that extend to a protracted fight or who have limited issues in their background. Candidates like Joe Biden, by contrast, who carry decades of political history that can be weaponized, have their electability framed negatively here.

For instance, Paul Waldman, in a December 2019 column for *The Washington Post*, argues that:

> Any Democratic nominee will face a similar version of the right's campaign of vilification, not to mention a news media that is likely to rerun the "But Her Emails" debacle of 2016, elevating some small weakness or misstep in the Democrat's history into a Watergate-level scandal. The most skilled candidates, like Obama and Bill Clinton, were able to overcome what was thrown at them, and it's perfectly reasonable to ask which candidate is best able to withstand the assault. Biden might be that candidate, but looking over his career I see reason for skepticism.

Here, Waldman creates the image of a dangerous rhetorical situation for the 2020 nominee. He begins this framework by evoking the phrase "But Her Emails," a reference to a common criticism of Clinton by Trump and his surrogates in 2016. Despite an FBI probe that revealed no criminal conduct (Edmondson), her use of a private email server while Secretary of State, the phrase became such a dominant news story in the race to the point that "emails" became the word voters most associated with her (Cillizza "Clinton Email"). The inclusion of the line undoubtedly reminds loyal Democratic voters (who constitute those deciding the Democratic

nominee) of what stark rhetorical challenges can impede the nominee. That he further

describes these potential challenges as "small weaknesses" transformed into

"Watergate-level scandals" further compounds the risks of choosing a nominee with

an exploitable past. Waldman makes Biden into a risky candidate by further noting

that the latter's career gives "reason for skepticism" about his ability to "withstand the

assault," a term that conveys violence, paints a vivid description of the rhetorical

challenges facing the potential nominee. The weaknesses he mentions, coupled with

his direct statement that the Vice President's career gives "reason for skepticism"

about his ability to survive a general election fight, all frames Biden's electability as

doubtful.

Kendi's piece on the benefits of a progressive nominee also speaks to potential

problems with Biden's record that would make him vulnerable in a general election:

> Young black swing voters who are not supporting Biden are more likely to be
> progressive and less likely to identify as Democrats than their elders. They
> look at Biden's record—from pushing "tough on crime" and welfare-reform
> legislation to mistreating Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas hearings to
> demeaning black parents—and are repelled. Like Clinton's super-predator
> video, I fear Biden's record can push the other swing voters into not voting.

Here, Kendi builds upon the frame that Clinton's record hurt turnout among black

voters in 2016 and applies the same frame to Biden. After mentioning the Russian

disinformation that targets black voters and encourages them not to vote, he further

frames young black voters as distant from the Democratic Party, by noting that they

may not even identify as Democrats. That he further describes young black voters as

repelled by Biden's policies, a term that carries a sharply negative connotation,

further casts Biden's candidacy as alienating to a group whose support is crucial to

winning the election.

The mention of Clinton's "super-predator" video refers to a comment the then-

First Lady made while supporting the 1994 Crime Control and Prevention Act

(infamous now for policies that disproportionately harmed black and Latino communities with harsh punishments, including for non-violent crimes). Her comments worked members of gangs and drug cartels "super-predators" and justify the need for harsh criminal justice penalties (Cramer and Sands). These comments served as a base for attacks on Clinton by Trump campaign surrogates to portray her as harmful to the black community—and therefore discouraging black voters from supporting her (*CNN*, "Trump Dredges"). In paralleling Biden's record to this vulnerability in Clinton's past, Kendi frames a potential Biden candidacy similarly flawed.

Kendi's argument subsequently parallels Biden's electoral vulnerabilities with Clinton's by naming two distinct areas where he has harmed the community—much like Clinton, advocating for "tough-on-crime" policies, and his role in the Clarence Thomas hearings and Anita Hill's allegations of sexual harassment that arose during them. The first echoes Clinton's "super predators" comment in the impact it had on the black community—both contributed to the tough on crime policies that resulted in mass incarceration. The second adds a vulnerability that Clinton did not face (her husband was not yet President); this one, arguably more specific to black women. Biden chaired the Judiciary Committee while Thomas' confirmation hearings unfolded; his critics allege that he could have called more witnesses that supported Hill's account and stopped his Republican colleagues from attacking her (Zhou). Hence, not only does Kendi frame Biden as not only having the same vulnerability that subjected Clinton, who lost to Trump, to weaknesses in the general election, but a further one that might harm his electability even more.

