

# BEYOND “SHATTERED”

## Creating Reflective Democracy in Trump’s America

**Judith Warner**  
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**“More people are insisting that their voices be heard, and it’s our patriotic duty to hear each other out.”**

**Donna Brazile, Hacks, 2017<sup>1</sup>**

For close political observers, the presidential election of 2016 unveiled a truth far more wide-reaching than the electoral college triumph of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton: **the failure of our parties – of the political powers-that-be, writ large – to produce candidates that captured the hearts and minds of the American people.**

In certain ways, this was hardly new. The United States has long been governed by a political class that is disproportionately white, disproportionately male, and disproportionately wealthy, and Americans have expressed their unhappy sense of being led by an “old boys’ club” for many years.<sup>2</sup> Yet there was something unique about the degree of disconnect in the last presidential cycle between American voters and the political gatekeepers – party and elected officials, big donors, unions, campaign operatives, consultants, and powerful advocacy groups – who have long determined who gets a shot at governing in the U.S.

Mainstream Republican presidential candidates were unable to speak to a party base eager for a voice that would holler their discontent. And the Democrats’ anointed candidate, cocooned within the protective embrace of longtime friends, consultants and donors, fell fatally short in inspiring and motivating a significant slice of her party’s electorate.

For Democrats, who ended that campaign season out of power not just in the White House and the U.S. House and Senate, but in 34 state legislatures, the result was absolutely devastating – “soul shaking” in the words of the longtime political operative Donna Brazile, who served as interim chair of the Democratic National Committee in the latter half of 2016, and chronicled the party’s many challenges in her post-election memoir, *Hacks: The Inside Story of the Break-ins and Breakdowns That Put Donald Trump in the White House*. In the three years that followed, the Democrats underwent considerable finger-pointing and some soul-searching. They issued promises and apologies, announced new programs and partnerships. And they scored some striking electoral triumphs: governors flipped in Michigan and Wisconsin; state houses flipped in Colorado and Virginia; an enormous number of state

legislative seats picked up in Pennsylvania, and control regained of the U.S. House of Representatives, with the ascension, notably, of the most reflective class of freshmen in the body’s history.

And yet, for advocates of reflective democracy, the story of the post-2016 period has been a mixture of triumph and frustration. In the run-up to the 2020 presidential election, there is still an enormous disproportion between the population makeup of the United States and the demographics of those who lead us. As of 2019, the U.S. population was 60% white and 49% male. Yet people of color hold just 11% of elected offices, and women no more than 31% of elected seats. White men alone, at just 30% of the population, are 62% of elected officeholders – despite the fact that they now win elections at a slightly lower rate than do female and non-white candidates.<sup>3</sup> And there is still a real disconnect between the rate at which white women – who are now 31% of the population and 27% of elected officials – have been able to advance toward something like their fair share of representation compared to women of color who, despite dramatic recent increases in political office-holding, still only hold 4% of elected seats, while comprising 20% of the population. (Men of color, at 19% of the population, hold 7% of seats.)

Indeed, behind the jubilation of taking back the House in 2018, and the enormous media fanfare around the entry in Congress of the young, progressive women of color dubbed “The Squad” – Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts and Ilhan Omar of Minnesota – many women of color, including Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley, came to office with bruising backstories of snubs by the political powers-that-be. Some had been told not to run because they didn’t “look like” their districts and had “no business” even trying to compete. Others had been bashed for taking on incumbents who, they were told, didn’t “deserve” a primary challenge. And even after publicly celebrating the arrival of the most diverse freshman class in history, party leaders privately seemed eager to curb the ways some of those victories had disrupted its hierarchy.

In April 2019, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee announced it would no longer grant contracts to pollsters, strategists and communications specialists who took on any clients who mounted

primary challenges. It was a move broadly denounced as an effort to protect longtime “moderate” incumbents like the anti-choice Illinois Congressman Dan Lipinski, who came within two points of losing his seat in 2018 to a pro-choice female challenger, Marie Newman. And it was immediately interpreted as a direct swipe at Congressional newcomers of color like Pressley and Ocasio-Cortez, who’d won their seats in Massachusetts’ 7th district and New York’s 14th, respectively, after defeating longtime Democratic incumbents Michael Capuano and Joe Crowley in primaries. With typical forthrightness, Ocasio-Cortez quickly dubbed the new rule a “blacklist + boycott” policy.<sup>4</sup>

This fall, in an email exchange for this paper, a former DNC official took a tone that was even darker. “Forget the national party,” she wrote. “I just don’t believe in the infrastructure anymore.”

Over the course of the past two years, with the generous support of a journalism fellowship from the Reflective Democracy Campaign, I interviewed close to 30 people currently working on the front lines in the effort to change the look, feel and practice of electoral power (and power-brokering) in the U.S. They were candidates, current and former elected officials, campaign managers and consultants, organizers and activists — people with a wide range of experience of working both within and outside of traditional gatekeeper institutions. All — including one (anti-Trump) Republican — were committed to increasing the presence of women and people of color in American politics. And all, including that one Republican, had complex stories to tell about the quest for reflective democracy in the anti-Trump “resistance” era.

Their stories drove home that there is a great deal of work still to be done to change the demographics of power in America. And yet, at the same time, their points of view, a down-up vision, in most cases, of political life in the trenches, was considerably different from the overwhelming narrative of gloom issuing from the “bubble” worlds of New York and Washington, D.C. In fact, their voices, taken together, added up to a surprisingly positive new narrative. Their stories showed that there’s been a real silver lining to the devastating wake-up call of 2016: In response to Trump’s victory, and in the face of continued frustration on the part of

non-traditional candidates — particularly women of color — advocates of reflective democracy have taken matters into their own hands. They’ve built a vibrant and highly successful universe of independent and grassroots organizations, some new, some newly energized. These groups are not only helping more women and people of color get elected, they’re creating a new political reality that is expanding the very definition of civic engagement. And, in the process, they’ve turned heartbreak and defeat into something that looks and feels a great deal like hope.

