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## **Chicanas in Texas Politics**

*Jose Angel Gutierrez and Rebecca E. Deen*  
*University of Texas-Arlington*

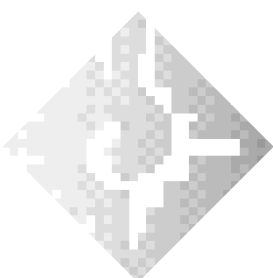
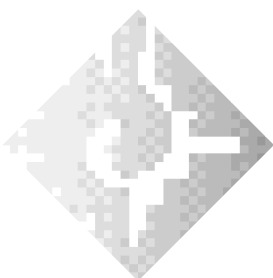
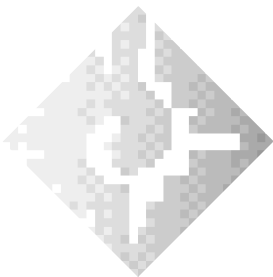
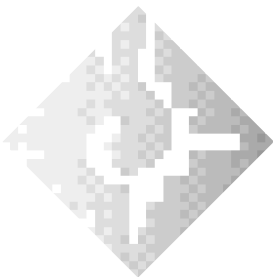
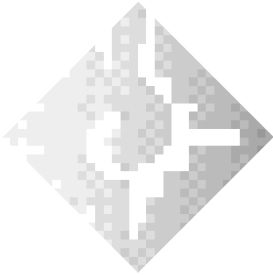
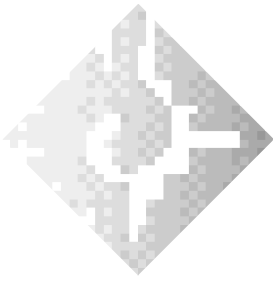
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# Chicanas in Texas Politics

*Jose Angel Gutierrez and Rebecca E. Deen*  
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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes the election of Chicanas to public office in Texas since the Chicano Movement and discusses the factors that promote and impede their election and performance in office. Ethnographic interviews were used to gather data on the experiences of Chicana candidates for County Judge in Texas. These findings are set in the larger context of women in politics. While gains have been made by Chicanas in all local elective offices, some positions remain elusive and electoral parity has not been reached. In addition to electoral barriers, Chicanas face impediments to office holding, once the election is won. Gender discrimination is not the major factor in gaining public office, rather once in office the internal competition and conflict with male officeholders presents formidable obstacles for re-election and tenure.

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# Chicanas in Texas Politics

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- *Generation of a program of research and evaluation to examine the social, economic, educational, and political condition of Latino communities.*
- *Transmission of research findings to academic institutions, government officials, community leaders, and private sector executives through publications, public policy seminars, workshops, and consultations.*
- *Provision of technical expertise and support to Latino communities in an effort to develop policy responses to local problems.*
- *Development of Latino faculty, including support for the development of curriculum and scholarship for Chicano/Latino Studies.*





# Chicanas<sup>1</sup> in Texas Politics

Women of Mexican ancestry have been involved in Texas politics since the land has been a part of Mexico. This participation continued through the Texas independence era to the present. However, the role that Chicanas have played in the American political system generally, and in Texas politics more specifically, has been largely overlooked. In fact, feminist scholars have noted that Mexican-American women, as well as other Hispanic women, have not been sufficiently credited for their role in politics (Prestage, 1995; Rule, 1995; Olivera, 1995; Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Cotera, 1976). Similarly, with few exceptions made for “superstars” such as Henry Cisneros and Dan Morales in Texas politics, the role of Mexican-American women and men has not been the topic of research interest among students of political science. The historian, Arnaldo de Leon (1993: 1) posits that serious scholarly work on the history of Mexican-Americans began after 1970.

