Factors Contributing to the Success of Rising Latino Leadership in Central California, a Qualitative Inquiry

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Factors Contributing to the Success of Rising Latino Leadership in Central California, a

Qualitative Inquiry

A Dissertation Presented

to the Faculty of the

Department of Public Policy and Administration

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Public Administration

By

Yammilette G. Rodriguez

November 2022

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Dedication

I am the proud daughter of Mexican immigrants. I rise because of sacrifices of those that came before me. To my Papi who fought the good fight and finished the race of this life, he is watching me from heaven and was my rock. Papi, your example of coming to this nation as an orphan instilled a work ethic in me of a hardworking immigrant. I can still hear your encouraging words “you can do this girl.” To my beautiful mother for your constant prayers and inspiration. I am so proud that you went to the university after many years of working and raising your children. Because of your intercession, my steps have been guided by God. Gracias, Mami.

To my daughters who are rising Latinas, Lizette and Juliette. Being your Mom is my greatest achievement. I can’t wait to see what incredible things you will do in this world with your gifts and talents. You give me the energy I need and inspire me every day. I love you, my little ones.

To my husband and life partner, Jaime Saul Rodriguez. You truly have been a constant support throughout all of my adventures and make me a better person. You are my lifeline, thank you for pushing me when I needed it and continuously encouraging me. Jim, you are my everlasting and forever love.

To all of the Central Valley Rising Latinos that I have mentored through-out the years, to you I say, Adelante! To the many friends who I consider family, you gave me the porras to keep going, I say mil gracias. There is so much work to do and we need your passion and desire to be a change maker. Finally, I dedicate this to all the little brown girls that didn’t have support systems or felt that they were not enough. You are enough and remember to bring others along with you. We must rise together!
Acknowledgement

Thank you to my faculty chair, Dr. Mia Ocean. You were always available and your guidance and feedback through-out this process has been invaluable. Your insight of your work in the Central Valley was so meaningful. You constantly encouraged me and gave me the support to keep going. Thank you for reminding me to give myself grace through this process. I have much appreciation for my committee members, Dr. Kristin Crossney and Dr. Allison Turner, thank you for the knowledge you imparted to me in public policy. You have made my experience in the DPA program one that is impactful and life-changing. I would like to thank my DPA classmates, especially Elsie that even though we are in different time zones was always available to talk and learn together on this journey. To my non-profit organization that I have worked for the past 13 years, Youth Leadership Institute. Let us continue to press forward to support young people to create policy change for generations to come. To my CEO, Patty Barahona, who was a constant encourager and motivator to follow my passions. To the Irvine Leadership Foundation for investing in leaders across the state of California and bestowing upon my the Irvine Leader Award in 2019. Finally, so much gratitude goes to the Latino leaders in the Central Valley who have dedicated their lives for the betterment of the communities in Central California. I thank you for sharing your stories with me and giving your thoughts on your public service experiences in the Central Valley.
Abstract

This research study is a qualitative inquiry into Latino public servants in Central California. Drawing from the knowledge of 60 Central Valley Latinos, the study provides details of their inside accounts of their public service paths and political journeys. The public servants shared personal stories of successes and barriers from their experiences and lessons learned through in-depth interviews and focus groups. The findings translated into recommendations for potential Latino leaders to seek public life as volunteers or to run for political office. The themes of political ambition and social networks and capital arose with subthemes of policies, gender politics, leadership development, and skill-building opportunities. Recommendations include the intentional preparation of the younger Latino generation, sustainable funding for leadership programs, Central Valley focused leadership development programs and political training curriculums with mental health and wellness components and extensive mentorship programs.