The first clear sign that something was up came in February, 2017, when an obscure state senate special election in tiny Delaware drew nearly \$1 million in political donations from all over the country, plus so many volunteers eager to canvas for the Democrat, Stephanie Hansen, that her campaign staff ran out of work for them to do.<sup>5</sup> The reason: it was the first swing election since Trump’s inauguration. The Democrats’ state senate majority lay in the balance.<sup>6</sup> And the race had come to the attention of a brand-new group named Flippable, which had been co-founded by a handful of former Clinton campaign staffers who’d come together for comfort in a Columbus, Ohio bar late on election night in 2016 and had walked away convinced that the way back for the Democrats was by flipping state legislatures. The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee had thrown resources Hansen’s way, too, and former Vice President Joe Biden had stumped for her. But, Hansen’s campaign manager Erik Raser-Schramm said soon after the election, “Flippable was more helpful.”<sup>7</sup>

More proof — on a much wider scale — emerged nine months later when, in a major surprise to most political forecasters, the Democrats flipped 15 seats in the 100-member Virginia House of Delegates. Both the number of wins and the nature of those wins were remarkable. For one thing, they represented a real about-face on strategy. Whereas in 2015, the Democrats had allowed 44 of the Virginia legislature’s seats to go uncontested, in 2017 their candidates ran even in hopeless-seeming districts, and in five of those previously abandoned districts, a Democrat won.<sup>8</sup>

More important still, in terms of national takeaway was this: At a time when all the talk in Washington was about

winning back white, moderate Obama-to-Trump voters (presumably, with candidates who looked and sounded just like them), the new victors headed to the former seat of the Confederacy reflected the full spectrum of their state's rapidly changing electorate.

Virginia voters elected their first-ever openly lesbian delegate, their first transgender delegate, and their first Latina delegates. They elected their first Vietnamese delegate, Kathy Tran, an advocate for immigrants' rights who'd come to the United States as an infant refugee, and scored a 22 point win over a Republican incumbent who had bested his Democratic rival by a full 27 points in 2015 — an almost 50-point swing.<sup>9</sup> They also elected an African American public defender, Jennifer Carroll Foy, who had persisted, and succeeded, in running for office pregnant with twins, despite the fact that party leaders, local elected officials and multiple unions had all come out in favor of her primary opponent, Joshua King, an Iraq war veteran and local deputy sheriff.<sup>10</sup> The outsized win rates for these erstwhile outsiders was a real “wake up call,” Howard Dean, the former DNC chair said, in an interview for this paper. “The Democratic Party had had a slate, and was getting their butts kicked. It was the usual, usual, and the ones who won were these upstarts.”

Many of the upset winners in Virginia had run without any initial support from their party. Some had been actively dissuaded from running by the party. But it hadn't mattered. They'd gotten the support they needed elsewhere. A number of the female candidates, like Foy, had been trained by Emerge America, an organization that recruits and trains Democratic women had experienced a huge surge in growth in the months following Clinton's defeat, and had made a conscious decision to beef up their recruitment and training of women of color<sup>11</sup> Other young progressives had been trained by Run for Something, a group launched on Inauguration Day 2017 by the former email director for the Hillary Clinton campaign. Flippable was back, joined on the ground by a local affiliate of Indivisible — the brainchild of a husband and wife team of former Congressional staffers who'd set out to put the insurgent, grassroots zeal of Tea Party-style organizing to work for the Trump “resistance.”

A bevy of small local groups seemed to have sprung up out of nowhere: Win Virginia, Vienna Democrats for

Change, just for starters. There were volunteers from groups called Dupont Huddle, in Washington, DC and from New York for Virginia.<sup>12</sup> And then there were people contributing resources from really far away: Like Local Majority, a Bay Area volunteer group, whose lawyers, professors, professional writers, editors and journalists were writing free briefing papers for candidates who didn't have the time to research (or the money to pay for research into) all the ins-and-outs of rural broadband, or carbon tax receipts, or the exact dollar amount of damage that extreme weather changes attributable to global warming were likely to cost their districts.

On the ground too was the Sister District Project, a PAC founded by Rita Bosworth, a Bay Area public defender eager to find a way for people like her, living in progressive areas, with “a lot of resources and a lot of energy,” as she put it in an interview for this paper, to do something more productive than sound off to one another on Facebook. After consulting with friends and family — and friends of friends of family, many of them lawyers — she'd done all she could to gain a rapid mini-education in the nuts and bolts of electoral politics, an area she'd never delved deeply into before. Together, they arrived at the idea of organizing people in very blue districts to transfer their time and money to Democrats in red and purple states who needed a boost. Like other innovators in the Trump-resistance inspired world of new, off-the-reservation, political organizing, she decided to focus most on swing districts and, in particular, on state legislative elections, with the hope of eventually flipping state houses and undoing some of the gerrymandering that had guaranteed that some now-purple states were consistently sending solid-red delegations to Congress.<sup>13</sup>

Sister District set up a website where would-be campaign volunteers could enter their zip codes and be connected to a team leader near where they lived. That volunteer leader would set up group meet-ups — in living rooms and community centers and church basements — and as the teams formed, Sister District assigned them two or three candidates for whom they would fundraise, phone bank, knock on doors or send text messages, taking direction from the campaign teams. These volunteers, working in parallel with members of other groups from all over the country, collectively gathered millions of dollars in small donations. They flew in volunteer

canvassers from the Pacific coast. They provided free web assistance and donated digital ads. They knocked on tens of thousands of doors, made hundreds of thousands of phone calls, wrote tens of thousands of postcards and sent even more text messages. They hosted hundreds of events around the country, using house parties, potlucks, and Skype meet 'n greets with candidates to educate whomever they reached about the importance of legislative elections, the power of \$25 donations, and the wide range of ways that people without much time or money could get involved in politics and make an impact.

The local, social, community-building, civics-educating and small-donation-encouraging aspects of all this was highly reminiscent of the house party system that then-candidate Howard Dean had initiated in the 2004 presidential primaries. The desire to work in all states, and build infrastructure from the ground up was, too. But this work wasn't about any one candidate, or any one race. "It wasn't just about the campaigns," reflected Karin Johanson, a longtime Democratic operative, who wrote about the effect of the new progressive "pop-up groups" in the 2017 Virginia state legislative elections in a paper for the Atlas Project, a DC consultancy,<sup>14</sup> and has followed their work ever since. "It was a change in American civic life."<sup>15</sup>

What changed in 2017 — and what has spread throughout American civic life ever since — began as a new blueprint for Democrats to win elections. What it immediately became, however — because the two goals do, in fact, go hand in hand — was a new playbook for speeding the ascent of women and people of color into politics, inspiring them to run, supporting them as they ran, and ushering them on to victory in races that would previously have been written off as impossible. The old blueprint had meant concentrating party resources on Congress and the presidency — and on the policy priorities of those in Congress and the White House — rather than investing in building up a pipeline of future national leaders on city councils and in state legislatures. It required supporting incumbents — not running insurgents against them in primaries. In short: preserving power and reinforcing the agendas of those already in power, even if those already in power didn't necessarily share the same priorities of voters in places very far from Washington, D.C.

The old playbook meant not "wasting" resources on candidates who "couldn't" win — because they were running in red states or red districts; because they were people of color running in mostly white districts; or because they couldn't raise the kind of money in the kind of time frame that gatekeepers deem proof of "viability." All those rules meant that women, people of color, and women of color above all, were kept out of power, because they couldn't get early backing when they needed it to win their primaries or never made it onto the ballot in the first place.

