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## Women in Southern Politics: How the Southern Experience Shaped Two Contemporary Forces

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**Women in Southern Politics: How the Southern Experience Shaped Two  
Contemporary Forces**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors  
Studies in Political Science

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Political Science

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Numerous books, papers, journals, articles, and newspapers have explored the human experience in the American South for many decades. Much of this recorded history and further academic and historical literature spans the time period since the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Most of these works, while claiming to focus on the entire population, address only the life experiences of men while assuming their information pertains to the entire population. Although a portion of these accounts focus on the African American experience overall, just a fraction examines the female experience. In this paper I will be examining women's political experiences in the post-Nineteenth Amendment American South with a focus on comparing and contrasting the backgrounds, careers, campaigns, election strategies, and outcomes of two oppositional politicians: Sarah Huckabee Sanders and Stacey Abrams, who both ran for governorship in the two southern states of Arkansas and Georgia in 2022. Quite useful will be a century's comparison of the political experiences of white and black women since the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, leading right up to modern-day where these two resolute, trailblazing women have ascended to the position in society where they so proudly stand and represent those with like-minded political positions.

### **Vote-Hungry Women: Why the disparate starting line?**

Starting at patriarchy's foundational root, the white man's gain, for centuries, has come at the demise of those whom society deems subordinate: women and people of color. Much of this perceptual epidemic stems from the abiding influence of Christian theology and its manipulation to benefit some while exploiting others. Anglo-Saxon men of European descent, by and large, hold steady at the top of the hierarchical totem pole. The World

Economic Forum found that as of March 2022, female CEOs occupy their positions at 74 of the 500 highest-grossing companies, up from just seven women in 2002. This exponential female representation still only translates to around 15% of the country's top economic powerhouses.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, white Americans hold the majority of these numbers. White male domination in the majority of fields is no surprise considering the history of other demographics to gain access to political, social, and economic opportunity and power. Aside from the economic world, Lillian Smith's catalytic "Killers of the Dream" nods to the cultural composition of the pre-1960s South, encompassing the psychological and virtuous cost of the contradictory rules about sin, sex, and segregation; the intricate system that fortified Southern society and oppresses women and black southerners.<sup>2</sup>

Today, more women are seen at the polls than are men<sup>3</sup>, but this slow and continual voting buildup has been transpiring over the course of a century since the passage and adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, which again is important to remember essentially only applied to white women due to extreme disenfranchisement efforts within the South. While not always the case, black women were largely discriminated against at the polls. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 is historically regarded as the first formal and organized meeting to discuss and take action against women's oppression - the first women's rights convention. It was planned and organized in just a few weeks by local, politically active women. Retrospectively, while this *was* a spark, it was not something that immediately grew into a raging, far-reaching fire, instead, it slowly smoldered. While most radical and revolutionary action tends to lead to usurpations of power and war, the convention

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<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum. 2022. "How Has the Number of Female CEOs in Fortune 500 Companies Changed over the Last 20 Years?" Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/ceos-fortune-500-companies-female>.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Lillian. 1961. *Killers of The Dream*. Doubleday.

<sup>3</sup> Center for American Women and Politics. n.d. "Gender Differences in Voter Turnout." Accessed March 3, 2023. <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/voters/gender-differences-voter-turnout>.

at Seneca Falls “led to a transformation of consciousness and a movement of empowerment on behalf of half the human race, which hardly has its equal in human history”.<sup>4</sup>

Across the nation, before the 1920s, the face of America was changing at a rapid pace for nearly every demographic living in the country. In a near relentless fashion, this young and immature nation was facing rapidly changing tides with respect to political, economic, societal, and cultural evolution. Preceding World War I, the presence of America within the world stage was far from the dominant and progressive nation that it’s perceived today by much of the global community. Overwhelming migration numbers of Europeans and other people groups to the young nation as it had originated, the rest of the world watched as we floundered and tried to establish ourselves among the historically powerful and centuries-old countries, which had immense wealth, established cultures, and political influence. Coming into the latter half of the 19th century, the industrial and contemporary North was far removed from the antebellum, slavocracy South in which the region desperately longed to remain entrenched. “America stood at a crossroads between innovation and tradition. Many Americans were looking boldly ahead, but just as many were gazing backward, to cherished memories of a fabled national innocence.”<sup>5</sup> Two separate ideals and versions about how the nation itself defined what citizenship and a bolstering economy looked like led directly into the secession of half of the once cohesive, young nation. To the rest of the world, adolescent America’s trial period was sputtering as the country experienced the bloodiest and deadliest war on American soil to this day - the Civil War - the result of a lack of unified and collective politics. The United States ripped itself apart for five years only to come out on the other side

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<sup>4</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. 2012. “The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Advanced Placement United States History Study Guide.” Accessed February 7, 2023. <https://ap.gilderlehrman.org/essays/roaring-twenties>.

with a country in need of a complete rebuild - one half of which was earnestly bitter and full of resentment towards the industrial North and its wishes for modernism. The whitewashed, physical record that remains can largely be accredited to white elitist women who laid claim to southern historical cultural authority and were able to turn war efforts into memorializing the dead and glorifying the long-forgone “Lost Cause.”<sup>6</sup>

The Postbellum Reconstruction era saw Black Americans gain more political power and influence than they would get their hands on for nearly another century. All across the states, black men were voting and electing their own to high-ranking offices and positions of power - something that ten years prior, most black and white Americans wouldn't bet their last dollar on. Unfortunately, in 1877, the hope of equality would be catapulted almost 90 years into the distant future with the roaring return of what is nearly just the white man's vengeance and yearning for social and political dominance once again.

A few decades prior, the term “Jim Crow” began to circulate around the South to refer to a certain version of the black man which white Southerners fabricated; the uneducated, child-like, helpless black man. “By 1838, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a struggling white actor, became famous by performing in blackface makeup as ‘Jim Crow,’ an exaggerated, highly stereotypical black character.”<sup>7</sup> This character's performances, in what became known as minstrel shows, toured across the South intending to push this highly offensive image surrounding African-Americans and the use of the phrase as a racial slur. By the 1870s, “Jim Crow” was now racial phrasing used to describe laws, penalties, and customs used as means of oppression against newly-freed blacks. Beaming from the psyche of white southerners, the

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<sup>6</sup> Colabadmin. 2022. “Women and Confederate Culture on Monument Avenue Archives.” American Civil War Museum, July 27, 2022. <https://acwm.org/blog/women-and-confederate-culture-monument-avenue/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ferris State University. n.d. “*Jim Crow Era*.” Accessed February 7, 2023. <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/timeline/jimcrow.htm>.

new system was going to benefit free blacks since it supposedly would teach them to live on their own in their own spaces (Jim Crow did have a slight paternalistic edge). The withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877 marked the collapse of Reconstruction and the succession of the Jim Crow Era. The resentment which whites staunchly held against blacks in the South of their newfound freedom fueled a sharp pivot against it: “A disaster for blacks, the collapse of Reconstruction was also a tragedy that deeply affected the future development of the nation as a whole. If racism contributed to the undoing of Reconstruction, by the same token Reconstruction's demise and the emergence of blacks as a disenfranchised class of dependent laborers greatly facilitated racism's further spread, so that by the early twentieth century, it had become more deeply embedded in the nation's culture and politics than at any time since the beginning of the anti-slavery crusade.”<sup>8</sup>

Consuming nearly the entirety of the next century, white lawmakers and politicians would make decisions to bar black people from every similar dimension of life the two races had previously shared and coincided in. What once had been shared spaces - such as homes, farms, city centers, post offices, general stores, and other community areas - were jarringly and completely separated, as if whites walked in a superior, far more pleasing, and tolerable dimension than black people did. While black men had the federal right to vote guaranteed under the Fifteenth Amendment, intimidation, violence, poll taxes, literacy tests, and other tactics contributed to considerable, almost complete disenfranchisement. “Violent intimidation of Black voters continued in the decades following the 1874 election, but by the twentieth century, Democratic political leaders felt confident enough to declare Black

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<sup>8</sup> Foner, Eric. 1987. “Rights and the Constitution in Black Life during the Civil War and Reconstruction.” *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 3: 863. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1902157>.



disenfranchisement as a policy goal.”<sup>9</sup> Some historians and scholars argue this period was worse than slavery for African-Americans living in the South. The incoming decades would be characterized by mass convict leasing, lynchings, fervent racial discrimination, intense poverty, and extensive migration to the North. At its core, white elitists were irrationally fearful of African-Americans reversing the power domination and implementing a flipped system of slavery, one that would enslave white people as blacks indulged in revenge. White supremacy ramped up violent threatening, lynching, sexual violence, and property damage - strategies used to run black people out of the bitter, nostalgic Southern region.

