

# Donald Trump's Gift to Feminism: The Resistance

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*Donald Trump's surprise win in 2016 galvanized once-politically quiescent women and jolted those who had believed second-wave feminist victories were enduring. This "resistance" drew on two potent forces: the passion of the newly awakened, primarily grassroots participants; and the organizing experience of professionals and institutions determined to channel that passion into sustainable electoral and policy gains. The movement expanded beyond the political to encompass the social and cultural spheres and gave women of color a place in the spotlight. As women ran for national, state, and local office in record numbers, the #MeToo movement toppled men who once harassed with impunity. Record numbers of women won in the 2018 midterms, retaking the U.S. House of Representatives for the Democrats, and six women declared their candidacy for president in 2020. But it remains unclear whether these gains will be lasting and overcome remaining ambivalence about women and power.*

On November 8, 2016, many American women confronted a crushing reality: their fellow Americans (including a plurality of White women) had elected a brazen misogynist as president, rejecting the first woman to run as a major party nominee. His sexual swagger, stream of insults about women's looks, and infamous taped boast of forcing himself on women shattered every political taboo that decades of feminism had labored to put in place. More concretely, his conversion from supporter to opponent of abortion, his pledge to appoint stalwart conservatives to the Supreme Court, and his determination to repeal Obamacare promised policies that would roll back women's rights once seen as settled law. Women who backed Clinton thought they would be celebrating a historic first; instead they were lamenting a staggering reversal.

On November 6, 2018, women shattered records in a display of raw political power at every level of government: as candidates, voters, volunteers, and donors. For two years, Democratic women had been on the march, running for office in unheard-of numbers and gathering in churches, sororities, brew pubs, and suburban dens to address postcards, plan protests, and storm constituent meetings. Women were the force that wrested control of the House of Representatives

from Republicans. Health care, gun control, and education, issues women have long rated as urgent, helped drive many votes to Democratic candidates. Suburban women deserted Republicans to flip many key seats; women of color mobilized voter turnout seldom seen in a midterm election. Nevada became the first state in the country with a majority of women in the legislature. Nancy Pelosi was once again speaker of the House, outwitting the president in their showdown over a shutdown. By early 2019, six women had announced they would run for president in 2020, one century after American women first won the right to vote.

These bookends capture a familiar dynamic for women in their long struggle for rights and representation: opportunity followed by regression, progress in fits and starts. While women won a record number of seats in Congress, they still have not hit the 25 percent mark. The gaps extend beyond politics. More than fifty years after equal employment laws opened new professions to women, the number of women running corporations is vanishingly low, and even dropped in 2018. Equal pay eludes women. They continue to shoulder more childcare and household work, holding them back from advancement in their jobs or persuading some of the most privileged to leave the workforce altogether. Women remain disproportionately poor. Divorce or single parenthood still leave them more vulnerable than men. The #MeToo movement has toppled once-immune men and replaced many of them with women, but new cases of sexual harassment seem to pop up daily, revealing its deep and stubborn roots from Hollywood to the factory floor.

Yet the leap from 2016 to 2018 also reveals something unexpected: Donald Trump's election turned out to be a boon as well as a curse for the feminist movement. The shock and anger galvanized women into political action and prompted a resurgence of feminist energy not seen in decades. Even as Trump's Supreme Court appointments and regulatory changes erode protections on fronts from abortion restrictions to campus sexual assault, women have mustered a formidable counterattack. The movement has combined two potent forces: the passion of the newly awakened, primarily grassroots participants; and the organizing experience of professionals and institutions determined to channel that passion into sustainable electoral and policy gains.

