

## Episode 242: Midterm Trailblazers

**Lisa:** Hi, I'm Lisa Hernandez

**Lizzy:** and I'm Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich.

**Lisa:** And we are your hosts for Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each month we will discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon. And this month, as we all await the quickly approaching midterm elections, we are talking about the rising number of Black women running for political office.

**Lizzy:** I cannot believe how quickly these midterm elections are approaching.

**Lisa:** Um, yeah, it seems like we're all close to the end of the year and our political spectrum is gonna change maybe dramatically or maybe not in the next couple of weeks.

**Lizzy:** You know, it's part of our job to sort of be on top of these things. And I'm not saying that I'm not, but I am saying that I feel like there is so much news happening right now. The idea that there's elections coming very soon and. As always, they can be quite pivotal. Feels like something, uh, that has sort of escaped my brain a little bit.

So I'm, I'm excited for this discussion to be grounding, I think for me in some ways.

**Lisa:** Absolutely, and I think, you know, it's really. It's really inspiring to hear about how much diversity is in the pool of people running for political office. Like not only diversity as far as, you know, different racial and ethnic makeup in the pool, but also different ideas and sociopolitical spectrums being brought into the office.

I feel like it's opening, it's opening doors for a lot of different conversations that we weren't having in previous years.

**Lizzy:** Well, that's good to hear. I feel like too many people stop at representation being important because we need sort of visual diversity among our leaders, but it's, and, and that is important, but it's so much more than that. It's, you know, when you have diversity of perspectives that strengthens democracy, or that's the theory anyway. You get better law making

**Lisa:** Right. And hopefully you get better turnout when people see different, different ideas coming around. Hopefully that does inspire a higher turnout, this midterm election, although I guess we'll just have to wait and see until a couple of weeks from now.

**Lizzy:** Soon enough. And of course, you know, not all of our listeners, but a healthy portion of our listeners are faculty, like the often subjects of no jargon are. Um, and so they're thinking about this too, not just as voters, but as people who are, you know, charged to varying degrees with the civic participation of their students.

Um, so we, we shouldn't go without mentioning SSNs faculty guides currently on our website scholars.org. Um, and that's for professors who might wanna use it as a resource in their classrooms.

**Lisa:** Absolutely. So please go check that out. And I'm really excited for all of you to listen to this wonderful episode that we have today. We. A great conversation with Professor Nadia Brown. Nadia Brown is a professor of government and director of Women's and Gender studies at Georgetown University.

Professor Brown's research interests live broadly in identity politics, legislative studies, and Black women's studies. She is also the lead editor of politics groups and identities Here's our conversation.

**Lisa:** Hi, Professor Brown. Thanks for coming on No Jargon.

**Nadia:** Thank you for having me.

**Lisa:** Of course. Um, so I wanna talk about midterms since it's right around the corner. Um, I was just reading an article the other day published in Bloomberg stating that Black women have been breaking records when it comes to running for office. We've got 133 Black women running for House of Representatives and another 21 Black women running for the US Senate.

Are these numbers reflective of a pattern? Have Black women been running more often or is this just a particularly unique election?

**Nadia:** No, this is a pattern for sure. I've written articles and thankfully I have written articles and I've said in every article of every election cycle, Black women are running at path breaking numbers. and that has continued. So what we're seeing is a continuation of Black women running at large numbers.

What's new or newer about this election cycle is there there's an increase of number of Black women running in various ideological spectrums. So not all Black women that are running would be your, quote unquote typical Democrat. Um, with the same kind of policy priorities and way of viewing the world.

They don't share the same ideologies, backgrounds, generations, policy preferences. Some of them aren't even Democrats. And so the more and more women that are running isn't so much

a, a. Story about the numbers as much. If it a story about the diversity of Black women who are running,

**Lisa:** So I do wanna talk to you a little bit about your work and one of your latest articles, Destined to run the role of political participation on Black women's decision to run for elected office, which was published in 2021. You and your co-authors argue that political participation strongly predicts being asked to run and thinking about running for office for Black women.

So I wanna just unpack the term of political participation, just what falls under this political participation, and just share some details about your findings.

**Nadia:** So political participation are all the things that that don't fall under or aren't housed under electoral politics. So electoral politics are those people that are serving in office and political participation are people that are not currently serving.