From the turn of the twentieth century to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, those evolving 20 years witnessed significant national and cultural development sweeping the nation by storm. The Progressive Era introduced enormous business expansion, automobiles, rapidly growing cities, a new concern for environmental conservation, astronomical immigration, an intensifying Temperance Movement, involvement in the greatest war the world had ever seen, and an exponential push for women’s rights. Regionally, however, the Southern states, characterized as a uniquely traditional place in comparison to the rest of the country, developed from a mainly rural, agrarian environment to a place of post-industrial cities, radiating suburbs, and vacant areas of rural, mechanized farming. The rest of the country was well beyond moving on; the South... just tirelessly trying to keep up. The region was also experiencing significant depopulation as the Great Migration was considerably underway around a decade into the century. In search of a better life free of racism-fueled discrimination and violence, the Southern Diaspora transformed America as oppressed, southern blacks, alongside a large number of poor whites, spread and established roots

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<sup>9</sup> Equal Justice Initiative. 2018. “The Montgomery Slave Trade.” In *Slavery in America*, edited by Equal Justice Initiative, 31-49.

throughout the northern and western states. The entrenchment of Jim Crow was not able to spread its evils as it had previously done so; however, the profound legacy continues to shape and negatively affect hundreds of millions of black Americans in contemporary America.

Before the Great War at the cusp of the second decade, the Southern region of the country appeared to be deeply culturally and psychologically rooted in the nineteenth century: its traditional innocence and heightened morality was something in which many Americans placed immense value. It seemed to many that the very foundational, Christian-based roots that America sat atop were withering as the younger generations strayed from the traditions and customs their predecessors expected. Prior southern slave owners and economically-benefiting supporters held that the white race was chosen by God, and naturally, that black people were born to serve in subordination. As this ideology tumbled alongside the downfall of slavery, it appeared that other long-harbored, traditional belief systems began to crumble as well. A revolution appeared post-war, and a new consumer-based economy generated new ideas and conversations surrounding gender roles, sexuality, and a declining national morality. These were not completely new ideas; however, "... the fundamental structural changes that were at play in earlier decades—namely, urbanization and industrialization—long predated the twenties."<sup>10</sup> These fundamental structural changes elicited a warping political culture confronting racism and sexism head-on, warranting both black and white women to fight for what they knew they deserved in a country founded upon freedom: Women's Suffrage.

As history has played out since the momentous ratification in August of 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment has displayed that what all women really needed, all those years, was

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<sup>10</sup> The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. 2012. "The Roaring Twenties." <https://ap.gilderlehrman.org/essays/roaring-twenties>.

agency. Predating the passage of an amendment to the Constitution, the movement had been underway since the mid-19th century with the Seneca Falls Convention, actively involving not only white women but black women as well. Black women had been working alongside white women in the struggle for suffrage from the earliest years; these coalescing ideas formed an intertwining effort for *both* suffrage and abolition. In the latter half of the century, the suffrage issue splintered over the issue of race following the Civil War, and certain congruences among suffragist groups began to deteriorate as the Fifteenth Amendment was introduced and began circulating amongst the public. “Sexism reared its ugly head, as the boys of the Republican party - the new “radical” party northern liberals set the rights of Black men over and against the rights of all women: Black and White. The Republicans passed the 14th and 15th Amendments which introduced the concept of male superiority into the Constitution for the first time.”<sup>11</sup>

With ratification of the 14th and 15th Amendments, enfranchisement would be delivered to black men but disregard women entirely. Introducing gendered language would permanently alter the Constitution and the journey towards suffrage for decades. “Suffragists had to choose between insisting on universal rights or accepting the priority of Black male suffrage. The split in the suffrage movement over the Fifteenth Amendment prompted Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony to sever ties with the AERA and form the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which promoted universal suffrage, insisting that Black men should not receive the vote before white women.”<sup>12</sup> Black suffragists began to believe that the creation and formation of their own organizations was the sufficient route to take in their efforts to secure the rights of all women, considering some of the coalition’s

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<sup>11</sup> Marjory Nelson, “Women Suffrage and Race,” *Off Our Backs* 9, no. 10 (1979): 6–22.

<sup>12</sup> “African American Women and the Nineteenth Amendment,” National Parks Service. U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed February 7, 2023. <https://www.nps.gov/people/nineteenthamendment>.

closest allies were exclusively breaking ties as this amendment was being debated. Sojourner Truth attests to this exclusive behavior in her classic work, *Ain't I a Woman*, scolding white women for their “constant comparison of the plight of ‘women’ and ‘blacks,’ charging that such analogies support the exclusion of black women.”<sup>13</sup> As many whites publicly denounced black male suffrage, black women only added their suffrage as another component of their goals.

Due to Black women’s involvement in the movement, institutions, and organizations formed by coalitions of black suffragists were heartily already in place to confidentially meet racial disenfranchisement efforts following the Nineteenth Amendment’s successful ratification in 1920, leaving black women with a continued fight, especially in the American South, to gain access to the polls off paper. The very same Jim Crow strategies and anti-black violence which had been plaguing black men for decades now took action against black women as well. “Black women managed to join voters’ rolls, but the intimidation continued. On Election Day eve, white-robed Ku Klux Klansmen marched onto the grounds of Bethune’s girls’ school in Daytona, aiming to scare Black women away from the polls.”<sup>14</sup> A significant absence of justice for intimidation strategies and threats of lynching loomed over Southern black men and women attempting to cast a vote as the second decade of the 20th century was underway. Unfortunately, they were left to fend for themselves: “But many Black women faced the beginning of a new movement for voting rights in the summer of 1920, and it’s a struggle they will wage alone because now the organizations that had led the movement for

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<sup>13</sup> Mayeri, Serena. 2001. “‘A Common Fate of Discrimination’: Race-Gender Analogies in Legal and Historical Perspective.” *The Yale Law Journal* 110, no. 6: 1045–87. <https://doi.org/10.2307/797563>.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, Martha S. National Geographic. 2021. “For Black Women, the 19th Amendment Didn’t End Their Fight to Vote.” *History*. Accessed May 3, 2021. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/black-women-continued-fighting-for-vote-after-19th-amendment>.

women's suffrage are disbanding".<sup>15</sup> Up north, however, black women were actively voting and gaining ground, sending hope and encouragement down to the South as they followed influential female activists like Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell - women who drew on Christianity to fuel their desire to subdue black women's oppression and curb white women's desire to segregate the movement.<sup>16</sup> Wells became a beacon for African-American women and a nuisance for white women, leading to her being labeled a "race agitator" by the U.S. government.<sup>17</sup>

Black suffragists were outraged at the unconstitutional restrictions being set in place throughout the South on black voters: poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and violence at the polls. "The colored women of the South will be shamefully treated, and will not be allowed to vote, I am sure. I hope the Republicans will do something toward enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment. We are so helpless without the right of citizenship in that section of the country where we need it most<sup>18</sup>," stated prominent black suffragist Mary Church Terrell in a letter to the NAACP just two months after the Nineteenth Amendment's ratification. Many continue to denounce a complete democratic victory in 1920; for black women in the South, the passage of the amendment did not signal a finish line but only marked a starting point.

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<sup>15</sup> Waxman, Olivia B. 2020. "When Did Black Women Get the Right to Vote? Suffrage History." Last modified August 17, 2020. <https://time.com/5876456/black-women-right-to-vote/>.

<sup>16</sup> Jefferson-Snorton, Teresa. 2020. "Dreams Deferred ... Visions Realized: The Struggle for African American Women's Rights." In *Women with 2020 Vision: American Theologians on the Vote, Voice, and Vision of Women*, edited by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessener, 23-36. 1517 Media. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cvzbd.8>.

<sup>17</sup> Giddings, Paula J. 2009. *Ida: A Sword among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign against Lynching*. New York: Amistad. 5-10.

<sup>18</sup> Block, Melissa. 2020. "Yes, Women Could Vote After the 19th Amendment - But Not All Women. Or Men." <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/26/904730251/yes-women-could-vote-after-the-19th-amendment-but-not-all-women-or-men>.

