



STATUS OF LATINAS IN  
**NEW JERSEY POLITICS**  
2024

by Chelsea Hill

**CAWP** CENTER FOR AMERICAN  
WOMEN AND POLITICS

**R** | RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK  
Eagleton Institute of Politics

# CONTENTS

**02**

About the Latina Civic Foundation

**03**

About the Center for American Women and Politics

**04**

Introduction

**05**

Existing Research on Latinas in Politics

**06**

Latinas as Congressional Officeholders and Candidates

**09**

Latinas as Statewide Elective Executive Officeholders and Candidates

**11**

Latinas as State Legislative Officeholders

**17**

Latinas as County Officials

**20**

Looking Ahead

**22**

Reference List



# ABOUT THE LATINA CIVIC FOUNDATION

Latina Civic Foundation is a 501c3 non-partisan educational committee whose mission is to build a network of civic engagement that expands Latina women’s capacity to develop their leadership potential and impact policy change via civic engagement in their local communities. By training women with the skills needed to run for office, manage and run electoral and issue-based campaigns, and build a base of strong community leadership, we hope to lay the foundation for future changemakers. The Foundation will also support initiatives that inform the public on critical issues that matter to Latinas in New Jersey. Latina Civic Foundation’s organizational growth is happening at a time of flux and change in our country. More than ever, education and civic engagement for young women is critical in building strong leaders that can advance quality of life issues for New Jersey diverse communities. With more than a decade of experience, Latina Civic Foundation is ready to move to the next chapter of its work and reach more Latinas to help them realize their potential as local and state leaders.



 [latinacivicfoundation.org](http://latinacivicfoundation.org)

**Please note:** This report was commissioned in the summer of 2023 as a result of an agreement between CAWP and the Latina Civic Foundation. All research, data compiling, and writing was done by CAWP staff. This report was not developed or released in consultation or coordination with any political party, candidate or campaign. The findings in this report are not intended to be aligned with any political party, candidate or political campaign.



# ABOUT

## THE CENTER FOR AMERICAN WOMEN AND POLITICS

The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is nationally recognized as the leading source of scholarly research and current data about women's political participation in the United States. Its mission is to promote greater knowledge and understanding about the role of women in American politics, enhance women's influence in public life, and expand the diversity of women in politics and government. CAWP's education and outreach programs translate research findings into action, addressing women's under-representation in political leadership with effective, intersectional, and imaginative programs serving a variety of audiences. As the world has watched Americans considering female candidates for the nation's highest offices, CAWP's more than five decades of analyzing and interpreting women's participation in American politics have provided a foundation and context for the discussion.

 [cawp.rutgers.edu](http://cawp.rutgers.edu)



**CAWP**  
CENTER FOR AMERICAN  
WOMEN AND POLITICS



Michelle Harris-Blackmon



No Latina has ever represented New Jersey at the congressional or statewide elective executive level.

**Latinas make up:**



of New Jersey's population.



of the state legislature.



of county constitutional officers.



of county commissioners.



of county party chairs.

Data as of January 2024

# INTRODUCTION

**Latinas are underrepresented across levels of office throughout the United States. That underrepresentation extends to New Jersey, a state that ranks in the top ten nationally for Latinas as a percentage of its total population.**

New Jersey presents a specific case study of Latina representation in officeholding. New Jersey is home to a rich and diverse Latina population, ranking eighth in the nation for its share. This report explores the scarcity in Latina electoral representation while giving context via U.S. Census population estimates at the state, county, and district level. It also explores obstacles and challenges Latinas face as candidates in a state with a history of powerful party influence and gatekeeping exercised by party leaders who make critical decisions about candidate recruitment and ballot placement (known as the party line). Further, it provides recommendations for increasing Latina representation in New Jersey, based on the state-specific data in

this report and on existing research on Latinas in politics.

The data in this report is as of January 2024 and reflects the Center for American Women and Politics' (CAWP) current methodology for race data collection. Unlike the U.S. Census, CAWP has included Latina as a primary racial/ethnic category in requests for self-identification. This means that while some officeholders might select white as race and Hispanic for ethnicity when asked as separate questions, they are asked by CAWP to report any race or ethnicity (one or more) with which they identify (options include white and Latina). The candidate race data in this report begins in 2000/2001, when CAWP began collecting this data.



# EXISTING RESEARCH ON LATINAS IN POLITICS

There is no single cause for Latina underrepresentation in New Jersey, but existing research on Latinas/os in U.S. politics can shed light on possible hurdles. In multiple studies, Angela X. Ocampo illuminates disparities in support for Latina/o candidates from partisan and political networks, noting how lesser integration into these networks than non-Latino counterparts translates into fewer resources (financial and otherwise) that contribute to candidate emergence, selection, and success (Ocampo 2018; Ocampo and Ray 2020). Similarly, in a California-based study, Christian Dyogi Phillips (2021) found Latinas were more likely to report being discouraged from candidacy by party leaders than any other race-gender group, and they shared having their expertise, experience, and commitment doubted by political elites. Phillips (2021) also points out the challenge Latinas – like women in other racial/ethnic groups – confront in navigating male-dominated co-ethnic networks, concluding that Latinas, at least in her study of Los Angeles, must navigate “tightly constructed pipelines and fences keeping them out” of formal political spaces and offices (140).

