

THE COLOR OF CAMPAIGNING: PERSONAL IDENTITY AND POLITICAL BRANDING  
IN THE 2020 DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for Departmental Honors in  
the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Texas Christian University

Fort Worth, Texas

May 8, 2023

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## **ABSTRACT**

Red, white, and blue has long dominated American politics. Its meaning is clear – the American flag, patriotism, liberty – and political candidates have drawn on these collective associations to sway voters. Yet, candidates have begun to shift away from these traditional colors, opting for more unique tricolor palettes that, while not associated with these shared American values, are also not connected to the exclusionary history of the nation and its political structures. This study examines the logo color combinations from the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, which saw the most diverse field of candidates ever in a presidential election. By pairing logos with biographical information, this study seeks to build upon prior research in political communication and political branding by exploring the relationship between a candidate’s identity and their logo colors, particularly the use of color combinations other than red, white, and blue. While there is much more research to be done in this area, this study sheds light on previously unstudied potential influences on candidate branding.

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## INTRODUCTION

In today's digital world, logos are an easily recognizable image of a brand – the Coca Cola font, the Nike swoosh, the Snapchat ghost. In a political context, logos are an individual candidate's visual identity, and the colors they utilize can directly impact voters' perception of the candidate. Historically, nearly all presidential candidates have used the colors of the American flag in their campaign logos. However, the recent diversification of political candidates has correlated with a shift away from the traditional red, white, and blue palette.

Despite growth in the field of political branding, little research has considered how candidates use logo colors to convey information to voters, particularly information related to the candidate's identity. This study seeks to fill some of these gaps by answering the question, "In the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, did candidates' identities correlate with their use of red, white, and blue in their respective campaign logos?" Branding and biographical information on the 29 most prominent candidates were analyzed to answer this question, providing insight into how social identities and feelings of belonging in America may influence political branding.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Political Branding**

As long as there have been competing political parties in America, there has been a need to positively market a candidate (or negatively market their opponent) to the public, particularly in the case of presidential elections. While in the 18th and 19th centuries, it was considered taboo for a presidential candidate to directly ask the public for their support, surrogates and supporters hosted rallies, debates, speeches, and parades, hoping to garner votes for their preferred candidate (Roosevelt House, n.d.).

The year 1896 arguably marks the beginning of a new era of political campaigning as wordy pamphlets transformed into colorful posters and buttons with slogans and portraits (Williams et al., 2022). The 1900s saw radio broadcasts, newsreels and television ads become new mediums of political persuasion, necessitating a more cohesive marketing strategy for presidential hopefuls (Roosevelt House, n.d.). It also saw a shift from a “mass media model to a consumer model” of political campaigning, and candidates shifted from political party figureheads to the face of their own campaign brands (Scammell, 2007, p. 176). This shift arguably began with Ronald Reagan, the first presidential candidate to “cultivate and manage” a personal brand, primarily owing to his experience in the entertainment industry (Baker, 2009).

The 21st century has created further changes with the emergence of the Internet and social media networks. Obama cemented social media's necessity in political campaigning with his 2008 victory (Augustyn, 2017). With this prevalence of digital media, a cohesive brand and messaging strategy is increasingly important, and campaign logos are one method of presenting a unified image of a candidate.

### **What's in a Logo?**

Generally, a brand is a “symbolic and psychological representation” of a company, product or, in the case of politics, a person (Scammell, 2007, p. 177). Through branding, organizations can cultivate “a unique image or reputation...in the minds of consumers” to outsell their competition (Williams et al., 2022, p. 5). A logo is a visual (whether through words or graphics) representation of this brand (Henderson & Cote, 1998). Due to the sensory cortex's focus on vision, sight is the most important way through which people take in information about the world around them, thus making logos perhaps the most critical aspect of a brand (Hattie and Yates, 2013).

