



**Understanding Nuances of
Latina Candidate Emergence:
*A Study of Latinas in San Antonio***

*by Patricia A. Jaramillo
University of Texas-San Antonio*

Research Report No. 40
November 2008

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Abstract

Even with the steady advancement of Latinas to elective office since the 1990s, they continue to be underrepresented in public office. Their relative absence diminishes the diversity of the voices of marginalized groups in U.S. politics, while their presence adds to it. Latina officeholders represent multiple groups through their support and advancement of policies that promote the interests and address the needs of many. Latinas in public office are noted for their unique means of coalition building, a characteristic approach of Latina community and political activists, that emphasizes relational politics. Based on data collected through group interviews in San Antonio, Texas, this paper identifies patterns of variables that influence Latina considerations relative to running for public office. Specific findings include the following: 1) gender and ethnicity intersect for Latinas to influence their decision to run for public office; 2) group consciousness and family support provide Latinas with resources to overcome barriers to becoming candidates, and 3) familial obligations, institutional designs of public offices in Texas, and risks associated with running for office constrain the willingness of Latinas to run for public office.

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Introduction

Many scholars have documented the substantial influx of women into elective office in the 1990s along with the steady progress of people of color, although the patterns of gender and ethnic progress appear to be qualitatively different (Fraga et al., 2003). Only recently have we disaggregated gender patterns by minority groups, finding that while women of color are underrepresented in terms of population, gender, and ethnic groups, they tend to serve in public office at higher rates than either White women or women in the aggregate (Scola, 2006).

In a study of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas from 1990-2004, Fraga et al., (2006) find that women have increased their presence in their state legislatures, while in three of the four states the election of Latinas was slightly higher than their white counterparts.¹ For Arizona, California, and Texas, Latinas comprise a greater proportion of Latinas/os in the state legislature. García Bedolla, Tate and Wong (2005) find that Latinas in Congress are also overrepresented relative to their proportion of the overall population. Although we are witness to a surge of Latinas elected to public office, we lack an understanding of Latinas in electoral politics, especially in the most resource intensive forms of activism such as running for and serving in public office (see García Bedolla, Tate, and Wong, 2005 ; Cruz Takash, 1997; Fraga et al., 2006; García et al., 2008 for exceptions).

Why is the presence of Latinas in elective office important? A representative democracy needs to provide its citizens with the opportunity to fully participate in governance. If barriers stifle potential interest or preclude the interested from the opportunity to participate in governance, then representation, and ultimately democracy, falters. A link between descriptive demographic makeup of our elected bodies and substantive policy output, along with the lack of parity when compared to the populations they represent, poses serious problems for representation. Moreover, rapidly changing U.S. demographics raise questions about the representativeness of the policies these bodies adopt.

The threat to representation is a result of empirical evidence showing both symbolic and substantive effects of more diverse government bodies. For example, Tate (2003) finds the mere presence of blacks in the U.S. Congress allows black citizens to *feel* better represented. Others demonstrate that gender and minority status have an effect on substantive policy (Lublin, 1997; Carroll, 2001; Tate, 2003). Swers and Larson (2005) find that women in the U.S. Congress are more likely than men to advocate for bills concerning women's issues although their level of commitment varies by party control of the institution and their placement on key congressional committees. The findings also suggest that minority status and gender can affect substantive policy. In a study of the Congressional Black Caucus, Pinney, and Serra (1999) find that black representatives in congress are responsive to the interests of black constituents.

A Latina offers perspectives that are unique not only to her identity as shaped by her experiences as a woman, but also her identity as a member of an ethnic minority. Studies in Latina politics have broadened our understanding of political participation and have forced us to recognize the political role of Latinas outside traditional institutions. Our understanding of Latinas as political beings recognizes that Latinas define politics broadly, that they are likely to emphasize the interconnectedness of their private and public lives, and that their political participation extends beyond the electoral arena to include community activism and community leadership (García et al., 2008; Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Pardo, 1990; Prindeville, 2003). For Latina legislators, although it appears their policy priorities are consistent with Latino legislators, their openness to and success with coalition-building is consistent with findings of relational politics and demonstrates the unique voice Latinas bring to their formal roles in public office (Fraga et al., 2006).