This type of exclusion by political insiders might also be related to electability biases, whereby political influencers – historically dominated by white men – assume that women of color are less electable than other groups, particularly in majority-white electorates. But research and anecdotal evidence proves otherwise; Eric Juenke and Paru Shah (2016), for example, show that Black and Latino/a Democratic state legislative candidates fare equally well in elections as their white counterparts. Moreover, Christina Bejarano (2013) demonstrates a “Latina advantage” in U.S. politics, outlining how Latina candidates can strategically leverage their gender to diffuse feelings of racial threat among white voters and their race/ethnicity to minimize gender traditionalism among minority men. A survey experiment conducted by Jessica Lavariega Monforti and Sarah Allen Gershon (2016) confirms that Latinas might be especially advantaged when running in racially diverse areas against white men. And a recent experiment from Martina Santia and Nichole Bauer (2023) finds that Latina candidates can effectively mobilize voters, and especially minority women voters, by highlighting stereotypically feminine issues while campaigning.

In evaluations of voter stereotypes, the limited research on Latina candidate evaluation reveals mixed findings. On one hand, voters appear more likely to rate Latinas lower than other groups (male and female) on perceived experience, competency, intelligence, and strong leadership (Gershon and Monforti 2016). Ivy Cargile (2016) finds the greatest doubts of Latina issue competencies come from non-Latino voters and – with other scholars – notes hurdles to Latina advantage on stereotypically feminine traits like warmth and compassion (Cargile, Merolla, and Schroedel 2016). But Cargile’s (2016) research also reveals sites for advantage, finding that Latinas outperform their male counterparts in perceptions of issue competencies around education, assisting the poor, reproductive health, and health care, each of which are especially salient in recent elections. And Latinas, like Latinas/os more generally, might well benefit from racial/ethnic affinity among voters. Multiple studies across time and place have shown that Latina/o candidates mobilize Latina/o voters (e.g. Barreto 2010; Rocha et al. 2010; Uhlener and Scola 2016). Christina Bejarano, Nadia Brown, Sarah Allen Gershon, and Celeste Montoya demonstrate the particular benefits of “minority linked fate” among Latinas, whereby shared minority status positively influences Latina perceptions of candidates’ capacity to represent their interests once in office (Bejarano et al. 2021; Montoya et al. 2022).



# LATINAS AS CONGRESSIONAL OFFICEHOLDERS AND CANDIDATES

While the number of Latinas in Congress has steadily increased over the last several decades, New Jersey holds a troubling distinction. Not only are there no Latinas currently serving, a Latina has never represented New Jersey in its congressional delegation. New Jersey joins a list of 40 states with this same distinction. Among the 40 states that have never had a Latina in Congress, New Jersey ranks second for Latinas in their population. The only ten states to have ever had a Latina serve in Congress are California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Mexico, Nevada, New York, Oregon, Texas, and Washington.

Currently, 19 Latinas serve as voting members of Congress, with 18 (13D, 5R) serving in the House and one (1D) serving in the Senate. They make up **3.6%** of all voting members and **12.6%** of all women voting members, and represent ten states. Historically, 29 Latinas have served in Congress with 28 (20D, 8R) having served in the House and one (1D) having served in the Senate. They make up **0.2%** of all members who have served in Congress to date and **6.9%** of all women who have served in Congress to date. An overwhelming majority of those 29 (**65.5%**) have come from only four states (California, New Mexico, New York, and Texas). The overwhelming concentration of Latina representation in these four states underscores the overall national underrepresentation. Moreover, and especially outside of these states, Latina congressional representation is relatively new. While the first Latina, Ileana C. Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), was elected in 1989, over half of all Latinas who have served in Congress have been elected since 2018.

On its own, New Jersey's lack of Latina representation in Congress is alarming. When contextualized within the state's demographics, the problem becomes even more striking. Latinas comprise **10.9%** of New Jersey's population, ranking among the top ten states in the country.

New Jersey joins Arizona and Connecticut in having no Latinas in their congressional delegations despite being in the top ten states with the largest Latina populations nationally. In fact, among the 40 states with no Latinas in Congress, New Jersey has the second-highest Latina population. Only Arizona's dearth of Latinas in Congress is starker against the **16%** of Latinas in its state population.