When they started Square One Politics, Miti Sathe, an Obama and Clinton campaign veteran, Will Levitt, an editor at Conde Nast, and Brian Bordainick, an entrepreneur and head of innovation at Hudson's Bay Company, wanted, like so many Democratic political activists in the post-2016 period — to focus on flipping Congressional districts that they believed were trending blue. They wanted to target districts that had been deemed hopeless in the past by the party, but that they believed showed promise, based on changing demographics — an increasing presence of people of color, of college-educated women and college-educated single women particularly; rates of job growth; patterns of consumer spending; the participation rate of people of color and the potential that existed for boosting it. The best way to win elections, they thought, was by recruiting "real people" — the kinds of people who would satisfy the desire for "authenticity" so consistently expressed by American voters in 2016.

Sathe, Levitt and Bordainick soon realized, however, that this was no simple task. Finding good potential candidates wasn't the problem; when they'd asked community leaders in the districts they'd had targeted for recommendations, they'd received plenty of great names. But the sorts of real people they wanted — non-lawyers, non-lobbyists, non-technocrats who'd spent their whole lives building their resumes for just such a run — said they just couldn't do it. They talked to inner city school principals, suburban young parents, community organizers, social workers, even journalists, and all said the same thing: There were just too many barriers to overcome. They didn't have the financial resources. They didn't have the connections. They didn't have the first clue of where to start. Figuring out fundraising, hiring campaign staff, finding office space, building a website and contact list — all the details, right

down to “just even filling out the forms to declare you’re running,” recalled Sathe, in an interview for this paper, seemed impossibly overwhelming to them.

This was a real wake-up call for the friends, one of whom had spent years living and breathing the day-to-day realities of political campaigning, another who’d built a career in exploring the ever-changing potential of new media, and a third who’d developed a national profile as a successful entrepreneur before he’d turned 30. “We thought, ‘what if we start an organization founded on startup principles for helping to lower the barriers to entry? Would we be able to get a more diverse pool of candidates?’” Sathe continued. “And what we found out was yes.”

They started small, offering just a few potential candidates a full slate of political services — creating campaign infrastructure, providing strategy advice and media consulting — for free. When one of their candidates, Liuba Grechen Shirley, a community activist on Long Island, New York with a full-time working husband and two small children, struggled to reconcile the demands of campaigning and childcare (an issue that would-be female candidates often cite as one of the most significant factors keeping them from running for office), they offered to help with that, too. They kept tabs on Shirley’s kids during campaign events, played with them during meetings, and got her campaign launched — staying with her until the end, when she lost to her opponent, the thirteen-term Republican incumbent, Peter King, by only six points.

When it came another of their candidates, the now-Congresswoman Lauren Underwood, the issue wasn’t encouragement or recruitment. Underwood was already in the race. Working their formula, and looking over her profile on LinkedIn, Sathe and Levitt had had the sense that she was just what they were looking for. Underwood was a registered nurse who had grown up in her district, had worked in the Obama White House and had serious health care policy experience. She had a pre-existing medical condition, and was skilled in talking about how, if the Affordable Care Act were repealed, it would affect her, her family, and others like her.

Sathe wrote Underwood a message on LinkedIn to propose a meeting.

“I know that this is very strange,” it began.

“Yeah, this is a little weird, but sure,” Underwood almost immediately responded.

Sathe and Levitt flew to Chicago a few days later. They met Underwood in a barbecue restaurant right outside of O’Hare airport. Seeing her in person sealed the deal; backing her, they said, was a no-brainer. “She was able to speak from this incredible point of empathy about why this was important to her and why she wanted to run. It wasn’t about becoming famous or one day making money as a lobbyist. She wasn’t one of those candidates who had set out to run since she was three ... she spoke from the heart. You can’t teach authenticity, but you can feel it,” Sathe said. “And I knew that if we got her in front of enough voters, that authentic place that she comes from would shine and people would be really inspired.”

Yet Underwood too was facing one very significant barrier to entry: She was an African American woman running in a more than 85% white, rural and suburban district outside Chicago which, for the past two election cycles, had been represented by a tea party Republican, and the Democratic establishment had deemed her candidacy hopeless. “At that time she had \$15,000 in the bank. She had been running for about a month and a half, two months at that point, she was getting no traction, all the DCCC and other folks had told her, ‘you’re running against incumbent mayor who’s white, who looks like the district, you don’t have a chance,’” Sathe said.

At the beginning, Square One’s decision to back Underwood in a district that hadn’t sent a Democrat to Congress in 30 years inspired enormous amusement. “There were times that we were laughed out of people’s offices,” Levitt recalled. But when Underwood won her primary with more votes than all five of her white male opponents combined, the gatekeepers stopped laughing and started sending money. The most powerful names in the Democratic party endorsed her, including former president Barack Obama and former Vice President Biden. Funders who’d previously said she was not “a fit” or an “impactful use of resources” proudly claimed her as their own.

“It definitely opened people’s eyes to what was possible,” Levitt said.

That no one was going to open the gates for a talented, highly qualified candidate like Lauren Underwood — that if she was going find a way past the party's gatekeepers, she'd have to go around them — came as a shock to the young entrepreneurs of Square One Politics: "We couldn't understand how everybody wasn't supporting her," Sathe said. For black women with long experience working in politics, however, that kind of story was old news.

Jessica Byrd had worked on dozens of political campaigns, and was leading candidate recruitment for EMILY's List when she left, in 2015, to launch Three Point Strategies, a consulting firm that focuses on the campaigns of progressive candidates of color. When she first struck out on her own, she was in many ways turning her back on a world that had educated and embraced her as she rose through its ranks. The problem was, for all the stated good intentions of the progressive non-profit world of Washington, D.C., she'd lost faith that, when it came to political gatekeeping, change could come from within. For one thing, the business of advocacy and support for women candidates was largely about money: who had it, who, by having enough of it had shown she was "viable" enough to get more of it: who promised high-minded and deep-pocketed donors a good "return on investment."

In an age of all but unlimited money in politics, there was, arguably, no way around that. But Byrd had seen over and over again how this system locked out candidates of color, who either didn't come from big money or lived in communities where big money wasn't available. It meant resources weren't spent on cultivating promising would-be candidates of color — who had not necessarily been polishing their governing resumes since high school — over time. "As money has flooded politics, people have spent so much time thinking about the dollars that there isn't the long-game effort to focus on people in the community. For so long, the national DC scene has set the standard: you don't take risks based on values; you run the 'safest' campaign so you can win," she said.