Within the white suffragist community, the Nineteenth Amendment reaching that 36-state mark with the ratification in the state of Tennessee was a bittersweet moment for many, knowing their African-American female peers would be informally denied inclusion in the successful legislation. “Well after the formal incorporation of women in the 1920s, the presence of state (and other) barriers to voting created particular burdens for women of color. In the South, the dominant Democratic political party viewed its interests as best served by engaging in extensive and violent efforts to block or slow black voter mobilization.”<sup>19</sup> Just two years prior, the willingness and excitement of white women to cast a vote was nationally displayed as William Hobby, Texas’s brand new governor, favored suffrage and passed state legislation allowing women to vote in the primary. Due to the timing of this passage with the registration deadline, women had 17 days to register to vote. The readiness and teeming desire for the vote among women, beyond representative of just Texas, was thoroughly put to the test. Equal to the number of Arkansans who typically cast a vote annually, 386,000 Texas women registered to cast a vote in a mere 17 days.<sup>20</sup> In accordance with the excitement of Texas women, white women all across the country overwhelmingly swarmed voting polls in the states that did not pile on additional restrictions, which suddenly existed in states behaving in the typical conservative, Democratic style. “Not all states chose to be so accommodating of new women voters. In the most extreme examples—Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina— (all) women were prohibited from voting in the 1920 presidential election because ratification in August took place after deadlines to register or pay poll taxes.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Wolbrecht, Christina. American Bar Association. 2021. “Did Women Vote Once They Had the Opportunity?” [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_education/did-women-vote-once-they-had-the-opportunity-/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_education/did-women-vote-once-they-had-the-opportunity-/).

<sup>20</sup> Maxwell, Angie. 2021. “The South and the Law” Lecture. University of Arkansas.

<sup>21</sup> Wolbrecht, Christina. “Did Women Vote Once They Had the Opportunity?”

In the South following ratification, women were slower to the polls than were women nationally. In her book “The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s”, Lorraine Gates Schuyler describes the ways in which white men were determined to hold their monopoly on political power. Efforts included men resigning their posts rather than register women at the polls, husbands refusing to pay their wife’s poll tax, and states going as far to return to nomination-by-caucus, mandating repeat registration for new voters, and using multi-ballot-box systems.<sup>22</sup> A clash of tradition and modernity set an uncomfortable position for white women as gender roles held more importance to Americans in this region of the country. “Antisuffragists argued that biblical edict placed the women in the home and that women's involvement in political activity would result in the moral decline of southern society, the ascendancy of Yankee domination, and the end of white supremacy. In the South, the New Woman, who personified the sexual and personal liberation of the Jazz Age, intersected with the Southern belle, who personified the virtue and repression of Southern culture.”<sup>23</sup> Regardless, the “New Woman” inhabiting the South brought forth ideas of social and political freedoms to women coming of age during this time, contrasting their mothers’ generation who came of age under the Lost Cause of the Confederacy.

In anticipation of suffrage’s success just before 1920, the leading national suffrage organization, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), dissolved their organization in 1919 when the fight was won, created a new organization - the League of Women Voters - and continued their work on behalf of a political voice for women.

Post-ratification, the League of Women Voters was thoroughly prepared to engage in a broad

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<sup>22</sup> Lorraine Gates Schuyler, *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2006)

<sup>23</sup> Davis, David A. 2018. “Domestic Disruption: World War I, Modernity, and Southern Women’s Fiction.” In *World War I and Southern Modernism*, 117–50. University Press of Mississippi.

range of activities including radio broadcasts, citizenship classes, and voting machine instructional displays at fairs and public places similar where women commonly went about and gathered. Both major parties established national women's committees in an effort to mobilize women voters. A state-led mobilization would have been required by regulation to mobilize *all* women, regardless of partisanship or interest. Subsequently, individual party mobilization sought to organize and swing only certain women most likely to support their position or interest. Following suffrage and the quick mobilization of women voters, this novel, eager voting bloc would be swung in contrasting directions by a shifting political culture that continues to divide women voters in contemporary America.

The Jazz Age catapulted women into the modern world in all aspects of life, from working to driving the economy exponentially to participating electorally, but the Great Depression, unfortunately, forced a retreat back into the home as the federal government placed immense value on the role of women in the home during this tumultuous time. As did most functions of American life, women's rights, efforts, and electoral participation plummeted during the Great Depression. "The family became the officially recognized and government-sanctioned backbone of American society. More than ever, women were expected to roll up their sleeves and keep their homes and families running smoothly – and on a budget."<sup>24</sup> Women were fired from and discouraged away from employment as men took over any remaining jobs. Seeming to become a theme, women did not go quietly away into the home, but instead organized labor grew and was increasingly politicized. Black voter support realigned over time in large numbers from the Republican to the Democratic party in support of Franklin Roosevelt's bid for re-election even though most remained registered as

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<sup>24</sup> Boomer, Lee. n.d. "The Great Depression. Women & Camp: The American Story." Accessed January 21, 2023. <https://wams.nyhistory.org/confidence-and-crises/great-depression/>.



Republicans. As the 1940s approached and war in Europe escalated, sucking in the United States in 1941, civilian employers opened their doors to all women as they filled vacant jobs left in the states by men away at war, and earning a wage outside of their husbands or father's provisions meant these women had more agency than ever. They fulfilled men's jobs on the home front just as well as the men had previously done, supplying the war overseas and keeping the American economy right-side-up for the war's end and a return to normalcy. Temporarily increased social, political, and economic opportunities gave millions of black and white women a taste of challenging the patriarchal order, which was soon to return and resume throughout the post-war era as Americans longed for the traditional order of things in the years following the "war to end all wars". White and black women alike reported to the same plants, factories, and war production centers; however, their new employment remained entrenched in segregation and the reduced wages that they saw their white counterparts earn.

That shimmering glimpse into agency and freedom, however, kickstarted a culture of encouragement towards women to become politically active in the public sphere, and not just by voting; it presented political activism not only as a public service but also as a source of personal fulfillment. Appealing to the devout South, the message was framed in a manner that propelled dutiful piety: a series of articles ran in the 1950s in the *Ladies' Home Journal* included a section named "Political Pilgrims Progress" with one reading "one housewife rejected the temptations of full-time domesticity and found salvation through politics rather than religion."<sup>25</sup> Journals, magazines, and articles in newspapers pointed out that women, especially mothers, had special, perhaps inherent, qualities of civilizing and peacekeeping,

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<sup>25</sup> Meyerowitz, Joanne. 1993. "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958." *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4: 1455-82.

which men lacked, that were needed in government following a series of two world wars in the span of approximately three decades.

Simultaneously, the war and post-war era brought black women a heightened longing for enfranchisement as they were given job opportunities on the home front while their husbands, sons, and fathers were drafted to the fronts of war-torn Europe. After risking their lives in a segregated military with many hundreds of thousands sacrificing their lives, black men returning home to a nation that denied full citizenship without the threat of discrimination and violence precipitated serious uproar among the black community. This unwelcoming sense upon homecoming reached into the lives of all black Americans, greatly influencing women's longing for equality. Gaining significant momentum in the years following the war, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People worked tirelessly to build upon strides made toward their equality. As the mid-1950s approached, the grassroots movement had enough momentum and support across the South that the Southern white opposition began to fear for their superiority. Women like Ella Baker, a prominent figure involved in the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Fannie Lou Hamer, a significant force promoting voting and economic rights among black women; and Rosa Parks, the iconic front of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, were all prominent female figures in this movement and played crucial roles in advancing the cause of black civil rights in addition to their more specific own: black women. Baker, Hamer, and Parks had experienced hateful discrimination living in a racist South and spoke of their own experiences as black women, inspiring others to follow their faction. Despite the inspirational and leadership capabilities of these women, we see that history oftentimes rejected their seriousness about their cause. They “worked during a time where few Americans were

capable of taking a Black women seriously as a political figure”.<sup>26</sup> Taking significant positions and membership in groundbreaking organizations conducting work such as boycotts, sit-ins, protests, and demonstrations, black women were deeply consequential to two landmark pieces of legislation that represented victory over centuries of oppression bearing down upon black people in the United States. The passage of the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964, will forever be regarded as a monumental day in American history, guaranteeing the right to equal employment, limiting the use of voter literacy tests, and establishing federal authority over the racial integration of public facilities. Just a couple of years later, the Voting Rights Act was signed into law, prohibiting state and local efforts to prevent Black men and women from exercising their right to vote as laid out in the 15th and 19th Amendments.<sup>27</sup>

While black women were busy combatting complex discrimination associated with their experiences of intersectionality being both black and female, white women were somewhat, but not entirely, aligned on their specific rights as white women, thus combatting less violence and mistreatment than black women, but nonetheless fighting a cumbersome war on gender inequality. While there was a faction of white women who had tied their efforts to the rights of white and black women alike, the wave that swept the nation and is primarily recorded in history books was the women’s rights movement for *white* women. Leaders like Betty Friedan failed to meet the mark that the ideals of femininity apply differently to women depending on varying economic classes, races, and additional layers of intersectionality - a term coined years later by legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989.<sup>28</sup> “The Feminine Mystique” describes the plight of bored and unhappy housewives at home,

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<sup>26</sup> Payne, Charles. 1989. “Ella Baker and Models of Social Change.” *Signs* 14, no. 4: 885–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174689>.