The night after Clinton's loss, women in a New York restaurant were weeping openly, their arms wrapped around their weeping daughters. In a suburb of Phoenix, Melinda Merkel Iyer recalled trying to soothe two sobbing, scared daughters; she could not sleep herself that night. And if liberal, White, relatively privileged women were shell-shocked, women of color of all classes now faced the president-elect's race-baiting, scaremongering about immigrants, and appeals to White supremacists. Facebook, later to be exposed as an unwitting tool of Russian bots bent on defeating Hillary Clinton, was flooded with anguished posts and meetups to mourn: the first glimmerings of what has come to be known as the resistance. Melinda Iyer joined their ranks not long after the election, one of count-

less women across the country spurred to political activity by their rage and despair at Trump's election.

Yet women were not united in grief; far from it. In Mississippi, Krysta Fitch, at thirty-two, had cast the first vote of her life for Donald Trump: she explained that as a devout Christian, she did not believe women should run for office. In Washington, D.C., Cleta Mitchell had no qualms about women's role in public life; she is a prominent lawyer, a former state legislator, and National Rifle Association board member – and an enthusiastic Trump supporter. In one of the Michigan counties that flipped from Obama to Trump in 2016, Victoria Czapski welcomed his tough talk on immigrants; she feared some were terrorists and said all immigrants must enter the country legally, as her great-grandparents did.

In head-spinning fashion, the 2018 midterm results appeared to be a rebuke not just of Donald Trump, but of the reversion to the Mad Men-era he embodied, the unchallenged dominance of White men. Women not only won office in record numbers, but the candidates were also remarkably diverse, including Blacks, Latinas, Muslims, Native Americans, gay, bisexual, and transgender women, military veterans, and CIA officers. The spontaneous primal scream of the Women's March had become an organized political movement, one that both embraced and eclipsed standard political parties and institutions.

Yet the divisions 2016 exposed – of race, class, and gender – remain. The country is both transfixed and repelled by strong women, who are all too often seen as overbearing, strident, and transgressive. While women's ambition knows no partisan boundaries, attitudes about gender roles often diverge by party affiliation. That is why women who break from tradition often face resistance not only from men, but also other women.

The grinding slog to transform American workplaces into ones not only free of sexual harassment but also more hospitable to women's leadership will test the durability of the #MeToo movement. A persistent ambivalence about women's power is even now playing out in the discussion surrounding Elizabeth Warren's presidential candidacy. As she rose in the polls, so did attacks on her as unelectable, unlikable, shrill, or angry – tropes often used to undermine women in politics and other fields. The 2020 presidential campaign looms as an important test of how gender assumptions and stereotypes play out in a field of multiple women, and whether the country is in fact open to a woman as commander in chief.

**T**he subways of Washington, D.C., on a January morning in 2017 were the first clue: you could not even cram onto the platforms, there were so many women in their bright pink pussy hats and handmade placards. No one knew what to expect from a march launched not by any organized women's movement but rather a Facebook post by a retired lawyer in Hawaii named Teresa

Shook. By the time the masses converged on the Mall, it was clear that turnout would surpass all expectations. It was a festival of protest, the mood not only defiant but exuberant, the signs a grab bag of every conceivable cause, united only in their revulsion for the president who had been inaugurated the day before. Marchers hoisted children on their shoulders or guided elderly parents through crowds so dense at times it was difficult to walk. They waved signs lettered in magic marker: “Hate Does Not Make America Great,” “I Will Not Go Back Quietly to the 1950s,” and “I’m 17 – Fear Me!” They chanted, “This is what democracy looks like.” These scenes were repeated in cities across the country and, even more surprisingly, the world.

That night, the professionals took charge. If the marches had been kicked off spontaneously and independently of existing women’s organizations, by the time they took place, experienced organizers were determined to channel the neophytes’ energy into sustained resistance. At a four-hour post-march meeting cum pep rally, a parade of organizations made pitches to interested marchers about causes they could champion.