## LATINAS IN CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATIONS VS. STATE POPULATION

as of January 2024

State	Latinas in Congress	% of Delegations	% of Latinas in State Population	State	Latinas in Congress	% of Delegations	% of Latinas in State Population
Alabama	0	0.0%	2.4%	Montana	0	0.0%	2.2%
Alaska	0	0.0%	3.6%	Nebraska	0	0.0%	5.9%
Arizona	0	0.0%	16.1%	Nevada	1	16.7%	14.8%
Arkansas	0	0.0%	4.1%	New Hampshire	0	0.0%	2.2%
California	4	7.4%	19.9%	New Jersey	0	0.0%	10.9%
Colorado	1	10.0%	11.0%	New Mexico	1	20.0%	25.1%
Connecticut	0	0.0%	9.2%	New York	3	10.7%	9.9%
Delaware	0	0.0%	5.1%	North Carolina	0	0.0%	5.1%
Florida	2	6.7%	13.6%	North Dakota	0	0.0%	2.2%
Georgia	0	0.0%	5.0%	Ohio	0	0.0%	2.2%
Hawaii	0	0.0%	5.4%	Oklahoma	0	0.0%	5.8%
Idaho	0	0.0%	6.5%	Oregon	2	25.0%	6.9%
Illinois	1	5.3%	8.9%	Pennsylvania	0	0.0%	4.2%
Indiana	0	0.0%	3.8%	Rhode Island	0	0.0%	8.7%
Iowa	0	0.0%	3.3%	South Carolina	0	0.0%	3.1%
Kansas	0	0.0%	6.3%	South Dakota	0	0.0%	2.3%
Kentucky	0	0.0%	2.0%	Tennessee	0	0.0%	3.1%
Louisiana	0	0.0%	2.7%	Texas	3	7.5%	19.8%
Maine	0	0.0%	1.0%	Utah	0	0.0%	7.4%
Maryland	0	0.0%	5.5%	Vermont	0	0.0%	1.1%
Massachusetts	0	0.0%	6.6%	Virginia	0	0.0%	5.1%
Michigan	0	0.0%	2.8%	Washington	1	8.3%	6.8%
Minnesota	0	0.0%	2.9%	West Virginia	0	0.0%	1.0%
Mississippi	0	0.0%	1.6%	Wisconsin	0	0.0%	3.7%
Missouri	0	0.0%	2.3%	Wyoming	0	0.0%	5.1%
<b>Total /National</b>	<b>Latinas in Congress</b> 19	<b>% of Congress</b> 3.6%	<b>% of Latinas in the Country</b> 9.4%				

Population source: U.S Census Bureau. United States Census Bureau: Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2022 (SC-EST2022-SR11H).

<https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-state-detail.html>



Just three Latinas have run as major-party candidates for Congress in New Jersey between 2000 and 2022 (when CAWP began collecting candidate race/ethnicity in 2000/2001).

In 2000, Theresa de Leon ran as a Republican to challenge then-U.S. Representative and current U.S. Senator Robert Menendez. She ran in the 13th congressional district representing parts of Essex, Hudson, Middlesex, and Union counties (a district mostly redrawn into the current 8th district). In the Republican primary and with the support of the county parties, de Leon won 57.5% of the vote, beating out two opponents. However, she was unable to overcome the obstacle of a heavily Democratic district in the general election, earning only 18.6% of the vote.

Four years later, in 2004, Amy Vasquez ran as a Democrat to challenge U.S. Representative Chris Smith (R) in the heavily Republican 4th congressional district, which at the time represented parts of Burlington, Mercer, Monmouth, and Ocean counties. Vasquez gained the support of the county Democratic parties and was unopposed in her primary. In the general election, Vasquez won just 32.3% of votes and was defeated by Smith.

Finally, in 2012 Republican María Piñeiro Karczewski challenged U.S. Representative Albio Sires (D) in the heavily Democratic 8th congressional district, which at the time included parts of Bergen, Essex, Hudson, and Union counties. While unopposed in the primary, Karczewski was defeated by Sires in the general election, winning just 18.9% of votes.

Each of these three Latina congressional candidates navigated similar electoral circumstances:

- They ran in districts that overwhelmingly favored the party of their general election opponent.
- They won their party's nomination with the backing of county party organizations but were granted this backing in districts that heavily favored their opponent's party.
- In each general election, they were challenging multi-term male incumbents who had the power of incumbency and the power of a strong party structure in that district.

Party support does not equal success in races that are so heavily weighted to the opposing party. It is significant that the only three Latinas to run in the last 23 years, while being backed by their party, were running in races that were virtually unwinnable. This pattern almost guarantees that Latinas will not make representational gains. Candidate recruitment, and support in winnable races, by both parties, is the first step to New Jersey having a congressional delegation that more closely represents its diverse population.



# LATINAS AS STATEWIDE ELECTIVE EXECUTIVE OFFICEHOLDERS AND CANDIDATES

As one of six states in the nation with two or fewer statewide elective executive offices, New Jersey does not present many opportunities for underrepresented communities to be elected statewide. Further, the only statewide elective executive office other than governor, lieutenant governor, is relatively new, having been established in 2010. A total of four women (one as governor and three as lieutenant governor) have served at the statewide elective executive level in New Jersey's history, and none have been Latinas.

Nationally, there are eight (6D, 2R) Latinas currently serving in statewide elective executive offices. One, Michelle Lujan Grisham (D-NM), is serving as only the second Latina to ever hold the office of governor.<sup>1</sup> The first, Susana Martinez (R-NM), was elected in 2010. These eight Latinas make up **2.6%** of the 310 current statewide elective executives and **8.1%** of the 99 women serving in these offices.