Age is also rendered a potential liability in a general election, particularly for the three septuagenarian candidates (Biden, Sanders, and Warren), who in mid-

October were the three leading candidates. David Byler, a *Washington Post* columnist, notes this in his October column. He first notes that both parties "blew it" in 2016 by "failing to nominate their most viable candidates," directly calling the audience's attention to the importance of the nomination process in finding a candidate who can appeal to the general population. He then goes on to note that both Trump and Clinton had qualities that resulted in their success in the primary but damage to their candidacy in the general election; Trump's ability to "deprive his opponents of media oxygen" became a host of scandals in the general, while Clinton's use of "political muscle" to "clear the field" of potential primary challengers allowed Trump to "portray her as a creature of the 'swamp." Such framing reminds the audience that some qualities that bolster candidates during a primary election can negatively impact them in the general—and that success in the former does not guarantee a win in November. In addition to mentioning the ideologies of Sanders and Warren as liabilities, Byler notes that none of the then-frontrunners "are particularly young… 78, 76, and 70 years old" and that "Americans have expressed real discomfort with candidates older than 70," raising potential general election liabilities for all of them.

The impeachment proceedings against Donald Trump complicate this facet of electability, particularly for Biden. In September of 2019, the public was notified of an anonymous whistleblower complaint that alleged President Trump had withheld congressionally approved aid for Ukraine because he wanted the country to investigate Hunter Biden, the former Vice President's son, who served on the board of Burisma, an oil and gas company in Ukraine (Blake). During that time, a Ukrainian prosecutor was fired for failing to investigate corruption—the opposite of Trump's allegation that he was fired for investigating Burisma (Blake). While there is no

evidence that the Bidens committed any sort of wrongdoing, many argue that the

repeated mentions of his name in connection to Ukraine would open opportunities for

disinformation campaigns to target low-information voters and convince them that

Biden engaged in corruption. Eugene Robinson, columnist at *The Washington Post*,

for instance, argues the following from a January 30, 2020 column urging Democrats

to "pick the best Democrat to beat Donald Trump":

> Trump's arms-for-investigations shakedown of Ukraine was always about the election. He knew that Biden could wipe the floor with him, so he brought out the playbook he used in 2016. "Her emails" was replaced with "Hunter Biden."… Fairly or not, this does raise vital questions for Biden and for voters who believe that Trump must be defeated at all costs. If Biden is the nominee, there is no question he will face an unending barrage of unfair attacks. "Burisma" will become a Trump rallying cry the way "Benghazi" was four years ago.

Here, Kendi references two right-wing talking points about Clinton that would

undoubtedly be familiar to those who paid close attention to the race in 2016. Both

"her emails," in reference to the email scandal discussed above, and "Benghazi," a

reference to the 2012 terrorist attack on the US Embassy in Benghazi, serve to remind

the reader of attacks Trump and his supporters lobbied against Clinton throughout the

campaign as evidence of her alleged corruption. In equating these phrases to two that

are associated with Joe Biden—"Hunter Biden" and "Burisma"—Kendi portrays a

general election campaign headed by Biden that is again inundated by misinformation

that disparages the Democratic nominee. In portraying Biden as particularly

vulnerable to this sort of general election campaign, Kendi reinforces the idea that

Biden's electability would suffer in a general election.

<div align="center">Identity</div>

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, I am particularly interested in

examining how electability discussions impact candidates of different identities. The

following section will explore how media narratives about the 2020 candidates'

chances explicitly and implicitly discuss their varying identities as either liabilities or strengths in a potential general election competition against Trump. Of the eight of the major candidates left in the race at by February 2020, only one (Tulsi Gabbard) is non-white, and five are male. These candidates at large are not demographically representative of the Democratic party base, which is predominately women and people of color. Electability may be at least partially to blame for this lack of diversity; lack of funds can cause candidates to drop out before any voters have had the chance to vote—and donors and individual voters may be wary about giving money to candidates they fear cannot defeat Trump.