To this point, research examines Latinas serving in public office or probes the role of Latinas as community and political activists (Fraga et al., 2006; García et al., 2008, Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Pardo, 1990; Cruz Takash, 1997). From this literature, we understand the unique approach to politics that Latinas bring and the unique voice Latinas offer. As officeholders, we identify the paths Latinas have taken to public office, the barriers they encountered and how they overcame these barriers (García et al., 2008). In order to serve in public office, Latinas must first make the decision to run. To better understand Latinas in electoral politics, it is important to consider the two stages of the process involved with the decision to run, first with the consideration of candidacy and second with the consideration of running for a particular office (Lawless and Fox, 2005). How Latinas enter the eligibility pool and emerge as candidates for office is unexplored. To fill this gap, I examine the question of why Latinas run for public office with a group of Latina activists in San Antonio, Texas.

Candidate Emergence

The decision to run for elective office has been investigated at various stages. Are individuals politically ambitious? What is the structural opportunity? This was first addressed as political ambition or progressive ambition. As such, early studies largely focused on current officeholders' decisions to seek higher office (Black, 1972; Rohde, 1979). More recent studies of candidate emergence used innovative methods for identifying potential candidates and investigated earlier stages of the decision making process in order to determine specifically, why some men or women (in some cases non-officeholders) run for elective office and others do not (Maisel and Stone, 1997; Fox and Lawless, 2005).

In studies of both progressive ambition and candidate emergence, a number of variables consistently affect the decision to seek office. Maisel and Stone (1997) divide these variables into strategic, institutional and personal considerations. Strategic variables are those factors, such as incumbency, considered by potential candidates to

influence their chances of winning an election. Incumbancy provides perquisites, name recognition, campaign resources, and experience (Black, 1972; Jacobson and Kernell, 1981; Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell, 2001; Stone and Maisel, 2003; Stone, Maisel, and Maestas, 2004). Other strategic factors such as the partisan composition of the voters, financial support, and party support (especially after redistricting), often benefit the incumbent or encourage a general election challenge (Black, 1972; Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell, 2001; Stone and Maisel, 2003).

While strategic factors have dominated empirical investigations of candidate emergence, institutional and personal variables are also known to factor into a potential candidate's considerations. Institutional factors include the level of professionalism of the office being sought. This includes pay and staff resources that vary across state legislatures. Also, likely candidates consider the personal costs and benefits of seeking office. Personal costs may include the exposure of self and family to negative campaigning, loss of employment stability and foregoing a higher salary for the traditionally lower salaries of public office, and demands of reelection (Maestas, Maisel, and Stone, 1999).

Gender and Running for Office

The current literature shows that women are affected differently than men by some of the same strategic, institutional, and personal considerations, and are particularly limited by sexism in the construction of gender roles. One of the differences between men and women include the fact that women are less likely to perceive themselves as viable candidates (Fox and Lawless, 2004). Women are also less likely than men to perceive the benefits of running for office and are more sensitive to their strategic environment (Fulton et al., 2006). Also, campaign resources appear to be different for men and women. In her examination of candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives, Burrell (2005) finds that while men and women are able to raise equitable amounts of money, men rely on large contributions while women rely on small contributions, which forces them to work harder to raise the same amount of money. Once the money

is raised, the expenditures are also known to have disproportionate effects. In another study of U.S. House candidates and challengers, Green reports that “all other things being equal, \$500,000 spent by a woman challenger would result in a predicted 6.5% of the vote, while the same amount would get the man a predicted 17.5% of the vote—a net difference of 11%” (2003: 19). In addition, it appears that the political parties have been negligent in their recruitment of women as candidates. In fact, Fox and Lawless (2004) find that women are not likely to be encouraged by the gatekeepers (including political parties) to seek elected office.

