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## How can a black woman be a Republican? An intersectional analysis of identity claims in the 2014 Mia Love campaign

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### ABSTRACT

Mia Love made history in 2014 as the first black Republican woman elected to Congress. Given the Republican Party's attempts to reach out to women and minority voters while simultaneously rejecting "identity politics," I ask: How does Mia Love navigate her Republican candidacy as a black woman? Through an in-depth analysis of Love's 2014 campaign output – including content analyses of her social media feeds, website, online videos, and advertisements – I demonstrate the various ways Love worked at the intersection of her political and social identities to align herself with the raced-gendered cultural norms of her party and district. In doing so, I contribute to recent empirical work on the electoral obstacles for Republican women candidates and deepen our understanding of identity politics on the Right.

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On November 4, 2014, Mia Love made history as the first black Republican woman and first Haitian-American elected to Congress. Much like the experiences of other Republican women and black Republican candidates, Love's "conflicting" partisan and social identities drew overt media attention to her race and gender (Lucas 2017; Ward 2016). During a campaign event at the University of Chicago Law School, a member of the audience stood up and asked, "In today's America, how can a black woman be a Republican?"<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, as several scholars have demonstrated, social identities have become increasingly associated with partisan affiliation (Mason 2018; Mason and Wronski 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). While the Democratic Party's electoral base is comprised of a coalition of "racial, religious, economic, and sexual minorities," Republicans garner most of their support from "social majorities or pluralities such as white voters, Protestants, suburbanites, and (heterosexual) married voters" (Grossman and Hopkins 2015, 125–126). In part due to these differences, the Democratic Party tends to embrace the concept of "identity politics," working to address the specific policy concerns of various groups of constituents. The Republican Party, on the other hand, focuses on broad, ideological principles – such as limited government, personal responsibility, and family values – while rejecting the premise that members of different social groups have specific policy interests (Grossman and Hopkins 2015, 2016).

These cultural norms have also contributed to a lack of diversity among Republican elites and have made it particularly challenging for women and minority Republicans to win congressional seats. Of the 252 Republicans serving in the 116th Congress (2019–2020), only 21 (about 8%) are women and only one<sup>2</sup> is a woman of color. This is compared to 106 Democratic women (about 38% of the party caucus), 46 of whom are women of color.<sup>3</sup> The ideological rejection of group identity politics in the Republican Party results in fewer resources for women and minority candidates compared to those in the Democratic Party (Burrell 2014; Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018; Kitchens and Swers 2016). In particular, Republican voters and donors are less likely to explicitly place value in a candidate's identity, making it difficult for conservative organizations dedicated to electing women and minorities to thrive (Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018).

Still, as Freeman (1986) notes, while the Republican Party “officially ignores group characteristics, ... it is obvious that it does pay attention to them when it feels the need to cater to the interest of the voting public in a particular group” (336). For instance, the Republican Party has showcased women and racial minorities as speakers at their national conventions to appeal to specific groups of voters (Fauntroy 2007; Fraga and Leal 2004; Freeman 1997; Och 2018; Philpot 2007; Sanbonmatsu 2004). Following the 2012 election, in which President Obama defeated Mitt Romney with a 10-point gender gap,<sup>4</sup> the party once again made efforts to expand their electoral base. The Republican National Committee (RNC) recommended strategies for future elections in an “autopsy” report titled the “Growth and Opportunity Project,” which stressed the necessity of reaching out to women and minority voters – including recruiting and supporting diverse candidates.<sup>5</sup> The National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) also created Project GROW (Growing Republican Opportunities for Women), which focused more specifically on recruiting women congressional candidates.

This tension between the ideological rejection of group identity politics and the strategic outreach to women and minorities undergirds the political environment in which Mia Love becomes the first (and only) black Republican woman elected to Congress. In this case study, I ask: How does Mia Love navigate her Republican candidacy as a black woman? To answer this question, I collect Love's 2014 online campaign output and use an intersectional framework to analyze how she presents her black womanhood to voters. Given media attention to her racial and gender identities and the RNC's emphasis on women and minorities in their “autopsy” report, I focus specifically on these identities and the ways in which other social and political identities intersect with her race and gender.

My analysis of identity claims reveals that Love was able to navigate a complex electoral environment by constructing her black womanhood in ways that intersect with her conservative ideology and align her with the racial and gender norms of her party and district. More specifically, she presented herself as a loving mother, a devoted wife, and the daughter of “model” Haitian immigrants. Additionally, while the campaign shared news articles that described her explicitly as a black woman, Love used that narrative to draw attention to her conservative credentials.

While previous research has examined how candidates choose to either highlight or downplay their racial/ethnic and gender identities (Dittmar 2015; Gillespie 2012; Persons 1993; Smooth 2014; Terkildsen and Damore 1999), less attention has been

given to the various ways candidates present themselves at the intersection of their social and political identities. I argue that examining the candidacy of Mia Love – a conservative woman of color in a majority-white, Republican district – works to unveil the intricate ways identity functions within Republican Party politics, including the way women and minority candidates preserve or challenge existing party culture. In doing so, this analysis also contributes to recent empirical work on the electoral obstacles and opportunities for Republican women candidates (Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018; Och and Shames 2018; Thomsen 2017), as well as an understanding of the role of racial/ethnic identity in conservative women’s representation (Celis and Childs 2012, 2018).

### **Mia Love and Utah’s 4th congressional district**

Ludmya “Mia” Bourdeau was born in Brooklyn, New York to parents who immigrated to the United States from war-torn Haiti in the early 1970s on tourist visas. Under immigration law that expired in 1977, Western Hemisphere immigrants who gave birth to a child in the United States could be granted legal residency, and, as a result, a pathway to citizenship.<sup>6</sup> While it is unclear whether or not her parents’ tourist visas expired prior to Mia’s birth in 1975, she stated in a 2011 interview, “My parents have always told me I was a miracle and our family’s ticket to America.”<sup>7</sup>

Raised in Norwalk, Connecticut, Mia went to a Catholic elementary school before eventually enrolling in public school. It was during her senior year of college that she attended her first Mormon service with her older sister. Shortly after graduation, Mia was baptised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), officially converting from Catholicism. A flight attendant at the time, Mia decided to move to Utah with a friend of hers. Jason Love, a missionary Mia had met briefly in Connecticut, helped the women move into their studio apartment in West Jordan. Not long after, Jason took Mia to a shooting range for their first date,<sup>8</sup> and within months, the two were married. They now have three children together.

