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Latina Politics: Gender, Participation, and Leadership

The Invisible Latina in "Latino Politics"

Political scientists have tended to neglect or discount Latina leadership and participation in electoral (i.e., elite) and community politics. The mainstream literature tends to focus on the social and reproductive roles of women (Hardy-Fanta 1993) and studies of leadership either do not include women in their analysis (see, e.g., Bennis 1993), fail to include a gender analysis (see, e.g., Crenson 1983), or define women as a "minority" so as to obscure the differences among Latinas and women of other ethnicities (Bayes 1982). Mainstream feminists do emphasize the importance of practicing grassroots, personal politics—a politics tied to relationships embedded in the family and community (see, e.g., Ackelsberg 1984, 1991; Flammang 1983)—but have almost exclusively recounted the experiences of

white women. A few exceptions do exist, of course, such as Bookman and Morgen (1988).

The Latino¹ literature primarily

calls attention to the "triple oppression" Latinas face: racism, sexism, and cultural traditions that encourage passivity, fatalism, and submissiveness (see Barragán 1980, Melville 1980, Mirandé and Enríquez 1979). Until recently, most books on Latino politics had no articles on women's political participation and leadership (Garcia 1988; Gómez-Quíñones 1990; Hero 1992; Jennings and Rivera 1984; Villarreal, Hernandez, and Neighbor 1988). Recent exceptions show progress: F. Chris Garcia's reader (1997) has two chapters on Latinas and politics and *Barrio Ballots* (de la Garza, Menchaca, and DeSipio 1994) describes the salient role

Latinas play in community-level politics, particularly in electoral campaigns at the local level. Most recently, Vargas (1999-2000) has written about the electoral and community-based political participation of Latinas.

In this article, we focus on Latino gender research in mass political participation and public opinion, in community politics, and in elite politics. In the first section, we examine quantitative research on Latinos in the U.S. In the second and third sections, we examine recent research on Latina political actors in community and elite politics. Our goal is to provide a thumbnail sketch of the work being done at the intersection of gender and Latino politics. We consider throughout how this literature supports or diverges from the mainstream literature on women's participation, public opinion, activism, and leadership. In the conclusion, we discuss future directions for research.

Latinas, Mass Political Participation, and Public Opinion

Political scientists have extensively researched various dimensions of voter turnout, party identification, nonelectoral participation, and opinions on public policy issues. Until recently, studies of Latino mass participation and public opinion have not examined the role gender plays in any depth. Scholars researching women's mass participation have analyzed national data sets that contain few nonwhite respondents. As a result, their findings are representative of white women but not of Latinas or other ethnic minority women. Only recently have data sets such as the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) (de la Garza et al. 1992) and the Citizen Participation Study (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) enabled scholars to write knowledgeably about Latinos.² What can be learned about Latina turnout, party identification, nonelectoral participation, and public opinion from this recent research?

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Turnout

In studies of Latino voting where gender has been considered, no significant gender differences have been found since the late 1970s (Lien 1994, 1998; MacManus, Bullock, and Grothe 1986). Data from the LNPS also confirms this trend. There were no statistically significant differences among men and women in turnout during the 1988 presidential election (Montoya 1997).

These results mirror the mainstream literature on women's turnout. When specific subpopulations are considered, however, gender differences do emerge. For example, Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet found (1989)

TABLE 1
LNPS Findings for Latino Turnout, by Ethnicity and Gender, 1988

	Mexican		Puerto Rican		Cuban		Anglo	
	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M
All Adults % Voting	30	27	49	49	66	70	67	66
Citizen Adults % Voting	51	50	49	49	73	72	67	66

Source: Montoya (1997).

that Latina heads of household are less likely to turnout than their male counterparts. This finding is consistent with a resource-model approach to political participation (see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) and argues for a deeper understanding of how gender, socioeconomic status, and family structure influence political participation. Further, there is also evidence that the predictors of Latina and Latino voting are not the same (Montoya 1997). For Latinas alone, the most consistent predictors of turnout across all national origin groups are interest in politics, church attendance, and organizational and school involvement--suggesting that political socialization and institutions have a stronger mobilizing effect on women than on men.