In a political context, branding is the creation of a candidate's public image in order to convince voters to exchange the candidate's ideas for votes (Smith and French, 2009). A candidate's political brand informs voters about their policy platform and personal characteristics, differentiating them from their opponent (Bible et al., 2016; Smith and French, 2009). A logo is a visual representation of a candidate's brand and is composed of color, imagery, and, in some cases, text; each of these elements contributes to the emotions and message portrayed by a logo (Williams et al., 2022; Krause, 2004; Holston, 2015).

Logos allow candidates to quickly relay substantive and symbolic information to voters by showcasing specific traits, identities, or policy positions; it is a "summary representation of what the candidate stands for" and who they are (Williams et al., 2022, p. 4). For example, a candidate with a focus on environmental policy may use green in their logo, and a candidate with a military background may include an American flag or use red, white and blue. In this way, a candidate may also indicate group membership through their campaign logo. If a logo aligns with a particular voter's (or a bloc of voters') identity, it "can create a positive attachment to the candidate" and cause a voter to become more willing "to learn more about the candidate" (Williams et al., 2022, p. 4). It can also impact vote choice, particularly in primary elections, where political parties cannot be used to differentiate candidates (Jenke & Huettel, 2016).

### **Color in a Political Context**

Color choices are thoughtfully considered in political branding, as it can allow a campaign to "set themselves apart from their competitors and establish their own unique identity in the public's imagination" (Peraza, 2019). Corporate brands use a particular color's cultural and emotional associations to shape public perception, and a political candidate's brand is no different (Smith and French, 2009).

## **Red, White, and Blue in Campaigns and Elections**

Looking at current and past elections for national political office, whether for senator, representative, or president, the colors red, white, and blue dominate candidates' logos and branding (Bible et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2022).

The reason for this is intuitive — the colors of the American flag signify patriotism and the collective American identity (Williams et al., 2022). Using red, white, and blue is a “safe” choice, a way to signal values and priorities without standing out from the fray, whether that be positively or negatively.

With the popularity of these colors in campaign collateral, it is unsurprising that American flag imagery also dominates political branding. Campaign logos frequently utilize individual elements of the flag, such as stars or stripes, or opt to use the flag in its entirety (Bible et al., 2016). The flag is a national symbol, signifying “patriotism, military service, or support for a strong national defense,” among others (Williams et al., 2022, p. 3).

Using a national flag's colors in campaigning is not unique to the United States: other countries where this is standard practice include Australia, New Zealand, and some European countries (Sawer, 2006). Interestingly, France prohibits the use of its flag's colors by political campaigns, as these colors are “regarded as too emotive to be used for partisan purposes” (Sawer, 2006, p. 4). Yet, this is arguably the very reason candidates use the colors of the American flag in their campaign's logo: to draw on the collective memories and “symbolic language that [is] about emotional identification” associated with the colors of the beloved star-spangled banner” (Sawer, 2006, p. 16).



## Political Parties and Color

In a discussion of color in a political context, it would be remiss not to mention the relationship between American political parties and color. While the exact time at which the nation shifted to viewing red as Republican and blue as Democratic, by 2000, it had become a staple in political and electoral coverage (Schloss and Palmer, 2014; Bible et al., 2016).

America's collective political consciousness is in opposition to most countries, where, generally, red represents liberalism and blue represents conservatism (Schloss & Palmer, 2014). The United States is also unique because candidates of both major parties regularly use the color of the opposition party: in the United Kingdom, it would be uncommon for a liberal to use blue or a conservative to use red in their campaign logo, but this is commonplace in American elections due to red and blue's status as the national flag's colors (Casiraghi et al., 2022).

The Republican and Democratic parties are also interesting due to their uninvolved role in the assigning of red to the Republican Party and blue to the Democratic. These colors were assigned by American media rather than the parties themselves. Before the early 2000s, both parties used both red and blue in their branding; now, the Democratic Party's logo is a sky blue, encircled "D," and the Republican Party's is a white "GOP" surrounded by a bright red rectangle (National Museum of American History, n.d.; Hohmann, 2010; Peate, n.d.). Each party now closely associates with its respective color to build a strong party identity. Such a phenomenon is nothing new: since ancient times, competing political organizations have used color to differentiate themselves from competitors and establish loyalty to the group (Casiraghi et al., 2022). With the lack of legitimate third parties in the United States, candidates may also use purple (which is, appropriately, a combination of the two parties' colors) to signify a more

centrist or independent political position and appeal to centrist members of the opposing party (Williams et al., 2022).