Priority one: preserve health insurance, including contraception and pregnancy care, as core health benefits of Obamacare. On the spot, marchers launched a mass call-in to their senators asking them to vote against repealing Obamacare. The next day, Planned Parenthood and other groups led training for organizers on channeling mobilization toward political action. The sponsors of the march culled names from those who had registered and worked to recruit them as volunteers for the 2018 midterms. The Women’s March sent out specific tasks that women could perform to keep the political momentum going and urged them to form “huddles.” These were local groups convened to plot specific political actions on a grassroots level: a successor to consciousness-raising groups, but with an immediate focus on concrete tasks.

The resistance soon expanded far beyond the loose and often fractious coalitions that constituted the Women’s March organization itself, which had become a national nonprofit. Women across the country, many new to political activism, formed chapters of Indivisible, one of a bevy of emerging groups that offered explicit instructions on how best to exert political power as constituents and organizers. The aim of these groups, including Swing Left, Act Blue, Sister District, and Flippable, was to take Democratic control of Congress in the midterm elections.

Indivisible’s downloadable handbook on what levers work to sway members of Congress became a template for women around the country, whose first act was to pack local town halls vowing to hold their members of Congress accountable for any vote to repeal Obamacare. Even as some Republican members of Congress canceled meetings, women from Minnesota to Pennsylvania rallied to shame them. Their first tangible victory came later that year, when enough Republicans, feeling the local heat, defected to defeat attempts to repeal Obamacare.

The resistance to Trump was a movement of several fronts. One strand drew on relative newcomers to politics: women newly emboldened to run for office along with a legion of volunteers driven to do something by their opposition to Trump and his policies. Usually, women have to be coaxed to become candidates. Now they were raising their hands in unheard-of numbers, taking advantage of a large number of open seats, which, compared with challenging incumbents, have historically been easier for women to win. Immediately after the election, groups that specialized in training or funding candidates such as Emerge America, She Should Run, EMILY's List, or Vote Run Lead, were deluged with calls: more in a week than many had received in a year.

Women who had been reeling in the days after the election began to act. From Melinda Iyer in suburban Phoenix to Megan McCarthy in a deep-red suburb of St. Louis, they took small, local steps that grew into sustained opposition. Trying to shake off despair, Iyer logged on to the Arizona state legislative website. She discovered Arizona's Request to Speak program, which allows a verified voter to register an opinion on a bill and ask to appear before the legislature.

At first, she said, she noticed a lawmaker rolling his eyes and others texting under the table as she spoke. She began to flag a variety of conservative bills, including tax measures she feared would deprive schools of money, voucher programs, or redistricting attempts, in a do-it-yourself newsletter first read by hundreds, then tens of thousands. A few months after the election, she was live-tweeting from the Arizona statehouse to muster opposition to a voucher proposal. Though that push failed, she helped collect enough signatures to force it on to a November ballot. There, voters soundly defeated the proposal, handing Iyer's troops another victory.

"We're not going to sit back anymore and let policies go through in the middle of the night," she said. "I never thought I'd be in a place where I'd know the Koch brothers' lobbyists by sight – and they'd know me."

She no longer worries about legislators underestimating her; in fact, she said lawmakers and advocacy groups now reach out to her when they want help spreading the word about bills they back.

Iyer drew inspiration from two important engines of activism; she joined a chapter of Indivisible and a burgeoning movement of parents and educators angry at the deep budget cuts state governments had inflicted on schools (later to emerge as #RedforEd and one of the forces behind a wave of teachers' strikes).

In February 2017, McCarthy assembled her first cadre of volunteers for her "huddle" in Ellisville, Missouri, at the Crafty Chameleon bar. Once resigned to holding back their political opinions for fear of alienating conservative neighbors in a district that has reliably elected Republicans, the women (and a handful of men) brainstormed about possible actions: Hold potluck suppers to meet and support local immigrants. Convene interfaith gatherings. Attend more marches – against the Dakota Access pipeline, for the release of Trump's tax returns. Bombard

members of Congress with letters and calls. Help with voter registration, since Missouri has adopted a strict voter-ID law.

