



California Immigration
Research Initiative (CIRI)

CIRI Research Brief Series

CIRI RB# 14 WINTER 2020

The California
Immigration Research
Initiative is a project
funded by the University
of California Office of the
President

“She came out of nowhere:”

Latina and Latino Candidate Emergence in Los Angeles County
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Summary of Findings

Los Angeles is renowned as a place where Latina/os have risen as powerful figures in politics. While Latinos have made some claim to that status, Latinas continue to fight for access to representation on numerous fronts. This brief draws from a larger multi-method case study of the pathways to candidacy for Latinas and Latinos in Los Angeles County during the last two decades. The main finding is that the persistence of underrepresentation among these groups is the product of processes that are interactive, and simultaneously shaped by race and gender. Chief among these is the extent to which Latinas are frequently excluded from, or invisible to, the central Latina/o candidate development processes and planning in Los Angeles. They are often not included in long term planning over competitive seats, subject to race-gendered “criteria” for garnering support from key stakeholders, and at time actively discouraged from running when they are perceived to be interfering with carefully laid plans within the Democratic coalition.

The Los Angeles metropolitan area encompasses the largest immigrant community in the United States. Roughly six million Latina/os and two million Asian Americans call it home. Nearly two-thirds of residents are immigrants or the children of immigrants. In this respect, one way to view Los Angeles’ political landscape is as a preview of the future of the United States as a whole, wherein the population is largely composed of people of color, and growth is driven by immigrants and their families (Pew Research Center, 2016; Ramakrishnan, n.d.).

In other respects, Los Angeles’ broad political context encompasses dynamics that evoke the histories, and present realities, in many other metropolitan regions of the country. First, the numerical dominance of White men in electoral politics is longstanding. They are the majority of electoral candidates, and among the



key gatekeepers in Democratic and Republican circles. Second, Latina/o elected officials now hold a central place in what has been described as Democratic “machine” politics, but that status and the widespread prevalence of Democrats generally, are fairly recent phenomena. Third, the African American proportion of the population, which served as a cornerstone of the Democratic coalition, has contracted in size amidst ongoing growth within immigrant communities. And finally, as in many other parts of the country, women from every racial group are elected at much lower rates than co-racial men.

This brief draws from a larger case study of the representation of Latinas and Latinos on the ballot and in elected office in Los Angeles County. I argue that the persistence of underrepresentation among these groups is the product of processes that are interactive, and simultaneously shaped by race and gender. Here I will focus on presenting several findings that reveal the extent to which Latinas are frequently excluded from, or invisible to, the central Latina/o candidate development processes and planning in Los Angeles. It is important to note that this brief covers only one set of pressures and constraints within the Latina/o elite political community in Los Angeles County, but that the broader case study demonstrates that these factors must be considered alongside the dominance of White men in the broader electoral context, and the ways in which that structures many of the choices and pathways available to Latina/os in electoral politics. The conclusions I outline here draw from these dozen in-depth interviews with candidates, campaign professionals, donors and other political leaders, as well as a new original dataset that tracks the race and gender of all state legislative general and primary election candidates in the county, from 1996-2016. These data paint a more nuanced portrait of the institutions and systems that have contributed to Los Angeles’ renown as a place where Latina/os have risen as powerful figures in politics. While Latinos have made some claim to that status, Latinas continue to fight for access to representation on numerous fronts.

