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# Commentary: Creating a Pipeline for a More Inclusive Democracy

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*Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus*

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### **Filling the Pipeline**

The first Women's Pipeline for Change research fellows gathered at the League of Women for Community Service in Boston's South End for an outreach event in July 2011 (from left): Martina Cruz, Lawrence School Committee member; Gladys Lebrón-Martínez, Holyoke School Committee member; Sheneal Parker, a Boston City Council candidate in 2011; Mayor Lisa Wong of Fitchburg; and Elizabeth Cardona, director of Governor Deval Patrick's office for western Massachusetts in Springfield. Photo by Centro Presente. Reprinted with permission.

# Commentary: Creating a Pipeline for a More Inclusive Democracy

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**Joyce Ferriabough**

After the 2010 elections, the number of women holding elective office in Massachusetts plummeted to 1998 levels, with women comprising only 24 percent of all officeholders and 20 percent of local elected officials. The figures for women of color who were officeholders were even starker: They held only 2 percent of elected offices, despite people of color comprising more than 20 percent of the state's population.

Women of color who are current officeholders in Massachusetts are typically the "first and only." In the state senate, there is one woman of color, Sonia Chang-Diaz. She is the first Latina woman to hold that office. Her seat was previously held by the first African-American woman to serve in the chamber. The House of Representatives fares better for women of color, but not by much, boasting just three: Gloria Fox, Linda Dorcena Forry, and Cheryl Coakley-Rivera, respectively an African American, a Haitian American, and a Latina.

As mayor of Fitchburg, Lisa Wong is the first woman of color popularly elected as a mayor in the entire state and the only Asian-American woman to serve in that position. For more than 100 years, the Boston City Council did not have a member who was a woman of color, until 2010, when Ayanna Pressley, who is African American, took her at-large seat. Boston has been majority-minority since 2000.

The 2010 Census shows dramatic increases in the state's minority population, presenting a unique opportunity to increase the number of

women of color in political leadership. A new initiative seeks to capitalize on that opportunity.

The organizing of the Women's Pipeline for Change was driven by Maria Jobin-Leeds and a consortium of activist women of color and their allies, including former state representative Charlotte Golar Richie, activists Gloribell Mota and Magnolia Contreras, lead researcher on women and politics Carol Hardy-Fanta, MassVote co-executive director Cheryl Crawford, Oíste executive director Alejandra St. Guillen, and Chinatown educator Suzanne Lee, to name just a few. Many other organizations have signed on, offering a wide array of support in the organization's development and execution. I am proud to be a strong supporter and active participant. The Jobin-Leeds family, Greg and Maria, supported by the respected Schott Foundation, have launched a number of programs that promote diversity, access, and quality education, including the Partnership for Democracy and Education, and the Access Strategies Fund. The goal of the Pipeline is to develop and launch a series of initiatives designed to encourage and support more progressive women of color getting into the political pipeline.

Women of color are critical contributors to shaping compassionate, thoughtful, and practical policy and budget decisions. Women of color bring unique experiences as mothers, wives, professionals, caretakers, and community leaders. They bring a legacy of community action. They are invested in the promise of a quality education and have a more sensitive perspective on problem-solving and making the economy work for families and for those who have been left behind or left out.

The Pipeline's first initiative, the Participatory Action Research Fellowship, a collaboration with the nationally acclaimed Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston, aims to take a closer look at the experiences of women of color leaders and the special challenges and obstacles they face entering, navigating, and ascending the political pipeline to higher elective office. We know some of the backstories of those who have answered the call to greater public service and been elected to office. Their successes have not come without great personal sacrifice. Most do not have personal wealth or extra funds beyond living expenses. So when they run for office, they run without benefit of a job or income. Many work with and/or come from



### **Up the Pipeline**

Boston City Councillor Ayanna Pressley celebrates with supporters after her ticket-topping performance in the general election on November 8, 2011. She is the first African American and second woman to receive the most votes in a citywide election for an at-large seat on the Boston City Council, prompting speculation about Pressley as a potential mayoral candidate. Pictured on the poster above her head is her mother Sandra, who died five months earlier. Reprinted by permission of Yawu Miller.

low-income, poor, or immigrant communities faced with a profound lack of resources. The challenge of fundraising, a daunting task for women of all stripes, is compounded for women of color.