As the midterms drew closer, one of the members of the huddle, with no previous political experience, ran for local office. Although she lost, she was the first Democrat to compete in that district since 2010 and was able to win nearly 45 percent of the vote in a staunchly Republican district.

“Women make it happen,” McCarthy said.

As the army of neophytes assembled, they joined a more experienced corps: grassroots organizations often staffed and led by women of color, from the South to the Sun Belt. For decades, Black women – through churches, sororities, and other mainstays of Black life – were foot soldiers in the effort to register and turn out voters. They were often overshadowed in the public eye by men who took leadership roles in the civil rights movement, even though their role was well known within their communities.

But their experience of resurgent racism – both close to home in racial incidents and through the national megaphone of Trump’s racist statements – imbued them with renewed urgency. When Roy Moore ran for senator in Alabama in 2017, with a record of bigotry toward Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and gay people and charges that he had sexually harassed underage girls, it was Black women who were key to his defeat. Women like LaTosha Brown, cofounder of the Black Voters Matter Fund, and Adrienne Shropshire, executive director of BlackPAC, directed money and foot soldiers to Alabama. Those efforts helped the surprise victor, Doug Jones, surpass even President Barack Obama’s share of the Black vote and win 98 percent of Black women who voted.

In states like Arizona, years of hostility to immigrants, embodied by, but hardly limited to, Sheriff Joe Arpaio, bred a generation of Latino activism. Women like Carmen Cornejo, chairwoman of Chicanos Por La Causa and a longtime advocate for the Dreamers, and Alejandra Gomez, co-executive director of Lucha, a local advocacy group, demonstrated their political power by rallying voters to unseat Arpaio in 2016.

As the midterms approached, turning out Latinx voters would prove as crucial in purpling states like Arizona as was the drive to animate Black voters in key Southern and Midwestern races. Many of these groups had long felt taken for granted by the Democratic Party establishment. And they were determined that both the party and the new infusion of politically engaged women, particularly well-meaning White suburbanites, recognize their experience and leadership.

“They need to trust that women of color can be strategists,” Gomez said. “We know we’re in it for the long haul. We want these women to also be in it for the long haul, not just this fired-up moment.”

Such tensions have long been a part of feminism, stretching back to suffragist days, when some White leaders of the movement appealed to racism to win rat-

ification of the Nineteenth Amendment in Southern states. And they had flared in the run-up to the Women's March in 2016, when Black women already angry about the plurality of White women who had voted for Trump objected to the initial lack of Black representation among the march's early leaders. While the march soon recruited experienced leaders of color, wounds festered and the Women's March organization itself split into rival factions, driven by accusations that some of these new leaders were anti-Semitic.

These skirmishes were a preview of a much more fundamental strategic and moral debate within the ranks of those determined to defeat Donald Trump. Women and people of color have provided much of the energy and fervor to resist him. But the Democratic Party is wrestling with how essential (or even possible) it is to woo back White, noncollege educated voters, particularly in the electorally significant Midwest. The midterms and the next presidential election will prove an existential test for the party, and the power and prominence of women of all backgrounds in the political struggle to come.

**I**t seemed as if the furor over Trump's behavior and attitudes toward women would play out just as victims of sexual harassment had endured for decades: an initial uproar, then a return to male entitlement and impunity. When the Access Hollywood tapes became public, politicians scrambled to distance themselves and pundits predicted Trump could not survive the revelations. The most searing reactions came in the torrent of online testimonials of harassment and abuse under the hashtag #MeToo. Although prompted by a White actress's post asking for women to share their stories, #MeToo had been launched a decade earlier by a Black woman, Tarana Burke, trying to call attention to the abuse and harassment endured by women and girls of color. Yet as has all too often been the case, Burke labored in relative anonymity to tell their stories.

Trump defied the predictions of doom. Many of his women supporters dismissed the tape as "locker room talk" and swatted away the accusations of multiple women that he had groped or kissed them without their consent.