Organized Exclusion: Latinas in the Latina/o Candidate Pipeline

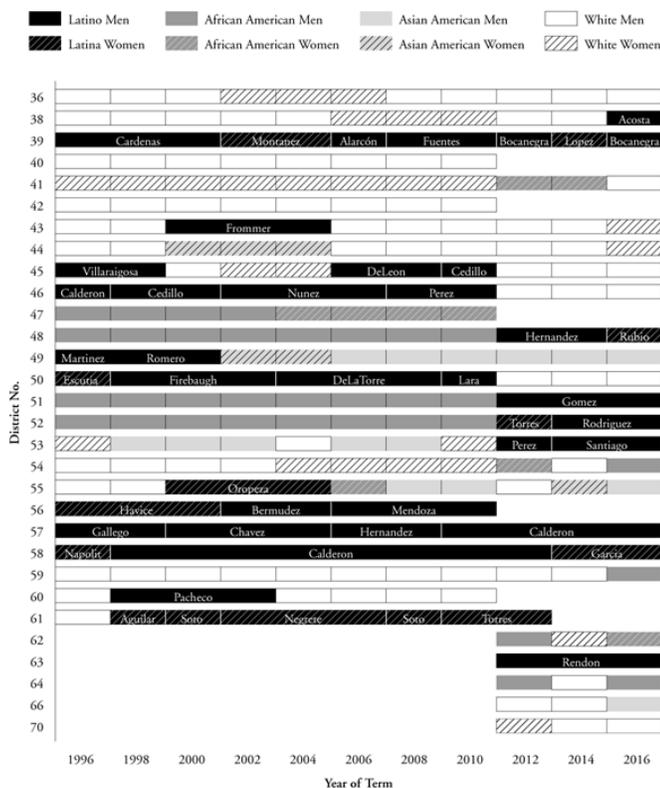
Latina/o Democratic elites in Los Angeles have developed a sophisticated and effective network of candidates, campaign professionals and donors across the county. Among Latinos in particular, interview respondents and media reports are in consensus that while surprises occur, candidates who become eventual frontrunners are typically identified by elites long before open seat elections are announced. A frequent feature of this tightly organized system is the frequent exclusion of Latinas from negotiations over candidate succession, development pipelines, and access to the high level of resources necessary to run and win election campaigns for top offices. Given the high barriers to entry for candidates in Los Angeles, the effective result has been that Latinas who emerge as candidates are required to clear significant electoral hurdles, even while deflecting discouragement from other Latina/os associated with (what respondents commonly referred to as) “the leadership.”¹

When members of the Latina/o Democratic “leadership” and candidates negotiate who will “wait their turn” and take a seat in an election cycle down the road, or who will replace someone looking to move up the political ladder, women are very rarely part of, or participants in, the conversation. There are clear criteria for being included: being a trusted relative, former legislative staff member or union colleague, and proving your commitment to the coalition by working on special projects and election campaigns. Among Latina/o state legislators in Los Angeles County, over three-quarters of men who have served in the past two decades meet those requirements. Only four of the 15 Latina state legislators from that period have similar backgrounds. As a result of this system, Latinas have had more limited access to the ballot as viable candidates, and those who have been successful have often emerged as surprise candidates (to the Latina/o leadership), largely outside of the City of Los Angeles proper.

Because these successful Latina officials are

frequently not part of the long term planning by leaders, and are instead more likely to be seen as disruptive, they are also less likely to have their preferences incorporated into succession plans, and their seats are more frequently won by members of other racial groups than other seats held by Latinos. The descriptive representation patterns of individual Assembly seats across the county over time are an illustrative example of Latinas' periods of office-holding as relatively anomalous, particularly in light of the representation patterns within seats held by Latinos. Figure 1 shows the race and gender of each Assembly Member elected in Los Angeles County between 1996 and 2016. The shading denotes the race-gender identify of the winning candidate and Latina/o legislators' last names are included as well. Co-racial men tend to have longer unbroken stretches in single seats than women from those same racial groups, and White men's contiguous terms in a single seat are more numerous than any other single group.

Figure 1: Race and Gender of California State Assembly Members' in Los Angeles County, by District, 1996-2016



Latina/os as a racial group in LA that is often described as having a system—a machine—in place to ensure that once a Latina/o wins a seat, it becomes what one respondent called a ‘beachhead.’ As Figure 1 illustrates, that is much more the case among Latinos than Latinas. The sections of the figure that are black with grey lines indicating office-holding by Latinas are more spurious than those of Latinos (solid black). In all but one seat, Latinas were replaced in three cycles or less by a Latino man or a member of another racial group. This indicates that when individual Latinas win, they are not preceded or followed by other Latinas when they are termed or forced out. That is the opposite of the case for most Latinos who served in the Assembly. Nell Soto and Norma Torres’ tenures in District 61 are the exception to this general pattern—that seat was held by Latinas for 12 years. Other seats won by Latinas did not remain that way for long.²

