



THE HIGHLAND PROJECT

The Fulfillment Gap:

WHAT BLACK WOMEN VOTERS ARE BUILDING—
AND WHERE INVESTMENT STILL FALLS SHORT

Black women know what a good life requires. They are investing in it, building it with their families and communities, and using their civic power to protect the possibility of it.

The Highland Project's sixth annual national poll of Black women voters in partnership with brilliant corners Research and Strategies asks: **Is the country investing in their vision?**

The answer is overwhelmingly no.

2026 ANNUAL NATIONAL POLL OF BLACK WOMEN VOTERS

A Collaboration between The Highland Project and brilliant corners Research and Strategies

WHAT'S NEW IN THE ANNUAL NATIONAL POLL OF BLACK WOMEN VOTERS

Our annual national poll features:

Burdened Subgroup Analysis – This analysis looks more closely at respondents who say they often or very often experience racism or sexism, or feel they have to tone themselves down for others' comfort (e.g., code switching). It helps us understand how these added burdens shape their experiences, priorities, and outlook.

Fulfillment Gap Analysis – Every respondent rated the same set of needs twice: first, based on how important each need is to them and their communities; and second, based on how well they believe leaders and institutions are delivering on that need. The difference between those two ratings is the fulfillment gap. It shows us where people feel their most important needs are being met—and where the greatest gaps remain.

Importantly, the fulfillment gap is not a measure of partisan approval or disapproval. It is a measure of how well respondents believe the broader system is delivering on the priorities that matter most to them.

METHODOLOGY

These findings are from a proprietary survey conducted by brilliant corners Research & Strategies on behalf of The Highland Project. This is a survey of 700 African American women who are registered to vote. The survey was conducted by phone using professional interviewers starting on August 30, 2026 and ending on September 10, 2026.

The survey's sample was drawn randomly from the voter file and geographically stratified for proportional representation. The data was weighted slightly to adhere to population demographics of voters in the voter file. The margin of error overall is +/- 3.7 percent, with a 95 percent confidence interval. Notably, the margin of error for sub-groups will be higher depending on the size of the sub-group sample and the size of the actual response to any given question.





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Black women are clear about the lives they want – lives shaped by joy, dignity, safety, economic security, belonging, and the freedom to be fully themselves.

What makes a joyful life? We asked Black women to rate the people, conditions, and experiences that matter most to their own definition of joy.

COMPONENTS OF JOY

94%	Mental Health	81%	Close Friends
92%	Financial Security	81%	Hobbies
91%	Loving Family	80%	Travel
89%	Healthy Eating	80%	Homeownership
87%	Rewarding Job	78%	Being Charitable

Components of Joy: Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 0 to 10 the importance of each item when it comes to defining a joyful life. The percentages reflect the number who rated each component an 8 out of 10 or higher.

Black women are telling us what a good life looks like. They are far less confident that America is moving toward it.

