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Latinas in Local Government, Políticas: Latina Public Officials in Texas

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In regard to the final area of inquiry, they all faced obstacles in **their** bids to become mayor. Vela, Serna, and Flores all recognized that **gender** influenced their representational roles and their approaches to **advocacy**. They were faced with stereotypes about the role of women in politics, **and** they were prepared to deal with them. Each of them was challenged in ways that men would not be. For example, Vela was questioned why she, **as** a grandmother, would be qualified to be mayor. Her male opponent **ques-**tioned her gender role and tried to make that the issue. Interestingly, **their** gender was not an issue to the women, but only to their opponents. All **of** them felt that they knew the issues as well as their male opponents, **and** more important, they believed they had better visions and plans of **action** for their cities.

In addition, the types of issues that each candidate thought were **impor-**tant were suggestive of a gendered agenda: improving the quality of **life**, strengthening families, ensuring access to health care, and providing **qual-**ity education. These issues seem to speak to their gender roles as **women** and mothers, but focusing on issues naturally associated with their **gender** helped make them effective leaders at the local level. Their priorities **were** also shaped by the demographic makeup of the region and the location **of** the city. Both Flores and Vela were able to establish cross-border **relation-**ships with Mexico, recognizing the importance of geopolitical position **in** the aftermath of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Finally, all the women struggled with their decisions to pursue **public** office. They each carefully considered whether or not they could do **the** job, and each faced a level of self-doubt. It is interesting to note that **the** women never questioned whether they could compete with the male **cand-**idates. They also never questioned their knowledge about community needs. Whatever self-doubt they may have had at the beginning was **clearly** not a factor once they were elected, and these trailblazers in Texas **politics** and Latina leadership have left an important legacy for those who **choose** to follow in their footsteps.¹¹

CHAPTER 8

LATINAS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Well, I'm not sure if you know, but I've held four elected positions.

ALICIA CHACÓN, EL PASO CITY COUNCILWOMAN

INTRODUCTION

The remarkable Alicia Chacón has held four elected positions—Ysleta Independent School District school board member in 1970, El Paso County clerk in 1974, City of El Paso council member in 1983, and El Paso County judge in 1990. Chacón is four times over a “first,” having the unique distinction of being the first Mexican American woman ever elected to those positions.

In the previous chapters, we detailed how Latinas have made great headway in various levels of government and in different arenas of Texas politics. This chapter focuses on five Latinas that have made great strides in local offices in Texas. The chapter will unfold in the following way: 1) a brief biographical overview of the five Latina firsts and their political socialization, 2) their decisions to run for public office and the barriers they confronted, 3) their leadership roles, and 4) their representational roles and advocacy in the community. Most political scientists agree that local government has a greater impact on people than any other level of government. On a daily basis, individuals are touched by the services that local government provides: garbage collection, police protection, emergency response services, street maintenance, libraries, and parks and recreation, to name a few.

In the state of Texas, cities with a population of five thousand or more are

considered home-rule cities, meaning they can select from four different types of local governments: strong mayor–council, weak mayor–council, commission (which has almost disappeared), and council-manager, which is becoming the preferred method. In Texas, city council elections are nonpartisan and take place in odd-numbered years. Council members are selected in single-member districts or at-large systems. Some cities, either voluntarily or because of voting-rights lawsuits, have changed from at-large systems to single-member districts. This has been instrumental in electing minority candidates. Houston's city council is comprised of fourteen members; nine are elected from geographic districts, and five are elected at-large. Several cities have institutionalized term limits. In Laredo, council members can serve only a four-year, staggered term with a limit of two elected four-year terms. The City of El Paso recently moved to staggered terms, and council members drew straws; some are serving two-year terms; others, four-year terms; and still others, three terms of two years each. However, there are no term limits in El Paso. In Houston, city council members can serve three terms of two years each. San Antonio city council members serve for two years and can serve no more than two full terms. Of the five cities discussed in this chapter, four have a council-manager form of government: Dallas, Laredo, San Antonio, and El Paso. El Paso residents voted in 2004 to change from a weak mayor–council form of government to a council-manager form. Houston has a strong mayor–council form of local government.

FIVE LATINA FIRSTS AND THEIR POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

The most recent data available from the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) indicates that in 2005, 96 Latinas were serving in Texas as members of city councils.¹

The five Latina firsts whose political trajectories will be discussed are: El Pasoan Alicia Chacón; Anita Nanez Martinez from Dallas;² Maria Berriozábal from San Antonio;³ Graciela (Gracie) Saenz, a native of Houston;⁴ and Consuelo (Chelo) Montalvo of Laredo.⁵ These women were selected for this study because they preceded today's Latina *políticas* in local government in distinctive ways. Chacón, as mentioned previously, was four times a first, quite an achievement for any politician. In 1969, Martinez became the first Latina elected to serve on a city council of a major U.S. city. Berriozábal was the first Latina to be elected to city government in a minority-majority city. Saenz was the first Latina to be elected to the city council in the fourth largest city in the United States. Montalvo was

the first Latina to be elected to city government in a community whose population is over 94 percent Mexican American; the fastest-growing city in the state of Texas, Laredo is also the second fastest-growing city in the United States.⁶

Alicia Rosencrans Chacón was born in El Paso and attended schools in the Ysleta Independent School District. Chacón remembers that her father had always been active in politics: in 1930, he ran for constable in the little town of Canutillo, Texas, and won, and her parents also had friends who were active in politics. In particular, Chacón fondly remembers Senator Ralph Yarborough, known as "the patron saint of the Texas liberals," who would visit their home. "He was talking to us like we weren't a bunch of kids, and he was talking to us as if we were adults. And we just felt so good! 'Cause you could feel his enthusiasm, and you could also feel that he respected you." She describes Senator Yarborough as "probably the longest time political associate that I had in my early years."