Keywords: public servants, Latino, community, leadership, Central Valley, Central California, political ambition
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Latinos have proven to be America’s growth engine. As reflected in the 2020 United States Census, Latinos have shown the greatest population growth over the past 10 years (California State Assembly Democratic Caucus, 2020). According to the United States Census Bureau (California State Assembly Democratic Caucus, 2020) data, it has projected a steady increase of 56% of the total growth of Latino inhabitants from 2020 to 2030. Yet, representation of Latinos in leadership positions such as the board of directors, commissioners, or an elected official seat is limited across the United States. According to the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), as of 2018, there were slightly over 6,700 Latino elected officials in local and national regions (National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials [NALEO], 2018). That number is minuscule and accounts for about 1% of the elected officials in the United States. Schaeffer (2021) from the Pew Research Center shared more recent data that reflected that the federal representation of White people makes up 77% of voting members in the new Congress, which is significantly greater than their 60% portion of the U.S. population. Schaeffer (2021) reported that the Latino population in the United States is twice as high at 19% and is only 9% in the House of Representatives. Ocampo and Ray (2019) studied women’s representation and discovered that the number of Latina lawmakers was more impacted than males, with only 37% of Latino elected office-holders across local, state, and federal levels being women. Although the numbers of Latino political representation do not match the population, the California State Assembly Democratic Caucus (2020) has acknowledged that Latinos voted in vast numbers in the 2021 presidential election and were the
largest ethnic minority voting group to be eligible to vote, which was 16.5 million. This national data is reflected in the state of California’s statistics on Latino public servant representation.

Although studies show traditional barriers to becoming a public servant, whether elected or appointed, it does not investigate further specific regions in the United States. Studies are either outdated or are generalized to reflect all Latinos’ experiences. The existing demonstrates limited information about Latinos in Central California. This dissertation project was needed to exhibit the unique backgrounds and comprehension of Latinos and uncover factors that impact these leaders in the Pacific West, specifically in the middle region of California. This study attempted to bridge the information gaps to bring out specific data and nuances when incorporating the variable of geographic region and Latino identity.

Qualitative data has been collected and analyzed from individuals that serve on boards and commissions, past elected officials, current political representatives, and potential candidates. The researcher concentrated only on Central California, which tends to be quite different from the rest of the state as a more conservative and rural area. The proposition is based on three components: if Latino leaders have entry into social networks, are intentionally developed, and are given the opportunity to build their skill set to engage in the community to create policy change, they would be more likely to politically or civically lead. Therefore, the investigation has determined how Latinos in Central California are accessing opportunities to lead and compared these underlying explanations to Latinos living in urban cities in Southern and Northern California. In addition, if equitable public policies were in place, it would allow additional opportunities for Latinos to engage, step up, and lead. This proposition coincides with the concept of social networks in how it creates intentional engagement and connection for their
members. The idea of social capital is explored as to its contribution to supporting Latinos to build political ambition or to serve the community as volunteer board members.

In this study, the term “Latino” is used as a descriptive for the participants. In Central California, a majority has ancestral heritage or descendants from North or South America who identify with the phrase “Latino.” If a participant interviewed self-identifies as something other than Latino, the researcher changed the language.

**Research Questions**

The main research question is: What are the key determinants that allow Latino leaders to aspire to be civil servants and be appointed to boards and commissions or explore political opportunities and then launch their campaigns and become elected officials? In addition, the researcher explored the following subset research questions:

- How or if leadership training opportunities increase the propensity of Latinos to pursue political office or to be appointed on boards and commissions?
- How do social networks and capital contribute to obstacles or successes that Latino leaders face when considering serving the community or seeking political office?

This researcher proposed two primary components that impact Central California Latino leaders’ ability to gain entry into social networks and capital, making them more likely to lead politically or civically. These components include:

- Intentional cultivation of relationships with current political or civic leaders in power through social networks and capital.
- Development of their leadership skill set to engage in the community and create policy.
What is Political and Civic Participation?

When processing how Latinos engage in leadership roles in the community, people must think about political and civic participation. Zani and Barrett (2012) shared that political participation is a purposeful activity that can lead to introducing, influencing, creating, or implementing public policy at the local, state, or national level and can take several different forms, which involve electoral processes, including running a campaign for elected office. Zani and Barrett (2012) compared civic participation as a form of connecting to the community through voluntary activity focused on helping others, achieving a public good, or solving a community problem, including work undertaken either alone or in cooperation with others to effect change. Civic engagement can come in the form of serving on nonprofit boards, volunteering on neighborhood or school councils, having a seat on volunteer municipal commissions, or simply belonging to civic organizations to benefit the common good.