51%

ARE PESSIMISTIC ABOUT THE COUNTRY'S FUTURE

92%

ARE DISSATISFIED WITH THE DIRECTION OF THE COUNTRY

88%

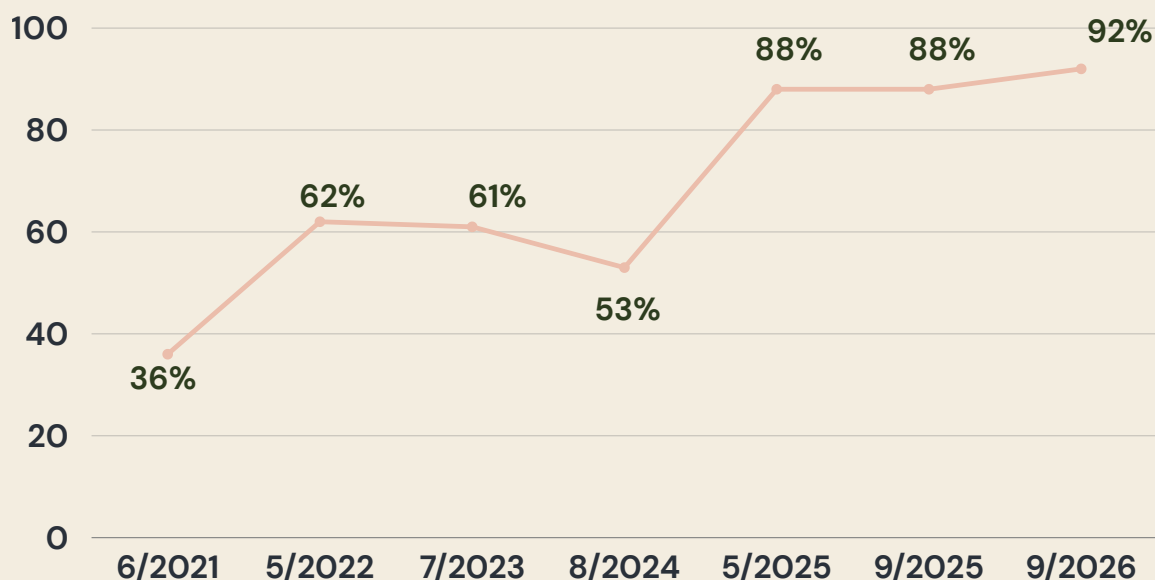
SAY THE ECONOMY IS GETTING WORSE

95%

ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE IMPACT OF CHANGES TO VOTING RIGHTS ON BLACK COMMUNITIES

The life Black women want and the country they see are moving further apart.

DISSATISFACTION WITH THE DIRECTION OF THE COUNTRY



Our polling shows a sustained deterioration in how Black women feel about the direction of the country.





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Deep concern is not translating into withdrawal. It is translating into urgency.

77%

Are very motivated to vote in the upcoming 2026 midterms

Even amid historic dissatisfaction, Black women remain highly motivated to participate, with a strong turnout anticipated for a midterm election. Their motivation reflects a strong sense of protecting what is at stake—for their families, their communities, and the future they are trying to build.

61%

SAY THE 2026 MIDTERMS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN PREVIOUS

87%

SAY CHANGES TO VOTING RIGHTS PROTECTIONS MAKE THEM MORE MOTIVATED TO VOTE



High motivation should not be confused with high satisfaction.

WHY THE 2026 MIDTERMS ARE IMPORTANT

Dissatisfaction with country's leadership

The country is heading in the wrong direction

Need for change

Cost of living and affordability

Need for checks and balances

When asked why the 2026 midterms are more important, the need for change, dissatisfaction with the country's current leadership, the poor economy and high cost of living, and the need for checks and balances were the most frequent responses. .

Coded open-ended questions among those who say 2026 midterms are more important than usual.

What's underneath the urgency and high motivation to vote?

The economy is a major source of urgency for Black women voters—but so are questions of dignity, protection, voice, and whether they can fully belong.

The economy is creating real strain—and Black women overwhelmingly feel left behind.

