

# NOT *POLITICS* *AS* *USUAL*

Women,  
minority,  
and LGBTQ  
candidates  
are running  
for office in  
droves.

They're  
winning,  
and turning  
politics on  
its head.

By **Joel Brown** Photograph by Janice Checchio

Ayanna Pressley, who attended the College of General Studies, upset a 10-term incumbent in her Democratic primary race in Massachusetts.







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# IT'S

91 DEGREES AT SUNDOWN IN Monahans, a dusty West Texas city of 6,800, where oil rigs see-

saw in vacant lots and the new Bennigan's is cited as proof of an economic upswing. Monahans was ranked the fifth most conservative city in the United States in 2015, based on campaign donations, and maybe that's why only four voters are waiting when Democratic congressional candidate Gina Ortiz Jones walks into Fermin's Restaurant for a meet-and-greet in late August.

"What I'd like to do is talk a little bit about my background and why I decided to take this jump," Ortiz Jones tells them, "and then we can talk about anything you want."

It's extreme retail politics. The district known as Texas 23, represented by Republican Will Hurd, stretches from San Antonio to the outskirts of El Paso, and encompasses 800 miles of the border with Mexico. In a midterm election year that looks more progressive by the minute, Ortiz Jones (CAS'03, GRS'03) believes there's a good chance for a candidate like herself—a gay Hispanic woman—who might not have had a shot a few years ago. "Every vote counts," she says. "We're showing up in all 29 counties because everybody matters."

No matter what happens on November 6, Ortiz Jones is part of a rising tide of new candidates, activists, and behind-the-scenes strategists on the campaign trail who are upending politics as usual. Why does it matter? For starters, if you are a white male incumbent up for reelection soon, look out. Many, but not all, of these new faces lean left, energized by Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign and by opposition to President Donald Trump's agenda. Candidates with virtually no name recognition to start are using the power of social media to launch grassroots campaigns, and in just a few short months are ousting entrenched politicians who were thought to be unbeatable.

Many of the new faces are women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community. Ortiz Jones is not even the best-known of the women who've won Democratic primary races. That might be Boston's own Ayanna Pressley, who attended BU's College of General Studies in the 1990s before leaving to work full time and help support her mother, who had lost her job. Pressley, the first African American woman to win a Boston City Council seat, made national news in September when she beat 10-term incumbent Michael Capuano (Hon.'09) in Massachusetts' Seventh Congressional District.



Gina Ortiz Jones (CAS'03, GRS'03), a former US Air Force intelligence officer, is running for a US House seat in Texas' 23rd District.

# Democratic women are winning primaries at a higher rate than men this year.

And then there is Sanders supporter and first-time candidate Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (CAS'11), who became an overnight media sensation after defeating longtime US Representative Joe Crowley in New York's 14th District primary this summer. Hours after Pressley won her race, Ocasio-

Cortez tweeted a photo of the two of them, shoulder to shoulder and beaming, with a proud message: "@AyannaPressley + I bonded over running while constantly told it's 'not our turn,' that we 'weren't ready,' 'good enough,' or 'experienced' enough. We kept going anyway. In June, I won my primary. Tonight, she won hers. Here's to November." Within days, the tweet had almost 50,000 likes.

"This is clearly part of a national trend, of having a surge of candidates who haven't looked like previous candidates, and in particular we've seen an incredible surge of female Democratic candidates," says Katherine Levine Einstein, a College of Arts & Sciences assistant professor of political science.

Einstein cites research by Boston College political scientist David Hopkins showing that the proportion of female Democratic nominees in House races this year is close to 50 percent, while in 2016 it was less than 30 percent—and 2016 was a high-water mark relative to previous years. According to the blog [fivethirtyeight.com](http://fivethirtyeight.com), Democratic women are winning primaries at a higher rate than men. However, the increase in women candidates hasn't been replicated on the Republican side, Einstein says.

The numbers aren't as clear for candidates of color and from the LGBTQ community, she says, but "we're definitely seeing more Latino candidates, and I suspect the same is true for LGBTQ identities. Certainly we are seeing more transgender candidates," including Vermont Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Christine Hallquist.

"For a long time, Congress has not necessarily represented the diversity of people," Ortiz Jones says. "I think that's why we're having some of these discussions about healthcare and



Andy Vargas (CAS'15), the son of Dominican immigrants, is the first Latino to represent his district in the Massachusetts House.

about protecting public education. There's such a disconnect between those in Congress now and the life experience of the people being represented."

Beyond the ballot, there's a rise in activism—embodied by the Parkland, Fla., students who rose to the forefront of the gun debate after the mass shooting February 14 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Climate change activists block pipeline construction, and women dress as characters from *The Handmaid's Tale* to protest a Supreme Court pick who threatens *Roe v. Wade*. Many of these groups have made the most of internet technology and social media, which makes it easy to organize an event, contribute to a campaign, or sign up to volunteer.

