

Q&A: Colorado's Latina legislators giving voice to their communities

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CU Boulder researcher Celeste Montoya studies Latina political involvement and how social movements have influenced it. Credit: University of Colorado at Boulder

Betty Benavidez strove to improve access to better education in her west Denver neighborhood. She worked in her local schools and founded action centers, belonged to the Hispanic Education Leadership Program and the West High School PTA, and was district captain for the Democratic party to mobilize Mexican-American voters.

When she was elected to the Colorado General Assembly in 1970, her occupation was listed as "housewife."

Benavidez was considered one of the *madres del movimiento*—mothers of the movement—in not just her Westside neighborhood, but in Chicana involvement in Colorado politics. She was the first Latina elected to the Colorado General Assembly, which happened during a turbulent time in not only Colorado politics, but in shifting [gender roles](#) and social movements focused on racial and [ethnic identity](#).

In [a chapter written](#) for the recently published book "[Distinct Identities: Minority Women in U.S. Politics](#)," Celeste Montoya, a University of Colorado Boulder associate professor of women and gender studies, demonstrates how [social movements](#) and community activism have played a vital role in shaping Latina legislative leadership in Colorado.

Even though Colorado has one of the largest and oldest Latino populations in the United States and Hispano legislators were elected to territorial legislatures even before Colorado was a state, representation was slow growing.

Benavidez was the first Latina state legislator in Colorado, but through the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, the number of Latinas in office remained low. In 2018, however, nine Latinos were elected to the legislature, joining five others already in office and creating the largest Latino caucus in Colorado history. Nine of the 14 were Latinas and eight of the women had been elected for the first time.

"I think there were a lot of similarities between 2018 and what was happening in the early '70s—multiple social justice movements, people of multiple marginalities starting to take leadership," Montoya says. "For many of these women, they're thinking about the overall well-being of their community and that they need to give their community a voice at this state level."

Montoya further explains that Latina legislative leadership is shaped by their experience and understanding of their social positioning—including race, gender, class and sexuality—which is influenced by social justice movements and translates to legislative practices.

Montoya recently answered questions about this topic, and a portion of that exchange follows:

There's not a lot of scholarship looking at Latinas in Colorado politics; how did you get into this area?

Montoya: Truthfully, my research initially was on women's human rights on a global perspective. I wasn't exposed to a lot of professors who studied Latino politics and I didn't know there was such a thing you could study. As a grad student, I got involved in the Latino caucus at one of the western conferences and I met all these scholars, a lot of them from California, who are studying Latino politics. Even though my research was in a different area, I kept getting pulled into research areas focused on gender and race in politics.

I'm a Latina from southern Colorado, and I didn't see a lot written about Latinas in Colorado politics—the literature was more focused on Latinas in Texas and California, maybe Florida. But as I got to reading about the Chicano movement in Colorado, looking beyond Denver and Pueblo at what was happening in the rest of the state, I was finding these amazing

stories of women's leadership. In a lot of the writings, women often were a footnote to men's stories, but the more I dug into it, I was finding that what was happening in Colorado fit into larger stories of what Latina leadership looks like nationally.

I think that women have such a different path to leadership because in many ways, the traditional paths had been closed to them, and that's especially true for women of color.

Since they were historically blocked from traditional paths to leadership, what are the paths that Latinas who entered Colorado politics have been taking?

Montoya: Some of patterns we see with women and with people of color in general are that a lot of the reasons they're running for office are very community-based. They have experiences where they keep hitting walls in terms of seeing what is possible and figuring, "If I was in the statehouse, I could make the change."

There's a pattern of seeing that need for advocacy and voice, but not so much in terms of having a political agenda. So many were like, "That was never the plan, it just sort of happened, I'm surprised that I'm here, but I'm just focused on doing this work now." There's not often this agenda of, "I'm going to use this as a springboard to run for the Senate." It's more, "I'm here to help my community and do the best I can while I'm here." Some of them had to be talked into running for office, often multiple times, and often didn't see themselves as qualified.

It seems that Latinas who run for state office deal with a double whammy of racism and sexism.

Montoya: Some of the Latinas I talked with, when I'd ask them about

discrimination they'd experienced, many of them went right to talking about racism first. I don't think it was because they thought the racism was worse than the sexism, but because the sexism is so normalized and pervasive. Some of them talked about addressing it, but others took more of a "pick your battle" approach, especially when the sexism came when working within the community.

You mention in your chapter that Latinas in Colorado politics have represented multiple marginalities but also worked at the intersection of multiple social movements. Betty Benavidez was in the wave of the Chicano movement and the women's right's movement, for example. What are some ways that social movements have prepared Latinas for office?

Montoya: I think one important way is helping them see that their experience is just as valid, if not more valid, than the conventional path of you go to law school or business school, although there are definitely some of them taking those routes. Social-justice movements have helped people recognize that representation is supposed to be about the people and the communities. These women of color are able to say, "You can get better policy from people who have experienced these challenges."

But that's been a hard narrative to share because of women of color's tendency to, in some ways, self-select not to run or participate in a system that they don't see themselves as being qualified to join. We also are having that message reinforced systemically, these perceptions that Latinas' experiences are not valid or good enough.

One of the things that's been interesting, too, is a lot of things that Latinas have succeeded at once they were in office may not have seemed

big at the time. Things like Laura DeHerrera introducing car-restraints-for-babies legislation that's law now, Latina legislators introducing policy for pay equity and smoking bans in public places and prison reform, policy to address the numbers of Hispanic children dying from strep throat. They were coming from their communities, they were involved in their communities, and that guided the legislation.

There's a lot of hope that the 2024 election cycle will see a lot of Latina representation among candidates for local and state office. Do you think that's true, or is there still hesitation to run?

Montoya: We've found that in Hispanic communities, there's sometimes some worry about the airing of dirty laundry. It's sort of this attitude of, "We know these are problems within our community, but if we talk about them too much, that invites more intervention that could be worse than the problem itself." There's sometimes a fear the attention could introduce new forms of oppression.

We also see with Latinas this question of how do they maintain legitimacy within the community as they're working to maintain legitimacy within political institutions. It's interesting to see Latinas who were community organizers first and the ways they try to achieve that balance. They still really want to be in service of the community and at same time be effective within political institutions. An interesting theme has been just how tired a lot of them get from all of this, the challenges within and outside institutions.

So, my feelings are really mixed (about the 2024 election cycle). I'm hearing some good things and there are some amazing initiatives going on, organizations trying to do community outreach, legislators trying to do outreach and mobilization. Some of the momentum that was part of getting Trump out of office is still there, but will it influence who ends

up making it on slate and how it mobilizes people? I think that's what's uncertain.

Latinos still have the lowest voter turnout, and we see in Colorado the districts that are seen as red are more likely to be ignored even though those votes still count in bigger elections. It's interesting to see where the money has flowed. But I think that is starting to change. People are starting to see the need to move beyond the notion that Denver Latino politics are Colorado Latino politics and really put effort into going to Latino and Hispanic communities outside the Denver metro area, learning how they understand themselves, what their needs are. This is so important. If not, we will continue to miss opportunities, to lose voice and representation.

More information: Celeste Montoya, *Sí, Ella Puede!* Social Movements, Community Activism, and Latina Legislative Leadership, *Distinct Identities* (2023). [DOI: 10.4324/9781003297031-16](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003297031-16)

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