

Democracy Rising's
**Women of Color
Pathway to Power
Report**

WE ARE
**DEMOCRACY
RISING**



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“For women of color, generations of the added burden of care, misogyny and racism have a compounding effect that keeps us out of the pipeline. There are so many places where we can just get yanked out of any pipeline that we might have actually gotten into. We are constantly being pulled out to care for the needs of others.”



Introduction

In the Spring of 2023, Democracy Rising convened the first Democracy Transformation Summit in New York State. A cohort of 18 women of color working on issues of justice and democracy in their local communities came together for three days to investigate our collective experience, priorities, and potential. Cohort members included elected officials, non-profit leaders, organizers, government administrators, and more. They came from 16 states and were racially, generationally, and geographically diverse.

During our time together, we discussed a glaring gap in our justice ecosystem: We, women of color, are not strategically building power as a political bloc. This research project is our attempt to start that work. This report details the insights we gained by surveying the ecosystem.

We wanted to learn how women of color working on issues of justice and democracy across sectors feel about building power together. We were curious to learn what these women want to see change, and how they would go about making those changes. We hoped they would share their visions, aspirations, and strategic genius. We hypothesized that women of color (WOC) are not only eager to strategically start building power as a bloc, but that they feel uniquely prepared and qualified to lead us all into a meaningful transformation of our democracy.

There is a pressure in the women-in-democracy space to focus almost entirely on elected officials and even candidates. Democracy is a daily practice, much like hope or love. We get better at it as we work at it every single day, within the structures of our homes, our workplaces, and our communities—not just the ballot box.

The fundamental proposition of a representative democracy is that our human needs and projects are too big for all of us to weigh in. We elect people we trust to have these deliberations and make these decisions on our behalf. As such, an important part of democracy is voting and electing our representatives.

Just as critical are much more routine democracy-building activities, including organizing in our communities, educating our children, working collaboratively with others in any field, advocating for justice and rights, managing and implementing democratically passed policy, and litigating anti-democracy/anti-rights affronts. It even includes the care economy. It takes the whole ecosystem to drive a functional democracy. This project focuses on that ecosystem.

Methodology

Led by Democracy Rising, a small working group developed a surveying tool to conduct interviews with a racially and culturally diverse group of women. We intentionally oversampled the voices of Black and Native women, recognizing the additional historical burdens they carry. As such, the insights gleaned from this project carry a particular weight towards the thoughts and opinions of Black and Native participants, as well as those in positions of top leadership. It's important to note that, given their own important roles in democracy building, the interviewers and authors of this report also were survey participants.

The survey instrument was a Google form in three sections used to guide the interviews. Interviewers took notes and entered them into the surveying tool. Interviews were conducted primarily by Democracy Rising staff, with 1/3 of the interviews being conducted by cohort members. Interviewers contacted women and gender-expansive people of color (POC) in their own democracy networks to invite them to participate. The list of participants grew as interviewees recommended other women whose voices should be included in this project. The 74 women we interviewed are civic leaders in 28 states nationwide as elected officials, government administrators, advocates, non-profit leaders, academics, organizers, and more. They are women at every stage of leadership. Against the odds, most of them have broken glass ceilings, and many find themselves at the top of their fields.

Most interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, with a few held in person or by phone. These conversations, lasting approximately an hour, unfolded in a relaxed and open manner, exploring three core areas:

1. Demographics
2. Demographic questions
3. Research questions

DEMOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

Chart I. Participant Field of Work

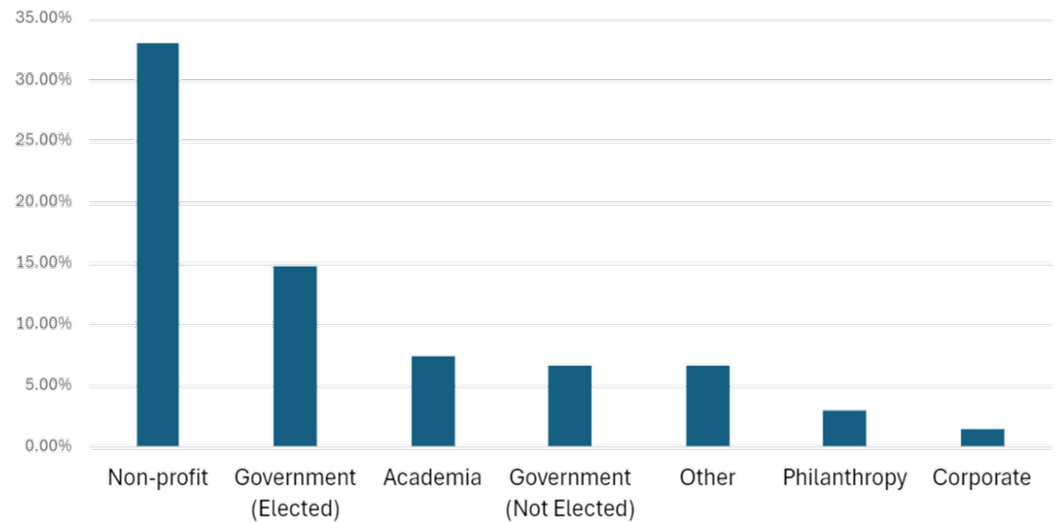


Chart II. State Distribution of Participant Location

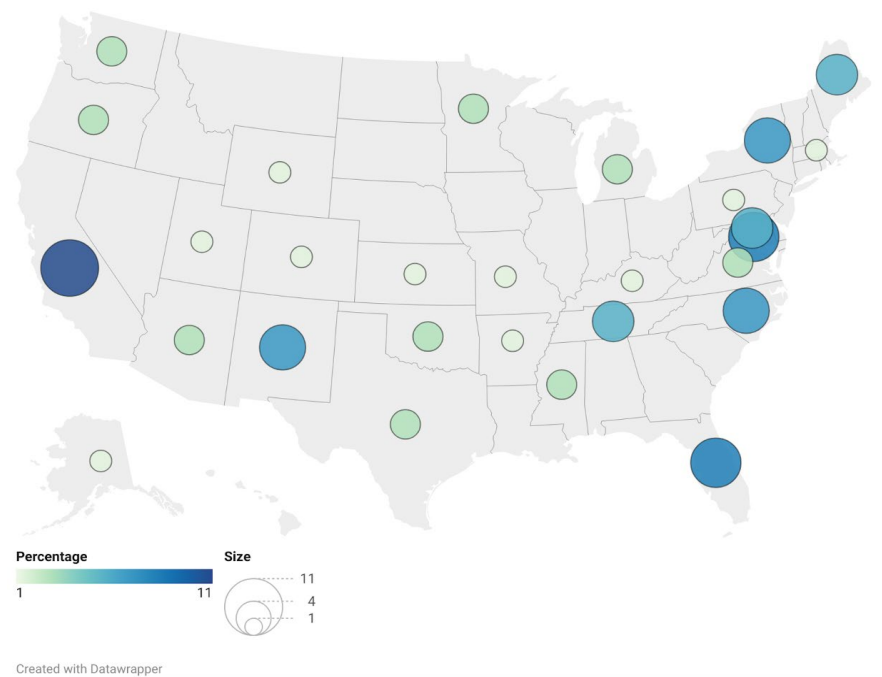
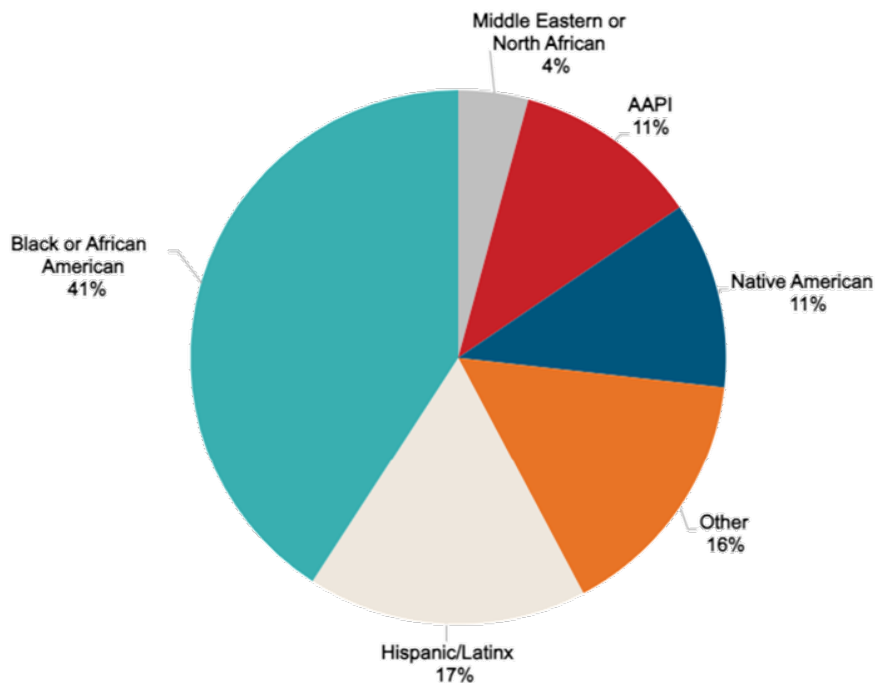


Chart III. Participant Cultural Identity



Context questions were aimed at gathering insights into each participant's professional journey as a woman of color, and their current work.

Research questions asked our participants to dream. The section started with the question "Women of color will comprise 25% of the total US population in about 10 years. What do you think our country would look like if, in 10 years, we held seats of power in proportion to our share of the population?" This question was followed by questions about the barriers we face, the progress we've made, how we treat each other, who our allies are, and what we need to do now, to get to hold 25% of the power in 10 years' time.

In addition to 74 interviews, we convened 2 small focus groups—one in Phoenix with a group of Native changemakers, the other in Miami, with a group of Black and brown changemakers, facilitated by cohort members. These dynamic conversations further enriched our understanding of the collective aspirations and challenges women of color face in the pursuit of democratic transformation. Interviews and focus groups were held between January and June 2024. After finalizing the data collection phase, the data was cleaned up and organized. Qualitative analysis was conducted using the Dedoose online platform.

What We Learned

OUR COLLECTIVE VISION

As a collective, our participants were able to articulate in detail the vision they have for the country we want to build and leave for our children and grandchildren. Most of our participants and all of our interviewers expressed gratitude for the space to have such a candid and aspirational conversation with someone that was, in many cases, a stranger. Several participants talked about the importance of doing vision work together, and how we must integrate this into our work practices. This can help mitigate the time focusing on putting out fires and holding the line. Having aspirational and future facing strategies is an important, but most often neglected, part of our collective work.

“This interview was challenging in the best way. It felt like a sigh of relief when you told me to put my dream cap on and bring out my magic wand. I felt liberated.”

“I've loved that you've placed me in a different world. Makes me think of basic needs. Having access and space for inspiration is a basic need. This work of imagining and visioning is part of THE WORK.”

We asked our participants to describe what this country would look like if women of color held power in proportion to our share of the population (25% in about ten years' time), across all sectors. Though most of us were able to share our vision at great length, a handful of our participants said it was difficult for them to dream in this way. The majority of us who were eager to dream believe that 25% is enough to radically change the landscape. This is not because we feel that with those numbers we can necessarily pass meaningful legislation, but because we believe we can profoundly change the culture of our institutions, our civil society, and therefore of our politics and governance. Many shared a vision of a country where process would be as important as outcomes, and where a productive democratic process is shepherd along through power sharing and a shift to a care economy. Our collective vision includes a rights expansive approach, where policies as a norm are universal, rather than targeted.

Several participants talked about how we would measure the success of our policies across the board by measuring how younger generations are faring.

As experienced coalition builders, power sharing was discussed in terms of how we know ourselves to be naturally more collaborative, diplomatic, and inclusive--always thinking about who is not at the table. Those of us who have worked with all women-or all women of color- teams had much to say about our unique power-sharing skills.