Unique to the Republican Party is its association with the American flag. Carter, Ferguson, and Hassin (2011) found that briefly exposing participants to the American flag shifted their beliefs and behaviors to favor the Republican Party, regardless of their prior partisan affiliation. This may be because the flag is associated with an “ideal” citizen, who is potentially perceived to be politically conservative (Carter et al., 2011). Therefore, using the American flag in a campaign logo can serve “as a cue about the candidate’s priorities” (Carter et al., 2011).

Yet, while the parties now adhere to their respective colors, political candidates have significantly more freedom to deviate from party branding, even though many still opt to use the red, white, and blue of the American flag.

### **Color in Campaigns and Elections**

As much homogeneity as there is in the identities of past presidents, there is even more uniformity in their methods of marketing themselves to reach the Oval Office. Nearly every president has utilized red, white, and blue in their campaign branding — the colors of the beloved American flag.

While a candidate may not use all three of these colors, it is difficult to find a political logo that does not incorporate at least one of the American flag’s colors. In fact, following the rise of social media, white has become a color included in almost all Congressional logos, likely due to the need for “white space” in social media images (Bible et al., 2016). Along with frequently using white, candidates who deviate from the typical red, white, and blue color scheme usually incorporate blue or red into their branding. Blue is more frequently used — in their study of 2018 Congressional campaigns, Williams et al. (2022) found that it comprised

nearly 70 percent of all logo colors, while red comprised only 17 percent. Still, there are partisan differences: Republicans are more likely to use red, and Democrats are more likely to use blue (Williams et al., 2022). More politically independent candidates may differentiate themselves by using purple — which is fitting, given that it is a combination of the two party’s colors (Williams et al., 2022). While a candidate’s political party can influence logo color choices, their social characteristics can also play a role.

### **Candidate Demographics, Collective Identity, and Political Campaigning**

#### **American Identity Past, Present, and Future**

Historically, America has contradictorily espoused egalitarianism and personal liberty while limiting citizenship (and even personhood) to select groups (Smith, 1988). This discrepancy began in colonial America, where European-Americans had to assert their superiority over indigenous peoples, class them as “marginal and hyphenated,” and “establish themselves as the only true Americans” (Smith-Rosenberg, 1993). American identity became associated “with a whole array of particular origins and customs” (Smith, 1988, p. 234). The “ideal American” was white, European (preferably English), male (with strict adherence to “patriarchal familial leadership and female domesticity”), Christian (preferably Protestant), heterosexual, middle- or upper-class, pro-capitalist, and a follower of traditional standards of morality (Smith, 1988, p. 253; Foster, 1999). This exclusion of entire demographics in America’s collective identity manifested itself in social institutions through the exclusion and underrepresentation of groups with characteristics deemed not to be that of the “ideal American” (Foster, 1999). It was not until the 1950s that cultural pluralism — the idea of America as a diverse “melting pot” of cultures and identities — became widely accepted (Smith, 1988; Bernstein, 2015).

Yet, while America has become more accepting of immigrants' unique cultural backgrounds in recent years, there is still pressure for immigrants and their descendants to conform to the idealized American identity and to "buy into" American culture. Vecoli (1996) argues that while the influence of "Anglo-conformity...has waned greatly," it still exerts considerable weight, particularly over the culture immigrants are compelled to buy into (p. 23). In this way, American immigrants are given conflicting messages of "cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity" (Vecoli, 1996, p. 23). They are expected to conform to American ideals but also maintain their own distinct cultural identity due to their demographic incompatibility (i.e., their lack of whiteness or Anglo-ness) with the historical idealized citizen; in other words, they are expected to take on an identity at odds with their already-existing cultural identity, which can create conflict and pressure to choose a "side" (p. 23).