<sup>27</sup>DPLA. n.d. “1960-Present: Black Women's Suffrage: DPLA.” Accessed March 1, 2023. <https://blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/timeline/1960-present>.

<sup>28</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6: 1241–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

meanwhile 60% of black women worked, 40% of those women as domestic help.<sup>29</sup> However, the movement for Afro-Americans' rights and the rights of white women were accompanied by similar strategies: "Both movements used international organizations to advance their cause, in fact, the stated purpose of NOW was to act like an NAACP for women... (the movements) sought to create integration and equal opportunity within the existing system through lawsuits, new legislation, and increased participation in the political process." (Langston, 1998). The Feminist Movement, spearheaded by women like Gloria Steinem and Friedan, renewed the call for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution to achieve equality in the workplace, education, and other areas of American society where they had been systematically oppressed for centuries at the hands of men.

In proper Southern reactionary manner, Christian conservatives saw the ability of the Equal Rights Amendment to undermine traditional gender roles and family structures that were supposedly the backbone of the nation's virtue and moral success since the post-war era. "In societies which have undergone violent conflict or transition, the call to a conservative national identity can be seen even more clearly, with national identity and traditional gender norms viewed as stabilizing factors, and the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation a core concern."<sup>30</sup> In the South, "feminism" was deeply intertwined with similar notions of hippie life, and with these perspectives came moral ambiguity, sexual permissiveness, drug use, anti-militarism, and ultimately iconoclastic, non-conformist behavior antagonistic of conventional society that Southern Conservatives so greatly feared and resented. Much of the Feminist Movement was centered around increased women's reproductive rights, and the rate

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<sup>29</sup> Langston, Donna. 1998. "Black Civil Rights, Feminism and Power." *Race, Gender & Class* 5, no. 2: 158-66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41675328>.

<sup>30</sup> Meintjes, S. and Turshen, M. and Pillay, A. 2001. *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*. London: Zed Books.

at which southern Christian Conservatives reacted to this specific issue was astounding: “By the 1970s, over two-thirds of the anti-feminist events that appeared in the New York Times were anti-abortion events, with the proportion rising even more in subsequent decades.”<sup>31</sup> Roe vs. Wade chartered a massive leap for the women's movement, and abortion suddenly became an extremely divisive, hot-topic word in America: a status of which it has yet to phase out.

In the late 1970s, fundamentalist Christians mobilized social conservatives through radio broadcasting, televangelism, and general scare tactics to coalesce this Moral Majority consistently identifying as Republican voters and handing their vote to pro-life candidates, whether they necessarily had a stance on the issue or not.<sup>32</sup> Streamlining conservative voters to the notion that pro-life means saving infant lives masks the covertly inhibiting nature of restricting reproductive rights: “The ability of women to participate equally in the economic and social life of the Nation has been facilitated by their ability to control their reproductive lives.” In nearly all situations, pregnancy will alter a woman’s educational attainment, her career advancement, potential earning status, and overall economic and political gain. The way reproductive rights have shaken out in politics has created a divisiveness among Americans that most could have never seen coming. That is unless you happen to fall into that category of Christian Fundamentalism who deliberately shaped the narrative the way it deliberately materializes in the modern political world, where access to abortion in many

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<sup>31</sup> Banaszak, Lee Ann, and Heather L. Ondercin. 2016. “Explaining the Dynamics between the Women’s Movement and the Conservative Movement in the United States.” *Social Forces* 95, no. 1: 381–409. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24754276>.

<sup>32</sup> McKeegan, Megan. 1993. “The Politics of Abortion: A Historical Perspective.” *Women’s Health Issues*. 127-31. doi: 10.1016/s1049-3867(05)80245-2.

Southern states sits next to impossible and has accounted for much of the polarizing divide America is experiencing in contemporary politics.<sup>33</sup>

### **Two Contemporary Forces**

Following centuries of disenfranchisement and a complete denial of political influence, women have found unconventional ways to rise to the previous positions of men, although Southern culture continues to infringe on their efforts. “Alteration, not transformation, has distinguished the political status of southern women. Ambivalent about women's roles, the South sanctions sexual politics and the illusion of change, while the Southern cultural tradition continues to inhibit genuine participation by women in its politics.”<sup>34</sup> Born into the fast-paced, warping political world that characterized the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, both Sarah Huckabee Sanders and Stacey Abrams grew up surrounded by the traditional, unique, Southern political culture. In conjunction with the radically divergent collective experiences of white and black women in the South, the contradictory experiences that shaped how these two individuals came into their own political fabric cannot be overstated enough.

### **Sarah Huckabee Sanders: “Faith, Family, and Freedom”**

The current sitting governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders is a born and bred Arkansan from the small town of Hope. Born into a political family in 1982, her father Mike Huckabee served as the Arkansas governor from 1996-2007 during a tumultuous time in Arkansas politics as a significant amount of legislative, executive, and judicial reform transformed the

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<sup>33</sup> Dimock, Michael, and Richard Wike. 2021. “America Is Exceptional in Its Political Divide.” The Pew Charitable Trusts. Last modified March 29, 2021.

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/winter-2021/america-is-exceptional-in-its-political-divide>.

<sup>34</sup> Brandon, Betty, and Charles Reagan Wilson. 2008. “Women in Southern Politics.” In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 10: Law and Politics*, edited by James W. Ely and Bradley G. Bond, 305–10. University of North Carolina Press. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469616742\\_ely.99](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469616742_ely.99).

face of state politics. In her youth, she was known to help with her father's election campaigns. Following graduation from the historically significant high school of Little Rock Central where she served as secretary of the Federation of Teenage Republicans, Huckabee attended Ouachita Baptist University where she graduated in 2004. Benefitting from her birthright into a politically advantageous family and her interest to get her foot in the door, Huckabee was fresh out of college in 2004 and able to serve as field coordinator for the George W. Bush reelection campaign and then later for the Department of Education under his administration. She spent a few years here before jumping on her father's upstart presidential bid as national political director in 2007, which was soon to fizzle out. Following the withdrawal of Mike Huckabee from the Republican nomination, Sanders became the director of "Huck PAC", a political action committee created with the ultimate goal to "promote conservatism and help elect conservative candidates at every level of government."<sup>35</sup>

Moving beyond her father's political life, Sanders served as campaign manager for the election of John Boozman who was running for election in the Senate and out of the House of Representatives; he successfully stationed his membership elsewhere under the management of Sanders. A few years later she went on to serve as an advisor to Arkansas's previous third congressional district representative, Tom Cotton, who successfully wrestled away incumbent Mark Pryor's Senate seat in 2014,<sup>36</sup> marking yet another significant flip in the GOP overhaul, or the "partisan earthquake,"<sup>37</sup> that was coalescing during these years. Venturing into the presidential election field once again in 2016, Sanders joined in her father's attempt at the highest public office, which quickly weakened as Donald Trump emerged as the Republican

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<sup>35</sup> Huckabee, Mike. n.d. "Huck PAC." Accessed March 17, 2023. <https://www.huckpac.com/>.

<sup>36</sup> Glueck, Katie. 2014. "Cotton Defeats Pryor in Arkansas." *Politico*, November 4, 2014. <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/11/arkansas-senate-results-elections-2014-tom-cotton-mark-pryor-112515>.

<sup>37</sup> Blair, Diane D., and Jay Barth. 2005. *Arkansas Politics and Government*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

front-runner. Subsequently, she became involved in the Trump 2016 election campaign and worked on the communications staff where she handled conveying information regarding Trump's platform on religion and the military for various coalitions. Following the victory over Hillary Clinton for the presidential office in 2016, President Trump appointed Sanders to serve as the White House press secretary where she served from 2017-2019.<sup>38</sup> Inaugurated in January 2023, Sarah Huckabee Sanders became the first woman to serve as governor in the history of Arkansas and the youngest governor in the nation.