“25-30% is a critical mass. That enables a tipping point for the culture of institutions. Institutions of power assume masculine approaches to leading. Right now, women who enter those spaces need to adapt. Having a critical mass would lend to culture changing.”

“We would have safety! Digital, physical, and emotional. There'd be a lot of dreaming involved.”

This concept regarding our leadership style also came up repeatedly as our participants talked about how it has largely been women of color who have stepped up to lead many of the movements of our time--movements that have been born as a response to the horrific violence people of color and women experience across the nation. These include Standing Rock, Me Too, BLM and others. Many of us talked about how these galvanizing events—the murder of George Floyd and Mike Brown, the Dobbs decision, the Keystone Pipeline, and many others—have pushed us to a point of no return, where we collectively have declared: *We can't take it anymore!* And person-by-person, the natural and inspired leaders amongst us are building nimble, inclusive, and intersectional movements.

“I was on the ground in Ferguson right after Mike Brown was killed. This really radicalized me and us as an organization.”

Participants also discussed the care economy, focusing on spending around care for self, each other, all beings, and the planet. Many of us mentioned the response to COVID-19 as proof that we, as a society, can indeed shift toward a care economy. Globally and nationally, covid was the most devastating event for our lifetimes. Governments were more or less competent in their response, and in the United States, the response was, and in many ways is still dismal. Even so, as local communities, and at the state and federal level, we were able to pass care policies and quickly. Specific policies our participants mentioned included stimulus checks, shifts to remote work for most workers, protections for essential workers, and changes in governance to accommodate remote public comment and voting. Culturally, we talked about the countless ways mutual aid efforts sprung up organically in small and large communities around the world. Many of us also mentioned the cultural shift during those pandemic days when we, as a society, expressed profound gratitude and appreciation for essential and care workers. Many of us also mentioned the incredible positive impact that the lockdown had on our environment, when our use of fossil fuels decreased so steeply.

We understand that a critical mass of people needs to be ready for change, to see it as a possibility, or as the pandemic showed us, as an urgent necessity, before change can happen and

take hold. We are also clear that, despite recent shifts in our culture and narratives, we still largely work under toxic conditions from the bottom to the top. The group's sentiment overall is that there is much work still to be done to change the narrative.

“Women of color is not just an identity. It is a political identity. We need think tanks. We need to be polled and included in exit polling, as women of color. We need to define our narrative to cultivate the solidarity we need. If our solidarity dissipates, our power dissipates. We need to expand and connect all the ways the culture makers help reinforce the political narratives and values.”

“As more and more of us move into these positions, our contributions will not be seen as add-ons, but as integral ways to advance equity. My wish is that if we reached 25% of power, we wouldn't have to be in fight mode all the time, and this would allow for creativity and that alone changes the power structures. This is not going to happen without much resistance.”

We are clear about what we are each individually best suited to do and that we need a healthy ecosystem to get to this world we have envisioned. We are proud of our work and our accomplishments. We believe we are making a difference. For some, it is stepping up and running for office/serving in office. For some, it is supporting those candidates and elected officials. For some, it is running organizations or agencies. For some, it is organizing, agitating, keeping electees accountable. For some, it is litigating. There are many roles to play, and they all have a place. Collectively, we understand that all of us are needed, and we are ready on all fronts.

Though most of our participants felt that a world in which we hold 25% of the power would significantly improve the lives of people in every community, many of us also expressed skepticism, bringing up the need to have a deeper analysis, beyond racial and gender identity and vet our allies by their class and feminist analysis. The phrase “skin folk ain't always kinfolk” came up many times. Seeing ourselves represented as women of color in positions of power is necessary but insufficient.

“Those 25% would be more educated, more affluent, and therefore more likely to be more conservative than the 25% of the women of color that constitute the average population. There is an objective benefit to reflective representation, but elites are going to behave different, even minority ones.”

“Representation is not a destination; it creates the conditions that we need so we can exert our power.”

“I can comfortably say that having more women and women of color as leaders will definitely change things. Now, I think gender as a diversity marker is important but insufficient. I think feminism is more important.”

An important note:

Since our interviews were conducted, the pendulum has radically swung, and we suddenly find ourselves in a reality most of us thought we would never experience in our lifetimes.

A few days after Vice President (VP) Harris ascended to the top of the Democratic ticket, we followed up with a small group of participants to gauge how this development might change perspectives on where we are and what we need to do moving forward. The response from this group was a cautious sense of awe at the changing circumstances, as well as a sense of empowerment at the possibility of having a woman of color--in other words one of us--taking the top leadership position in the U.S. and the world. This group expressed a need to shift our strategy to how we best position ourselves to influence her thinking and hold her accountable in the likely scenario that she indeed becomes our next President.

OUR ROLE

First and foremost, our role is to lead. We understand the power of seeing ourselves represented in government and leadership across sectors, and many of our participants are doing just that. We believe our burden is to show that we can lead, innovate, shine, and make change. When talking about our role, many of us specifically mentioned some iconic women of color leaders of our time, like Kamala Harris (pre-presidential bid), Deb Haaland, Ketanji Brown Jackson, Sharice Davids, Stacey Abrams, members of “the Squad”, and others. We consistently refer to them with familiarity, by their first names, and see them as one of us, because we also see ourselves as prepared, uniquely qualified, and brilliant. We largely agree that the cultural experience of seeing these Black and brown women leading at the highest levels, with courage and integrity, has changed the national narrative. This narrative shift opens doors for us. Our role is to build toward, identify, and leverage those opportunities, and to lift each other up as we climb.

“We recognize the power of our collective. We form collectives. We become our own force multipliers.”

