



The Rising Participation of Latinas in U.S. Politics and Public Office-Holding

Christina E. Bejarano, Texas Woman's University

Latinos are 16.3 percent of the total U.S. population according to the 2010 Census – up by 43 percent over the previous decade. As their numbers grow, Latinos have become more interested in politics. Female Latinos (Latinas), in particular, are often catalysts of political change, the ones who take the lead in mobilizing families and communities. Latinas are gaining ever more political authority and voting power – and using them to dramatically influence American politics.

Latina Political Candidates

In the last ten years, racial and ethnic minority women in U.S. politics have made significant strides. Already by the late 1990s, women made up significant proportions of their respective minority delegations in U.S. national and state legislatures, and the growing political presence of Latinas can significantly influence the nature of Latino political representation in the United States. Despite increasing success for minority females, however, scholars have much to learn.

Even though Latinas are making gains in U.S. politics, they – like women in general – are still underrepresented overall. Questions abound concerning the joint impact of race and gender on electoral support: Will the public support a candidate who is both female and a minority? How will Latina candidates fare in elections, given their intersecting identities? Do they have double the disadvantages as women and members of an ethnic minority? The answer, as my research shows, is that Latinas actually may benefit from this combination of identities.

My findings challenge the prior scholarly assumptions that minority female political candidates face compound electoral disadvantages. My argument does not assume that minority women escape double disadvantages. Rather, I show that multiple identities can bring political advantages too – in this instance, helping Latina women candidates overcome burdens from either their gender or ethnic identities.

- Instead of being a hindrance, a candidate's gender can help her deemphasize disadvantages that come from ethnic differences from many voters. In addition, a female minority candidate may get a boost in electoral support from both fellow minorities and from women of all backgrounds.
- Due to their dual identities, Latinas are actually able to attract more diverse voter coalitions than their male counterparts. Generally, in fact, Latinas are more likely than their male Latino counterparts to win elections to represent districts with a majority of non-Latino residents.

In the book based on my research, I examine several competing hypotheses to explain why this positive boost from dual identities may benefit Latinas holding political office; and I also explore advantages for Latina

candidates for the Texas and California state legislatures. Overall, my work challenges scholars to rethink the common assumptions made about gender stereotypes and disadvantages for female political candidates – because it turns out such disadvantages vary for females of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Latinas in politics offer a window into new possibilities.

Latina Political Behavior

Beyond elections and office holding, political participation rates for U.S. racial and ethnic minority females have also increased dramatically in the last ten years, exceeding increases for their male counterparts. There are many unanswered questions. Compared to their male counterparts, Latinas not only participate more; they also express distinctive political attitudes that have helped them lead the way in boosting Latino political participation.

Voting differences between men and women in U.S. politics are now reinforced among minority women. In the 2012 Presidential Election, black female and Latina voters overwhelmingly supported President Obama, by margins of 9 to 11 points respectively, exceeding the seven-point gender gap among white voters. Minority women vote at higher rates as well as somewhat differently than their male counterparts.

My research explores the Latino gender gap using additional breakdowns by national origin, nativity, and generational status. I build on previous research by exploring political attitudes and participation for different Latino generations in the United States. I begin with a gendered analysis of migration and political incorporation; then I examine recent diverse political experiences for Latinos. Using national public opinion datasets, I am able to analyze gender differences in Latino political attitudes and behavior for the 2004, 2008, and 2012 U.S. presidential elections. The results show differences by gender and across generations.

- Latinas demonstrate more liberal political views and behaviors than their male counterparts. For example, in the 2012 election, Latinas had increased support for both President Obama and the Democratic House candidates, compared to their male counterparts. Latinas also demonstrated greater levels of support for gender equality and compassion issues.
- In addition, compared to men in their community, Latinas show higher levels of voter registration and turnout and are more likely to be civically engaged in community and civil rights groups.

Overall, the multiple political and civic strengths exhibited by Latinas in the United States give them potential advantages when they can choose to run for political office. As Latinas continue to think and act differently from their male counterparts in politics, they are likely to amass ever-more political authority and voting power, putting them in a position to dramatically influence the course of American politics for everyone in their community and beyond.

Read more in Christina Bejarano, *The Latina Advantage: Gender, Race, and Political Success* (University of Texas Press, 2013); and *The Latino Gender Gap in U.S. Politics* (Routledge, 2014).