Interview respondents’ descriptions of Latinas’ candidacies in recent cycles suggest that these patterns are evidence of their not being incorporated into concerted efforts to maintain or gain “Latina/o” seats. Many Latinas’ recent elections to the legislature were described by Latino male respondents as “coming out of nowhere.” When I asked one legislator whether that description rang true for her, she responded:

I was told not to run because ... ‘we have deals carved out for these districts and you’re screwing it up.’ People were really dismissive because I was to them, coming out of nowhere and it’s like, ‘Well, I’m not coming out of nowhere. I grew up in this community.’ ... The problem is that I didn’t come out of nowhere. The problem is that these individuals weren’t paying attention.

Them telling themselves that I came out of nowhere is convenient for them that...they’re putting the blame someplace else and choosing to have no self-reflection. I think that that’s actually the bigger

problem and I think a lot of it is because...I was a woman.

Most respondents' mentions of Latinas getting on the ballot and winning were related as stories of outsiders and disruptors, disturbing carefully facilitated plans of the Latina/o Democratic leadership. For one race in particular, several respondents described the emergence of a Latina candidate (at the prompting of a Latina elected official acting on her own) as her "swooping" in unexpectedly, despite a longstanding agreement among the leadership in favor of another candidate:

That was the deal that they put together because then everybody gets to move up. Everybody gets a seat in the whole thing. Then, [Latina Candidate] comes up on the side and ruins that whole thing.

Among the respondents who perceived a wider issue with Latinas not gaining traction in elected office at the same rate as Latinos, most were frank that when Latina/o leaders were deciding who to tap for a race, or begin laying groundwork for (with donors and community leaders) as a potential candidate down the road, they rarely chose women. One respondent said that:

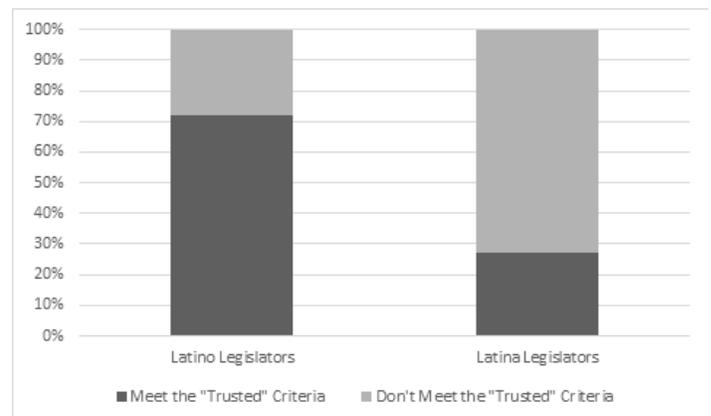
I think of that as part of this – the process in which people become candidates. The infrastructure...we just talked about the Polancos [Torres', and Martinez's] and all that. They were pulling their staffers up. By and large, they were pulling men, weren't they? Yeah. They were pulling men and then the labor unions themselves are pulling men, generally.

A central reason for women not being part of the pipeline, that emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews, was that very few were part of an inner circle of elected and political leaders that is defined by who has worked together as political staff, or union directors, or through family ties. The exclusion of Latinas from these inner circles stems from an interlocking set of criteria for membership that renders them less visible as potential

candidates, and available to run, in comparison to their Latino counterparts.

When viewed in their totality, the gender differences in professional and familial backgrounds of Latina/o legislators elected since 1996 suggest that there are structural limits on Latina's access to possible political patrons. Figure 2 illustrates the relative proportions of Latinas and Latinos elected to the California State Assembly or Senate from 1996-2016 who met the informal criteria for inclusion in the leadership's candidate development process that were widely reported by the interview respondents: working as a senior staff member for another legislator, serving as a senior director for a labor union, or a close family connection to another Latino elected official.