Collectively, we also recognize that our role is to protect ourselves and each other. This means constant vigilance and fighting to defend our safety, rights, and paychecks on a daily basis. Many participants mentioned Dr. Claudine Gay and other women of color who have recently paid a steep price for daring to exist as women of color in institutional positions of power. Although all this erodes our ability to lead, innovate, and make change, these conditions also make us particularly politically astute, and incentivized to work together in allyship with others. We are skilled diplomats, because we’ve learned through the generations how to get what we need to make it work for our families and communities, despite being at the bottom of more metrics than any other demographic. Some of us also shared a deep analysis of the tension between short and long-term work, and how we must address the harms that will result as a consequence if we don’t implement certain short-term policies urgently.

The concept of needing to change culture before meaningful policy change can happen came up repeatedly in our interviews. In this regard, this group believes that we can make big strides now, as

we approach 25% of the population. There is nuance in this thinking as we also understand that sometimes policy change must precede culture change. Participants talked about specific legislation, like the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, the Affordable Care Act, and others as examples of a policy push that seismically changed the culture. Yet they also mentioned more nuanced cultural changes leading the way to policy change, like when the *Love is Love* slogan was released, causing the tides of public perception to change rapidly, and the Marriage Equality Act became law shortly after. We recognize that big policy change is often much more difficult to achieve than big cultural change. It is our role to be creative and aspirational about this opportunity, and to be strategic in supporting our leaders and directing our dollars to fund policy and culture work. Many of our participants stressed the need to shift our culture to center mothers and mothering in our power-building work.

“I would make a structural norm and a cultural norm to pay for childcare with campaign funds. The cultural part is very important. We need to lift all shame.”

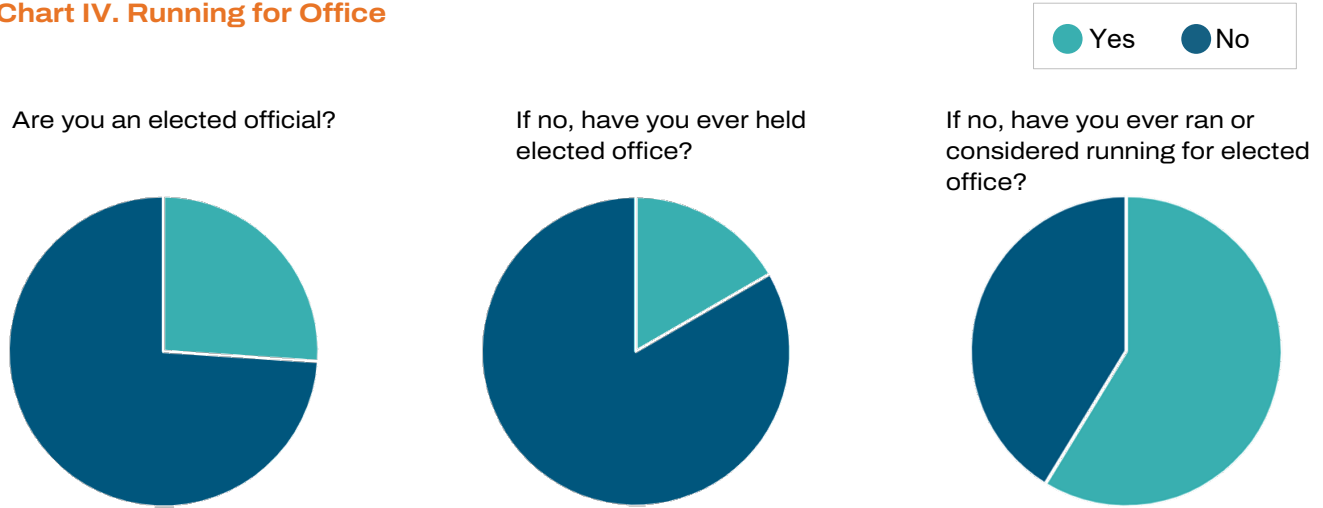
“We are missing the mom archetype from our movement. Centering the mother. So much is best fought for by moms. We don't center moms. The right centers moms. Moms for liberty, etc. I think of the moms at school board meetings all over fighting for their queer or trans kids. We haven't made a space in the movement for them, and we must.”

Many of us mentioned Black women being, proportionally, the most educated segment of the population. As women of color, we see ourselves as a yet-to-be-leveraged political force that can swing any election. We are also clear that we know how to build this world we dream of. We are confident in our abilities and qualifications as a bloc, and we are also clear that, demographically, there is no turning back. There are just going to be more and more of us, and more of us means more allies, which, in turn, means better outcomes for everybody. Our role is to build a just and livable world for all of us.

ABOUT RUNNING FOR OFFICE

Of the 74 women interviewed, almost 40% are either currently serving, or have formerly held elected office. Of the 60% who have not, about one-third have run or considered running. Almost every person who said they have run or thought about running said that they considered it because someone they respect asked them. Most of us enter elected office at the local level, though a handful entered elected office at the state or even federal level, because a seat was open. Many of the participants who have broken the glass ceiling in their respective non-elected fields expressed a tucked-away dream of one day, perhaps after retirement, running for office at the local or hyper local level. When asked why they decided to run, all of the electees expressed a love of community, a commitment to public service, and a belief that they could make a difference. Many of us who have stepped up to run have been treated with disdain, even from those who we expected to support us. We are told to wait our turn. We are told that we are not ready or good enough. This lack of support and solidarity weighs heavily on us.

Chart IV. Running for Office

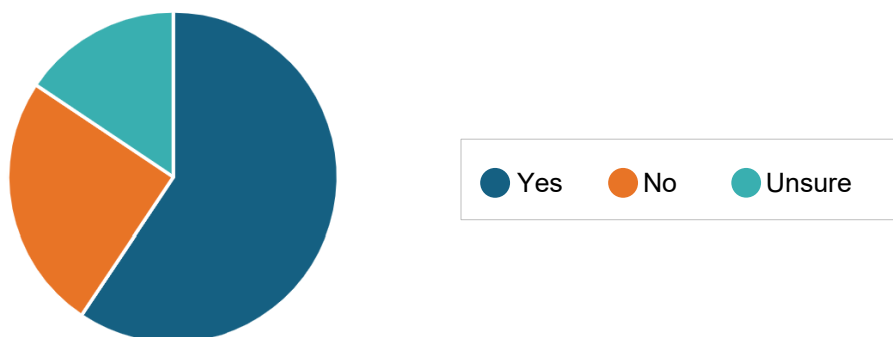


“I first ran for DA at 28. Because my experiences being a Public Defender was that things weren't fair for Black folks in my community. Ten years later I ran for State House for the same reason. I didn't know that I was going to run, but all of the sudden there was a seat opening from a decades' long incumbent. Once there, I never planned to run for Congress. But my Congresswoman urged me to run. I was aware that I was never going to be in the majority in my state legislature because of gerrymandering, so I thought, at the federal level the power does shift every few years. This is why I ran.”