In office, but are trying to impact government. So it's things like voting, writing a letter to your, you know, senator. donating money to a candidate. It's protesting. belonging to a grassroots organization, right? These are forms of political participation. But what, uh, Lori Frazier, Diane Pinder Hughes, and Jamil Scott and I show in in our article is that Black women don't see this disconnect, right?

So political science wants to make these very neat definitions of, okay, political participation is stuff that happens outside of being elected official or running for office. And then electoral politics are those people that are seeking office or serving an office. And for Black women, the more you are likely to participate, um, in politics, the more likely you are to then see yourself as a candidate, as to run for office or to serve an elected, um, office.

It's not that neat kind of like tidy binary box. Political science just has a very warped way of understanding how Black women think, feel, relate to, to politics. and it's always intersectional. It's always overlapping.

Sometimes, you know, it's messy. It's not neat. There are no boxes, there are no binaries. and so in our research, right, Black women are saying, Yeah, I vote and I run for office, right? Or I donate money and I can see myself sitting, you know, sitting as a state senator. There is no disconnect.

**Lisa:** Mm-hmm. . And it does sound like a fascinating group to study. Is there something that sets their political ambitions apart from other groups that have been running for office?

**Nadia:** But I think this is a good question because it juxtaposes -- Oh, am I using too much jargon? Sorry,

We'll start –

**Lisa:** I don't think so. I think it's fine. Juxtapose, I get it.

**Nadia:** Ok, Good. Ok. You know, so this, this is a, it's a really good question because the literature and how political scientists often times think about Black women are in these two camps of either racialized politics or gender and politics.

And there's a small cadre of scholars like myself who are doing work at this nexus who are really interested in understanding how Black women's identities are intersectional in, in as much as they are the combined new identity of being black and a woman, right? So it's making like Black women have distinctly different, different experiences.

And so the, the bigger question I think isn't, um, I think, I think it's much more of a shortcoming of political science literature than how what we as scholars know about Black women candidates. More so than like what's actually going on down on the ground. And it's because we've been looking at – political scientists, unfortunately have been looking at Women candidates or Black candidates or Latinx candidates, you know, disabled candidates as if there are these separate groups of people and that you can't all be the same thing at the same time. And that's really the importance of intersectional analysis to see how the totality of someone's identity

is impacting how voters respond to them, how they market themselves to possible constituents. and that's the work that I wanna do. So I think the, like the silly answer is like, yeah, political science is late, right? Um, but these women have been running, will continue to run and do so uniquely in their own ways.

And unfortunately, political scientists didn't have the tools to figure this out. So I can give, give an example. So I do research on Black women, political elite. Most of my work focuses on elected officials, but I do talk with them. I do talk to candidates. Um, I have, candidates in the book that I just co-published with Danielle Lemi, where we look at candidates who are running for office to help understand how they kind of market themselves to the politics of appearance of, of their voters.

But what we find, right, are like these stories of Black women being told to wait their turn. They're being told that there is room for them at places like Emily's List, but there's not, or to wait their turn is like a Black person running as a Democrat. and not recognizing that there are multiple strengths in being a Black woman.

And so now there are new organizations, right, like Higher Heights, or Black Women's Pack in Texas that we worked with who are distinct. Organizing and working with Black women as Black

women candidates and these organizations and these women have been working in ways that have always taken into account, their intersectional identities.

And so my research really is like trying to bridge that gap, right? Like taking these women's lived experiences and bringing them in a way that makes it legible to political scientists.

**Lisa:** And you were mentioning that you study the ways voters respond to these groups, Groups that have intersectional or overlapping identities. So can you talk about what you have been seeing of looking at voting behavior when it comes to Black women candidates?

**Nadia:** So we know that when Black women run that they have the opportunities to win and they need the support of whether it's the, their political party, they need support of donors. They oftentimes have the support of voters, and that's the part that. It really gets overlooked. So Black women are the number one supporters of Black women candidates, and that's huge, right?

Because Black women have high turnout rates. Black women are known voters. So when candidates, for example, like Lauren Underwood right now is running for reelection in Congress. Her district has been redrawn and she is now, probably gonna have a very, very tough battle in front of her. And that's because she's now in a new district where people usually don't turn out to vote.