88%

FEEL THE ECONOMY IS GETTING WORSE

58%

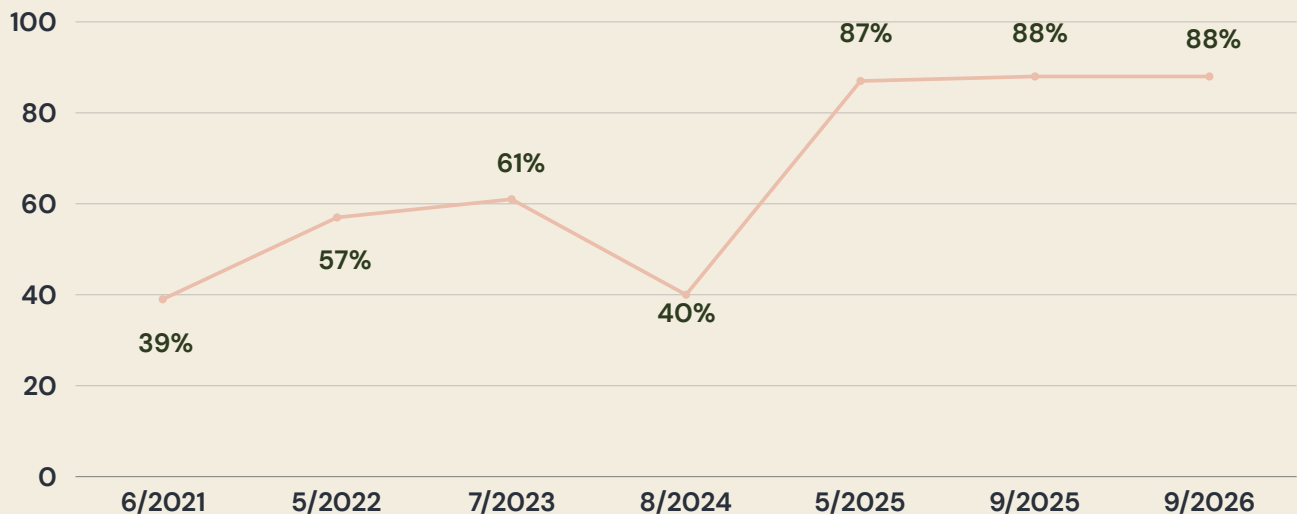
SAY THEIR WAGES AND SALARY ARE FALLING BEHIND THE COST OF LIVING

21%

IMPACTED BY FEDERAL LAYOFFS

Pessimism about the direction of the economy remains extremely high.

BLACK WOMEN VOTERS SAY ECONOMIC CONDITIONS ARE WORSENING



The economic realities are deeply felt by Black women voters—and are clearly part of what is driving their urgency. **But the economy is not the whole story.**





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Politics is not abstract
for Black women. It is
showing up in their
daily lives.

The pressures Black women are naming are not confined to elections or headlines. They are shaping how women move through work, community, public life, and how fully they feel they can be themselves.

95%

Are concerned the Supreme Court's
weakening of the Voting Rights Act will
negatively affect the Black community

92%

Oppose ICE funding taking precedence
over food benefits for seniors and
children



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Black women are navigating protecting their voice, dignity, and belonging.

36% shared they often experience racism and discrimination.

29% shared they often experience sexism.

42%

often or very often feel they have to tone themselves down for others' comfort (e.g., code switching).

Taken together, these findings point to **an everyday tax on full belonging**: the persistent work of navigating not only how Black women are treated, but how much of themselves they feel free to bring into public life.



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Black women are clear about what progress looks like—and how far away it feels.

47%

Feel the country will be a worse place for Black women 10 years from now

Real progress would look like...

