



ISSUE BRIEF

The Price of the Seat: What 12 Pilot Interviews Reveal About Serving as a Woman of Color in Office

AUGUST 2026

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RESTORATIVE
DEMOCRACY



GERALD R. FORD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY
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Introduction

In 2018, the midterm elections brought a significant increase in the representation of women of color in public office, with a record 47 women of color elected to Congress.¹ Yet while getting elected is a major milestone, women of color have faced uniquely high threats to their safety and well-being while serving in office. As recently as 2023, women serving as local officials were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to experience insults, harassment, threats, and worry about themselves or their families being attacked.² Minority officials more broadly reported significantly higher levels of insults, harassment, threats, and worry about attacks on themselves or their families (13%), compared to their non-minority counterparts.³ It is no surprise, then, that women of color are significantly less likely than their non-minority and male counterparts to run for re-election, post on social media, attend events in public spaces, work on controversial topics, and go out in public (Bridging Divides Initiative, 2024). These constraints limit public servants' capacity to shape policy.

To better understand the hurdles women of color face in public office, and how these hurdles affect their work, a research team⁴ conducted 12 pilot interviews, each lasting about an hour. The questions explored respondents' experiences seeking public office, serving in public office, their decisions to remain in or leave public office, and general reflections on support resources. The pilot interviews included representatives from eight states Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. The ethnic identities represented among the pilot interviewees included Asian (3), Black (4), Hispanic/Latine (3) and Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) (2). The types of office included alderman (1), board of governors (1), board of trustees (2), county commissioner (2), city council member (1), state house representative (2), state senator (2), and judge (1). All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom between November 2025 and April 2026, using a pre-written list of questions, and participants were compensated with a \$25 gift card.

The results highlight systemic barriers that both constrain and endanger women of color in elected office, revealing patterns that extend beyond individual incidents to structural dysfunction in political institutions.

The Safety Costs of Serving

All of our respondents reported safety concerns tied to electoral cycles and specific policy positions. These security concerns had spillover effects on family members, effectively constraining the officeholders' ability to carry out their work.

One county commissioner described her experience implementing residential security measures as the election approached:

"We end up getting a safe house for the election time, so a few days before and a few days after, we get, you know, we get an Airbnb somewhere."

Moreover, these safety concerns took a toll not only on the county commissioner herself, but also her family members, with

her five-year-old son telling his teacher, "we're hiding from the bad guys."

Threats were not confined to election cycles - sensitive policy issues also escalated threats and hostile communications. A state house representative supporting policies that would expand access to abortion described the direct threats following testimony:

"[T]here were a couple of bills dealing with abortion access. We walk into the hearing, and, like, the lights were bright ... [W]hat they were hoping for was a clickbait moment, and, like, I just wasn't... fast enough on my feet, and so I kind of, like, walked right into this thing. And so then we started getting all types of communication from, like, I mean ... my uncles heard about it in Australia And, so all sorts of, you know, there were death threats, death wishes."

The account highlighted how policy testimony could trigger hostile communications, including death threats.

A state senator described a similar pattern of safety concerns, along with racialized hostility, when supporting gun control legislation:

"[W]e have had several pretty public incidents. [O]ne person in particular, [was] using a racial slur during a committee hearing. And then... I can't remember if it was that same hearing or a different hearing where he brought in parts of a ghost gun. We were all very concerned about it. Those times that we felt concerned about our safety were because of the policies that we were choosing to prioritize. And then also, for the women of color on that committee, just me and [fellow legislator], you know, that added an element of the fact that this guy is clearly a white supremacist."

This testimony reveals that racialized and gendered threat patterns compound when women of color advocate for contested policies, creating intersectional security concerns not experienced by male or white colleagues.

Other interviews revealed a structural tension faced by women of color in public office: the expectations to remain approachable and accessible, while also needing to ensure the safety of themselves and their family. Women of color report heightened expectations to demonstrate availability and warmth to accommodate ideas of how women should interact with others. A judge described this interaction:

"... [B]eing out in public... I make sure my head is on a swivel... Just Saturday, I went to Marshalls. The lady next to me, she was like, 'I know you from somewhere.' I never know whether it's going to be a positive experience or a negative. And she said, oh, the [anonymized] case. And she said,... you were also my judge at [court location]. And she's like, but you were really nice to me, and she wanted to give me a hug. So I was like, maybe? I'm giving you a hug, but should I be giving you a hug? I don't know... [B]ecause you never know."