Jason Love, a white man born in Idaho, had been involved with the LDS Church and canvassed for Republican campaigns in Utah since he was a teenager. But it was Mia Love who ended up serving six years on the Saratoga Springs City Council after proactively dealing with a midge infestation in her neighborhood.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, Love ran for mayor of Saratoga Springs and, in 2010, became the first black female mayor in the state of Utah. By 2012, Love entered her first congressional race, running in Utah’s 4th congressional district.

Created in 2011 during the state’s redistricting process, Utah’s 4th congressional district encompasses portions of Salt Lake, Utah, Sanpete, and Juab counties. As a majority-white district, 86.8% of its residents identify as white and only 1.4% identify as black. While Salt Lake County has become more diverse and ideologically left-leaning in recent years,<sup>10</sup> a majority of residents in each county of the 4th district identify as Mormon, and religion continues to be an important aspect of the district’s electoral environment. Love’s general election Democratic opponents in both 2012 and 2014 were also members of the LDS Church.

While its voters are predominantly Republican,<sup>11</sup> the 4th district is Utah’s most competitive congressional district. As a result of redistricting, Utah’s 2nd congressional district, represented for over 10 years by moderate Democrat Jim Matheson, had become a

conservative stronghold. In 2012, Matheson decided instead to seek re-election in the 4th district, running against Mia Love in the general election. The Cook Political Report that year rated the 4th district “Lean Republican”<sup>12</sup> and Love, a viable Republican nominee, received significant campaign support from party elites. In August of 2012, she was invited to speak at the Republican National Convention, in what appeared to be an effort to symbolically showcase gender and racial diversity within the Republican Party (Fauntroy 2007; Fraga and Leal 2004; Freeman 1997; Och 2018; Philpot 2007; Sanbonmatsu 2004).

Following the convention, Love has deemed a rising star in Republican Party politics.<sup>13</sup> She was a conservative, black Republican woman endorsed by party leaders like Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan, as well as Tea Party organizations like FreedomWorks and Tea Party Express (Miller, Walling, and Smentkowski 2012). In the end, Love lost to six-term incumbent Jim Matheson by a mere 768 votes, making Utah’s 4th congressional district one of the most Republican districts in the country represented by a Democrat. When Matheson announced the following year that he would not seek re-election in the 2014 midterms, Love quickly became the frontrunner.

That Love could become the first black Republican congresswoman in history was emphasized regularly throughout media outlets in both 2012 and 2014 (Ward 2016). And while it may have helped her gain national party support, attention to her race and gender was also something she attempted to downplay. After defeating her moderate Democratic opponent, Doug Owens, by a margin of 5.5%, Love said in a 2014 post-election interview, “This had nothing to do with race ... Utahns are not interested in dividing Americans based on race or gender.”<sup>14</sup> This tension between needing to emphasize her racial and gender identities while at the same time rejecting identity politics demonstrates the complexity of Republican Party politics. As the first conservative woman of color to successfully navigate this tension at the congressional level,<sup>15</sup> analyzing Love’s 2014 campaign can serve to untangle the more intricate aspects of identity politics in the Republican Party.

### **Centering conservative women of color: an intersectional approach**

Wendy Smooth (2006) argues for the incorporation of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1990) into studies of electoral politics, calling it “a mess worth making” (403). Indeed, understanding candidate experiences at the intersection of race and gender can help to answer questions about who gets elected and represented in the American political system. For example, while women of color tend to be at a disadvantage in terms of receiving positive media coverage (Gershon 2012 ; Niven 2004; Ward 2016), they may also benefit from their intersecting identities by acquiring campaign resources both from groups that seek to elect racial/ethnic minorities as well as those that seek to elect women (Bejarano 2013; Smooth 2006). And while still far from parity, the election of women of color continues to be a driving force behind the increasing descriptive representation of women and people of color as a whole (Carew 2016; Hardy-Fanta et al. 2006).

Take Democratic Representative Gwen Moore’s successful bid to become the first African-American woman and first African-American from Wisconsin elected to Congress. Smooth (2006) argues that

Moore embraced the fullness of her identity and employed an intersectional framework in which she drew upon race-based resources and women-based resources. Had she run as the “black candidate” only or the “woman candidate” only, she would not have capitalized on the crossover appeal needed to secure the vote in her majority white district. (411)

Importantly, though, given the dearth of Republican women of color in elective office,<sup>16</sup> studies of black female candidates most often focus on the experiences of Democrats (Clayton and Stallings 2000; Darcy and Hadley 1988; Dowe 2016; Philpot and Walton 2007). As a conservative Republican running in a majority-white district, the way Mia Love employs her racial and gender identities must be understood at the intersection of her ideology and in the context of her partisanship.

Scholarship on black Republicans and Republican women has highlighted some of the additional electoral obstacles present in Republican Party politics. When running in majority-white districts, both Democratic and Republican black candidates have typically deemphasized their racial identity so as not to alienate white voters (Gillespie 2012; McCormick and Jones 1993; Persons 1993; Smooth 2014; Terkildsen and Damore 1999). Yet as partisan affiliation becomes increasingly linked to race and racial views (Mason and Wronski 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018), deracialized campaigns may not be as electorally beneficial for black Democratic candidates as they once were (Stout 2015). The same cannot be said for black Republican candidates, who must work to win conservative, white voters. In his historical analysis of African-Americans in the Republican Party, Corey Fields (2016) also finds that “African American Republicans who invoke the color-blind strategy are better able to capitalize on the political and discursive opportunities surrounding blackness within the GOP” (219). As such, while many black Republicans prior to the 1980s vocally critiqued their party’s positions on civil rights (Rigueur 2015), modern black conservatives often contribute to the narratives of racial uplift, color-blindness, and respectability politics that are championed by the Republican Party (Dawson 2001; Fields 2016; Greer 2013).

The link between gender stereotypes and party politics also plays a role in how Republican *women* campaign for political office. Women candidates of both parties are generally stereotyped as being more liberal than their male counterparts, less competent on issues related to the military and national defense, and more capable of handling issues like healthcare and education (Dolan 2010; Huddy and Terklidsen 1993; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009). Voters also perceive women to be more feminine and prefer them to act as such (Carroll 2009). This becomes particularly challenging for Republican women, whose party is viewed by voters as more competent on “masculine” issues like national security and crime (Huddy and Terklidsen 1993; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Winter 2010). The disconnect between what voters expect of women candidates and what they expect of Republican candidates makes it difficult for Republican women to win elections – and, in particular, to convince primary voters that they are conservative enough (Dittmar 2013; King and Matland 2003; Schneider and Bos 2016).