Latinos in Central California as Public Servants

This study defines public servants as serving on a board of directors (nonprofit or corporate), a municipal or statewide commission, a current or past political candidate, or an elected representative. Even in a state such as California, where the Latino population is significant, there are disparities in representation. Paluch (2020b) from the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) demonstrated that non-Latino white Californians are 37% of the state’s population, 55% of voters, and 54% of state legislators. Yet, Paluch (2020b) points out that nearly four in 10 California residents are Latino (39%), while Latinos comprise 21% of voters and 25% of state legislators. Latino lawmakers represent 27 seats in the California state legislature, making up about a fifth of its 120 officeholders.
For the sake of this study, the concentration is on a smaller region in California, the middle of the state, the San Joaquin Valley, which is in the Central Valley. Central California is rural and agriculturally rich, with a population of about one million residents, which is increasingly becoming more Latino. According to Bohn et al. (2018), the San Joaquin Valley is about 4.3 million people and is composed of eight counties: Kern, Tulare, Kings, Fresno, Madera, Merced, Stanislaus, and San Joaquin. As discovered in the 2020 California State Assembly Democratic Caucus data, six of these counties in the San Joaquin Valley reflect mostly a Latino majority, with Kern at 54.9%, Tulare at 65.5%, Kings at 56%, Fresno at 53.6%, Madera at 59.6%, and Merced at 61.8%. The California State Assembly Democratic Caucus data (2020) reflected that Stanislaus County was not too far behind at 48.1% and San Joaquin County at 42%, which is more north in the region. In this investigation, the Central Valley or Central California terminology has been applied for familiarity purposes. The research has concentrated on Latino leaders that reside in and represent the eight counties. As demonstrated by the State of California Department of Justice (2022) Office of the Attorney General, Figure 1 reflects the different geographical regions in California.
With the rural aspects of the region come disparities for marginalized communities and their leaders. This section of the state has similar commonalities and shares geographical descriptions and constituencies. For example, the data at the Fresno County Office of Elections (2021) showed that local municipalities have just recently started to reflect their populations, such as the county of Fresno, where over 50% of the city council is Latino, but the county board of supervisors has 20% of Latino descent. Fresno County is not alone. The Latino Caucus of California Counties (2022) reflected that even though Kern, Tulare, Kings, Madera, and Merced also have Latino majority populations, they also only have one Latino board of supervisors at
20% of the county delegation. The Latino leadership pipeline has come to a standstill and has been stifled in the region due to numerous circumstances. Currently, there is not a vast amount of information that allows stakeholders to understand the factors contributing to Latinos becoming public servants in Central California. Thus this study can provide some insight. Unique challenges arise for Latino public servants, and this investigation’s purpose was to draw out those distinctive experiences.

As Paluch (2020b) described, the state of California’s Latino population is significant, showing that almost four in 10 residents in California are Latino at 39%, but that the decision-makers creating policies and laws do not reflect the populations they represent. In order to reach political equity with Latino public servant participation, it will require systemic changes in access to becoming a political or public representative. The disparity of Latino underrepresentation has been studied by examining the following:

- political ambition,
- gender politics,
- policies,
- social networks and capital, and
- leadership skill-building opportunities.

