

OPINION

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How Philanthropy Nurtured the Female Stars of This Election Season

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MARK VANCLEAVE/STAR TRIBUNE/AP
IMAGES

Ilhan Omar, who won the primary in the race to be a U.S. congresswoman from Minneapolis, could become one of the first two Muslim women in Congress.

Many political pundits believe that the effort to confirm Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court could create a backlash among women voters that will sweep in a wave of female candidates, much like the Clarence Thomas confirmation battle is thought to have led to the "year of the woman" in the 1992 election.

Coming just weeks before the midterm elections, no matter the outcome of the nomination, it's quite likely that we will see an amazing number of women elected in November to hold offices at all levels of government.

What might get lost in the daily headlines is that this sweep of women, especially women of color, is the result of seeds sown many years ago by nonprofits and foundations — sometimes in unusual ways. And perhaps just as important, not all the work that influences elections comes from grant makers focused on democracy and electoral participation. In fact, a growing assembly of foundations is making a difference.

Telling the Story

Among the most striking examples of this phenomenon, Ilhan Omar recently won her primary race to become a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Minneapolis. Running in a heavily Democratic district, Omar is likely to become one of the first two Muslim women in Congress, along with Rashida Tlaib, a Democratic candidate for Congress in Michigan.

Omar has already broken through the glass ceiling in dramatic fashion, becoming the nation's first Somali-American state legislator when she was elected in 2016 to a seat in the Minnesota Senate. Her electoral victory in 2016 was captured vividly in the recent documentary film *Time for Ilhan*, which premiered at this year's Tribeca Film Festival.

That documentary, financed by several foundations, is an example of the type of media and communications grant makers can support to change the narrative on who gets to hold and use power.

Time for Ilhan, which takes its name from the motto of the candidate's 2016 campaign, is a riveting example of cinéma vérité, revealing a deep look behind the scenes of a grass-roots movement that rose up to overtake a 22-term incumbent. And the filmmakers behind *Time for Ilhan*, which had its broadcast debut on Fuse TV this week, hope it will help to spark more campaigns by diverse political candidates in future elections.

According to director Norah Shapiro, "Our goal is to engage audiences in a deeper conversation about the broader context of the current political climate, inspire women and people of color to run for office, inspire citizens to support women and people of color candidates, and increase voter turnout and participation."

Already several foundations have contributed to the production of the film, including the Jerome, McKnight and Surdna foundations, as well as the Catapult Film Fund. And there are even more opportunities for grant makers to continue supporting outreach efforts envisioned by the filmmakers in partnership with groups like Vote Run Lead, a national training program that helps women learn how to campaign effectively for public office.

Leadership Development

Perhaps just as notable about the role philanthropy can play: Even before it supported the film, the Surdna Foundation contributed to Ilhan Omar's development as a community leader.

In 2013, Surdna provided support to Nexus Community Partners in St. Paul, to spread the Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute, which was originally a program of Oakland-based Urban Habitat. The purpose of the institute is to train, support, and place people of color and other underrepresented community members on local boards and commissions that have the potential of promoting equitable services for all people.

Omar was a member of the initial class of community leaders in 2014, and this experience was a building block in her rapid rise as a public servant.

In a discussion with grant makers on the occasion of the film's Tribeca Film Festival premiere, Omar commented on the value of her training as a community leader. "It's about having fluency in the needs of the people you serve," she said. "I'm grounded by the value and the vision of the work."

Since her election victory, Omar has rocketed to prominence as an avatar of progressive values and identity in the era of Donald Trump. An immigrant who spent four years in a refugee camp before arriving in America at the age of 12, Omar has appeared on countless news programs, was a guest on *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah, and was featured on the cover of the *Time* magazine devoted to "Women who are changing the world." She even appeared in a brief cameo in a music video for the song "Girls Like You" by pop music group Maroon 5.

But for Omar, the trappings of fame are simply instruments for achieving her policy objectives, "not just getting a seat at the table, but getting the best seat at the table." Besides, she said, "My kids keep me very humble in not letting it get to my head."

For grant makers engaged in the hard work of civic engagement, investments in talent don't happen in front of the paparazzi at velvet rope lines and inaugural balls, but in building the capacity for every citizen to become a community leader.

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