Congress: Campaigns And Elections

How does a Somalian-Muslim Refugee Woman win a seat in Congress?

In the past, citizens who were able to participate in government were limited to land-owning white men. As a result, women's voices throughout history have been neglected due to men dominating higher positions in government. However, surely, but slowly Americans are attempting to create change in the government, but a lot of work is still necessary to achieve this. The majority of Congress still is disproportionately white old men, which is poorly reflective of the diversity of the United States' body and ideologies as a collective. In the most recent years, especially following Obama's presidency, more minority groups have been running and getting elected for positions of power throughout the government. The most recent election in 2018, challenged the status quo by electing over 411 women, people of color, and L.G.B.T. candidates. Out of the 2018 congressional winners, one specifically stood out in particular, Ilhan Omar. Omar is the first woman of color elected to represent Minnesota, and the first Somali-American elected to the U.S. Congress. She also was one of the first Muslim women to be elected into congress. Omar being elected to this position broke many institutional barriers and is an inspiration for others within the multicultural communities who aspire to someday run for a position in a government office. Throughout this paper, we will be discovering how did immigrant women from Somali create a campaign that allows her to win a seat in congress? IIhan's use of media attention and her confidence to speak up against Trump's unjust leadership, her liberal policies, and her understanding of her own community is what led her to win.

Biography: To get a better understanding of Omar and how she won the election we have to examine her upbringing and the relationship she has with her district. At the age of eight, IIhan was forced to leave Somalia due to the civil war and had to stay in a refugee camp in Kenya for another 4 years. Eventually, IIhan and her family arrived in the United States in 1995 in hopes to gain equality and opportunities to eventually gain the American Dream. IIhan and her family were one of the first Somali families to arrive in Ceder-Riverside Minnesota. As she grew older she saw the expansion of the Somali population especially in the neighborhood of Ceder-Riverside. As a result, Omar gradually witnessed the constant struggles the Ceder- Riverside community faced, which become the foundation for her congressional run. Not only did her community upbringing her decision to run, but her IIhan's father was also a driving force. By the age of 14, Ilhan's interest in politics grew rapidly as she was an interpreter for her father at local DFL caucuses. Watching neighbors come together to advocate for change at the grassroots level made Ilhan fall in love with the democratic process. In high school, IIhan became a local organizer and has been a coalition builder ever since. She eventually worked as the senior policy aide for the Minneapolis City Council. TIME states, "Through her advocacy work she was able to advance important issues, including support for working families, educational access, environmental protection, and racial equity (Time, 2019)." Even before Omar ran for a seat in congress she was already giving back to the community because she understood the need to improve the conditions of those surrounding her.

History of Minnesota 5th Congressional District: Minnesota's 5th Congressional district has typically stayed a small urban congressional district in Minnesota. According to MPR News,

“The millennial age group, ranging from 22 to 36 years old, also makes up the greatest share of the voting-age population in the district at 35 percent or more than 200,000 voters (MPR, 2019).” This demographic is very rare to see considering the millennials outvoted the number of baby-boomers, who are typically the ones at the voting polls. This shows that the district is very active in politics at a young age compared to other districts in the country. Minnesota’s 5th district is also one of the most educated districts in the state which comes with some of the wealthiest people in the state. Surprisingly, it also has the highest poverty and unemployment rate in the state. This makes the district economically diverse which is also very rare. Minnesota’s 5th congressional district has remained a democratic district for over 56 years. They have voted democratic for all elections including presidential, and congressional seating. This makes sense considering urban, educated, high-income individuals tend to vote democratic. However, Minnesota’s 5th congressional district stands out considering the influx of Somalian refugees that reside in Minnesota. According to TIME, “Over 50,000 Somalis currently reside in Minneapolis and many of them live in Ceder-Riverside even giving it the nickname Little Mogadishu, after Somalia’s capital (TIME, 2019).” Similarly, IIhan Omar, a refugee, also grew up in Ceder-Riverside like a majority of Somalian citizens of Minneapolis. This is probably the biggest reason why IIhan won the election because of the connection she had to the people of the district. Omar is the typical citizen you would see in the district, a hardworking refugee Muslim woman raising a family. Omar was an inspiration to the people of the district because she resembled them, and understood the problems they faced. IIhan was able to make those connections because of her Somali background, and being able to create a community in the communal culture. She was able to hear the problems the community faced and turned them into her key points when running for congress.