Signaling ideological credentials may also be more important for Republican women candidates than for Democratic women. Republican party culture – and, specifically, the rejection of group identity politics – gives Republican women access to fewer identity-based resources (Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018; Kitchens and Swers 2016). While liberal women’s organizations like EMILY’s List help to fund Democratic women candidates, Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman (2018) find that Republican women’s

organizations are largely ineffective, in part due to the fact that party donors care more about conservative ideology than gender. Thus, similar to the deracialization strategies of black Republican candidates, many successful Republican women have worked to “degender” their campaigns, focusing less on “women’s issues” and steering clear of references to their families (Dittmar 2015; Schreiber 2012).

This electoral terrain has implications for which kinds of women are represented in American politics. While Republican women tend to be more moderate, on average, than Republican men, many moderate Republican women choose not to run for Congress as a result of these ideological barriers (Thomsen 2015, 2017). One consequence is that the Republican women elected to Congress are increasingly conservative and have become “ideologically indistinguishable” from their Republican male counterparts (Frederick 2009). Recent scholarship shows that conservative women legislators represent women at the intersection of their gender and ideology – from the way they work together as women in legislative caucuses (Mahoney 2018; Wineinger 2018) to the way they speak on behalf of women (Celis and Childs 2012, 2018).

Indeed, as Nadia Brown (2014) emphasizes, “it is important to recognize that intersectionality is not only a recognition of the confluences of Blackness and femaleness but also other categories of identity and experience” (24). Yet just as studies of black women tend to exclude conservatives, studies of conservative women tend to exclude racial minorities. Examining the intricate ways in which Love presents herself as a black woman at the intersection of her political identities thus serves to expand our understanding of the experiences of women of color in electoral politics across the ideological spectrum.

### **Raced-gendered institutions**

Importantly, at the heart of intersectionality studies lies an analysis of *power* (Tomlinson 2013; Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin 2013). That is, race and gender are not simply categories of identity; they also function as “processes” (Beckwith 2005) that shape and are shaped by political institutions. Understanding the raced-gendered (Hawkesworth 2003; Hancock 2009) institutions in which candidates like Mia Love are working allows us to analyze how the strategic employment of race and gender both shape and are shaped by existing power structures.

Mary Hawkesworth (2003) describes raced-gendered institutions as those in which “race-specific constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in the daily culture of the institution” (537). The Republican Party functions as one such institution, as its ideological emphasis on family values and traditional gender roles (Barnes and Cassese 2017; Freeman 1986; Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Wineinger 2018), among other beliefs, prioritizes definitions of family and womanhood that are rooted in whiteness (Alphonso 2018). In her analysis of the historical development of American political parties, Gwendoline Alphonso (2018) argues that conservative visions of “family values and practices were long those of white middle America” (147). Central to this construction of white conservative womanhood is the ability to be both a good wife and a good mother – or, rather, a good “mama grizzly,” who viciously protects her cubs from government intrusion (Beail and Longworth 2013; Deckman 2016; Dittmar 2015; Schreiber 2016; Sparks 2015). How, then, does Love navigate Republican Party culture as a black

woman in a majority-white district? Is she able to express “mama grizzly” anger in the same way that white female conservatives can?

Additionally, given Love’s religious identity and the demographics of her district, the centrality of whiteness and the specific constructions of womanhood within the LDS Church are important contextual factors to consider. The complex racial history of the LDS Church, in which Church leaders implemented and enforced various racist policies well into the twentieth century, has made the topic of race a sensitive one among Mormons (Mueller 2016). As Reeve (2015) describes, Mormons faced discrimination in the United States similar to that of racial minority groups, and while this has made many Mormons sensitive to issues of racial discrimination, the Church also worked to emphasize its whiteness as a result. Today, 86% of Mormons are white, and only about 3% are black.<sup>17</sup> And like many Christian religions, traditional gender roles are also valued in the LDS Church. In a statement titled, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” the Church described its official stance on family values, writing, “Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan,” and, “Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.”<sup>18</sup>

As feminist scholars have emphasized, race and gender are not stagnant, but rather, are socially constructed identities that are both malleable and performative (Giddens 1984; Butler 1990). Like gender, “whiteness is not only limited to bodies and skin color, but also to ideas, knowledge production, values, and beliefs that are held as the norm” (Smith 2004, 151). Analyzing the way Love employs her racial and gender identities contributes to studies of intersectionality by complicating what it means to be a black woman within specific raced-gendered institutions. Importantly, as Alexander-Floyd (2008) argues, while black women with political power challenge the status quo through their very identity, they do not necessarily “displace the dominant power structure,” and in fact, can work to uphold it. This paper, then, also seeks to reveal how Love, as a conservative black woman, contests or preserves the norms of these raced-gendered institutions as she runs for political office.

## Data and methods

This case study examines Love’s online campaign output from 18 May 2013 (the day she announced her candidacy) through 4 November 2014 (Election Day). Specifically, I analyze her YouTube videos, online advertisements, website, and Facebook and Twitter feeds. Because I am focused on candidate self-presentation, I collected all online content promoted by the campaign, including retweets and highlighted media. Highlighted media includes any article or video that was not originally produced by the campaign, but which was linked to on her website or social media accounts. A total of 1121 individual posts/videos were collected.

I then watched each video and read each social media post and web page in order to code for the use of racial or gender identity claims. An identity claim was considered to be made when Love’s racial<sup>19</sup> and/or gender identity was referenced in the post or highlighted media. Table 1 shows the percentages of posts containing racial and/or gender identity claims on each platform. Notably, 14.5% of all of Mia Love’s online content contained some reference to her race or gender.

**Table 1.** Percentages of posts with racial/gender identity claims by platform.

Platform	Total posts	Posts with racial/gender identity claims	Percentage
Twitter	536	75	14.0
Facebook	457	51	11.2
Website	106	30	28.3
Advertisements	14	5	35.7
YouTube videos	6	2	25.0
Total	1121	163	14.5

Using a general inductive approach (Thomas 2006), I re-read/watched each post containing identity claims to identify and code for (1) the specific identity referenced in the claim, (2) the focus of the claim, and (3) the source of the claim. I identified three categories under the umbrella of gender claims: woman, mother, and wife; and two categories under the umbrella of racial claims: black American (including “African-American”) and second-generation immigrant. To code for focus, I categorized the claims as making either a “direct reference,” “value reference,” or “indirect reference” to Love’s racial/gender identities (see Appendix). A direct reference explicitly discusses race/gender as the main focus of the post. A value reference briefly mentions race/gender but places political or policy value in that identity. For example, when Love says, “As a mother with three children enrolled in public schools, education is extremely important to me,” she is both invoking her own identity as a mother and also placing policy value in that identity by claiming education is important to her. Finally, an indirect reference mentions Love’s family, uses a gendered/racial image,<sup>20</sup> or is simply a descriptor.

