

# Lessons from Campaigning in the Time of COVID-19

## Women Candidates and the Challenges They Faced



*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.<sup>1</sup> 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 are<sup>2</sup> - 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.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel is praised for her “fact-based, evidence-based, consensus oriented leadership,”<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> 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](https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2025203?query=featured_coronavirus).

<sup>4</sup> 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](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/angela-merkel-coronavirus-legacy/2020/07/16/fab207c2-c5d1-11ea-a825-8722004e4150_story.html).

<sup>5</sup> 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. While communities across the country grapple with the pandemic and its effects, during this election cycle, women from diverse ages, backgrounds and ideological viewpoints ran for - and won - elected office in numbers never before seen.<sup>6</sup>

“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.<sup>7</sup> Yet women continue to persist. While Democratic women have the highest share of women's elected positions, for instance, Republican women ran and won at historic rates for Congress this year.<sup>8</sup> In states where there have been women governors, Republican women are nearly equal to the number of Democratic women who have been elected.<sup>9</sup> Even in the face of a global pandemic, women are running and winning in higher numbers than ever before seen. In fact, during this current election cycle, we have seen a 20 percent increase in 2020 from the previous record set in 2018 of women running just for Congress.<sup>10</sup>

“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, and 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)

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<sup>6</sup> See CAWP Staff, “Results: Women Candidates in the 2020 Election” (CAWP), November 8, 2020. Available at: <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/election-analysis/results-women-candidates-2020-elections>.

<sup>7</sup> 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>.

<sup>8</sup> 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>.

<sup>9</sup> 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/>.

<sup>10</sup> 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 did the COVID-19 pandemic affected female political candidates?*

The women featured in this issue brief are but a few of the women who ran for office across the country in the 2020 election cycle, demonstrating tenacity and determination in their candidacy while managing the impacts of the pandemic in their personal lives. They ran for federal, state, and local offices, hoping to impact change in their communities and beyond. Whether they won or lost their races, they all describe important lessons learned from the campaign trail.

**Vanessa Fuentes**

*Councilwoman-elect 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 faced many hurdles in her campaign but continued 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 hoping 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.

Fuentes won her election to City Council.

## Jessica González-Rojas

*Assemblywoman-elect 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 percent 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.<sup>11</sup> In González-Rojas’ case, this held true. In July, after all absentee ballots were counted, she learned she won the primary – a milestone she celebrated.

González-Rojas believes that the COVID-19 crisis may encourage even more women to run for office in the coming years. 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.”

González-Rojas won the general election in November, and will represent New York’s 34th State Assembly district.

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<sup>11</sup> 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 old, my brother was shot and killed three minutes



away from my house when he was 18 years old. 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 hoped to start her career in politics by representing the home community that she truly cares about.

Cortez did not qualify for the November 2020 election after signatures were counted.

## **Genevieve Collins**

*Candidate for Congress, Texas 32nd District*

Genevieve Collins is proud to be a seventh generation Texan and the granddaughter of Calvert Collins, the first woman elected to the Dallas City Council. She was honoring her grandmother's legacy by running for Congress. Collins is passionate about public education and ran to make a difference and bring opportunity to Texans and others across the United States. "My grandmother was a trailblazer and I am thrilled to



follow in her footsteps. Now is the time for women who care about our communities to step up and make changes. I believe in an America that works for everyone, regardless of race or gender, and I'm running to make sure that everyone has a chance at success."

In spite of her family's history in politics, Collins faced challenges as a woman running for office during COVID-19. While she felt led to run, she did not expect to do so during a global pandemic. To compound the challenges, Collins had an emergency surgery in the middle of her campaign, which led her to have to cancel a debate and face downtime in the middle of a Congressional race. Still, she remained optimistic. "Women are awesome! We're living in very topsy-turvy and uncertain times. Women provide compassion, sanity, warmth and a keen perspective in business. Women see the entire playing field and are visionary. This means that we are able to create more substantial, meaningful policies. Women know how to get stuff done."

Collins built her ideas on the legacy of strong women in her family.

"I consistently tell people that strong women dream big and we lead with reason and grace. That's what we need in times of division – women leading and bringing us together."

Collins lost her election.

## **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 we will see a 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.

Crockett won her primary and was unopposed in the general election.

## Alexsis Rodgers

*Candidate for Mayor, Richmond, Virginia*

Alexsis Rodgers is a community organizer, nonprofit director, and lifelong activist for change. She did not expect to run for office in 2020. 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 aggression. 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. Rodgers notes running for office was 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 ran to bring power back to the people."

Rodgers acknowledges that her campaign was different from others that she has been a part of in the past – partly because she was 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 got creative. They ramped up remote organizing and digital efforts and even experimented with some new ways to safely engage with people in their neighborhoods. "People still wanted to see me and I wanted to see them. I also needed 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."

Alexsis lost her election.



## Conclusion

The women who ran for office during COVID-19 innovated new strategies, broke new ground, and engaged new communities. Although challenging, women are stepping up to be problem-solvers and policymakers. Americans face many crises during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women across the country are creatively finding solutions to these crises that the pandemic has caused or amplified. In some cases, this meant stepping up to run for office in a difficult campaign situation to improve the outcomes for many.

Women candidates, including those featured in this issue brief, have emerged to represent their communities. These women are leaders in their communities and are ready to build systems that work for our country. Whether they won or lost, the increased number of women seeking political leadership is a good sign. 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](http://www.reflect.us)**

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

November 9, 2020