One quarter of the women currently serving expressed uncertainty about whether they will run again because of the political climate. A comparable share of the women who have considered running or have run before also said they are not considering it anymore because of the political climate. Three quarters of those currently serving said that, despite experiencing political violence, they don't have it as bad as others, and they are committed to finishing the job.

Chart V. Serving in Elected Office

If you are currently serving in elected office, or have served in the past, would you consider running again?



“I am running for reelection because I believe there is still a lot of good work to be done. I've been experiencing the political climate but probably not as bad as others. It has been mostly trolls who attack me for being an immigrant, for the way I look, the person I am. A small woman. A Mexican woman. It doesn't really matter but it is still harmful. My biggest concern is less what it does to me but what it does to society and the immigrant community.”

“We have our DA in my county who is a woman of color. She had to take a mental health leave. Same thing for the only other woman of color on my council. She had to go on mental health leave. It's tough. We are scrutinized and attacked. But still. I want to deliver for my community on the things I set out to do. I am running for re-election now.”

“I haven't run for office because it is not safe for me as a Muslim woman in the south. I have already gone through a horrific hate campaign. But also because I am a change maker and a peacemaker. I am motivated by principle-based actions. Elected office doesn't allow for this.”

This research confirmed our understanding of the political ecosystem surrounding women of color. Teachers and organizers become candidates, and electees return to working on non-profits or running campaigns. Lawyers become mayors, and mayors become small business owners. Most of those who have not considered running have been asked to run, sometimes repeatedly. Still, they are clear that they are better suited for other roles in our democracy, either supporting candidates or elected officials or keeping them accountable from the outside. Many women talked about how getting our people elected is necessary but insufficient, and that we have to be very intentional about building support structures around our elected officials once in office, so that they can stay true to their values when they get a taste of power.

THE OBSTACLES WE FACE

“The most underestimated people in politics are women of color. We manage to do more with less.”

The primary barrier to accessing our power is access to money. Overall, this barrier was described as frustration with the gender wage gap and poor pay for care providers and public servants. Additionally, participants repeatedly mentioned the lack of access to affordable child and elder care, affordable health care, and affordable quality programs and educational opportunities. From the candidate or elected official perspective, the expense of running was also a barrier, even for local office. As a bloc we don't have the built-in wealth networks of our white and male colleagues and opponents (even if they would deny it!). All of this is in the context of the domestic and caretaking responsibilities that still largely fall on all women by default.

“Who is determined to be a viable candidate is usually who can raise the money, and we don't have the kind of wealth that others do.”

“For women of color particularly, there is the added burden of care, misogyny, racism. Generations of this have a compounding effect that keeps us out of the pipeline. There are so many places where we can at any time get yanked out of any pipeline we might have actually gotten into. We are constantly being pulled out to care for the needs of others.”

“I used food stamps when I was in college. As a student it helped me to have that little money so I didn't have to get another job, so I could get the grades. A lot of the programs that exist that are constantly torn down are the programs that helped someone like me be a sitting member of Congress.”

After money, the main barrier that surfaced is cultural resistance. Despite all the brilliance, experience, and qualifications we bring to the table, we still largely work within systems and structures that don't take us seriously, from our families and loved ones to our larger institutions and everything in between. We, therefore, struggle with believing in ourselves. We suffer from impostor syndrome. When we are ambitious and want to excel, particularly professionally, we experience daily micro and macro aggressions. We are consistently questioned about our intelligence, appearance, qualifications, family responsibilities, etc. Though most of our participants expressed a general experience of solidarity and support from other women of color, many also expressed experiencing undermining from other women of color, as well. There was nuance in the comments around this issue. Many of our participants talked about how there is still a mentality of “there's only room for one of us” in some work environments and in almost all work environments as we climb the ladder. Lack of solidarity and support between us came up as a generational issue, which is difficult to address, because most of us are raised in a culture where respect for our elders is foundational.

“One thing I've personally found very challenging is the fight against the limits that society puts on you. I constantly repeat to myself, *God give me the confidence of a mediocre white man.*”

“People often don't realize something about high leadership roles for us. People think it's ladders and a pathway. The goal is to reach the glass ceiling. The truth is the ladder ends and you end up in this wild uncharted territory where you are forced to engage in hand-to-hand lethal combat. That's the last stretch. There is no pathway.”

“I am a Muslim. There's a lot of BS around this. I don't cover my head so this creates all kinds of narratives for Muslims and non-Muslims, both of which are incorrect. Everyone wants to put you in ONE box, and I belong in at least 7 boxes. You have to be a representative model at all times in all spaces. I wish I didn't have to be the 1st Muslim woman in almost every space I've been in.”

