

Black Candidate Preferences: An Original Conjoint Survey Experiment

The Black Voter Project (BVP) is a public opinion survey project created in 2016 to fill voids in how social science examines issues of democracy, citizenship, belonging, and political incorporation in the Black community. The BVP has led to peer-reviewed publications, mainstream media op-eds, and reports (such as the [Washington Post](#), [Politico Magazine](#), and [the Atlantic](#), to name a few), collaborative partnerships, as well as data archived with the [Roper Center](#). The BVP is the only ongoing longitudinal survey of the Black electorate, interviewing respondents over a four-year survey project in which three waves of panel data were collected (2019, 2020, and 2022).¹

The final wave of 2022 BVP (N=1,305) includes an original survey experiment that used a conjoint experimental framework to test Black attitudes toward potential political candidates for an undisclosed office. Using attribute importance scores, preference shares, and optimal profiles, the conjoint analysis offers insight into what attributes Black respondents consider the most important in candidate selection.² The conjoint outputs allow one to quantify preferences for attributes and attribute levels. This information, in the present case, generates the ideal candidate profile, one for whom Black voters are most likely to vote.

The conjoint experiment included in the 2022 BVP offers insight into preferences for hypothetical political candidates defined by attributes like race, gender, age, years in politics, occupation, support for Black Lives Matter (BLM), Democratic Party endorsement (Biden or Sanders), and veteran status.

¹ Under the direction of Dr. Christopher Towler, the Black Voter Project (BVP) is a series of ongoing public opinion surveys focused specifically on collecting accurate and representative data of the Black community. Starting with a Pilot-Study in 2017 (archived with Roper), the BVP currently consists of five separate national and statewide surveys of Black Americans, in addition to the multi-wave panel study of Black public opinion, the first of its kind in decades. The latest survey, the 2022 National BVP, collected a nationally representative sample of 1,305 Black Americans around the 2022 midterm elections.

² Attribute importance scores indicate the overall importance of each attribute in driving preferences. Attributes with higher importance scores are more influential in respondents' choices. For preference shares, using the utility values, you can simulate market shares for different product/service profiles. This shows the likely preference share if products with specific combinations of attributes were introduced to the market. Based on the utilities, you can determine the optimal combination of attribute levels that would be preferred by respondents. This is the product profile predicted to have the highest market share.

The results reveal that BLM support and race were the most important factors driving voters' preferences, accounting for 23.6% and 21.1% of preference share, respectively. Specifically, candidates who expressed strong support for BLM were strongly preferred, with a 66% preference share (compared to 23% for opposition to BLM and 11% for non-committal to BLM). Similarly, Black candidates were also preferred, with a 64% preference share (compared to 15% for White, 10% for Hispanic, and 10% for Asian American). Gender was moderately important at 16.8% preference share, with a slight preference for female candidates (54%).

Age and years in politics had a less pronounced impact on preferences, at 7.8% and 7.2% preference share respectively. Voters marginally preferred candidates around 29 years old and with 8 years of political experience. Occupation was more influential at 23.6% share, with the highest preference for corporate lawyers (38%).

A candidate's veteran status also affected preferences considerably, accounting for a 9.8% share. Voters strongly preferred a candidate who was a veteran (59%) versus someone with no veteran status (41%). Democratic Party endorsement by President Biden versus Bernie Sanders mattered less to voters (8% share), with a small majority preferring Biden's endorsement (51%). Lastly, prior military service influenced preferences at 9.8% share, with voters moderately preferring veterans (59%).

