Women and Social Change: Intersection of Activism and Politics

When Dr. Augustine asked to me participate in this roundtable, I was honored but, to be honest, also a little intimidated. I wasn't sure what knowledge or experience I had that would make me an adequate presenter. So I wrote down everything I thought I knew on the topic of Women and Social Change that I though someone else may want to know, and here's what I came up with. I am the chair of the Bradley County Democratic Party, a position that has helped me meet inspiring women that have run for and/or hold political office, and that has expanded my knowledge and training on how to support and train political candidates for the future. So I have some knowledge about Women and Politics.

I am also an amateur political activist. I have helped organized a couple of peaceful protests and participated in a number of others, including the Washington D.C. Women's March. So let's label *that* Women and Activism.

So, a lot of people that I talk to don't think that these two elements of my identity, politics and activism, line up. When I decided to run for leadership of our local Democratic party, I was told that I was selling out my activist ideals. I have other women friends, other colleagues in the Democratic party, who were told the same—who even lost friends because of their decision to participate in the political process. Ultimately, they see politics and activism and diametrically opposed to each other.

So what I decided I wanted to talk about for my part tonight was the intersection or the relationship between activism and politics. In particular, I want to highlight how they work together to create social change, and especially emphasize the role that women play in that change. I will also, at the end, talk about some of the particular challenges that women face and some of the options that are available to us to overcome those barriers.

So, people often see activists and politicians as being on opposite sides, after all, the role of the activist, especially the protestor, is to speak out against the current structures, structures that politicians often inhabit and help develop. Where political figures help create laws and policy, activists often oppose them. To this end, politicians are often also viewed as lawful, while activists are typed as disruptive if not outright unlawful. The political system is structured and hierarchical, where activist groups are often amorphous and communal. Ultimately, politics often seeks to maintain the status-quo, while activists fight to change it.

In our society, as part of that hierarchy and structure and status quo of politics, politicians, as people, are often placed on a pedestal. They are given the benefit of the doubt, repeatedly. Many believe they are not to be questioned, let alone interrupted or criticized in public. But the American government is also patriarchal and predominately white and male, and that ties in to our perception of politicians as well.

(This may also be a chicken or the egg - do we expect that level of respect of our politicians because they're male, or are they male because that's who we have give that level of respect to?)

If you don't believe me when I say that the American government is a white, patriarchal system, here's some numbers for you. Women make up 50.8% of the American population, but only 19.4% of The Senate and House of Representatives are women. Women of Color make up almost 20% of our overall population (at 19.7%), but are underrepresented in the government, making up only 7% of the current Congress. Historically, of course, the numbers are even worse. Even with this current, massive gap between population and representation, there are more women of color, and women across the board, in Congress than ever before.

Here's some more numbers for you to think about. There was not a single woman in the US Senate until 1948. Not one. The first woman of color wasn't elected to the House of Representatives until 1965, and Carol Moseley Brown, the first black woman in the Senate wasn't elected until *1993*. 1993. And, as we all know, there has never been a woman president, and 2016 was the first time a women even received a major party's nomination. So yes, the current American field, while changing, is still very much male-dominated, and women, across the board, are underrepresented in American politics.

But politics is where a lot of social change happens. So what do we do?

For starters, we start electing more women. Which is already on the uptick. 2018 was termed "the year of the woman," and we did see 102 women elected to the House at the midterms. That's huge, and voting really does matter. But what do we do until the next elections?

The other thing to do is to be sure that we don't restrict women once they're in office. And this is where I see politics and activism start to coalesce.
For women, the sheer act of participating in the political process is an act of protest. But a lot of people don't like protest. And women who try to create change from the inside out often receive much of the same backlash that activists receive when they try to cause change from the outside

in. So, what I want to show tonight is that social change, especially when it is propelled by women, is inherently disruptive, whether it is in politics or activism.

We have a tendency to smooth over the rough edges of historical movements and figures to make them more agreeable to a modern audience, while at the same time condemning contemporary figures that are their spiritual successors. By taking a look at some of the major moments for women in American history and the women behind those moments, I hope that we can begin to see the kind of struggle and activism change has always required, allowing us then to see the current political climate for women within a broader context.

So, let's start with women's suffrage. The fight for all women's right to vote spans over a century. There are two moments, however, that I would like to highlight. The first are the actions of Silent Sentinels. On January 9th, 1917, a group of women from the National Women's Party (NWP) met with Woodrow Wilson. They left that meeting disappointed with his response to their requests for suffrage and decided to take action. Harriot Stanton Blatch, a leader in the NWP is recorded as saying, "We must have a continuous delegation to the President of the United States, if he is to realize the never-ceasing, insistent demand of women that he take action where he is responsible. We may not be admitted within the doors, but we can at least stand at the gates. We may not be allowed to raise our voices and speak to the President, but we can address him just the same, because our message to him will be inscribed upon banners which we will carry in our hands. Let us post our silent sentinels at the gates of the White House." And they did. For the next two years, six days a week, a rotating group of women stood outside the White House gates. Although the women were silent, they carried massive signs that communicated their message. According to historian Belinda Southard, "On the most fundamental level, the Silent Sentinels were women seeking political voice through the right to vote. Because they were denied the right to vote *as women*, the Sentinels appropriated the political dimensions of femininity into their militant identity…In doing so, the Sentinels expanded the public/private limitations placed on women's political participation and enacted the political change they sought."