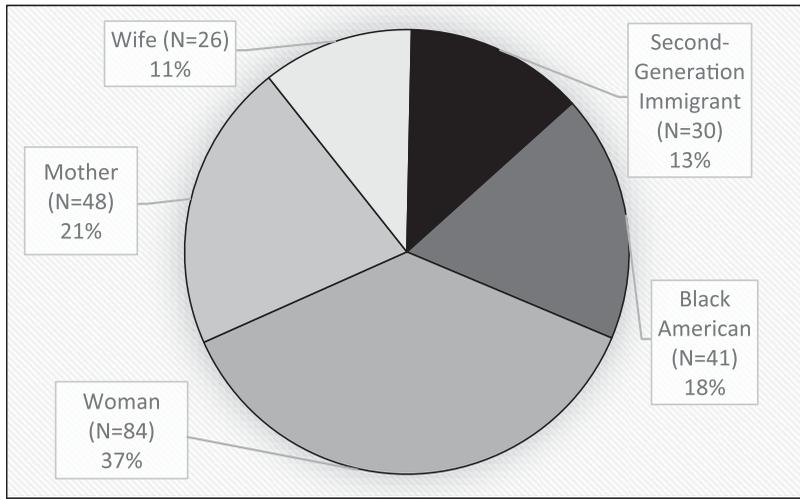
The source of each claim was coded as Love, media, or other.<sup>21</sup> If Love was directly quoted making an identity claim in a news article, Love, not the media, was coded as the source of that claim. If the same identity was discussed multiple times in the same post, I only coded that identity once unless the source of the claim was different. If, however, several different identities were discussed, the post was coded for each one of those identities. This brings the total number of individual racial/gender identity claims to 229.

## Findings

Figure 1 displays the breakdown of each racial and gender identity used in the Love campaign: woman, black American, mother, wife, and second-generation immigrant. Notably, gender identities (woman, mother, wife) were used more frequently than racial identities (black American, second-generation immigrant), indicating, perhaps, that Love was more comfortable referencing her gender than her race. In the following sections, I discuss the sources of these identity claims and provide more insight into how they were employed throughout the campaign.

### *Black American, woman*

An analysis of the sources of each claim reveals that the identity “black American” was present mainly in news articles highlighted by the campaign (see Figure 2). Specifically, 56% of these claims were made by media sources, compared to 34% made by the candidate herself. Most of the claims made by the media (61%) were indirect references, often used to describe Love as potentially the first black Republican congresswoman, with no further

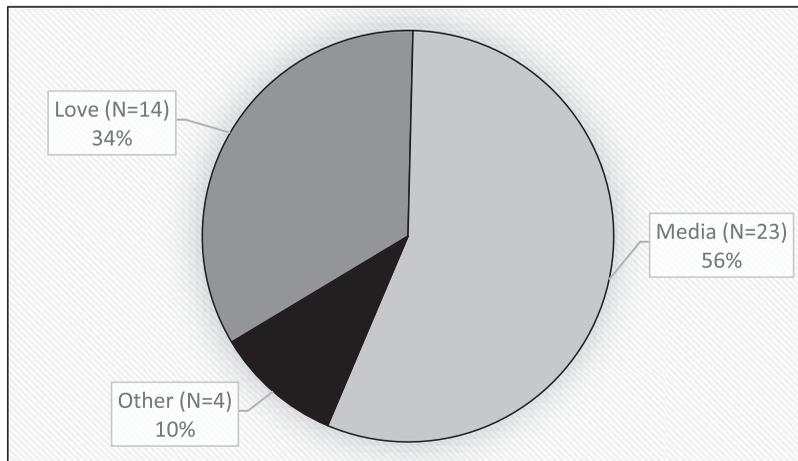


Total identity claims: 229

**Figure 1.** Percentages of racial and gender identity claims.

substantive discussion. Still, some articles went further, stating, for example, that Love would “be the first black female Republican in Congress and the first person of color to represent Utah – which makes her a standout hope for a party struggling to reach out to women.”<sup>22</sup> In a political environment in which GOP leadership is focused on voter outreach and diversifying Republican candidates, this type of reference signals to party leaders and activists that Love is a valuable candidate for the party as a whole.

When Love did describe herself as a black American, she often did so in a way that allowed her to respond to media attention to her race by emphasizing her conservative values. For instance, *Forbes* reported that Love had received sexist and racist letters calling her a “‘dirty, worthless whore’ who ‘sold out to big business’ and is exploited ‘like the House N – she truly is.’”<sup>23</sup> In the same article, Love assured readers that she



**Figure 2.** Sources of identity claim: black American.

was not bothered by these letters because “the issues facing America right now are colorblind.”<sup>24</sup> By arguing that her racial identity is irrelevant to her policy positions, even in the face of explicitly racist attacks, Love aligned herself with her party’s rhetorical and ideological rejection of group identity politics.

But Love also went beyond this colorblind narrative, at times even employing racial dog whistles that are commonly used by conservative politicians (Lopez 2015). On the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, for example, a Facebook post by Love read,

I do not believe Dr. King was asking for a handout ... He wanted us to be able to live and pursue our dreams free from government oppression. He wanted freedom, and I don’t believe he ever intended for any of us, whether black, white, or any other color or group, to receive special status in society.<sup>25</sup>

This rhetoric is comparable to that used by other prominent black conservatives, including Justice Clarence Thomas, who once stated that “Malcom X never said ‘black people should be begging to the Labor Department for jobs’” (Dillard 2001, 17). As Angela D. Dillard (2001) argues,

Implicitly recognizing that intellectual traditions are made, not found, and that they are the result of selective interpretation and, therefore, always open to re-invention, black conservatives and their fellow travelers have been steadily mustering arguments for their slice of a usable past. (17)

Indeed, by tying her racial identity to an interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement that distinguishes hardworking blacks from those who are asking for government handouts, Love preserves, rather than challenges, the racial politics of the GOP.