Alicia married Joe Chacón, a member of the El Paso Police Department, and together they ran a Mexican food factory, which the Chacóns would maintain over time. Their children, like their mother, attended schools in the Ysleta Independent School District. Chacón joined the Parent Teacher Association and eventually ran for a seat on the school board because she was concerned about injustices that she witnessed in terms of delivering quality education to predominately Mexican American children.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter appointed Chacón to serve as the Small Business Administration regional director; she was the first woman in the nation ever appointed to serve in that capacity. After accepting that position, she began commuting to Dallas. That same year, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance appointed Chacón, along with ninety-nine other Americans, to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). For personal reasons, Chacón returned to El Paso twenty months later and continued to work with her husband, who had retired from the police force to work in their business. In 1983, she was elected to El Paso's city council and served until 1987.

In 1969, Anita Nanez Martinez was the first woman and Latina elected to serve in local government in Texas, and thereby became the first Latina woman to sit on a major U.S. city council. She served in that position until 1973. Martinez was born in a predominately Mexican section of Dallas known as "Little Mexico." Her parents owned a small business. She attended local public and parochial schools. She always felt herself a leader in her neighborhood. Even as a young child she would organize games for other children. In 1939, when she was just fourteen, Martinez went

door-to-door soliciting signatures to have the road she lived on, Pearl Street, paved. She worked as a civil service employee and an executive secretary prior to her marriage to Alfred Martinez, a local restaurant owner. After she married, Martinez joined the Women's Auxiliary of the Dallas Restaurant Association. While raising her four children, she still found time to volunteer with community and parochial organizations, the YWCA, and the Dallas Independent School District. Martinez maintained close ties to the business community and over time developed a strong affiliation with the Republican Party.

More than a decade later, in 1981, Maria Berriozábal became the first Latina to serve on the San Antonio City Council, a position she held for ten years. Born Maria Antonietta Rodríguez, she grew up in a family of six children and attended parochial schools in San Antonio. Her parents had migrated to the United States during the Mexican Revolution of 1910. She assumed a very important role in her nuclear family by helping her parents make important decisions, including financial decisions that affected the family. "I was fourteen, and I had a mission, and my mission in life was to help my father and mother so my sisters and brothers could all go to college." Berriozábal taught catechism, and one day a Catholic sister organized a group to go teach catechism in "poor neighborhoods." The irony was not lost on her: "We were so poor, but we went to poor neighborhoods to teach catechism." She fondly remembers this experience: "I remember how struck I was by the act of getting together with a group, and doing something together. I was fascinated with doing something with other people, and organizing. And I think that became an opportunity I could find to be with other people, and that to me is politics."

Berriozábal was very active in the Catholic Church and joined a variety of organizations, always working with women's organizations and assuming positions of power. When she was twelve years old, she read about Margaret Chase Smith, the first female U.S. senator; when she learned that Smith had been a secretary at one time, she decided to become a secretary herself. Berriozábal was also deeply inspired by the appointment of Pope John the Twenty-third and the changes promoted by Vatican II. She lamented, "I read that Christians had a responsibility to be out in the world, not only as ministers, nuns, [and] priests, but also as lawyers, and teachers, and public officials, and I remember when I read that, it was an incredible insight." Berriozábal was also deeply moved and affected by the assassination of President Kennedy, a Catholic and Democrat with whom she identified. "I was working at the Salvation Army as a secretary, and my bosses were all Republicans, and they said, 'You know, Mary (they called

me Mary), your president is gonna get inaugurated, so why don't you go to the dining room and watch it on T.V.'" She did, and when she heard him say, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," it was a turning point for her. She recalls feeling "that is me, I have to do this." And so her political activism began. After she married Manuel Berriozábal, she began studying political science at the University of Texas-San Antonio, and she received her bachelor's degree in 1979. She remembers that her university experience included "learning more about politics, and learning more about democracy and our political system." The War on Poverty program allowed for the creation of community development corporations in which church groups were able to participate. Berriozábal says that she "became a poverty warrior" and learned about political involvement from the War on Poverty programs.

Gracie Saenz credits her political aspirations to her civics teacher, "who was very involved in local politics. . . . He was probably one of the first Hispanic Republicans in Houston. He got us involved in political canvassing and getting people registered to vote. My first introduction to politics was through this teacher." Saenz also remembers taking a class in Mexican American Studies at the University of Houston with José Angel Gutiérrez, a La Raza Unida activist and professor of political science. "I remember taking classes with him and thinking, you know, the ideology of the Chicano movement was a little too extreme for me, brown power, all of the different activist organizations. . . . My father always taught us that we had to respect authority and elders." In 1992, when she was working as an attorney, Saenz became the first Latina elected to the Houston City Council.

Consuelo (Chelo) Montalvo and her husband got involved in politics through their association with the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). Montalvo was encouraged to work on committees and to run for positions within the organization. The couple attended city council meetings that sparked their interest in city government and politics. The LULAC experience empowered Montalvo to challenge decision makers and elected officials. Her husband, John Peter Montalvo, served on the Laredo City Council in the 1980s, and Chelo served on the Laredo City Council from May 1988 to June 2000. She was mayor pro tempore of the city in 2000. She was the first woman on the city council to serve two terms and was ineligible to run again due to term limits. Montalvo represented District 8, an area that she describes as having "a lot of people, poor people, that we have here, especially in our district. This is the oldest district in the city of Laredo, the downtown area." She was also involved

in revising the city charter when Laredo switched from a strong mayor-council type of government to a city manager form.

THE DECISION TO RUN (ALWAYS AT SOMEONE ELSE'S BEHEST)

I never had aspirations for political office—it always sought me.

ANITA N. MARTINEZ

He [Judge Al Leal] was the one that started feeding me this. . . . We need leaders who are educated, who are wanting to do the right thing, who will serve our community effectively and not embarrass us . . . he set the seed in me.

GRACIE SAENZ

Public office is a noble endeavor, it is a beautiful thing. . . . I got very close to the people, very close, very attached to the idea that the relationship [between] a constituent and their elected official is very unique. It is unlike anything else.

