

Corey Andrew Powell (00:02):

I'm joined today by Erin Vilardi founder and CEO of Vote Run Lead, the nation's largest and most adverse training program for women to run for office and win. She first launched the program as vice president of program and communications at the white house project. Erin, welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Erin Vilardi (00:19):

Thanks so much for having me.

Corey Andrew Powell (00:21):

You're very, very welcome. And, you know, before we begin, I gave a little intro there about your work, but I am always curious to know sometimes when I first start talking to someone about their inspiration. So share with our listeners, if you will, what first inspired you to become an advocate for gender equality in politics?

Erin Vilardi (00:40):

I was very inspired by my older sister who was the first in our family to go off to college and basically got bit by sort of the feminist bug with her women's studies 101 and had me subscribe to Ms. Magazine and doing petitions in the middle school and really teaching me the skills of activism and how you can make change in your community. And from there, I went on to be kind of a nerdy class president type and ended up double majoring in politics and women's studies at NYU. So looking back, it looks very strategic. Of course it never is, but it does have a through-line that I really believed since I was little that it was important for women to be at the forefront, not just to, you know, sort of serve our own issues, but to build the kind of world we wanna see.

Corey Andrew Powell (01:28):

Yeah, absolutely. And I know that so much of your work obviously deals with the disparity of women in political positions. And so I love that at an early age you were, that was instilled in you. So the current project Run51 is described as a sure fire strategy to achieve women majorities in all 50 state legislatures. And you provide resources for every woman in every state to run and have successful campaigns. So I think what we should really do is first explain why would a female majority in all 50 states be important to achieve?

Erin Vilardi (02:02):

Absolutely. I love that question. Two reasons, one, it is simply reflective of the population. So we are 51% of Americans. 51% of us should be sitting in and achieving close to or exceeding a representative government, a reflective government of their people. Of course, within that, the intersections and diversity with women, being a woman, women of color, younger women, women, women not just in the city and suburbs, make sure that women in rural communities are represented and trained, and women are represented. So the true breadth of the sort of intersections that make up American women. And with that, you know, that's the representative piece. That will inspire other young people who have never seen themselves in politics to do things differently. That will inspire people who have never reached out to their elected official to see someone who looks like them actually increases the community's likelihood to be participants in democracy.

Erin Vilardi (02:58):

But we do things differently when we get in, in large numbers, we shape the agenda in a way that hasn't been shaped before. Often that is prioritizing women and families issues as we traditionally know them. But yeah, we, you know, we know that black women end up putting more resources forward around issues of democracy, right? We know that when you come from a different economic background, if you're not a lawyer, you know, and you're from a working class background, you get into the legislature, you are gonna look at all those bills through a different lens and to be able to, you know, legislate and write policy in a way that is expansive, right? Is providing more solutions and more ideas to solve the problem. So, yeah. You know, short answer is I kind of think we're smarter-better, but you know, maybe at least in government anyway. Yeah. But you know, the long answer I just gave you, so I hope your listeners will, will [Inaudible]

Corey Andrew Powell (03:47):

No, I totally get it. I totally get. And in fact, we will, I will delve into some of those areas where women actually, you know, there's some studies as you shared. Yeah. So we will talk about that too, but you know, it's, it's funny right now, especially with the consideration going on, where Joe Biden is going to elect the first or his first Supreme court justice. And of course he's vowed to make it a black woman. And it is interesting to see how a certain part of the country has a backlash against that before the person's even chosen, which is kind of funny. But it's, it's funny because, you know, it's like, why would you

not want to maybe diversify that court in that way? Or at least just kind of add another voice that has not been there before. So do you think it's fear that's just driving that or is it just really blatant misogyny against women?

Erin Vilardi (04:36):

It's all three and I think, yeah, I think fear is actually what fuels misogyny. I think fear is what fuels the racism. I think fear is what is really the sort of fire power under those things that we're afraid of that other person. We don't know how that other person might treat our group, right? Whether that's rational fears or irrational fears. And you know, I think here though, when we talk about the Supreme Court Justice, it is a long time coming, right. In the sense of that reflective democracy, the number of black women in law schools, the number of black women judges. Look across the south, you see an amazing ...so there is not a lack of a talent pool. And you're seeing that actually the lists are getting longer. The women are remarkable, names I've never heard of, and this is the work I do.

Erin Vilardi (05:17):

Right? So the bench is deep literally, and some things, you know, you just have to kind of put in front of people. I don't know where it comes from. You know, if I did, I think I'd for sure be making a lot more money than I am now. But you know, like that is what, this is the issue that we're trying to tackle. And in the meantime, we have to make these bold steps that say, Nope, I'm just gonna go ahead and do this. And I'm gonna, I'm gonna maintain my campaign commitment to put a black woman on the Supreme court and you're gonna see the difference and yes, she's gonna be qualified and all the things that you're afraid of are not going to happen, but I'm not gonna explain that to you now. I'm gonna go ahead and try to hurry my nomination and that's what we see happening. And so in some instances, I think you wanna talk with the community, you wanna build those relationships. And in other instances, like you're just gonna put an African American woman on the Supreme court and you're gonna thank me later. You know? So because like I said, there's no lack of talent here. Each of these women are pretty phenomenal

Corey Andrew Powell (06:10):

When it comes to the actual initiatives that Ru51 implements to give women resources and create these avenues for them to run for office and, and be successful, What are some of the things that go into those campaign efforts?