It's not that they're not registered and it, maybe, it's not that they're just so apathetic, but we know that when Black women turn out to vote, they do so in large numbers and usually for the Democratic, uh, candidate. And that Black women are the number one supporters of Black women candidates. And so the issue is, right, they have the support

from Black women when they have it, right? But it's how do we mobilize other voters to support Black women candidates? And probably if you've been paying attention to some of the, I'm gonna call it made up, that kind of fear tactic rhetoric that's going around Stacey Abrams, campaign for governor in Georgia.

It's this. It's this. idea that Black men don't support Black women or that Black men are feeling left out by this new wave of Black women voters. And it's so frustrating, right? Because Black men do turn out to vote in high rates. For Democrats, right, that they peel off a little bit from Black women.

That's because Black women's voting, um, rates for Democratic candidates are so high. It's like 98, 96, 94%. So if a Black male, Black men are voting for Democratic candidates at 90%, 88%, right, That is huge. It's still better than other demographic groups, right? So their white counterparts

are voting almost like 50%, 56, 50 4% for, for a Republican. Um, and the same for Latinx communities. So the issue is, you know, it gets turned into like, who's going to be electable and now people are pointing the fingers at Black men because we know that Black women turn out to vote and support Black women.

And so the issue was looking at brothers like, What's going on with y'all? Are you gonna support Black women candidates? And so there's this real conversation that I think needs to be had and thankful that Black Politicals are having this internally. But there is Some Black men who won't support Black women candidates.

That needs to be addressed. But it's also right, how is messaging being packaged to Black men voters? And I think that Black women candidates do a good job of talking. That's what my research finds, that Black women do a good job of reaching out to Black communities writ large.

The other thing is, why is it the expectation that Black women candidates will only win if Black women will support them?

It needs to be a more call in to say, white folks, Latinx folks, Asian Americans, you have good opportunities to support Black women candidates. You should as well.

**Lisa:** Right, Like focusing on Black populations votes towards Black candidates is really ignoring a large, very large section of other voters that could also be supportive as well. Um, I do want to ask you about these elected officials, like once they are elected, can you share some examples, the impacts on policy made by recent Black female elected officials?

How have they maybe changed policy in a way?

**Nadia:** Well, this, I love this question because this is, this is actually, the, the part of my work that I'm the proudest of is being able to make this plane to not just the discipline of political science, but to policy makers. The politicos, it's that it's so important to have diverse voices at the table because we have different policy outcomes, right?

Because people have different lived experiences that they understand and see a problem and a, and a solution to a problem in a unique way. And so some examples that I've published have been around. Having different, um, state set aside quotas for doing business with the state? Right. So my first book, Sitters in the State House, I talk about the state of Maryland used to have, um, a policy for contractors who wanted to do business with the state that they could apply as either a minority as a woman, and the Black women legislators were hearing from Black women constituents and other women of color constituents.

Well, this is a problem, right? If you're being asked to choose between applying to do business with the state as either a Black person or as a woman. What if you're both, And the other members of the legislator that I spoke with, they saw this policy as not a big deal, right?

They were like, Oh, well that gives this woman the opportunity to apply twice for this program, but it's an extra hurdle, right? That these women have to go and stand in line, get the application, fill this at the time, right? They had to then fill it out and then hope to see if they're gonna be picked up on one end.

And if one, uh, you know, one of the quota, um, businesses is filled, they're waiting on the other. But if there was a special set aside right, for women of color or other people that could fit, it doesn't make sense to ask people to do the same thing twice. And so that was one of the, one of the big ones that was so eye-opening that having Black women and policy makers at the table

They were able to rectify and said, we're going to do away with these two quotas and then put them, into one big pot. The other bit is, um, another book that I'm working on now that has been really eye-opening for me to think about how Black women have been at the forefront of dealing with pandemic policies and issues stemming from the, from covid 19.

And one of them has been around caregiving. And so we know that caregiving is feminized. It is one of those pink collar jobs and oftentimes a low skill, low wage job. So thinking about, um, healthcare workers that might come into your home like an LPN who is, might be taking care of an elderly person or someone who is disabled.

These are often times women who might be new immigrants to this country and they are most likely Black and Brown. And what was going on, and this is a research that's happening in the Maryland state legislature. The Black women legislators were telling me that they wanted to work with the Women's Caucus, Latinx Caucus and the Black Caucus to find ways to protect these women workers, um, who were going into these homes to do this kind of care work since the pandemic.