But the fury and anguish about harassment did not ebb; it went underground and then burst spectacularly into the open. Many women continued to seethe not just about Trump's election, but what also appeared to be the indifference to their viral testaments of abuse. And women who once were understandably afraid to speak out began to take the immense risk of abandoning the shield of anonymity, coaxed by dogged reporters.

A window cracked open at Fox News with the exposure and downfall of Roger Ailes and Bill O'Reilly. But it was not until a handful of actresses and administrative assistants went public with their accusations that Harvey Weinstein forced himself on them – and in many cases, then paid them off to keep quiet in confidential settlements – that #MeToo ignited and spread around the world.

It was a dizzying time – news media executives, movie stars, corporate chiefs, Silicon Valley tech titans, academics, artists, musicians, architects, directors, playwrights, novelists, dancers, chefs – a cascade of men accused of preying on women were, remarkably, pushed out of jobs even if they were the chief rainmakers or creative forces.

Yet just as Tarana Burke had found, justice was more elusive for women with less visibility, money, or social status and, all too often, women of color. Restaurant servers endured harassment in exchange for the tips necessary for even a minimally living wage, or lost income when they rejected advances. Women laboring on farms and cleaning hotel rooms all reported abuses ranging from rape to harassment. And on factory floors where the earliest cases establishing sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination were originally won, an entrenched culture of sexual swagger, entitlement, and bullying proved a stubborn scourge.

At two Ford Motor Company plants in Chicago, lawsuits, investigations, and findings of discrimination by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) stretched back decades.

When Darnise Hardy arrived on the line in the 1970s, one of the first women to work on the floor, she was told she belonged in the kitchen. In 1993, when a young Suzette Wright arrived at the plant, she was greeted with sexual taunts. And nearly twenty years later, Christie Van's supervisor pressed her for sexual favors.

Women filed the first of many lawsuits in the 1990s. The EEOC found evidence of sexual and racial harassment and reached a settlement with Ford that included having outsiders monitor the factory for three years. For a few years, workers said incidents subsided. Then the Great Recession of 2008 nearly bankrupted the automobile industry and diverted attention from harassment to survival. When production finally began to rebound, incidents of harassment spiked. In 2015, half of all sexual harassment and gender discrimination complaints lodged with the EEOC about Ford's domestic operations originated in Chicago.

In the last few years at Ford's Chicago plants, one woman said a male coworker bit her on the buttocks. A laborer described in pornographic detail what he wanted to do to another woman, then exposed himself to her, she said; later, he pushed her into an empty room and turned off the lights before she fled. Once more, the EEOC issued a finding of discrimination and hashed out a settlement with Ford in the summer of 2017. Once more, the company vowed to change and paid a stiff penalty, while outside monitors headed to the factory floor.

What was particularly sobering was that top Ford managers were not cartoon villains. They insisted they wanted the harassment to stop, but they underestimated its scale, urgency, and staying power. The monitors in the first settlement had ended their stint in 2003, but noted warning signs: staffers inexperienced in investigating complaints, the lack of a policy against fraternization, and the practice of promoting people widely perceived to be harassers. All of these issues would resurface.

Ford delayed or declined to fire those accused of harassment, leaving workers to conclude that offenders would go unpunished. It let sexual harassment training wane and, women charge, failed to stamp out retaliation.

Workers and their advocates also pointed to failings of the local union, torn between its mission to represent both accusers and the accused, with a leadership that included alleged predators. Many women accused their union representatives of either harassing them, dismissing or trivializing their complaints, or pressuring them into silence because of fears the plant would be shut down.