### **Representation and Diversity**

While American society has become more accepting of individuals who do not adhere to its strict ideals, there is still a lack of diversity in the nation's social institutions, particularly in government. Due to the long history of "elite white men" (the "ideal" American citizens) being in positions of power, their views and their perceived superiority have been reflected in legal and social structures (Feagin and Ducey, 2017). While, over time, representatives of other groups (for example, women) have been added in limited numbers to these institutions, there is still a dominance of these elite white men, despite the demographic diversification of the American population (Feagin and Ducey, 2017).

The 118th Congress (2023-2025) is the most diverse in America's history, but it is still far from representative of the public (Schaeffer, 2023). Despite making up 59% of the country's population, 75% of members of Congress are non-Hispanic whites; 28% are women, compared

to the 51% female general population; 94% have a bachelor's degree or higher, with 38% having the same level of education in the general populace (Schaeffer, 2023).

As unrepresentative as the U.S. Congress is, the presidency is an even starker contrast to the American people. Gender and racial representation are skewed — there has been no female president and only one non-white president. However, there are also other differences that are less visible. In terms of class, most presidents have come from an upper-class, economically privileged background, and many, particularly in the nation's early years, came from a few socially prominent families (Pika et al., 2021). Most presidents since 1900 have possessed some form of higher education, with many receiving these degrees from elite institutions and many studying (and later practicing) law (Pika et al., 2021). Most presidents also come to the White House with prior experience in public office — before the election of Donald Trump, only three had not held public office, and these three had each served as high-ranking military officers (Pika et al., 2021).

### **Minority Candidates**

Perhaps even more homogenous than U.S. presidents' identities are their political branding strategies. As Peraza (2019) points out, while male candidates have 45 former presidents to draw inspiration from, female candidates have no such role models; while men can “lean on the conventional wisdom and branding playbook of past winners,” women must decide whether to conform to red, white, and blue or to create a more unique branding identity. The same concept can be applied to other groups historically underrepresented in the presidency (and in political office in general), such as members of the LGBTQ+ community or people of color. These candidates also have no “branding playbook” for presidential elections and must make a

conscious decision to follow the precedent set by the homogenous presidents of the past or to break from tradition (Peraza, 2019).

While no studies have been conducted regarding identity and political campaign logo color choices in presidential elections, studies of Congressional, state, and local elections can provide some insight.

### **Campaigning as a man, campaigning as a woman**

Female candidates must decide if they will play into gender-based stereotypes or consciously deviate from them (Kahn and Fridkin, 1996). In a study of over 900 campaign logos from the 2018 Congressional elections, Williams et al. (2022) found that the decision to “buy into” these stereotypes often depended on a district’s political makeup and an opponent’s characteristics. Female candidates of both parties who were running in swing or nonpartisan districts, as well as Democratic candidates running in a Republican leaning-district, were more likely to brand themselves in a way aligning with traditional gender norms (for example, by making domestic issues or stereotypically female traits such as empathy a crucial part of their brand). Yet, in races between two female candidates, both candidates are more likely to subvert these norms by emphasizing traditionally masculine traits such as leadership (Windett, 2014; Williams et al., 2022). Women were also more likely to use “nontraditional campaign colors” such as “yellow, orange, purple, and green,” possibly to subvert campaign norms of red, white, and blue and differentiate themselves from other (male) candidates (Williams et al., 2022, p. 9).

Notably, there is a lack of research considering how gender impacts political branding on a more national stage, such as in presidential primaries and general elections, likely due to a significant lack of past women candidates to draw data from.

## **LGBTQ+ Candidates**

Kluttz (2014) frames LGBTQ+ candidates' campaigns in a framework of identity salience, finding that such candidates have a high level of sexual identity salience. However, this result is skewed, as candidates who are LGBTQ+ but not “out” — i.e., have a low level of sexual identity salience — would not be included in the study. Kluttz's study does not examine how this impacts campaigning from a marketing perspective. Still, it is possible that, due to their high sexual identity salience, LGBTQ+ candidates may select colors or imagery that are either in direct opposition to political branding norms (i.e., red, white, blue, and the American flag) to emphasize their “othered” identity or use traditional colors and symbols to subvert social norms.