There was, and is, she knew, a more basic problem as well: For mainstream political organizations, taking on the structural barriers that exclude reflective candidates is potentially bad for business. Enormous amounts of money flow back and forth among the Democratic

Party, powerful advocacy groups and Washington's most prestigious political consultancies. People shuttle back and forth, too, depending who is in or out of office in the White House and whose cadre of advisors, friends, pollsters, lawyers, and the like have followed. This happens in the states as well: "People misconstrue the idea of [gatekeeping] institutions in terms of quote-unquote 'the party,'" said Lauren Groh-Wargo, who served as Stacey Abrams campaign manager during her 2018 run for Georgia governor and now is CEO of Abrams' voting rights advocacy group, Fair Fight. "When you really dig in in a lot of states, it's really who are the media consultants, who are the local consultants, who are some of the major county party officials, that sort of deeper layer. That's where the money is moving: Who's getting the media buys? Who's getting the retainer agreements? Who are the consultants that the national folks call? That's often where the behind-the-scenes power really is."

When candidates receive endorsements from the DCCC or EMILY's List, that support comes with the understanding that those favored candidates will choose campaign consultants from a set list of favored "vendors" — tried and true campaign managers, media consultants, etc. who, the argument goes, have enough of a track record to guarantee a good return on investment. Few of the vendors on those lists have typically been people of color. They tend not to have extensive experience working with people of color. They tend not to spend money cultivating and engaging potential networks of voters of color — finding them where they are, learning what they worry about and need, conducting, in short, in the kind of off-year focus group research and other forms of outreach that are continually taking place in white suburban communities. They tend to favor campaign strategies — like television ad buys — that are expensive, disproportionately target older, white voters, and, as it turns out, funnel contracts to those the original vendors know, like, and continually work with.

None of this is unique to the Democrats, of course; nor is the practice of friends passing work to friends peculiar to the world of politics. But it does lead to what academics call "homosocial reproduction" — like selecting like, over and over again. And that does not serve the cause of reflective democracy.

Byrd wasn't yet 30 when she started Three Point Strategies, but she'd been around long enough to see that the flow of money and insider campaign personnel determined not just who could become a candidate, and who could run a campaign, but also how that campaign would operate: how money would be spent, what priorities would be set, what "values" would be conveyed by the priorities of hiring, spending and campaigning. Could a different set of values prevail, she wondered: "Can we build alternatives to a broken system," she remembers asking herself. "Could we see politics that doesn't just move the needle but brings justice?"

Before the age of Trump, when she voiced questions like that, she was an outlier. Now she's got plenty of company. "There's such a thirst for an alternate way of doing things," she said.

Wisconsin was a particularly ugly failure for the Clinton campaign in 2016. The state had voted for Bernie Sanders in the primary; Clinton did not return during the general election. The robust get-out-the-vote efforts that had boosted black turnout for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 largely fell away. In Milwaukee County, the most solidly Democratic area in the state — and home to almost three-quarters of the African American population — the Clinton campaign operated less than half the number of field offices that the Obama campaign had maintained. And the black voter turnout rate dropped from 79 percent in 2012 to 47 percent in 2016, the lowest level in the state's history. Voter suppression played some role in that — how great a role is still contested, even among progressives; a University of Wisconsin-Madison study of non-voters later showed that "unhappy with choice of candidates or issues" was the most significantly cited reason why voters stayed home.<sup>16</sup>

That accumulation of fact, however, didn't play much of a role in the story of how Clinton lost Wisconsin that dominated the news in the wake of the election. Instead, recalled Angela Lang, a lifelong Milwaukee resident who was working as the political director of the progressive alliance For Our Future at the time, the most common explanation was: "Well, if Milwaukee would have just turned out and voted' — which usually is code for black folks ... 'If black people would have just voted, we wouldn't be in this scenario,'" she recalled in an interview for this paper. "It was a really harmful narrative," she said. "And it shifted the blame to a

disenfranchised community that wasn't engaged."

Lang and other grassroots activists and organizers in Milwaukee's black community wanted to share a different story — their story — but as 2017 advanced, they realized they had to do more: to build "sort of infrastructure, something really, really bold and really black and unapologetic in a way that Milwaukee kind of hadn't seen before," she said, "so that what happened in 2016 doesn't happen again." As they met to discuss just what this might be, they found themselves posing a central question much like those motivating Jessica Byrd's work: "What does it look like to actually build longterm black political power?" Lang recalled. "People took our votes for granted, or people just made assumptions: 'black people are Obama voters, and they're naturally just going to show up for Hillary Clinton. Let's spend our time and our resources on other demographics.' That was a miscalculation." she said. "We didn't want to wait for a party or a candidate to engage us. We wanted to do it ourselves."

In late November 2017, when Lang founded BLOC (Black Leaders Organizing for Communities), she took as her starting point the need to listen. Residents of Milwaukee's North side, home to nearly all the city's black community, were used to having politicians come talk at them right before elections. They weren't used to being called upon to help set budgetary priorities or shape policy. When BLOC's organizers started going door to door, they always asked one question: "What does it look like for the black community to thrive?" The query caught many residents off guard. "To this day, we joke about the number of looks and the confused faces they had because people hadn't really knocked on their doors before, and if they did, they didn't knock on their door asking what their issues were and just listening," Lang recalled. Once people got over their surprise, however, they said a great deal, she said. "We heard a lot of super- local issues. We heard big macro issues. We heard everything from speed bumps and potholes — we heard a lot about speed bumps and potholes — all the way to issues around healthcare, around mass incarceration, around living wage jobs."

Many people in the area had lost their voting rights. Or they had previously lost their rights and were waiting for them to be restored. Some had already had their rights restored, but didn't know it. Others — longtime taxpayers

and community members — couldn't vote because they were undocumented. They not only felt that they lacked the right to speak up about neighborhood problems, they were afraid to even try.

Lang's small staff turned their doorstep comments into an instant to-do list. Then they went back to people's homes with phone numbers for city agencies. They connected residents with their alderpeople and county supervisors. And they connected neighbors with neighbors. They started hosting summertime cookouts. They kept a stream of information coming about what city government could do, what it should have been doing, and how pressure could be put on elected officials. Along the way, Lang noted, "people learned a little bit more about how the political system worked as a whole. And there was kind of this hunger, and this desire to really learn more, and to be a part of a system, because more and more people started to figure out how these systems work, how to make their voices heard, and then wanted to continue to learn."