The struggles to set Ford's Chicago plants in order are echoed by institutions across the country that not only are trying to change workplace cultures, but also are battling culturally imbued attitudes about sexual entitlement and the very nature of masculinity. Like the sexual revolution in the 1970s, the new spotlight on sexual harassment prompted a searching, uncomfortable assessment not only of the workplace, but also of private life: what constitutes consent, how to read sexual cues, the role of pornography in shaping men's approach to foreplay and sexual conquest, whether bad sex is a form of harassment, whether men would now shy away from mentoring women. This confusion and resentment, too, would detonate in the political arena.

**S**omehow, women are still shocked and angry to find that sisterhood is fickle. Women, in fact, do not define their self-interest in the same ways. That was true at the peak of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and it remains true in the age of Trump.

A truism of political science is that party affiliation drives voting, far more than gender. And women who voted for Trump spanned the gamut: conservative Christians like Krysta Fitch who believed the Bible made men the head of the household; nurses like Rebecca Gregory who supported Planned Parenthood but objected to President Barack Obama's stance on the police; engineers like Deb Alighire of Michigan who trusted his business acumen to bring back jobs to decimated manufacturing areas; women like Victoria Czapski who worried about terrorism and immigration.

Most women I interviewed over the past two years either felt his insults to women were exaggerations by a hostile news media or decided they were a far lower priority than other issues. "If I turned down every candidate who objectified women, I'd vote for no one," Gregory said. Many women I met, whether they subscribed to traditional gender roles or not, whether they embraced being called feminist or shunned the label, were hardly meek and subservient. They were often forceful and opinionated.

Yet it was the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation hearings in September 2018 that exposed how raw, wide, and partisan the gulf between American women remains. While mostly Democratic women rallied around Christine Blasey Ford, finding

her testimony sincere and courageous and explaining her memory lapses as the understandable result of trauma, Trump's base had markedly different reactions. Some dismissed her as part of a partisan plot: Kavanaugh himself, his face contorted with rage, denounced the hearings as a political hit job and insulted members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, most notably Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota. For others, the hearings resonated with a note Trump had struck: that could be your husband or son falsely accused in a wave of #MeToo hysteria. And still others, most notably some who had either survived sexual abuse or whose close relatives had, echoed some of the divides of class that helped power Trump's election. They prided themselves on stoicism and grit, implying that unlike elite women, they could not afford to dwell on their experience years later.

"PTSD, c'mon, get real," said Crystal Walls, a sixty-year-old waitress in Southaven, Mississippi, who said her daughter had been raped, beaten, and left unconscious in a motel room twenty years ago. "Maybe she needs to talk to some servicemen that really understand PTSD. It's not that I don't understand rape, big time. But if it affects you that bad, which it did my daughter, you go to counseling, whatever you need to do. My daughter's gone on just fine with her life."

Some were also skeptical of the gaps in Ford's memory. Krysta Fitch said her stepfather abused her for several years, beginning when she was about nine years old and ending with his arrest and imprisonment when she was thirteen. "I just have a hard time believing that someone would wait that long to say something," she said of Ford. "For her not to be able to remember most of the things that happened doesn't make sense to me. There are small, minute details that stick with you no matter what. I mean the room you're in, or the smell of that person, it stays with you."

So why don't women who share the all-too-common experience of being demeaned and harassed by men share a common bond that might transcend political party? And why would women oppose rights and freedoms that seem to be in their own self-interest? It is a question that has tormented feminists since the fight for suffrage.

It depends on which identities – woman, wife, mother, race, class, political, or religious affiliation – are more central for which woman. Just as Phyllis Schlafly rallied conservative women against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s by defending motherhood and homemaking, political scientists have found that many conservative women tend to define their power and privilege through the men in their lives. Trump's appeal to economic, racial, and gender resentment and his promise to return to old hierarchies appealed to a segment of women even as it did to men, a study by political scientists Erin C. Cassese and Tiffany D. Barnes showed.<sup>1</sup> Many of these women scored high on a scale of "hostile sexism," meaning that they saw women's gains coming at the expense of men. They also clung to the advantage of being White as compensation for the disadvantage of being a woman.