18%

EQUAL RIGHTS AND ENDING DISCRIMINATION

15%

BETTER POLITICAL OUTCOMES AND LEADERSHIP

11%

GREATER REPRESENTATION IN POSITIONS OF POWER

10%

BETTER JOBS AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

9%

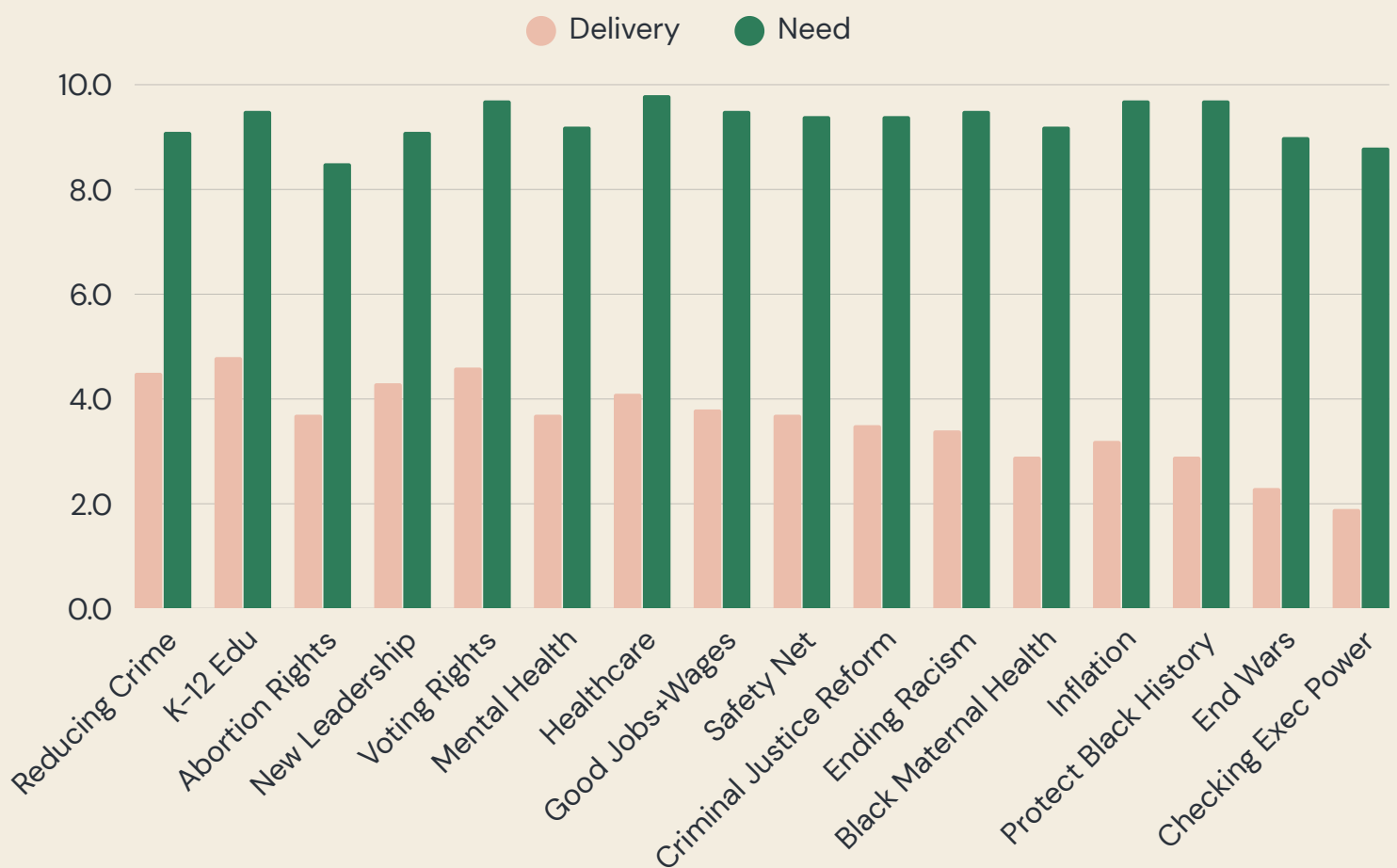
GREATER WORKPLACE EQUALITY

So how far are we from that vision?



The system is falling short on the things that matter most.

No need prioritized by Black women comes close to delivery by leaders and institutions.