MARIA A. BERRIOZÁBAL

There are some commonalities in these Latinas' decisions to run for office. Not one of them knew at the time that they would be making history—that, in fact, they would be the first Latina in that elected position. They only learned that they would be "firsts" after they were heavily involved in the electoral process. All five women reported that they decided to run because a person, a friend, or mentor asked them to do so, or it was suggested by a group of close friends or associates.

As mentioned earlier, Alicia Chacón attended school in the Ysleta Independent School District. In the 1970s, her three children—Carlos, Corinne, and Sam—also attended "the family school." But the school buildings had deteriorated drastically by the time Alicia proudly joined the PTA and became the organization's president. Several community members, parents, and teachers had complained to the principal and to the school board, but their complaints were never addressed, and school officials disregarded their telephone calls. They were totally ignored and felt disrespected. Chacón ran for a seat on the Ysleta Independent School District Board because, as she put it, "they asked me to run." Teachers, community members, and parents who were aware of the district schools' dilapidated conditions were angry at being ignored.

Even though the Ysleta school district was 80 percent Latino, not one Latino had ever served on the school board, and not a single principal in the district was of Hispanic descent. Chacón ran against a twenty-year incumbent, Jessie Gaunck. At first it appeared that she had won by a small

margin. However, as the votes were counted, the names of fifty voters on the machine were not listed on the precinct roster. A legal battle ensued with the assistance of George McAlmon and a legal defense team from the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF). Four months later, and after a special election was held, Chacón made history. When her victory was finally announced, she became the first Latina elected to serve on the board of the Ysleta Independent School District.

According to Chacón, she became known as a troublemaker: "I took it as a compliment. I always worked within the system. We needed to make a lot of changes." She started questioning hiring practices and suggested that Hispanic women be given the opportunity to work in leadership roles as principals and assistant principals. While serving on the school board, Chacón decided to run for county clerk in El Paso County.

In 1974, at the age of thirty-nine, Chacón again made history when she was elected to serve as county clerk, the first woman ever to serve as an elected official in El Paso County. She beat five other candidates in the Democratic primary and thought she was "home free" until Thea Savage, a native of Germany married to a World War II veteran, intervened in the proceedings. Savage, who had been defeated in the Democratic Party primary, announced that she would seek the post as a write-in candidate.⁷

The *El Paso Times* endorsed Alicia Chacón for county clerk. There were 140,000 registered voters in El Paso County. In the final analysis, 46,486 people cast votes in that election, and Chacón received 33,422 votes.⁸ The turnout for that election was 33 percent, and Chacón received 72 percent of the votes. Recent voter turnout in El Paso had been between 9 and 14 percent. High voter turnout when Chacón ran for office may be attributed to the fact that after the Voter Registration Act of 1965 had been passed, voter registration campaigns focused their efforts on minority communities. The other important factor was the emergence of another political party, *el Partido de la Raza Unida*.

La Raza Unida, an activist third-party organization, had been established four years earlier, in 1970, to increase social, economic, and political self-determination for Mexican Americans in Texas. The party fielded several candidates for office in that 1974 election: at the state level, Ramsey Muñiz was running for governor, and at the local level, José Tinajero for county commissioner; Magdalena Cisneros for justice of the peace in Precinct 3; Ricardo Enriquez for constable in Precinct 3; and Jesus Viramontes for constable in Precinct 5.⁹ Equally important, in the neighboring state of New Mexico, Democrat Jerry Apodaca became the state's first Spanish-surnamed governor.

Though Chacón embraced the Chicano movement and worked with

Willie Velasquez and César Chávez, she nevertheless joined the Democratic Party in 1957. She worked on the state steering committee for several candidates, including Hubert Humphrey and Jimmy Carter. From 1968 to 1974, she served on the Texas Democratic Executive Committee, the first Mexican American to serve in that position. She attended the Democratic National Conventions in 1972 and 1976, and the state convention numerous times.

In the case of Anita Martinez, it appears someone of prominence in the community admired her from a distance and asked her to run for office. Martinez received a phone call from a woman she had never met named Candy Estrada. She asked Martinez to consider running for city council at the suggestion of Bill Alexander, the attorney for the City of Dallas at the time. Alexander had told her that Anita Martinez would win if she agreed to run for city council. Estrada said she wanted someone who would represent Mexican Americans well. When Martinez mentioned the conversation to her husband, Alfred, his first reaction was, "Are you nuts, with all the things that you are doing?" However, Martinez felt that running for office would be a way to bring about needed change, and her husband gave her his blessing.¹⁰

It was an epiphany that inspired Berriozábal to run for office. She had been working as a secretary in the legal department at HemisFair '68. Her boss interacted with the strategists in San Antonio politics. Her secretarial duties included taking minutes at meetings. Since her boss was chairman of the local Democratic Party, she had the distinct advantage of recording minutes. "I remember that the things they talked about and discussed were things I would see in the newspaper the next day. And I would say, 'Wow! We were talking about this, just the three of us; now look, I read it in the paper.' So this thing called politics is really good. I wanted to learn about that because I can do things for my neighborhood, I can do things for my *comunidad*." She decided to run for office "because there was no reason not to." From the beginning of the campaign, she was confident that she was going to win: "I was just so sure. It was the right thing to do. I was so confident I was the right person." Berriozábal saw this as an opportunity to bring about change and self-determination for Chicanos in the community. She attributes her success to "the people who helped. A lot of them had never been involved in politics. They were the ladies who were active in the church, young people, children, women, and there was a kind of innocence about it." Her opponent in that race was a San Antonio police officer, Al Peeler, who was favored to win because he enjoyed the support of the city's political establishment (Franks 1987).

Gracie Saenz was not expected to win. She recalled that

every single political consultant that I went to said that there was just no way. They would not even touch me in terms of helping me because I had no money, no name recognition, no political base, running against an incumbent, Beverley Chapman [an African American woman], on a ballot with eight others and very little time to campaign. But, the persons that did help me were a judge by the name of Al Leal and his wife, Mary. Judge Leal's family had grown as an influential family in the Houston political scene. With their help, we organized a significant grass roots campaign.