This paper seeks to redress this imbalance by exploring the role of Chicanas in Texas politics. First the experiences of Chicanas in the political system will be examined, including the patterns of electoral success. Then, through analysis of ethnographic studies of Chicana candidates for County Judge in Texas, a better understanding of their contributions to the political system will be reached. Under what conditions are Chicanas successful in winning office? What kinds of barriers do these women face, once in office? What does the future hold for Chicana candidates in pursuit of electoral success in local politics in Texas? What lessons can be learned that apply to the electoral success of Chicanos more generally?

## Chicanas in the Political System

Chicanas have played an important role in the political system over time. For example, Chicanas were involved with the founding of the older, traditional civil rights organizations of the Mexican-American community, both in Texas and nationally. Jovita Idar from Laredo, Texas organized the first feminist organizations for women of Mexican ancestry in 1911, *La Liga Femenil Mexicanista*. The role of Chicanas in the formation and development of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in 1929 and, later, the American G.I. Forum in 1948 was essential. LULAC and G.I. Forum are the oldest

civil rights organizations among Mexican-Americans. Maria Hernandez and her spouse, Pedro, argued with the male founders of LULAC for a less Anglo assimilationist, less hierarchical organization, and for a more Pan-American, cultural nationalist ideology within the organization (Cotera, 1976: 73-82). Chicanas accepted supporting roles to the men in the American G. I. Forum as the women’s auxiliaries (Allsup, 1976; Ramos, 1982: 42-48).

During the organizing of the *Viva Kennedy* Clubs of the 1960 presidential campaign, and in the subsequent founding of the Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations (PASO) in Texas and the Mexican-American Political Association in California (MAPA), Chicanas played a central role. They were key in the formation of various campaign organizations as well as transforming these groups into viable community organizations post-election (Garcia, 2000). Virginia Muzquiz, Enriqueta Palacios, and Elvira De La Fuente were very involved as leaders in the PASO chapter in Crystal City, Texas during 1962 and 1963, the key period of the first successful electoral victory in a Texas municipality.

Hardy-Fanta (1993: 14) in her study of Latina women in Boston politics is critical of the early White male-centered research done on political participation and political consciousness in single cities (e.g., Floyd Hunter, Robert Dahl, Robert Lane) for their exclusion of Latinas’ influence. Early studies of the Mexican-American electorate also ignored the gender issues inherent in the political phenomenon and dismissed the issue as a mere independent variable with limited impact on the overall phenomenon (De la Garza and Brischetto, 1984). Labor studies and generational studies of Mexican-Americans have not investigated the role of the woman, particularly with the advent of women moving into the labor force in record numbers after World War II. Richard Santillan (1989) clearly illustrates in his early work in this area that the research focus has been on Mexican-American males, not females.

Bert Corona, a Chicano activist since the 1940’s, makes significant mention of two women, a Mexican and a Guatemalan. They made careers of political work in the organizing for labor union membership of women working in canneries in California and pro-

moting a feminist agenda for Chicanas: Linda Moreno and Josefina Fierro (Garcia, 1994). Luisa Moreno and Josefina Fierro, both rose through the ranks of the California labor union movement to reach elective office at the state level in the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO). Moreno also was the key organizer of the first national conference of Mexican-Americans and other Hispanics, *El Congreso Nacional del Pueblo de Habla Española*, that addressed the concerns and needs of the Spanish-speaking. For their political activism in the labor movement and Chicano community, both women were targeted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) for harassment in the form of red-baiting and called for questioning before the congressional committee. Both sought exile in Mexico to avoid the possibility of incriminating co-workers in the political activities. Moreno died in Guatemala in 1992 and Fierro still resides in Mexico (Garcia, M. 1995: 105-124).

## The Chicano Movement

The Chicano Movement, the mid-1960's through approximately the early 1980's, refers to the period where Mexican-Americans in the United States engaged in concerted social protest (Acuña, 1988; Meier and Rivera, 1972; Gomez-Quinonez, 1990; Muñoz, 1989; De Leon, 1993; Garcia, 1997). This social protest movement, as other similar movements in history, provided important political opportunities for the participants and later, its beneficiaries. The Chicano Movement had as its focus the attainment of two general goals: promotion of cultural nationalism around the notion of a Chicano homeland, Aztlán; and a rights-based agenda to press for civil and human rights for Chicanos.