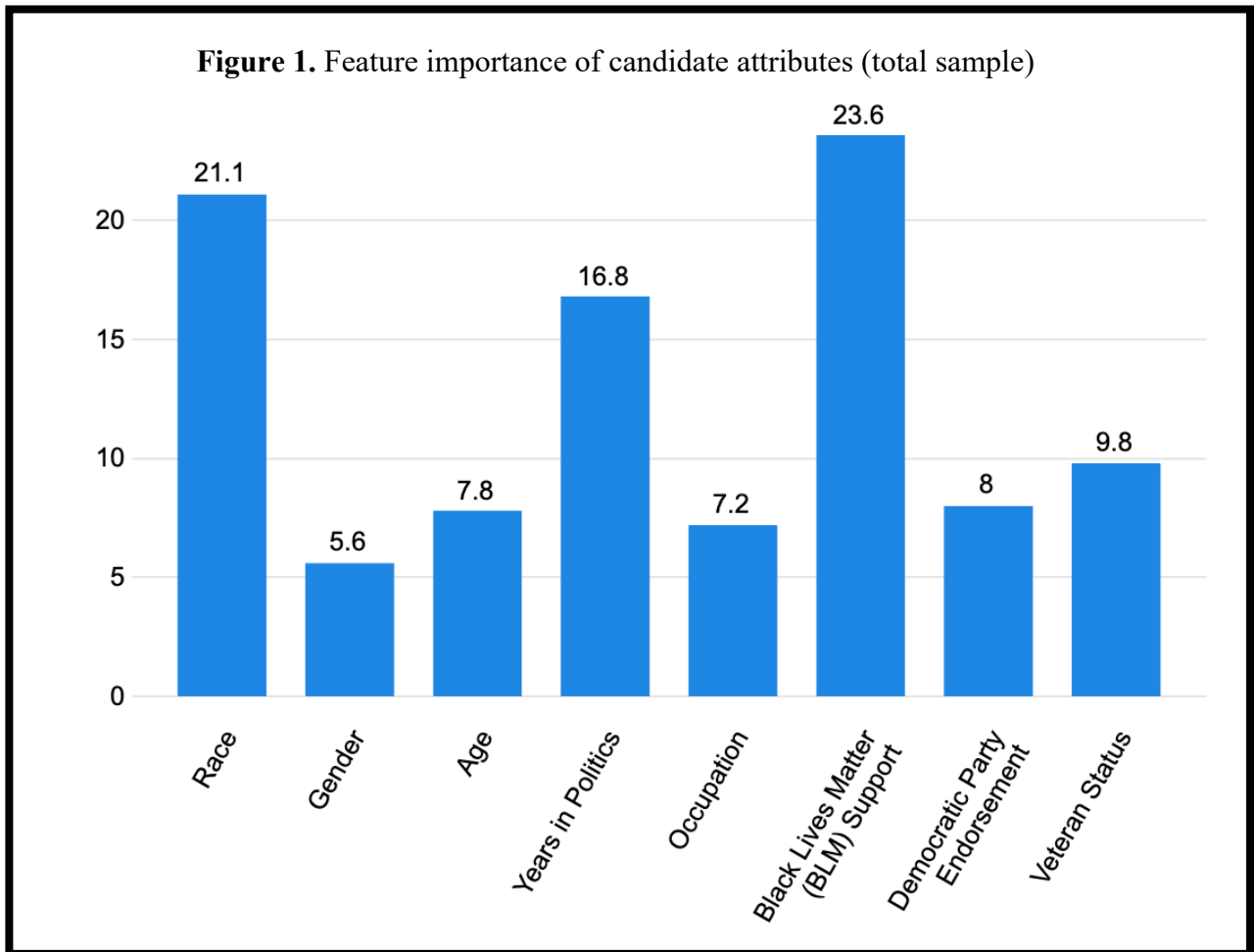
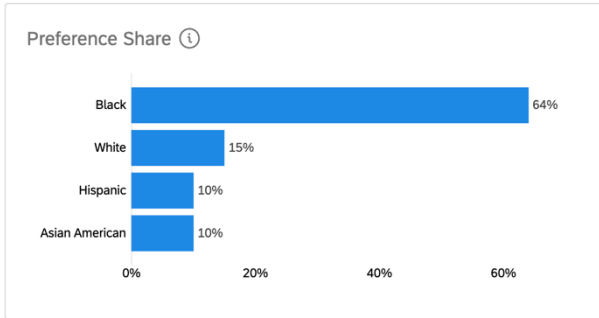
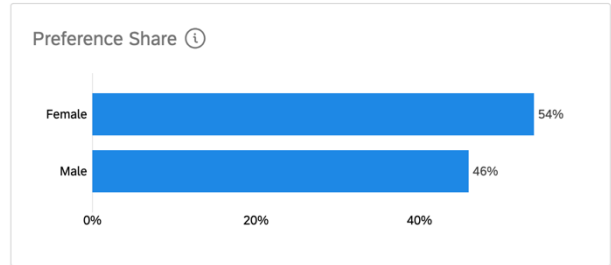


Figure 2. Preference share of candidate attributes (total sample)