At the time Saenz first ran for city council, some Hispanic political activists filed a lawsuit against the City of Houston to do away with the at-large seats. The established Hispanic power elite wanted to dismantle the bifurcated council seats (nine single-member districts and five at-large). They argued that since no Hispanic had won an at-large seat, this could be seen as unconstitutional and a violation of the voting rights of the Hispanic minority. Saenz was the only Hispanic candidate running for an at-large seat and would be in a critical political position representing the entire city of Houston. Her loss would have supported their arguments for single-member districts, but her victory proved detrimental to their case. Nevertheless, her victory allowed for further Hispanic involvement because it proved that Hispanic candidates could have crossover appeal. Given the astronomical growth of Houston's Hispanic population, the bifurcated system will probably make it easier for Hispanics to get elected to the city council.

Saenz had a difficult race against an incumbent for the at-large council seat in 1992. She made it through the first round, garnering 15.1 percent of the vote to come in second, while the incumbent was able to obtain 40 percent. The runoff was going to prove pivotal since the political establishment and the funding resources were all betting on the incumbent. A strong grassroots coalition, along with a focused and aggressive campaign targeting the Hispanic community by one of the strong mayoral candidates, Robert Lanier, helped garner the requisite strength to get the vote out. Even at that, it was not until a television broadcast of videotape showing the incumbent pulling Saenz's campaign signs that the race took a turn in her favor. Ultimately the race was won by 50.4 percent of the vote in the runoff, a miracle in the eyes of this Latina leader. Her narrow victory was secured by the support of mayoral candidate Bob Lanier and An-

glo voters, since the Hispanic voting populace was still only 7 percent of the voter turnout.

In reflecting on her candidacy, Saenz recalled:

Houston was faced with a Hispanic leadership void. I saw where the political elite were always trying to tell the community that they needed to have designated leaders that could speak for them. If there were any issues in the community that needed to be addressed such as education, health care, jobs, they would ask, "Who is your leader so we can speak with them?" And so every single important issue that came our way was trying to be funneled into the hands of maybe four or five individuals. And my question was, "Why is it that we have to have one voice, when they have so many voices in every single important institution in existence, whether its health, transportation, economics, or education? And yet, telling us that we have to have but one voice? . . . and that was when I decided that I would run. Our community at large needed to know that we had many incredible, well educated, and well prepared Hispanic professionals ready to take on public service.

The November 1997 election was quite contentious for a variety of reasons. First, Houston mayor Bob Lanier could not seek reelection because of term limits, and eight candidates vied for the position. In addition, Proposition A would continue (or, if it failed, end) the city's 1995 affirmative action program, which had helped women and minority-owned businesses win city contracts (with a 20 percent goal for inclusion). It was one of the most divisive issues on the ballot. Furthermore, there were elections for the Houston Independent School District, Houston Community College Board, fourteen proposed state constitutional amendments, and a series of bond issues. On the eve of the election, the Reverend Jesse Jackson attended a rally in support of Proposition A. He was recorded as saying: "Citizens of good will in this city must see the value of inclusion; Houston is in a pivotal position to point the way" (Mason 1997). Since Houston was the fourth largest city in the United States, the election received national media attention.

Saenz credits family, friends, former classmates, teachers, and other community members for her electoral success. Her volunteers were known as "Gracie's guerillas." She had a cadre of more than 150 volunteers who "worked twenty-four hours a day" to get her elected. Because she did not have much money, her strategy was to post purple signs all over Houston, a metropolitan area that spans over 660 square miles. As her campaign unfolded, she received donations from people as far away as Chicago.

Like the other Latina leaders profiled in this chapter, Montalvo ran for office because other people encouraged her to do so. Montalvo's husband had served on the Laredo City Council in the 1980s. During his tenure in office, Montalvo became involved in helping with his work, often taking messages from constituents for her husband. Subsequently, Montalvo felt that she could serve the citizens of the city because she had learned so much from helping her husband. While taking and relaying messages from constituents, she felt that she could really help people: "Sometimes they don't want to talk to him; they want to talk to me, because I'm the woman of the house. I understand the people, the parents, the housewife, because of the kids, because of the work. And they can talk more directly to me than to a man. And that's why people would encourage me . . . you need to run. We want you to run." One of Montalvo's major concerns was her speaking ability: "I'm not a very good speaker *porque* I don't speak that much English." Yet she ran against three other candidates, all men, and won, becoming the first Latina to serve on the Laredo City Council. Montalvo states that she was a "representative for the poor and the underprivileged people, that they don't have any money, they don't know what to do. So that's why I decided I wanted to be part of the city council."

All five women credit their family, friends, neighbors, and community volunteers for helping them succeed electorally. It is interesting to note that they all enjoyed the support of their husbands during their political careers. Berriozábal describes her husband as "very helpful and an extraordinary man." This kind of familial support bodes well for Latinas, many of whom have limited financial resources to run a campaign and rely extensively on human capital—community resources and networks—for their races.

BREAKING BARRIERS TO PUBLIC OFFICE

Because I defied every single political consultant's idea of "this is the way you run an election." I defied every single thing that they said. That they just basically told me that there was no way that I could ever win this election.

GRACIE SAENZ, INTERVIEW, JUNE 2004

When Anita Martinez and Alicia Chacón ran for office at the height of the Chicano movement, they were not only challenging the broader communities' political agendas, but also gender roles and cultural tradition, given that the women's movement was also gaining strength and momentum. In 1969, Martinez was running for a citywide, at-large district

in a highly competitive election that would become a historic race. Frank Hernandez, a local attorney, filed for candidacy for the same city council seat as an independent, thereby effectively splitting the Latino vote into two factions, a departure from the previous experience of having only one Latino candidate for an office. Two Anglo candidates also vied for this position. The Citizens Charter Association backed Anita Martinez, who ultimately received 21,984 votes. Frank Hernandez received 5,950, and the two Anglos combined received 13,851.¹¹ The Citizens Charter Association also helped to elect African Americans to the city council. Another Latino candidate, Manuel Almagner, who ran for city council in another district, was defeated.