Latino Party Identification

Since the 1970s, more women than men overall have associated with the Democratic Party (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986). Among Latinos, gender differences in party identification are mixed. Studies of Texas and California show Mexican American women are less likely to identify with the Republican Party than Mexican American men (Brischetto and de la Garza

1983). Similarly, exit poll data from the 1996 national election confirms earlier work by Welch and Sigelman (1992) and shows an 18-percentage-point gender gap in party identification among Latino voters: 69% of Latinas, compared to 51% of Latino men, claimed affiliation with the Democratic Party. In contrast, the gender gap for whites was only 8.5 percentage points; for African Americans, it was 11.6 points (Hardy-Fanta 2000).

Bivariate data from the LNPS, however, paints a more complicated picture. As Table 2 shows, Mexican and Puerto Rican women are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party than their male counterparts, but only Puerto Rican women exhibit a statistically significant difference (F. Garcia and Uhlaner 1998). In contrast, a higher percentage of *cubanas* identify with the Republican Party than do Cuban men. The evidence indicates that any gender gaps among Latinos in party identification vary by national origin.

Nonelectoral Participation

Among whites, men remain slightly more active in nonelectoral politics than women, even after controlling for differences in socioeconomic status and other resources (Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1994). Among Latinos, however, there are few consistent gender differences in nonelectoral participation (e.g., contributing to a campaign, volunteering for a party or candidate, posting a campaign sign or bumper sticker, contacting

TABLE 2
LNPS Findings for Latino Partisanship, by Ethnicity and Gender, 1989-90

Partisan Identification	Mexican		Puerto Rican		Cuban	
	W	M	W	M	W	M
Democrat	61	58	72	53	19	20
Republican	16	16	8	21	69	58
Independent/Other	23	26	20	26	12	22

Source: de la Garza et al. (1992). Calculations by authors.

Notes: Figures are percentages.

the media or an elected official, attending a rally, working with a group to solve community problems). A survey of Latinos and Asians in California found gender differences in only two nonelectoral activities: Latino men were more likely to work in groups and to make campaign contributions (Lien 1994; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989). Using national data, Montoya (1997, 2000) found no significant differences by gender in these acts. In short, where there are gender differ-

ences in Latino participation, they are small and less consistent, but the gap is in the direction of the one reported in the mainstream literature.

At the same time, the influences on Latino men's and women's participation are distinctive. The predictors of participation for Latinas are financial status, civic skills, and involvement in associations, particularly schools. These characteristics are indicators of a gendered affluence because they reflect the roles that women often perform at work and in the family. Latinas with financial resources and autonomy, who have developed writing, presenting, and contact skills through work, and who interact with schools and other voluntary associations are more likely to participate in politics. In contrast, the influences on Latino men's participation are inconsistent across national-origin groups (Montoya 2000).

Public Opinion

The literature on Latino public opinion is small, disproportionately oriented toward immigration, and relatively silent on the influence of gender. Hardy-Fanta's (2000) analysis of 1996 exit poll data suggests that Latinas are more likely than Latino men to hold the position that legal immigration should be decreased. Others investigating Mexican American and Latino attitudes on immigration have found no gender differences (Binder, Polinard, and Wrinkle 1997; Hood, Morris, and Shirkey 1997; Wrinkle 1991). There is also little evidence of gender differences in support for social welfare spending among Latinos. Latinas are slightly more supportive of increased government spending on child care than are Latino men, but are no more likely to favor increased spending on other welfare programs (Montoya 1996).³ These results contradict research on whites that finds women are more likely to favor increased spending than men (Dietch 1988). Interestingly, Mexican American women favor decreased defense spending but Puerto Rican and Cuban women do not. Finally, while Latinas are, in general, more supportive of women assuming modern social and political roles than are Latino men (Montoya 1996), Latinas are also less likely to support abortion than men—and white women, a point discussed later in this article.

Conclusion

Overall, where there are gender differences among Latinos in turnout, party identification, nonelectoral participation, and public opinion, they coincide with those found in the mainstream literature. However, there are many instances where expected gender differences are not found. The explanations for these different outcomes lie in a better understanding of processes of political and social incorporation and the structure of political opportunities available to Latinos.