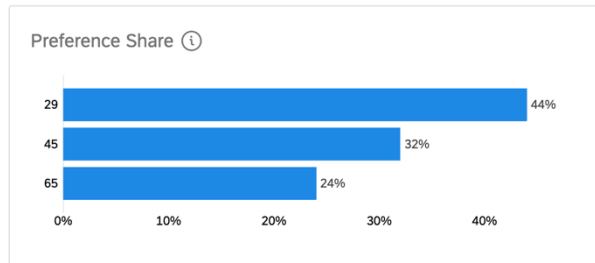
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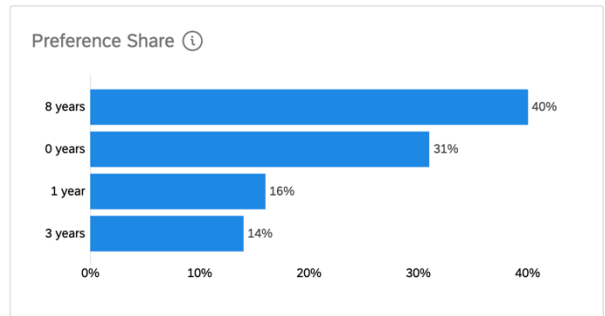
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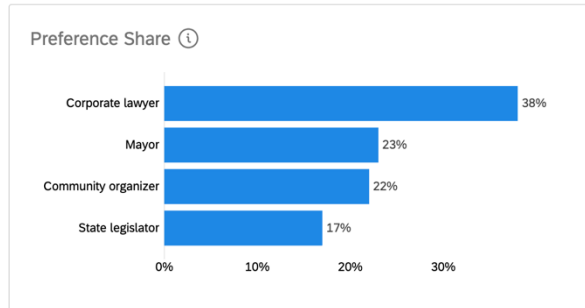
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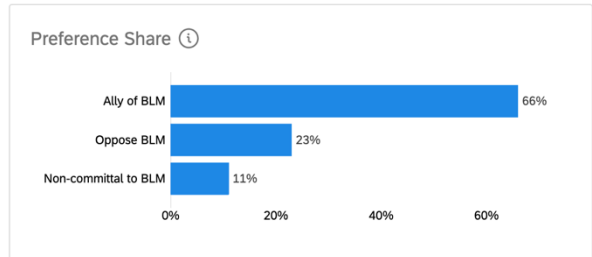
Years in Politics



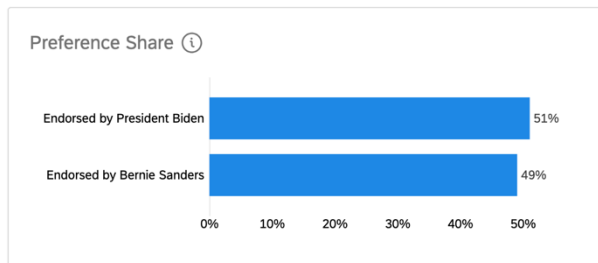
Occupation



Black Lives Matter (BLM) Support



Democratic Party Endorsement



Veteran Status

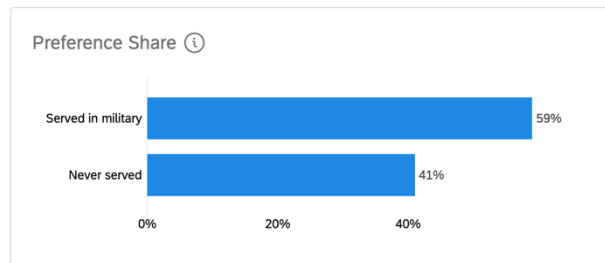


Figure 3. Optimal Candidate (total sample)

Race	Black
Gender	Female
Age	29
Years in Politics	8 years
Occupation	State legislator
Black Lives Matter (BLM) Support	Ally of BLM
Democratic Party Endorsement	Endorsed by President Biden
Veteran Status	Served in military

Preferences of Low-Propensity Black Voters

The Black population is far from homogenous, something that includes the preferences of the Black electorate. Accordingly, we examine conjoint results for other relevant segments of the entire sample. To start, we can take a look at how Black respondents who reported that they *did not* vote in 2020 compared to the overall results. This way, we can assess differences in candidate preference between low- and high-propensity Black voters.

The importance and preferences for each attribute are identical between the two groups. Support for BLM is most important, followed by Race, years in politics, and veteran status. It is clear that BLM allies are preferred by both groups, as are candidates endorsed by Biden and who served in the military. Further, Black candidates are strongly preferred among non-2020 voters, i.e., low-propensity voters, with a 64% preference share. Corporate lawyers are most preferred for occupation. The optimal candidate profile is the same for both low- and high-propensity Black respondents – a Black female corporate lawyer allied with BLM, endorsed by Biden, and a veteran.