BLOC's staffers who were going door-to-door — the organization calls them "ambassadors" — also were coming back to the office saying that they wanted to learn more. They loved their positions as community opinion-gatherers and would-be fixers — some told Lang that their friends and family had noticed a change in them because of their "fancy new job" — and they wanted to get better at it. So when BLOC began its first candidate field program, canvassing in early 2018 for the state supreme court candidate Rebecca Dallet, an outspoken advocate for women who would go on to be the first non-incumbent progressive justice elected to the court in 23 years,<sup>17</sup> Lang taught them to anticipate and be able to answer all the questions likely to arise about what the state supreme court was and what it did, and, in particular, how it ruled on issues, like voting rights, that were of supreme importance to the local community. And there was always more. "Instead of people just saying, 'Hey, vote for candidate X and here's why,' we'd be saying, 'Hey do you know what the sheriff's department does Do you know that they oversee evictions? Do you know that they oversee the police? It was being able to do some of that education at doors and then say, 'This is why it is important for our community to show up,'" Lang said.

Some days, with all the training, BLOC's morning pre-canvas launch could take well over an hour. And there was debriefing time at the end of each day as well. Lang also ran "wellness Wednesdays" — days when the staff took the time just "to breathe," talking about the issues in their lives: the racism, the financial strains, the trauma. Outside groups that had also joined in the Dallet election effort questioned the value of this time-consuming talk and labor-intensive work. They questioned the usefulness of canvassing in "low-performing" wards. They counseled Lang to concentrate instead on "regular, reliable" voters. "We need to just make sure we're getting our people out," they would say.

But taking the time to breathe, and allocating the mental and emotional energy to teach and heal, Lang felt, weren't luxuries. They were necessities for a group of workers whose issues were the community's own. If the focus were really on "our people," she felt, then it really had to be on BLOC's people. The ambassadors weren't just teaching about civic engagement; they were modeling it, and they were able to be role-models without sugar-coating any aspects of their lives. Like many of the residents of an area hit hard by mass incarceration, some of the ambassadors themselves had lost their voting rights, or were waiting to have them restored. There was tragedy all around. (Including, during the reporting of this paper, the arrest of one of BLOC's most valued ambassadors — and the son of Lang's number two — for the hit-and-run deaths of two small children.)

All of this made the bonds between the organizers and those they organized deeper and more meaningful. "They were taking that information and talking to community members, and some of the residents were like, 'Oh, you sound really knowledgeable and you're young, and you look like me,'" Lang explained. "How do I get to be a part of this? How do I learn more in the way that you learned?"

Lang has a labor background — as did a number of the key activists, advocates, and leaders of new organizations interviewed for this paper. Their extra attunement to the economic and social issues of working class people, in addition to those of race and gender, brings another crucial, but less frequently-discussed, dimension to today's efforts to diversify the American political elite. It's a notable absence from the conversation: Blue-

collar workers, after all, have long been strikingly under-represented in elected office in the U.S.. Although working class Americans have accounted for more than half of the population since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they have never held more than 2% of seats in Congress. In state legislatures, their presence has fallen from a mere 5% in the 1980s to a measly 3% in recent years. And even on city councils, fewer than 10% of members today have blue-collar day jobs.<sup>18</sup>

That's why many now see a particular urgency to recruiting and training workers who are active in the labor movement to enter politics. Michigan United, a coalition of progressive organizations with a strong labor presence, for example, has taken strides in the past three years to work with union partners to find working people with an interest in running for office or otherwise building a career in the business of governing. The idea is for organized labor to become an "incubator of leaders," rather than simply a source of predictably Democratic votes, explained Bartosz Kumor, Michigan United's director of movement politics, in an interview for this paper.

Operating out of a former funeral home in Detroit, Kumor and his small staff have been building up a candidate pipeline made up of activists eager to learn the ropes of electoral politics. Under the direction of the former State Senate candidate Abraham Aiyash, their leadership development programs and Movement Politics Academies have trained just over 200 people since 2016, most of them women and people of color. They've had candidates elected to school boards and municipal councils around the state, including Tasha Green, the first African American woman to serve on the formerly all white and male city council in Westland, Michigan's 10th largest city. Three alums — Laurie Pohutsky, Padma Kuppa and Mari Manoogian — are now serving in the Michigan state house. Building on those successes, and with an influx of funding now for grassroots groups in the swing states, they're training more candidates for 2020 and also focusing on teaching the skills people need to build up their "civic resumes" to work on campaigns, in district offices, and up and down on every level of the professional ladder of behind-the-scenes work in government. The ultimate goal goes beyond any single election, Kumor explained: it's long-term change to the political apparatus, replacing gatekeepers for whom working people's challenges are abstract talking points

with workers who have lived through the problems they hope to solve with policy. "We're lucky in that Michigan is political interesting now, and people are willing to invest in infrastructure. That's the silver lining of Michigan going red in 2016."

For the young activists, candidates and campaign professionals building the new, alternative political infrastructure that's doing the work of reflective democracy today, getting to the point of seeing that the "same old, same old" didn't work did not require a big shift in mindset. The proof was all around them in the demographics of American political leadership. The lived results were all the more glaring — and had taken on new urgency — in the electoral map, post-November 2016. And the old assumptions that had long guided gatekeeper decision-making on what made for a good candidate and who was viable, also, on a gut level, just didn't make sense to them, based on lived experience.

"Once Trump was elected — and this is bipartisan," an on-the-rise female state senator in a state that's currently turning blue said in an interview for this paper, "I think people realized that if he was qualified to be president, they certainly were qualified to be on their town council. So the training really had to shift from, 'Are you qualified to run?' to 'What should I run for and how do I win?'" In other words, said the senator,, who has worked as a recruiter and trainer of women candidates for a number of in-state and national organizations, and, as a successful elected official, has gone to bat for multiple women who party gatekeepers hoped to dissuade, there's been a meaningful change in at least some corners of the world of new candidate-grooming over the past couple of years. There's been a change in focus, she said, from "get-in-there" encouragement to a much greater emphasis on dealing with the concrete structural issues that have long kept newcomers, particularly those without money, rich social capital and political connections, from getting in front of voters and making their way through primaries.

Many of those driving that change, like Sathe, Levitt, Byrd, Lang and Kumor, have been Millennials, impatient "with the slow progress of democracy," as the state senator, who made her way, in her early 30s, and with no gatekeeper support, to her state house, and last year, in one of the most competitive races in the country,

helped flip her legislature blue. “We expect to win and we expect to get somewhere.” Members of the most racially diverse generation in American history, long-schooled in inequality and economic uncertainty, and accustomed to critiques of institutional power and privilege, they were more attuned to, and less inclined to accept without a fight, the structural barriers that have kept people without vast social networks and deep pockets (or social networks of people with deep pockets) out of politics. They were also the first generation whose entire political life had played out in an online, real-time universe, in which a reinvigorated grassroots organizing — from *MoveOn.Org* through #MeToo — had shown that grassroots organizing could be both intimate in power and near-infinite in reach.