Gender

This last category, which frames male nominees as particularly effective at appealing to the most voters, is more nuanced than the other categories, but equally significant. Hillary Clinton undoubtedly faced sexism in her 2016 run, and that sexism is often implicitly framed as a weakness for female candidates in a general election, hampering their electability. Polling about the 2020 race often finds that voters are wary that *other* voters will refuse to vote for someone—a June 2019 poll, for instance, found that while 74% of respondents indicated they would be comfortable with a female president, only 33% believed their neighbors would be comfortable, a stark difference (Ipsos). As electability rests on what voters believe others want in a candidate, such beliefs do not bode well for the women candidates in the race.

Early discussion of the potential candidates, which included a record number of women, focused on doubts voters and Democratic Party officials had about the possibility of a woman president in 2020. A January 2019 piece in *The New York Times* begins by highlighting the doubts of women who want to see a woman president, noting that:

Joyce Cusack would love to see a woman as president in her lifetime. But she isn't sure it should happen in 2020… Too many Americans may not want to 'take another chance' on a female candidate, Ms. Cusack said, after Hillary Clinton was met with mistrust and even hostility in swing states (Lerer and Chira).

Here, the nomination of a woman is framed as a potential liability for Democrats in 2020, and consequently something that voters concerned about beating Donald Trump should take into consideration. That the first woman cited is framed as passionate about a woman in office—she would purportedly "love to see a woman as president"—but skeptical about any woman's success in 2020 presents the idea that doubts about women's chances of success are so strong they are coming from even those who support them. The use of the word *should* here is particularly noteworthy, as it attaches a sense of obligation to the idea of not having a female president—that is, rather than dismissing the possibility of a female nominee, the frame suggests that nominating a woman would be damaging to Democrats, and so should not occur. This danger is made especially pronounced by the reminder of the Clinton campaign's failure and the phrase "take another chance" to refer to a potential candidacy of a woman. Though the article does include counterpoints and quotes from strategists who argue the benefits of a woman leading the presidential ticket, the entire premise of the article rests on the fact that there are sustained doubts about the success of a woman leading the presidential ticket—doubts that voters afraid of any weaknesses that could aid Trump's reelection campaign would likely take seriously.

Coverage of individual female candidates also often raised doubts about their ability to succeed. The day Elizabeth Warren announced her candidacy, for instance, *Politico* correspondent Natasha Korecki wrote an article entitled "Elizabeth Warren Battles the Ghosts of Hillary." While the article primarily focuses on Warren's viability—her likelihood of winning the Democratic primary—those chances are

discussed in terms of factors that caused Clinton to lose in the general election, hence

implicitly suggesting potential weaknesses in Warren's electability. Discussing the

narratives that have emerged about Warren's candidacy, Korecki notes:

> She's too divisive and too liberal, Washington Democrats have complained
> privately. Her DNA rollout was a disaster — and quite possibly a White
> House deal-breaker. She's already falling in the polls, and — perhaps most
> stinging — shares too many of the attributes that sank Hillary Clinton. In the
> year of the woman, it adds up to one unwelcome mat for the most prominent
> woman likely to be part of the 2020 field. But it also presents an unmistakable
> challenge: How does Warren avoid a Clinton redux — written off as too
> unlikable before her campaign gets off the ground?

Here, Korecki frames Warren's candidacy, still nascent at that point, as a troubled

one. Though not all of the problems Korecki describes result from Warren's gender,

the one she labels "most stinging," suggesting it could deliver the strongest damage to

the Massachusetts' Senator's campaign, is the comparison to Hillary Clinton. Korecki

furthers the idea that the gender-based comparisons to Clinton's campaign are

damaging to her by calling them an "unmistakable challenge." Korecki's argument

that Warren's campaign could become a "Clinton redux" serves to remind audiences

of the struggles the last woman nominee faced, dismissed by the sexist trope of

"unlikeable" "before her campaign got off the ground"—and consequently suggesting

that Warren is more likely to suffer the same fate. As noted above, a number of the

media narratives explaining why Clinton won characterized her as the wrong

candidate for the election—too unpopular to beat Trump. Consequently, in suggesting

that Warren could be unable to overcome perceptions that she is unlikeable, Korecki

implicitly frames her gender as a weakness for the general election.

