

Campaigning in the Time of COVID-19

Women Candidates and the Challenges They Face



From childcare concerns to media portrayals, women candidates have persistently faced unique challenges to their campaigns. The global pandemic has exposed these challenges in many instances and exacerbated them in others. Our current moment underscores that we must continue working towards solutions that address the myriad of barriers to women's political leadership.

– Amanda Pohl, ReflectUS Programs Director

Introduction

Research has found that when voters describe the qualities they want in political leadership during times of crisis, they want leaders that can handle the crisis with confidence, anticipate societal needs, effectively communicate with the public, and act with both compassion and resolve.¹ While there have been differences along gender lines in perceptions of leadership during times of crisis - men generally believe men are best equipped while women generally believe women are² - the current global pandemic has put women's political leadership center stage across the globe.

Women's Political Leadership Around the World during COVID-19

Women political leaders around the world have responded to COVID-19 in varying ways. Yet, a majority of them have responded with decisive action, taking into account the needs and vulnerabilities of all community members, accompanied with compassionate care. Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, for instance, was globally praised for moving swiftly and communicating core messages of combating the virus with vigor and empathy.³ Similarly, Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel is praised for her “fact-based, evidence-based, consensus oriented leadership,”⁴ which has led Germany to a lower death rate than similar nations. While Prime Minister Sanna Marin of Finland is governing with a coalition of women party leaders and seeing 10 percent fewer deaths than her European allies.⁵

¹ See Barbara Lee Family Foundation, Rising to the Occasion: How Women Leaders Prove They Can Handle A Crisis. Available at <https://www.barbaraleefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Rising-to-the-Occasion-How-Women-Leaders-Prove-They-Can-Handle-A-Crisis.pdf>. Last Accessed September 2020. See also Pershing and BNY Mellon, Americans Crave a New Kind of Leader. Available at <https://www.pershing.com/global-assets/pdf/americans-crave-a-new-kind-of-leader.pdf>. Last Accessed September 2020.

² See Ibid.

³ See Michael G. Baker, Nick Wilson, and Andrew Anglemyer, Successful Elimination of COVID-19 Transmission in New Zealand. (New England Journal of Medicine, 383:e56), August 20, 2020. Available at https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2025203?query=featured_coronavirus.

⁴ See Loveday Morris, “Angela Merkel is riding high as she steers Europe's coronavirus recovery effort” (Washington Post), July 16, 2020. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/angela-merkel-coronavirus-legacy/2020/07/16/fab207c2-c5d1-11ea-a825-8722004e4150_story.html.

⁵ See Amanda Taub, “Why are women-led nations doing better with COVID-19?” (New York Times), May 15, 2020. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html>.

Admittedly, it's difficult for any political leader to navigate these unprecedented times; yet many women have managed to lead in the face of COVID-19 with determination, resolve and care. It is these same qualities - collaborative leadership, innovation, servant leadership, and efficiency - that Americans have consistently noted they want in their leaders.

COVID-19 has been a devastating crisis to communities across the globe, and its deleterious impacts have been particularly felt in the United States. As communities across the country are grappling with the pandemic and its effects, women from diverse ages, backgrounds and ideological viewpoints are running for office in numbers never before seen.

“Women approach governing differently than men. Women leaders build better collaborative working tables. They are approaching governing from a whole perspective on ‘how do we protect our nation and communities and educate our young people?’ The approach is often more intersectional.” —Glynda Carr, ReflectUS Coalition Member, President and CEO of Higher Heights

Running for Office During COVID-19

Throughout U.S. history when women step up to lead, they are often faced with sexist tropes, double standards, and unfair assessments around credibility and likeability.⁶ Yet women are running and winning in higher numbers than ever before at every level of government. While Democratic women have the highest share of women's elected positions, Republican women are running at historic rates for Congress this year.⁷ In states where there have been women governors, Republican women are nearly equal to the number of Democratic women who have been elected.⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has further spurred the number of women running for office. In fact, we have seen a 20% increase in 2020 from the previous record set in 2018 of women running just for Congress.⁹

“This is really a time about questioning leadership and the effects of the consequences of running for office. People who are looking into running for office will feel that their constituency, their rights, the public policy directly affects them and makes a difference,” —Madalene Mielke, ReflectUS Coalition Member, President and CEO of the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS)

⁶ See Maggie Astor, “A Woman, Just Not That Woman’: How Sexism Plays Out on the Trail” (New York Times), May 15, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/11/us/politics/sexism-double-standard-2020.html>.