New Jersey joins 45 states that have no Latinas currently serving at this level, including the 42 states that have never had a Latina serve in statewide elective executive office. Historically, 29 (23D, 5R, 1NP) Latinas have served in statewide elective executive offices in eight states (Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Texas). Of those 29 Latina officeholders, 17 (**58.6%**) have come from New Mexico. This mirrors the trend in congressional representation nationally; Latina officeholders at both levels of office are concentrated in states with higher Latina/o populations.

<sup>1</sup> Two Latinas have served as governors of U.S. Territories. Sila Calderon (PPD) and Wanda Vazquez Garced (PNP) served as governor of Puerto Rico.



When compared to the Latina population in New Jersey, the story at the statewide level mirrors the congressional level. Latinas make up **10.9%** of New Jersey's population while having zero representation at the highest elective offices in state government.

In the last 23 years, only one Latina has run as a major-party candidate for statewide elective executive office in New Jersey. In 2013, Milly Silva ran unsuccessfully for lieutenant governor. A prominent labor leader in the state, Silva was handpicked by the Democratic nominee, former state Senator Barbara Buono, to appear as her running mate in the general election. The Buono/Silva ticket (the first, and to date only, all-woman gubernatorial ticket in New Jersey) garnered only 38.2% of the vote, losing to incumbent Governor Chris Christie.

Both lack of opportunity and insufficient commitment to recruitment present hurdles to Latina representation at the congressional and statewide levels in New Jersey.

But these hurdles are even more stark at the statewide level given that there are only two elected offices available. Even more, because gubernatorial candidates pick their running mates in New Jersey – in contrast to states where voters decide – power is even more centralized within the gubernatorial candidate, and the party that nominated them, instead of with the voters.

While no Latinas have held statewide elective executive office, Latinas have earned high-level positions as executive branch appointees. The first Latina to serve in a governor's Cabinet was Zulima Farber, who was appointed as public advocate by Governor James Florio in 1992. In January 2024, two Latinas served in Governor Philip Murphy's 25-member Cabinet: Jacquelyn Suárez, acting commissioner for the Department of Community Affairs and Diane Gutierrez-Scaccetti, commissioner of the Department of Transportation. On October 2nd 2023, Gutierrez-Scaccetti was appointed Governor Murphy's chief of staff. She held both roles simultaneously until January 26th when it was announced that she would be replaced at the Department of Transportation by a man.