The results suggest that the same candidate profile excites both low and high-propensity Black voters. More research could examine if other attributes reveal differences between groups.

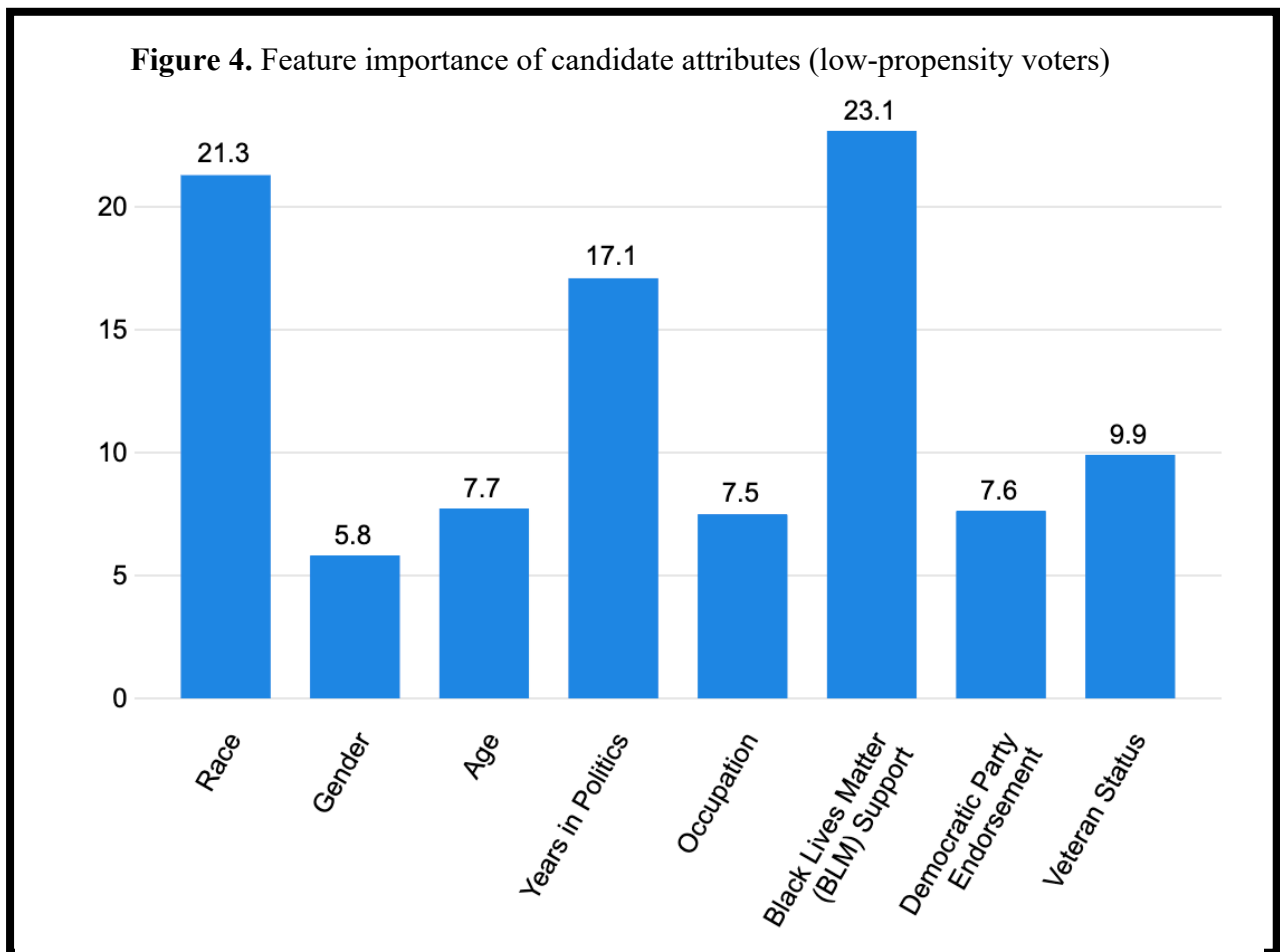
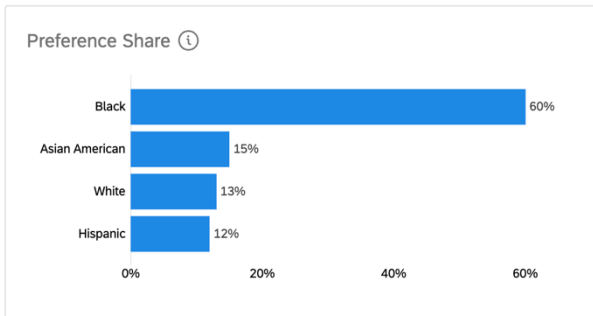
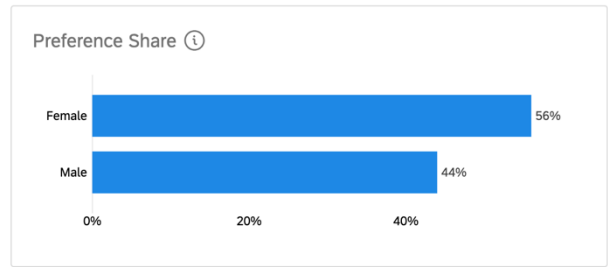