Among these political opportunities was a new avenue to access the power structure and an important population segment of this social protest movement were Chicanas. While there are no precise estimates found in the contemporary literature on the number of female participants during this era, mention is made in all available literature of the involvement of Chicanas in every aspect of this movement. In some books on the Raza Unida Party (Santillan, 1974; Garcia, 1986) there is brief and scant detail on the role, scope, significance and actual identity of female, militant, activist members and leaders. Armando Navarro's book, *Mexican-American Youth*

*Organization* (1995), has a more ample discussion of the role, scope, significance and actual identity of the female members and leaders of "MAYO," as the organization was called at the time. MAYO was the precursor to the rise of the Raza Unida Party, an ethnic political party. Navarro (1995, 2000) and Gutierrez (1999), both in recent works, chronicle the important roles of Chicanas within the Raza Unida Party and in the politics of a local community in Southern Texas.

Women were active in MAYO and they also bore the laborious task of organizing the components of the political party. In this political work, Chicanas, both in and out of the Raza Unida Party (Garcia, 1989), found political opportunity to access the power structure across the country as never before. They not only pressed the two goals of the Chicano Movement but also sought their liberation as women.

## The Raza Unida Party and the Political Opportunity Structure

The Chicano Movement gave rise to many organizations that later became institutions, such as the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), and the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project (SVREP). During the heyday of the Chicano Movement, a political party was also organized, La Raza Unida Party. The Chicano Movement and these organizations provided the "political opportunity structure" for Chicanas to rise from workers and followers to leaders and candidates for public office.

"Political opportunity structure" is the dimensions of the political environment that either encourage or discourage people from using collective action (Tarrow, 1994). Electoral activity is an obvious form of collective action. Historically, women generally have been excluded from full participation in American politics, first through not being allowed the voting franchise then as candidates for election. The numbers of women candidates who are successful is on the rise; women constitute 22% of all state legislators, which is an increase of 13 percentage points in the past 30 years (CAWP, 1998). However, parity with men for nationally elected offices remains elusive; women comprise only 11% of Congress.

This disparity in electoral success is more significant for Chicanas. In addition to barriers faced as female candidates, these women face the additional burden of their ethnicity. Marta Cotera opined at the Women and Power Symposium held in Austin, Texas in 1976, to the predominantly White female audience that “On a nationwide basis, Chicanas have no representatives in the Women and Power Symposium Committee, no U.S. Senators, no U.S. Representatives, no federal judges, and no high federal administrative positions. At the state level in Texas, we have no state senators, no state representatives, no judges, no mayors, and only one Chicana in a state commission. The only county where we have made significant political gains is Zavala County where women helped structure the Raza Unida Party and then promptly ran for office. We have seven elected positions in that county” (Cotera, 1977: 14).

As with other women candidates, Chicanas have experienced far greater success at the state and local level in Texas, historically a 1-party Democratic state. During the early 1960’s several Chicanas from deep South Texas sought county level positions for the first time and won. Tina Villanueva in Jim Wells County, (Alice, Texas) and Minerva Peña in Starr County, (Rio Grande City) were elected County Commissioners. In 1964, Virginia Muzquiz sought the Democratic Party nomination for State Representative from District 34; she did not win that election. Later, she was elected County Clerk for Zavala County in 1974 under the Raza Unida Party banner while Alicia Chacón was also elected to the same type of position in El Paso County (Cotera, 1976: 169). Chacón would, in 1990, be elected the first female and first Mexican-American County Judge for El Paso County, while another Chicana, Enriqueta Díaz Lane, also got elected as County Judge in Maverick County (*Texas Almanac*, 1992-1993: 460). The County Judge is the county’s chief executive officer and is the most powerful elective office at that level.