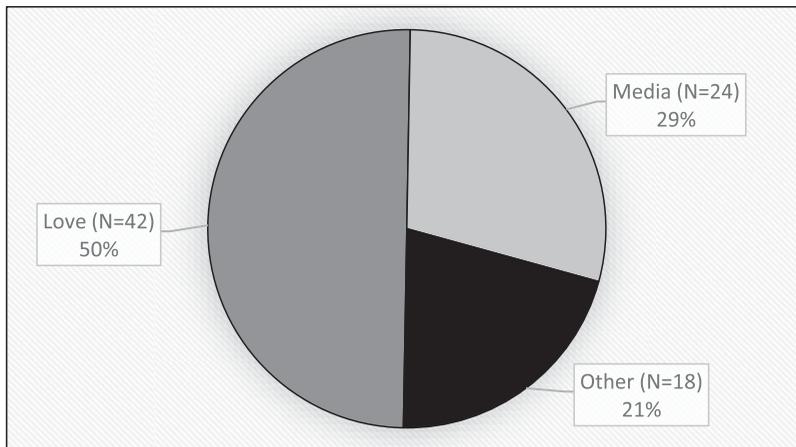
This decision to uphold conservative versions of historical racial narratives is just one way Love works to signal her conservative credentials through her racial identity. Indeed, in half (50%) of the claims Love made about being black, she explicitly mentioned the fact that she was either a conservative or a Republican. For example, in a *Cosmopolitan* article, Love said, “I’m going to let people out there know that we exist, and that ... there are conservative black Americans everywhere that believe in fiscal discipline, limited government, and personal responsibility.”<sup>26</sup> Likewise, when asked in a Roll Call interview in August 2014 if she would consider joining the Congressional Black Caucus, Love stated that she would, saying,

In order for you to affect change, you can’t do it from the outside-in; you have to do it from the inside-out ... We have the ability to be leaders in our community; we don’t have to be dependent on a federal government to do that.<sup>27</sup>

And so, while most of the claims describing Love as a black American were made by the media, Love demonstrated the ability to turn that media attention into an opportunity to credential herself as a true conservative.

Similar dynamics are seen in the presentation of Love’s identity as a woman. [Figure 3](#) shows the sources of “woman” identity claims. Love was just as likely to present her womanhood through highlighted media and other sources as she was to reference this identity herself. But understanding how this identity was framed can give us further insight into the way Love’s ideology intersects with her gender.

As with the identity “black American,” when Love referred to herself as a woman, she often attached conservative credentials to her womanhood. In 43% of Love’s “woman”



**Figure 3.** Sources of identity claim: woman.

claims, she overtly mentioned her ideological or partisan identities. On social media, for example, Love showed herself speaking at Republican women’s events, being endorsed by conservative women’s organizations, and advocating on behalf of conservative women.

Yet tension can also be seen in Love’s attempt to simultaneously reject identity politics and empower women. When asked in an MSNBC interview how being a woman has influenced her politics, Love responded,

My goal is to represent all Utah voters, regardless of gender. I think the serious issues we face are not gender-specific, but rather they impact both men and women ... However, sometimes women are only passively involved in politics. I encourage women everywhere to get involved so that their views will be reflected in the policies that are made.<sup>28</sup>

This tension highlights the complexity of identity politics within the Republican Party more generally. For instance, Love’s campaign shared a video produced by the RNC titled, “Women of the GOP.” In it, nine Republican women candidates, including Mia Love, are shown campaigning as a female narrator describes the Republican Party as “empowering,” “engaging,” and “motivating.” The video ends with the narrator saying, “This year, Republican women are taking back the future.”<sup>29</sup>

While the belief in the value of women’s distinct perspectives is common among congresswomen on both sides of the aisle (Dittmar, Sanbonmatsu, and Carroll 2018), working within an individualistic party culture makes this terrain particularly challenging for Republican women to navigate. As seen by the campaign’s use of identity claims, one way Love addressed this was by explicitly rejecting the concept of group identity politics while simultaneously employing her racial and gender identities in ways that displayed her conservative credentials. In the following section, I illustrate how Love continued to do this in even more nuanced ways at the intersection of her social and political identities.

### ***Mother, wife, second-generation immigrant***

While Love did talk about herself explicitly as a black woman, I find that she more often presented her gender and racial identities in subtler ways. At the intersection

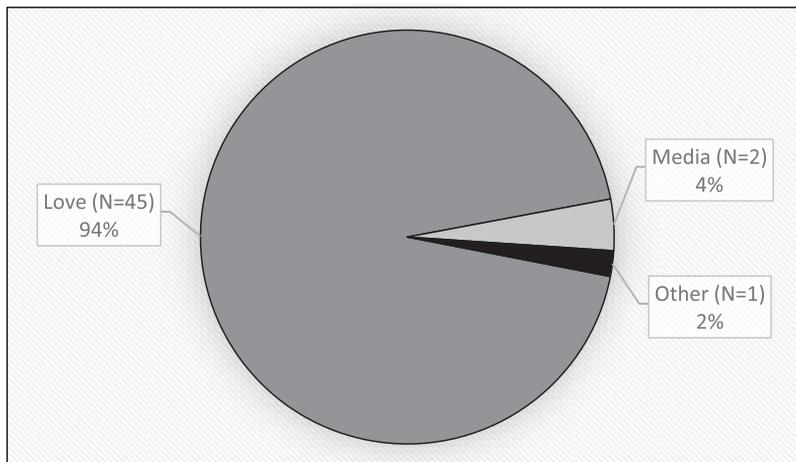
of her social and political identities, Love performed black womanhood in a way that preserves the existing racial/gender dynamics of the Republican Party and her majority-white, predominantly Mormon district. Figure 4 shows that when the campaign presented Love as a mother, it was most often Mia Love herself, not the media or other sources, who made those claims. Ninety-four percent of all “mother” claims made were made by Love. Likewise, Love made 96% of all claims that described her as a wife (see Figure 5).

In each section of her website, Love made some reference to herself as mother, to her children, or to the fact that she is married (to a white, heterosexual man). On social media, Love also frequently mentioned her family and her role as a mother. Facebook posts, for example, showed Love wearing an apron while making cherry jam<sup>30</sup> and bottling grape juice<sup>31</sup> at home with her children. “These are the most precious moments in life for me,” she wrote, “It helps to remember what we are all fighting for.”<sup>32</sup> This emphasis on motherhood exemplifies the way Love’s gender and ideological identities intersect to shape her self-presentation. As Ronnee Schreiber (2008) points out, many conservative women activists