To fully digest the nature of Sanders' platform and her reach in the state of Arkansas, the social and political fabric of the state and its particular relation to the South must be understood. Coming of age during a tumultuous time in Arkansas politics, the 1980s and 1990s housed the most transformative institutional reform the state had witnessed since Reconstruction. The political stage professionalized in all branches allowing for alteration of party representation to later be instrumental in the "partisan earthquake" that swept Arkansas just a few election cycles later. Institution of term limits dramatically shifted things: "...finally, in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the Senate changed its rules twice to make it more difficult for powerful senators to trap legislation in committee. However, the passage of the strict term limits amendment derailed the natural institutional growth of the legislature. The lack of continuity created by the removal of all veteran legislators has interrupted the evolution of the legislature into a more fully reformed body." (Blair, 2005) Sanders' father, Mike Huckabee, was able to secure the office of governor as a Republican in 1996 amid more than a century of a monopolized Democratic governorship. Forcing open long-held seats in both the House and Senate yielded an increased representation of women and some

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<sup>38</sup> Arkansas Governor - Sarah Huckabee Sanders. 2023. "Governor Sanders." Accessed March 17, 2023. <https://governor.arkansas.gov/about/governor-sanders/>.



African-Americans, with GOP women gaining numerical strength at a faster rate than African-Americans<sup>39</sup> (who remained fairly steady at around 11% of all members). In the tidal wave that was 2008, Arkansas experienced the broadest, fastest, and last flip to Republicanism in the South over the cycles of 2010, 2012, and 2014. Voters went from overwhelmingly voting blue to overwhelmingly voting red in basically half a decade.

Mike Huckabee and his ascent into politics characterize much of the ideology Sarah Sanders was raised on and from which she directs her own political platform. The former president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, Huckabee holds many staunchly conservative positions that tightly parallel Christian Fundamentalism, including displaying the Ten Commandments in all Arkansas public schools<sup>40</sup>, among more general stances like opposition to gay marriage and abortion. Blair and Barth describe Huckabee to be “fervently protective of gun rights and endorses most all elements of a ‘family values’ agenda”.<sup>41</sup> The Huckabee family hails from deeply religious roots, and the former governor’s stance on issues reflects Christian ideals. He wrote in his book, *From Hope to Higher Ground*, that from the time he was in his youth, he saw a future for himself working in communications for an evangelical organization ‘because of my deep personal faith.’<sup>42</sup> Post-graduation, he went on to direct and produce television programs, publications, advertising, and public relations for “Focus”, a faith-based ad agency in Texas that served a national evangelical organization. Continuing his education, he acquired his master’s degree at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Growing up in a family that believes in diminutive separation of Church and state, Sarah Huckabee Sanders holds many, if not most, of her father’s political

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<sup>39</sup> Blair, Diane D., and Jay Barth. 2005. *Arkansas Politics and Government*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

<sup>40</sup> Couzin, Jennifer. 2008. “Mike Huckabee.” *Science* 319, no. 5859: 26–27.

<sup>41</sup> Blair, Diane D., and Jay Barth. *Arkansas Politics and Government*.

<sup>42</sup> Wormald, Benjamin. 2020. “Religion and Politics '08: Mike Huckabee.” Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2008/11/04/religion-and-politics-08-mike-huckabee/>.

attitudes, despite her membership in a socially oppressed group compounded through conservative Christianity: women. Sanders' failure to drop her maiden name of Huckabee, as most women of her particular set of traditional beliefs would, corroborates her willful association with the image and precedent her father previously set in Arkansas.

As White House press secretary, Sanders was fiercely loyal to the president. Standing as Trump's right hand for a number of years, a female press secretary created the plausibility Trump needed to appear aware of progressive culture, which strives to break down structures of oppression against women and other groups. However, there is something to be said about Sanders' specious facade under the guise of what many may perceive to be white feminism. Her extensive political history and success working on winning campaigns within various PACs, consulting firms, and the Department of Education set her up well to represent a woman of significance in this position, and as institutional practices at the White House have been challenged in the modern era, considerable staffing changes occurred. Suddenly, decision-makers adapted to the demands.

In her book, "Rebirthing a Nation: White Women, Identity Politics, and the Internet", Wendy K. Z. Anderson indicates that during his presidency, Trump appointed 62% of his communication roles to women, one of which was Sarah Huckabee Sanders. Although many would characterize her presence as the third woman to serve as White House press secretary to be a signal of progress, Sanders' inexperience in that specific area manifested into extreme loyalty, marking her the perfect woman to sacrifice her voice and power to function as a sort of maiden shield to veil national doubt of Donald Trump's oppression-charged narrative. Sanders quickly earned a reputation for evasion and outright lying.<sup>43</sup> "Through their

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<sup>43</sup> Tisby, Jemar. 2022. "Faith on the Ballot: White Christian Nationalism vs. Black Christian Tradition." *The Boston Globe*, March 17, 2022. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022>.

classification of motherhood, internalized-isms, and color-blind ideology that they couch in ‘hard work’ and ‘merit-based’ claims, these women used a white privilege filter to frame their ‘individual feminism’ as a form of contained agency to shield Donald Trump from the impact of his oppressive rhetoric.”<sup>44</sup> Sanders and other women working under the Trump administration used a guise of female empowerment to simulate, rather than actually engage in, tangible feminism which disassembles power structures. This deemed “guise,” coupled with her functioning as an extension of Trump and a staunch Republican, was certainly enough that Arkansans overwhelmingly voted her into the governorship as the first woman to run the executive office in the history of the state.

On the campaign trail, Sanders geared up for the governorship race against Democratic nominee Chris Jones on her so-called “Freedom Tour” across Arkansas where she denounced Washington, the “radical left”, and “crazy bad, out-of-control”<sup>45</sup> ideas coming out of the nation’s capital. Framing her campaign and potential seat in the governor’s office in a typical Arkansas traditionalist manner, Sanders appealed largely to white Republican men and women who knew and recognized her from watching her on television as Donald Trump’s press secretary, despite how few press meetings the team managed to get away with. “The Trump White House has not only lapsed its own personal record for the span of time with no press briefings, Sanders has also surpassed the all-time record for time with no on-camera briefings since they began during the Clinton administration.”<sup>46</sup> Little coverage and specification as press secretary mirrors her lack of indicated specific policy proposals and

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<sup>44</sup> Anderson, Wendy K. Z. 2021. “Responsibility of a White ‘Privilege Filter’: Dismantling Conservative White Women as Color-Blind Maiden Shields.” In *Rebirthing a Nation: White Women, Identity Politics, and the Internet*, 121–47. University Press of Mississippi.

<sup>45</sup> Rains, Brett, and Adam Roberts. 2022. “Sarah Huckabee Sanders Campaigns in Fort Smith.” *KHBS*, November 4, 2022. <https://www.4029tv.com/article/sarah-huckabee-sanders-fort-smith-campaign/41871923#>.

<sup>46</sup> University of California, Santa Barbara. n.d. “The American Presidency Project.” April 1, 2023. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.

plans for the state during her campaign run.<sup>47</sup> On her “Freedom Tour”, Sanders spread her vague, but resonating message, perking the ears of the majority of Arkansas’s citizens: “I want to make sure the Arkansas I grew up in, the Arkansas that I love, the Arkansas that most of you grew up in and that you love as well, is the same one”<sup>48</sup> (that is passed down to the next generation). Sander’s message of preserving Arkansas values, halting “indoctrination” in schools, pledging to ban critical race theory,<sup>49</sup> reducing “a lifetime of government dependency” through education reform, and rewarding “hard work” by phasing out Arkansas’ state income tax overwhelmingly appeals to the typical Arkansas voter in contemporary politics. Conservatism characterizes almost the majority of state voters in nearly all elections, and Sanders’ consistent messaging and pushback against the media, cancel culture, and the widespread “attack on values” supposedly stemming from the Biden administration and progressivism allowed her to maneuver Arkansans to happily cast their vote in her favor. With Sanders being so closely associated with Trump, who received 62.4% of Arkansas’s vote in the 2020 presidential race<sup>50</sup>, it came as no surprise when she claimed just 3% shy of two-thirds of the state votes in November of 2022, successfully acquiring the executive office with relatively little competition.<sup>51</sup>

The “Freedom Tour” being titled in such a way does provoke considerable irony. The label was slapped onto every tour bus, sticker, stage sign, the website URL, and even

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<sup>47</sup> Field, Hunter. 2022. “On the Trail: Sarah Huckabee Sanders Brings Anti-'Radical Left' Message.” *Arkansas Advocate*.  
<https://arkansasadvocate.com/2022/09/12/on-the-trail-sarah-huckabee-sanders-brings-anti-radical-left-message-celebrity/>.

<sup>48</sup> Field, Hunter. “On the Trail: Sarah Huckabee Sanders Brings Anti-'Radical Left' Message.”

