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Latinas and Elected Office: Overcoming the Barriers of Intersectional Identities

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The Political Landscape for Latina Women

Despite having a long history of continuously working to mobilize communities, Latina women are often ignored as political actors and are described as minorities in the political arena. Studies have shown community trust in women's political leadership abilities but associate men with official political positions.² Latina invisibility in official capacities, though, does not mean they are ineffective as political actors.

Latinas are able to work in effective ways that do not always fall directly in line with institutional frameworks, yet, provide the same or higher levels of effectiveness to meet community needs. Frameworks of institutional office-holding positions exclude the unique political identities that Latinas have worked to develop in their respective communities. Indeed, as race and gender scholar Carol Hardy-Fanta notes, "When the definition of political leadership is expanded to include community-based, not solely position-derived, forms of leadership, Latino community empowerment may depend, to a great extent, on the political leadership of Latina women."³

In this brief, I aim to highlight the systemic obstacles working against Latinas running for public office. My work draws on a thorough review of existing academic literature as well as conversations with two Latinas active in the political realm – Marisa Calderon and Stephanie Gabriela Lopez. Their involvement in political action committees, campaign work, and non-partisan organizations striving to increase the number of Latinas in public service make their perspectives crucial to proposing effective solutions.

Breaking Down the Representation Advantage

Marisa Calderon, a board member for Latinas Lead California⁴, highlighted the difficulties in finding common interests for Latino voters. Establishing mutual priorities among a

¹ Based at UC Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends approximately 30 Cal students to the state's capital every summer for eight-week public service internships. The Jo Freeman Women in Politics Fellowship supports Cal-in-Sac Fellows whose individual research projects focus on women in politics, including research on public policies that affect women.

² Takash, Paule Cruz. "Breaking Barriers To Representation: Chicana/Latina Elected Officials In California." *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 22, no. 3/4 (1993): 334. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40553253>.

³ Hardy-Fanta, Carol (1995) "Latina Women and Political Leadership: Implications for Latino Community Empowerment," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 14. 221. <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol11/iss1/14>.

⁴ Latinas Lead California is a non-partisan political action committee (PAC) founded in 2015 by Los Angeles City Councilwoman Monica Rodriguez and aims to support Latinas running for office in California state and local offices.

diverse group can feel impossible due to the fact that ‘Latino’ is often considered a broad umbrella term. Calderon, who ran for California’s 50th Congressional District in 2020, explained that political and economic priorities differ throughout Latino populations as countries of origin and socioeconomic statuses vary so widely. This can drive away Latino civic engagement, a group that is already among the lowest in registration and voter turnout.⁵

Non-citizenship among Latinos poses an additional challenge. Hardy-Fanta addresses this in her 1995 publication by arguing that “generating a sense of empowerment in a community increasingly made up of undocumented immigrants requires a political leadership not constrained by the requirements of an official position or organizational role,” a pathway Latinas are already taking.⁶

Economic Assimilation & Financial Constraints

Calderon recounted her experience running for office, highlighting the importance that finances play when running a campaign. She noted that some candidates have more affluent networks than others, a key consideration when running for office. Backed by research, studies show that most Latina elected officials in California have a working-class background.⁷ A great majority of Latina elected officials were raised by laborers and service sector workers; and despite attending college, 61% of the women surveyed had incomes under \$75,000 and worked in non-executive roles.⁸ Unfortunately, many of the Latinos who go on to succeed in politics are able to do so only after economic assimilation.⁹

Cultural Values of Gender Bias

Cultural gender biases, often presented in the forms of machismo and marianismo, work against Latinas even in co-ethnic spaces. A study presented by Dr. Christina Bejarano shows that “minority men are less likely to support progressive gender role attitudes...”¹⁰ Among minority men, Latino men are most opposed to ‘progressive gender role attitudes,’ a deeply entrenched social bias which deters the Latino vote from Latina candidates.

Calderon experienced this gender bias when running her own campaign, as she was told to “wait her turn.” Latinas face discouragement from running by their own party, sometimes

⁵ Dominguez-Villegas, Rodrigo, and Michael Rios. “From Eligibility to the Ballot Box.” UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute, October 3, 2022. <https://latino.ucla.edu/research/voter-turnout-gaps-2020/>.

⁶ Hardy-Fanta, Carol (1995) “Latina Women and Political Leadership: Implications for Latino Community Empowerment.” 231.

⁷ Takash, Paule Cruz. “Breaking Barriers To Representation: Chicana/Latina Elected Officials In California.” 342.

⁸ Takash, Paule Cruz. “Breaking Barriers To Representation: Chicana/Latina Elected Officials In California.” 342.

⁹ Casellas, Jason P. “The Institutional and Demographic Determinants of Latino Representation.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2009): 403. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20680248>.

¹⁰ Bejarano, Christina E. *The Latina Advantage: Gender, Race, and Political Success*. University of Texas Press, 2013. 132. <https://doi.org/10.7560/745643>.

because a Latino is already running and will face blame for ‘splitting the vote’ if they run against him.

The Importance of Turnover Rates

One solution is to support an increase in Latino elected officials through the implementation of term limits. According to Dr. Casellas, “...the opening up of otherwise monopolized seats has had a positive effect on Latino descriptive representation.¹¹ Increased seat turnover not only opens up seats but also does away with the incumbency advantage.¹² States such as Arizona, California, and Florida have started to see some of the largest benefits of term limit policies.

Once termed out, politicians look to run for the ‘next best seat’, a pathway that helps land both Latinos and Latinas alike in national elected office. Implementing universal term limits in state legislatures opens more seats and helps close the gap in Latina elected officials.

Why Coalition Support Is So Essential

For Latinas, coalition support matters. By highlighting the importance of co-ethnic and co-gender voting, coalitions contribute to the success of Latina campaigns.¹³ Latinas Represent¹⁴ executive director Stephanie Gabriela Lopez shared that the organization offers training to aspiring Latina candidates with a focus on local and state government. When asked about which of their initiatives is most important, she pointed to their strategy of narrative change which affirms to individuals that they *are* capable of being elected officials. Lopez described running for office as a relationship-building task and explained that developing partnerships and connections with other organizations helps fulfill their mission.

Research attributes an increase in the number of minority legislators to efforts by political parties and organizations to recruit and fund candidates.¹⁵ Coalition groups and political action committees are essential to getting Latinas into elected office. Helping Latina candidates develop effective strategies is a commitment that must be made in order to tackle existing structural barriers.

¹¹ Casellas, Jason P. “The Institutional and Demographic Determinants of Latino Representation.” 412.

¹² Casellas, Jason P. “The Institutional and Demographic Determinants of Latino Representation.” 400-401.

¹³ Bejarano, Christina E. *The Latina Advantage: Gender, Race, and Political Success*. 135.

¹⁴ Latinas Represent is a national, non-partisan initiative organization aiming to increase the number of Latinas in civic engagement and public service careers.

¹⁵ Casellas, Jason P. “The Institutional and Demographic Determinants of Latino Representation.” 403.