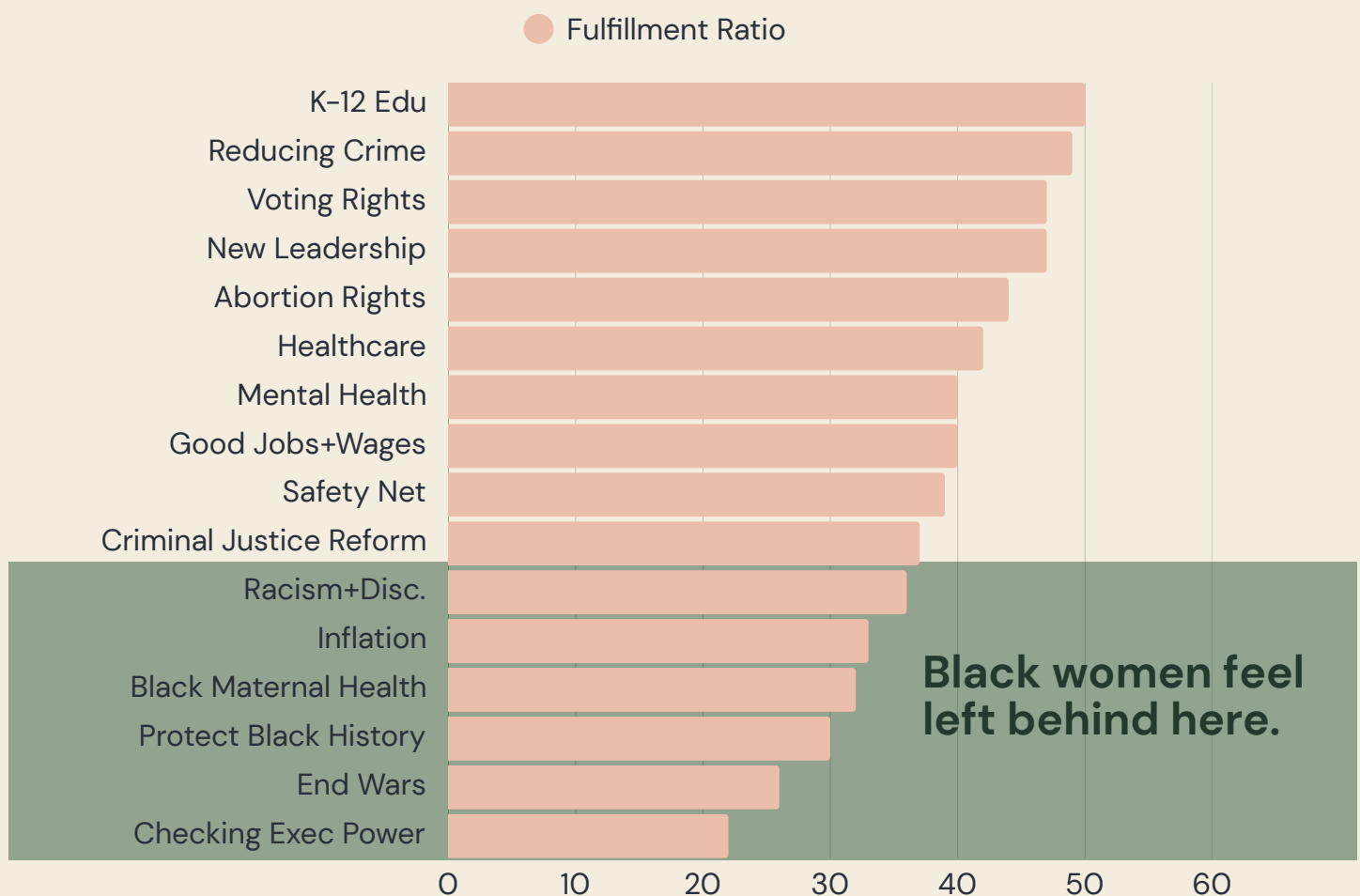
This difference between need and delivery is what we call the fulfillment gap, and it is immense. On average, needs are rated 5.7 points higher than delivery.

On several of the needs Black women rate as most important, perceived delivery by leaders and institutions is only a fraction of the level of importance respondents place on them.



No issue is close to fulfillment. The overall fulfillment ratio is just 38%.