In media articles about voters' considerations of electability, Warren's

candidacy is consistently framed as a risky one that causes those who would

otherwise support her to choose other candidates. In the January 2020 *Reuters* article

cited above, for instance, Ax and Lewis use Warren's campaign as the frame for their

discussion of the choices voters are making as a result of concerns about electability. The article starts by discussing a volunteer for Warren's campaign working to "convince voters to cast their lot with" the candidate. The terms "cast" and "lot" in particular evoke games of chance, in direct opposition to the security typically offered by candidates framed as likely to win the general election in November. The article then notes the concerns voters have regarding Warren's electability, specifically that "her liberal stances would not draw enough broad support to defeat… Donald Trump in November" before noting that many voters were making facing similar "head-vs-heart dilemma[s]," reinforcing the idea that Warren's candidacy is one that, in the face of Trump's potential reelection, makes emotional but not logical sense.

The authors then go on to quote several people who decided against voting for Warren because of these electability concerns. Even the voter who they quote as labelling "electability" as code for misogyny has Warren listed as his second choice, behind Pete Buttigieg. While the article is not solely focused on Warren—the authors do go on to discuss Sanders' record in the same context—they only quote one voter deciding against him, compared with two for Warren. This, coupled with the fact that anecdotes about the Warren campaign's attempts to convince voters she is electable serve as both the opening and closing anecdotes, emphasizes Warren as the primary candidate voters are abandoning for others in light of electability concerns.

News frames also use the candidacy of Kamala Harris, the only black woman and the only Asian American woman in the race, to question whether Americans would vote for a woman of color to occupy the White House. Much like with Warren, profiles of Harris frequently refer to potential sexism and racism as burdens for her to enter the White House, again raising doubts about her campaign's longevity through November. In November 2019, less than a month before her campaign ended, *ABC*

News ran an article originally titled "Is Kamala Harris Proof That America isn't Ready for a Woman of Color as President?" Such framing renders the very act of being a black woman potentially detrimental to a presidential campaign and offers Harris' fading candidacy as "proof," further cementing the idea that women of color cannot win the presidency. In framing Harris' candidacy as a referendum on whether Americans will vote for a woman of color, these frames legitimize the idea that the status of being a non-white and non-male is something that voters may not "be ready" to accept—an election weakness that voters concerned about electability may take into consideration of their vote. To their credit, *ABC* did change the headline to read that "Sen. Kamala Harris Questions Whether America Would Elect a Woman of Color," a reflection of something Harris herself asked at a campaign event, placing the focus on the candidate's words rather than what her campaign means for women candidates of color at large.

Many media frames discussing electability in concert with gender note that the term is frequently deployed against women and minority candidates but does embody valid concerns many voters have about the way such candidates will be treated in a general election campaign, evoking the concerns about candidates' abilities to withstand general election attacks that dominate the second prototype of electability discussed above.

In January, discussions about the supposed electability of women candidates reached a fever pitch when reports arose that Senator Bernie Sanders had purportedly told Elizabeth Warren in a private conversation that he did not believe a woman could defeat Donald Trump. In much of the media reaction, arguers forcefully deny that sentiment, taking great lengths to note that both women regularly win elections and that Hillary Clinton won the popular vote. That said, however, they also tend to

accompany such rebuttals with an acknowledgement that voters have many fears about have the gender-based attacks Trump would use against a woman candidate. In doing so, such references allude to the "ability to stand up to Trump attacks" quality outlined in the second electability prototype.

Li Zhou, for instance, writing for *Vox* on the debate between the candidates, writes:

> Part of the reason Sanders's purported comments have prompted such a response is that they wade into assumptions some voters have expressed about the electability of a woman president... Effectively, because of Hillary Clinton's loss in 2016, some voters are concerned a woman won't be able to defeat Trump due to the sexism she'll face from other voters.

Here, Zhou explicitly notes that women candidates' gender is a concern for electability-minded voters, hence framing gender as a potential general election liability in the views of some. In tying these concerns to Clinton's loss, Zhou makes an explicit connection to electability in light of the Democrats' loss in 2016, the driving force behind much of modern-day discussions about electability. While Zhou does note that the assumption "doesn't account for the many factors that contributed to Hillary Clinton's defeat," she does acknowledge that women candidates do face sexism, a potential hurdle in a general election. That such discussions occur as a result of comments from Bernie Sanders—who is often framed negatively by the first electability prototype, but positively by the second—suggests that even those who eschew the notion that a candidate be moderate to appeal to the white-working class may still carry reservations about women candidates' electability, presenting gender as an even larger liability than the ideology of candidates.

