

# AAPI WOMEN CANDIDATES

## Advancing **AAPI Women Candidates**

### Summary

Asian American and Pacific Islander<sup>1</sup> (AAPI) women lead AAPI nonprofit organizations far more often than AAPI men, yet lag just as far behind AAPI men when it comes to running for office. This brief explores why AAPI women are less represented as elected officials and provides recommendations to increase the number of progressive, community-based AAPI women candidates who seek elected or appointed office.

<sup>1</sup> AAPIs include people of East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and the Pacific Islands.

<sup>2</sup> We recognize that this characterization is not inclusive of genderqueer, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming individuals.



This brief is a collaboration between the National AAPI Power Fund, New American Leaders Action Fund, and Groundswell Action Fund, all of whom support the advancement of women of color. We recognize the term “women of color” inclusively, to encompass women<sup>2</sup> who are Black, AAPI, Latinas, Native American, Arab American, and Middle Eastern. Women of color, led by Black women, have led real change in our communities

for decades and most recently, in the 2018 blue wave in Congress. But women of color are rarely seen as the ones who should run for public office.

Our organizations embarked on this paper<sup>3</sup> to shine a national spotlight on the need to elect more progressive women of color by examining AAPI women as a subset of this important constituency. As the country and virtually every state and local jurisdiction have

witnessed, progressive, elected women of color, while still the vast minority, are leading the resistance to the White House and old guard lawmakers who are predominantly Anglo and male. When women of color lawmakers lead, the policies they promote are more progressive. Just as importantly, the way in which they negotiate and build winning coalitions is qualitatively different and creates a more sustainable model for governance.

“Elected AAPI women will prioritize the community and its issues. We are more likely to lift up and be courageous about prioritizing these issues.”

— Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal,  
7th Congressional District, Washington

<sup>3</sup> This brief relies heavily on two groundbreaking studies by New American Leaders: *State of Representation 2020: New Americans in State Legislatures*, July 2020; and *State of Inclusion: New American Journeys to Elected Office*, 2016.

## The Data



### AAPI Women Lead the Nonprofit Sector

From a review of the staff leadership of 65 state and local AAPI civic engagement organizations in the United States with at least one full-time staff and year-round programming, 81% were led by AAPI women, as either Executive Director or Co-Executive Director.<sup>4</sup> In a review of a subset of 41 of these organizations, 75% of their civic engagement and organizing programs were led by AAPI women.

From this sample, more than three out of every four AAPI civic engagement organizations are led by AAPI women.

<sup>4</sup> Research by the National AAPI Power Fund, July 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> NAL defines a "New American" as a first- or second-generation immigrant who is an American citizen.

<sup>7</sup> State of Representation 2020: New Americans in State Legislatures, New American Leaders, July 2020.

### But AAPI Women Lag behind Men as Candidates

AAPI women are far less represented as candidates, compared to AAPI men. In its July 2020 report, New American Leaders (NAL) found:

- There are 47 AAPI women state legislators, comprising just 32% of the 149 AAPI state legislators in the country.<sup>5</sup>
- There are 30 New American<sup>6</sup> AAPI women state legislators, comprising just 36% of the 84 New American AAPI state legislators in the country.<sup>7</sup>

Approximately 7 out of every 10 AAPI state legislators are men, almost exactly opposite the percentage for nonprofit leadership.

# The Challenges

## Facing AAPI Women Candidates

From the interviews we conducted, three challenges stood out as common obstacles to AAPI women—and most women of color—running for office.

### “Why isn’t your husband running instead?”

Chai Moua, a Portage County Board Supervisor and community organizer in Wisconsin, heard this question often when she decided to run for office. Bo Thao-Urabe, the Executive and Network Director for the Coalition of Asian American Leaders in St. Paul, MN, stated, *“The patriarchal structure is strong. Women are welcomed as helpers but not seen as leaders. When men run they are never asked their qualifications. When a woman runs, that’s the first thing asked.”*



“In many Asian American families with resources, parents typically are encouraging their children to become doctors or engineers; becoming an elected official isn't even on the radar.”

— Stephanie Chang,  
Michigan State Senator and the first Asian American woman to serve in the Michigan Legislature

AAPI women and women of color are accepted as nonprofit leaders, but less so as candidates. Courtni Pugh, a seasoned campaign veteran, noted, *“We’re taught to work hard and be respectful, not brag about our accomplishments, and running for office breaks AAPI women out of that stereotype.”*

### **“But you can’t raise money.”**

Chang noted that fundraising is a difficult challenge: *“Asking for money is foreign for many AAPI women.”* Tram Nguyen, the Co-Executive Director of New Majority Virginia, has seen firsthand that AAPI women and most women of color often come with enormous rolodexes of personal and professional networks, but these networks do not typically include political donors.