The judges account illustrated how women of color in public-facing positions often manage both safety risks and professional approachability — a cognitive and emotional labor not required of all elected officials.

Recruited, Then Sidelined: Deprioritized by Political Parties

Women of color are often recruited because of their connections to community members and grassroots movements, but their parties do not always value the perspectives and priorities that stem from those relationships and experiences. Although political parties may support, on paper, the priorities of the communities represented by women of color, respondents said that these policies fall lower on the priority list. The lack of momentum around policies for communities of color causes struggle and emotional drain for the elected officials.

One state senator described the sense of responsibility she held to uplifting her communities' issues and the frustration that arises from how her political party did not prioritize those issues:

"There is that added extra responsibility of lifting up issues of facing immigrants, or issues facing, Black residents with policing, right? I have had conversations with other women of color that I serve with, where we all collectively have felt these issues are not getting prioritized, and ... we're kind of tired of it. ... We should prioritize some of these challenging issues, and not just be worried about, like, holding on to the Democratic majority. We need to deliver results that actually matter, to ... communities of color. Some of the things that are... long-standing priorities, around, like, police accountability or the [name of bills] bills, like, those things that we failed to get done. I think it's, like, devastating to some of us in a different way because of who we are."

This account documents how women of color experience dual expectations: they are recruited based on their connection to historically marginalized communities yet encounter party structures that subordinate those communities' policy priorities to electoral strategy.

A state house representative, shared a similar experience, describing to us her critiques of the structure of her party:

"One thing that I think is so beautiful about the Democratic Party is that we are the big tent. The thing that I think we struggle with is that there have always been, like, hierarchies within that tent."

This quote identified institutionalized hierarchies within party structures that create insider-outsider dynamics around policy priority-setting.

Elected, Then Abandoned: Distance from the Organizing Base

Many of our respondents noted a disconnect between pre-election organizing relationships and post-election realities. Prior organizing work often acted as an asset and launching pad for their campaign journey. However, after being elected, many felt left behind by the movements that had once been a strong support system.

A city council member, who worked as an organizer for 10 years, reflected on this transition:

"I got recruited. I'd been doing community organizing work for 10 years. I was doing immigrant rights, workers' rights, community organizing on the ground in [name of state]. I think that's what made me, one, a really good candidate, and then, two, a really good effective elected. But I would say the biggest challenge immediately was, after getting elected, just how different the shift is from being an organizer in the movement, and then being on the other side, feeling like I didn't have that movement anymore. [T]here's a lot of room there to... reflect on how we... encourage people to run, and then... at times feel abandoned by the movement that helped you sharpen your tools."

This account illustrates how women of color coming from an organizing background often face a shift in support from organizing movements despite prior encouragement to run for office.

This city council member later elaborated on the uniquely high standards placed on progressive women of color:

"I do feel like a lot of my values were questioned, and ... I often think about how women of color, particularly progressive women of color, are held to such a high and impossible standard ... I think all of that made me realize that it's not my responsibility to live up to other people's standards."

The city council member reveals the impossible standard of organizer movements faced by women of color, especially those who align with a progressive political ideology.

A state senator who came from an organizing background, shared a similar experience, describing the expectations placed on women of color in office who come from grassroots organizing:

"I felt like there was so much hype about [me], and then [I] didn't meet the moment, you know? It's a high expectation of... being in elected office and how transformational it could be. And not... that it's been said, but sometimes I feel it about myself, and sometimes it's implied."

These accounts document a pattern in which women of color in elected office, particularly those with progressive values, internalize unrealistic expectations about transformative impact while simultaneously losing access to supportive organizing infrastructure. This creates psychological strain that can contribute to burnout and reduced political efficacy.

Shifting Standards of Qualification

Women of color in public office reported that their credentials were subject to heightened scrutiny compared with predecessors and male counterparts, and often used to undermine their experience and intelligence. This is connected to a broader expectation that women of color must hold qualifications beyond what is formally required to be deemed worthy to serve in office.