At the same time, some commentators do push back on the idea that women's gender is a liability. Cited above, Bakari Sellers' article in support of Kamala Harris

actively notes that the term is often used to bolster white men. Elizabeth Weil's May

2019 profile of Kamala Harris for *The Atlantic* further notes that:

> Has the United States dealt with its own racism and misogyny enough to
> elect a black woman president? There's little rational basis for saying yes.
> But there was little rational basis for believing that a man named Barack
> Hussein Obama could win the White House either, let alone a huckster
> named Donald Trump.

Here, Weil frames Harris' race and gender not as liabilities, but potential boons to her

candidacy by reminding her audience of previous candidates who were presumed to

be unelectable—both of whom went on to win the White House. Much like Sellers,

her use of Obama's middle name reminds audiences that conventional wisdom about

electability in 2007 framed the former president as unelectable. In calling Trump a

"huckster," a term with highly negative connotations, she further frames the 2016

election results as unexpected, calling into question those who believe that electability

can be deduced on a "rational basis" of believing who will win the presidency.

Similarly, Nia-Malika Henderson, writing for *CNN* in May 2019 about

remarks Kamala Harris made at an NAACP event decrying the male whiteness of

"electability," points out the biases inherent in the term. She opens her piece reacting

to Harris' remarks with the line "Finally, someone said it," expressing exasperation

with the way the concept has been presented. She goes on to note that the term is

about "the power of whiteness" that allows candidates like Biden and Buttigieg to

appeal to the Midwest, pointing out the inherent biases in discussions of

"electability." While articles like these undoubtedly help to counter the prevailing

prototypes of electable candidates, they are still less common than the articles

elevating the electability of white male candidates. Even Henderson's article ends

with a quote from a black woman saying that a Harris presidency is "not going to

happen" because "black women are at the bottom," extending the idea that voters

believe electoral success is reserved for those who belong to less marginalized identity groups.

This is not to say that there are not valid criticisms of all the female candidates or that sexism is wholly to blame for the end of their campaigns; there are multifaceted reasons, from Harris' record on criminal justice earning her scrutiny from the left to Klobuchar's lack of support with black voters, an obstacle shared by the other midwestern candidates, that the women candidates have struggled. However, given the extreme importance voters have placed on nominating someone who can "beat Trump" in this election, any doubt cast on a candidate's ability to win the White House in November carries profound importance, and may hurt the fundraising abilities of the candidates deemed "not electable" and preventing them from staying in the race longer. Especially given that Warren, who is arguably less ideologically extreme than Sanders, is frequently cited as a candidate who voters would pick if they were not concerned about Trump's reelection, there is definite evidence that concerns about electability have harmed women candidates. *FiveThirtyEight*, for instance, surveyed 845 white Democratic voters in May 2019; women were initially eleven points more likely than man to choose a woman candidate, but after reading an article pointing to identity politics as the reason for Clinton's loss, they were only six points more likely than the men, who were already more likely to blame identity politics for the 2016 results (Haines and Masket).

The repeated emphasis on electability in media frames surrounding Warren, Harris, and the other female candidates arguably functions as a similar primer to the articles showed to participants in the study; repeatedly emphasizing the vulnerabilities of women candidates in a general election and consequently rendering them unelectable. Hence, two years after 2018 was declared "The Year of the Woman," the

women candidates for the presidency are still facing rhetorical barriers that prevent them from being framed as electable candidates for the presidency. Women candidates will undoubtedly continue to run for the presidency, and it will be interesting to see if, absent the threat of a Donald Trump reelection, arguers in the Democratic party still push back against women's candidacies for fear of losing the general election.

Discussion

At the time of this writing, Joe Biden has become the presumptive Democratic nominee; Bernie Sanders, the other remaining contender, ended his campaign on April 8, 2020. That the most diverse Democratic field in history narrowed to the two septuagenarian white men is who led in the early polls speaks to the power that electability narratives had in restraining candidates. Furthermore, the fact that the nominee is Biden, who has been the primary beneficiary of the first prototype of electability in this paper, further impresses the importance of these electability narratives in determining which candidates are not only successful, but are able to stay in the race (Biden had poor results in the first two contests but his campaign survived).