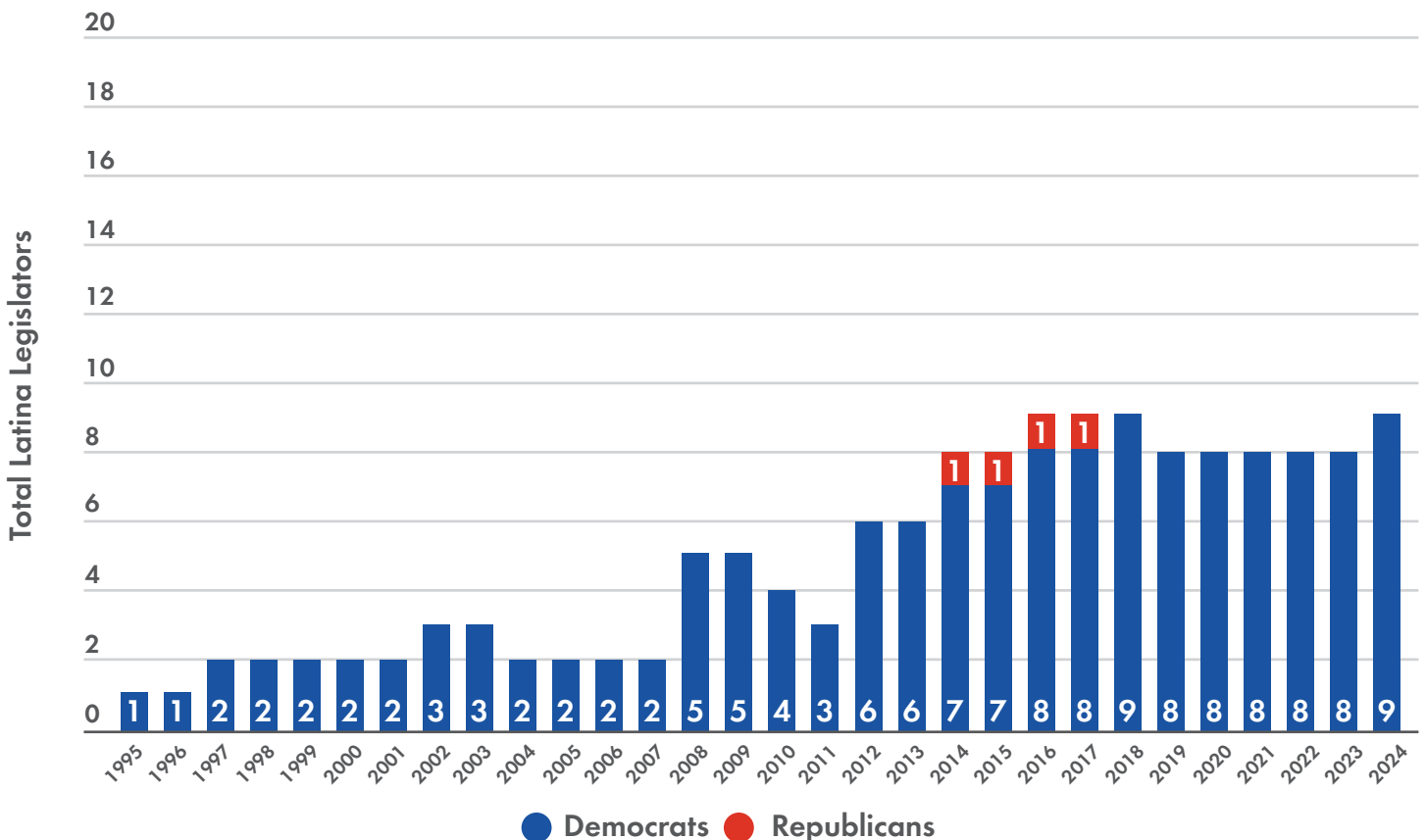


# LATINAS AS STATE LEGISLATIVE OFFICEHOLDERS

While Latina representation at the congressional and statewide elective executive level in New Jersey has been non-existent, more inroads have been made at the state legislative level.

New Jersey welcomed its first Latina to the state legislature when Nilsa Cruz-Perez (D) was appointed to an Assembly seat in 1995. She was subsequently elected to the Assembly and is currently serving in the Senate. Since then, a total of 16 (15D, 1R) Latinas have served in the legislature. Notably, **56.3%** (9) of the Latinas who have ever served in the New Jersey legislature are currently serving as of January 2024. This reflects how recent the advancement of Latinas in the state legislature is; the first women, all of whom were white, entered the New Jersey legislature in 1921, and the first Black woman was elected to the legislature in 1957. However, it took until 2021 for the first Asian American/Pacific Islander women to be elected to the legislature.

## LATINAS IN THE NEW JERSEY LEGISLATURE





Currently, nine Latinas serve in the New Jersey Legislature, including three in the Senate and six in the Assembly. All are Democrats. Just one Republican Latina, Maria Rodriguez-Gregg, has served in the legislature, serving from 2014 to 2018. Latinas are currently **7.5%** of all legislators, **22%** of the 41 women legislators, **11.7%** of Democratic state legislators, and **75%** of all Latina/o legislators.<sup>2</sup> Latina representation among women legislators nearly matches their population share among the women of New Jersey (**21.5%**). They rank third in terms of representation among women legislators of different racial groups with white women (**48.8%**) and Black women (**26.8%**) holding the most seats, and Asian American/Pacific Islander women holding the smallest share of seats (**4.9%**).

## LATINAS SERVING IN THE NEW JERSEY LEGISLATURE IN 2024

as of January 2024

Name	Chamber	Party	District	% Latina/o Population in District
Nilsa Cruz-Perez	Senate	Democrat	5	27.1%
M. Teresa Ruiz	Senate	Democrat	29	48.8%
Nellie Pou	Senate	Democrat	35	53.9%
Yvonne Lopez	Assembly	Democrat	19	36.5%
Annette Quijano	Assembly	Democrat	20	48.3%
Alixon Collazos-Gill	Assembly	Democrat	27	21.2%
Rosy Bagolie	Assembly	Democrat	27	21.2%
Jessica Ramirez	Assembly	Democrat	32	22.6%
Carmen Morales	Assembly	Democrat	34	25.4%

Population Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Congressional and State Legislative Districts. Source: 2022. 2022 State Legislative Districts American Community Survey 5-Year Data Profiles.

<https://www.census.gov/acs/www/data/congressional-and-state-legislative-districts/>

<sup>2</sup> Data on race/ethnicity for latino legislators from [www.njspotlightnews.org/2024/01/how-diverse-is-njs-221-legislature/](http://www.njspotlightnews.org/2024/01/how-diverse-is-njs-221-legislature/)



Nationally, New Jersey ranks in the top five for Latinas as a proportion of all women legislators, bested only by states with larger (and some significantly so) Latina populations. The state also ranks in the top ten states for Latina representation in the legislature. This is reflective of its Latina state population ranking also landing in the top ten. Unfortunately, Latina representation (**7.5%**) in the legislature still falls short of the state population proportion (**10.9%**).