Many in the Millennial new guard, the state senator noted, have, by necessity, entered into politics far more familiar with the activist vocabulary and community-building tactics of movement organizing than with the ring-kissing rituals of old-time party politics. They assume and they rankle, and, in refusing to wait their turn, they can come off as “entitled.” But they also recognize, and reward, and much more naturally default to precisely the tone of “authenticity” that the American public-at-large seems increasingly to demand. All of which is, perhaps, part of why, in the age of “okay boomer,” the change that announced itself in Virginia in 2017 didn’t go away. Instead, as the 2020 election year began, it had only become more apparent.

In 2016, Pennsylvania was so heavily gerrymandered that, despite being split evenly between Democrats and Republicans, its voters sent 13 Republicans to House of Representatives and only 5 Democrats. Those congresspeople had the dubious distinction of being the largest all-male delegation in the U.S. Congress. In 2017, volunteers from new home-grown “pop-up” groups started to criss-cross the state, eager to flip their state house before the next round of redistricting and cognizant of the fact that Trump’s relatively narrow state win had largely been due to Democratic defections (or no-shows on Election Day) in depressed formerly blue rust belt and rural areas.<sup>19</sup> They traveled for hours from their homes in solid blue districts to knock on doors in red and purple areas where elections can easily be decided by less than 100 votes. Under grey skies, they slogged through mud and slush, looking for the 10 or 20

or 100 Democratic voters who hadn’t turned out to vote in years because they thought their votes didn’t matter or felt forgotten by the party.

“It’s just a grind like weight loss,” said Jamie Perrapato, a former court-appointed criminal attorney who closed her practice in late 2016 to channel the despair she felt and heard all around her into one of these groups, Turn PA Blue, which sends volunteers from Pennsylvania’s blue “bubble” districts like her own into hard-red districts where Democrats have long declined to venture — and which cost Clinton the state in 2016.<sup>20</sup> “You can do all these crazy, complicated diets and all this funky stuff, but at the end of the day it’s really simple: you eat less and you move more. And that’s what this is. It’s really simple. It’s just talking to voters and talking to voters that nobody talks to.”

These efforts have been strikingly effective: Since 2017, the groups have made huge gains in Democratic turnout in state, local and Congressional elections. They picked up 11 seats in the state house in and seven in the state senate in 2018, and sent four new women — all Democrats — to Congress. In 2019, they took control of the majority of the board of commissioners in the former Republican stronghold of Monroe County in the northeast of the state. They also cleaned house in prosperous Republican areas, winning all nine countywide elections and most of the municipal races in Chester County, a Philadelphia suburb that had been under Republican control for three centuries. They took control of the county council for the first time in 150 years in neighboring Delaware County. And in prosperous Bucks County, they took control of the board of commissioners for the first time in 40 years.<sup>21</sup>

Like Levitt and Sathe, Perrapato had her share of meetings early on where she was laughed out of the offices of established state gatekeepers because of the huge ideological gaps between the kinds of progressive candidates she backed and the moderate-to-conservative people she was speaking to. But now, she notes, no one is laughing. A new star of the state senate is Katie Muth, a young athletic trainer, professor of kinesiology, and unabashed progressive who in 2018 managed to defeat a powerful four-term Republican incumbent in a district that hadn’t elected a Democrat in almost 40 years.<sup>22</sup> Party insiders had deemed Muth “hopeless.” But Perrapato had

seen the passionate enthusiasm she inspired in her out-of-district volunteers. And those volunteers had spoken to so many of Muth's potential voters that they had been able to tell her, in great detail, what the people in her district were thinking and cared about most deeply. As a result — unlike the party gatekeepers who'd canceled her out — she was able to speak the people's language, talking about jobs, and healthcare, infrastructure and education. "She met the voters where they were. She never shied away from what she believed in, but she didn't shove her beliefs down people's throats. And she also was doing a lot of listening," Perrapato said. "The farther you get from the ground, you operate more on assumptions than on what's actually happening."

Although the populations they seek to engage may be different from state to state and community to community, the rules of engagement for the new grassroots groups changing the demographics of power in America are the same: Show up. Listen. Encourage and explain. Don't assume. And, above all, don't write off a single voter as a lost cause. Following those rules allowed Shanda Yates, a 38-year-old plaintiff's attorney in Northeast Jackson, Mississippi, to flip a state house seat last year, despite being a complete political newcomer, running in a district the party had long abandoned, and taking on a top Republican incumbent who had first won his seat when Yates had been just six years old. She did this with no financial or real logistical help from the party (the Mississippi Democratic Legislative Trust offered some logistical tips — like how to set up a PayPal account — and the DLCC endorsed her as a "small business champion," although no one from the organization ever made contact by phone or email). But she did have enormous support from the leaders of Sister District, who flew to Jackson to help her set up a field program, checked in with her afterwards every two weeks, held Skype fundraisers for her all over the country, and created maps that showed on which specific doors she should knock to motivate base voters, try to win back longtime disaffected Democrats, and even to woo likely "persuadable" Republicans. In the end, she and her husband and campaign volunteers knocked on 10,000 doors in all — and she won by a margin of 168 votes.

Sister District, Tech for Campaigns and the People PAC propelled Shelly Simonds, a former teacher and journalist, to victory too, in 2019, by lending field and

other free support, including top-notch web designers, digital strategists and videographers. With all of that outside help, Simonds, who went from a 15-point loss in the Virginia House of Delegates election in 2015 — "abysmal turnout," she said, "it was like throwing a party and no one came" — to the heartbreak, in 2017, of winning by one point, triggering a recount and losing when an election official picked her opponent's name out of a bowl to break a tie,<sup>23</sup> was able to put her all into getting out the vote. Altogether, with volunteer canvassers out in full force, her campaign knocked on 78,000 doors. She won by an almost 18-point margin. And the Virginia state legislature finally flipped blue.

After so many notable and unanticipated victories by "so many candidates nobody cares about," as Jessica Byrd puts it, traditional gatekeepers have had to take notice. The successful outsiders, candidates and campaign personnel alike, are "forcing gatekeepers not to gatekeeper" — at least, by the old rules, she said. "They're getting embarrassed and they're getting challenged in ways they never were challenged in the past. I think, since 2016, there's been a huge shift in who gets a say, who sets the agenda, and who gets to talk."