Erin Vilardi (06:26):

Yeah, absolutely. So we've got resources on our YouTube pages and of course on, you know, how to run on our vote, run lead website, but specific to the run 51 because I do, I want women to be really serious about the state legislature. It is the least sexy office to say out loud, legislature. Right? But, it really is the sort of the heartbeat of American democracy. And it is a place where if we did see and where we do see an influx of women, real change gets made. But so we, you can log on and say sort of, I'm interested in running. You'd give us a little bit of your information, right then and there you're gonna get 10 emails over the course of 10 weeks with three tips that are specific to taking action on how to research who's in your legislative seat, how to file for a legislative seat.

Erin Vilardi (07:12):

What does a legislature do? What does your, how to find the district that you could run in? So very practical about 25 tips over the course of 10 weeks that you can walk yourself through and really figure out if the legislature is the place for you. We have coaches where you can book a coaching session for free and have a one-on-one conversation, which is huge. We're expanding that program. It's gotten great reception, so far. We are coming out with a video series in Women's History Month that breaks down some of the deep things within the legislature, they're getting to be really expensive campaigns, right? Because everyone's recognizing that running for the state leg is critical. That's where the voting right stuff is happening. That's where the anti-choice stuff is happening. So we're breaking down, like how much does it really cost? What kind of digital game do you need to run at a state level? That's a little bit different than your school board and a heck of a lot different than for Congress, you know, so really making sure the resources are level set for this particular office. So I feel really good about the package we have for women, if the legislature's right for you. And so, you know, come on over and check it out, cuz we've definitely got your back in helping to make that decision. And if the seat is the right place for your energy.'

Corey Andrew Powell (08:16):

Now, when you mentioned sort of how I guess women are, are thinking of things differently, based on maybe some more, the things that are important to them that might deal with family or social issues, but it's really mostly blaring when you think about things like reproductive rights pay.

Erin Vilardi (08:33):

Pay —Financial money money.

Corey Andrew Powell (08:35):

Right. Yeah. I was gonna say. Because you gotta be able to eat and support your family and make the same amount, you know, as a man does in the same job. Right?

Erin Vilardi (08:41):

And in the pandemic right now, you know, on the one side, in your home it's motherhood and you know, and then, and the caretaking economy and on the outside, it's in a predominant number of nurses, you know, and those sections of frontline workers where, you know, women are getting really squeezed in the pandemic, both economically and from a, you know, mental and physical health. And so like, you can't tell me that if we did have a bunch of women running this country, that the pandemic would've been handled like this. No.

Corey Andrew Powell (09:06):

Yeah. Well, and so that brings me to my point cause, and listen, no argument here because I was raised in a house of three generations of strong women. You know, it was, I realized what a blessing it was to have at one point, great grandma, grandma and mom as a little boy. And I'm like, you know, and that's just all that history and, and tenacity and survival that comes with it. So to me, it's kind of funny cuz I'm not the only one men know women get stuff done. So I'm not sure why there's so much resistance cuz if you really want something done nine times out of 10 in my house, it was just, ask a woman to do it. But that brings me to my other point that we tapped in earlier, you know, there are some specific areas in which women in leadership roles, they do sort of outshine the men or perform better. And that's like a tangible assessment that we can make there. So tell me some of those areas in which, you know, hey women have thought about things differently and it yields results because X,Y, Z.

Erin Vilardi (10:02):

Yeah. I think, you know, you can look at the Harvard Business Review, you know, sort of elite studies and you see that, you know, eight outta the nine leadership qualities that women are out ranked except for, the women, outranked men, excuse me. You know, especially when it comes to female bosses and things like that. You see the one area that does not is visioning, which is really interesting, right? That women don't have the ability to sort of that men have a better ability if you will, to have that long term visioning and strategic thinking. So that's something that's interesting, but that's what some of those more sort of heavy academic studies show. And, but when it comes to government, we do see over the years that women tend to pass budgets on time, they tend to allocate more resources towards new things that have yet to even be on the agenda, to be the ones adding those agenda items. And they dramatically actually put forward more bills co-sign to more bills. So they're doing more of that work for the government. And they're doing the work of government more efficiently and with everything in sort of deadlock and gridlock right now, there does seem to be this need for on a very practical level, you know, us getting things done better.

Corey Andrew Powell (11:11):

And without making it like a male bashing conversation. But I do wonder is that because in many cases you see the male politicians sort of playing like a game of chicken with hyper-masculinity, right. They're just sort of like calling each other's bluff, not getting things done, sort of almost like, you know, trying to make each other blink first versus, hey, we have some stuff we have to get done here. You know, like have we thought about why that is?