<sup>49</sup> 2023. “Ex-Trump Aide Sanders Defends Critical Race Theory Ban as Arkansas Governor.” *The Guardian*, January 15, 2023.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/15/sarah-sanders-arkansas-governor-ban-critical-race-theory-schools>.

<sup>50</sup> Shepard, Steven. 2020. “Live Election Results: 2020 Arkansas Results.” *Politico*, November 2020.

<https://www.politico.com/2020-election/results/arkansas/>.

<sup>51</sup> “Arkansas Governor Election Results 2022: Live Map: Midterm Races by County.” *Politico*. November 2022.  
<https://www.politico.com/2022-election/results/arkansas/statewide-offices/>.

“freedom” being the word to text to receive updates and information about the campaign on a mobile device. Freedom, in the framing of the new sitting governor, elicits a desired expulsion from the quote-on-quote “radical left” federal government that conservative America resents. This “radical left” is often contorted by Republican lawmakers to craft manipulation to scare and fear-monger voters. In this context, the use of “freedom” alludes to something much bigger than just the campaign of Sarah Huckabee Sanders: White Christian Nationalism and the religious right’s Moral Majority. Prevalent during the Trump presidency and his prevailing perception among other GOP politicians across the nation and particularly in the South, “freedom” is often lumped into phrases pertaining to Christian Nationalism. We see examples of this deliberate correlation throughout various aspects of American society. Sanders’ book she wrote about the inner workings of the Trump White House is literally entitled, “Speaking for Myself: Faith, Freedom, and the Fight of Our Lives Inside the Trump White House”. The 1970s saw the political rise and cohesion of White fundamentalist Protestant denominations, often known as “evangelical”, who believe in “biblical authority”, “family values”,<sup>52</sup> and interpret scripture through a gender ideology that suppresses women. It adheres to women’s picturesque submission to male authority and the necessary role of motherhood, sounding awfully familiar to the Cult of True Womanhood which early feminists so fiercely combatted.<sup>53</sup>

As Christianity has slowly been declining in the United States since the late-twentieth century and religious non-affiliation has simultaneously been climbing,<sup>54</sup> phrases such as “faith, family, and freedom” behave as a sort of rallying cry among alt-right Christian

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<sup>52</sup> Ward, M. 2019. “Sermons as Social Interaction: Pulpit Speech, Power, and Gender.” *Women & Language*, 42 (2): 285–316. doi:10.34036/W027.

<sup>53</sup> Mannon, B. 2019. “XVangelical: The Rhetorical Work of Personal Narratives in Contemporary Religious Discourse.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 49 (2): 142–162. doi:10.1080/02773945.2018.1547418

<sup>54</sup> Sage Mikkelsen, and Sarah Kornfield. 2021. “Girls Gone Fundamentalist: Feminine Appeals of White Christian Nationalism.” *Women's Studies in Communication* 44, 563-585. doi: 10.1080/07491409.2021.1911895

Nationalists who wish for a “righteous America”. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in the South, commonly known as the “Bible Belt” due to the extensive history of Christianity and its use to justify systems of sexism and racism. Christian Nationalism rests upon ideals of white supremacy that have been circulating for generations to denounce the abilities of groups of people that are not white men.<sup>55</sup> Essentially, White Christianity imagines that to be worthy of the “American Dream”, it must position that family as heterosexual, middle class, and white. “This framework blames Black people/people of color for the systemic poverty, housing inequality, lack of access to education, and other systemic injustices that oppress them. By deploying a universalized yet invisible Whiteness and especially White femininity, White Christian nationalism imagines racial and ethnic minorities as unworthy—or incapable—of the American dream.”<sup>56</sup>

In October 2022, a Pew Research Study found that 67% of Republican or right-leaning Americans believe the U.S. should be a Christian Nation, while only 29% of Democratic or left-leaning Americans believe the U.S. should be a Christian Nation. One respondent defines Christian Nationalism as “elevating one religion above another. It is making this a theocracy and not giving people the freedom to practice their religion or giving them freedom from religion. It is dangerously wrapping one religion and love for America together. It is weaponizing the flag.”<sup>57</sup> The new Republican governorship of Sanders has already proven to be one collaborating with visions of Christian Nationalism, which she clearly stated in 2018, “A lot of times people say you need to separate faith and work, and my answer is that you

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<sup>55</sup> Jones, R. P. 2020. *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>56</sup> Cooper, Brittney C. 2018. *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

<sup>57</sup> Nadeem, Reem. 2023. “Views of the U.S. as a 'Christian Nation' and Opinions about 'Christian Nationalism'.” Pew Research Center. Accessed November 23, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/10/27/views-of-the-u-s-as-a-christian-nation-and-opinions-about-christian-nationalism/>.

can't, because if you are a deep-rooted Christian, your faith is what defines you, and I think that's something that I try to take with me in everything I do and certainly don't separate that when I go to work every day."<sup>58</sup> Sanders is incredibly upfront about her faith and her willingness to take this mindset to the governor's office each and every day - an office that supposedly upholds a separation of Church and state. Many call this new coalition a threat to democracy because it threatens the foundational nature of the United States - the very element that allows *everyone* to speak, worship, protest, organize, and live as they choose: Freedom. How ironic.

### **Stacey Abrams: "Hope for Georgia"**

Stacey Abrams was born in 1973 in Madison, Wisconsin, to her mother, who worked as a librarian, and her father, who worked in a shipyard. Abrams' parents were both active participants in the Civil Rights Movement as her mother can attest to being thrown off public transit for sitting in the "whites only" section, and her father was beaten and jailed for his participation. She was raised on a "you can be anything you want" mantra, and her parents encouraged her and her six siblings to be active in civic engagement from a very young age. The Abrams swiftly relocated to Gulfport, Mississippi, where she recalls her mother associated their family with the "genteel poor" who lived on the brink of poverty but "watched PBS and read books".<sup>59</sup> Education, knowledgeability, social justice, and service to humanity were of high importance in their family. An advocate of public education, Abrams credits the public school system with "saving" her and her siblings who all now work in various fields doing tremendous work. The family once again relocated, this time to Atlanta,

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<sup>58</sup> Tisby, Jemar. "Faith on the Ballot: White Christian Nationalism vs. Black Christian Tradition."

<sup>59</sup> Rothberg, Emma. n.d. "Biography: Stacey Abrams." National Women's History Museum. Accessed March 23, 2023. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/stacey-abrams>.

Georgia, where Abrams' parents attended the Theological Seminary at Emory University to become ordained Methodist ministers.

During Abrams senior year of high school at Avondale High School, she was named valedictorian of her class and was subsequently invited to the governor's mansion to meet the Governor and other valedictorians from around Georgia. The family traveled by way of public transportation because they could not afford a car, and Abrams can recall walking from the bus stop to the mansion as most other families drove right up to the gates. Retelling this story many times over the years, Abrams can't seem to recall actually meeting the governor, but she vividly and painfully remembers what happened as her family reached the guard station. "The guard looked at my parents, then he looked at me, and he said, 'This is a private event, you don't belong here.'"<sup>60</sup> Lacking any shock factor, but instead filled with infuriation, Abrams' parents argued their way past the guard and into the most powerful place in the state of Georgia. "He (the guard) looked at the MARTA bus driving away and told himself a story about who would be on that bus – and that they did not belong in the Governor's mansion."<sup>61</sup> The year was 1991.

After graduation, Abrams attended Spelman College, an all-women's HBCU where she graduated Magna Cum Laude with a B.A. in interdisciplinary studies of political science, economics, and sociology as well as being named a Truman scholar.<sup>62</sup> During her time at Spelman, Abrams led a protest against the Rodney King verdict and co-founded an organization called the Students for African-American Empowerment. Following her undergraduate career, Abrams was not finished yet in terms of educational attainment. She

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<sup>60</sup> Rothberg, Emma. "Biography: Stacey Abrams."

<sup>61</sup> VocaliD. n.d. "Iconic Voices of Black History – Stacey Abrams." Accessed March 23, 2023. <https://vocalid.ai/iconic-voices-of-black-history-stacey-abrams/>.