Personal costs of running for office also vary by gender. Women are more likely than men to consider the difficulties of balancing professional careers (or public service) with familial obligations (Fox, Lawless, and Feeley, 2001; Fox and Lawless, 2004; Fulton et al., 2006). While women have made advancements, they are still disproportionately relegated to the private sphere of family rather than the public sphere. Women who have emerged in the public sphere and who are married and share responsibilities with a partner are still much more likely to assume the role of primary caregiver. For women who express political ambition, child care responsibilities delay “their entrance into the political arena” which “makes it unlikely that they will be able to climb very high on the political career ladder” (Lawless and Fox, 2005: 69).

Additional arguments, beyond strategic, institutional, and personal factors, have been made for the lack of a proportionate female presence in elective office. Some argue it is a result of the scarcity of women in professions from which potential candidates emerge (Conway, Steurnagle, and Ahern, 1997; Thomas, 1998). This argument suggests that as women continue to enter the fields in which potential candidates emerge (such as law), they will be more likely to enter the public arena. However, others have found this argument limited, in essence forcing women to follow a male path to public office rather than following their own paths, for example, through community activism or fields of education.

Women of Color and Running for Office

Research is generally underdeveloped but there are efforts to investigate effects of structural, institutional and personal factors for women of color who run for public office. Importantly, the gender model does not appear to predict the success of women of color who run for public office. In state legislative elections, at least part of the explanation appears to be that white women and women of color seem to be successful in states where different contextual and structural influences have an impact. For example, single-member districts and per capita income appear to be important contextual factors for the success of women of color for state legislative offices (Scola, 2006).

Whether it is our understanding of the unique voice and approach that Latinas bring to public office or the unique mix of structural and institutional factors that contribute to the successful election of Latinas, it is clear from the research that gender expectations do not fit Latinas as women of color. To be sure, we have gained more insight concerning women’s choices to run or not to run for elected office, in general. However, we still lack understanding of the nearly absent voice of Latinas in elective office, especially at the higher levels, and the reasons why some Latinas are more likely or less likely to become candidates.

Latina Identity

I argue that our understanding of why Latinas run (or do not run) for elective office can be increased by expanding the current literature to include issues of identity, specifically the intersectionality of gender identity and racial/ethnic identity. A rich, cross-disciplinary body of literature shows that the identity of women of color informs their very definition of politics, shapes their policy preferences, and influences how they participate politically (Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Cruz-Takash, 1997; Pardo, 1990). As a Latina’s collective identity is shaped and cued by her context, it functions as both a push and a pull factor with regard to political participation. The “push” mobilizes Latinas politically, while the “pull” draws them away from a run for public office.

The Push

The mobilization, or “push,” to participate originates from many different sources (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). For this paper, I focus on two expectations that contribute to our understanding of why Latinas run for public office. The first is the push associated with group consciousness, and collectivistic elements of ethnic identity. The second is the push associated with social networks and the resources they provide to potential candidates.

Group consciousness based on racial/ethnic identity can be a political resource. Policy preferences and political participation motivated by Latinos’ perceptions of a common fate are similar to those found among African Americans (Tate, 1993; also see Kaufmann, 2003 for an extension to intergroup participation). Among Latinos, Sanchez finds that a sense of commonality, perceived discrimination, and perceived benefits to Latino collective action inform policy preferences for issues salient to Latinos and influences Latino-specific participation (Sanchez, 2006a, 2006b). García Bedolla (2005) also finds that elements of identity mobilize Latinos to participate. Specifically, he argues that when an “affective attachment” to their group interacts with a perceived threat to the group, it is mobilizing. For García Bedolla, the key to political participation extends beyond common fate and must include some sense of group worthiness and a self-perception that the individual’s actions could be effective.