Melissa Deckman, a political scientist at Washington College, in Chestertown, Maryland, who has written about women in the Tea Party, surveyed likely female voters in the midterms and found that Democratic women ranked gender equality among their top political priorities; Republican women ranked it among the lowest, far behind terrorism, immigration, and education.<sup>2</sup>

**A**fter two years of training, fundraising, and testing the waters, women mounted their most direct lunge at political power in 2018 as they ran for office at all levels of government. The midterms offered an existential test of the resistance, and women's centrality to it. And they offered clues about the most effective ways of selling voters on women and power: how to champion and defang images of strength and assertion.

In every way, the midterm candidates and campaigns broke the mold. Insurgent women of color like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Ayanna Pressley of Boston challenged longtime White male incumbents in their own parties, pulling off upset primary victories in safe Democratic seats. Notably, Republicans fielded relatively few women; the party has lagged in creating fundraising and recruitment infrastructure aimed at women.

The women of 2018 campaigned in new ways. They were unapologetic about motherhood. A few breastfed babies in their introductory videos, while Mikie Sherill of New Jersey defied the conventional wisdom that bringing kids to campaign events would provoke questions about how women could juggle Congress and children. Lucy McBath won Newt Gingrich's formerly safe Republican seat in suburban Atlanta, propelled by a raw video describing her son's death in gun violence.

They were aggressive. Dana Nessel won her race for Michigan's attorney general with a pull-no-punches ad about sexual harassment: "Who can you trust most not to show you their penis? Is it the candidate who doesn't have a penis?"

They claimed male emblems of power as their own. In campaign ads and videos, a crop of women military veterans projected strength and patriotism, dressing in uniform or posing in a bomber jacket next to a fighter plane. Those credentials helped some Democrats flip seats in more centrist districts, including Elaine Luria in Virginia and Chrissy Houlahan in Pennsylvania.

And many women were determined to exert power they had long been denied as voters or candidates of color. LaTosha Brown has spent more than a quarter-century as a grassroots organizer studying how Black voters can gain power in their own communities, lessons she put to work rallying and motivating voters to turn out across the South. Raised in Selma, Alabama, she was surrounded by landmarks of the civil rights movement and reminders of continuing discrimination and voter suppression. She plastered a bus with images of raised Black fists, and drove through countless small towns in Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee, drawing appreciative honks from Black drivers and some avert-

ed stares from Whites. She and her colleagues chose states with marquee races, like Stacey Abrams's quest in Georgia to become the first Black female governor in the nation. Brown opened each meeting with a spiritual or civil rights anthem and closed each one with a prayer. She and her colleagues have found that shaming Black voters to turn out by citing the many who died to win that freedom is often counterproductive; they must be convinced their vote will make a difference. So at every stop, she talked to voters and volunteers about the importance of change at the local level, like running for seats on the school board or in races for sheriff or prosecutor.

For decades, through the civil rights and women's liberation movements, women of color remained largely invisible, partly out of deference to Black men who were often prime targets of racial violence, partly because sexism was hardly limited to White men. Not only did they march and endure water hoses, dogs, beatings, and imprisonment, they also taught school, cooked church suppers, held down their households when Black men were killed or jailed, and brought their children with them to the polls to impress on them the urgency of voting.

In the midterms, many were in the spotlight at last. They did not win all the victories they sought: Abrams lost by the smallest margin of any Democrat in decades, amid widespread charges of voter suppression. Brown allowed herself some flashes of bitterness, but no despair.

"One of the gifts of Black women is that we're extremely resilient," she said. "We don't have the luxury of giving up. We see how fragile democracy is. But you will see that people still feel a sense of pride and accomplishment of the work that has been led by Black women. My belief is that if enough of us are building relationships together, we're going to assert the America that we seek."

**T**hat assertion began as women took office in January 2019 – and it both enthralled and appalled a nation still unaccustomed to muscular displays of female power.

