

REFLECTIONS ON BEING A SMALL PART OF THE YEAR OF THE WOMAN

JAMIE BALLINGER*

In 2018, I ran for State Senate for District 7 in Tennessee. I lost that election just a few months ago. And I am still wrapping my head around the experience. I find myself in a somewhat awkward position. People, both close friends and strangers, think that I should be elated for running a strong campaign.

I am not elated. Do I feel accomplished? Sure. Did I learn a lot? Definitely. Was it the best “hard thing” I have done in my life to-date? Absolutely. What all these well-meaning friends and strangers do not fully appreciate, however, is that losing has the tendency to make you (or perhaps it is just me) feel like a loser.

It could simply be the attorney in me. The law is a results-oriented profession. No one high-fives you when you walk out of a courtroom after presenting a hard-fought, energetic, reasoned, and authentic yet losing argument. A loss is a loss, and the thing you were trying so hard for is now out of reach.

To be clear, I am not complaining. Running for office is a great privilege. I am lucky to have had the opportunity. I also know that I gained more from the experience than I gave, and I gave it every measure of my strength for nearly a year. Everyone should run for office one day. Yes, really—everyone. We need everyone in the arena in our democracy advocating for ideas and representing their worldview.

I make the point of being candid about my feelings, because I think it is important to show other people that, despite the strengths, accomplishments, and invincibility that others may perceive you to have, a hard political loss is deeply felt. And, in fact, such a loss *should* be deeply felt if you put everything into your campaign. I am now in the phase of appreciating my loss while at the same time making sure that it does not keep me from taking up the next challenge.

* Jamie Ballinger graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Tennessee before obtaining her law degree from the University of Tennessee College of Law, where she graduated with honors and as a member of Order of the Barristers and Chair. She joined national firm Baker Donelson after serving as an attorney and shareholder at Knoxville firm, London & Amburn. She has a robust civil litigation practice in the areas of healthcare, employment, and manufacturing.

HOW DID I GET INTO POLITICS?

In many ways my foray into politics feels both inevitable and shocking—shocking because I do not consider myself a politician. Indeed, when I was recently introduced as one, I was revolted. The word politician seems to lack any positive connotation. I don't know anyone who can say either word without pursing their lips, including myself.

But now, running for office feels like an inevitability to me. I came to appreciate that it was my interest in a legal education and my work as a lawyer that gave me fortitude to “jump into the arena,” as politico types would say. Being a lawyer is immensely empowering. I have heard it described that if life is a board game, the lawyers are the ones that have read all the rules. Knowledge of the rules may not make lawyers fun at parties, but this knowledge does give you faith that the law can and often does work well. And your experience as a lawyer teaches you that advocacy can ensure the proper application of the law or change the law for the better. I also take to heart the wisdom that a law school friend (and fellow bookworm) shared with me many years ago: When Dick the Butcher says in *Henry VI*, “The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers,” it is because he knows that before mayhem can reign, those that know the law and advocate for the rule of law must be silenced. I think many lawyers instinctively get this principle. We are officers of the Court. We have a duty to the law we have sworn to protect. We have a duty to be good representatives of the legal system.

It now also feels inevitable that I ran for office because, when I look back over the last ten years, I see that my attention steadily became focused on the need for more women in leadership, both in the private and the public sectors. Over the course of these last ten years, I have been to a dozen presentations that focus on the need for women in leadership. These presentations highlighted how women apply a more comprehensive and holistic approach to decision making in the private sector, discussed how women do not negotiate their salaries as frequently as men, and pointed out that women do not hold political office at the same rate as men.

For my part, over the last several years, I began encouraging women I knew to run for office or to seek appointed offices. I even mediated a presentation between a Democratic operative and a Republican operative for a women's legal group I am a member of to try and give women a bipartisan look at running for office and the need for women to run. Notably, as I learned during the course of my

campaign, it seems that, regardless of party, everyone agrees that more women should be in elected and appointed office.

I had also taken a look at the UN Women data for Women in Politics for 2017.¹ This report was also splashed around in the news. It showed that only eleven women were serving as heads of state in democratic countries.² Ranking 104th, the United States, the UN Women report revealed, fell in the bottom half of all countries in the world for women serving in Congress.³ In the United States House of Representatives, 19.1% of representatives were women, and in the United States Senate, 21% of senators were women.⁴ Women of color made up just 7.1% of members of Congress.⁵ In contrast, women are between fifty-one percent to fifty-two percent of the population in thirty-seven out of fifty states, and fifty percent of the population in ten of the remaining thirteen states.⁶ The private sector was not fairing much better with only 5.1% of CEO positions held by women in S&P 500 companies,⁷ and only 22.2% of the board seats of Fortune 500 companies.⁸

In hindsight, I believe this data contributed to my rising sense of urgency to do my part to get women in decision-making positions in the public and private sectors. I started to tell women I knew to register to vote, to give money to candidates, to volunteer for a campaign, to call their representatives, to run for office, to credential themselves professionally and rise in their field, to seek leadership roles in their companies, to start their own companies, to work the polls—in essence, to do anything to help make a difference for women.