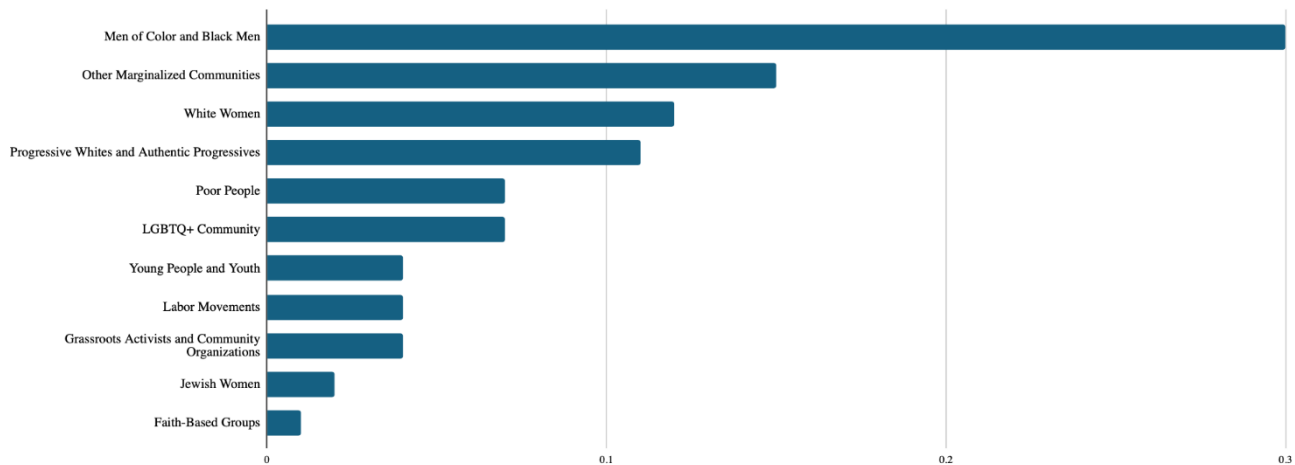
Most of us mentioned the Dobbs decision, and we talked about how stripping our right to bodily autonomy is the lightning rod. Despite the messaging the proponents use that this is a religious or moral issue related to saving babies, if we don't have bodily autonomy, we lose our ability to participate in civil society in any role that is not that of mother/caretaker. Our entire democracy depends on women's right to bodily autonomy.

Many of us mentioned the challenges faced as our public education system erodes. We are alarmed about the fact that recently we have seen our schools banning books and curricula that teach our kids our history. Much like bodily autonomy, having a poorly educated society is also intended to keep us from participating in civil society in any role other than that of low-wage workers. Ensuring that we are recruiting and supporting good women of color candidates to run for school board was flagged as an important issue. Many of us also mentioned the necessity of paying our public school teachers properly.

“Good public education was key for me. I had great teachers in high school, and high-quality programs. I was student government president. I was in debate, and that was really one of the most important things I got involved with, that taught me how to think and dream big.”

“We need to revamp our whole public education system. We need to teach our true history and move away from a system that prepares low wage workers to a system that prepares pluralistic leadership. We need to be the ones creating curricula and running educational institutions.”

Chart VI. Who do you think are WOC’s most natural allies?



We asked our participants to talk about what the role of white women in helping us build power. Though there was general consensus that white women can be a key ally and can help us, there is also a general consensus that they can only do so after they do some serious work themselves. Roughly one-third of the comments had a positive tone around white women, a little over one-third had a negative tone, and one-third were neutral. Most of our participants wish that white women would step back and do some self-reflection. We need them to build their own awareness of race dynamics and of what it means to be a good ally, and to spread that awareness with other white people. Many of us feel that as they do this work, which takes time, white women can also actively help us by leveraging their access to their networks on our behalf, as well as speaking our names and uplifting our achievements in rooms we are not in. We overall think that if they commit to doing deep and ongoing anti-racist and accountability work, we can build a solidarity movement together.

“It has been great to see so much growth in numbers of organizations led by women of color. It would benefit white women to work for them.”

“White women should use their privilege in all those spaces we can't be in. Say our names and lift up our work in those spaces. I see white men doing this more than white women.”

“We have to push white women to tell us what they can do to meaningfully disrupt those rooms where we are not in. YOU tell me what you can do, stop asking me what you can do.”

“There's plenty of white-women-work to be done that can't be done by us. They can't hear us. It's human nature. True allyship is not just supporting and elevating us. The real work is identifying how race shows up in every space and acting in meaningful ways to disrupt that.”

We also asked our participants who they think are our most natural allies in helping us build our political power. On this question, most of our participants said Black men and men of color, though most of those comments also came with skepticism about their capacity to really show up as allies and dismay at how much anti-sexist work is still needed. After Black men and men of color, our participants mentioned marginalized communities more broadly, including poor people of all races and the LGBTQ community. Interestingly, when answering this question specifically, only four participants mentioned labor, only four mentioned young people, and only one mentioned faith communities.

WHAT WE NEED NOW

We asked participants to envision waving a magic wand to make the changes needed now to ensure that, in 10 years, we hold 25% of the power. Most used this aspirational question to recommend policy solutions, followed by waves of the wand that instantly implemented cultural change.

On the policy front, our participants mentioned specific policies that increase our representation in decision making positions and, therefore, our ability to wield power. Many of these policy solutions were discussed at the local level, though many also refer to state or federal level reform. The most common policies included electoral reforms, such as ranked choice voting, proportional representation, and open primaries; campaign finance reforms, such as democracy dollars, robust public finance laws, and the opportunity to use campaign funds on child and other dependent care; and economic reforms, such as universal basic income, fair pay for public servants, student loan forgiveness, access to quality public education and healthcare, affordable housing, and much more. These policy solutions reinforce the group's clarity about the goal of realizing a society fueled by a care economy.

Quotas came up a lot. We love them, and we hate them. They are very effective in getting us into leadership in numbers. Still, there is an overall sense of unease about quotas, and the overall sentiment is that quotas are good in some circumstances, and for a period of time. For example, some women said that they would like to see quotas in leadership in the private sector, but not as

much in elected office. Others said they'd like to see quotas in all public and private leadership bodies, but only for some years, until those numbers are normalized in the culture.

"I would mandate representation quotas in legislative bodies, committees, agency appointments, judicial appointments, etc. If we were to have proportionality right now, in Congressional committees, 100% of our women of color members of Congress would be chairing committees."

Many participants mentioned ballot initiatives--like the ones we have recently seen in states around the issue of access to abortion--as an effective and much more time efficient avenue to reach policy change. A few mentioned ballot initiatives as an avenue at the local level, where city charters can be amended to bring about change.