In considering political and social incorporation, it is important to note that Latinos are not monolithic nor are their differences static. This can be illustrated by considering the pace and contours of ethnic incorporation through language. Generally, but not universally, bilingual Latinas are more likely to participate in politics than their Spanish-speaking counterparts. In Puerto Rican communities, however, Spanish fluency

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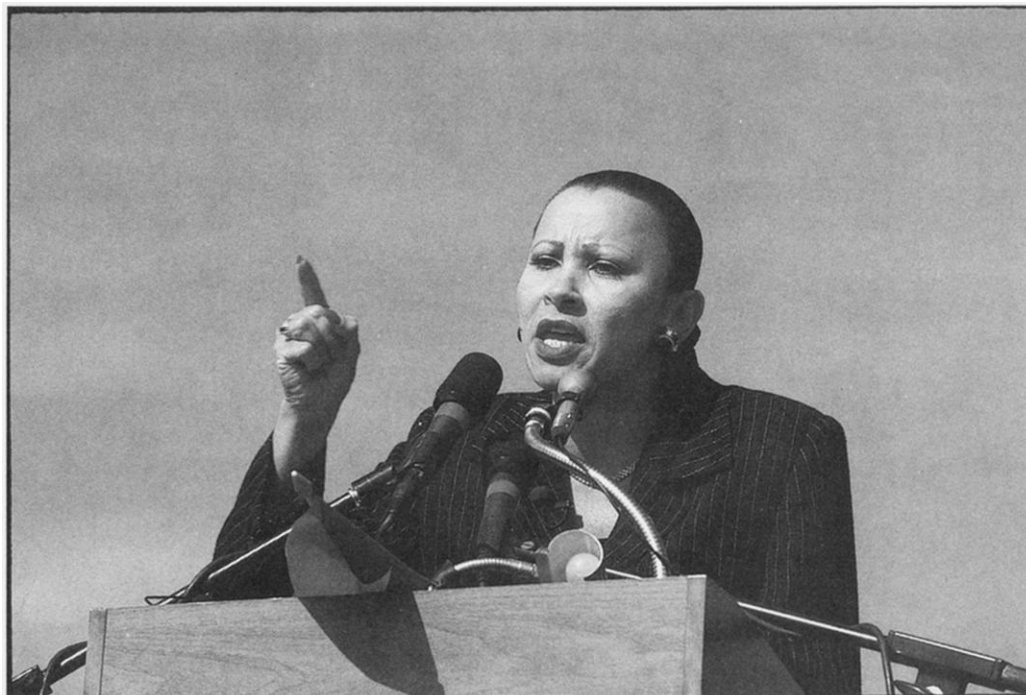
promotes women's participation. Confounding any generalization, language is not a significant predictor of participation for Latino men (Montoya 2000). Gender differences in language ability can have important outcomes for political participation, but they are different across national-origin

groups and those differences will change over time. In addition, degrees of ethnic incorporation may elevate the importance of race over gender, thus helping to explain why gender differences do not appear where they are expected.

In considering the structure of political opportunities, Latinos are less likely to be asked to participate in politics because of socioeconomic status, language barriers, and gender. Some questions that will advance our understanding of Latino political mobilization, opportunity, and gender are as follows. One, given that women are still less politically interested than men, what can be learned about adult Latina political socialization by looking at organizational membership? Both Pardo (1990) and Hardy-Fanta (1993) have tried to provide answers by studying Latina activists in Los Angeles and Boston. Acquisition of nationally representative data is the next step. Two, are Latinas mobilized through different means and on different issues than are Latino men? Researchers have had much to say on this question, and, indeed, research on Latinas has addressed this question with respect to elected officials (Takash 1993) and mass participation (Montoya 2000), but more remains to be done. Again, a nationally representative data set would help scholars answer these questions. Three, what organizations are most likely to mobilize Latino men, and where do Latino men acquire their civic skills (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995)?⁴

Latina Leadership and Participation in Community Politics

Recent research demonstrates that Latinas are leaders and participants in all aspects of community politics as agents of social change, activists seeking improvements in neighborhood services, and mobilizers in Latino election campaigns. Throughout *Barrio Ballots* (de la Garza, Menchaca and DeSipio 1994), for example, Latinas emerge as leaders in community mobilization during the 1990 elections in four of the five sites studied. In a similar analysis, Valadez quoted a male leader in Chicago as saying, "Women are the backbone of many organizational efforts" (1994, 121).



Representative Nydia Velázquez (D-NY) speaks at a march for immigrant rights. Velázquez was the first Puerto Rican woman elected to the House of Representatives, earning a victory in 1992. Previously she was the first Latina elected to the New York City Council (1984). Photo by Rick Reinhard/Impact Visuals.