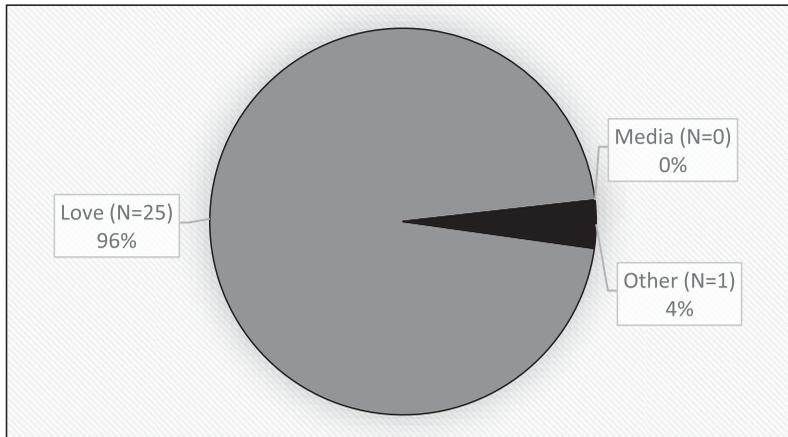
are mostly bound by gender-based visions of maintaining a culture premised on women’s social and biological differences from men. Appeals to maternalism are often featured, with women claiming legitimacy as actors through their status as mothers, or by arguing that feminism devalues women’s roles as primary caretakers. (17)

Indeed, Love used her motherhood to both credential herself as a conservative and legitimise her policy positions. In 2012, Democrats attacked Love’s proposal to eliminate the Department of Education. As such, Love’s 2014 campaign focused on clarifying her stance on education policy, using a motherhood narrative to legitimise her position. For instance, in an advertisement titled, “Education,” Love stated,

Utah parents, Utah teachers, can do a better job teaching Utah students than any political elite in Washington. *As a mother with three children in public school*, [emphasis added] I want to have the option to talk to my teachers and find out the best educational strategies.<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 4.** Sources of identity claim: mother.



**Figure 5.** Sources of identity claim: wife.

In discussing economic issues on her website, Love similarly emphasized the political competence of wives and mothers:

I agree with Margaret Thatcher’s assessment that “Any woman who understands the problems of running a home will be nearer to understanding the problems of running a country.” The wives and mothers I converse with at city events, school plays, church, and the grocery store have far more common sense than the political elites in Washington. With a struggling economy and more than \$17 trillion of national debt, we don’t have the luxury of kicking cans down the road anymore.<sup>34</sup>

Love’s use of motherhood rhetoric gives us insight into what it means to run a campaign as a black conservative woman. In Schreiber’s (2012) analysis of the websites of 2010 Tea Party women candidates, she finds that while 80% of the candidates mentioned that they had children, “only 26% of them articulated that being a mother matters in terms of their issue priorities or positions” (556). Importantly, most (76%) of these candidates were white women, suggesting, perhaps, that Love must work harder as a black woman to present herself as both a good mother and a qualified conservative candidate.

And yet, it is also important to note the way Love’s motherhood rhetoric differs from typical “Mama Grizzly” frames used by Tea Party women (Beail and Longworth 2013; Deckman 2016; Rosen 2012; Schreiber 2012, 2016; Sparks 2015). As Ruth Rosen (2012) notes, “[Sarah] Palin’s ‘Mama Grizzly’ is the perfect image of a furry but dangerous creature who will instinctively destroy anyone to protect her innocent cubs” (63). It is true that Love did, at times, invoke the anger (Rosen 2012; Sparks 2015) that is central to Mama Grizzly rhetoric. For example, in an interview with Fox News’s Sean Hannity, Love discussed her daughter’s dismal future resulting from government overreach:

My 12-year-old, by the time she goes to school, because of government takeover of health-care, government takeover of education, she will find herself looking at \$150,000 of tuition ... How is she – by the time she gets her portion of the debt and her tuition – how is she supposed to make a difference?<sup>35</sup>

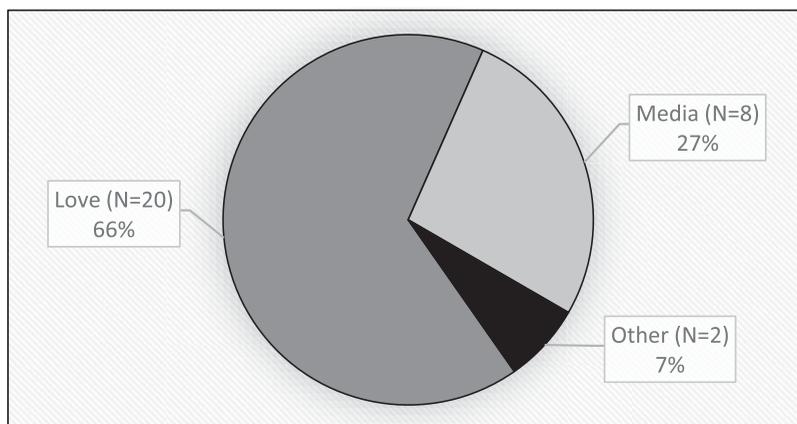
But, overall, the motherhood performed by Love was not one rooted in “mothers’ primitive tendencies to protect their young by any means necessary” (Dittmar 2015, 119).

Rather, consistent with Sparks's (2015) observation, Love most often presented herself simply as a "dedicated mother" and "devoted wife" (45). As Sparks suggests, these "maternalist and heteronormative subject positions do not provide much of a platform for public anger by women of color" (Sparks 2015, 45).

These findings demonstrate one of the electoral challenges Love faces as a conservative, black Republican woman. Like most Republican women, Love must work to overcome gender stereotypes and prove her conservatism to Republican voters. Yet like black women across the political spectrum, Love must also work to avoid a racialized "angry black woman" stereotype (Block and Haynes 2017; Brown 2014; Jordan-Zachery 2008). Love successfully navigated this tension by showing how her roles as a wife and mother inform her conservative policy positions. In doing so, she is able to demonstrate her ideological credentials while conforming to raced-gendered expectations of women in the LDS Church and Republican Party.

Much like that of her gender identity, Love's presentation of her racial identity also functions at the intersection of her ideology and within the context of Republican Party politics. Unlike the identity "black American," Love described herself as the daughter of Haitian immigrants more often than did the media or other sources. Figure 6 shows that 66% of all "second-generation immigrant" claims were made directly by the candidate. Given that Love would potentially be the first Haitian-American elected to Congress, it is significant that Love chose to shape her own immigrant narrative during the campaign, rather than allow other sources to control it.