But the highest profile changes have been on the ballot. Among factors that historically discouraged women and minority candidates, Einstein says, were having resources (money) and enough trust in the process to feel they have a chance of winning. But now the rise of the Sanders wing and Trump's policies, she says, have made some of them think, "Maybe it is time for people like me to run for office."

They've discovered that not only is it their time to run, but with increasing frequency, it's their time to win.

**Coming Home to Run for Congress**

In Monahans, Ortiz Jones pulls her audience of four together at a single table and tells them the story of her life, not stinting on the parts that would once have made her an unlikely candidate, and to some red state voters, may still: about her mother, a well-educated woman who came here from the Philippines as a domestic worker in search of the American dream; about her San Antonio childhood of reduced-price lunches and subsidized housing; about going to BU on an ROTC scholarship and serving as a US Air Force intelligence officer in Iraq, fearing all the while that she would





New York's Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (CAS'11) became an overnight media sensation after her primary win.

be exposed as gay under the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.

She tells them how proud she was to work for the Obama administration after she left the Air Force, and how an influx of Trump appointees in early 2017 led her to quit her job in the office of the US Trade Representative and come home to run for Congress. She talks about her progressive policies, her concerns about Trump’s treatment of immigrants, her opposition to the border wall.

Voter Frank Heslin is on the local hospital board, so the conversation turns to healthcare. Ortiz Jones talks knowledgeably and with passion about how tough rural hospitals have it, how far people must travel to get care, how many are uninsured. “I was very impressed,” Heslin says afterward. “She probably has more grasp on it than I do.”

A fracking boom has filled the West Texas highways with oil workers, and liberals are mocked even on the rock radio station out of Odessa. You might think a liberal woman who believes in climate change and is against Trump’s border wall would be a long shot here. But Ortiz Jones and her supporters are encouraged by the numbers: about 60 percent of Texas 23 residents are Hispanic, and Hillary Clinton beat Trump in the district by 3.5 percent in 2016, while Hurd was reelected by just 1.3 percent, or 3,000 votes.

“I think we’re witnessing an awakening of opportunities for people of a different posture,” says Juan Dominguez, a retired high school teacher, at an Ortiz Jones campaign stop the next day in the mountain hamlet of Fort Davis.

Approximately 50 of the town’s 1,200 residents greet the candidate on the patio of the Cuevas de Leon Mexican restau-

rant. Most are already on her side, fired up by a recent visit from Beto O’Rourke, the Democrat challenging Republican US Senator Ted Cruz. More diverse candidates “are essential to our democracy,” says Betty Avant, a retired social worker and former Democratic precinct chair. “It’s a way to pull more people into being a part of what it takes to make a strong country, a strong democracy.”

The Dems here are also incensed by a local dustup over access to polling places. County officials had planned to shut down a couple of locations favored by Hispanic voters, who tend to vote Democratic, but backed down after a public outcry. It played badly against a background of what many see as draconian immigration policies under Trump. “I think the Hispanic community needs to understand they’re not living in the 1800s anymore,” Dominguez says, “and they need not fear reprisals for how they vote.”

Ortiz Jones gives much the same talk as in Monahans, then presides over a lively Q&A that touches on guns, climate change, and the Mueller investigation of Trump.

“It goes back to fundamental questions about who we are as a country,” she says. “Do we want to live in a country where the quality of your education, your healthcare, is based on your income levels? I don’t think that’s right and many of the voters I’m talking to don’t think that’s right, and we need representatives who understand that.”

Soon she’s 75 miles down the road in Pecos, giving her stump speech in yet another Mexican restaurant. Here there’s a new sign of her campaign’s viability: a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* covering her appearance.



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**From BU to the National Stage**

“The people closest to the pain should be closest to the power,” Pressley says often, and that in part explains why she challenged Capuano, a reliably liberal voice in Washington, to become in all likelihood the first African

American woman representing Massachusetts in Congress. There is no Republican opposing her on the November ballot.

Pressley caught the attention of national media following the Ocasio-Cortez victory. Her win similarly shook up the state’s political establishment, bolstering thoughts of a blue wave. But it’s a different kind of blue. Preparing to represent one of the commonwealth’s most ethnically diverse districts, but also its most economically unequal, Pressley supports what she calls an “equity agenda,” centering around public health and economic development for underserved communities, education and criminal justice reform, issues affecting women and girls, and improved treatment of immigrants, starting with the elimination of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Meanwhile, self-described democratic socialist Ocasio-Cortez, considered a shoo-in for the seat in New York, is campaigning for other progressive candidates around the country. She spoke to a full house of students at BU’s Tsai Performance Center October 1, exhorting them to activism and to persist, even when progress seems out of reach.