The DNC, the DCCC, and EMILY'S List (referred to by all who were interviewed for this paper as a "gatekeeper," despite its outsider roots), have all come under attack in recent years for their lack of reflectiveness and for their less than vociferous support for candidates of color early in their campaigns; all have gone out of their way recently, too, to issue strong statements expressing their desire to change. In July, the DCCC underwent a major staff shakeup after sustained criticism of its resistance to diversity in its leadership.<sup>24</sup> EMILY'S List's president, Stephanie Schriock, has expressed a commitment to "thinking strategically" about how to better engage with voters of color, and has partnered with the Latino Victory Fund, Higher Heights for America, and the Asian American Action Fund to create training programs that can more directly address the specific needs and challenges of candidates of color.<sup>25</sup>

EMILY'S LIST has hired a Native consultant to advise them on creating a native-specific training as part of their Run to Win programming as well — the sort of change, said Chrissie Castro, founder of the California Native Vote Project and Advance Native Political

Leadership, that is sorely needed. Past efforts to bring mainstream candidate training programs to Native women have generally backfired, she noted, because they lacked an awareness of the ways that the competitive, cut-throat, game of American politics went over badly in communities where where “being part of a collective” was highly valued, and putting oneself out there in front of others looked down-upon. “They need native women to run them so they can infuse them with their own stories, show it’s not just an empty process,” she said.

African American women have been making the same argument for many years. Higher Heights for America, a group founded in 2011 by the political activists and strategists Kimberly Peeler-Allen and Glynda Carr to support black women as candidates and harness their political power more generally, had been operating with notably scant media attention and scarce funding. But having been one of the first groups to support Ayanna Pressley (as well as Lauren Underwood and Congresswoman Lucy McBath in Georgia), they’re now getting a lot more airtime for their message that black women need to be seen and cultivated not just as voters, but as political power-brokers in their own right. “Our pure existence happened because of the environment where we felt our votes and leadership weren’t being fully recognized,” Carr reflected, in an interview for this paper. “2018 showed black women can run and win outside of the system. Should we have to? No. But it showed we could build alternative pathways if necessary and change the face of leadership.” In addition to EMILY’s List, Higher Heights has been partnering with Emerge America to offer candidate trainings specifically tailored for black women’s issues. “You can’t replace the authentic connection we have with our communities,” Carr said.

Other high-level black campaign strategists are increasingly leading organizations focused on electoral work in African American communities and advising established gatekeeper groups on tailoring their training and recruitment efforts to take into account the unique hurdles that would-be black candidates have long faced. And a number of older and established non-DC-based groups as well are making efforts to be more actively and effectively engage in “walking our talk” when it comes to women of color, in the words of Danna Lovell, who heads the Emerge America affiliate in Nevada, which last

January seated the country’s first female-majority state legislature and swore in its first female-majority state supreme court.

Habon Abdulle, the co-founder, with now-Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, of Women Organizing Women, a Minneapolis group working within the city’s sizable population of East African immigrants, agreed, in an interview, that she has seen a change of late in the way that some of the larger and more established candidate recruitment and training groups are at least trying to operate; she singled out Women Winning, a long-established Minnesota organization, for having made new and very active efforts to connect with the Somali and other East African women with whom she works. In the past, when well-meaning outsiders staged local trainings, she said, “Often what they were missing was that women of color are a spectrum: there’s the woman of color who has her stuff together and is really ready to run for office and the woman of color who doesn’t even know how to file a statement of candidacy. Or they would put together affluent women — lawyers, accountants, doctors — who had followed politics for a long time and were now pursuing political careers, with new American women who were beginners and after the first day won’t come back to the training because of all the acronyms and policy talk, which is all foreign to them.”

Despite these signs of improvement, however, it would be a gross exaggeration to say that the gates of power are being thrown wide open. Just about every woman of color interviewed for this paper, or the campaign surrogate for a woman of color, had a not-too-distant story of mainstream gatekeeper inattention or out and out blockade. It might have come in the form of pushback against a candidate’s hairstyle, dress or weight. Or there might have been not-so-casual comments aimed at undermining the authority of those who represented would-be candidates — linguistic tics that conveyed where power resided and where those who already had it had resolved that it would not.

Abdulle repeatedly encountered this in late 2013, when she first approached mainstream male gatekeepers (both Democrats and Republicans) about the work she was doing with Somali women in her area. “They asked me odd questions,” she recalled: “They would say, ‘We don’t know you. Where have you been? Where are the women

of your community?” The received wisdom about Somali women — that, as Muslims, they were second-class citizens, confined to their homes and lacking both the interest in and the opportunity for political involvement — was so strong that it seemed to blind them to her very presence before them. “‘Where’ ... when I’m standing there, they were asking, ‘where are the women of your community?’ *Don’t you see me? I’m standing in front of you. We’re here doing all this work,*” she remembered thinking. And then, when she managed to get the men to see her, she recalled, she couldn’t get them to acknowledge who she really was — a Ph.D. candidate, with years of research and political activity, both in Italy and the U.S. behind her — and what she was really doing. “So, after insisting, they would be like, ‘Okay, next time, could you come with the elders of your community?’” she said. “They talked in a way that was meant to show that they were ‘progressive’ — ahead of the game. But actually, they were aggressive. They were projecting their Orientalism and misogyny onto me. That ‘I don’t know you’ business: it’s ... ‘if I don’t see you, you don’t matter. If I don’t see you in the way I want you to be, then your leadership isn’t valid.’”

In the grossest examples, gatekeeper pushback could take the form of bullying: powerful progressives threatening insurgent campaign personnel with firing and subsequent blacklisting if they didn’t start to play by the old rules. It could take the form of not-so-subtle intimidation: as when formerly friendly power brokers summoned a candidate who had fallen out of favor to Washington to confront her with a dossier of damaging information at a meeting where she’d thought she was going to receive financial support. “They essentially threatened her to dissuade her from continuing in the race,” said an operative who had witnessed the scene.

Intimidation could take the form, for example, of the “rumor mill” through which the Atlanta political establishment created a steady drumbeat of doubt about Stacey Abrams at the start of her 2018 Georgia gubernatorial campaign. These former political staffers and consultants, who “saw themselves as sort of the backbone of the party” but were not invited to work on Abrams’ campaign, said Lauren Groh-Wargo, Abrams’ campaign manager, kept up a level of general “chatter,” both in hushed private conversations and in the press, “that there was no way a black woman could be viable.”

It was a testament to Abrams’ own political networks and relationships — built over 11 years in the Georgia state legislature — that the rumors didn’t turn into reality in Abrams’ primary campaign, where, after anticipating running unopposed, she suddenly found herself facing another Stacey, this one white, and from the very same Atlanta suburb into which millions of Democratic dollars had poured just one year earlier for the white, moderate, male (and unsuccessful) special election congressional candidate Jon Ossoff. Instead, Abrams won her primary with 76% of the vote, and won more votes than any Democrat in a state-wide race ever had<sup>26</sup>, despite running against a sitting secretary of state who had put in place new voter registration rules that effectively purged tens of thousands of African Americans from the voter rolls.<sup>27</sup>

“This is really the intricacy and depth of gatekeeping” today, said Jessica Byrd, who was Abrams’ chief of staff on the campaign. “It’s not a fat guy with a cigar saying ‘get out of the race ... It’s the kind of gatekeeping that tells you they’re smarter than you. They know something you don’t see. It’s seeding doubt about your own ability to do good in your community. It’s gaslighting — making you doubt yourself. It’s the conniving little brother of the big gatekeeper that creates this feeling that you put *everyone* at risk by being who you are.”