## **Other Identities**

There is a significant lack of research examining how identities other than gender and, to a certain extent, sexuality play a role in political candidates' image and campaign branding, particularly for national offices such as U.S. senator, U.S. representative, and president. Aspects of identity that could influence branding choices include socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, educational attainment, immigration status, and more. Branding choices, such as logo colors or symbols, can be used to signal membership in one or more of these groups, and the influence of group membership is particularly salient during primary elections (Jenke and Huettel, 2016). Choosing to deviate from the colors of the flag could be a way to symbolize group membership that is outside of the American ideal — non-white, non-male, non-Christian, etc.

## **Collective Identity, Political Branding, and the American Flag**

As previously mentioned, America's public consciousness includes an emotional attachment to the nation's flag. Through events such as the Olympics and social norms such as flag pledges or the display of the flag outside government buildings, “state symbols” like the flag

become “linked to events and situations that the citizens...associate with pride, joy, and high spirits...enhanc[ing its] emotional value” (Kolsto, 2006, p. 698; Kimmelmeier & Winter, 2008). It is likely due to these associations that candidates select red, white, and blue as their campaign logo’s color palette: Americans are taught to associate the flag (and its colors) with patriotism and pride. It represents American exceptionalism, democracy, and freedom (Kimmelmeier & Winter, 2008).

However, for some, the flag may not evoke such feelings. While it may have a long-standing, mostly positive collective meaning, it has also been linked to post-9/11 white cultural nationalism and the white Christian nationalism that gained popularity during the Trump presidency (Kusz, 2007; Loomis, 2020). The American flag, bald eagles, and other symbols became “expressions of an aggressive Americanism that reinforces white-coded values” and emphasizes “overly masculinized patriotism” (Loomis, 2020, p. 25).

The flag also represents the “ideal” American citizen — an elite white male (Carter et al., 2011; Feagin and Ducey, 2017). For those not included in this ideal demographic (which is a growing proportion of the nation), the flag may serve as a reminder of their historical (or current) exclusion in America’s social institutions, such as the presidency or Congress. It may be for this reason that political candidates who have historically been on the margins of society (for example, women, as seen in Williams et al.’s 2022 study) do not incorporate the flag’s colors into their campaign logos.

It is also possible that candidates choose to deviate from red, white, and blue in their logos because they are campaigning in a constituency that does not feel represented by the American flag and past public officials and want to express their own non-traditional identity through their campaign logo. Using unique logo colors can allow candidates to “convey a



particular identity” and to garner support, as “voters are more likely to support a candidate whose identity matches their own,” so using colors other than those of the flag may be a conscious decision to showcase that a candidate’s identity does not align with the “ideal” American citizen, and to appeal to groups whose identities also do not align with this ideal (Jenke and Huettel, 2016).

While the use of red, white, and blue has been a norm in political campaigning for decades, so has the identity of these candidates as elite white men (Feagin and Ducey, 2017). In fact, of the past presidents, only one victor did not use red, white, and blue, and very few unsuccessful candidates have deviated from this norm.

### **Historical Outliers**

#### **Going Green: Jimmy Carter**

Only one American president has dared to step outside the traditional campaign color scheme of red, white, and blue. Democrat Jimmy Carter’s 1976 and 1980 presidential campaigns utilized green and white. These colors served as a reminder of Carter’s humble roots as a peanut farmer: his “patriotism was rooted in the green fields of rural America” rather than the red, white, and blue of the American flag, along with reflecting Carter’s focus on environmental policies (Peraza, 2019; Georgia Conservancy, n.d.).

The green and white palette also signified his disconnect from corrupt Washington elites: in the post-Vietnam War and Watergate era, public trust in the government was at an all-time low (Bowman and Marsico, 2014). Consequently, the American flag’s red, white, and blue hues may not have stirred the same feelings of patriotism and pride as in the past.