Clearly, the Raza Unida Party played a key role in supporting and electing more women to public and appointed office than either of the other political parties combined. During the 1972 national convention of La Raza Unida Party held in El Paso, one-third of all the voting delegates in attendance from 17 states and the District of Columbia were Chicanas. Maria Elena Martinez was elected the Texas state chair of the party in 1974, the first woman to head a political party in the state. Alma Canales was nominated to run

for Lieutenant Governor in Texas during 1972, another first. In Zavala County, all but one of the elected judges for the county from 1974 to 1980 supported by the Raza Unida Party were Chicanas. Marta Cotera, in *The Chicana Feminist* (1977), pointed out the centrality of the Raza Unida Party in Zavala County, Texas to the paradigm shift toward election of Chicanas to all offices, school board, city council, and county government.

The trend set by the Raza Unida Party among Chicanas seeking public office in Texas continued beyond the decade of legal existence of the political party, 1970 to 1980, into the current realignment and growth of the Republican Party. Martinez and Martinez (1980) surveyed the public office landscape across the nation to ascertain the number of Mexican-American officeholders during 1979-1980. They reported impressive gains by the near end of the Chicano Movement era, namely within the Democratic Party but not exclusively. Vilma Martinez, also the President and General Counsel of the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (founded in 1968), served on the President’s Ambassadorial Review Committee. There were 13 Chicanas in various executive department branches with one Ambassador, Mari Luci Jaramillo; several Chicanas held high level state agency appointed positions; and one state senator in Colorado (D-I 8th), Polly Baca Barragan, had been elected. There are several Chicana state legislators in the southwestern states, particularly New Mexico, California, and Texas. The National Committee of the Democratic Party, for example in 1980, had within its 351 members seven Hispanics, and, of these, six were females.

The first Chicana elected to the Texas state legislature, as a Representative to the lower legislative chamber, was Irma Rangel from Kingsville, Texas in 1976 (Unterburger and Delgado, 1994: 660). The first Chicana elected to the Texas state senate in 1984 was Judith Zaffifini from Laredo (*Texas State Directory* 1995: 613). The first statewide officeholder in Texas was Lena Guerrero. She first was elected state representative from an Austin district as a Democrat. Gov. Ann Richards, a Democrat, appointed her in 1991 as a member of the Railroad Commission, a highly visible and important regulatory agency overseeing oil, gas, railroads, and road transportation in Texas. She served for 20 months and was elected Chair of the agency by her colleagues (Talgen and Kam, 1993: 189). During her campaign for re-election in 1992

she was defeated handily, largely because she misrepresented on her resume that she held a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas, when in fact she had not earned the degree. Moreover, when confronted with the discrepancy rather than admit to the allegation she attempted to cover-up the falsehood, which dragged the issue in the campaign for weeks (*Dallas Morning News*, 1996). And, in 1994, LULAC, the oldest Chicano civil rights organization in the nation, elected as Chair at its national convention, the first woman leader from among two women candidates, Belen Robles (El Paso) over Rosa Rosales (San Antonio). The first Chicana, Republican state representative, Elvira Reyna from the Dallas area, was elected in a Special Election in 1993 (*Texas State Directory*, 1995: 98).

### **Barriers to Electoral Success**

There are many other reasons for the exclusion of Mexican-American women from politics, historically. Though socioeconomic factors are real barriers to political participation in the electoral arena generally, women face additional obstacles. While little evidence has been found to support voter bias against women (Darcy, Welch, and Clark, 1994), women are more likely to win elections under certain conditions. As noted earlier, women have experienced less success at the national level. At the sub-national level in the United States and abroad, women are more likely to be successful in lower prestige races (Dolan and Ford, 1996; Lovenduski, 1986), when they constitute a greater number of the body to which they aspire, i.e., when they are a critical mass (Rule, 1998), and when turnover is high (Stanley and Blair, 1991, Nechemias 1985, and Rule, 1986).