The Mothers of East Los Angeles, first described by Pardo (1990), continue, according to Pachon and Argüelles, to do "the bulk of political organizing in the community. . . . Some saw the churches as future centers of political activism, while others saw women as the backbone of political organizing" (1994, 151). Other examples come from indigenous and Mexican American women organizing for environmental justice (Prindeville and Bretting 1998) and Hardy-Fanta's 1993 work on Latina involvement in party politics in Boston. Latinas have also led efforts to mobilize Latinos to register and vote in Boston.

Conclusion

Feminist theorists have suggested that relationships play an important role in women's psychological development and adaptation to sociopolitical roles.

Latinas--like feminists--stress collective, nonhierarchical political organization, consciousness raising, and less-formal leadership, and encourage interdependence and cooperation (see, e.g., Warren and Bourque 1985). Thus, Latinas wishing to become active in politics may share a bond with women from other groups. Feminists have also articulated a broader view of the nature of power than that offered by male theorists who emphasize "power over." Power, for feminists, is linked to empowerment, "to the ability to act with others to do together what one could not have done alone" (Ferguson 1987, 221). When a Latina activist said that politics is "promoting change," the possibilities for building coalitions among Latinas and other women became apparent (Hardy-Fanta 1993, 30).

The problem with realizing this potential lies in part, of course, in the divergence between white feminists and Latinas on certain key issues. Latinas associate feminism with abortion rights and, justifiably or not, many feel that abortion rights overshadow the issues of concern to Latinas and Latino communities—issues such as child care, health care, affordable housing, and education (Pachon and Argüelles 1994, 152). Recently released data show that there is a 15-percentage-point *reverse* gender gap among Latinos on the question of whether abortion should be kept legal, whereas the gender gap for whites and African Americans is very small. Fifty-one percent of Latinas in the 1996 exit poll were pro-choice compared with 66% of Latino men. Latinos are the only group with a sizable gap in this direction (Hardy-Fanta 2000, 7).

Latinas in Elected Office

As elected officials, Latinas are most prominent on local school boards and in municipal government. But their slow, unprecedented rise to state and federal offices, including the U.S. Congress,⁵ signals their increasing prominence among America's political leadership. Latinas make up a significant percentage of the total number of Latino elected officials—at rates that surpass those for women overall. Pachon and DeSipio (1992) reported that in 1992, Latinas made up 30.1% of all Latino elected officials. In that same year, women constituted only 17.2% of elected officials in the United States. State-level data add to this intriguing

finding. Hardy-Fanta (2000) found that in Massachusetts, Latinas win election at much higher rates than Latino male candidates. Between 1968 and 1994, Latinas won 56% of their election campaigns while Latino men won only 15% (2000).

What is unique about most of these political women is that they draw most of their early support from Latina organizations. Organizations such as Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional (based in Los Angeles), the National Hispana Leadership Institute, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the Hispanic Steering Committee of the National Women's Political Caucus have helped prepare Latinas for political office. More recently, political action committees have also been established to foster Latinas' candidacies. The first such PAC was the Latina Political Action Committee (LPAC) established in 1990 in Sacramento, California,⁶ followed by the Florida Hispanic Women's PAC and the Texas Women's Political PAC. In addition, The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) recently unveiled a Latina web site titled "Elección Latina" (www.rci.rutgers.edu/~cawp/Eleccion/home.htm).

Despite Latinas' growing visibility in national politics, very few studies of this phenomenon exist (Sierra and Sosa-Riddell 1994). The existing works primarily describe how Latinas transform their networks, resources, and experiences into political assets, and how Latinas, as political actors, behave differently from Latino men.

Creating Political Assets

Pardo (1998) concluded that Chicanas are able to transform traditional family networks and cultural resources into political resources for action. Sierra (1997) drew similar conclusions from her case study of the successful campaign of Santa Fe Mayor Debbie Jaramillo. Takash (1993) argued that Latina political office holders are able to overcome barriers of race, class, gender, and culture largely because they are able to draw from their experiences as long-time community activists. The challenges for Latinas may be most formidable when they are running against other Latinos in highly competitive elections (S. Garcia 1998). Further, as Baca Zinn (1980) pointed out, moving into politics allows Chicanas to alter their traditional sex roles and at the same time promote the Chicano culture. Hardy-Fanta (chap. 5, 1993) highlighted the complex and rich process of Latina political socialization and the development of Latina political consciousness. Together, these researchers demonstrated that there is more than one path to elected office and that the benefits of electing Latinas, and women in general, extend beyond their community to the larger polity.