## **Unsuccessful Trailblazers**

Two other presidential candidates of note have stepped beyond the red, white, and blue norm: Shirley Chisholm, who ran in the 1972 Democratic presidential primary, and Jesse Jackson, who ran in the 1984 and 1988 Democratic presidential primaries. Though neither secured the nomination, they were trailblazers in their own right: Chisholm was the first black person to run for a major party nomination and the first woman to run for the Democratic Party's nomination, and Jackson was the second black candidate to run for a major party nomination, second only to Chisholm (Simien, 2015).

Chisholm's campaign lacked a cohesive logo or branding strategy, as did many presidential campaigns of the time, but did break away from convention by consistently using red and yellow in its political buttons (Melton, 2020). Jackson also deviated from tradition and utilized a multi-colored rainbow logo, representative of his pro-woman, LGBTQ+ and black Rainbow Coalition (Apollo Publishers, 2020, p. 291). This rainbow logo also signified the diversity of the American populace: as Jackson said in his 1984 Democratic National Convention speech, "Our flag is red, white, and blue, but our nation is a rainbow—red, yellow, brown, black, and white" (5:34:42).

## **Obama: A New Day in Political Branding**

In 2008, Barack Obama provided the first cohesive visual identity of a presidential candidate, setting the standard for political communication in the world of social media. His red, white and blue "O" logo, stylized to look like a rising sun, signified a new day in America and, as his iconic posters pronounced, hope (Goldmacher, 2021). Most notably, the "O" could be easily transferred from print to digital and could stand alone or be combined with text (School of the Art Institute of Chicago, n.d.). Sol Sender, who spearheaded the development of the

campaign's brand, drew inspiration from corporate and commercial brands rather than the political logos of the past, representing the shift to a more commercial model of political campaigns (School of the Art Institute of Chicago, n.d.).

### **The AOC Effect**

Political branding has also been impacted by a phenomenon Peraza (2019) terms the "AOC effect." Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 campaign for a seat in the House of Representatives utilized a unique logo with a bold upward-facing font and a yellow and purple color palette. Following her victory, the distinctive diagonal type has become commonplace in political campaigns, "serving as a visual shorthand of sorts" for progressive Democrats — an easy, effective way to unconsciously communicate liberal policy positions to voters (Goldmacher, 2021).

### **2020 and a Changing American Identity**

The 2020 Democratic presidential primary provides an interesting case study of the use of color in campaign logos. This primary was unique for several reasons, largely due to the sheer volume of candidates and the large number of candidates historically underrepresented in the presidency (racial minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, women, etc.). People of color and women, respectively, made up approximately one-fifth of the candidates; the first openly LGBTQ+ individual ran for the nomination; only one of the eight best-known candidates reflected a traditional American nuclear family (Seitz-Wald, 2019).

The 2020 election was also noteworthy because of the candidates' multicolored campaign logos, something that even the mainstream media noticed and reported (Seitz-Wald, 2019; Peraza, 2019). Particularly popular in such coverage was Kamala Harris's red, yellow, and purple as an homage to Shirley Chisholm (O'Kane, 2019), Pete Buttigieg's highly symbolic

color palette (Last, 2019), Elizabeth Warren’s “liberty green” (Pappenheim, 2019). Overall, in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, candidates branched out from the traditional red, white, and blue more than ever.

It may not be a coincidence that an increasingly diverse candidate pool led to a broader array of colors being utilized in campaign logos. Given that prior research supports the idea of women using colors outside of red, white, and blue to differentiate themselves from male opponents, it is possible that members of other historically underrepresented groups may use a similar strategy (Williams et al., 2022). Using non-traditional colors can quickly convey their minority identity or identities to voters, something that is particularly important in a primary election in which voters are more likely to cast a ballot for a candidate with whom they share group membership (Jenke and Huettel, 2016). This phenomenon may be particularly prevalent in this specific election due to the large number of candidates and the increased difficulty for voters to gather information on and develop an informed opinion of all potential presidential nominees (Fischer, 2019). Prior research has examined political branding (specifically, logo color choices) through the lens of gender in congressional elections (Williams et al., 2022). Still, there is little research outside of this that examines how different aspects of identity, such as race or gender, may intersect with political branding at a national scale.