<sup>62</sup> "Rep. Stacey Abrams D-89 Biography - Georgia." Accessed March 24, 2023. <https://www.house.ga.gov/Documents/Biographies/abramsStacey.pdf>.



went on to receive her Masters degree at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, followed by her J.D. at Yale. Moving back to Atlanta, she worked as a tax lawyer until the age of 29 where she was appointed the Deputy City Attorney for Atlanta.<sup>63</sup> Her political career was just at its brink of taking off, and in 2006 she was elected to the House of Representatives in Georgia. Her reputation of bipartisanship quickly followed. In 2010, Abrams broke barriers when she was elected as the House Minority leader – the first African-American woman to do so in the history of the state. Upon assuming office, Abrams took to advocacy in the areas of educational opportunity, economic security, criminal justice reform, expanded Medicaid, and increased understanding and awareness of mental health. She served more than 10 years.<sup>64</sup>

In August of 2017, Stacey Abrams resigned her position as House Minority leader to announce her run for governor of Georgia. Abrams' campaign simultaneously created a lot of hope and excitement for the future, but it also created bitterness and negativity. That excitement stemmed from the hope that a Black person, *a Black woman*, could win the governorship in a deep-South state with its overwhelming Republican base. That bitterness and negativity stemmed from Conservative traditionalists angry that someone would dare challenge the status quo. In May of the next year, Abrams made history as she became both the first woman and first African-American to be a major-party candidate and win the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in Georgia. This nomination by and of itself was a win. A rocky, uphill battle lay ahead for the governorship as she faced up against a white, politically conservative contender, Republican Brian Kemp, who was currently serving as

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<sup>63</sup> “Rep. Stacey Abrams D-89 Biography - Georgia.”

<sup>64</sup> Darrisaw, Michelle. 2020. “12 Things to Know About Stacey Abrams who Announced She’s Not Running for Senate in 2020.” *The Oprah Magazine*, October 21, 2022. <https://www.oprahdaily.com/entertainment/a41723054/oprah-stacey-abrams-georgia-governor-election-campaign-2022/>

Secretary of State for Georgia and was an avid Donald Trump supporter. With the Democratic party behind her with full support, Abrams countered attacks made against her by Kemp and Georgians because she was a woman, even extending their attacks on her appearance and supposedly falling short of the societal beauty standard in America. With a collective \$40 million raised, Abrams ran an aggressive field campaign, venturing into rural areas to target unlikely voters who would be partial to her plans of expanded Medicaid, amid other policies. “She doesn't think she can defeat Republican Brian Kemp by simply relying on habitual voters, even the college-educated, affluent whites who lean Republican yet would consider her because of Kemp's unapologetic embrace of President Donald Trump. Instead, her challenge in the final weeks of the campaign is to coax infrequent voters off the sidelines.”<sup>65</sup> A spearheading advocate for voting rights, instead of relying on traditional voters, Abrams looked to voters whose voices have largely been ignored because they haven't been engaged before.<sup>66</sup> Abrams' loss devastated millions of hopeful Georgians as she came in just shy with 49.78% of the vote.<sup>67</sup>

Stacey Abrams quickly galvanized an awareness around the 2018 election where she maintains that serious voter suppression is still being implemented throughout various institutions. In her concession/non-concession speech given after days of the race being too close to call, Abrams resounded that there was significant voter suppression within the election, and this was not the first time an election has witnessed such manipulation in Georgia. The names of more than a million, some claim reaching up to 1.5 million, Georgia

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<sup>65</sup> Barrow, Bill. 2018. “Inside Stacey Abrams' Strategy to Mobilize Georgia Voters.” *Athens Banner-Herald*, October 16, 2018.

<https://www.onlineathens.com/story/news/politics/elections/local/2018/10/16/inside-stacey-abrams-strategy-to-mobilize-georgia-voters/9542437007/>.

<sup>66</sup> Barrow, “Inside Stacey Abrams' Strategy to Mobilize Georgia Voters.”

<sup>67</sup> Detherage, Kimberly L. 2020. “Claiming Our Inheritance.” In *Women with 2020 Vision: American Theologians on the Vote, Voice, and Vision of Women*, edited by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, 59–78. 1517 Media.

residents had disappeared from the rolls, including “a 92-year-old civil rights activist who had cast her ballot in the same neighborhood since 1968.”<sup>68</sup> On top of the stricken names, over 53,000 voter registrations were pending just a month until the election, and thousands of registrations were denied. “County election officials shut down 214 polling places, the bulk of them in minority and poor neighborhoods.”<sup>69</sup> Polling sites had failing machines forcing them to make voters wait hours in line or close early altogether. “After witnessing the gross mismanagement of the 2018 election by the Secretary of State’s office,”<sup>70</sup> Abrams launched *Fair Fight*, an organization working towards ensuring every American has a vote as well as holding our electoral processes accountable. Fair Fight 2020 was a specific initiative that funded and trained voter protection teams in 20 battleground states. The initiatives did not stop there: “In 2019, she launched *Fair Count* to ensure accuracy in the 2020 Census and greater participation in civic engagement, and the Southern Economic Advancement Project, a public policy initiative to broaden economic power and build equity in the South.”<sup>71</sup> A mover and shaker in the state of Georgia, Abrams continues to serve as a symbol of voting advocacy across the United States while specifically addressing issues in the South that work to register and turn out voters, particularly young voters and voters of color.

Just last year in 2022, eager to shoot her shot once again at the governorship, Abrams announced her plans to run again for the executive seat of Georgia. Aware from the start that the governor’s seat would be harder to attain this time around due to Brian Kemp’s incumbency, the campaign was set to be even more aggressive, but many analysts assert that the campaign trail was too similar to the 2018 run, and less aggressive, if anything. Despite

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<sup>68</sup> Timmons, Heather. 2018. “Stacey Abrams’ Concession Speech is a Powerful Critique of US Civil Rights,” Quartz. Accessed March 25, 2023. <https://qz.com/1468560/read-stacey-abrams-full-concession-speech>

<sup>69</sup> Anderson, Carol. 2018. “Brian Kemp's Lead in Georgia Needs an Asterisk.” *The Atlantic*, November 12, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/georgia-governor-kemp-abrams/575095/>.

<sup>70</sup> Fair Fight. 2021. “About Stacey Abrams.” <https://fairfight.com/about-stacey-abrams/>.

<sup>71</sup> Fair Fight. 2021. “About Stacey Abrams.”

Georgia coming to symbolize the Democratic party's future, Abrams lost to the Republican contender once again in the fall of 2022. Lacking "retail politics", the Democrats supposedly did not do enough direct voter outreach this election, failing to dial phones and knock on doors.<sup>72</sup> Additional reasoning could lie in Joe Biden's falling approval rating during Brian Kemp's governorship where he hammered home his handling of the economy amidst inflation, rising gas prices, and Covid-19. "On the campaign trail, Gov. Brian Kemp constantly emphasized his handling of the state's economy, from reopening businesses and schools early in the pandemic to pausing the state gas tax amid rising prices."<sup>73</sup> Unanswered questions continue to swarm the exact ins and outs of Abrams' loss, but one thing of which Abrams herself is convinced, among millions of others, lies in the facts that racism, sexism and other institutional oppressors continue to hold the capacity to knock women like Stacey Abrams down.

After breathing, walking, and simply "being" both a woman and African-American, Abrams can attest to the very niche experiences lived by her and others who look like her, yet many Americans cannot say the same. "As Jane Junn admonishes, we should not consider gender politics as static. Gender interacts with race in a dynamic fashion, and manifests itself differently in politics depending on the context. In sum, black women face a myriad of challenges and opportunities for achieving elected office."<sup>74</sup> Since being defeated in November 2022, Abrams has been quite outspoken pertaining to her awareness of how racism contributed to her loss. "By the end of her campaign, Ms. Abrams spoke more bluntly about

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<sup>72</sup> Gringlas, Sam. NPR. 2022. "Georgia Democrats Weigh What's Next after Losing Race for Governor Again." November 21, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/19/1137552158/the-path-looks-uncertain-for-democrats-after-losing-the-georgia-governorship-aga>.

<sup>73</sup> Gringlas, Sam. NPR. 2022. "Georgia Democrats Weigh What's Next after Losing Race for Governor Again."