Latinas Behaving Differently in Politics

Sonia Garcia (1992, 1997) and Marisela Marquez (1997) examined Latinas' political aspirations and motivations for political involvement and found they are motivated to enter politics for both traditional and community-oriented reasons.⁷ They exhibit a commitment to mobilizing voters and addressing specific issues as well as a commitment to the Chicano/Latino community and their larger communities. These findings serve as the basis for a more robust and complex explanation for

Despite facing racial, class, and gender barriers, Latinas are being elected to political office and bringing with them, as other women do, their personal convictions about the need for responsive government.

why people are involved in politics than do standard accounts (e.g., Schlesinger 1966) and are in close agreement with the predictions of feminist theorists (Ferguson 1987) and scholars of women in electoral politics (Thomas 1994).

Conclusion

In short, the literature on Latina elected officials demonstrates that Latinas are combating differences of class and gender as they become elite decisionmakers. Many Latinas may not have traditional backgrounds in business and law, but they are using the resources from their communities to seek and attain elected office. Once elected, these women may have a profound impact on representative bodies, given their motivations for entering politics.

Conclusion and Research Directions

Our review of the literature on Latinas' involvement in politics gives rise to several observations. In political participation and public opinion, there are few gender gaps. When they do exist, they are generally in the direction indicated in the mainstream literature. For issues on which the gaps are different or absent, scholars must look to the social and political incorporation of Latinos and to the structure of their political opportunities to explain the differences. In leadership and community organizing, it is clear that political scientists are only beginning to describe fully the political leadership of Latinas. Further, Latina perceptions of politics seem to conform to those in the theoretical literature, increasing the possibilities for schol-

arly and political coalition building. Our review of studies of Latinas in elected office strengthens our belief in representative democracy. Despite facing racial, class, and gender barriers, Latinas are being elected to political office and bringing with them, as other women do, their personal convictions about the need for responsive government.

To advance this research and strengthen its connection to existing literatures, we recommend gathering more data on the political beliefs and behaviors of Latinas and studying, quantitatively and qualitatively,

how organizations socialize and prepare Latinos for political action. Given that Latinos are the fastest growing minority population in the U.S., it is imperative that the National Election Study, the General Social Survey, and other ongoing survey projects oversample Latinos and identify Latinos by national origin. Surveys specifically of Latinos, similar to the LNPS, should also be undertaken. Moreover, given the importance of grassroots mobilization among Latinos, investigations of their political socialization can shed light on gender differences in mobilization and on the problem of low Latino participation in general.

Notes

1. The terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" are used interchangeably to refer to people from (or who trace their ancestry to) the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. The term "Latinos" can be used to refer to the overall Hispanic population or to Hispanic men. To avoid confusion, we refer to all Hispanics as *Latinos*, to *Latino men*, and to *Latinas*, a term which refers exclusively to Hispanic women.

2. The LNPS is a nationally representative sample of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans in the United States. See de la Garza et al. (1992) for a description of the methodology and for an overview of the data. The 1979 Chicano Survey (J. Garcia and Arce 1988) is the earliest representative sample of Mexican Americans.

3. When asked if welfare reform "cuts too much" as part of the 1996 exit poll, 30% of Latinas, compared to 13% of Latino males, indicated that the current welfare law cuts too much (Hardy-Fanta 2000).

4. The LNPS only asked about skills acquired in the workplace. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) showed, civic skills can be acquired through a host of voluntary organizations.

5. Five Latinas are serving in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1999-2000: Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA), Nydia Velazquez (D-NY), Loretta Sanchez (D-CA), and Grace Napolitano (D-CA).

6. LPAC promotes Latina Democratic candidates and other Democratic candidates who support Latina issues. It functions as an equivalent to Emily's List, whose members are primarily white women.

7. Data were gathered by interviewing Latinas at the 1990 Latina Candidate Development Conference, sponsored by the Latina Political Action Committee in collaboration with the National Hispana Leadership Institute in Los Angeles, and at the 1992 Democratic Convention in New York.

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