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Strategies for Increasing Latinas in Elected Office

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In California, where 39% of the population is Latinx, having surpassed Whites as the state's single largest ethnic group in 2014, this percentage is not reflected in the amount of Latino/as holding elected office or political leadership. For example, in the California State Assembly, 46% of members are White compared to 26% who are Latinx ([The California State Legislature – Center for Youth Political Participation](#)). Although Latinas, who make up 19.4% of the state's population, have made some gains in the legislative realm, they are the most underrepresented (8.5%) in executive appointments ([UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute](#)). Nationally, Latinas, who make up 18.5% of the U.S. population, are severely underrepresented in Congress (2.8%) and among statewide elective executives (2.9%), state legislators (2.1%), and mayors in the 100 most populated cities (3%) ([Center for American Women and Politics 2022 Fact Sheet](#)).

It is critical for decision makers to come from the communities they seek to serve and to have a diversity of voices present at the table; the intersectionality of race and gender is fundamental in this regard. The input of these individuals, shaped by their lived experience, can have a huge impact on creating policy for the future of our state. However, there are a variety of hurdles faced by Latinas when it comes to running for office. In order to identify these and get a better understanding of how to overcome them, I reviewed Paule Cruz Takash's piece, "[Breaking](#)

¹ The Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends approximately 30 Cal students to the state's capital every summer for eight-week public service internships. The Jo Freeman Women in Politics Fellowship supports Cal-in-Sac Fellows whose individual research projects focus on women in politics, including research on public policies that affect women.

[Barriers To Representation: Chicana/Latina Elected Officials In California](#)” and conducted interviews with two Latinas currently involved in public service.

I first spoke with Aracely Campa-Ramirez, the Senior Deputy Director of Strategic Program Planning and External Affairs at the California Governor’s Office of Business and Economic Development. She gave some background on how she became interested in politics and public service, stating that as a first-generation daughter from a Mexican household, issues such as immigration have always been looming. This aligns with Takash’s observation that Latinas’ road to politics is most often fueled by frustration at the lived experiences faced by their families and communities. As an undergraduate student at Sacramento State, Aracely’s interactions with her professors, most of whom were involved in the political world at the Capitol, placed her on the path to secure internships with elected officials and gain hands-on experience in the formation of policy. However, at the time when she began her work at the Capitol about twenty years ago, there were only about eight Latinas serving there in elected public office. After graduation, Aracely sought to remain politically engaged by continuing to intern in political offices, but it was challenging because financial hardships forced her to take on a second job in order to make ends meet. This sacrifice paid off and she eventually became a Legislative Aide for Assembly Member Anna Caballero. She has since served under her as both a Legislative Director and Chief of Staff when Caballero was in the State Assembly and State Senate, respectively. Similarly, Aracely was the Legislative Director for Assembly Member Nora Campos, followed by a period as Deputy Director of Legislation at the California Department of General Services, and she has also worked as the Capitol Director for Senator Ben Hueso. Aracely was appointed to her current position by Governor Gavin Newsom in July 2021.

Aracely identified two major barriers to Latinas making it into elected office: a lack of information, for example, what to do and what steps to take when running for office, as well as a lack of a support system, which includes, for example, mentorship and having the assistance in place necessary to continue being caretakers at home (for children, elderly parents, etc.) while running for and serving in elected office. Especially since Latinas culturally have such strong ties to their families, Aracely explained, if they can't take care of things at home it makes it harder to commit to doing something away from home when there is not a support system to ensure their caretaker role is filled.

As for organizations that would help overcome these barriers, Aracely mentioned Hispanas Organized for Political Equality which has a yearly program (HOPE Leadership Institute) to recruit women (specifically Latinas) into politics. Aracely mentioned that her *comadre* is on the board, and it was interesting to note that when she utilized the term *comadre* this was a nod to the very uniquely-Latina community organizing strategy, identified by Takash, where women are most successful in bringing people together because of the *comadrazgo* and connections they have amongst each other that strengthens the movement. Aracely wishes she had participated in HOPE's program early on in her career, and thinks that it would have been very beneficial, but thanks to the network of Latinas she has worked for who have supported the program, she feels she has a lot of insight on its curriculum.