For Latinas, evidence continues to accumulate for the interconnectedness of their private and public lives and the effects of this interconnectedness on political participation. Both Hardy-Fanta (1993) and Pardo (1990) find important links between the private sphere defined by family or community and the public sphere. According to Pardo’s (1990) findings, Latinas are mobilized into activism when there is a perceived threat to their community. Community, then, is an extension of family and an extension of the private sphere. Similarly, García Bedolla (2005) finds first-generation Latinas blurring public and private boundaries and argues that this provides a “holistic vision of activity” (2005: 126). The shift to a collective for Latinas is the reflection of group consciousness.

Finally, Hardy-Fanta’s (1993) findings suggest that the solicitation to participate and interactions with others may be particularly relevant to Latinas. She contends that interpersonal relationships are essential to the political mobilization of Latinos, and especially Latinas. Therefore, social networks, both formal and informal, can be expected to play a role in the push to participate in electoral politics.

The Pull

As a counter force to the “push” to participate, Latinas may “pull” back from participating due to barriers they face that are above and beyond barriers faced by other candidates, including other women. The literature identifies two realms of influence that hinder Latinas’ political participation in Texas; the structure of paths to public office in the state, and cultural expectations of Latinos based on their gender and their familial obligations.

In this paper I focus on the cultural and gender role expectations that limit Latina political involvement. Above and beyond the typical gender role demands that all women experience, Latinas are also confronted with their culture’s expectations; the “machismo” attitudes of Latinos and familial obligations associated with their gendered roles. These factors may well overshadow any interest in running for public office. Added to the abovementioned pull from political involvement is another cultural dimension that hinders the capacity of Latinas to wage viable campaigns. According to Texas State Senator Leticia Van de Putte, the ego and confidence necessary to raise money for an electoral campaign is contrary to cultural assumptions that Latinas should be humble (García et al., 2008).

Finally, while the merging of private and public worlds may act to mobilize Latinas to participate politically, the geographic boundaries of elective office may be an unrealistic and unnatural expansion of their private lives. This may result in Latinas having greater interest in practicing forms of politics that do not include running for elective office.

Methodology

The location of San Antonio, Texas is important for both structural and contextual effects. Fraga et al., (2006), identify Texas as a state that follows the trend of Arizona and California in the steady rise of the number of Latinas elected to the state legislature. However, the authors point out that Texas is “an anomaly,” consistently lagging behind Arizona, California, and New Mexico in the proportion of women and Latinas who served in the state legislature from 1990 to 2004 (Fraga et al., 2006: 131). The lack of a professional legislature along with the state’s traditional political culture and population heterogeneity may explain this lack of progress (Hero, 1999; Scola, 2006). However, the designation of Texas as an outlier and as a unique case, positions it for in-depth analysis (George and Bennett, 2005).

The location of San Antonio and the selection of Latina participants for the group interviews were essential to the research design. San Antonio is a majority-minority city. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, San Antonio has more than one million residents and approximately 61% of the population is Latina/o, with Mexican Americans comprising most of this category. Therefore, Latinas can be found in a broad array of professional, social, and voluntary statuses that position them to participate in politics and locate them as part of the eligibility pool for potential candidacy.

San Antonio’s history is similar to other majority-minority cities located in the Southern and Southwestern United States. The population of San Antonio has been divided along lines of demographic minority status and class and this trend remains largely intact (Booth and Johnson, 1983; Flores, 2003). Its past and present reflect segregationist residential practices, disparities along ethnic lines for educational funding and resources, an unequal distribution of public services, and the longtime exclusion of blacks and Latinos from any true political power (Booth and Johnson, 1983; Brischetto, Cotrell, and Stevens, 1983; Gambitta, Milne, and Davis, 1983; Rosales, 2000). During the 1970s, political structural changes, such as the transition to single-member districts for city council

elections and the implementation of term-limits, had mixed effects on the election of racial and ethnic minorities at the local level (Flores, 2003).