⁷ See Susan Davis, “More Republican Women Than Ever Are Running For Congress: Here’s Why” (NPR), June 17, 2020. Available at <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/17/878226784/more-republican-women-than-ever-are-running-for-congress-heres-why>.

⁸ See Ella Koeze, Meredith Conroy and Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, “More Women Are Holding Political Office — But Not Everywhere” (FiveThirtyEight), January 30, 2020. Available at <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/more-women-are-holding-political-office-but-not-everywhere/>.

⁹ See Zach Budryk, “Over 570 women registered to run for office, topping 2018 record” (The Hill), July 14, 2020. Available at <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/507228-over-570-women-registered-to-run-for-office-topping-2018-record>.

In the middle of a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to elect those who have the qualities to lead. Yet, *how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected female political candidates?*

The women featured in this issue brief are but a few of the female candidates across the country, demonstrating tenacity and determination in their candidacy while managing the impacts of the pandemic in their personal lives. They are running for state and local offices, hoping to impact change in their communities and beyond.

Vanessa Fuentes

Candidate for Austin City Council, District 2

Vanessa Fuentes has a passion for criminal and health justice. She announced that she was running for office a few weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States. She has faced many hurdles in her campaign but continues to persevere.

Fuentes believes that, as a country, we should meet women where they are and offer childcare to those who need it so more women can run for office without the barrier that lack of childcare presents. She finds the quote, “empowered women empower women” inspiring, and believes that women who are in office

should see their position as a way to uplift other women to follow in their footsteps, so they can understand “that can be me too.”



“As a woman of color who doesn’t come from money, it is a sacrifice to have to resign from my job and live off of personal savings. For many people it’s not even an option to do that. It’s not always a level playing field when seeking public office.”

This pandemic has severely impacted girls and women in many ways. In particular, those who already faced food insecurity are seeing an even more intense struggle during COVID-19. Fuentes notes that food insecurity is disproportionately felt in rural and minority communities. She reminds us that these are pre-existing struggles, which have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the other pressing issues that Fuentes is looking to address include broadband internet access for all and access to quality childcare.

“We need equality at all levels,” Fuentes shared when questioned about the support that women need during COVID-19. She noted women are on the front lines of this pandemic as nurses and grocery clerks, and her own mother is currently employed at a grocery store. Fuentes is constantly thinking of her mother’s safety and health during this time, as well as others who are on the forefront of this crisis. She stated that times of disparity are an opportunity for leaders to pass policies rooted in equity that lead to equality. These policies include funding for childcare, paid sick leave, and funding early childhood education.

Jessica González-Rojas

Candidate for New York State Assembly, District 34

Jessica González-Rojas is an advocate who left her previous career and decided to run for office. “I have been a lifelong activist who has always cared about marginalized communities and particularly the intersections of their lives,” said González-Rojas. “I’ve been doing advocacy for so long that I’ve ultimately learned that we need better elected officials. The possibility of creating systemic change feels really powerful.” González-Rojas ran against an incumbent in a five-way primary and acknowledged the challenges she faced, “I



definitely felt disadvantaged by the fact that I ran against an incumbent who’s been in office for 12 years.” Incumbency is a powerful force for a number of reasons, including experience with elections and district lines drawn to protect incumbents across the United States. However, the Reflective Democracy Campaign recently noted that between 2012 and 2018, there was a 54% increase in women of color running for state legislative offices and when diverse women ran, they won at the same rates as their male and white counterparts.¹⁰ In González-Rojas’ case, this held true. In July, after all absentee ballots were counted, she learned she won the primary and will face a new opponent in November.

González-Rojas believes that COVID-19 may encourage even more women to run for office. She believes that while women face barriers to running for office, they should also be empowered through their perseverance and by the issues that affect them.

“I think we still might see a surge of women raising their hands because they see such a failure in a system that is predominantly run by men.”