One judge described being told that her qualifications were insufficient despite meeting all requirements:

"I was always told I was too young ... [and that] I didn't have enough years of practicing law. So people just basically told me that I shouldn't do it, I can't do it, even though the law said you only have to have 5 years to practice law, [and] I was at 7, and I was eligible to do it. I was old enough."

A city council member shared a similar experience of having her intelligence and credentials questioned due to her age:

“...the first time around, the biggest experience I felt of being othered was how young I was. I was 30 when I ran, and I think that for a lot of older folks, there's a sense of, like, what would you know?”

A county commissioner described a similar form of credential erasure when shifting from school board to running for congress:

“At the school board level, there is a little bit of credentialing, but they're like, oh, she's an educator, she's a mom with a baby. That's good enough for the school board. I had tried and true supporters at the school board level who had this... it was like this emotional allergic reaction when I decided to run for Congress ... It was, like, ‘How dare you? What do you think you are?’ when I started to move upward into positions that people consider important, even though I would argue the school board was massively important.”

These accounts reveal shifting and context-dependent credentialing standards applied to women of color, in which qualifications deemed sufficient for other roles or lower office are retroactively devalued when they seek positions of greater authority.

Appearance as a Site of Delegitimization

Respondents report unsolicited commentary on their appearance and clothing choices, including guidance to modify their presentation to align with others' beliefs about professional norms.

A county commissioner described the objectification of her body after giving birth:

“I was back in my pre-pregnancy clothes, but they fit tight. Not crazy, but they [fit differently], and people would say things like, have you thought about, you know, maybe dressing more conservatively? Have you thought about, you know, this or that? Or straight up telling me that I should dress, like some of the older women in our [state] legislature who, frankly, wear, you know, slacks and long, flowy tops, and are White.

And I just was like, you know no, I'm not gonna buy a whole new wardrobe for this, number one. Number two, this is what I look like. This is what a postpartum body looks like...”

A city council member, described a similar, ongoing pattern of appearance-based critiques:

“They've talked about what I've worn to council, they've talked about my demeanor from the dais.”

These attacks on appearance and bodily presentation constitute a form of delegitimization in which women of color are subjected to grooming and presentation standards, effectively requiring them to conform to specific embodied presentations of authority.

Nativist Challenges to Belonging

Respondents reported being subjected to nativist rhetoric questioning whether they were American enough to serve in public office. The underlying premise is that being born in the United States is a prerequisite for holding public office, and, even among those born in the United States, there are degrees of Americanness that one should possess to be fit to serve. Nativist attacks took a variety of forms, including microaggressions regarding names being challenged as “un-American,” claims that respondents were “not from here,” and even having their citizenship publicly challenged.

A county commissioner shared her experience being told that her name was a political liability after being elected:

“I had political consultants tell me [that] it was incredible that I do as well as I do, considering how odd my name is, considering how un-[name of state], my name is.”

A city council member described anti-immigrant rhetoric she faced from political opponents who emphasized their own U.S. birth to cast her as less authentically American:

"The second time around, there was so much ... anti-immigrant rhetoric couched in, well, she's not even from here. My opponents would say [referring to themselves], "I'm native, like, I'm native-born [U.S. City]" and to me, it was very coded."

A state senator described her experience having her citizenship challenged during two separate electoral campaigns, with legal proceedings initiated:

"When I ran in 2012, and when I ran in 2018, my citizenship got challenged... A lady came to the Secretary of State office as we were turning in the signatures... I was in the office with the Secretary of State person that counts the signatures, and that was verifying that I was gonna get on the ballot, and then we have her in the main office yelling that I should not be running for office because I wasn't a citizen... She actually issued a lawsuit and then she did it again in 2018... I went to the court for both... I remember crying..."

The continuous, psychological warfare of trying to make us believe or think that we don't belong."

These accounts illustrate how formal legal mechanisms can be weaponized to question citizenship and belonging, creating sustained psychological pressure and requiring officeholders to expend resources defending their basic eligibility for participation. These challenges occur despite legal citizenship requirements being satisfied and represent a racialized form of delegitimization.