Figure 5. Preference share of candidate attributes (low-propensity voters)

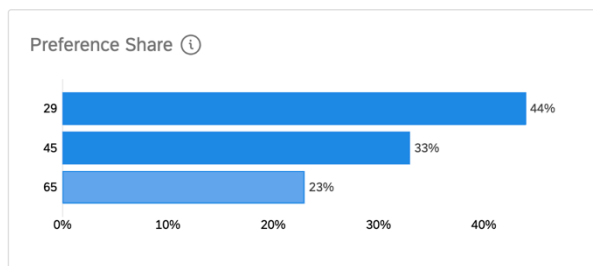
Race



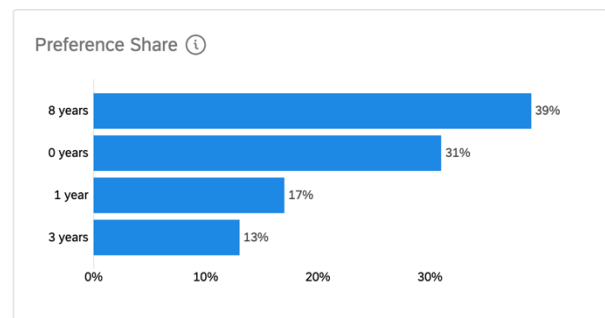
Gender



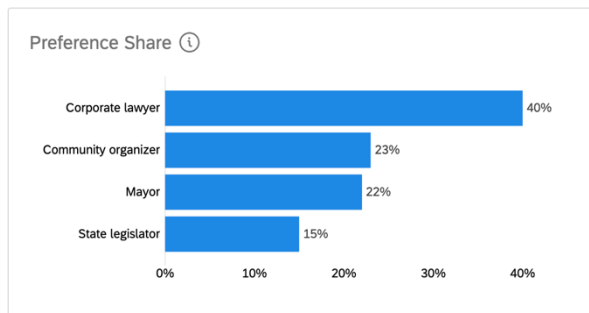
Age



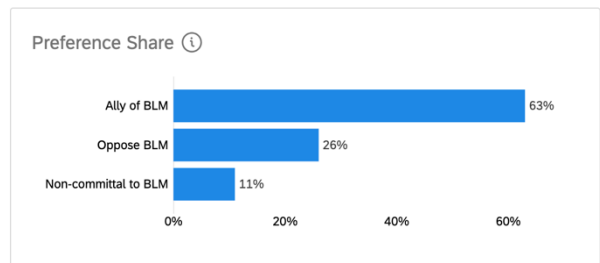
Years in Politics



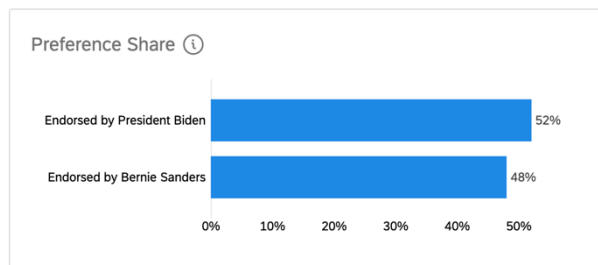
Occupation



Black Lives Matter (BLM) Support



Democratic Party Endorsement



Veteran Status

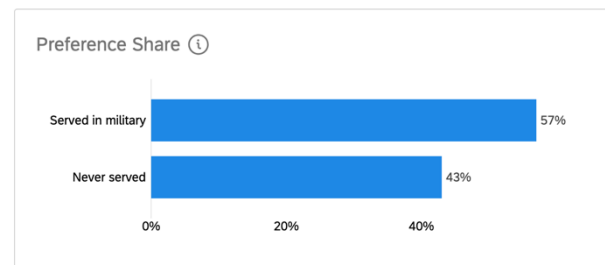


Figure 6. Optimal Candidate (low-propensity voters)