## METHOD

### **Hypothesis**

*Hypothesis:* Candidates who are members of marginalized groups and historically underrepresented in public office (i.e., the presidency) will be less likely to use red, white and blue as their primary logo colors.

## Data Collection

For the Democratic party, the 2020 presidential primary brought forth the most diverse group of candidates in the history of presidential elections. The crowded Democratic field consisted of an unprecedented number of candidates: the Federal Election Commission reported financial information for over 50 Democratic candidates in the 2019-2020 presidential election cycle. To narrow down this group to candidates considered “legitimate” contenders in the race for the nomination, this study will track the 29 Democratic candidates that the Center for American Politics and Design (CAPD) included in its 2020 presidential candidate dataset, which identifies the specific colors used in each candidate’s logo. With only 29 subjects, this dataset is small compared to studies of Congressional or local elections. Still, it is comparatively large in the context of presidential elections and may provide insight into how candidate branding differs for presidential elections.

Information from CAPD’s dataset was added onto through biographical research of each candidate. This research allowed for the creation of “identity variables” such as race, gender, sexuality, education level, educational prestige, generation, region and several others. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted for each “identity” variable, with the variable “RWB” (a dummy variable coded based on whether the candidate did or did not use red, white and blue as their logo’s primary colors) serving as the dependent variable. Candidates were only placed into the red, white, and blue (RWB) category if they utilized all three of these colors in their logo; for example, Julian Castro, who used white and two shades of blue in his campaign logo, was coded as “non- RWB.”

## RESULTS

Due to the unbalanced representation in the sample, some variables could not yield significant results, such as sexuality (with only one LGBTQ+ candidate) or educational level (with only one candidate who did not possess a college degree). Other variables with more balanced demographics (for example, race) did not yield significant results, partly due to the small sample size. Still, there are two findings of note.

### **Gender**

Gender bordered on statistical significance ( $\text{sig}=0.054$ ), with female candidates being less likely to use red, white, and blue. See Table 1.

*Table 1: Gender and RWB*

Frequency			
Logo colors	Gender		
	Female	Male	Total
Used red, white, and blue	1	14	15
Did not use red, white, and blue	5	9	14
Total	6	23	29
Test Statistics			
	Value	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	
Pearson Chi-Square	3.724	.054	

### **First-Generation American**

A candidate's status as a first-generation American was determined based on at least one of their parents not being a natural-born U.S. citizen. Information was found on all candidates' parents except Eric Swalwell, who was excluded from this test. Chi-square test results indicate that first-generation Americans were more likely to use red, white, and blue at a statistically significant level ( $\text{sig}=0.043$ ). See Table 2.

*Table 2: First-generation American and RWB*

Frequency			
Logo colors	First-generation American status		
	Not First-gen American	First-gen American	Total
Used red, white, and blue	7	7	14
Did not use red, white, and blue	12	2	14
Total	19	9	28
Test Statistics			
	Value	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	
Pearson Chi-Square	4.094	.043	

## DISCUSSION

The results clearly indicate that color choices matter when it comes to gender identity and first-generation American status. It is possible that a candidate’s decision to deviate – or not – is made, at least in part, by certain aspects of their identity.

### **Gender**

As was expected based on previous studies of Congressional elections (Williams et al., 2022; Windett, 2014), women candidates in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary were more likely than men to deviate from red, white, and blue in their campaign logos. This finding also aligns with my hypothesis that individuals with identities historically underrepresented in the presidency (in this case, gender identity) would utilize non-traditional color palettes in their campaign logos. There are several potential reasons for women’s more diverse color palette choices.