1. UN WOMEN, *WOMEN IN POLITICS: 2017* (Jan. 1, 2017), http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2017/femmesenpolitique_2017_english_web.pdf?la=en&vs=1123.

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

5. *Women of Color in Elective Office 2017*, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POLITICS, <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-color-elective-office-2017> (last visited Apr. 6, 2019).

6. *Population Distribution by Gender*, KAISER FAM. FOUND. (2019), <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-gender/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>.

7. Drew Desilver, *Women Scarce at Top of U.S. Business—and in the Jobs That Lead There*, PEW. RES. CTR. (Apr. 30, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/30/women-scarce-at-top-of-u-s-business-and-in-the-jobs-that-lead-there>.

8. HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES, *THE HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES BOARD MONITOR: APPOINTMENTS OF WOMEN TO BOARDS HIT RECORD HIGH 2 (2018)* (citing 2020 WOMEN ON BOARDS, GENDER DIVERSITY INDEX 4 (2018)), https://www.heidrick.com/Knowledge-Center/Publication/Board_Monitor_2018 (“[T]he percentage of women on Fortune 500 boards rose only to 22.2%, up only 1.2 percentage points from the figure of 21% the previous year.”).

I would like to think that I did, in fact, help to make a difference. I certainly think that people were surprised once they heard the data.

I continued, however, to be discouraged. I still was not seeing many women running for office. I realized that personally I was terrified to run, and that I was essentially telling my friends and colleagues to do something that I myself would never do. I realized that it was time to face my fear. I applied for and was accepted into a training program that teaches women to run for office. I learned about the nuts and bolts of campaigning and told myself that if I ever saw a position that I could make a difference in, I would step up.

WHEN MY SHIP CAME IN

In late 2017, a female friend that I respect told me that I should run for State Senate for my district, District 7. She said that it would be hard but that she knew where my heart was in terms of public policy and this seat would give me a chance at doing good public service. When she first told me that I should run for office, I was flattered. But I can't say that I really grasped what she was saying. It was akin to someone saying: "You should hike Kilimanjaro. It is life changing. Of course you can do it." Yes, of course I can train, buy the gear, and get the plane ticket, but can you really just up and climb a mountain? It seemed like something you would put on a bucket list and never scratch off. But her counsel rang in my ears and the idea began to grow roots. Fear of losing could not be a factor; fear of embarrassing myself could not be a factor. Instead, I just asked myself if this was a place where I could lead and do my part to get more women . . . well . . . everywhere. I decided it was. There was very little peace in that decision. Knowing something is the right decision does not make it much easier. The rightness of it gives you passion, but your fear doesn't leave you. You just do it anyway.

I am still quite shocked that I ran. It doesn't matter how tough of a lawyer you are—putting your name on a ballot and asking for a vote is a whole new ball game. The people that you are asking to vote for you are entitled to know who you are and what you are about. And it is their right to not agree with you, and to let you know publicly or privately. This dialogue is good for democracy. We need more of it. But, as everyone knows, it is not the exchange of ideas that scares you. It is your grandmother hearing someone call you names on TV or on Facebook or in the paper. It is the knowledge that there are those that will purposely attempt to take your words and shape or change them for their own purposes. It is also the fear of being wrong. There is hardly a political leader that can withstand scrutiny with the

passage of time. As a product of their time and their own bias, they have been blind to the rights of others. And history remembers.

If you are going to run, you have to make peace with all of this. Only your family and very close friends actually know you. An election is, in one sense, personal but, at the same time, it is in no way personal. For those that will vote for you, and for those that will vote for your opponents, they are projecting who *they* think you are on to you. Do not hold it against them. Most people are too busy to follow politics closely, and they often have not been taught enough about our system of government. Everything about what you are doing is alien to them. Be sure to give grace and receive grace. Be firm, do your homework, and state your position. Do not bend a knee to hate, but be kind. Maybe you are right today, but you will be wrong tomorrow.

Elections matter, and because they matter, they make people a little crazy. I ended nearly every email of my campaign with the same sentence: "I am grateful." This was intentional. With so much work laid out before us to get more women elected, to get governing bodies that actually resemble our population, it is easy to be discouraged. But, unlike many, I had a job that allowed me to take the time to run, I had a family that could afford my stepping back from work, I had a rock star education from the University of Tennessee, and I had friends and strangers help me. Those are all things to be grateful for. On the other hand, the folks that the public policies you are debating and fighting for will really help, are working two jobs and don't have healthcare. When it comes to that, the threats of losing, of being embarrassed, of your grandma hearing someone call you a bad name on TV, are nothing.