Nancy Pelosi has offered a master class in the patient acquisition and exuberant flexing of power. She methodically put down a rebellion against her reclaiming the post of speaker of the House, one that smacked of sexism and ageism. She outwitted and flummoxed a pugilistic president in a duel over the government shutdown that riveted the country. In a now-famous televised encounter, she deftly parried Trump's attempts to talk over, ignore, and undercut her. She was steely, calm, and pointed. He demanded money for the wall; the master vote-counter told him flatly he would come up short. He tried to unnerve her by referring to her leadership challenge; she shot back, "Don't characterize the strength that I bring to this meeting as the leader of the House Democrats."

A president who revels in insult by tweet found himself one-upped in the art of the put-down. As a candidate, Donald Trump was so invested in totems of mas-

culinity that he felt he had to reassure voters about the size of his penis; she dismissed his calls for the wall as “like a manhood thing for him.” Nor did she hesitate to use her authority as a mother and grandmother as its own sort of weapon; she dismissed the president’s behavior as akin to a toddler’s tantrums. The impeachment inquiry has posed an existential challenge to Trump, and Pelosi, initially wary, is now at the heart of the most consequential duel of power – between branches of government and this man and woman – that the country has witnessed in decades.

But with women’s ascent came attacks and unease, particularly if those women were not White or political centrists. Ocasio-Cortez has become a lightning rod for the right, who have deployed familiar weapons of gender: branding her as a hypocrite for wearing expensive (and borrowed) clothes in an *Interview* magazine photo shoot and falsely accusing her of hiring her boyfriend on the government’s dime.

She has broken all the rules in Congress, where deference to seniority is the norm and newcomers are expected to avoid the spotlight. It may be particularly galling to see such a young woman – she was twenty-nine when she won her seat in Congress – command so much attention and so coolly deflect criticism.

As the presidential race heats up, so has the debate about how women running for office are characterized and covered. Women once more are confronting charges of being unlikeable or unelectable – questions frequently raised about Elizabeth Warren – prompting accusations of continuing double standards. Women candidates are wrestling with how much to emphasize gender, as Kirsten Gillibrand did in her unsuccessful primary bid, or downplay it, as Amy Klobuchar has. There remains a political buzz about men running for office that tends to elude women, as many charge was the case for Beto O’Rourke or Pete Buttigieg compared with Stacey Abrams. It is both heartening and depressing that several of the men running for president felt compelled to say they would name a woman as vice president: on the one hand, women have become a potent enough political force that they must be placated; on the other, the faithful number two is a place women know all too well.

And yet, as Warren’s rise in the polls shows, women remain credible candidates for president. She hasn’t confined herself to traditional women’s issues or expected codes of behavior, nor has she run away from what she’s learned as a woman in men’s fields. Warren’s popularity has been fueled in part by her detailed policy positions: an area in which women in politics have long excelled, by necessity. Her struggle to juggle work and family as a divorced mother resonates with many women, and her childcare proposal is the most comprehensive of any candidate’s. She is also seen as a willing pugilist who punches back at Trump – hardly the model of traditional feminine decorum.

Just as the women who won the grueling battle for suffrage knew a century ago, the prize of full equality for women remains elusive. The backlash to women’s

power epitomized by the rise of Donald Trump remains a potent strand of American life, but perhaps less potent than many women feared in 2016. The work of wrestling and sustaining power for women will remain, no matter who prevails in 2020.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Erin C. Cassese and Tiffany D. Barnes, "Reconciling Sexism and Women's Support for Republican Candidates: A Look at Gender, Class, and Whiteness in the 2012 and 2016 Presidential Races," *Political Behavior* 41 (3) (2019): 677–700.
- <sup>2</sup> Melissa Deckman, "What Women Want: Issue Priorities for Women Voters in Election 2018," Gender Watch, August 10, 2018, <http://www.genderwatch2018.org/what-women-want/>.