Latinas in San Antonio share similar experiences of sexism and racism with women of color in other cities and states (Baca Zinn et al., 1986; Pardo 1990). Latinas across the nation were excluded from the feminist movement and those in Texas were excluded from full participation by co-ethnic men fighting in the Chicano civil rights movement in Texas (Acosta and Winegarten, 2003; Rosales, 2000). This intersectionality of gender and ethnicity has had important and surprising effects. While women of color have been longtime political and community activists in San Antonio, they were largely absent from local elective offices, only recently emerging as candidates, demonstrating a strategic element to this intersectionality (Fraga et al., 2006). The 2007 San Antonio elections were historic due to the number of women running for local offices. Five women were elected to the San Antonio city council and all were women of color (four Latinas and one black woman). Also locally, five Latinas challenged sitting county judges in 2006, two for state district judgeships and three for county court-at-law positions. Three of the five Latina challengers successfully defeated incumbents, with women across ethnicity and political party, successful in judicial races. Even with these local successes, the progression of Latinas to higher office has been slow and inconsistent, reflecting patterns in other cities and states (García et al., 2008).

Participant Selection

Using an innovative approach to participant selection in their study of gender and candidate emergence, Fox and Lawless (2004; 2005) identified members of the eligibility pool by targeting professional organization memberships for participation in their study. My initial approach was to follow a similar process. I contacted Latina professional organizations in San Antonio, Texas to solicit participation for small group interviews. Unfortunately, this solicitation produced only two respondents. Reflecting the close network of an activist population in San Antonio, a more

productive method of identifying participants was to use a rolling, reputational sampling approach (Gray et al., 2007). I contacted well-recognized politically and socially active men and women in San Antonio for referrals to Latina professionals who would be willing to participate in the study. Not only was I able to solicit participation from Latina professionals, I was also provided access to a particularly active group of women whose professions, community, and political activity positioned them for political activism and made them more likely to become members of the Latina candidate pool within San Antonio.

Thirty-eight Latinas participated in eleven group interviews from late-October 2006 through mid-December 2006. Group size ranged from as small as two to one large group of nine. Two participants preferred to be interviewed separately. The interviews were confined to San Antonio, only Mexican American women participated, and the solicitation to participate was based on referrals. In addition, by employing group interviews, I hoped to prompt women to consider their own identity as women and as members of an ethnic group, and to delve deeper into the effects of identity on political participation. Group interviews were designed to remove the “Other” and provide the women who participated with a safe space for sharing their political experiences and attitudes (Madriz, 2003). The group setting allowed for greater horizontal interaction between participants, with limited questions or guidance from me, the moderator. Following transcription of the group interviews, participants were assigned aliases to protect their anonymity.

Three methods of data collection were used. First, when the women arrived to participate in the group interview, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire that captured basic demographic information and other information: levels of activism and political engagement; family responsibilities such as the presence of children at home and division of household labor; political socialization and parental political involvement; and long-term goals. Participants were asked about their participation across a wide range of activities, including whether they had voted in a local, state, or national election; wrote letters to a newspaper;

joined or paid dues to a political interest group; contacted an elected official (by phone, email, letter, etc.); contributed money to a campaign; volunteered for a political candidate; joined a group in the community to address a local issue; volunteered on a community project; attended a city council or school board meeting; or served on a board of a non-profit organization.

The second method of data-gathering utilized the Twenty Statements Test (TST), whereby participants were asked to list twenty responses to the question “Who Am I?” (Kuhn and McParland, 1954; also see Verkuyten, 1991 relative to ethnicity). Finally, the group interviews were recorded and transcribed as the third source of data. For purposes of this paper, I rely on the questionnaires for providing an overview of the participants in the study and the transcriptions for insight into general patterns.