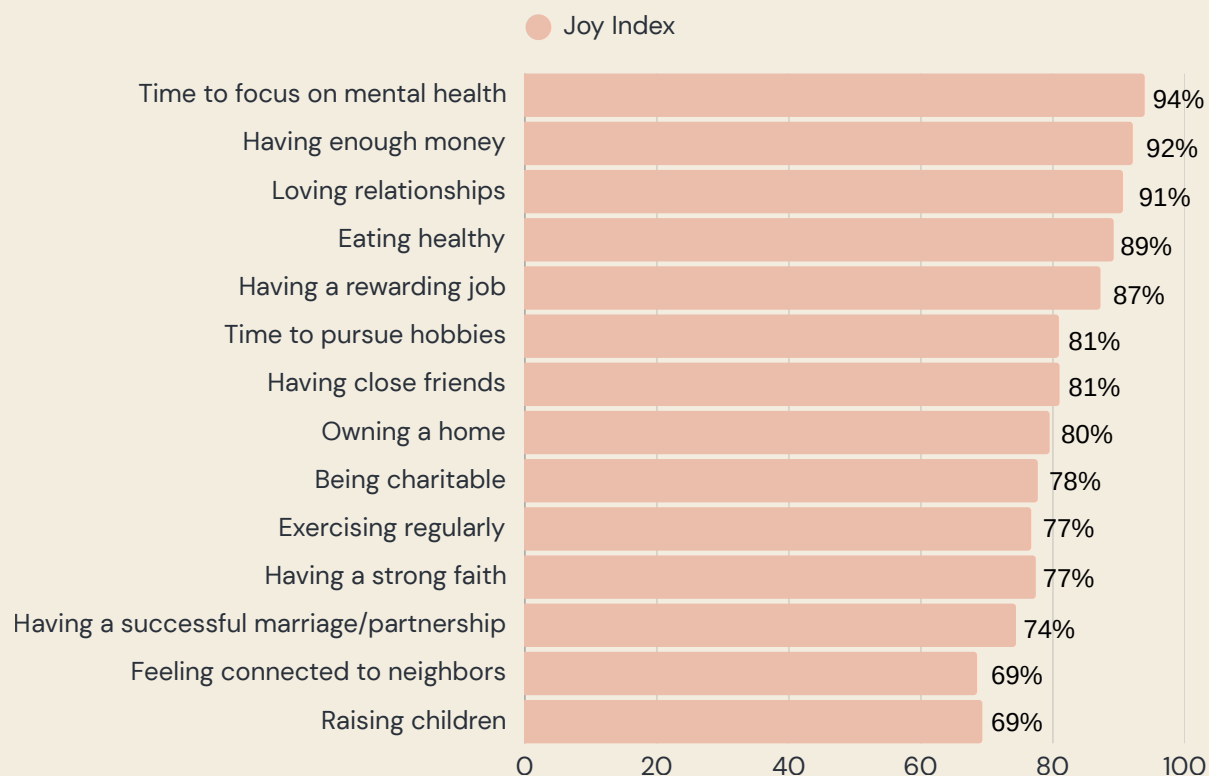
Black women's highest priorities show the largest gaps between importance and delivery. In fact, the system performs relatively better on lower-priority issues.





The priorities that would make fulfillment possible aren't abstract. Black women are telling us how they define joy.

The Joy Index gives us the clearest picture of the life Black women are trying to build – and what makes that life feel possible.



As burden rises, feeling connection matters more.

The definition of a good life is remarkably consistent across subgroups, except for those experiencing more burdens. Feeling connected to neighbors becomes more important as burden rises.

Components of Joy: Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 0 to 10 the importance of each item when it comes to defining a joyful life. The percentages reflect the number who rated each component an 8 out of 10 or higher.



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A good life is personal. What Black women say must change is structural.

When asked to share in their own words what real progress would require, they return to rights, fairness, and power.

18%

Named equal rights, equality, or ending racism and discrimination – the most common group of responses

Dignity, security, voice, and freedom are not competing with the pocketbook.

They are part of what makes the joyful life that Black women describe possible. Enough money matters – so does health, family, safety, and belonging. Rights and power shape whether those things are reachable.

The Fulfillment Gap is ultimately a gap between the life Black women can clearly imagine and the conditions that would make that life possible.



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Black women are clear about the life they want. A life with dignity, voice, safety, enough time and money, loving relationships, meaningful work, and belonging.

Our polling shows that those aspirations are not separate from politics or policy. They are shaped by whether institutions protect rights, create fairness, expand opportunity, and deliver on the priorities Black women say matter most.

The question is not whether Black women know what they want.

It is whether the systems around them will help make that life possible.