This is not to say that the electability narratives have singularly driven voters' choice of nominee, but that in context of the fears of Democrats about this election year, electability narratives are particularly powerful in shaping which candidates sit higher in the polls and how long they can afford to stay in the race. As discussed above, the United States presidential primary is incredibly long, with candidates declaring more than a full year before the first votes are cast, consequently requiring profound amounts of spending by campaigns in order to stay in the race. Despite the diverse candidates, by the time voters in the Iowa caucus had their say, they were

choosing from eleven candidates—only three of whom were people of color and only three of whom were women. By the Nevada caucuses (the third state to vote), they were choosing from eight major candidates—of whom there were three women and one person of color. By Super Tuesday, that number dwindled to four major candidates—all septuagenarian white people, three men and one woman (Elizabeth Warren).

Polling of voters also reflects the idea that "electability" concerns affect their choices in the Democratic primary. In June 2019, a poll conducted by research firm Avalanche asked voters which candidate they would vote for if the primary were held then and which candidate they would vote for if they had a "magic wand" to make any candidate automatically ascend to the presidency. The preferences for these two questions changed dramatically, with support for Joe Biden falling from 29% support to 19% and nearly every other candidate rising; Elizabeth Warren had the sharpest increase, going from 16% to 23% (Avalanche, "Electability"). Such a shift indicates the power electability narratives have over voter preference and may help to explain why the Democratic field narrowed the way it did, with many women and people of color exiting the field before voting. As women candidates and people of color continue to fight for the presidency, understanding how these narratives were created may help them to further develop rhetorical strategies that push back against such narratives and counter their influence on their campaign.

The first electability prototype has arguably been the most dominant throughout the election cycle, consequently placing the concerns of the white working-class at the forefront. This is particularly pronounced in the elevation of both Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar, who had low polling numbers overall but even worse numbers among black voters, sometimes polling at 0% among them (Hensley-

Clancy and Cramer) as particularly electable, while candidates of color like Cory Booker and Kamala Harris, who had similarly low polling numbers but performed better than Buttigieg and Klobuchar among black voters (King), ended their campaigns before voting began.

It should be noted, however, that Joe Biden, long framed as the most electable by those who elevate the importance of the white working-class, is the presumptive nominee in large part due to his overwhelming support among older black voters. More sophisticated analysis on the reasons for this support have been done during the election cycle by journalists like Astead Herndon of the *New York Times* and Maya King of *Politico*; their analyses provide insight into the multifaceted reasons for the level of support Biden has among the group, including, but not only, their electability concerns.

That said, the goal of this paper is not to examine the support different demographics gave to different candidates but rather how the media elevates specific candidates and voter concerns. That Buttigieg and Klobuchar—the candidates with the least appeal among black voters but perceived appeal to white voters—were the ones who dominated among the first two contests, which are predominately white, meant that other candidates, who may have had more pull among black voters but struggled in white states like New Hampshire and Iowa, were unable to stay in the race long enough to garner delegates from states with larger minority populations.

There are further avenues for research that could provide more insight into the success or failure of specific candidates in this race. Due to space constraints, this paper does not consider the impact of horse race coverage, for instance, which appears to sharply impact which candidate voters say they are going to support at the polls. After the South Carolina primary, for instance, news coverage of Joe Biden's

75

campaign dramatically shifted, positioning him as the dominant frontrunner where the week before his campaign had been presented as a failing one. Nor does it examine the impact of how polls of potential general election races between Trump and individual nominees are framed. Because my sole focus has been how candidates are described in relation to their general election prospects, this paper did not look at more coded language used only to critique women candidates or candidates of color, like "aggressive," "cold," and "angry," because such discussions are often either in more conservative newspapers that were not the focus of this paper (*The Daily Beast*, *The New York Post,* etc.) or mired in discussions about candidate's viability (chance of winning the nomination) rather than their general election prospects. Investigations of the discourse surrounding the candidates using this language would likely shed further insight into the rhetorical forces impacting the 2020 candidates.

That said, however, "electability" has so dominated discussions of the 2020 candidates that it is has played a substantial role in which candidates have succeeded in the contests thus far—and which candidates' campaigns were able to last long enough to reach a voting contest. While these concerns, which disproportionately harm women candidates, candidates of color, and progressive candidates, are ostensibly merely out of a fear of Donald Trump, it remains to be seen if such concerns are further echoed in 2024 and future presidential contests. Especially as the Electoral College, which elevates the votes of smaller states often perceived to have larger white working-class populations, remains more important to the election outcomes than the popular vote, prototypes of electability may continue to remain focused on white men who can best appeal to these voters, rather than to the American electorate at large.

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