Age, family size and obligations, cultural bias, and marital status have and continue to obstruct a Mexican-American woman's path to public office, elective or appointed. Wilma Rule (1995: 689) attributes the exclusion of women in political affairs not only to "unfavorable contextual conditions — including cultural biases and discriminatory practices" which can be overcome, but also to unfavorable electoral systems that are not neutral.

Economic disadvantages are a clear barrier to election of Latinas. In 1993, more than one-third of Hispanic families with children under 18 were living below poverty (34.3%), compared with two in five

Black families (39.3%), and one in seven White families (14.5%). In 1993, the Hispanic household median income dipped to \$22,886, the lowest median income level for Hispanic households since 1975 (\$22,793). Since 1989, the Hispanic median income values have declined an average of \$665 annually. The median income of Hispanic female year-round, full-time workers was \$17,112. The comparable figure for Black females was \$20,312 and for men was \$22,979. (National Council of La Raza, 1995). In the case of the Mexican-American female, politics is not affordable to most lower and middle class members. The permanent entry of women into the labor force, generally, is a positive factor enhancing political participation. The diversification of the family structure away from the nuclear family and the aging of the baby boom generation are other positive factors (Jewell and Wicker, 1993: 705-706).

Given both the obstacles for Chicanas to overcome and their experiences in the political system generally, what has been the effect of Chicana's attempts to win election to local offices in Texas? This study utilizes data collected in ethnographic interviews of these candidates for County Judge in Texas to explore this issue as well as to examine the situations these women face, once elected.

### **Chicana Candidates for Texas County Judges**

Texas has the greatest number of elected officials than any other state. Chicanas have made impressive gains in obtaining public office since 1968. There are numerous elected positions with city, school board, and community college governing boards to which Chicanas, and other women, have successfully sought election. There are thousands of these positions. In county government there are elected positions that have been viewed as "jobs for women," such as county treasurer, county and district clerk, and tax collector. Chicanas, in record numbers, have been elected in recent times to these positions. For example, in 1986 there were two Chicanas serving in the Texas House of Representatives, 23 in county government, 63 in municipal government, 23 in various judicial positions, and 80 serving on school boards. By 1996, however, there was one Chicana serving in the Texas Senate, eight Chicanas were serving in the House of Representatives, 61 in county positions, 102 in municipalities, 46 in various judicial capacities, and 118 were elected to school boards.

**Table 1. Chicana Candidates for County Judge in Texas**

<i>Socorro "Coco" Medina</i>	1986	Potter County	* Lost in primary to eventual winner.
<i>Severita Lara</i>	1986	Zavala County	* Lost in run-off to incumbent. Lacked funds for successful legal challenge.
<i>Alicia Chacón</i>	1990	El Paso County	* Won, lost reelection.
<i>Enriqueta Diaz</i>	1990	Maverick County	* Won as independent write in. Indicted, convicted and removed from office.
<i>Trine Gamez</i>	1994	Deaf Smith County	* Lost to incumbent.
<i>Norma Villarreal Ramirez</i>	1994	Zapata County	* Lost but had resources for Recount and won. Lost re-election.
<i>Dolores Briones</i>	1998	El Paso County	* Currently serving.

Alternatively, there are positions historically viewed as "jobs for men," such as county commissioner, justice of the peace, district and county attorney, and county judge. Texas has 254 counties and each has a County Judge. The County Judge is the most powerful elected position within all governmental units in Texas. The County Judge is the highest paid position at the local level and has multi-faceted powers and responsibilities. Among these duties are: chief executive of the county; judicial officer; budget officer; elections officer; civil defense director; personnel director; program administrator; and titular head of local government.

A review of the roster of public officials in this position illustrates the paucity of Chicanos. In 1997, there were more White women County Judges (23) than Chicano men (eight). As of this writing, there is only one sitting Chicana County Judge, Dolores Briones, in El Paso County. In the history of the position, there have only been four Chicanas elected; none have won re-election.