Martinez credits her victory in part to the Citizens Charter Association, for their financial support, and the Dallas Restaurant Association Women's Auxiliary, for helping get out the vote. In 1969, on Cinco de Mayo, an important Mexican holiday, Anita Martinez was sworn into office as the first Mexican American elected to the Dallas City Council. She remembers that after she began serving, her colleagues on the council told her, "Don't work so hard. You make us look bad." Only 2,500 Mexican Americans were registered to vote in the Dallas City Council election when Anita Martinez ran for office in 1969. However, a major increase took place in the 1970s, when nearly 10,000 Mexican Americans voted.

Chacón made history a fourth time when she became the first woman and Latina elected to serve as a judge for El Paso County, and the first Mexican American to serve in that position. She defeated Luther Jones, a popular, longtime El Paso politician who had also served several terms as a member of the Texas legislature. Chacón served as county judge until 1994, when she ran unsuccessfully for reelection. She was defeated by Chuck Mattox, a classic "good ol' boy rancher," who subsequently served only one term.

Chacón describes a broader connection to the Chicano movement, working with leaders such as César Chávez, Willie Velasquez, and Antonia Hernandez. Chacón was working not only on local issues; she was also committed to the broader cause. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, she promoted a political agenda that would come to fruition through the courts—challenging at-large districts in the City of El Paso, the El Paso Community College District, and the Ysleta Independent School District. In 1983, Chacón ran for city council in El Paso and defeated the incumbent David Escobar. She served in that capacity until 1987, again making history by being the first Latina to serve on the city council.

According to Chacón, the nature of political campaigning changed over time. She reminisced about the times when candidates raised money

by having dances and selling tickets, and even having bake sales. As she points out, "Now one has to be a great fund-raiser." Chacón lamented how election campaigns have changed: they "used to be more fun than they are now. . . . You had a lot more grassroots and community activities. You didn't rely so much on television. You relied more on community organizations and a one-to-one type of relationship." She went on to say, "We don't play golf. Women are not part of the network. We rely on the informal process." Chacón described her fund-raising efforts as nontraditional and mentioned that banks, lawyers, labor unions, and Mexican American individuals donated to her campaigns.

One of the barriers Chacón encountered was other women because she was a devoted Catholic and not pro-choice. "The choice should come before one gets pregnant," she asserted. Women's organizations were lukewarm towards her candidacy because of her stance on abortion. "It took a long time for women to trust me. In the beginning I had more men supporting me than women."

Saenz and Chacón agree that politics is a nasty business. Chacón made it a point to take female friends along to meetings and other political activities. "I was very determined to protect my image as a homemaker, and as a very straight person; and I have always been very religious, a spiritual person. . . . I didn't go alone, lest people think I was loose." Chacón went on to add that the other problem was that campaigns and politics become very personal, and very nasty, and very judgmental: "You expose your family totally to public scrutiny. Nothing about your life is private anymore. . . . It's a very difficult decision [to run for public office]." Saenz echoed Chacón's sentiment: "Stupid things happen to you when you are in public office. People become jealous, and you can't understand why they do what they do. People become mean. They become ugly; and they say things that are so wrong and such lies. So you've got to be ready for the fact that people try to shoot you down. They are going to try to belittle you."

Montalvo ran for office after she learned the ropes from her husband and obtained the self-confidence that she could do the job. Nevertheless, she also mentioned the negative aspects of campaigning. In particular, her greatest barrier was the fact that she had left high school after completing her junior year, and she felt that she was not a very good speaker because of her limited English-speaking abilities. What helped her overcome these barriers was the encouragement she received from a broad-based constituency.

Berriozábal and Saenz were elected to their offices in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively. Berriozábal decided to run for office after San Antonio had single-member districts in place. One of her opponents had grown up

on the west side and had moved out to the suburbs, but returned to her home district to run for office. She was critical of that and declared, "To me that was an insult; it was about self-determination. So I was very sure that I knew the issues of my neighbors, and . . . I think that's what I remember, and how beautiful it was." In terms of fund-raising, Berriozábal stated that money was a big issue "because you're not gonna get money from the people . . . unless you prove that you're very safe, and that you're not gonna rock the boat" (Franks 1987, 66).

LATINA LEADERSHIP

All five of these Latinas have a strong sense of justice and principles that they embraced as they developed and matured as leaders. They all credit their parents for instilling in them the importance of working with and for others. Leadership to Chacón involves three main ingredients: commitment, discipline, and compassion. She also added that a good leader has to have a vision. Chacón mentioned César Chávez, Willie Velasquez, Antonia Hernandez, and Henry Cisneros as people she admired for having good leadership qualities. She described herself as starting out as "kind of like a PTA leader, [but] I turned into a Chicano leader."¹²

Chacón attributes the lack of Latina leaders to "family concerns." In many ways, she comes across as rather conservative and traditional when she speaks about children and parental roles. Yet she also conveys the message that women need to get involved in the community to create a better place for their families.

In describing her own leadership style, Martinez says, "I have a strong sense of justice and righteousness. People know I follow through and accomplish what I promise. I go to bat for people in need. They call me *cuero de baqueta* [leather skin]. I do not let what other people say bother me. When people say bad things about me, I just keep going if there is an opportunity to do good, to bring people along, and to create progress for others."¹³

According to Martinez, leadership also involves an important trait: "Perseverance does not know what the word 'no' means. Be a good judge of character. Take people's talents and strengths and charge them with something that they can accomplish. Be good at giving other people credit when something is accomplished. People will follow a leader if the leader has a clear path or goal, and everyone knows it will benefit the whole community."