Race	Black
Gender	Female
Age	29
Years in Politics	8 years
Occupation	State legislator
Black Lives Matter (BLM) Support	Ally of BLM
Democratic Party Endorsement	Endorsed by President Biden
Veteran Status	Served in military

Preferences for Black Men

Lastly, prudence recommends we also consider the role that gender plays in candidate evaluation. Study after study suggests that Black men participate at significantly lower rates than Black women, yet it remains unclear how candidate attributes might explain gendered differences in turnout.³ When isolating the experimental results for only Black men (meaning calculating candidate preferences for only the Black men in the sample), once again BLM support and race remain the most important attribute, with a 63% and a 59% preference share for BLM supporters and Black candidates, respectively. Veteran status remains equally important for Black men, with a moderate preference for candidates who served in the military. Furthermore, candidate gender has a low-to-moderate importance for Black men, only slightly less than the preferences of all respondents together (5.1% for Black men vs 5.6% overall); there is a slight preference for female candidates in both cases. Also, age and occupation have comparable low-to-moderate importance and similar preference patterns.

³ Mangum, M. (2003). Psychological involvement and black voter turnout. *Political Research Quarterly*, 56(1), 41-48.



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Comparatively, occupation is slightly more important for Black men (23.5% preference share vs. 21.1% overall); yet, the corporate lawyer remains the most preferred occupation. Black men also have a stronger preference for candidates endorsing Bernie Sanders (56% vs. 49% overall). Veteran status is slightly more important for shaping Black male voters' preferences (10.2% share vs. 9.8% overall). In addition, the optimal candidate profile differs, with Black men preferring a Black female mayor endorsed by Bernie Sanders, versus a Black female state legislator endorsed by Biden for the overall sample.