Conservative constructions of American exceptionalism are rooted in the idea that all immigrants can prosper economically through dedication, hard work, and individual perseverance (Edwards 2011, 46). Indeed, when former congressman and Tea Party sensation, Allen West, endorsed Love as a Guardian Fund<sup>36</sup> candidate, he said, "The daughter of Haitian immigrants, Mia knows what it takes to work hard and make ends meet – and she's living proof the American Dream still exists."<sup>37</sup> Working within this framework, Love frequently used her parents' immigration story to highlight the concept of American exceptionalism: "As a person whose parents immigrated to America from a



**Figure 6.** Sources of identity claim: second-generation immigrant.

country of dictators,” Love wrote on her website, “I cannot express enough my appreciation for having been born and raised in a nation of freedom and liberty.”<sup>38</sup>

Similar stories were used when speaking on the issue of immigration. In her final general election debate, Love spoke in detail about her policy stance:

I want everyone to know that I’m committed to legal immigration. I’m the daughter of parents who immigrated to this country – as a matter of fact, my father said that his proudest moment was when he became a US citizen. He learned how to speak English, he studied American history and the American Constitution, and he said that ... when he pledges allegiance to the American flag, not only did he know exactly what he was saying; he meant every word of it.<sup>39</sup>

Love went on to say that the United States must secure the border, track people who leave the country, and create a uniform rule of naturalization.<sup>40</sup> This particular presentation of her racial identity puts Love in the company of other prominent Republican politicians with immigrant backgrounds, like Nikki Haley, Bobby Jindal (Tsukerman 2015), and Marco Rubio (Edwards 2011). Embracing an immigrant uplift narrative allows Love and other minority Republicans to shine light on their racial/ethnic identities while distinguishing themselves from other black Americans (Greer 2013; Rogers 2006; Waters 1999) and conforming to the policies or values of the party.

## Discussion

Previous research has shown that deracialization and degendering campaign tactics are used regularly by women and minority candidates in majority-white districts. Yet by focusing specifically on identity claims, this case study reveals the more intricate ways in which political identities like ideology and partisanship intersect with race and gender in the context of electoral politics. Running for office at a time when the GOP is struggling to reach out to women and minorities, Love was challenged with navigating an environment in which party leaders embraced her racial and gender identities as assets to the party while simultaneously denouncing “identity politics.” I argue that Love was able to negotiate this tension by employing her intersectional identities in various ways throughout her campaign.

While the media often focused on Love’s identity as a black woman, my findings indicate that Love used that attention to explicitly tout her ideological credentials as a black *conservative* or a *conservative* woman. Additionally, in presenting herself as a loving mother, devoted wife, and daughter of model immigrants, Love constructed her black womanhood in ways that intersected with her conservative ideology and preserved the raced-gendered cultural norms of her party and her district.

Understanding Love’s self-presentation on the campaign trail has several implications. First, it helps to illuminate the complexity and significance of social identities in the context of Republican Party politics. As Mason and Wronski (2018) have found, white and Christian identities are strongly associated with Republican partisanship. The authors suggest that Republican elites “could relatively easily remind voters of their White and Christian identities to enhance partisan identity strength” (274). Indeed, I show that Mia Love moved beyond decracialization strategies to actively align herself with white, Christian constructions of family, motherhood, and citizenship. Love’s decision to accentuate her conservatism when discussing her race and gender also demonstrates her

ability to successfully navigate the Republican Party culture. Throughout her campaign, Love simultaneously denied the significance of identity and also worked in myriad ways at the intersection of her social and political identities to distinguish herself from liberal black women and adhere to the cultural norms of her party's white, Christian base. More generally, these findings highlight the fact that political candidates must work within the context of various raced-gendered institutions – including political parties – and their campaigns can uphold and/or contest the cultural norms of those institutions.

Second, this study contributes to current discussions regarding the political representation of Republican women. The partisan discrepancy in the number of women elected to Congress has continued to widen following the 2018 midterm elections: in the 116th House of Representatives (2019–2020), Democratic women make up 38% of their caucus, while Republican women comprise only 6.5% of their conference.<sup>41</sup> And while Republican elites have attempted to promote the candidacies of Republican women, structural and ideological barriers to office (Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018; Thomsen 2015) have resulted in fewer and increasingly conservative Republican women elected to Congress (Frederick 2009; Thomsen 2017). Mia Love's self-presentation on the campaign trail supports existing literature by demonstrating the importance of signaling conservative credentials as a female Republican candidate (Dittmar 2013). That Love presented her black womanhood in ways that underscored her conservatism shows that, despite challenging Republican norms through her social identities, she has also upheld the ideological obstacles that prevent more moderate Republican women from running for office (Thomsen 2015).

Finally, Love's campaign illustrates how racial/ethnic identity can complicate our understandings of the way conservative women both navigate campaigns and make political claims (Celis and Childs 2012; 2018). Love's use of motherhood rhetoric, for example, deviates from that of white Tea Party women in that she highlights her role as a nurturing mother while stopping short of invoking the anger that is central to "Mama Grizzly" rhetoric, thus avoiding an "angry black woman" stereotype. Love's identities as a black woman and second-generation immigrant also served to distinguish her from other black Americans and to legitimise her conservative stances on topics like immigration and American exceptionalism.

Importantly, though, these identities may also present future electoral challenges for conservative women of color like Love. Despite being deemed a rising star in Republican Party politics, Mia Love lost her election in 2018 after having served only two terms in Congress. My analysis of her 2014 campaign illustrates how Love worked at the intersection of her political and social identities in ways that both explicitly and implicitly aligned her with the raced-gendered cultural norms of the party. Yet as President Trump continued to engage in overtly racist and sexist behaviour following his election in 2016, Love was tasked with simultaneously supporting her party's policies and denouncing presidential rhetoric that was at odds with the social norms of her district.<sup>42</sup> And while this was true for Republican candidates across the country, Love's racial/ethnic identity presented additional pressure, forcing her, for example, to respond directly and personally to Trump's remarks that immigrants from El Salvador, Haiti, and African nations were coming to the United States from "shithole countries."<sup>43</sup> In an official statement, Love demanded an apology from the president while continuing to stress conservative constructions of citizenship and the American Dream:

This behavior is unacceptable from the leader of our nation. My parents came from one of those countries but proudly took an oath of allegiance to the United States and took on the responsibilities of everything that being a citizen comes with. They never took a thing from our federal government. They worked hard, paid taxes, and rose from nothing to take care of and provide opportunities for their children.<sup>44</sup>

Love's struggle to defend her conservative credentials as a black woman could also be seen throughout her concession speech in November 2018. In it, she criticized President Trump's rhetoric, distancing herself from overt racism and sexism while framing herself as a caring mother and highlighting the "family values" narrative central to the conservative politics in her predominantly Mormon district. She went on to say,

I am always asked: How can you be a black member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a Republican, and a woman in the state of Utah? I would always proudly say, "Follow the sun." It is a warm, compassionate place. Utah is a place where the sun is always rising, where families look out for each other.<sup>45</sup>

Overall, Mia Love's case highlights the complexity of identity politics on the Right. By focusing on the campaign of a conservative woman of color, I unveil identity-based tensions within the Republican Party and demonstrate how specific constructions of race and gender are central to its politics. Scholars should thus continue to take seriously the role of social identities in partisan politics, and in particular, delve deeper into the ways party culture affects the political representation of women and minorities on both sides of the aisle.

