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What we can learn from indigenous women at the ballot box – Editorial by By Yifat Susskind

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With the first year of Trump's presidency behind us and midterm elections fast approaching, progressive women are faced with the looming question of what comes next. How can we go beyond resistance to advance our progressive vision, especially in this difficult moment in history when the right is on the rise?

This is a crucial time for us to give electoral politics another look. Progressives sometimes view electoral politics with suspicion, especially as a vehicle for women's empowerment. To be sure, when women's political participation is measured only in mere percentages of women in office, or when women elected then advance an anti-women's rights agenda or are denied real decision-making power — this is not progress.

However, to imagine a way forward, we need to evaluate many different strategies, including putting progressive women's names on the ballot box. What untapped potential is there for women in electoral politics? Can this kind of political participation both defend against right-wing threats and advance our progressive vision?

The experiences and insights of women at the margins are instructive here—like Indigenous women who have been historically excluded from state power and still face the double discrimination of sexism and racism. Two of the central values that guide many Indigenous women's leadership hold promise for us all: promoting collective well-being and sharing knowledge and resources across generations.

This year, a record number of Indigenous women are running in the 2018 US midterm elections — including three hoping to represent New Mexico, Wisconsin, and Arizona in Congress and one aiming to become governor of Idaho. These women have already used their influence in politics to defend their communities and the environment and to speak out against unjust immigration policies.

"I'm ready to go to bat for any immigrant in my community who is in fear of being deported," said Debra Haaland of the San Felipe Pueblo of New Mexico in an interview with VOA News. "I come from a community of

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people whose families have been split up enough by governmental policies, and that should never happen.”

Knowing firsthand the damage done by racist policies, Haaland thinks first of the well-being of people at risk in her own community and beyond. She sees the connections between the threats of deportation and displacement and, as an elected leader, can advance collective solutions that protect people at risk.

By running for office, Indigenous women in the US are building toward a long-term progressive vision — one that includes Native American experiences and representation in the lawmaking and governing processes. Their presence in office would also be a defensive strategy, shifting the balance at the national and state level in order to safeguard the progressive policies we’ve already won and to protect vulnerable people and communities.

This surge of Indigenous women running for office is happening abroad as well. Last year in Nicaragua, the first ever Indigenous woman was elected Mayor of Waspam, a town on the country’s North Atlantic Coast. A lifelong organizer and advocate for Indigenous women and girls, Mayor Rose Cunningham is now an even more powerful force to secure her People’s rights and improve the livelihoods of women and girls.

I know her story well, because I have worked with Rose for decades through my organization MADRE and seen firsthand the transformative power of her leadership—especially for young women and girls. She has mobilized thousands of women’s rights activists in Waspam to provide care and community for women and girls facing violence, poverty and discrimination.

In that work, she creates space for the leadership and decision-making of young women, through a network of *promotoras* or community organizers. Their work as *promotoras* allows young women to go out into communities, hear people’s stories and strategize ways to meet their needs. Young women become recognized as community leaders in their own right, ensuring that the work Rose has built will endure into the next generation.

Now, she sits in the mayor’s office, where she can continue to mentor and inspire young women and to advance her community’s priorities from the inside the halls of power. She has told me about some of her plans. Working with these young women leaders, together they’ll bring humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable people in her community and foster sustainable agriculture by supporting women farmers. They’ll create shelters and programs to end gender violence, and they’ll deepen their community organizing to make sure people have the health care, education and basic services they need.

These values – of collectivity and of collaboration across generations – are core to the lessons that these Indigenous women offer. From their example, we can better grasp political office, not as end in itself, but as an arena from which to protect the most vulnerable and take steps towards our vision of the future we want to build.

Yifat Susskind is Executive Director of MADRE. For more than 20 years, Yifat has partnered with women’s human rights activists from Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and Africa to create programs in their communities that combine grassroots organizing and international advocacy to meet urgent needs and create lasting solutions.

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