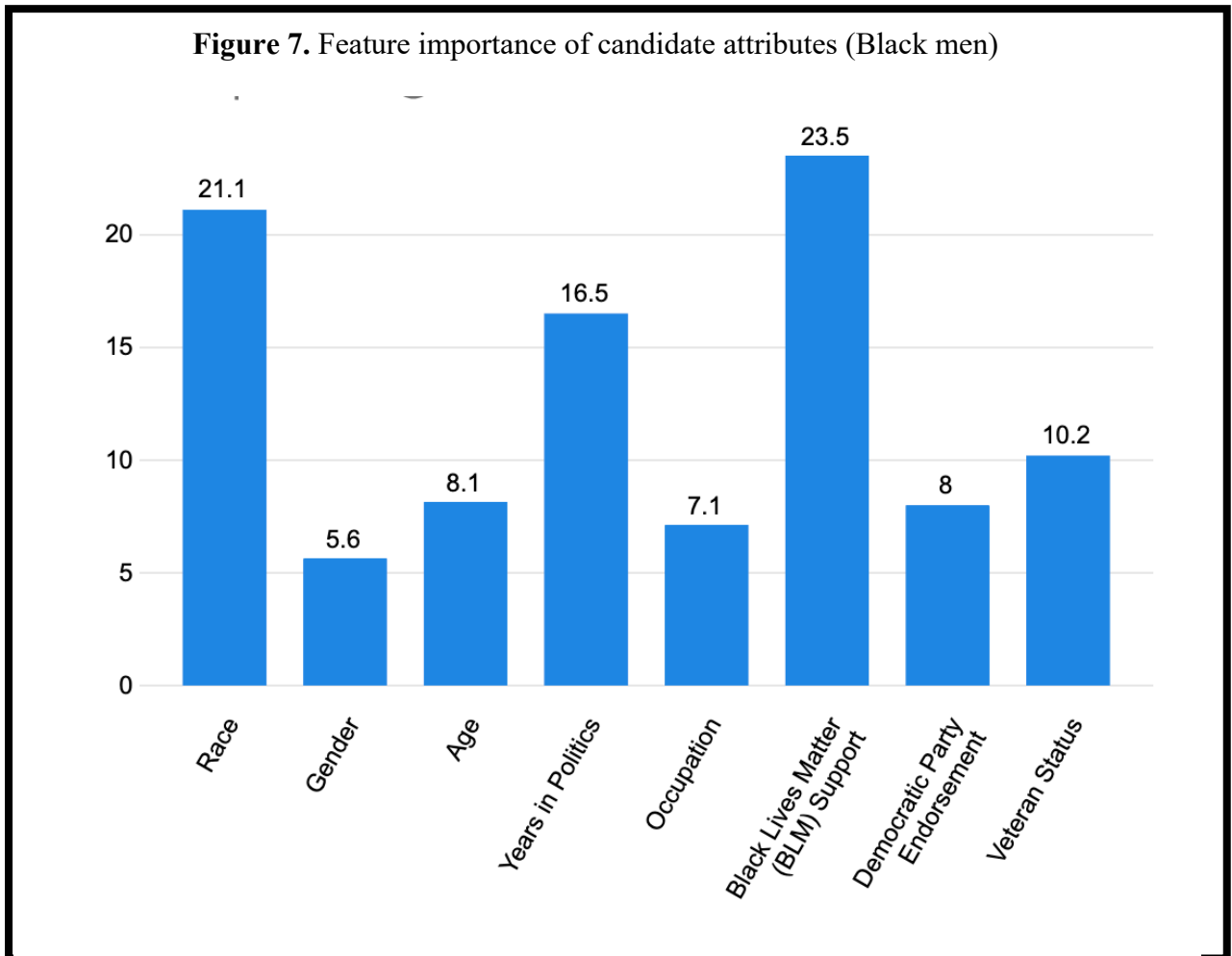
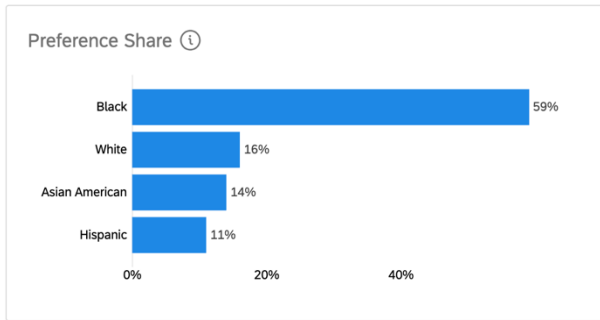
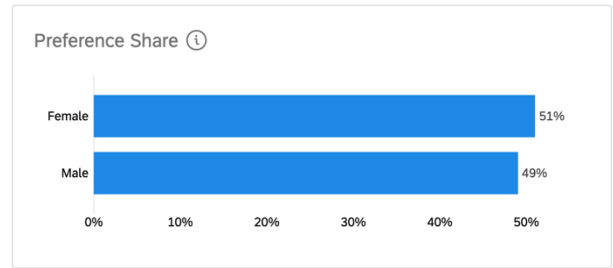


Figure 8. Preference share of candidate attributes (Black men)