Figure 2: Percentage of Latina/o Legislators with "Trusted" Criteria before Candidacy, 1996-2016



Among the 32 Latinos elected to the California state legislature during the period of this study, all but nine were either senior legislative staff for another Latino elected official, a senior director with a labor union, or the close relative of a Latino elected official. The ratio of individuals who fall into that category is reversed among Latina legislators; only four of the 15 were on the staff of a Latino elected official. This divergence underscores that the pathway to office-holding for Latinas is qualitatively different from that of Latinos serving in the same legislative body, from the same county. Latinas' socio-political positioning is farther from the center of mainstream political power than that

of Latinos, and as a result, they have less access to the resources required to mount a viable candidacy than co-racial men.

The consequences for Latinas' exclusion are manifold. These dynamics render Latinas less visible, or even invisible, to those who actively recruit and support Latina/o candidates in at least two ways. Latinas are not physically visible or "on the lists of people that are brought up at fundraisers and cocktail parties" as potentially running for a seat, as one respondent put it. Additionally, if Latinas are not serving on legislative staffs, or working at a high level on union campaigns, they are missing opportunities to build trusted relationships with power brokers over time. In turn, they are less frequently turned to and asked to perform political favors and tasks that are important tests of commitment to the coalition. Thus, they are also less psychologically visible to elites as possible candidates, since they are less proven as what several candidates and elected officials called "good members of the team."

Building Latina/o Political Power, with Latinas at the Table

When asked to identify why there are fewer Latinas than Latinos included in the leadership's candidate pipeline, several male respondents stated that it was for fairly straightforward reasons—the leaders pick people they know and have worked with, and women just happened not to work for them. Two respondents noted that Latinas are simply not as prevalent as Latinos in the senior staffing positions in legislative and city council offices from which favored candidates often emerge. The tone of these comments indicated that the absence of women from these strategically valuable positions was simply a matter of luck, coincidence, or timing. The data presented in this brief suggest that there are more structural issues at hand.

It is also worth noting that several of my interview subjects would likely disagree that there is a general pattern of Latinas' exclusion from the inner workings of Latina/o candidate development

efforts by the leadership. During interviews, if the respondent had not already raised gender differences or issues during the course of our conversation, I asked at the end whether they had noticed or thought about the decline in the number of women getting elected to the state legislature generally, and whether they thought it was related to other issues we had been talking about. Some male respondents said that they had not thought about it, and that the recent composition of the Board of Supervisors being four women and one African American man showed that there was "no issue." Other men also ticked off women who have been known to have influence in Latina/o political circles, like former County Supervisor Gloria Molina, former State Senator Gloria Romero, and current County Supervisor Hilda Solis. However, these women's names were not raised earlier in the conversation, when I asked those same respondents to specifically identify who "the leadership" was that everyone talked about as central figures in candidate emergence.

Moreover, I did not have to explicitly ask about the differences between women and men in Latina/o politics when interviewing Latinas—most talked about it as inherent to their journey as candidates, or as a key aspect of the trajectory of candidates they had known or observed. Even in talking about the candidate pipeline itself, Latinas were largely invisible to Latino political elites. These dynamics raise questions about the costs of "race-based" solidarity and coalition-building in electoral politics that is blind to marginalized subgroups like women.

The patterns of centrally facilitated, at times exclusionary, candidate emergence and support efforts on the part of the Latina/o Democratic leadership in Los Angeles are widely acknowledged in their effectiveness and pivotal role in shaping the electoral landscape of the county. This ongoing work has put the needs of some segments of the immigrant community front and center in Southern California and in Sacramento. However, the informal pipelines can also be characterized by the extent to which Latinas are "not part of the plan." Many Latina candidates I spoke with said

that they they are not opposed to having plans in place to advance the representation of Latina/os, or the overall goal of working together strategically across districts to increase the size of the Latina/o caucus in the legislature. But the current system of candidate development is insufficient in their view, in large part because it leaves half of the Latina/o population of Los Angeles without a real seat at the negotiating table.

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