And some of them right, are like again, healthcare. Others are childcare. Some of that is elder care. And they saw this as an intimate problem. Their sisters, their mothers, their aunts, their cousins, right? Were doing this kind of work and these other caucuses saw them as discrete issues. Right. So is this an issue around, um, you know, leveraging immigrant labor?

Is this an issue around feminized work? Is this an issue around, how Black people can be exploited in a, in under, kind of under the table economy The answer is yes. Right? All of these things are true. All these Black women who got together to show that these desperate kind of communities were being impacted, but weren't talking to each other, and the best way to, to write legislation was to have these groups come to the table, but listening to the voices of the Black women.

But then what they needed was the power of these caucuses, right? So these women couldn't pass these bills all on their own. They needed the Black Caucus. They needed the Latin Next Caucus, the Women's Caucus, to come together with their membership and say, we support this legislation. and so it's so -- 'cause policy is made in these little kind of disparate groups that's really impacting a very targeted group that could be left out because they're seen as undeserving or unworthy.

And it's not that many people by these larger. So again, right, That's what the, the Black women policy makers are bringing that they're saying, We need all these people to work together because this group that you might think the small subsection of the Black constituents or the women constituents are actually larger and need our voice here in Annapolis.

**Lisa:** Absolutely. And it sounds like, Black women's like keen connection to their own communities. And their original, political participation that maybe stemmed from maybe community organizing, as we've seen with especially Representative Corey Bush. It really brings a unique perspective into policy making.

We talked a little bit about, um, the high political participation rates of Black women. So what do you think maybe other groups that don't have high of a participation rate, maybe we mentioned a lot about, White voters not turning out for, democratic candidates or not turning out to vote as high rates as Black women.

So what do you think other groups can learn from Black women's political participation?

**Nadia:** Oh, Black women have been doing it for ourselves since day one, and that no one is going to save us, so we have to do it ourselves. And I think that's, you know, that's the difference, right? That other groups might see their connection to the state in a way that is more transactional or a way that is more, Institutionalized.

Whereas Black women in my research today, like my current research, but um, those that are serving in office are running for office, but even historical work, right? Things that I read and cite, from people like Martha Jones. Or showing that Black women have always taken matters into their own hands because they have to.

Right? There is no, no government official coming to say hi. Right? Like, um, what do you think would be a good policy? Would you like to run for office? Do you see, you know, American democracy working out for you? If not, right, come on in and let's, you know, figure it out together and try to change. That does not happen.

So Black women say, Alright right, Like, I'm gonna do. By myself. And so I think about, um, you know, ancestors, women like Fannie Lou Hamer, who was , who was given the tools to, to, to



learn about voting, right? That there was outside members to her community who gave her the tools to think about voting.

However, outside, um, activists did not shape her activism. Right? She already had that in her to mobilize her community through song, through feeding people, through relating to people, understanding folks, right. And then putting pressure on the Democratic party in Mississippi. Then putting pressure right on the president of the United States to seat her.

Right. That was all her. The same way that Stacey Abrams, Right. Has called out the corrupt system in Georgia that has purged people from the roles that has diluted Black vote and Black voting strength. Um, and then called people into the system to change it. There's, there is a. For me, a very short line between women like Fannie Lou Hamer and Stacey Abrams.

Uh, there's a thin line between people like Ida B Wells and LaTosha Brown, right? That these women are politically engaged and active because no one will save them. They have to save themselves, and they're doing so with the support and help with their community. I think it's just a different orientation to politics that Black women have because we've had to have it right of being marginalized and excluded means that you can't sit back and wait for others.

If you want to see a change, you have to be that change.

**Lisa:** Absolutely. Thank you for sharing that. And I wanna ask based on, you talked to some organizations that are encouraging more Black women to run for office. Can you share some examples on how they have been doing this through their work?

**Nadia:** Sure. So, um, for the second book with Daniel Lemmy and I, we worked with the Black Women's Pack in Texas. And that was such an amazing, um, eye opening experience. Again, Black women who noticed there was a dearth of Black women's support and leadership in the state of Texas and. Organize themselves. They form conferences.

They have, um, donor circles. They partner with researchers like, like me to help give them insights about larger themes, about what's happening in their communities, what's happening with them. Um, and that's a hundred percent grassroots on the ground, right? Like it's sisters helping sisters to get elected to making connections and networks, giving people training that they need to be an effective, um, effective legislator once they win.