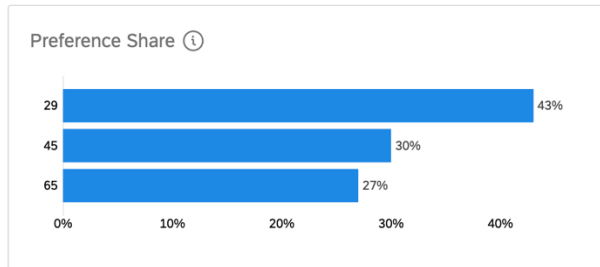
Race



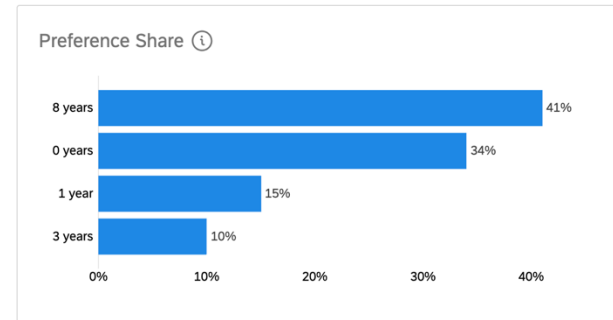
Gender



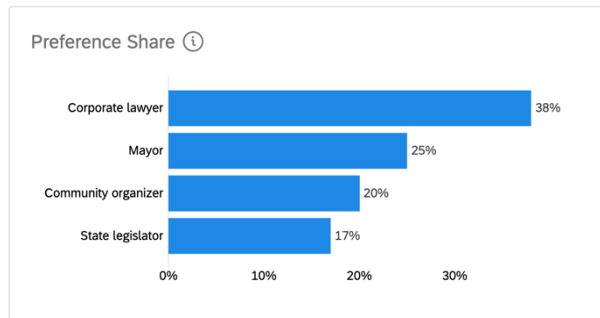
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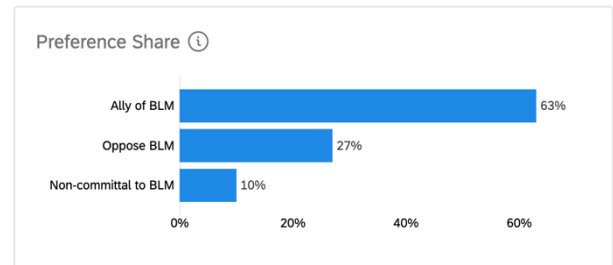
Years in Politics



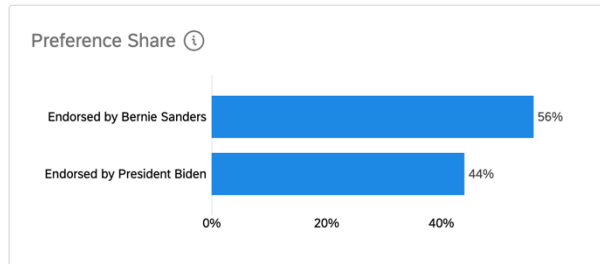
Occupation



Black Lives Matter (BLM) Support



Democratic Party Endorsement



Veteran Status

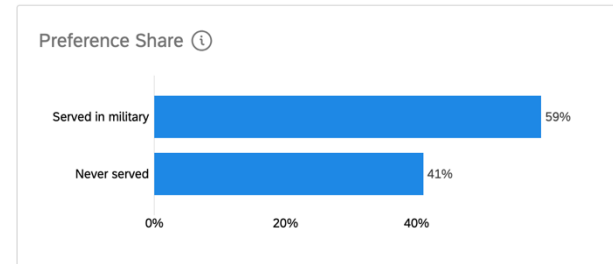


Figure 9. Optimal Candidate (Black men)

Race	Black
Gender	Female
Age	29
Years in Politics	8 years
Occupation	Mayor
Black Lives Matter (BLM) Support	Ally of BLM
Democratic Party Endorsement	Endorsed by Bernie Sanders
Veteran Status	Served in military

Conclusions and Major Takeaways

Overall, race remains the key driver of preferences for Black male voters, but the importance of occupation, party endorsement, and BLM support separate Black men from the rest of the respondents. Segmenting the data reveals how preferences vary across voter demographics. Thus, four major takeaways from the conjoint analysis include:

1. Race and support for BLM are consistently the most important attributes driving voters' candidate preferences across all groups analyzed. Black candidates were strongly preferred over other races by wide margins. This suggests race may override other factors when voters evaluate candidates. Support for BLM matters, but its importance varies across groups. It was more influential for the general electorate than for Black male voters specifically. This implies BLM support motivates some voter segments more than others.
2. Occupation and party endorsement have variable impacts depending on the voter segment. Occupation mattered more for Black men while party endorsement showed distinct preferences between groups.

3. For non-voters, candidate preferences aligned very closely with the general electorate, despite their lack of recent voting history.
4. The optimal candidate profile differed based on the segment, highlighting how different attributes resonate more strongly with some groups compared to others.

To sum things up, race consistently shapes preferences, but the importance of other attributes depends on the specific voter segment. Campaigns must understand these differences to tailor messaging and outreach effectively across groups. The optimal hypothetical candidate profile based on these results would be a Black female corporate lawyer, aged around 29 with 8 years of political experience, who is an ally of BLM and is endorsed by President Biden.

Unfortunately, we were able to include a subset of potentially relevant attributes in the conjoint experiment due to sample size and design limitations. Additionally, the sample may not fully represent the voting population. Follow-up qualitative research could provide further insights into the relative importance of attributes and specific preferences. Overall, this conjoint analysis provides a quantitative look at how voters trade-off between candidate attributes and reveals which ones may matter most in driving preferences.