The Pipeline also holds high the value of building on mentorship and networking among women of color. African-American women have been legendary mentors and community builders. Organizations such as the League of Women for Community Service, Jack and Jill, Links, Coalition of 100 Black Women, historically black sororities, and many others too numerous to count, offer a wide range of programs and scholarships that impact African-American women and encourage community and educational empowerment.

In 2009, aghast at the dwindling numbers of women across the board taking up the challenge of running for political office, the forty-year-old Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus (MWPC), of which I am an officer, returned to its municipal roots, so to speak, and reopened a political pipeline to encourage more women to run for city council

and mayor, where most women candidates enter the world of politics. A multi-partisan, pro-choice, pro-civil rights organization, MWPC worked for the victory of Pressley in 2009 and in 2010 for Shauna O'Connell, a Republican who represents Bristol County in the Massachusetts House. In 2011, the MWPC supported the successful reelection bids of Pressley and Wong, and two newcomers to the political terrain: Suzanne Lee, a Chinese American who nearly ousted a district incumbent in her first run for Boston City Council, and Sheneal Parker, another district council candidate in Boston who is an African-American activist and single mom. Lee and Parker survived the preliminary election and went on to the November 8 final election, along with Pressley, who did not have a preliminary election. MWPC is a proud partner with the Pipeline.

The uniqueness of the Pipeline is that it offers a consistent organizational structure that examines the core challenges that women of color face entering and navigating the political pipeline, their needs, and strategies that foster the goal of electing more of them and supporting them once they enter the political pipeline.

The five women of color selected for the UMass Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy's Participatory Action Research Fellowship have a wide range of experience in public service and electoral politics. They are working on a variety of topics that explore the challenges for women of color and are researching ways to document methods to better motivate and encourage women of color to move into and up the political pipeline. Their theses are eagerly anticipated because they will build the framework or foundation that will inform and direct the future work of the Pipeline. The distinguished and accomplished fellows are: Elizabeth Cardona, director of Governor Deval Patrick's Western Massachusetts Office in Springfield; two school committee members, Martina Cruz of Lawrence and Gladys Lebron-Martinez of Holyoke; Mayor Wong of Fitchburg; and Parker, who in 2011 unsuccessfully challenged Councillor Tito Jackson in Boston's District 7, which includes Roxbury, parts of Dorchester and the South End, and the Fenway.

Parker's race was a textbook study of the plight of women of color who run for office, and underscores the reasons a more structured apparatus is needed to assist them. As a Participatory Action Fellow, Parker's personal campaign experience would make an excellent thesis project

because her story comes with valuable lessons for other women of color who wish to enter the political pipeline.

Parker is a public school teacher, a former president of the Fenway Community Development Corporation, and an activist in various organizations that help to better the district in numerous ways. She has contributed to tangible job creation, including helping mentor successful teen entrepreneurs. A single mom whose son's father was killed on the streets of Boston, she has been a strong advocate for public safety and for getting guns off the streets. She was once a victim of domestic violence. She holds two master's degrees. She is a graduate of EMERGE, a superb entry-level program that trains candidates in basic campaign skills.

A first-time candidate, she was endorsed by the Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus, a group of the most politically savvy and experienced women in the state. A MWPC endorsement comes with resources. The organization's political action committee can and often does contribute money, provide interns to help in a campaign, and supply candidates with an array of on-the-ground support and direction, including canvassing, phone-banking, and an array of organizational support. Parker took advantage of all that.