## LATINA REPRESENTATION IN 2024 BY STATE

as of January 2024

State	Congress	Statewide Elective Executive	State Legislature	Population	State	Congress	Statewide Elective Executive	State Legislature	Population
AK	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%	3.6%	MT	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%
AL	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	2.4%	NC	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.1%
AR	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.1%	ND	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%
AZ	0.0%	18.2%	17.8%	16.1%	NE	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.9%
CA	7.4%	0.0%	20.0%	19.9%	NH	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	2.2%
CO	10.0%	0.0%	5.0%	11.0%	NJ	0.0%	0.0%	7.5%	10.9%
CT	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	9.2%	NM	20.0%	42.9%	17.9%	25.1%
DE	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	5.1%	NV	16.7%	0.0%	7.9%	14.8%
FL	6.7%	20.0%	5.6%	13.6%	NY	10.7%	0.0%	5.6%	9.9%
GA	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.0%	OH	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%
HI	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	5.4%	OK	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	5.8%
IA	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	6.5%	OR	25.0%	0.0%	2.2%	6.9%
ID	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	6.5%	PA	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	4.2%
IL	5.3%	16.7%	6.2%	8.9%	RI	0.0%	20.0%	4.4%	8.7%
IN	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	3.3%	SC	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.1%
KS	0.0%	0.0%	2.4%	6.3%	SD	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.3%
KY	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.0%	TN	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.1%
LA	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.7%	TX	7.5%	0.0%	11.0%	19.8%
MA	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%	33.1%	UT	0.0%	0.0%	1.9%	7.4%
MD	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	5.5%	VA	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	5.1%
ME	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	VT	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	1.1%
MI	0.0%	0.0%	2.0%	2.8%	WA	8.3%	0.0%	4.8%	6.8%
MN	0.0%	0.0%	1.5%	2.9%	WI	0.0%	0.0%	3.8%	3.7%
MO	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	2.3%	WV	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	1.0%
MS	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	WY	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%	5.1%

Population Source: U.S. Census Bureau. United States Census Bureau: Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: April 1, 2020, to July 1, 2022 (SC-EST2022-SR11H).

<https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-state-detail.html>



## Paths to Office

The 16 Latina officeholders who have served in the New Jersey legislature come from diverse backgrounds, not just personally but also professionally, showcasing the many ways in which their experience can bring unique perspectives. The vast majority did not hold previous elective office, but many served in local governments in unelected positions. Others have backgrounds in the nonprofit sector, education, military, and as attorneys and prosecutors. Three of the 16 Latina state legislators were first appointed to their positions in the legislature to fill a vacancy, but all went on to win elections in their own right. As in the broader Latina/o community, there is diversity among the Latinas serving. They include Colombians, Cubans, Dominicans, Ecuadorians, and almost half are Puerto Rican. These diverse backgrounds are part of the story of each Latina legislator and illustrate that each Latina has a unique perspective and background that can benefit the communities that they represent.



## Latinas make up:

7.1%

of leadership positions  
in the New Jersey  
Legislature

11.1%

of Senate leadership  
positions

5.3%

of Assembly leadership  
positions

12.1%

of Democratic leadership  
positions (no Republican  
Latinas serve in  
the legislature)

Data as of January 2024

## Latinas in Legislative Leadership

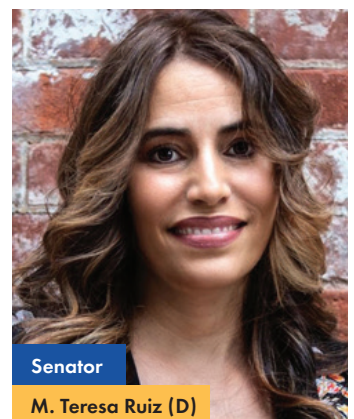
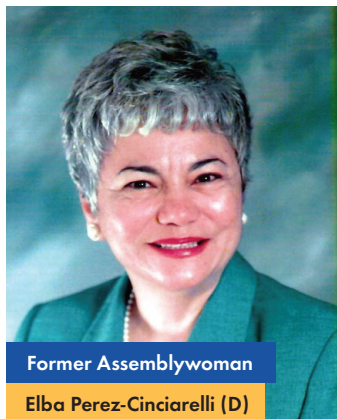
While there is inherent power and political influence that comes from holding a state legislative office, the power to ultimately set the legislative agenda rests with those in leadership positions. Officeholders in leadership positions can have influence on setting policy agendas, guiding deliberation, and making decisions on political strategies and candidate recruitment. Having Latina voices at the table when these decisions are being made is a sign of political power.

The highest-ranking Latina in the legislature and the first to hold one of the eight top leadership positions in either chamber is M. Teresa Ruiz, who serves as the Senate majority leader. In addition, Nellie Pou serves as the Senate majority caucus chair and chairs the Legislative Latino Caucus. In the Assembly, Annette Quijano serves as the majority conference leader and Yvonne Lopez serves as deputy speaker.

Overall, Latinas in leadership nearly match their overall percentage of the legislature (**7.1%** vs. **7.5%**). Furthermore, of the nine Latinas currently serving, almost half of them are in leadership (**44.4%**). This is especially noteworthy considering four of them were first elected in November 2023. This illustrates that while Latinas are underrepresented in the legislature, those that are in office have made strides to positions of power.