<sup>74</sup> Gillespie, Andra, and Nadia Brown. 2022. "#BlackGirlMagic Demystified: Black Women as Voters, Partisans and Political Actors." *Phylon (1960-)* 56, no. 2: 37–58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26855823>.

seeing herself as an outsider and wanting to take on the power structure in a state with a long history of racism.”<sup>75</sup> As consistently seen when women are viewed in any form of spotlight, even more so women of color, they are ripped apart in ways the likes of men will never experience. “Simply put, many argue that Stacey Abrams is a brilliant political powerhouse with tremendous promise and potential. But she is also an outspoken Black female progressive. She is an unmistakable and unapologetic Black woman with a commanding presence.”<sup>76</sup> Noted in her first debate against Brian Kemp, “I don’t have the luxury of being a part of a good-old-boys’ club.”<sup>77</sup>

The term “digestible” is often used to describe white, conservative Americans’ ability to expand their gaze beyond who is typically in these positions. In the leadup to the presidential race of 2008, a group of journalists ran a list experiment analyzing if Americans would support a female presidential candidate. The study found that roughly 26% of the American public would be “angry” or “upset” by a female president.<sup>78</sup> This level of dissatisfaction is consistent across several demographic groups. Much of this exact phenomenon can be used to trace a certain percentage of points not cast for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Kamala Harris in 2020, whose careers as Democratic presidential nominee and Vice President came around a century beyond the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. In the

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<sup>75</sup> King, Maya, and Reid J. Epstein. 2022. “Eager to Grab National Spotlight, Abrams Falls Again on Georgia Stage.” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/10/us/politics/stacey-abrams-georgia-governor-election.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Hoskin, Maia Niguel. 2022. “The Real Reasons Stacey Abrams May Have Lost Georgia’s Gubernatorial Race.” *Forbes*, November 27, 2022.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/maiahoskin/2022/11/21/the-real-reasons-stacy-abrams-may-have-lost-georgias-gubernatorial-race/?sh=3402251a1d5a>.

<sup>77</sup> King, Maya, and Reid J. Epstein. 2022. “Eager to Grab National Spotlight, Abrams Falls Again on Georgia Stage.”

<sup>78</sup> Streb, Matthew J., Barbara Burrell, Brian Frederick, and Michael A. Genovese. 2008. “Social Desirability Effects and Support for a Female American President.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 72, no. 1: 76–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25167611>.

world of politics, women cannot seem to meet that inaccessible standard which doesn't even seem to exist for men.

Researching during a time of massive conversation surrounding systemic racism, women's equality and more, I sought to conduct a study in which I could reverberate the aspects of race and gender throughout. The campaign announcements of the two women around whom my work revolved seemed to be the perfect platform for my research concentration, especially considering the rarity of two women running for governor in southern states. Seemingly hand-picked by luck itself, Stacey Abrams, a Black Democrat out of Georgia, and Sarah Huckabee Sanders, a White Republican out of Arkansas, created an ideal scenario for my chosen realm of study. Conducting this project, I sought to understand *why* two women have politicked in such discordant directions their entire careers and why they display passion about certain issues where they strive to leave their mark. There are certainly reasons why we cannot be sure of the translucent answer due to the sharp rise in partisan polarization during this period; however, throughout this research, I have concluded the foundational reasoning boils down to race and oppression. If I were to have infinite time and resources, I would choose to conduct interviews with Sanders and Abrams to understand them at a heightened level. This would be enlightening to unpack who they are outside the world of the press, the media, and their critics.

### **Conclusion**

Sanders and Abrams alike ran for governor of southern states in the fall of 2022 on platforms that did not resemble each other in the slightest. What delineates these two rests in their individual lived experiences as distinct members of a historically racialized system, placing their passion into oppositional political efforts and accomplishments into wildly

separate categories. This is not to discredit the struggles of white women, but the uphill climb cannot be situated in a parallel sense whatsoever. While commonly lost in historical discourse, the Nineteenth Amendment legitimately applying to white women alone cannot be overstated enough as it set the starting line back just short of another half century for Southern Black women through detrimental disenfranchisement. Yes, the Nineteenth Amendment - in theory - applied to all women regardless of color. But did it really? Black women were discouraged from voting in a myriad of ways; disenfranchisement efforts like poll taxes, the literacy test, intimidation tactics, violence and more. For people who appear like Abrams, the battle for equality could be described as more like a dogfight, combatting layers of oppression repeatedly tacked on as freedom slowly inched forwards for centuries. Abrams reverently stands atop the political platform and ideologies she upholds *because* she is able to recognize the failings of this country to encourage and legally support people like her. Abrams so strongly backs policies supporting voter rights, immigration, reproductive rights, public education free from privatization, Medicaid, and more because she identifies areas where historically oppressed groups have suffered at the hands of white supremacy and patriarchy.

Sarah Huckabee Sanders reached the governorship in a Southern state with an extensive history of misogyny: an incredible milestone moment for women in Arkansas and elsewhere. However, her platform and stance mirrors a traditionalist viewpoint that doesn't necessarily seek to uplift women or any historically oppressed group - that is the distinctiveness here. Sanders rarely refers to herself as a woman, let alone as a member of an oppressed group of people or regard anyone to be a victim of the United States' history of oppression, but instead she argues the existence of systemic racism and other institutionalized oppression towards minority groups in 2023 as archaic blasphemy. "Sanders ignored historic

discrimination against underrepresented populations while values like ‘American exceptionalism’ legitimated entitlement and privilege of some, but not all...”<sup>79</sup> Governor Sanders functions as a sort of enigma, where she ostensibly appears to be a marker of women’s progress but strictly adheres to policies like restricting reproductive rights hindering the rights of women, among other policies that hurt the underrepresented.

Refusing to look back, go back, or fall back, women have continued to fight tirelessly for equal footing in this country. Our constitutional exclusion set a precedent of a “nevertheless, she persisted” attitude: the attitude carried with women who came before us. Those same women endured an unimaginable patriarchy beating down on their “rights”. Women’s legal political activism in the United States broke through the surface just barely over a century ago. There is no quantifiable way to even begin to understand what women could have been capable of had they been granted the same privileges and opportunities as men since European colonization, but what has been accomplished in the years available to us as women has fallen nothing short of phenomenal. Rising from a society that has historically discouraged women in fields traditionally reserved for men, the careers of Sarah Huckabee Sanders and Stacey Abrams as women should be regarded in the highest esteem as any woman in positions these two have achieved should be greatly respected. For Sanders to achieve the highest office in the state of Arkansas as a woman, let alone the youngest governor in the nation, is feminism transpiring as suffragists once only hoped for. The career Stacey Abrams has led as leader of the Georgia legislature and near-successful runs for governor proves an unimaginable coalescence of aspirations of which Black women once only dreamed. 2023 is witnessing the highest percentage of women in Congressional seats in

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<sup>79</sup> Anderson, Wendy K. Z. 2021. “Responsibility of a White ‘Privilege Filter’: Dismantling Conservative White Women as Color-Blind Maiden Shields.”



the history of the nation, where 28% of all members are women.<sup>80</sup> Still remaining far below an accurate population representation of women in the U.S., the exponential numbers serve to extend women's hope for equality in Congress sometime in the next century. Out of those 128 women, however, just 29 Black women represent constituents.<sup>81</sup> Efforts to represent *all* women requires dismantling of various social hierarchies that are still very much intact today.

In 1914, Suffrage leader Alice Stone Blackwell wrote, “the struggle has never been a fight of woman against man, but always of broad-minded men and women on the one side against narrow-minded men and women on the other.” Carrie Chapman Catt agreed, writing that “the enemy of suffrage was not men, but resistance to change.”<sup>82</sup> Deferring from and challenging oppressive systems that keep all women from their full potential depends on trailblazing women in positions of power such as Sarah Huckabee Sanders and Stacey Abrams who have the agency and platform to alter the narrative. Women’s odyssey for equality in the United States remains some distance away, but that is not to say it’s out of reach. Our ability to be humbled enough to listen and be receptive of our own impact determines the weight of our words and actions on others. The finish line lies in the hands of everyday Americans consciously choosing change.

Sarah Huckabee Sanders and Stacey Abrams are just nine years apart in age and live only three states away from one another. They are both published authors and have been actively involved in politics at multiple levels and areas throughout their adult lives. Both

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<sup>80</sup> Leppert, Rebecca, and Drew DeSilver. 2023. “118th Congress Has a Record Number of Women.” Pew Research Center. Accessed March 18, 2023.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2023/01/03/118th-congress-has-a-record-number-of-women/>.

<sup>81</sup> Schaeffer, Katherine. 2023. “22 States Have Ever Elected a Black Woman to Congress.” Pew Research Center. Accessed March 18, 2023.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2023/02/16/22-states-have-ever-elected-a-black-woman-to-congress/>.

<sup>82</sup> Miller, Joe C. 2015. “Never A Fight of Woman Against Man: What Textbooks Don’t Say about Women’s Suffrage.” *The History Teacher* 48, no.3: 437–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24810524>.

women have had incredible political careers thus far in a field largely dominated by men.

They also both identify as Christians. One particular characteristic about these women

remains the dominant reason why they have politicked in such divergent ways: race.

Something so trivial, yet formidable - a deliberate concept created to subordinate some to the

domination of others - shouldn't be a factor in the experiences you have as a human being

walking this earth, yet it has the power to divide the masses. In any case, the color of their

skin and the excruciating history associated with that microscopic human variability has

produced two contemporary, female forces that walk through this world in such very different

manners.

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