Participants reported high levels of community and political activism. Approximately one-third of the Latinas in the study reported participating in all ten acts of political participation, with another 40% reporting participation in 8 or 9 of the acts. Another 27% reported participating in 5 to 7 acts and only 1 woman reported as few as 2 acts. The average age among participants was 48. Approximately 70% of participants reported having at least one child and, of those, 48% had children still living at home. Ideologically, the women in the study reported being either moderate (51%) or liberal (45%) and overwhelmingly identified with the Democratic Party (88%). The mix of professions represented by the Latina participants in the study is important to note, given the target of professional associations emphasized by Fox and Lawless (2004, 2005). In their research, Fox and Lawless sought to identify women who would be more likely to comprise the eligibility pool. They argue that the eligibility pool includes women in professions that are most likely to feed into elective office. In contrast to research focused on progressive ambition that seeks to understand the ambition of *existing public officials* for higher office, research targeting the eligibility pool focuses on *potential candidates*, and must overcome the difficulty of identifying this potential pool. The Latinas who participated in the study represented a range of professions, including

business, law, and education which is consistent with the Fox and Lawless approach. Experience with and interest in running for or holding public office also varied. Some of the women had held public office in the past, some were officeholders at the time of the interviews, some had just successfully run for public office, some considered running in the future, and others had no desire to ever run for elective office. Latinas targeted for participation in the study were community and political activists. This was based on the understanding that Latina officeholders may not follow a traditional path to public office via traditional professions and are likely to emerge as candidates from their experiences as activists (García et al., 2008)

Evidence of a Push/Pull

The qualitative approach to this study provides an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how Latinas think about potential candidacy. The questionnaires and interviews provide insight for how Latina identity functions as both a push and pull, at times simultaneously. Some of the findings support the gender politics literature, but other findings suggest Latinas may consider a different mix of barriers and resources for some of the most resource intensive forms of activism, specifically, running for office.

Push: Group Consciousness

Elements of a push to activism appeared throughout the interviews. This was particularly true with regard to expressions of group consciousness, with an interesting generational difference between participants. Although group consciousness is defined in a number of ways, the collectivistic elements provide for shared experiences by Latinas that empowers them for activism (see García Bedolla 2006; Miller et al., 1981; Sanchez 2006a; Sanchez 2006b). More mature women spoke of their experiences with discrimination that led to their involvement with the Chicano movement in Texas. They were also likely to mention their involvement in the Raza Unida party or their involvement with the Democratic

Party as a response to the Raza Unida party. Younger generations also spoke to issues of group consciousness as shared experiences and collectivistic notions defined by issues in education, especially funding for education. The generational differences with regard to group consciousness appeared to be distinguished by the presence of an immediate threat. Mature women who cut their teeth in politics in the 1970s were more likely to identify triggers of mobilization as experiences of discrimination. These experiences were more likely to raise ethnic consciousness than gender consciousness. Younger women identified inequalities in public policy adoption and implementation, but were less likely to state their concerns as immediate threats of discrimination.

Sara is in her 50s, a community activist and organizer who was a county chair for the Raza Unida Party in the 1970s. She spoke directly of experiencing discrimination, from which evidence of group consciousness emerges. In talking about the accusations her mother's Anglo-white employer made toward her mother stealing items from her employer, Sara comments,

“my mother was a very honest woman. That [stealing] is not something she would even think about. So, I had a great deal of anger that was built up around this whole idea of the Anglo community which had such power.”

She witnessed this discrimination as a young girl. Then in college, as Latinos were trying to make progress in elective office in San Antonio, she describes a group of young Latino men who were being mentored by Anglo-white men, “liberal Democrat types.” She recognized that “it was still the Anglo game.”

They still had, even if they were liberal, they still had a lot of control over the agenda... So, I became involved with Raza Unida Party. I've never been able to sit there and watch the inequalities that have existed. I was part of a generation that I think was the same way.”

