

Race and Social Justice Initiative Student Leadership Award Proposal

The Political Gender Gap: How to Win Elections in a System that in not
'Set up for Us'

Ebony Venson

December 10, 2018

Executive Summary

I am seeking the Student Leadership Award from the College of Charleston's Race and Social Justice Initiative, to pursue research on black women in elected office. I aim to identify and analyze barriers that impact the electoral success of black women. Through examining these circumstances, I hope to gain insight on how to create a framework that will help advance black women's political participation and attain a reflective representation in elected office at various levels of government. Through attending the Taste of Emerge conference I desire to expand my knowledge on creating an environment for Black women to run, win and lead. Participating in this conference will encourage me to harness my power as a black woman, run for office, and become the lifeblood of my community, fighting for a just and racially equitable society.

Statement of Need

Women make up over half of the United States population but are still highly underrepresented at all levels of government. The 2016 CUNY institute study on the political gender gap addresses the issue that women perform just as well as men in elections – but they are not running.¹ *The State of Racial Disparities in Charleston County 2000-2015* directly addresses issues that hinder black women's participation in the civic process and further the political ambition gap. An oppressive culture of "sweet tea racism" has continued to "quietly strangle" our communities and stifle opportunities for political advancement. The continuation of the systematic racism addressed in the report has led to a severe distrust in the political system. From its inception, the American political system built its economic and political influence on the subjugation of people of color. This injustice has created current challenges for up-and-coming

¹ Jocelyn Drummond, Qian Zhang, and Victoria Lawson, *Who Runs our Cities*, (New York, CUNY Institute, 2016), ii.

black politicians trying to advance in a political system that, was not designed with them in mind.

A Brookings study, authored by political scientist Andrew Perry, identifies two times as many men, as compared to women, declared “definite” interest in running for office in the future, and women were about 50 percent more likely than their male peers to state that they would never do so. They also discovered women of color were 50 percent less likely than their white counterparts to even “consider” pursuing public office.² According to the Center for American Women and Politics, women of color constitute 7.3 percent of the total 535 members of the 115th Congress.³ Black women made up 6.6 percent of the country’s population and 6.5 percent of the voting age population in 2016, but accounted for 3.1 percent of federal and state elected officials. Of the 287 black female incumbents in 2016, 62 percent held seats in majority-black districts and 77 percent of elected black women represented minority white constituencies.⁴

Despite being virtually tied with white women for the highest rates of voter registration and turnout, black women are less likely to be encouraged and more likely to be discouraged from running for offices than their white counterparts or black men, according to a 2015 report from Higher Heights and the Center for American Women in Politics.⁵ Moreover, when black women run for office, they are less likely to receive the early campaign fund and endorsements that often position candidates to mount successful campaigns. Despite a deep well of successful grassroots and political activism, black women are often challenged to find the type of culturally

² Andre Perry, “Analysis of black women’s electoral strength in an era of fractured politics,” Brookings, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/analysis-of-black-womens-electoral-strength-in-an-era-of-fractured-politics/>, (December 8, 2018)

³ “Women of Color in Elected Office,” Center for American Women and Politics, <http://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-color-elective-office-2018>, (December 8, 2018).

⁴ Perry, “Analysis of black women’s electoral strength in an era of fractured politics.”

⁵ Ibid.

relevant candidate training that can help them translate their experience into effective campaign strategies.⁶

Program Description and Expected Results:

Several organizations have begun to develop pipelines to help boost black women in their effort to run for office. Organizations like Higher Heights and Emerge America have developed training programs and organized culture-shifting communications campaigns that have encouraged more black women to run for office. The Taste of Emerge conference hosted by Emerge America seeks to give democratic women the skills they need to turbocharge their campaigns and beat the odds. Top political strategists and trainers teach attendees critical elements of campaigning, including: campaign overview & structure, messaging, media relations, and the art of relationship building. Through participating in this conference, I hope to gain the tools necessary to run for office and share my knowledge with other women of color in my community. I desire to work to ensure government policies appropriately consider challenges and persistent opportunity gaps faced by too many disadvantaged, marginalized, and underrepresented women—and inspire other women of color to do the same—to ensure that everyone who aspires to run for office has a chance to succeed.

⁶ Ibid.