## Notes

1. Love, Mia. 21 Apr 2014. "Why I'm a Republican." Love for Utah.
2. Representative Jaime Herrera Beutler (R-WA) is Latina and the only Republican woman of color in Congress at the time of this writing. This number does not include the two Latina delegates, Jenniffer Gonzalez (R-PR) and Amata Radewagen (R-AS).
3. "Women Serving in the 116th Congress 2019-21." The Center for American Women and Politics, The Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. <<http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/list-women-currently-serving-congress>>; "Women of Color in Elective Office 2019." The Center for American Women and Politics, The Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. <<http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-color-elective-office-2019>>.
4. "The Gender Gap: Voting in Presidential Elections." The Center for American Women and Politics, The Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. <<http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/ggpresvote.pdf>>.
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6. "22.1 Prior Law and Historical Background." U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. <<https://www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/AFM/HTML/AFM/0-0-0-1/0-0-0-6330/0-0-0-6339.html>>.
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10. Cohen, Micah. 9 July 2012. "Utah: Very Republican but Not Quite as Conservative as It Appears." *FiveThirtyEight*. *The New York Times*. <<https://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/09/utah-very-republican-but-not-as-conservative-as-it-appears/>>.

11. The Cook Political Report rated the district “Lean Republican” in 2012, “Likely Republican” in 2014, and “Lean Republican” in 2016. In 2018, it was labeled a toss-up. The 2013 Cook Partisan Voter Index (PVI) for the 4th district was R+16, meaning its results in the previous two presidential elections were 16 percentage points more Republican than the national average. The 2013 PVI for the state of Utah was R+22.
12. “2012 House Ratings.” 5 Nov 2012. The Cook Political Report. <<https://www.cookpolitical.com/ratings/house-race-ratings/139119>>.
13. Wyler, Grace. 29 Aug 2012. “Everyone is Talking About Mia Love, the Real Breakout Star from Last Night’s GOP Convention.” Business Insider. <<https://www.businessinsider.com/mia-love-rnc-republican-utah-convention-speech-video-2012-8>>.
14. Schwartz, Ian. 5 Nov 2014. “Mia Love vs. CNN Host on Her Victory: ‘This Has Nothing Do With Race.’” *Real Clear Politics*.
15. Unlike other Republican congresswomen of color, like Jaime Herrera Beutler and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Mia Love is an ideological conservative (the American Conservative Union gives Herrera Beutler and Ros-Lehtinen a lifetime conservative rating of 64.00 and 67.40, respectively. Mia Love has a 94.00 ACU rating. While other women of color espousing the Tea Party label, like South Carolina governor Nikki Haley and former Florida lieutenant governor Jennifer Carroll, have run as statewide candidates with large and diverse constituencies, Love’s case is particularly significant because she is the first black Republican woman to win a congressional campaign in a Republican, majority-white district.
16. “Women of Color in Elective Office 2018.” Center for American Women and Politics. Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University. <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-color-elective-office-2018>.
17. “A Portrait of Mormons in the U.S.” 2009. Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life.
18. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” 1995. The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
19. I use the term “racial” to describe references to Love’s identity as a black American (including the term “African-American”) as well as references to her ethnic identity and immigrant background.
20. A gendered/racial image was coded as such when the picture portrayed Love in ways that explicitly drew attention to her racial or gender identity. For example, pictures of Love with her children, with her husband, at a women’s event, or standing next to a quote about the “American Dream.”
21. The “other” category was made up mainly of retweets of individual followers on Twitter, but also included the claims of people or organizations that endorsed Love.
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29. “Women of the GOP.” 8 Oct 2014. YouTube video. Republican National Committee.
30. Love, Mia. 14 Jul 2013. Facebook.
31. Love, Mia. 23 Sept 2013. Facebook.
32. Love, Mia. 23 Sept 2013. Facebook.
33. Love, Mia. 23 April 2014. “Mia Love – Education.” YouTube.
34. Love, Mia. 4 Nov 2013. “My Everyday Inspiration: Women.” Love for Utah.
35. “Love Discusses Obamacare and Education on Hannity.” 7 Oct 2013. Good 4 Utah.
36. The Guardian Fund was established in 2012 by former Florida congressman Allen West to help elect conservative veteran and minority candidates.
37. Derby, Kevin. 22 Oct 2013. “Allen West Goes to Bat for Mia Love.” Sunshine State News.

38. Love, Mia. 24 Sept 2014. "Gratitude for the Constitution." Love for Utah.s
39. KUED. 14 Oct 2014. *Utah 4TH Congressional District Debate 2014*. YouTube.
40. KUED. 14 Oct 2014. *Utah 4TH Congressional District Debate 2014*. YouTube.
41. "Results: Women Candidates in the 2018 Elections." The Center for American Women and Politics, The Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.
42. Largely due to disapproval from the predominantly Mormon population, Donald Trump won Love's district in 2016 with only 37% of the vote.
43. Love, Mia. 2018 Jan 11. "Here is my statement on the President's comments today." *Twitter*.
44. Love, Mia. 2018 Jan 11. "Here is my statement on the President's comments today." *Twitter*.
45. Ember, Sydney. 2018 Nov 26. "Mia Love Criticizes Trump in Scathing Concession Speech." *The New York Times*.

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## Appendix. Coding for focus

### Social Media

**1 = Direct reference:** focus of post; explicitly references race/gender

**2 = Value reference:** endorsed by a gender/race-specific organization or attends a gender/race-specific event; or briefly mentions race/gender and places political value in that identity

**3 = Indirect reference:** talks about Love's children, husband, or immigrant family; gendered or racial picture

### Articles/Web Pages

**1 = Direct reference:** the focus of article; race/gender is referenced in the headline

**2 = Value reference:** endorsed by a gender/race-specific organization or attends a gender/race-specific event; or briefly mentions race/gender and places political value in that identity

**3 = Indirect reference:** talks about Love's children, husband, or immigrant family; race/gender is only used as a descriptor

### Videos

**1 = Direct reference:** the focus of video; race/gender is referenced in the title

**2 = Value reference:** endorsed by a gender/race-specific organization or attends a gender/race-specific event; or briefly mentions race/gender and places political value in that identity

**3 = Indirect reference:** talks about Love's children, husband, or immigrant family; gendered or racial images