“In the words of Howard Thurman (Hon.’67), ‘What makes you come alive? Go do that,’” she said, invoking the name of the dean of Marsh Chapel from 1953 to 1965.

Known as Sandy at BU, Ocasio-Cortez was a student ambassador for the Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground, where Raul Fernandez (COM’00, Wheelock’16), a Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development lecturer and director of its Higher Education Administration Program, was assistant director.

“Everybody knew her as one of the smartest people in the room,” Fernandez says. “Her main focus was using the time she had on this planet to benefit people in the community.”

“It has always been young people who are the conscience of this nation,” Ocasio-Cortez told students at the Tsai event. “The drive to put everything on the line for a better world is what it is going to take.”

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**More Than Identity Politics**

The same changes that powered Pressley and Ocasio-Cortez to victory are at work at the local level as well. Andy Vargas (CAS’15), the son of Dominican immigrants, came home from a senior-year internship in Barack

Obama’s White House driven to work on issues such as education and opiate abuse in Haverhill, Mass., where he grew up. In November 2015, he won a seat on the Haverhill City Council, the first Latino elected official in a city that is 20 percent Latino. He was ready to run for reelection in 2017, but changed tacks when a seat in the Massachusetts House of Representa-

“Everybody knew Ocasio-Cortez as one of the smartest people in the room.”

tives opened in midterm. He won that race, becoming the first Latino to represent the Third Essex District, and he’s running for reelection to a full term this fall. Among other alumni candidates this year is Nika Elugardo (LAW’10), a self-described progressive who won the Democratic primary in the Massachusetts 15th Suffolk District over the incumbent, Representative Jeffrey Sanchez, chair of the House Ways and Means Committee. Elugardo has no Republican opponent in November.

Vargas has thought a lot about this diverse generation of political activists. He believes the success of Latino, black, and LGBTQ candidates isn’t just the result of identity politics. Society has changed enough so that people from those communities can have a seat at the table now, he says, and economic pressures, from the 2008 crash to the health insurance crisis, have pushed them to seize that opportunity.

Candidates like Vargas, Pressley, and Ortiz Jones prefer to focus on solutions to these problems and have no plans to adopt the vitriol coming out of Washington, D.C.

It’s a smart strategy, says political scientist Einstein. “There’s some evidence that negative advertising and negative campaign strategies might depress turnout,” she says. “I think it’s a much more effective turnout strategy not to just



Activist Jamie Engel (CAS’16, Wheelock’18) (far right), with Hillary Clinton and aide Huma Abedin, is determined to make change.

Austin Tyler Fields (CAS'16, Questrom'16) worked for President Donald Trump's inaugural committee and at the White House.



say, 'I'm going to stop Trump's immigration policy,' but to have a different, progressive immigration or environmental policy."

The new crop of candidates eschews another traditional campaign approach: chasing after so-called super voters, people who have consistently turned out in the last three elections. Vargas prefers to look for "people who aren't engaged in the political process, people who need someone to actually speak to their values, to bring them out to the polls."

That approach may be working. "My gut tells me there's a lot more excitement about the candidates we're seeing in 2018," Einstein says. "Anything that's generating more turnout from people of color who sat out the 2016 election, from young people who sat out the 2016 election, that's to the good for the Democrats." Turnout in the Pressley-Capuanos race seems to back that up; more than 102,000 people voted, over twice the number who went to the polls in 2016, and more than any primary during Capuanos's tenure.

### The Power of Digital Technology

Another factor driving a new generation of political activists, red and blue alike: the access to and power available through digital technology.

California Republican Austin Tyler Fields (CAS'16, Questrom'16) arrived at BU in 2012 and signed on as an intern with Mitt Romney's Boston-based presidential campaign. "Politics always seemed like it offered the biggest bang for your buck," Fields says, "the most efficient use of your time in terms of how you can impact a significant portion of the population for the better."

He worked in Romney's advance department, making sure that every rally or speech had enough banners, posters, and handouts. Later, as he pursued undergraduate degrees in political science and management, he worked or interned with political campaigns back home and a lobbying firm. The Republican National Committee (RNC) offered him a full-time job in its strategy and analytics department after graduation.

"I was a business intelligence analyst," Fields says, working with massive voter databases and analyses. "My team would take that data and look for insights and important analytics and present them in a graphic or report that offered different insights to the various stakeholders at the RNC."

After the election, he worked for Trump's inaugural committee and was hired as associate director of protocol and presidential gifts in the White House. He became director when his boss was transferred, and stepped down in July to begin graduate studies at UCLA School of Law, hoping it will help him move to the next level in his political career.

Technology, he says, has been an important force for democracy. "With the advent of technology, there are infinitely more ways to get involved, and it's easier," Fields says. "You see people like Ocasio-Cortez unseating incumbents like Joe Crowley, running on values they believe in, and you also see people who are in high school organizing protests and getting tens of thousands of people marching on Washington. It can be as simple as starting some sort of fundraising or activism on social media. From the comfort of your couch, it seems, you can be more active than you could be out in the streets

"You don't have to be a millionaire to make your voice heard."