With such a crowded field of candidates, it is possible that female candidates chose to use fewer standard colors to stand out. With such a crowded field, there was a greater incentive to utilize colors other than red, white, and blue. Due to their gender identity’s mismatch with that of

the “ideal” American, women may have been more comfortable deviating from campaigning norms than men.

Additionally, those who used traditionally feminine colors, such as Marianne Williamson, who used pink, may have hoped to draw attention to her gender. This is particularly important in primary elections, when voters are more likely to select a candidate based on social identity factors rather than policy positions (Jenke & Huettel, 2016). As a hypothetical example, a low-information female voter standing in line to vote in the Democratic presidential primary may see Williamson’s sign, quickly recognize her identity as a woman given the use of pink and decide to vote for her due to their shared identity.

### **First-generation American**

This study's most notable finding was that first-generation candidates were more likely to use red, white, and blue than non-first-generation Americans. This finding contradicts my hypothesis that candidates with marginalized identities would be less likely to utilize these colors. However, this finding supports the historical pressures for immigrants (and their descendants) to “assimilate” and conform to American culture (Vecoli, 1996). By using the flag’s colors, first-generation Americans can quickly signal to voters that they are *real* Americans.

### **IMPLICATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION**

The present study examined some aspects of political branding and identity. However, there are still many gaps in research, and with increasingly diverse political candidates, there is much room for development in this area.



### **First-Generation Americans and Immigration**

The finding that first-generation American presidential primary candidates were more likely to use red, white, and blue adds to the currently limited research concerning identity and political branding. This finding could be applied to elections at other levels to determine if this is a pattern within political branding or simply a pattern for the 2020 Democratic presidential primary candidates.

An interesting finding in the context of the 2016 (and, to a lesser extent, 2020) presidential election's focus on immigration from Mexico is that Julian Castro, one of only two Hispanic candidates, is not a first-generation American but did emphasize his Latino identity. Castro used a light blue accent to call attention to the accent mark in his first name, possibly drawing inspiration from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's bold inverted exclamation mark in her branding (Goldmacher, 2021). The other Latino candidate, Richard Ojeda, did not seem to emphasize his Latino identity in his logo. Still, future research may want to consider how first-generation American status works alongside racial or ethnic identity to impact candidate branding.

These results may also suggest that immigrants running for political office in the United States may be more likely to use red, white, and blue. Future research could examine a candidate's immigration status or birth country and its potential impact on political branding using data from congressional, state, or local elections.

### **Gender**

This study supports the claim that gender impacts a candidate's political branding choices, with an almost statistically significant finding of women being less likely to utilize red, white, and blue. However, it appears that the women in the 2020 Democratic presidential

primary were less likely to deviate from these colors than female candidates in previous congressional elections (Williams et al., 2022). Future research should compare presidential and congressional campaign branding, particularly through the lens of a candidate's gender identity.

### **Identity and Branding**

While some identity variables may not have been statistically significant in this study, that does not rule out their potential role in other elections. Future research could replicate this study using a much larger dataset of local and/or state-level elections to determine if other aspects of identity may play a role in political branding choices. Particularly, identities that may contrast with the idealized American (LGBTQ+, non-white, non-Christian, etc.) should be examined in the context of political branding. Overall, given that prior research has primarily looked at gender and its role in political branding, a shift towards studying candidates' identities in addition to gender could provide much-needed insight into campaigns and elections.

There is also limited research considering political branding in national-scale elections such as the presidential primary. Given that prior research suggests candidates tailor their image and branding to appeal to their respective constituencies, one may wonder how having a nationwide constituency impacts candidates' branding. Further research could explore this idea and its potential effects. Additionally, as future presidential candidates become more diverse, patterns may emerge regarding political branding, particularly the role of personal identity in branding choices.

To conclude, while nearly all past presidents used red, white, and blue in their campaign logos, the 2020 Democratic presidential primary shows that unique and nontraditional color combinations are becoming increasingly popular. In this specific election, gender and first-generation American status played a significant role in the decision to deviate from political

branding norms. With the diversification of America and its public officeholders, social identity may play a more substantial role in future elections, particularly regarding logo color choices.

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