On the culture change front, we collectively agree that we must focus on intentionally building a power network. Many of us mentioned the wealth and professional networks that white men, and by proximity, white women have, that we don't have access to. We understand that part of the work is building allyship with people accessing these power networks and pushing them to leverage their networks on our behalf. But collectively, we are clear that most of the work involves us building our own networks, formal and informal.

When participants were asked to share what services and supports helped them get to where they are now, almost everyone mentioned the crucial role of formal and informal mentors. Some found their mentors through public schools, some through affinity groups, some through employment, some through leadership programming, and in various other ways. Because many of our participants are women who have broken many glass ceilings or work in white and male dominated fields, many mentioned that the mentors and sponsors that have helped them were white men. Others mentioned intentionally seeking out mentees as we advance in our careers. Mentors overall were defined as people along the way who saw our potential and helped us navigate our environments, offering advice, tools, and encouragement. Some of us talked about the importance of having sponsors, as well, defined as a mentor who will spend political capital on your behalf and will absolutely make that call that will land you a job interview, or make sure that you are in the right rooms.

"When I was in my late 30's a legendary old school civil rights lawyer took me to lunch. To map out my career in detail. It's something she did with many Black women lawyers. These people picked up the phone and told my org that they needed to take me for this role. I try to do the same now."

"Mentorship from other women of color has been integral to me as a new legislator. They built me up as they paid attention to the things I was interested in working on and learning about. It would have been incredible if I had gotten this much earlier on."

Collectively we emphasized the importance of scaling up our culture of mentorship and sponsorship, and of building up our leadership pipelines for girls and women of color. Our participants had a lot of thoughts on how to address the gaps that we see and have experienced in the current state of our leadership pipelines. Many of us talked about starting leadership

programming for girls in preschool and throughout their K-12 years as part of the official curriculum. The girls would get the training, and, in turn, teach the boys what they learn. Many of us talked about a leadership bootcamp type of programming for emerging young leaders. Participants expressed disappointment with our experience with some pipeline programs. For example, some talked about specific base building organizations have worked for where, despite leadership training being available, the organizational culture does not prioritize building leaders up, but rather having them meet numbers until they burn out and leave. Some of us talked about specific candidate recruitment and training organizations, which sometimes offer excellent training, but leave candidates who lose their races behind. They never follow up with them and ensure that they still use their training to achieve leadership. Some talked about leadership training opportunities coming around too late, when our girls and young women are already conditioned to doubt themselves. Most of the gaps this group identified are due to lack of funding, lack of strategic thinking about collective impact, and sadly, our inability to interrupt what we say we want to interrupt—the masculine, metrics-driven, transactional way of doing work.

“I would do something to ensure the pipeline is all the way around. Training lobbyists, campaign teams, candidates, consultants, etc. Everyone who wants to run would be plugged into someone else's campaign first.”

Other waves of the wand included instant access to therapy and other mental health services and the cultural normalization of utilizing such services. This was specifically mentioned for young girls in school, organizers, and elected officials.

CALL TO ACTION—WHAT WE NEED TO DO NOW TO GET US THERE

The pendulum swing that this country has experienced in the few months since these interviews were conducted creates a remarkable opportunity to accelerate the change that we identified as a must to get us to the world we envision. In this short time, we have gone from the dread of the seemingly inevitable plunge into authoritarianism, to the real possibility of having our first woman of color President. This radically changes our perception and belief in what is possible. We will never again live in a world where we haven't seen the most powerful white man in the world quietly and gracefully cede power to a Black woman. We will never again live in a world where we haven't seen crowds of tens of thousands of diverse and hopeful Americans attend rallies supporting this candidate and raising hundreds of millions of dollars for her campaign. Whether Vice President Harris gets elected or not, the fact that these historical events have happened does not change, and the opportunity to accelerate the work we need to do, as identified by this group of women of color, becomes irresistible, but we must remember the hard lessons we learned from the aftermath of the progressive, inclusive change that we were able to rapidly implement during Covid, when we largely went back to the status quo after the worst of the crisis had passed. As a society, we squandered the opportunity to keep the many policies and civic practices we implemented, and we can't afford to squander this opportunity now.

There are many organizations doing the work identified as crucial in this report already— what is missing is an ecosystem-wide strategy. Things are largely happening in a piece-meal way. Each

organization or small coalition doing their little part, without a collective strategy to maximize our impact. Additionally, there plenty of duplication of efforts, reinventing the wheel, and plain old gaps that nobody is filling.

This is the time for us to collectively build our muscle as a political bloc. We propose we do this by:

1. Connecting the people who are doing the work in different locations to each other, and de-siloing of the spaces in which we each work. To multiply our capacity to make policy and/or cultural change without reinventing the wheel each time, we must create better avenues for wisdom sharing.
2. Working more efficiently, strategically, and inclusively. To achieve our goals, we need connectors and orchestrators funded to do the work of bringing unusual partners to plan together. Currently, even when we invest in bringing people together, we neglect to think outside the box. For example, we don't often have educators, futurists, or story tellers in rooms where policy makers are working on advancing a specific policy. We don't know what we don't know, and when we only bring people who know the same things into a room to develop a strategy, we run the high risk of derailment due to blind spots.
3. Investing in building up our civic infrastructure. We must learn to do democracy in a democratic way, beyond election cycles. This involves strengthening our leadership pipelines, and addressing the gaps that exist within this field, so that leaders who are prepared to lead in whatever field they go into, based on a framework of power-sharing and co-governance. Additionally, we must create a culture of mentorship and sponsorship, with formal and informal opportunities for girls and women of color at every stage of their leadership development.
4. Connecting democracy and creativity/the arts. Given the erosion of our democracy in recent years, we must change hearts and minds in order for the body politic to be ready for transformational change. This requires investing in the creative work that helps shift our cultural narratives and connecting those doing democracy work with those doing cultural shift work.
5. Passing democracy-building reforms that will increase our representation in elected office at all levels of government. Getting a critical mass of empowered, transformed, and protected women of color leaders to these seats of power is what will transform our communities.