Aracely said that what helped her overcome these barriers, and eventually land a leadership position in the Governor's Office, was the right timing of the opportunities that came her way, and the drive to ensure that the sacrifices her parents made in raising her and offering her a better life were worth it. Furthermore, she emphasized the importance of mentors. All of the women she worked with in her first position were Latinas who then went on to more

prominent positions in the Capitol; they supported her and are still in touch with her to this day. They pioneered as legislative staff and she considers them trailblazers and role models. She does wish that she would have been more proactive in actively seeking out mentors and asking questions to existing connections such as, “Who do you recommend I speak to?” in order to have expanded her network in that way.

Mariana Corona Sabeniano, Chief of Staff for Senator Monique Limón, had a similar path to Aracely in that she also comes from a first-generation, working-class background that influenced her decision to become involved in politics. Mariana started her journey also at Sacramento State through the Sac Semester program which placed her in an office at the Capitol with former Senator Alan Lowenthal. This experience introduced her to policy making and the difference one can make through this avenue. For example, Mariana was tasked with working on a bill related to farmworkers. Seeing as her family works in the fields and she comes from an agricultural community, she had invaluable insight in this project. Mariana eventually secured a job with former California Assembly Member Juan Arambula, with whom she connected on many levels (e.g. Spanish spoken at home). Working for Assembly Member Arambula was an empowering moment in her career.

Mariana is a 2015 participant of the HOPE program, which she credits with helping her become more involved in the Sacramento community. The discussions they had were tailored to address questions such as: What is happening in our communities? How can we contribute? She gained invaluable skills through assignments that tasked her with looking up commissions on the city and county level, something she was previously unfamiliar with. Through this research project, she found new areas of interest and opportunities to serve, and she proceeded to apply for these. To her surprise she heard back in the span of a few months that she had been appointed

to the Sacramento Community Police Review Commission and the Natomas Community Planning Advisory Council. “I just applied without knowing what the process was and I ended up getting both of those appointments. And from there is where it started, from those commissions I wanted to go out to communities, different organizations and leaders and let them know what I was doing so they could give me feedback.” From here, she grew as a leader and as more and more people heard about her she was approached several times about running for office but declined stating that she is more comfortable behind the scenes and better fit to be a staffer. However, this soon changed and she ran for a seat on the Sacramento County Board of Education representing Area 2. In the election held on June 7, 2022, she won and will be serving through June 2026. At the time of our interview, she had just been sworn in and had her first official meeting (July 2022).

Barriers to running for office that Mariana identified were: mustering up the courage to run, facing imposter syndrome (questions of am I good enough? Do I belong here?), and asking for money (which is not something Latinx families typically do). It took her some time to get comfortable with what she was going to say when asking people to give her money. It also required her to change her mentality and to accept that “It is not about me but about my message, what we could accomplish THROUGH me.”

When Mariana launched her campaign running for a seat on the Natomas Unified School District Board of Trustees in September 2020, which she ultimately did not win in the November election of that same year, she had the party’s endorsement but the party was focused on bigger races and other candidates. Those who supported her were mostly her own personal network of friends, family, mentors and the like. She credits organizations such as Emerge California, based out of Oakland, whose Training Program she participated in, with providing support for women

who are interested in running for elected office. She noted, however, that the help dwindled as time passed from the completion of the program and that there is not really a strong long-term structure to support alums. Mariana also emphasized the importance of local organizations that help host events, raise money and recruit volunteers. Therefore, in terms of receiving organizational support, it is most important to see who is locally with you and sees your momentum and boosts your name. These are the people who are most likely to stay engaged. In order to overcome such barriers, Mariana and others founded Latinx Young Democrats of Sacramento County. The goal of the organization is to have more Latinx people in office and also support candidates who are allies. Mariana said that this was a group she could rely on and which actively supported her. Its members included people who are also part of the legislature, are involved locally, and work on campaigns. Finally, Sacramento Latina Leaders Network, which is a group of women who get together to learn about different professional opportunities and support each other, has also helped shape her trajectory. This also had an air of *comadrazgo*, since the organization does not get involved politically, but the members utilized word of mouth to recruit support for Mariana's campaign.

If we are to achieve representational parity for Latinas in California, we must address the lack of support, incentives, and resources available for Latinas to run for office. As Aracely and Mariana have also shown, Latinas are actively filling this void with the creation of organizations and community support networks that uplift potential candidates and meet their particular needs in the political arena.