In contrast, group consciousness is less likely to be a result of direct experiences of discrimination and threat for younger generations of Latinas. Rather, younger Latinas described early exposure to issues of social justice, but a later emergence into activism. Ana's story reflects the generational difference. Ana, who is in her late-20s, discussed her exposure to political issues and the political discussions that existed in her home-life. Similar to other young Latinas, Ana discussed her awareness of issues of social justice at an early age. In fact, much of the group consciousness and collectivity conveyed by younger Latinas followed the need to maintain social justice. Ana, in discussing what would motivate her to run for public office, began to discuss issues in education. In Ana's words,

I think there is a point where you can't tolerate it anymore... Something will eventually trigger [activism]. We can get mad or go to a private school, but at the same time it totally changes the environment for the future of our kids. That's why I think my parents were very active and my aunts and uncles who are generations older than my parents were very active, because they saw the injustices, but not just injustices that were done to their own children, but to the environment that was there. It just wasn't fair.

Ana is talking about the San Antonio Independent School District, an overwhelmingly Latino, low-income school district. Within her discussion she makes reference to "our kids" denoting a shared responsibility and collectivity. Tied to these responsibilities are issues of fairness, recognizing that her own socio-economic status allows her to opt out of the public schools, but that there is a greater social responsibility associated with her identity as a member of a collective.

Mature Latinas appear to have had direct experiences of discrimination that informed their group consciousness and directed their immediate activism. Younger Latinas were more likely to relate stories conveyed to them of their family's experiences of discrimination. These young Latinas conveyed a group consciousness and awareness of social justice, with less immediacy.

Push: Networks

Networks of friends and family played essential roles, empowering the Latinas in the study. Latina participants recognized very well what it takes to run a campaign and were far from naïve about the necessary commitments. Rather, they easily identified their networks and the campaign resources these networks could provide. Individually, very few expressed concern over being able to run a viable campaign. An overwhelming number of the women expressed little to no inhibitions about the ability to raise money. In fact, many mentioned their own experiences raising money in their jobs or through their volunteer work. The networks of friends and family and professional experiences informed Latinas on how to run viable campaigns.

One group interview involved three young Latina lawyers, Diana, Ida and Maria; two practice family law and the third practices corporate law. During that interview, I asked if any of the participants considered running for elective office. Diana responded,

"I can see every single person at this table running for office at some point." When asked if they would be comfortable fundraising, Ida responded with, "I loved fundraising" while Diana asserted, "Oh, yeah, that's not a problem."

Maria, the third participant was more reluctant, but considered how that obstacle could be overcome. She stated,

I'm probably less comfortable with asking for money, but it's how you ask... the fundraising part is an art form and I think some people have it and some people don't. For those who don't, I think that they've surrounded themselves with people who do have it, who are able to garner that money for them. At the same time, I like the idea of going out and shaking people's hands, I like the idea of going out and meeting with people, talking with them.

When asked who they would solicit for help in running a campaign, Latina participants in each group interview were able to identify their own networks. Reflecting the small, tight network of the Latina community and political activists in San Antonio, many of the participants included the participants in their interview group or participants in other interview groups as members of their network; as resources they would tap into, if they decided to run for public office. In fact, for those who discussed recruitment into activism or a solicitation to run for elective office, the recruiter was always a friend, a family member and never a political party representative.

The interview groups themselves provided a space for Latina empowerment. Consistently, when the groups included a generational mix of Latina participants, mature Latinas encouraged younger Latinas to run for public office. Sometimes, the encouragement came with specific instructions on how to run a campaign, while other times it came as very general statements of encouragement to take a risk. In the first group interview, a mature Latina repeatedly told the younger Latina participant to “get over it” each time the young Latina mentioned a barrier to why she was not ready to run for public office. The young Latina ended the interview with the statement,

“I know, I need to just get over it.”

Pull: Familial Responsibilities

In addition to the push that emerged, the study also revealed evidence of a pull that constrained becoming a candidate. When asked why they would run or not run for elective office, the most frequent response was time away from home. Participants repeatedly mentioned family responsibilities. The gender and candidate emergence literature identifies the presence of children as one familial obligation that may keep Latinas from running (Lawless and Fox, 2005). Interestingly, it was not solely the presence of young children, but the responsibilities associated with participants’ identities as daughters and nieces, with mention of an aging parent or relative and the associated cultural expectations (García et al., 2008).