Campaign/ Primary Election: Minnesota’s 5th congressional was run by incumbent seat Keith Ellison, but in the 2018 election he gave his seat up to run as Attorney General. In class, we learned how difficult it is to beat an incumbency due to them having more access to the constituents of the district. An incumbent like Keith Ellison is able to persuade the people by doing pork-barreling projects to improve the community, franking to promote his election, and constituency service to show the people what they have done for the community. This gives an unfair advantage to the incumbent because citizens are more likely to vote for someone who has actually been doing things for the community, rather than a newcomer. When Ellison gave up his seat many people, like IIhan, felt encouraged to run because an incumbent seat was open, and they didn’t have to run against someone who has already created a relationship with the public. Alongside IIhan were 4 other qualified candidates, but what made IIhan stand out to the citizens of Minnesota’s 5th district? IIhan’s biggest competitor was Margaret Kelliher who had prior experience as a former house speaker and 14 years in the legislature. Even though Kelliher had prior experience, IIhan was a standout candidate due to her strong rhetoric against President Trump and his immigration policies. By using her life experience as a Somalian refugee, Ilhan was able to relate to the concerns and constraints placed on people within her district. Some of the main policy points IIhan focused on during the primaries were abolishing the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, which sparked the interest of the media. IIhan expertly used these outlets in order to let her voice be heard on a national level. Sparking the media allowed her the opportunity to talk about policy changes she wanted to see such as Economic Justice for Working Families, Access to Public Education, and Ensure Environmental Justice & Energy Independence. Furthermore, IIhan got support from popular democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who made big waves in the media for her comments criticizing the Trump administration. Similarly, Omar got huge media attention from outlets due to her comments criticizing Trump and stating things like Trump, “always takes

an opportunity to others to vilify them and destroy their existence and ability to access our justice system (Politico, 2019). As a result, this led Omar to not only receive media attention at the local level but nationally too, which was inspiring for citizens to see a refuge Muslim women running for a seat in Congress under the leadership of a conservative immigrant-hating president. Usually, media attention causes a bias in a bad light, but in Omar's case, the media is what got her elected.

It's actually quite surprising that an extremist candidate like IIhan was voted into congress since more moderate candidates are typically elected into congress. In the article, "What Happens When Extremists Win Primaries?" Andrew Hall examines how the nomination of an extremist changes general-election outcomes and legislative behavior in the U.S. House. Hall explains that Moderates tend to do well in general elections because they have to appeal to most voters, while in primary voting ideological extreme candidates are more likely to win. Halls's study clearly works in Omar's case because her extreme ideological values led her to win. This is due to spatial voting which is when citizens vote on individual issues, and ideology. Most of the constituents in Minnesota's 5th district aligned with Omar's key legislation of removing ICE, and she gained even more support when Minnesota's Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota (DFL) endorsed her. Overall, Omar was able to win the primaries due to spatial voting because Americans like to vote more moderately for general-elections, and more extreme for general-elections.

Minnesota's 5th congressional election: As for the primary election it wasn't a surprise to see Omar win considering Minnesota's 5th congressional district always votes democratic. Her opposed mate Jenifer Zilensky had no chance of winning the race, according to project FiveThirtyEight, "Omar raised $697,000...Zielinski raised $15,000 (FiveThityEight, 2018)." Figure 1 down below expands on this by displaying how IIhan won by a landslide by comparing her and Zilensky's ballot points, fundraising, and candidate experience. IIhan knew the primaries were nothing to worry about, but the real question is how did an ideological extremist candidate win a seat in Trump's presidency? Well, it's no surprise that since Trump has been elected he has been an unpopular president due to his harsh rhetoric against Muslims, immigrants, and multicultural ethnicities. Electing IIhan was Minnesota's way of backlashing against the ideologies that conservative Trump represented. We not only see this back-lash with IIhan but within the whole 2018 congressional winners, by Americans electing the most diverse class to enter congress they were able to challenge the status quo. This isn't the first time Americans have elected extreme ideological candidates into a polar opposite party of the President. Matthew K Buttish expands on the American back-lash in his article, "Candidates Matter: Policy and Quality Differences in Congressional Elections." Buttish states, "The unpopularity of the president and the war in Iraq influenced voting choice (and election outcomes) in 2006 because local candidates were linked to the issue, largely by virtue of their party (Candidates Matter, 2012)." In 2006 many voters and democrats were against the Iraq war which led to democrats winning an overwhelming amount of seats because Americans did not want war, and the backlash was to elect democrats. In this view, voters are attentive to national issues, but not necessarily to the differences between candidates running in their districts. This shows that party identification and ideologies play a crucial role when electing citizens into congress. Just like 2006, the 2018 election was a backlash towards Trump's racial discriminate ideologies, which resulted in the election of over 411 Democrats into congress. IIhan was fortunate enough to be elected within 2018 because of the political impact of Trump's unjust leadership had on the American people.

Clearly, IIhan Omar won the hearts of many Americans by fighting against Trump’s racialized ideologies and gaining media attention to highlight the needs of her community. Due to her understanding of her community, Ilhan was able to create policies that not only advocated for her community but for American citizens nationwide. Ilhan is the perfect example of how to effectively time your congressional, by using her platform and background as a Somalian refugee to her advantage. At this time, Americans were looking for a candidate who was vocal and showed a polarized view from Trump's policy, and Ilhan capitalized on this by sparking the media’s attention with her harsh criticism of the Trump administration. By using the media to spread awareness of Ilhan’s message she was able to become recognized on both a local and national level. Furthermore, her congressional run was supported by the absence of Minnesota’s 5th congressional incumbency seat, which allowed IIhan the opportunity to differentiate herself from other candidates and win the heart of the public. Ultimately, IIhan’s mixture of media attention, her confidence to speak up against Trump, and her understanding of her own community is what led her to win.