# Current and Former Latina Senators and Assemblymembers





# LATINAS AS COUNTY OFFICIALS

## COUNTY GOVERNMENT

There are three types of elected positions in New Jersey’s 21 counties: county executives, county constitutional officers, and county boards of commissioners. No Latina – or any woman, for that matter – serves among the five county executives in New Jersey.<sup>3</sup> Two Latinas serve as county constitutional officers, both as county surrogates: Claribel Cortes (D-Middlesex) and Zoila Cassanova (D-Passaic). They are **3.1%** of all and **9.1%** of women county constitutional officers. County surrogates handle matters under the jurisdiction of the Surrogate Court such as adoptions, guardianships, and estates.

Each county also has an elected board of commissioners.<sup>4</sup> These boards are the legislative body of the counties and are responsible for county level planning and funding. The first Latina to serve on a county board was Nidia Davila-Colon of Hudson County, who joined the board in 1983. Nine Latinas (all Democrats) from six counties currently serve as commissioners. They are **6.7%** of all and **18.8%** of women commissioners. They make up **11.8%** of all Democratic commissioners.

### LATINAS SERVING AS COUNTY COMMISSIONERS IN 2024

as of January 2024

Name	Party	County
Germaine M. Ortiz	Democrat	Bergen
Virginia Betteridge	Democrat	Camden
Caridad Rodriguez	Democrat	Hudson
Fanny Cedeño	Democrat	Hudson
Yraida Aponte-Lipski	Democrat	Hudson
Clary Azcona-Barber	Democrat	Middlesex
Sara Sooy	Democrat	Somerset
Lourdes M. Leon	Democrat	Union
Michèle S. Delisfort	Democrat	Union

Latina representation at each level of elected county government remains well below their representation in the state population. When broken down by county, Latina county officeholder representation matches or exceeds Latina representation in the county population in only five counties: Middlesex, Somerset, Camden, Hudson, and Union. Conversely, Latina elected representation falls below Latina county population in 16 counties, with 14 counties having no Latina representation in elected county government. Of those with no Latina representation, Cumberland has the highest proportion of Latinas in its population at **16.3%**.

<sup>3</sup> This position only exists in Atlantic, Bergen, Essex, Hudson, and Mercer counties.

<sup>4</sup> County commissioners were known as county freeholders up until 2020.



## LATINAS IN COUNTY GOVERNMENT VS. COUNTY POPULATION

as of January 2024

County	# of Latinas in County Government	# of Total County Government Positions	% of Total County Government	% of Latinas in County Population
Atlantic	0	13	0.0%	10.0%
Bergen	1	11	9.1%	11.5%
Burlington	0	8	0.0%	4.6%
Camden	1	10	10.0%	9.6%
Cape May	0	8	0.0%	4.1%
Cumberland	0	10	0.0%	16.3%
Essex	0	14	0.0%	12.2%
Gloucester	0	10	0.0%	3.9%
Hudson	3	14	21.4%	21.4%
Hunterdon	0	8	0.0%	4.0%
Mercer	0	11	0.0%	9.8%
Middlesex	2	10	20.0%	11.6%
Monmouth	0	8	0.0%	5.8%
Morris	0	10	0.0%	7.3%
Ocean	0	8	0.0%	5.0%
Passaic	1	10	10.0%	22.2%
Salem	0	8	0.0%	5.2%
Somerset	1	8	12.5%	8.0%
Sussex	0	8	0.0%	5.7%
Union	2	12	16.7%	16.7%
Warren	0	6	0.0%	6.0%

Population source: U.S. Census Bureau. Annual County Resident Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2022 (CC-EST2022-ALLDATA).

<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-counties-detail.html>



## COUNTY PARTY CHAIRS

County party chairs are particularly powerful in New Jersey as they are central to candidate recruitment and support. County party chairs are elected by party committee members, not in popular elections. There are 42 county chairs representing New Jersey's 21 counties. They play a significant role in shaping the choices available to voters in New Jersey elections. Most notably, they have the most control over a system in New Jersey known as the party line. This affects the placement of candidates on the ballot, and those who secure the party line through the county party committees and their chair reap the electoral benefits.<sup>5</sup> A study on the party line by Dr. Julia Sass Rubin of Rutgers University points to an example where two candidates ran against each other in the primary and were given the line in one county and not the other. The difference in results for the candidates "when they were on the county line versus when their opponent was on the county line was 35 percentage points" (Rubin 2023, 57). The county party committee and, ultimately, the chair are able to award candidates with not just a favorable position on the ballot, but also the full resources and funding that come with the endorsement of a major party. This uniquely New Jersey phenomenon creates 42 positions with a great deal of power and political influence.

In February 2024, a federal lawsuit was filed challenging the ballot design. In March, a U.S. District Judge granted a preliminary injunction to do away with the party line for the 2024 primary election, but only in the Democratic primary. This is a significant development in the future of the party line as we know it but its ultimate fate will be decided with a final ruling in the lawsuit and pending appeals.

Currently, Latinas are two of 42 county party chairs, and both are Democrats. They are **4.8%** of all and **9.5%** of Democratic county party chairs in New Jersey. No Latinas serve as Republican county party chairs. Latinas make up **28.6%** of the seven women holding these powerful positions. With the New Jersey party county line in place, it is even more important for Latinas to be represented at this level.