Sonia and Patti, Latina community and political activists in their 30s who participated in the same group interview, mentioned their role as mothers of young children and their choice not to pursue public office due to this responsibility. In another interview, Gloria, a business professional in her mid-40s, made several mentions of her aging parents and her responsibilities. In fact, because Gloria is the only unmarried sibling and has no children, her brothers and sister rely on her to care for her parents’ needs. Since her parents do not drive, this includes running errands and transporting them to doctor’s visits. It also demands that she be attentive and proactive with regard to their medical care. Gloria carefully balanced her parents’ needs with her professional career and community activism.

Pull: Scrutiny of a Candidate

Some of the participants did not view themselves as candidates, but simply preferred their role as workers. Others were aware of the compromises they would need to make as a candidate or public official and were unwilling to make those compromises. Martha, a long-time community and political activist in San Antonio stated it most succinctly, giving two reasons why she would not run for public office:

One, I think, as a citizen, I am more powerful than any... elected official and I say that very sincerely. I do not need to sit at that podium to be looked at. All I need is a microphone to be heard and to move people, but I don’t need to be one of eleven, one of four or five, one of fifty, one of one hundred and twenty. I am more powerful as a citizen... The second reason is that I am a foul mouth sailor speaking girl and if I want to stay at Beatriz’ house until three in the morning and drink and have a great time, I don’t want anybody criticizing me... On the other hand, I’m always pushing women and Latinos to run because you have to have a person up there and you have to have a voice, and a good voice.

Finally, some mention was made of the limited opportunity structure. In particular, participants observed that the presence of long-time incumbents who held positions at the local level made it difficult to consider running for public office. For example, Letty, an educator who works for a non-profit, expressed interest in running for a local school district board. Her apprehension to running was a result of her discomfort in challenging an incumbent, with the recognition of the time and money required to wage a viable challenge.

A Mix of Push and Pull

The empirical challenge comes with the simultaneous presence of a push and a pull and identifying how Latinas overcome the barriers to decide to run for public office. One participant, who had held local office in San Antonio, was particularly adamant about her mother's opposition to her involvement in politics because of contrary cultural expectations for Latinas. This same participant, however, identified her mother's essential role in helping her raise her children, allowing her to assume a more prominent role in politics. The cultural expectations could have limited or nullified her political activism. Instead, this Latina was able to reconcile what could have been conflicting identities: being a Latina pushed to participate politically by issues of social justice on behalf of the Latino community in San Antonio, on the one hand, and being a Latina pulled by cultural expectations, as expressed through her mother, that would limit her social responsibilities to her role as a mother and pull her away from politics [see Barvosa-Carter's (2007) discussion of mestiza autonomy].

Elaboration for Future Research

The patterns identified in this pilot project inform the literature by highlighting the differences that exist for Latinas as potential candidates for public office. These findings suggest that the clear lines of personal, institutional, and structural patterns identified in candidate emergence are blurred by Latina experiences. In addition, these patterns provide important lines of inquiry for further research.

First, studies examining different mechanisms that drive Latino group consciousness need to incorporate generational differences. It may be that the components of group consciousness, namely group identification and extensions to linked fate and collective action, qualitatively differ across the generations. That is, Latinas and Latino men may identify with the group, view their fate as tied to the group's fate, and may mobilize on behalf of the group, but the specific ways by which individuals are tied to the group's fate and how they are mobilized on behalf of the group depends on different generational experiences.

Second, the identification of networks across Latina groups suggests an area of inquiry that would benefit greatly from network analysis. Unfortunately, network analysis was well beyond the parameters of this study, given the extensive research design and extensive participation rates necessary for capturing the data (McClurg, 2006; McFarland and Pals, 2005). How Latinas' networks function as resources for their mobilization and participation comprise a substantial gap in the current literature.

Endnotes

- 1 The term Latina politics applies to broader studies of Mexican American, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Central and South American women. For consistency, I use Latina throughout this research to include Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American women. That said, participants in this project overwhelmingly identified themselves as Mexican American.

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