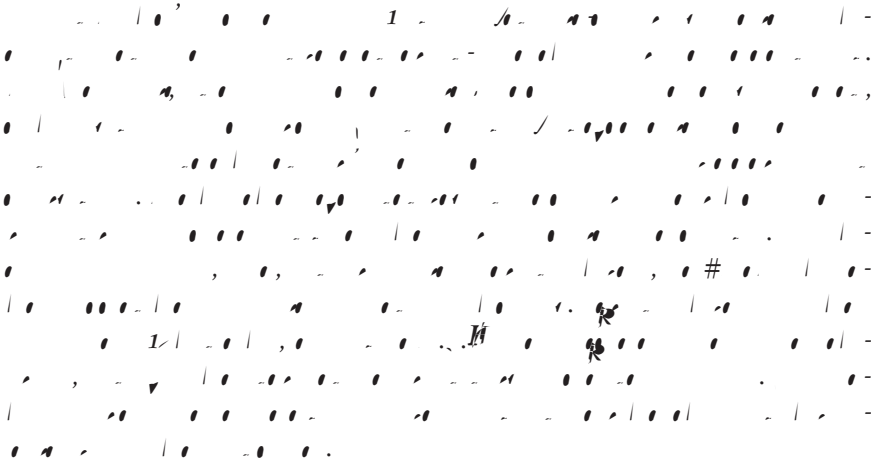


Donald Trump's Gift to Feminism: The Resistance

Susan Chira



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.

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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,

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.

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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.

It 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

Ford delayed or declined to fire those accused of harassment, leaving workers to conclude that offenders would go unpunished. It let sexual harassment training

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 mem-

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.²

After 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.

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

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 wresting and sustaining power for women will remain, no matter who prevails in 2020.