The Tax of Personal Policies

Almost all of the interviewees came from working class backgrounds, making the policies they debated—healthcare access, minimum wage, racial equity—deeply personal, as opposed to abstract ideas. While their lived experience enriches policy design and impact, it also creates a distinct emotional and psychological burden. Many of our respondents described the emotional toll of watching policies fail or be scaled back, and the burden of making personal arguments for policies that should be treated as universal rights or practical necessities.

A county commissioner described healthcare access as a deeply personal issue tied to survival and family loss:

"I was particularly called to run for office because I'd lost my mom to pancreatic cancer over the course of a couple of weeks. I spent most of my life growing up uninsured... She had insurance for most of those last years of her life, but being on Medicare, [we] saved every dollar she ever was able to squirrel away. ... And my representative in Congress at the time, [name of representative], voted against people's access to healthcare every single chance he got. He voted against Obamacare and against it every single opportunity."

Another county commissioner shared a similar story about her personal connections to the issue of minimum wage:

"I pushed to raise wages for our food service workers and our janitorial staff. And, you know, for me, again, I was arguing from a position of having lived with family members who worked for minimum wage. And that wasn't the life experience of anybody there."

These accounts document how women of color serving in office invest emotional and psychological labor in advocating for policies grounded in their lived experience, while simultaneously watching these policies fail to advance or require compromise that undercuts their original intent. This creates a distinct form of burden—the tax of connection—in which representation becomes personally costly rather than institutionally supported.

Discussion and Implications

This pilot study documents interconnected barriers that constrain the political efficacy, well-being, and representation capacity of women of color in elected office. These barriers - electoral security concerns, party deprioritization, delegitimization, nativist attacks and emotional burden- operate at structural, institutional and interpersonal levels. Individually, each barrier represents a significant constraint on political efficacy. Collectively, they create a compounding disadvantage that undermines women of color's capacity to represent their constituents, advance policies aligned with their values, and sustain commitment to electoral politics.

The findings suggest that diversity in elected office—measured by demographic representation—is insufficient without corresponding institutional and cultural reforms that address these systemic barriers. Understanding these barriers, and how to overcome them, is essential to creating political environments in which women of color can exercise power, advance constituent interests, and sustain engagement in electoral politics.

About the Author

Paulina Trujillo is a research assistant at the Ford School Center for Racial Justice. She earned her Bachelor's in Political Science and Women's Studies from the University of Florida and her Master's in Public Policy from the University of Michigan Ford School. As the daughter of Puerto Rican and Panamanian parents, she seeks to uplift the narrative of Latine voices within policies to create opportunities for communities to thrive.

Endnotes

- 1 Chiu, B. (2019, September 18). The Spike In Political Mobilization Of Women Of Color In The U.S. Will Define 2020. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bonniechiu/2019/09/18/the-spike-in-political-mobilization-of-women-of-color-in-the-us-will-define-2020/>
- 2 Survey of Local Elected Officials on Threats and Harassment: Q3 2024. (2024). In Bridging Divides Initiative. <https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/updates/2024/survey-local-elected-officials-threats-and-harassment-q3-2024>
- 3 Ibid
- 4 Our research team consisted of Nadia Brown (Georgetown University), Raquel Castañeda-López (Restorative Democracy Project), Karla Magaña (University of Michigan), Mara Cecilia Ostfeld (University of Michigan), Melynda Price (University of Michigan), Paru Shah (Rutgers University), Paulina Trujillo (University of Michigan), and Camila Villegas (University of Michigan).

Acknowledgements

This research project was initiated by Raquel Castañeda-López, the founder of Restorative Democracy, to better understand the experiences and institutional challenges faced by women of color serving in elected office.

The project was led by Paulina Trujillo, whose research and analysis form the basis of this issue brief, with research support from Karla Magaña and contributions from Camila Villegas. We are grateful to Dr. Nadia E. Brown (Georgetown University), Dr. Mara Cecilia Ostfeld (University of Michigan), Dr. Melynda Price (University of Michigan), and Dr. Paru Shah (Rutgers University) for their partnership, intellectual guidance, and expertise throughout the research process.

We also thank the elected officials who shared their experiences through the 12 pilot interviews. Their willingness to speak candidly about the realities of serving in public office made this research possible. This work was made possible in part through support from the University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender and the University of Michigan Center for Democracy and Civic Empowerment. The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and research team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders or partner institutions.

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