Compounding matters is the “dual campaign” that many women of color have to run. As Moua explained, *“We have to run a campaign to win public support, and then an internal campaign to get support, as women, from our own communities.”*

Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal stated, *“We also need to educate AAPI donors, who are mostly male and tend to give to men, even if there is a qualified woman running. We should look to create a network of AAPI women who are funding AAPI women.”*

### **“You have to ask a woman to run at least 50 times.”**

Nguyen has heard this saying often, and it speaks to the obstacles before AAPI women that are not there for AAPI men: *“There are very few trailblazers. Women need to see others who look like them so they can see themselves walking in their shoes. It’s as simple as that.”*

Aisha Yaqoob Mahmood, Director of the Asian American Advocacy Fund in Georgia, stated, *“I’ve talked to so many women who were interested in running for office about how to overcome ‘imposter syndrome’—they would often ask, ‘Isn’t there someone else who should run?’”*

AAPI women, and women of color generally, need repeated encouragement to run and compelling role models who are already in office.

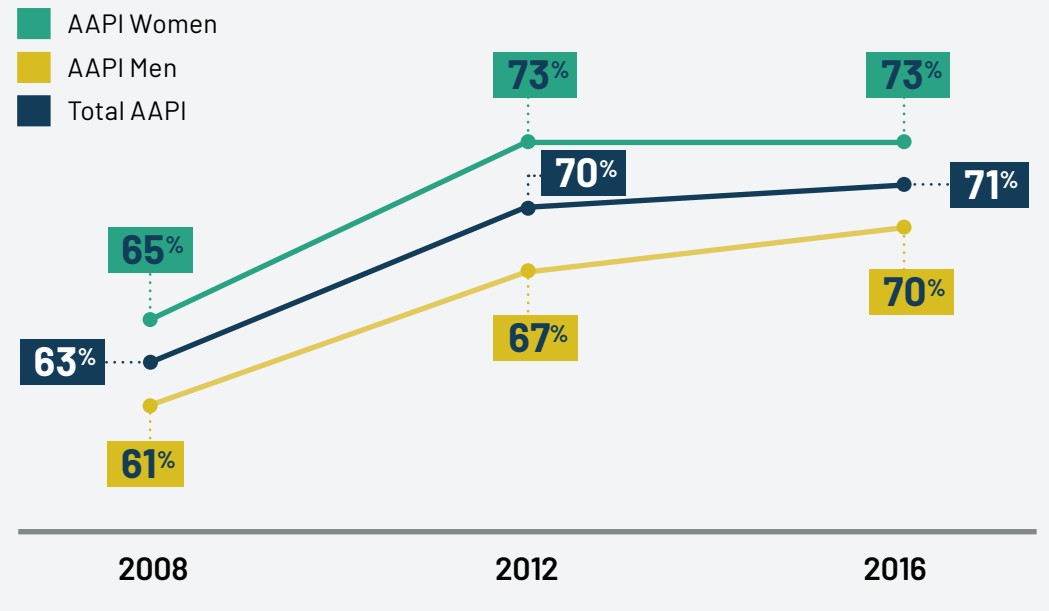
Chang remembered, *“I needed a lot of encouragement to decide to run for office. I shadowed Rashida [Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib from the 13th District in Michigan] at the State Capital when she was a state legislator so I could visualize myself doing the job. Rashida said I could still be an organizer, but I would be organizing my colleagues.”*

# The Progressive Payoff

If more AAPI women ran for office and won, progressives would win big. AAPI women are consistently more progressive than AAPI men. The following chart shows the presidential choice of AAPI women versus men between 2008 and 2016:<sup>8</sup>

## Percent Supporting Democratic Candidate

By Gender, 2008-2016



<sup>8</sup> Source: Catalyst, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> *Ahead of the Majority: Foregrounding Women of Color*, AAPI Civic Engagement Fund and Groundswell Fund, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> The following data is from the AAPI Civic Engagement Fund's 2018 American Election Eve Poll.

In 2018, the trend continued: 73% of AAPI women supported the Democratic candidate for Congress, compared to 69% of AAPI men.<sup>9</sup>

Further:<sup>10</sup>

- **92% of women** versus **86% of men** supported closing the gender wage gap.
- **77% of women** versus **74% of men** supported the DREAM Act.
- **82% of women** versus **76% of men** supported more strict gun laws.
- **81% of women** versus **78% of men** opposed racial profiling.