¹⁰ See Reflective Democracy Campaign, *The Electability Myth: The Shifting Demographics of Political Power in America*. June 2019. Available at <https://wholeads.us/the-electability-myth/>. Last Accessed September 2020.

Esmeralda Cortez

*Candidate for Oakland, California City Council,
District 7*

Born and raised in Oakland, CA, Esmeralda Cortez is no stranger to obstacles and believes her personal experiences led to her embracing values of fearlessness and courage. “When I was 10 years that has impacted my family in so many ways.



Three years later, the same thing happened to my friend’s older brother. He was also shot and killed at the age of 18 years old. When that happened, I started to see a pattern – now all around me, young black and brown men are being shot and killed at a very young age. That was really the turning point for me; it stopped being about my personal anger and pain and became about my community’s collective pain and anger,” said Cortez. She also understands the unique voter challenges of her district, which includes low voter registration numbers and low voter participation.

“In general, women lead. We are the best leaders in times of crisis. We don’t step down just because COVID-19 shows up at our front door and says we can’t leave [our homes] anymore.”

Cortez has a strong belief in gender parity at all levels of government and fights back against stereotypes of women candidates. “I’ve heard the argument before that women are just too compassionate, too emotional. I think that is exactly what makes us better leaders. If we can stop criminalizing, for instance, the homeless population, then we can actually start attacking the root problems of what makes people go into homelessness. Instead of demonizing, we bring out our compassion instead and say, ‘hey, you are a human being too, just one of our unhoused brothers and sisters, and instead of criminalizing you, we are going to uplift you,’” she said. Cortez plans to start her career in politics by representing the home community that she truly cares about. Despite her challenges, she continues to persevere and uplift those around her.

Dianne Morales

Candidate for Mayor, New York, New York

As a first-generation college graduate and Afro-Latina born in Brooklyn, Dianne Morales is running to be the Mayor of New York City. She emphasized, "I am not a professional politician, I have never been engaged in elected office or politics in this way. I will say that as an outsider candidate, woman of color, jumping into the race, there were a lot of questions among what I would call 'the chattering class' as to my viability. Those questions



felt to me that they sought to erase my experiences. I made a decision at that point in time that I was going to speak up and speak out and I did. I have the potential to help to inspire and become a part of a movement of people in the community who are ready to push for significant change."

"2020 inevitably will be such a historic year. I think we are going to see an increase in people running for office and on the other hand, I just hope we come out of this strong."

Morales noted that COVID-19 is making campaigning more intense than ever before and shared that some campaigns have paused to see how COVID-19 is going to affect the community.

Morales is an agent of change and wants to see system changes to support more women running for office, even in the midst of a crisis. "I think that there are expectations inherent to the role that we are expected to play in the home, as parents and as caregivers, and I think there are structural things that need to be put in place in order to make running and serving easier. Whether it is affordable childcare, equity in terms of wages, I think that providing different types of support is important. There was just last year legislation passed in New York to allow child care to be an acceptable campaign expense; that is a game changer. I also think we need to help women understand the importance of representation – providing them with the training and support to enter this space and to run campaigns is critical." Morales' efforts to benefit her community will continue, and she hopes that the pandemic doesn't discourage women from running for office in the future.

Jasmine Crockett

State Representative-Elect, Texas House District 100

Jasmine Crockett decided to put a hold on her law career to focus on politics. She said, “As an attorney that has been licensed to practice for the last 14 years, in Texas, Arkansas, and in federal courts, I ultimately decided that it was time for me to stop fighting cases one case at a time, and instead, make wide, sweeping changes. As someone who does criminal defense and civil rights work, it became frustrating to have to work within the confines of laws that did not work for all people.” When speaking about her experiences with



campaigning during COVID-19, she stated, “We, overall, are resilient people.” Crockett noted that some of her best memories related to campaigning in the pandemic were greeting voters at the polls. “Poll greeting isn’t something that goes on throughout the entire country, but down south in Texas, we are really big on it. There were so many people that were just excited to see that I took the time to show up to the polls and greet them, even though we were dealing with a pandemic. It’s not like I could walk up and talk to them, but the fact that I cared enough to show up, that mattered to them.”