A number of the campaign veterans interviewed for this paper said there has definitely been a change of tone on the part of traditional gatekeepers who, as recently as two years ago, were reacting to the rise of outsider candidates and electoral groups with undisguised disdain. In a late 2017 paper for the Brookings Institute, authors Jonathan Rauch and Raymond J. La Raca captured the sound of it perfectly, as they surveyed the members of the American Association of Political Consultants for reaction to what they called the “rise of the hobbyist candidate” and the “trend toward amateurism.” (The consultants, unsurprisingly, were not fans. “It’s become like a clown car,” one said. “Everyone thinks they’re qualified and everyone jumps in.”)<sup>28</sup>

Now, a number of those “amateurs” said, the professionals have started speaking their language — and, often, taking credit for their work. “We certainly had all of the groups claim victory for our candidates who did win. There was lots of: we’ve been with so and so since day one and look how far they’ve come,” one noted.

And yet, even as a growing, if begrudging, respect has come to replace the outright scorn, a new sort of passive resistance has appeared in its stead. A bitter irony of their candidates' recent successes, a number of sources said, is that the very gatekeepers who once dismissed them with laughter now treat them as competition. This has led to new kinds of shut-out: status gatekeeping, information-monopolizing, contact-hoarding. In all, the psychology of scarcity writ large into what some called the "political-industrial complex" of progressive politics.

"We are filling a niche that no one else fills," said the founder of an organization that provides campaign support for free and has fielded enormous and growing demand from candidates. "The normal power structures in each state has said to us every time, 'we don't need you.' ... They're 'starved' of resources. They're 'overwhelmed' ... *Why* would they turn us down when the candidates are asking for us?"

This is not necessarily a mystery. Trying to reduce the barriers to political entry by providing top-flight campaign assistance, or research, or web support and social media strategy for free — as do organizations like Local Majority, Sister District, Square One Politics, and the like — does, arguably, pose an existential threat to people who make a very good living by selling those services. Running for office, after all, is big business — particularly for the campaign advisors and consultants who have long built their client lists through referrals from major gatekeepers, essentially forming a second layer of even more behind-the-scenes gatekeepers, operating with very little transparency. In all, the DC "revolving door," creates "a lot of misaligned incentives," Levitt notes. "When I started out, I assumed the only thing we'd have to overcome would be the Republican incumbents that we were trying to beat," he reflected. "And it turns out that there's a lot of party politics internally that have been a challenge as well."

It can sound disingenuous to say, as some of the new crop of political players working to shake up our white, male, and upper middle class political elite do say, that the ultimate goal of their work isn't winning their races — that "an election is not seen as a finish line," as Michigan United's Kumor put it, "but a punctuation mark in a longer process." In politics, after all, winning is the name of the game. It's how careers are made, income

is earned, and — of course — policies, and the values they rest upon — get put into practice. And yet, there's no denying that something larger is happening.

Stacey Abrams, for example, lost her race for Georgia governor. But she also activated millions of Georgia Democrats, many long-dormant. She did it while looking, speaking and acting like herself, with a campaign operation that threw out the old playbook, spending money on field operations and community outreach rather than and big media buys, using outsiders for her brain trust rather than the old-boy's network of fancy consultants in Atlanta. Above all, she accomplished what the Rutgers University professor Brittney Cooper has called "the most important victory: [to have] expanded our political imagination and enlarged our sense of what is possible."<sup>29</sup>

The Abrams campaign was, perhaps, the most dramatic and high-profile example of a loss that left in its wake a bright light of possibility, but it wasn't the only one. Liuba Grechen Shirley's Congressional race also ended in defeat, but it scored a major win for other working parents, present and future, barred from running for office by the impossible costs of childcare. And that's because, with Square One's help, Shirley successfully petitioned the FEC to allow working parents to use campaign funds to pay for child care in specific, campaign-related circumstances. In a landmark May 2018 ruling, the FEC approved. That year, other women running for state and local office around the country, inspired by Shirley's example, petitioned their own election officials to approve similar changes in campaign finance rules. (With mixed success: In Texas, which did eventually approve the change, the male opponent of a female petitioner, running for county commissioner, likened her request to using campaign funds to kennel a dog.)<sup>30</sup> And in the wake of the FEC's decision, eight other candidates for Congress reported babysitting and child care as campaign expenses, including Jahana Hayes, the first black woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Connecticut, and Ilhan Omar, the first Somali-American elected to Congress.<sup>31</sup>

**That sort of victory doesn't just make a crack in the apparatus of gatekeeping — it wedges the gates open so others can pass through. ■**

# Footnotes

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10. She beat King by 12 votes, and went on to defeat her Republican opponent by 26 points.
11. An 87 percent surge by May 2017, Emerge America founder Andrea Dew Steele told Elle. Rachel Combe, “Hillary Clinton Is Getting Back In The Game, But Some Critics Would Prefer She Sit This One Out,” elle.com, May 16, 2017
12. Karin Johanson, “Why Virginia Matters: Diversity, Outside Groups, Caucus, and Environment Lead to Down-Ballot Wave,” (Washington, DC: The Atlas Project, 2018).
13. “State legislative races are smaller, they’re less expensive,” Bosworth explained, echoing the thinking of many other group founders and leaders interviewed for this paper. “These days, in any Senate race or gubernatorial race or even congressional race, you’re talking millions and sometimes tens of millions of dollars. That’s just not a race that any ordinary person would feel like they can influence. In state legislative races and local races, a \$25 or \$50 contribution goes a long way. It actually is possible to get out there and knock on all the doors of your constituents because you have smaller districts.”
14. Johanson.
15. That “civics piece ... coming together to understand how much state capitals do, and who state legislators are,” coupled with the knowledge that “there’s a way to impact them even if you’re not a billionaire,” was the hook that pulled her, and many other women like her into direct political activity for the first time, said Melissa Walker, a children’s book author in Brooklyn, who started working with the former New York State Senator Daniel Squadron on his new Future Now Fund after hearing him speak at a friend’s house, and was soon running the organization’s Giving Circle program; Ninety percent of the candidates Future Now funded in Virginia that year won.
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