There are various reasons for the scarcity of Chicano County Judges, and Chicano county-wide elected officials more generally. The county judge position is elected county-wide in an at-large fashion, as opposed to single member districts as some other local races are held. This is a paid and more prestigious position compared with other local offices. Voter attention and the difficulties of campaigning in a rural environment increase campaign costs for this race relative to others.

The limited success of Chicano candidates has been in the predominately Chicano populated counties, many along the U.S.- Mexican border. Chicanas have not shared in this electoral success.<sup>2</sup> In fact, only

seven Chicanas have sought the County Judge position. This is in line with previous research that suggests a first order problem to the under-representation of women in elected office is in fewer number standing for office (Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994).

Political resources were important for all of these women candidates. While electoral success generally requires resources, Table 1 illustrates the significant effect this factor played in the experiences of Chicanas seeking election as County Judge. Of the three that eventually lost their bid, all were beaten by the eventual winner. Two winners were incumbents.

The case of Severita Lara particularly demonstrates the importance of a lack of resources in her defeat. In Zavala County in 1986, she received enough votes to participate in a run-off election. She beat the incumbent, who was a White male, by one vote. In the ensuing recount, Lara was allocated appointment of only one of the five members on the recount committee. By contrast, her opponent was given three seats. She lost the recount by two votes and was forced to borrow the funds to file a lawsuit in district court. After losing the suit, she had exhausted her resources.

Reports of ethnographic interviews describing Lara's account of the circumstances under which she lost her bid are detailed elsewhere (Gutierrez, 1999). In these accounts, she clearly indicates the personal and political power the incumbent had. Not only did he have a majority of the recount committee and the financial resources to fight her lawsuit, but Lara also suggests that the incumbent may have been responsible for bribing members of the committee. She says she was offered \$50,000 to withdraw from the race.

In 1994, Norma Villarreal Ramirez had a similar experience in Zapata County, albeit with a different outcome. Ramirez initially lost her bid for County Judge, but challenged the election because she suspected fraud in the early voting and absentee balloting period. Unlike Lara six years prior, Ramirez was able to borrow the funds to finance the legal fight, from which she emerged victorious.

Resources played another kind of role in the election of Enriqueta Diaz in Maverick County in 1990. She won election over the incumbent county judge, a Chicano Democrat, as a write-in candidate in the General Election. Diaz was able to organize a massive “get-out-the-vote” campaign with countless volunteers and surprise the incumbent. Her opponent grossly underestimated the intensity and effectiveness of the Diaz campaign, relying instead on the traditional Democratic Party base of votes enjoyed by Democrats in border counties such as Maverick County (Eagle Pass). In the border counties of Texas, the Republican opposition, if any, is token opposition and only serves to siphon off votes from the Democratic or Independent candidate. The presence of a “third” candidate is important however, because electoral victory in the General Election is based on plurality of votes, not majority, and any votes taken from the Democratic column favor the other challenger(s).

After her election in Maverick County in 1990, Enriqueta Diaz experienced difficulties. Once in office, she was constantly at cross-purposes with the County Attorney and members of the Commissioner’s Court during the first half of her 4-year term. The County Attorney was able to bring an indictment for official misconduct involving court files of pending cases and obtain a conviction of County judge Diaz which forced her from office in her third year.

Another Chicana who was successful in her bid for County Judge was Alicia Chacón, in El Paso County in 1990. Since Texas still has vestiges of the 1-party dominance of the Democratic party, her real opposition came in the Democratic primary where she faced the incumbent. Unlike Socorro “Coco” Medina in 1986 (Potter County) and Trine Gamez in 1994 (Deaf Smith County), Chacón was able to raise the more than \$100,000 necessary to mount an effective campaign and marshal a large number of volunteers to bring out the vote to win. Her victory came in the May 1990 primary election and faced no Republican opposition in the General Election.