Crockett believes showing up at the polls is an exciting part of campaigning and she was glad to be there to thank voters for showing up, voting, and taking the risk in this high-stakes environment.

“I do believe in the power of the people, and I do believe that in November, we will see a huge shift in this country. While we are divided, there are more of us that are coming together.”

When asked what qualities women bring to political and government leadership, Crockett stated, “Compassion. By the general nature of who we are as women, we tend to be a little bit more compassionate and we tend to be great mediators.” She also noted that in a divided nation, compassion and peace-making skills are more relevant than ever before.

Alexis Rodgers

Candidate for Mayor, Richmond, Virginia

Alexis Rodgers is a community organizer, nonprofit director, and lifelong activist for change. She did not expect to run for office this year. That all changed in May, when Richmond, Virginia became a hotspot for racial tension as protestors urged city leaders to change policies that have resulted in the death of residents in crisis and officials responded with violence and arrests – even toward bystanders and those in the media. Rodgers’s history of fighting for people through her work includes expanding access to Medicaid in Virginia and centering the voices of women of color in domestic worker roles. Her long history of leadership prompted her to run for office. She worked with other local organizers and was able to get more than enough signatures in less than two



weeks to qualify for the ballot. But for her running for office has been increasingly difficult during a pandemic and in a city in crisis. “The biggest challenge right now is that people are hurting and frustrated,” said Rodgers. “They are out of work. They are struggling with schools and childcare. Nearly one-third of the population in the city is facing the threat of eviction. There is a serious mistrust and distrust of government officials.

I knew I had to reach people while they were hurting in the midst of multiple crises – COVID, a civil rights crisis, and things we’ve never seen in our lifetime – and I had to help them understand how I would be different.”

As a Black woman, Rodgers has faced challenges throughout her career and running for office is no different. “I’ve always had to deal with the people who thought I was there to bring them coffee,” she said. “They automatically assume I’m not as smart or I don’t care about issues that aren’t ‘women’s issues’. I absolutely care about economic development and permit workload in our city. I see small businesses are frustrated because they are being shut out of their city processes in favor of special interests. I’m running to bring power back to the people.”

Rodgers acknowledges that this campaign is different from others that she has been a part of in the past – partly because she’s the candidate and partly because of the times in which we are living. She explains that it is incredibly important for women, especially women of color, to find mentors who have been through these challenges. Rodgers notes, “We hear that it’s not easy and it’s not. Young women are also finding success in abandoning the traditional system and forging our own path. We can do that and still respect and honor the wisdom of those who came before us.”

To overcome the challenges COVID-19 has presented, Rodgers and her team are getting creative. They are ramping up remote organizing and digital efforts and even experimenting with some new ways to safely engage with people in their neighborhoods. “People still want to see me and I want to see them. I also need to respect that Richmond has more than a 40% Black population and a large Hispanic population and those are the people who have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in Virginia. Our numbers in the city are rising and I will not ignore that.”

Conclusion

The women who are running for office during COVID-19 are innovating new strategies, breaking new ground, and engaging new communities. Although challenging, women are stepping up to be problem-solvers and policymakers. Americans have faced many crises during the COVID-19 pandemic, including access to childcare, affordable housing, civil rights and social justice concerns, high unemployment, and more. Women across the country are creatively finding solutions to crises that the pandemic has caused or amplified. In some cases, this means stepping up to run for office in a difficult campaign situation to improve the outcomes for many.

Women candidates, including those who never thought they would run for office, are emerging to represent their communities. These women are leaders in their communities and are ready to build systems that work for women and families. The more women from diverse ideological backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and experiences run for office, the more people from diverse communities will be represented in places where key decisions affecting their lives are being made. As Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said, “Women belong in all places where decisions are being made.”

ReflectUS

ReflectUS is a national, nonpartisan coalition working to increase the number of women in office and achieve equal representation across the racial, ideological, ethnic, and geographic spectrum. ReflectUS is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. To learn more, visit: www.reflect.us

Special Acknowledgements: Haley Ariybi, Ella Asnin, Sarah Bergin, Andrea Flores, Peyton Chambers, & Carla Romeus, ReflectUS Interns