Or it connects 'em to donors so that they can win because they have enough money in the campaign coffers to, um, to be able to sustain a general election. And mostly right, it's a primary election for most Democrats, right? If you make it out the primary, you'll be able to win. The general others are bigger and more nationally known, like higher heights.

And that's run out of New York by Glenda Carr. And that is a national stage right of, um, higher heights endorsing Black women candidates, working to get them elected. So doing things like phone banks, donations, uh, social media strategies, that really highlight how Black women. Can help and should help other Black women win elections.

Another one is Win with Black women. That's put on by Jotaka Eaddy, who convenes a Sunday night off the record call. Right? And it's women who show up in their personal capacity to talk about issues that impact Black women and have political come in and speak with us. and that Black women can share their.

Their grievances, their policy preferences. It's a place where people can air things out in love and then get directions on how to move forward. And so it's a very concerted, community call to figure out, okay, how will Black women in their personal capacities be able to support other Black women who are running for office?

to be honest, right, like as a, you know, as a Black feminist, as a baby, Black feminist, I dreamed of these spaces and now, right, 20 years later, I'm 40 and I'm able to see these things and to be a part of them and to offer my expertise as a leg, as a, you know, expert on legislators and Black women candidates.

But then it also, as a Black girl, it just feels so good, right? Because it is, again, like this ethos of Black women and taking it on their own hands, forming these own organizations. To do something and they've worked. Right. So because these organizations like Sister Scotus, right? We have Ketanji Brown Jackson sitting on the Supreme Court.

Because of Women with Black women, right? We have a Kamala Harris, uh, sitting, uh, right in the VP's seat, and there's a legacy of Black women who are trying to build up the next leaders, right? So it's women like Minyon Moore or Donna Brazile who are helping, or Leah Daugtry right, who are helping to, you know, really teach and generate the next generation of Black women leaders so that it's not power hoarding right, but power sharing to make sure that there will be more women that will come down the pipe who are able to help others.

**Lisa:** You've mentioned a lot of like Black women doing it for themselves, but also it's doing it for their own communities and sharing that expertise and experience that they have with other Black women as well and creating this sort of, um, community. So I appreciate you coming on this podcast and sharing your expertise with us and the people listening as well.

And I do wanna ask if you have any closing thoughts before we go.

**Nadia:** I will share that In terms of Black women supporting Black women candidates, that is amazing and I think that we can, we can, and we'll continue to do that, but the part that I, I want

to put the call out is voting isn't enough and in our communities, We often focus on voting and it's good, right?

We have to show up, we have to vote. But I would love to challenge the listeners to know jargon, to think about more holistic ways to support candidates. So if you're able, and particularly Black women candidates and, and the communities that they represent, if you're able to donate money to good candidates, please do that.

We know that campaign finance is the mother's milk of politics, and so your donation enables people to get their voices out there and heard, particularly in very expensive media markets. The other thing I'll note is if you can't afford to donate, you can use your voice and your platform on social media.

You can talk about why you're supporting a candidate. You can ask other people to donate, remind people to vote. You can do phone banking rates. Some things are. Small. Some things require a larger time commitment or a larger financial commitment, but I, I want people to think about engaging in politics much more broadly than just showing up on November 8th to vote and that after the election cycle, hold those people accountable.

Right? That if someone that you've elected isn't, you know, behaving in the ways that you think that they should, isn't voting on the things that you think they should, isn't talking about the issues that you think they should. Then call 'em up. Talk to their office, right? Hold them accountable. Show up at the city council meeting.

Show up at the state legislature. Send your congressperson a letter. And these are all the things that we've learned from our Black feminist foremothers, right? They've done this all. They've paved the path to us. They've given us a roadmap to follow. And so, I urge each and every one of your listeners to be like a Mary Church Terrill.

I urge everyone to be like a Mary McLeod Bethune or Ida B. Wells, um, to do this work that Black women have done for so long, and now to continue it into this next generation.

**Lisa:** Thank you so much. I'm excited to have our listeners be reminded of all the things that they can do beyond just showing up to a voting booth. So thank you so much for joining us on No Jargon. It's been such a pleasure to talk with you,

**Nadia:** Thank you so much, Lisa. It's a pleasure.

**Lisa:** . And thanks for listening. For more on Professor Nadia Brown's work, check out our show notes at [scholars.org/nojargon](https://scholars.org/nojargon). No Jargon is a podcast of the Scholar Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policy makers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy. The producer of our

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