30 years ago. What technology has allowed is, you don't have to be a millionaire to make your voice heard."

One-time Vargas campaign worker Jamie Engel (CAS'16, Wheelock'18) will be using technology to help amplify and strengthen her grassroots organization. Late this summer, she became the first hire for Democracy Entrepreneurs, a new Boston-based nonprofit created by City Year founder and two-time US Senate candidate Alan Khazei. It will serve the leaders of nonprofit groups ranging from Report for America to the Parkland students' March for Our Lives. With Engel as program and development manager, Democracy Entrepreneurs will provide modest funding for organizations just getting on their feet, but will focus on teaching leaders best practices for

# CONSIDERING *a Career in Politics?*

## *SOME ADVICE ON HOW TO GET STARTED FROM THOSE IN THE THICK OF IT*

Young activists don't have to look far for role models this year. The Parkland, Fla., high school students who survived a mass shooting at their school on Valentine's Day led the massive March for Our Lives rally in Washington, D.C., just five weeks later, and continue to speak out for gun control and safer schools. For young people who want to run for office someday or make an impact on a cause they're passionate about, there's no better time, with digital technology at their fingertips and a political landscape roiled by newcomers like themselves. We asked three alums for best practices for young people who want to jump into politics.

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**JAMIE ENGEL**  
(CAS'16, WHELLOCK'18)  
**Program and development  
manager for the new  
nonprofit Democracy  
Entrepreneurs**

- Seek knowledge inside and outside of the classroom. A political education doesn't just occur at school—get involved. Volunteer, even if it's just a couple of hours a week. The experience is invaluable. And remember, no job is too small. Often the least glamorous ones (making phone calls or knocking on doors) are the most important.
- Don't be deterred from working for first-time candidates.
- Your voice matters, and you can be an influencer on campus. Encourage your peers to become politically involved, even if you have ideological differences.
- Never lose sight of your moral center and the issues that matter most to you. Remember why you care.

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**ANDY VARGAS (CAS'15)**

**Massachusetts State Representative, Third Essex District**

- First and foremost, spend a lot of time thinking about the issues that—to borrow a phrase from Howard Thurman (Hon.'67), dean of Marsh Chapel from 1953 to 1965—really upset you and frustrate you, and let them drive your work. If it's funding for education back in your hometown, you might want to work on education funding on the state level, or you might want to run for school committee back home to ensure you are advocating for every single dollar. Don't think about the position you're most interested in. Think about the issues that drive you.
- Second, spend a lot of time listening. Often it's easy for us to just jump right into something we are passionate about—and we should. But I think we also have to check our privilege as college graduates at the door. There are other people who are most familiar with the problems we are so passionate about, so spend a lot of time listening to them.
- Third, just work—work really hard. We won our city council race because we knocked on so many doors—thousands—that we wore our shoe leather down. And we won this race for state rep when we had no business running because we knocked on so many doors and stayed up late and did the work.

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**GINA ORTIZ JONES (CAS'03, GRS'03)**  
**Democratic congressional candidate  
in the Texas 23rd District**

- Find a way to give back to a community that has given you so much. At BU, one of the experiences I really, really enjoyed was being part of the BU Siblings program, which was a great way for me to give back—to the Boston community, but also to a kid who was super-talented but could use a mentor. It was very enriching for me.
- And as I tell every young person, particularly women, be so good that they can't ignore you.

putting together a board, fundraising, and other skills. And while there will be conferences and in-person meetings, digital learning will help spread these lessons around the country. For Engel, it's the natural extension of a lifetime of activism.

"I am the adopted daughter of two gay men who fought tirelessly for marriage equality and two-parent adoption in the state of Colorado," she says. "They taught me to always stand up for what I believe in and instilled in me the value of bettering the lives of those around you."

While studying political science at BU, she took a Teach for America job in Lynn, Mass., teaching seventh and eighth grade, in large part to gain firsthand understanding of inequality in America.

"The day after the 2016 elections I had students coming in

in tears, 11 and 12 years old," she says. "I had one little girl say to me, 'What am I going to do if my parents get deported and I have to take care of my little brother who's in fifth grade?' And that's just one of the many stories—fears of deportation, fears of losing jobs, of losing health insurance."

The experience deepened her understanding of the problem and her determination to make change "a hundredfold," Engel says. She earned a master's in education at BU because she thought it would help her do the best job for the kids in Lynn as well as help her work on education policy.

"I think that my generation, no matter what you might see on Twitter or on social media, is hopeful that there is a better future ahead," she says. "We just need to put in the work to make sure those hopes become reality."