Dolores Briones, also from El Paso County, was able to repeat Chacón’s electoral victory in 1998. Briones had sought to become the first Chicana elected to Congress in Texas in 1996; she lost to a Chicano male. In 1998 she won against the incumbent male officeholder in the primary election and went on to defeat the Republican candidate in the General Election. In her case, the incumbent County Judge and Commissioners did not overspend funds. It remains to be seen how collegial her colleagues on the Commissioner’s Court treat her.

Chicanas stand for office with less frequency than Chicanos or White Women. Upon entry into the political fray, they often lack the resources necessary to counter those of the incumbent. Beyond these difficulties, however, are those they experience when they are able to win office. These women describe these barriers in terms of the establishment’s hostility towards them as political outsiders and as women.

Chacón fell victim to these hostilities, as well. Because of the remaining 1-party dominance, the real race is the Democratic primary in the Spring. Chacón won that race in March of 1990, but did not take office until January 1991. In those eight months, the out-going Judge, aided by the County Commissioners, proceeded to spend and exhaust all available funds and reserve funds before she took office. Among her first order of business as County Judge was to raise taxes, cut programs, contain costs, and borrow funds with which to operate the county. Her popularity among voters dropped. The public never fully understood why this female judge had to raise taxes and cut programs. She narrowly lost her re-election bid four years later. Chacón describes the experience as result of the incumbent’s bitter feelings towards her as well as a desire to make her job as difficult as possible from the beginning. She also suggests that her gender and conservative lifestyle may play a small part in their animosity towards her (Gutierrez, 1999).

Norma Villarreal Ramirez also recounts facing hostilities from other county officials after her win in 1994. Several county officials refused her telephone calls or to meet with her. Others made rude and obscene gestures to her in her open Commissioner’s Court meetings. As with the case of Chacón in 1990, Ramirez attributed her difficulties to the twin constraints of fighting the establishment and of being a woman. In responding to these abusive situations

with her colleagues, Ramirez was hamstrung by her desire to be “ladylike” (Gutierrez, 1999).

This is typical of what Gil and Vazquez (1997: 6) call the *Marianista* syndrome. It is the companion of *Machismo*, a mindset born out of traditional Hispanic culture that dictates gender roles. According to Gil and Vazquez, Hispanic women are taught to emulate the Virgin Mary, that is to be selfless and subservient, never putting one’s own needs before others, especially those of men. A Latina is taught that her primary responsibility is to her family and her home, even if she is employed outside of the home.

Ramirez faced these expectations from her colleagues. Other women candidates describe how their husbands had to campaign for them to assure male voters that the women would be capable of treating men fairly, especially in cases of domestic violence and child support.

### **Positive Factors for Increased Women’s Electoral Success**

From the heyday of the Chicano Movement when that social movement created many social movement organizations, one such entity, the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, has completed a 20-year history and claims to have registered 2 million Mexican-Americans in the Southwest. In 1994, the U.S. voting age population was nearly 190.3 million and Hispanics were almost 17.5 million of those, or 9% of total. Of these Latinos, 5.24 million actually registered and 3.34 million voted in 1994’s Congressional elections, less than 4% of all votes cast in that election (Palomo, 1996). Texas has some 1.2 million Mexican-Americans registered to vote and 42% of all Mexican-Americans in the state are eligible to vote, but remain unregistered. In the Midwest region of the country, a similar program — the Midwest Northeast Voter Registration Education Project — has existed since 1982. This entity claims to have registered during its lifetime more than 1.1 million Latinos in that part of the country — Chicago east to New York.