SPECIFIC POLICY REFORMS

The reforms listed below are the ones that came up the most in our interviews. Some of these are possible only at the local level, while others would require federal legislation. Some of these are possible only in some states and not in others. Many of these reforms have been passed and implemented successfully somewhere, while some have been recalled in other places. We have much to learn from these examples.

Electoral:

- Ranked Choice Voting
- Proportional Representation
- Open Primaries

Campaign Finance:

- Democracy Dollars
- Public Financing
- Campaign Funds for Dependent Care

Care Economy:

- Paid leave
- Parental leave
- Accessible child and dependent care
- UBI

Broader Economic Reform:

- Fair pay for public servants
- Student Loan Forgiveness
- Bodily Autonomy Laws
- Affordable Healthcare
- Affordable Housing
- Affordable Higher Education

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Appendix

Below is a list of all of the women interviewees who participated in the Pathway to Power report.

- Samar Ali, Vanderbilt University, Research Professor of Law and Political Science
- Danielle Allen, Harvard Lab for Democracy Renovation, Director
- Aimee Allison, She the People, Founder and President
- Candace Avalos, Verde, Executive Director
- Laila Aziz, Pillars of the Community, Director of Operations
- Michelle Barsa, Omidyar Network, Principal, Building Cultures of Belonging
- Carla Bernal, Pivotal Ventures, Women's Political Power
- Shirley Bondon, The Black Clergy Collaborative of Memphis, Executive Director
- Brittany Buford, Partners in Democracy, Managing Partner for National Programs
- Nimasheena Burns, Durham County NC, Vice Chair of Board of County Commissioners
- Jessica Byrd, Black Campaign School, President
- Cheryl Canson, Treat me, don't mistreat me, Founder
- Gabriella Cázeres-Kelly, Pima County, AZ, County Recorder
- Jackie Castañeda, DC Latino Caucus, President
- Stephanie Chang, MI State Senator, D3
- Rebecca Chavez-Houck, Aspira Public Affairs, LLC, Managing member
- Winny Chen, Democracy Fund, Associate Director, Governance
- Sandra Choi, MinKwon Center, Director of Civic Engagement
- Cora Cole-McFadden, City of Durham, NC, City Council Member/Mayor Pro Tem
- Jennifer Riley Collins, Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Regional Administrator for the Southeast
- Lashae Copeland, Liberatory Educator, Eagle Rock School



- Jasmine Crockett, US House of Representatives, TX-30
- Maulian Bryant (Dana), Penobscot Tribal Ambassador
- Shari Davis, Center for Economic Democracy, Co-Executive Director
- Bernadette Carter-Dove, City of Goldsboro, Human Resources Director
- Marjan H. Ehsassi, Berggruen Institute, Fellow - Future of Democracy Program
- Vanessa Fuentes, City of Austin, City Council Member
- Nadia Firozvi, Trusted Elections Fund, Senior Advisor
- Tayna Fogle, Lexington, KY, City Council Member
- April Fournier, Portland, ME, City Council Member
- Keesha Gaskins-Nathan, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Program Director- Democratic Practice US
- Fatima Goss Graves, National Women's Law Center, President and CEO
- Katherine Grainger, Civitas Public Affairs, Managing Partner
- Dulce Gutiérrez, WA State Labor Council, Legal Aide, Union and Naturalization Organizer
- Jo Ann Hardesty, City of Portland, OR, Former Council Member
- Christina Haswood, Kansas House of Representatives, KS10
- Cheniqua Johnson, St. Paul, MN, City Council Member
- Marcia Johnson, Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, Co-Director of the Voting Rights Project
- Hwa Jeong Kim, St. Paul, MN, City Council Member
- Nikylan Knapper, City of Maplewood, MO, Former Mayor
- April LaNubian Roberts, Florida Rising, Black Constituency Director
- Carol Lautier, DEMOS, Director of Movement Building
- Judith LeBlanc, Native Organizers Alliance, Executive Director
- Teresa Leger Fernandez, US House of Representatives, NM - 3
- Vanessa Lopez, DC Action, Campaign Manager
- Donna Loring, Former representative for the Penobscot Nation
- Andrea Marta, Faith in Action Fund, Executive Director
- Francine Maxwell, Black Men and Women United, NAACP, San Diego Branch
- Genevieve Mina, Alaska House of Representatives, AK 19
- Rafiah Muhammad-McCormick, Tennesseans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, Coordinator for Community Outreach
- Theeda Murphy, Abolition Works TN, Lead Organizer
- Nikki Nice, Oklahoma City Council, Councilwoman Ward 7
- Jaynie Parrish, AZ Native Vote, Executive Director
- Victoria Pelletier, Represent Women, National Partnerships Manager
- Maria Perez, Democracy Rising, Co-Executive Director
- Marina Piña, NM Human Services Department, Communications Director

- Krystal Reyes, City of Tulsa, OK, Chief Resilience Officer
- Rosa Reyna-Pugh, Equality State Policy Center, Director of Civic Engagement
- Angelica Rubio, Vote Run Lead, NM State Director
- Maria Salamanca, School Board Member, FL D2
- Gabriela Santiago-Romero, City of Detroit, MI, City council member D6.
- Andrea St. Julian, San Diegans for Justice, Co-Founder and Co-Chair
- Celina Stewart, League of Women Voters US, CEO
- Sangita Sigdya, Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund, COO
- Reena Szczepanski, New Mexico House of Representatives, NM 47 and House Majority Whip
- Kelli Ann Thomas, Miami Dade County, Former Vice Chair, Community Council 14
- Rebecca Thompson, Rebecca Thompson International LLC, Principal
- Nee-Nee Torbert, FREE, SD, Co-founder
- Heather Villanueva, More Equitable Democracy, Deputy Director
- Muthoni Wambu Kraal, Women Democracy Lab, Executive Director
- Monalisa Weber, Great Rising Farm, Co-founder
- Karen Wharton, Citizen Action of New York, Democracy Coalition Coordinator
- Bertha Winbush, City of Durham, NC, Deputy City Manager