This, then, is a prime example of the intersection of activism and politics. From the outset, for women to be able to participate in the political sphere, it required activism.

Okay, so, standing silently outside the White House may not seem like a really big deal. In terms of types of political action, these days it seems kind of mild. But the Silent Sentinels were the first group to ever picket the White House. And when public sentiment began to turn against

them, and punishments for their activism grew, these women did not back down. On November 10th, 1917, 33 women were arrested and sentenced to 60 days in prison, in squalid conditions. Alice Paul, leader of the NWP, went on a hunger strike while in prison, and was force fed twice a day by having a tube shoved down her throat. The evening of these arrests would later be known in history as the "1917 Night of Terror." So, while the aims of the Silent Sentinels was political, it required protest, activism, and sacrifice.

Also, the NWP is still around. They have a museum in Washington D.C. Up until the 1990's they were an active lobbyist group that petitioned successfully for a lot of political change. So, again, The NWP had a long history of working from both sides in order to create real social change.

So, the 19th amendment was ratified in 1920, ostensibly giving all women the right to vote. But we all know that it didn't really work out that way, and in to the 1960's African American men and women were being still denied that right.

Let me tell you about two more women, then, who were fighting for social change: Fannie Lou Hamer and Annell Ponder. Both Hamer and Ponder were active participants with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led at the time by Martin Luther King Jr, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). They both worked tirelessly, traveling the south in order to inform and register black voters. According to Clarissa Myrrick-Harris, a contributor to the book *Southern Black Women in the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, "It was black women in the forefront of getting the vote out." "Black women were a force to be reckoned with in the mid 20th century and collectively helped to galvanize the limited black voting strength of African American women and men." Two of the women who played a significant role in this movement were Hamer and Ponder.

In June of 1963, Hamer and Ponder, along with other civil rights workers, were arrested in Mississippi. Members of their group were eating at a "whites-only" bus station restaurant when they were ordered to leave by officers. When the activists tried to record the officer's license plate number, the whole group was arrested, including Hamer, who was forced off the bus. Once in custody, the activists were interrogated about registering voters and then were beaten. The women were groped and assaulted. Annell Ponder was so beat up that when an SCLC representative came the next day, she was unable to speak her face was so swollen. (That man was also arrested and tortured.) *Hamer* suffered injuries from which she never recovered, including a blood clot above her eye and damage to one of her kidneys.

Despite being within their rights to register to vote and to inform others on voting, these two women were among the many unreasonably arrested, beaten, assaulted and in other ways punished for their effort. Hamer was also fired for registering to vote, and she and her husband had their land revoked from them. What Hamer, Ponder, and the many women like them sought was the political power of the vote, which was their right to have, but the change needed to secure that vote unfortunately required activism and protest that came with a high price.

That was just to get to vote. Once that happened, women started to run for office, too.
So, moving then into politics, I want to highlight two other women that demonstrated a protest ethos while acting within the political structure. The first is Shirley Chisholm. Elected in 1968, Shirley Chisholm was the first African American woman in Congress. She was also a member of the League of Women Voters, the Urban League, and the NAACP. Chisholm was known as "Fighting Shirley," and upon winning her election, she's quoted as saying "Just wait, there may be some fireworks." She's also recorded as telling critics, "I have no intention of just sitting quietly and observing." And she didn't. In 1972, she ran for president - she was the first African American (of any gender) to seek the nomination, and the first woman to seek a nomination from the Democratic party. Her campaign was an uphill battle, and she faced racism and sexism at every turn. She even had to file a legal complaint with the FCC in order to participate in a televised debate. In her book *The Good Fight*, Chisholm writes, "I ran for the Presidency, despite hopeless odds, to demonstrate the sheer will and refusal to accept the status quo." (there's that word again.) "I ran because somebody had to do it first. In this country, everybody is supposed to be able to run for President, but that has never really been true." So, we see through Chisholm's political actions and her writings how working within the legal framework, within the structures of government, still requires a heart of protest and a willingness to disrupt the status-quo if change is going to be achieved.