For Berriozábal, family and religion were important components in her upbringing and helped hone her leadership skills. Her grandmother, a de-

vout Catholic who became president of many church organizations, served as a role model and helped Berriozábal cultivate her own leadership skills. She also credits her family for teaching her about democracy: "What I have learned—not only in school—about democracy is that it's the people. I had learned it at home. I had learned it at church. I had learned it at school. It is like everything I had ever learned I was able to go with to public life as an elected official, and put all those values to work." She admires her father as being a good leader, as well as César Chávez, Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Eleanor Roosevelt. Berriozábal says that she gets "really excited" about doing things for other people: "I like to bring leadership out of people." However, she does point out that "it is difficult to be a brown woman if you are a very assertive brown woman. It's like we are allowed to excel just so much as long as we don't threaten anybody . . . our men can't handle it . . . they don't know what to do with us" (Franks 1987, 66).

Saenz says one of her leadership qualities is having "the gift of gab"—being an effective communicator: "I think I have a passion for people. I have a passion for justice." She went on to add, "I have loved people who have been always working side by side . . . good leaders are those that inspire others to do the best that they can." She believes that U.S. senator Kay Bailey Hutchison is a good national leader. Saenz also believes that her husband, a Houston police officer, is a good leader. She benefited tremendously from his experience as a police officer because she learned about what was happening in the streets. She was also able to see the needs of police officers, though she did have to walk a fine line so as not to appear to have a conflict of interest.

In Laredo, Montalvo was busy at work, and at her behest, major road improvements on the San Francisco–Xavier Road came to fruition, helping the area's residents gain access to a major thoroughfare. Montalvo credits her association with the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) for cultivating her leadership role. She also learned the ropes, so to speak, from her husband, who was a public official. She remembers attending a city meeting and saying to herself: "I can do it. I can do it better than the other council members that were there!" She recalls, "They didn't say anything during the meeting, and I was thinking, 'Why don't you say something?' or 'Come on, do it for the people,' you know! That's the way that I would do it."¹⁴

Language and culture appear to have been important factors for all five women's leadership. Anita Martinez promoted Mexican culture through dance and cultural events. Alicia Chacón emphasized that one should

"value cultural background," and that it is important to speak or at least understand Spanish. Saenz fondly remembers how her father, who was born in Houston but raised in the Mexican state of Michoacán, "encouraged in us the understanding of his family tree. Every year we would go back to Mexico . . . and see really how difficult it was. He grew up in the rural countryside without any of the modern conveniences, no running water, no electricity, no T.V. So each year it was quite an ordeal for us as kids to go back and see this." Saenz stated that being able to speak Spanish was important to her: "I was able to easily float in and out of my communities without a problem, from the barrios. . . . And the Spanish came in very handy on the international side." Having traveled extensively to Latin America on trade missions and interacting with high-level officials, Saenz says, "My Spanish has been definitely a benefit to me." Similarly, despite Montalvo's limited English abilities, she was able to successfully negotiate the political system in Laredo, a predominantly Spanish-speaking community.

Berriozábal sprinkles words of Spanish into conversations very comfortably, and it seems that she has great linguistic maneuverability. However, it should be noted that when she decided to run for mayor of San Antonio, some of her critics claimed that she could not win because "she has too much of an accent." That, of course, is shorthand for saying that she's too obviously Hispanic to win Anglo votes (Franks 1987, 66).

Martinez, Chacón, Berriozábal, and Saenz indicated that they are very religious and spiritual, and derive great strength from their respective faiths. According to Martinez, the day before her historic election to the city council in Dallas, "I prayed to God to let me win big, or forget it, because I am not going to get in a runoff. I was listening to the radio and I heard about the lines of people waiting to get their licenses at the records building. God sent me the story, so I went to the records building to campaign. I know I picked up a lot of votes that day" (Martinez 2004). Saenz credited her faith for keeping her grounded and, in a special way, holding her accountable to herself.

REPRESENTATIONAL ROLES AND ADVOCACY

All five women were stellar advocates of community issues. In many ways, they served as links between established power brokers and their constituents. Martinez scheduled meetings throughout the city of Dallas in order to bring elected officials closer to the community. She recalls, "I held town meetings to see what citizens wanted. People were not always friendly. Pete Martinez, an angry militant man from Little Mexico, . . .

I asked him to give me ten things that needed to be done." **Remarking** proudly on her successful bid for reelection, she says, "I even had the support of the most militant group, the Brown Berets." It is interesting to note that Martinez enjoyed the backing of people in the business community and the Republican Party, yet she was able to use her position to help her community. Martinez lists her two major accomplishments as saving Pike Park from private developers and building the recreation center in west Dallas that now bears her name. Martinez personally believes that her greatest impact on public policy has been in the area of human rights, as well as in promoting education among Latino youth.

Martinez's election to the Dallas City Council in 1969 quickly yielded results: major improvements in park and recreation equipment and programs, street lighting, sidewalks, and paved streets appeared in Mexican American neighborhoods. Mexican Americans were appointed to the city boards, commissions, and committees, and Mexican American police officers became visible at community meetings and schools. Environmental laws were enforced, and industrial air polluters whose emissions affected Mexican American neighborhoods were forced to install pollution control equipment or be closed down. Martinez initiated a series of town hall meetings around Dallas, thereby motivating local residents to become involved in their community, and likewise, at her behest, various city officials went to parts of Dallas that were home to the underprivileged, minorities, and poor. In 1970 she also pushed the city council to proclaim September 16 (Mexican Independence Day) as "Mexico Day" in Dallas. She proudly read the proclamation at the Pike Park Independence Day celebration. In attendance was J. J. Rodríguez, president of the Federación de Organizaciones Mexicanas. This event was also a first for the city of Dallas.

Chacón lobbied the federal government for funding to bring water to *colonias*, one of her major accomplishments in her tenure as county judge. She is also very proud of the fact that her successful bids for office led many other Mexican Americans to run for public office. She served as a source of inspiration to others, including Dolores Briones, who ran successfully for county judge in El Paso in the 1990s. Chacón says, "My breaking some of the barriers has left the door open for many more and created opportunities."