The two current Latina county party chairs are Arlene Quiñones Perez (Hunterdon County), who was first elected in 2014, and Amalia Duarte (Morris County), who was first elected in 2022. Both are Democrats serving in heavily Republican counties, presenting them with distinct challenges in comparison to their Democratic peers. Moreover, the scarcity of Latina Democratic chairs in Democratic counties means that they have less influence on candidate recruitment and selection in counties where Democrats have the greatest chance of electoral success.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the county party line system:  
[www.politico.com/states/f/?id=00000173-e86a-d94e-a1f7-ecfba18e0000](http://www.politico.com/states/f/?id=00000173-e86a-d94e-a1f7-ecfba18e0000)







## LOOKING AHEAD

Upcoming elections will determine whether these levels of representation improve or remain stagnant. Though still early in the cycle, as of January 2024 there are at least two Latinas running to be the first woman to represent New Jersey in Congress, one for the U.S. Senate and one for the U.S. House. It was not until 2014 that the first Black woman was elected to Congress from New Jersey and 2017 that the first Black woman was elected statewide. Additionally, no Asian, Native, or Middle Eastern/North African women have served at these levels of office in the Garden State.

A recent report on Latina congressional candidates by Anna Sampaio (2023) uses interviews to outline both obstacles to and opportunities for increasing Latina representation. Latina candidates shared experiences of discrimination and political hostility, as well as structural marginalization consistent with previous research showing unequal access for Latinas/os to elite political and partisan networks. But Sampaio also describes Latinas' effective response to these obstacles, identifying "comadrisimo" – or the creation of communities of care – among Latinas as both a tool for coping as well as a pragmatic intervention to promote and retain Latina political representation. This reliance

on informal networks of Latinas is consistent with findings from Kelly Dittmar's latest report for the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), *Rethinking Women's Political Power* (2023), which reveals similar tactics employed by Latinas, Asian American, and Black women candidates and officeholders whose political support infrastructures remain less robust than their white women peers.

The comadrisimo fostered among Latina political leaders signals just one of many opportunities for increasing Latina political power and representation. Another opportunity comes in expanding the sites for recruitment and support at the candidate emergence stage. Previous research has shown that the roots of Latina political representation are in Latina community organizing, involvement, and activism (e.g. García et al. 2008). This mode of political participation does not always translate into candidacy, as Latina leaders may perceive extra-institutional action as more influential than officeholding (Phillips 2021). But recent elections have proven the value and capacity for translating advocacy into candidacy for women political leaders, Latinas included. Tapping into these robust networks of political women can help to build the pool of Latinas well-situated to run and serve.



While political power can be exercised in many ways and through many roles – not just through holding elective office – research consistently proves that representation matters among elected officials. And this work extends to Latinas specifically. Research on Latina state legislators finds that their policy preferences are distinct from their peers (Rocha and Wrinkle 2011), and a recent book by Beth Reingold, Kerry Haynie, and Kirsten Widner (2020) includes Latinas among the women of color state legislators that they find are most likely to promote policies that serve groups that are multiply disadvantaged, as well as sponsoring legislation that benefits not just the interests of women but also those of racial and ethnic minorities. More qualitative and anecdotal evidence is widespread, showing the value of distinct lived experiences, perspectives, and insights in shaping the representational impact of Latina officeholders (see, for example, Dittmar, Sanbonmatsu, Carroll 2018).

Latina underrepresentation in New Jersey politics is glaring. The research tells us that while Latinas face obstacles and barriers in achieving electoral success, the benefit for New Jersey of remedying this underrepresentation is clear. In New Jersey specifically, this will require further research and interventions at an organizational level. Looking forward, there are several paths for intervention and improvement:

- It is vital to support existing programs that recruit and support Latina candidates. These programs, such as the Elections & Leadership Latina Academy (ELLA) Wins at CAWP's Ready to Run® campaign training, Latinas Building the Bench sponsored by Latina Civic Action, and Latina Civic PAC, have been doing the work in New Jersey to not only provide knowledge for Latinas looking to run for office but also create networks of support. Both are critical to the success of Latina candidates.
- Further, it is important to go beyond what is currently available by expanding the pool of organizations and support for Latina candidates. This means making sure that Latina candidates feel support broadly and not just within their own community. It also means providing diverse forms of support, whether it be at the financial level or the organizational level, that take into account the varied experiences of Latinas in New Jersey.
- There must also be interventions to address state-specific obstacles to Latina candidates, namely political party gatekeeping. The parties must make concerted efforts to recruit Latina candidates, and work should also be done to demystify the process and dismantle barriers of entry. The parties need to make intentional efforts to recruit and run Latinas in winnable races. The current system not only centralizes decision making to party leaders, it also discourages newcomer participation. While this discouragement affects all political newcomers, the data in this report proves that Latinas distinctly suffer the effects.

While there is more work to be done, the Latinas that currently serve and have served historically in New Jersey have made inroads into positions of power and influence despite the barriers. This is due in part to the work that Latinas all over the state – officeholders and activists – have done to move the needle further towards equal representation.

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