Finally, we come to the modern day. The last woman I want to highlight is a good friend of mine, Mariah Phillips. Mariah is one of the women I have had the great pleasure to meet during my tenure as chair of the Bradley County Democratic Party. Mariah ran for Tennessee's 4th Congressional seat for the House of Representatives. I asked Mariah about her experiences running as a female candidate, and here's part of what she said: "As a woman I was immediately dismissed as unprepared and unready. Although I had a bachelors degree in political science and a masters degree in leadership, had been both a us government teacher and a successful business leader, I was told that I should stand down and let someone else run. The man I ran against in the primary had no political experience, but for some reason, he was considered more qualified. I

didn't let that stop me and I beat him 2-1 in the Democratic Primary." She also told me, "It's not traditional for women to run for office, but it's not unusual for women to lead. We do it everyday in our families, workplaces, and community groups. Women are often over-looked for the positional authority, when they so often earn the personal authority. That needs to change." I see in Mariah that same spark of protest and activism that I see in women, throughout history, that sought to tap into their political power. Despite being discounted and overlooked, Mariah persevered, and continues to do so. (Here's another quote from her, "It's hard to put yourself out there, and in my case, we didn't win. But I know our campaign moved the needle and got people engaged. We are laying the groundwork for a victory in the future, for me or for someone else.")

In the fall of 2017, when White Supremacist groups planned a rally to take place in Mariah's home city of Murfreesboro, Mariah knew she had to do something. So, along with friends and colleagues, she helped found Murfreesboro Loves, an organization that planned positive counter-events on the day, helped local businesses board up their stores in preparation and regain lost income after the fact, and continues to organize and host service projects throughout the city. Mariah is the image of grassroots political action intersected with social action.

If you are a young woman sitting in the audience right now, and you're here because you're interested in social change, you may, at this moment, be thinking "yikes, this is not what I signed up for." But I don't tell you all of this to scare you off. I want to tell you this so that you know when you face adversity, when you are told to sit down, to be quiet, to wait your turn, to work harder, to not rock the boat, to be more polite, to smile more, you are facing down and disrupting the same power structures that these great women faced. My friend Mariah was told that she was too inexperienced, despite being better equipped than her male opponent. Shirley Chisholm was told that she was disruptive, that the "American landscape" wasn't ready for her yet. Many have tried to over-write bid for the Presidency as merely symbolic. Fannie Lou Hamer and Annell Ponder were both called terrible things and punished for trying to exercise their right to vote. When they were arrested, Ponder was beaten in particular for refusing to call the arresting officers "sir." And even the suffragists, with their lace collars and wide-brimmed hats were described "militant" and "aggressive."

These are lines that has been used against women, including politicians and activists, time and again. And it's still happening. Watch the news, and you'll see it. This is a constructed narrative, perpetuated by a patriarchal society. It works in three steps. One, it tells women who want to be leaders, who want to create social change to be quiet and to stay in their lane (in other words to stay in the house.) Two, when women do speak out, it buries them in history or it

rewrites their story to be more palatable. Three, because it has taken away our historical examples, each time the narrative starts back up with step one, it feels new again. That same language "aggressive," "militant," and its modern synonyms "shrill," "un-likeable," "resting B face," continue to be used to keep them from overturning the status-quo (which is patriarchal). So, on one hand, if you're here and you're not a woman or you're not very interested in politics, I want you to hear this because I want you to watch out for this in the future. See the language that society and the media uses to describe women who try to create change, and begin to question it. If you're here, and you *are* a women and you *are* interested in enacting social change, this is for you too. You will face adversity, and when you speak out, there will be those that try to shout you down. But what I want you to know, is that, when people (and it will probably be men *and* women), when people come at you with these criticisms, you can rest easier knowing that (a) they are not the truth, they are instead of narrative that has been designed to keep women in check, and (b) that drawing those criticisms means that you are walking in the footsteps of the great women world changers before you.

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I know that seems like a conclusion, but I want to take just one minute to tack on the end here how you *can* get involved in activism and/or politics. Option one is to consider running for office. Here's another quote from Mariah, "Running for office is not the only work that needs to be done. But it's the most direct. If you want to change the way government works, you have to change the type of people you elect. And if those people don't exist, run Yourself."

The two major political parties have trainings and workshops for candidates. There's also a training program for women called Emerge that you can find in many states, including Tennessee.

If running for office isn't your thing, you can get involved and help create social change by volunteering with a local political party or with a campaign. Both of these can be done by getting in touch with your county parties. In Cleveland, we have a Democratic, Republican, and Libertarian Parties, and there's a DSA in Chattanooga, if that's what you're interested in. They can also hook you up with candidates from their parties. You may choose to take on a leadership role, or you can volunteer by canvassing, phone banking, letter writing, or helping plan other events like fundraisers.

If you're interested in something more bipartisan but still political, I would also suggest the League of Women Voters. They do voter education and registration.

And that's just politics. There are, of course, a host of other non-profits and organizations that may align with your interests. I'm happy to talk with people afterwards, or to go into more detail during the Q&A, if folks are interested. Thank you!