Erin Vilardi (11:38):

Some of the research is around like, is ego actually, that women tend to have less ego, more invested in their political leadership. They tend to get into politics in order to get things done because there's a particular issue and motivated by a particular issue or particular cause or they've had some awakening by taking on some issue and see that the government route is the way to go. You know I don't know the answer to that question. I also know a ton of amazing men. I know a whole crop of, you know, couples that are raising boys, you know, to be wonderful men, but there is a stronghold right now, especially in this country, on that toxic masculinity, right? On that, there is sort of a one size fits all for what is male leadership. Right?

Erin Vilardi (12:21):

You see, you're seeing it in the Republican party right now in a way with a sort of loyalty to Trump that is so unusual, I think for us, but is also some something that we've been inching towards quite honestly, you know? And so it shouldn't be that surprising that, you know, hyper masculinity, that toxic masculinity in both the violence and you know, of January 6th, you know, specific to white supremacy and white nationalism, like those things are all connected and that's, that's a group of people that, you know, isn't having these conversations like we're having right, isn't and doing podcasts like this, isn't having that kind of nuanced conversation that we're trying to have about what a reflective democracy might look like. What does it mean to bring in communities? And so, I don't know, I don't, you know but what I know is that there's a lot of room for allyship and feminist leadership. There's a lot of room for allyship and the movement for black lives. There's a lot of room for allyship and how we might wanna lead differently that I actually think we're all really desperate for, we're all looking for.

Corey Andrew Powell (13:20):

I agree. So many of those conversations have to be had. I in another podcast I do, I interviewed an actor. Who's an out Jewish actor. Who's he was on the TV show, Madam Secretary named Yuval David. And a lot of our conversation was about, we couldn't figure out why Jewish people and black Americans here, Jewish Americans and black Americans, aren't like rallying together to fight a system of oppression because we have so much in common. And as we, as he and I were having this conversation about that, the Whoopi Goldberg thing happens, you know, and, but it brings that to the forefront, to what you just said. I mean, you know, we need to have a lot more of these conversations, so that way we can mitigate fear of others. And get to understand where the other person's coming from.

Corey Andrew Powell (14:06):

And we do not do that enough clearly. Is the issue that there's not enough women running or interested or are there women out there who are like, you know what I'm running, but then they have no campaign support. They have, they're facing the misogyny they're facing the resistance. So they're there, but you it's hard. Like for example, I just read like Alabama, for example, had a history of just not voting for black candidates, no matter how great they were. Right. And then I just saw that Obama only got like a 11% or something like that out of the state. And that's just how they vote. So do you think that dynamic is in place just for women like this one place just is not gonna ever vote for a woman?

Erin Vilardi (14:47):

So a really interesting 20 year study came out like today or yesterday by professor Jennifer Lawless, who has been looking at women and ambition for a long, long time. And for whatever reason, most likely socialization women are quote unquote less ambitious for public office. Meaning they state that they're, they don't have a desire to run for public office. So then the most recent, it's done every 10 years, and so now 2021 is the second decade, but the third time they did it. And 60% of men have ambition for public office. 60% of women do not have ambition for public office and it's sort of inverse of each other and has been that way for about 20 years. And so there is some of that big cultural stuff, right? That we aren't reading the newspaper to girls in the same way that we aren't politicizing girls in the same way in their own kind of leadership and, and power.

Erin Vilardi (15:39):

So that's one, but on the other hand, the system of how we run for office was built by a very small group of wealthy land, owning white men of a certain, you know, other geographic region where most of them came from in Europe. Yeah. And so we have a system that has been built around the life experiences and, and privileges of that class and of that group of people. And so you do find it a lot harder for women to gain fundraising support. Right now in 2022, you find that young women, women of color, women on sort of the non traditional candidates, if you will get a ton of online harassment, like you could not believe Corey. You know, and we hear about the AOCs and Ilhan, but it is all the way down to the local level. So much of that is that fear.

Erin Vilardi (16:23):

So much of that is sort of that white, toxic masculinity we talk about. It is both their womanness, it is both their otherness of being an immigrant, it's both their otherness of being a woman color. So that is a real challenge for women right now, as you step out, that's very 2022, right? That wasn't here when our founders came about. So you do have some of that long standing historical stuff, but you also have the climate today. But what we're seeing is that, you know, post 2016, there was this big surge. There are other motivations, there are other incentives for women. They get in, they get a lot of stuff done. That feels fantastic. They're good at what they're doing. They're finding new ways to network with one another. And we're talking about all the reasons at Vote, un, Lead, why it is worth it for you to jump in here. And you know, don't have, you don't have to be, you know, Kirsten Gillibrand and run for president and be in public officer for a long time. Right? You can be your

city councilperson for eight years, for twelve years and you can also have your job, you know? So it's really figuring out how we get more women to lead a political life that includes them being in the leadership position.

Corey Andrew Powell (17:31):

Thank you for listening to motivational Mondays, present by the National Society of Leadership and Success and available wherever you listen to your favorite podcast. I'm Corey Andrew Powell, and I'll see you again here next week.