She started her council campaign with a strong background of community service. She had zero dollars in the bank and no campaign structure. In essence, she started with nothing and needed everything. For her, it was a climb from the beginning. Despite losing last November, she had what most women and women of color possess when they decide to run, an indomitable will to succeed, fueled by the desire to serve.

Parker ran against a popular incumbent who won a special election in March 2011, even though 92 percent of District 7 voters did not cast ballots. Jackson rode the 8 percent turnout to victory, a statistic that Parker believed made him ripe for a challenge. Also, she thought that low voter turnout did not bode well for the future of civic engagement in the district. She had hoped to get a bigger chunk of the nonvoting 92 percent than she ultimately did. The outcome upheld conventional wisdom that turnout is expected to be low in communities of color in an election year without a mayoral race. First-time candidate Lee turned that conventional wisdom on its head by taking a powerhouse vote from Chinatown and from the progressive South End (considered low-voting also), topping the

District 2 preliminary and besting incumbent Bill Linehan, 39 percent to 35 percent. She lost the November final by fewer than 100 votes, beating back conventional wisdom in this case. The seat representing District 2, which encompasses parts of the South End, all of Chinatown, and all of South Boston, has always been held by a councillor from South Boston.

At-Large Councillor Pressley topped the field and kept her citywide seat despite the campaign of Michael Flaherty, a former at-large councillor and high vote-getter who attempted to return. She became the first candidate of color and second woman to win the most votes in an at-large council race in Boston. Her finish was a sign of how much the city's voting patterns have changed: The first woman to top the at-large field was Louise Day Hicks, a polarizing candidate who staunchly opposed school desegregation in the 1970s. In contrast, Pressley ran on an inclusive platform. There are four at-large seats, currently occupied by Pressley, Felix Arroyo, Steve Murphy, and John Connolly. In order for Flaherty to have recaptured a seat, one of the present four councillors would have had to lose. The conventional wisdom held that Pressley or Arroyo were the most vulnerable. Arroyo, who is Latino, came in third and Pressley fourth in 2009. Again, conventional wisdom was wrong. Pressley and Arroyo finished first and second, respectively, in 2011. Lee's candidacy appeared to help both in shoring up part of their natural bases. They met their other challenge of getting substantial numbers of votes beyond their bases.

Two black women ran in the preliminary election for District 3, which encompasses parts of Dorchester and Mattapan. The seat had been held by Councillor Maureen Feeney, who had announced plans to retire and resigned soon after the final election. Both women who ran for her seat were eliminated in the preliminary. In a crowded field of seven candidates, Marydith Tuitt, an aide to state Representative Fox, finished fifth; Stephanie Everett, a former aide to state Senator Chang-Diaz, finished sixth. The campaigns of both of these very able first-time candidates were woefully underfinanced. They also faced another challenge. Despite a growing minority population, much work needs to be done to register the growing immigrant community in order to compete effectively against a solid, consistent, active, and mostly white voting bloc in the eastern part of Dorchester. Representative Dorcena Forry, a Haitian American whom I worked with as part of her winning team in her first



run for the legislative seat, did a masterful job of bridging that divide and winning over Dorchester's white voting bloc, demonstrating as Patrick did when he became the first African-American governor of Massachusetts that for a candidate with the right message, race becomes a lesser factor than message, a solid body of work, connection to the entire community, and strong political skills. After all, politics is about relationships.

The 2011 election produced some noteworthy victories by women of color, including Wong's come-from-behind victory in Fitchburg's mayoral election, and avoided a worst-case scenario in Boston. If Pressley, Lee, and Parker had all lost in the November 8 general election, there would have been no woman on the Boston City Council for the first time in almost forty years. In the case of Pressley, the first woman of color elected to the council and an at-large councillor representing the entire city, her loss would have been considered a major setback for women's progress overall and clearly a blow to communities of color.

But Pressley overcame the challenge, Lee nearly did, and Parker learned some valuable lessons to share with other women of color and for her next run. The promise of the Women's Pipeline for Change is to offer a vehicle to nourish current and future generations of women of color leaders.