Sayu Bhojwani, Founder and President of New American Leaders, stated, *"Our work with immigrant and refugee leaders shows time and again AAPI women leaders in office are champions of a multiracial democracy rather than a vessel for identity politics."*

Moua added, *"With more AAPI women in office, there would be more legislation and programs that impact the most vulnerable and impacted, more community engagement in government, and more solutions that come from the community."*

And the impact of more AAPI women is much more than just having more progressive positions. Moua continued, *"There have been a lot of Hmong men in office and they tend to conform to the status quo. Women stand their ground and the men don't."* Nguyen observed, *"AAPI women are much more aggressive and tenacious and work with all stakeholders to find creative solutions. AAPI men are sometimes quick to compromise, just to get something passed."*

**“By having more women in office, you don’t lose the voice of men. Women include everyone’s voices.”**

— Aisha Yaqoob Mahmood,  
Director, Asian American Advocacy Fund

## RECOMMENDATION

# Develop a Campaign Training Program *for AAPI Women*

AAPI women are in leadership right now, primarily in nonprofit organizations. But they are rarely recognized as qualified for public office. A new training program could break the mold and begin to recruit talented organizers and existing community leaders who have anchored local organizations that serve, advocate for, and mobilize AAPIs year-round to run for office. This program could develop AAPI women as candidates and campaign staff and could open up new avenues for AAPI women to begin to run for office in greater numbers.

Key components of a new training program could include:

- The nuts and bolts of how to be a candidate and run a campaign;
- Fundraising;
- Telling one's personal story;
- Public speaking;
- Addressing internalized oppression;
- Legislative business: drafting policy, using parliamentary procedures, and how to analyze budgets;
- How to create a network of support; and
- Furthering a pipeline for AAPI women, including an internship program with elected AAPI women.





# Conclusion

There are obstacles in place that make it difficult for AAPI women to run for office. A new training program could be a first step to begin to remove these obstacles and create more role models for future AAPI women candidates. But training alone is not enough. The broader movement shares a responsibility to elevate AAPI women leaders as well. For example, the progressive sector should consider resourcing new and more political giving circles and/or AAPI affinity groups within mainstream women's political fundraising networks, and AAPI men who are elected should

ensure a high percentage of women staff and interns and encourage them to be candidates as opportunities arise.

While this report has focused on AAPI women, the challenges and solutions raised are important for all progressive, women of color candidates. Women of color often run and win in districts that are much more diverse than their own ethnicity, proving that women of color can and should become leaders of the larger progressive movement within elected bodies.



# Acknowledgments



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- Tram Nguyen, Co-Executive Director, New Virginia Majority
- Courtni Pugh, Partner, Hilltop Public Solutions and Co-Founder, Shatter
- Bo Thao-Urabe, Executive and Network Director, Coalition of Asian American Leaders, St. Paul, MN
- Aisha Yaqoob Mahmood, Director, Asian American Advocacy Fund

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## About the Authors

### National AAPI Power Fund

The National AAPI Power Fund (Power Fund) was established in 2020 to support the emerging AAPI voting bloc. We recognize the need to harness the energy, enthusiasm, and potential of this electorate for progressive impact in 2020. The primary goal of the Power Fund is to develop and support the capacity of AAPI groups toward both short-term wins and the advancement of radical new ways of embedding critical political education into the work to grow a burgeoning bench of organizers, activists, and progressive voters. The National AAPI Power Fund has an affiliated 501(c)(3), the AAPI Civic Engagement Fund, and is fiscally sponsored by NEO Philanthropy Action Fund.

[www.aapipower.org](http://www.aapipower.org)

### New American Leaders Action Fund

The New American Leaders Action Fund (NALAF) is building a democracy that represents and includes all people by supporting New Americans as they run for office, engage new voters, and expand civic engagement. A 501(c)(4) organization, NALAF energizes and expands the electorate through targeted outreach, uplifts diverse candidates through strategic endorsements, and supports progressive policies that help immigrants thrive. Together with its 501(c)(3) affiliate, New American Leaders, NALAF provides a suite of programs carrying emerging leaders throughout the journey from general campaign skills, to voter outreach along the campaign trail, to advancing progressive policy change once elected.

[www.nalaf.org](http://www.nalaf.org)

### Groundswell Action Fund

Groundswell Action Fund (GAF) was founded on a simple but revolutionary premise: that those who are most excluded from our democracy should be at the center of transforming it. GAF is the first 501(c)(4) public foundation of its kind in the country, one of the largest to center WOC-led (c)(4) work, and a major source of seed funding for 501(c)(4)s working on Reproductive Justice issues. GAF's mission is to strengthen U.S. movements for reproductive and social justice by resourcing intersectional electoral organizing led by women of color, low-income women, and transgender and gender nonconforming people of color.

[www.groundswellactionfund.org](http://www.groundswellactionfund.org)