Maurillo E. Vigil (1987) cites evidence from exit polls in Texas during the 1984 presidential election to support the claim that Mexican-American women registered and voted in higher numbers than their male counterparts, 55% to 45%. Harry Pachon (1987) states “more Hispanic women vote than men.” In

other geographic areas such as New York, Falcon (1988) found that more Latinas are registered than Latino men, 59% to 41%, in 1984. The only contrary evidence was found by Vigil (1987) in California during the same election where Latino men outvoted Latinas 55% to 45%. Hardy-Fanta (1993) states of Boston politics that Latinas “make up the majority of the participants and activists at political events.”

In the 1988 presidential election, Latinas registered and voted in greater numbers than Latinos. About 37.4% of Latinas were registered and 30.1% voted while the men lagged with 33.5% registered and only 27.4% voting (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989). Pachon found that, nationally, women held only 12% of elective office while Hispanic women held 18% of the offices.

During the 1994 national elections for Congress, Hispanic support for the Democratic Party dropped significantly from 72% support in 1992, for example, to 61%. This drop carried over into the state legislative races involving 140 Hispanic incumbents in nine states in which the group, both Democrats and Republicans collectively, lost four seats (Brischetto, 1995). In the 1996 Democratic Primary election, it is estimated that 38% of the total votes cast were from Mexican-Americans and that 48% of all votes cast in the subsequent run-off election for U.S. Senate and other races across the state were from Mexican-Americans (*Dallas Morning News*, 1996).

The future bodes well for increased political participation by all women, including the Mexican-Americans and other Latinas due to passage of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA or “motor voter”) which went into effect January 1995. The “motor voter” law requires states to register, for voting purposes, those applying for a driver’s license or public assistance (AFDC, WIC, Food Stamps, Social Security, Medicaid, etc.). The estimates of voter registration, or registration updates, since the NVRA began are approximately 1 million persons per month in the 42 states covered by the act (Piven and Cloward, 1996). Fox and Cloward project a rise of 40 million new voters by the 1998 mid-year national elections when the full 4-year cycle of drivers’ license renewal will be completed. They also contend that historical disparities in registration rates by race, income, and age be eliminated, for example, only 40% of 18-24 year olds are registered, but 85%

have drivers' licenses. Poor and minority people are also more likely to drive than be registered. People signing up in public assistance agencies could reduce income and race disparities to the vanishing point. Public assistance recipients are the most Democratic constituency in the electorate. Roughly 10 million unregistered citizens will apply for public assistance, or be re-certified, between 1995 and 1996 elections.

Among youth in the first year of college across the country, Latinos reported an interest in politics and keeping current on events at a higher rate (33%) than the rest of the student population — Anglo and African-Americans combined — at 28% (Alicea, 1996). From among the academically talented high school Latino seniors in the nation the National Hispanic Institute holds annually the Lorenzo de Zavala Youth Legislative Session. This is an 8-day, intense training session on the legislative process and judicial system with emphasis on self-governance and group empowerment. More than 90% of these students go on to college (*The Hispanic Outlook*, 1996).

## Conclusions

The Chicano Movement created a political opportunity structure for Chicanas and other Latinas to find new avenues of access to the power structure. Record numbers of Chicanas and other Latinas are seeking public office and winning when able to obtain the resources necessary to mount effective, credible campaigns. The traditional contextual barriers of cultural bias, socioeconomic factors, gender discrimination, and exclusion are falling by the wayside. More women, of all ethnic backgrounds, are not only seeking public office, but also becoming students of politics and government. Increasingly research that focuses on other electoral activity than that of White, male candidates is being conducted.

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## Endnotes

1. "Mexican-American" and "Chicano(a)" are the terms used in this paper to denote the largest population component of Hispanics of Mexican ancestry in the United States. The other two subgroups of Hispanics (or Latinos) are Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Chicano is the gender neutral term used to describe the group. To describe gender, Chicana is used to denote women of Mexican ancestry.
2. However, Chicanas are breaking down electoral barriers in mayoral races in the border region. The first Chicanas elected to large Texas cities were elected in the border region in 1999. Blanca Vela was elected mayor of Brownsville and Betty Flores was chosen mayor of Laredo.