Berriozábal's father watched every single city council meeting on television and then provided her with analysis and suggestions. He provided great insight and strategies for her political work. One council member said, "Maria is an extremely aggressive woman. She can play pretty tough when she wants to. If given a chance, my feeling is that she would roll right

over you, full speed ahead. And that is not just my perception" (Franks 1987, 66). Some critics claimed that she worked very closely with neighborhood organizations and that she would not play "deal maker." Berriozábal was also criticized for being overtly "pro-Hispanic in her politics," though she insisted that she did not know what that meant (*ibid.*).

It is clear that she enjoyed the support of people in her district and was very much in tune with their needs, because she lived in communion with the district. By all accounts, her overall tenure in the city council was positive. Although several neighborhood improvement projects were passed, Berriozábal was not comfortable talking about her achievements. Berriozábal also led the effort to create the \$10 million House Trust Fund, which helps provide housing for low-income people and the homeless, and continues to provide federal and private funds for affordable housing. She fought against giving special-interest tax abatements to low-wage businesses, and also businesses that were being erected over the recharge zone of the Edwards Aquifer, San Antonio's only source of drinking water. She served on the Border Region Citizens' Committee that developed a consensus plan for a \$2 billion higher education package that was adopted by the Texas legislature to settle a lawsuit brought against the State of Texas by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. The settlement brought money to San Antonio to help develop the downtown campus of the University of Texas–San Antonio and to support the University of Texas Health Science Center. It also created resources for the development of new universities in the border region. She served as a very active honorary chair of the San Antonio Independent School District bond issue, working successfully with community leaders in pressing for passage of the historic \$483 million bond issue for the repair of dilapidated inner city schools.

In Houston, Gracie Saenz worked to establish after-school programs for children, and to expand parks and recreational centers to meet the needs of young people. She was active in promoting affirmative action contracting for minority businesses. Saenz describes herself as a conduit: others came forth with ideas, and she just helped channel them through. Among those ideas that she pushed forward were promoting bilingualism of city employees so that parks, transportation systems, the zoo, and the airport would contribute to the atmosphere of being an international city. She played an important role in promoting Houston as a city conducive to international trade. Saenz noted that "Houston is changing. Baseball fields are being converted to soccer fields." Saenz mentioned how people in Houston celebrated Chinese New Year and how increasingly diverse the

city was becoming, including a diverse Latino population. The city is increasingly multicultural, and according to Saenz, "Houston now has one of the most diverse city councils in this country." But she says, "It wasn't about me. It never was about Gracie. It was about a community and the ability to work together and make things happen. . . . I'm glad that somebody else is now council member. Now we have to help . . . and that is good, . . . that is the way I think it should be in a democracy."

Montalvo credits her mother, who was very strict and *muy derecha* (very proper), for being a major influence in her life. And she describes her relationship with her husband as that of a true alliance and partnership: "I helped him and he helped me, and our kids, they were very positive and would help us out, too." While serving on the city council, Montalvo achieved many successes locally through the building of roads and access routes. She describes her role as that of "a representative for the poor and the underprivileged people, that they don't have any money, they don't know what to do. So that's why I decided I wanted to be part of the city." Her commitment to her constituency is genuine: "I was learning to defend the people, the underprivileged people, because that's what my barrio, my district in the city is." She defended her voting record publicly and always voted for the "people out there . . . that put me in here, in this position." Montalvo says that she did a lot of research before casting any vote, and she emphatically justified her positions: "I'm going to go out there and vote for all the projects, housing, all the things that the people need." While she served on the city council, Montalvo supported the completion of the Columbia and World Trade International bridges, which ameliorated the traffic congestion through the city of Laredo. She was the lone dissenter on a controversial vote to hire a consultant to seek out companies that would explore the possibilities of privatizing the Laredo International Airport.¹⁵ She also voted to fire city manager Florencio Peña, saying that "the city manager does not have the scope or vision to get economic prospects for the city." Both Saenz and Montalvo emphasized the importance of doing one's homework before acting on an issue.

LIFE AFTER ELECTED OFFICE

After leaving office, these five candidates continued to contribute extensively to their respective communities. Inspired by her work with young Dallas Hispanics, Martinez founded the Anita N. Martinez Ballet Folklórico. She believes that the self-esteem of young Hispanics can be increased by raising cultural awareness and promoting their rich cultural

heritage. The Ballet Folklórico is now a major institution in the Dallas region and, through her leadership and vision, is able to garner public funding, grants, and private donations. Incorporated in 1981, the Ballet Folklórico has won statewide, national, and international recognition and fame.

Martinez's political accomplishments led to an outstanding record of improvements in the depressed communities of west Dallas and Little Mexico. In 1972, the Zonta Club bestowed upon Martinez a service award for her "distinctly constructive volunteer contribution to Dallas." She had the opportunity to interact with high-level elected officials, including three U.S. presidents. In 1973, President Richard Nixon appointed her to a three-year term to evaluate the U.S. Peace Corps (Martinez 1999). Her first assignment was to travel to North Africa, the Near East, Asia, and the Pacific to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Peace Corps. She hand-delivered her Peace Corps report to President Gerald Ford at the White House in 1976. In 1991, President George H. W. Bush appointed Martinez to serve a three-year term on behalf of the Department of Transportation to oversee the expansion of opportunities for small and minority- and women-owned businesses. It was a remarkable journey for a hometown girl from Little Mexico.

Martinez served until 1973, but her political efforts had a long-lasting impact on the city of Dallas. At her behest, the city council approved the building of a recreation center in west Dallas, and the council dedicated the building in her honor in 1976. The Anita N. Martinez Recreational Center became the most utilized center in Dallas. Martinez then spearheaded a \$1.96 million Dallas bond campaign to have the center renovated and enlarged after she was out of office.

After her exit from political life, Alicia Chacón became executive director of the El Paso United Way, retiring from that position in January 2003. She has served on more than twenty-five boards and committees, and continues to work on behalf of the community of El Paso, including becoming president of the board of the Non-Profit Enterprise Center. Chacón stated that she was ready to give her husband, Joe, the traditional home life that was impossible when she was a high-profile community mover and shaker.¹⁶

In 1995, the Ysleta Independent School District inaugurated the Alicia R. Chacón International Language Magnet School, whose embraced vision declares that "All Alicia R. Chacón students will demonstrate civic responsibility while becoming lifelong learners and risk-takers in a multicultural society."¹⁷ According to Chacón, the school teaches the "curriculum of the

future . . . it teaches not only the language of other people, but the culture and traditions . . . as we move our country and the whole world moves to globalization, the schools are going to have to follow the model of having students understand that and respect those different cultures."

After her tenure on the city council, Berriozábal decided in 1991 to run for mayor, a race she did not win. When Henry B. González, the longtime Democrat who represented a large part of San Antonio in the U.S. House of Representatives, retired, Berriozábal decided to seek that seat; however, the winner in that election was Charlie González, the former representative's son. Berriozábal continues to work in her church as well as in community organizations, but she is taking a reprieve from grassroots politics. She mentors young women and continues to serve as a source of inspiration to other Latinas seeking public office.

Saenz, meanwhile, in addition to her dedication and commitment to her legal practice, finds time to volunteer in the community, at her church, and in Latino organizations. Her most recent endeavor is working on the establishment of the nation's first Hispanic-owned bank, Aquila Bancorporation, which serves the inner-city residents of Houston (Greer 2001).

After Montalvo left the city council, she unsuccessfully ran for county commissioner in 2001. The redistricting based on the 2000 census data drew lines that put her at a disadvantage. That race ended in a runoff in which she placed third. Montalvo's husband, a retired employee of the U.S. Postal Service, has continued his involvement in local politics, serving on the Laredo Independent School District Board of Trustees and becoming chairman of the Laredo Housing Authority. They have four children and six grandchildren.

Montalvo has also served on the HIV Advisory Consortium Board for the city, as well as on the Laredo Independent School District Crisis Committee. At a candidates' debate for county commissioners at a Kiwanis Club meeting, others were extolling their degrees and credentials, while Montalvo, having an eleventh-grade education, proudly stated that she is a "domestic engineer," a homemaker, who proved herself as a leader in government. She listed her accomplishments as having bridges built and getting tractor trailers off downtown streets.

CONCLUSION—"NEW LATINAS ON THE BLOCK"

Serving in local politics enables Latinas to work in other sectors of their communities that can have compounding beneficial effects in areas such as health care, culture, the nonprofit sector, the arts, and education.

Though Latinas have made great headway, there is still a long way to go. Predominately Mexican American communities such as San Antonio and El Paso have never had but a handful of Latinas elected to public office. Other major cities with a large Mexican American population have had minimal political representation by women. Austin, Texas, for example, has never had a Latina on the city council.

In sum and in closing, all five elected officials indicated a desire to see more Latinas run for office. Chacón encourages and mentors other Latinas who are considering running for office, telling them, "Don't be scared by the lack of money." Saenz warns future officeholders "to really have a strong fortitude and inner strength." Bilingualism is becoming increasingly important, and campaigning in both English and Spanish is becoming a necessity for all candidates.

It is important to note that these five Latinas were not selected or actively recruited by political parties, but instead cultivated their own networks and provided their own leadership training. This is a sad indictment of political parties, which are supposed to cultivate future leadership.

With regard to their political socialization, all five women indicated that their respective families had a major impact on their political socialization. Alicia Chacón's father ran for public office, and high-level politicians visited them in their home to discuss politics when she was a child. Maria Berriozábal credits her grandmother for showing her the importance of helping others. All respondents mentioned that their husbands were instrumental in helping them achieve political success. Chelo Montalvo was inspired to run for office by her experience helping her husband fulfill his duties as a city council member. Gracie Saenz stated that she was more responsive to dealing with crime and police department issues because her husband was a police officer and supported her throughout her political career.

One notable pattern with respect to their decisions to run for office is that not one of the candidates had a master plan to hold public office. They all reported that someone else encouraged them to pursue a political career. Martinez received a phone call out of the blue; Chacón, Berriozábal, and Montalvo received encouragement from their friends and family; and a judge presented the idea to Saenz.

Their friendships, extended families, and established networks helped them overcome barriers to running for office. Gracie's "guerillas," Chacón's friends and family, and Berriozábal's networks were all credited with helping them win elections. In spite of the hardships that they encountered, they all indicated that barriers can be overcome with persistence and perseverance as well as with the support of family and friends.

These five Latina leaders continued to assume positions of leadership even after leaving public office. It appears that they employed relational feminist principles by ensuring that they worked well with others to achieve their goals, which were all community oriented. Not one of the interviewees felt motivated by individual gains; rather, they were all interested in helping the community. They expressed the sentiment that running for office was not about fulfilling their own personal agendas, but helping their communities—including the broader Latino community.

As advocates these Latinas were able to bring significant improvements to their communities. Martinez was instrumental in improving neighborhoods in Dallas; Chacón advocated for the inclusion of Latinos in the electoral process; Saenz worked as an international ambassador for the city of Houston, raising the profile of Latinos; and Montalvo worked tirelessly for the poor in her district and raised awareness of the hardships that they endured.

All have left a legacy in their communities. Martinez has made a major impact in the cultural arena; Chacón continues to be a source of inspiration to women running for public office; Saenz is focusing on economic empowerment issues for the Latino community; and Montalvo has served on various community boards and commissions, constantly reminding Laredoans that there is a large minority population whose needs must be met.

Indeed, all five candidates are great models for others who aspire to political office at all levels, and much can be drawn from their experiences, successes, and achievements. It is the trailblazing paths of these five unique and historic Latina "firsts"—Anita Nanez Martinez from Dallas, Alicia Chacón from El Paso, Maria Berriozábal from San Antonio, Graciela (Gracie) Saenz from Houston, and Consuelo (Chelo) Montalvo from Laredo—that others will continue to follow, forging their own new horizons and furthering the Latina vision, community by community.