In this dissertation project, the varied reasons for the disparity of representation have been studied with the unique view of the participant. A qualitative study has been conducted that includes administering in-depth interviews and focus groups. As part of this process, the questions that were developed have been done in an open-ended format to allow the participant to speak about their experience. Interviews were conducted with only elected officials that were former, current, or political candidates. Focus groups were done with Latino public servants in
general who serve as volunteer board members or commissioners. The investigator conducted in-depth interviews with 24 elected officials representing Central California’s eight counties of Kern, Kings, Fresno, Madera, Merced, Tulare, Stanislaus, and San Joaquin. Three focus groups were conducted of 36 Latino public servants who volunteer or are appointed to boards and commissions. The researcher was interested in understanding the journey of public servant leadership from the lens and perspective of a Central Californian. The interview questions were structured around political ambition, gender politics, policies that benefit or provide a disadvantage to Latino public participation, the impacts of social networks and capital, and leadership training that build up skill sets or create pathways for potential leaders. The interviews and focus groups posed questions in the categories of demographic information, their preliminary civic engagement and journey, their public service life, and increasing the Central California Latino leadership pipeline. Ultimately, the results shine a light on whether these issues enhance or deter opportunities for Latinos when considering serving the community or seeking political office.

In this dissertation, the chapters are divided into the following sections. In Chapter 2, the literature review was composed to draw out information on how Latino leaders have access to broaden their opportunities to become public servants and policymakers and the unique dynamics they encounter in Central California. Latino political participation has been described in this chapter. In addition, there is limited data regarding the political ambition of the immigrant population and their decision-making process to launch a political campaign. The journeys of Latino public servants are not accounted for, especially in what prompts them to serve Central Valley communities. The determinants of why Latinos go into public servanthood are missing in
the literature, specifically in a rural, agricultural, and conservative region like Central California. Thus, the political landscape of this region has been described in this study.

In addition, gender politics in the Latino community is investigated in which existing studies only share generalized information about Latinos. Policies that benefit and limit Latino public servants were described in this section. Advantageous laws such as California legislation creates boardmanships for people of color and requires entities to have diversified boards, including gender equity. Social networks and capital were included as constructs that can contribute to the development and encouragement of Latino leaders to decide if they want to pursue political office or to be appointed to boards and commissions. Lastly, a case study of the Central Valley Latino Leadership Academy (CVLLA) has been shared to discover how skill-building opportunities can play an integral role in why Latinos would have increased confidence and be empowered to run for office or participate in social action as civil servants. Other notable Latino leadership development programs have also been described, such as the Chicano Latino Youth Leadership Project (CLYLP), Hispanas Organized for Political Equality (HOPE) Leadership Institute, and the Latino Leadership Initiative (LLI). To break down all of the factors researched as successes or potential obstacles, the theories of critical race theory (CRT), Latina and Latino critical legal (LatCrit) theory, and empowerment theory (ET) have been utilized and explained in this chapter. Finally, this section will end with a definition of terms, an evaluation, and an acknowledgment of gaps in the literature review.

In Chapter 3, the researcher has outlined the methods utilized in this study to collect pertinent data by conducting interviews and focus groups with Latino leader participants.

Chapter 4 reports on this study’s results and findings and the themes identified through the data collection process by utilizing the thematic analysis process. Theories used to categorize
the themes that emerged were CRT, LatCrit, and empowerment theory. The themes emerged as political ambition and social networks and capital with subthemes of policies, gender politics, leadership development, and skill-building opportunities. Additional topics that supported the subthemes include familial inspiration or legacy, Latinos being held to a higher standard, early guidance, cultural connection, Latino leadership development academies, lack of mentorship, isms intersecting with growth development, self-critique, discriminatory policies and broken systems, imposed imposter syndrome, early development, sense of duty, overly conservative region, financial resources, nongenerational wealth, and bivocational public service.

Chapter 5 summarizes the study, shares interpretations, and discloses limitations while discussing potential future research. The dissertation project concludes by stating closing statements and reiterating the study results.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter discusses existing data and literature related to Latino public servanthood in the Central Valley. The topics that are exhibited include Latino political participation, the Central Valley political landscape, political ambition, gender politics, effective policy change for Latino leadership opportunities, social networks and capital, and finally, a case study of the CVLLA, which is a leadership development program. Other leadership development training programs for Latinos were presented in summary in this section. In addition, this chapter describes the lack of information specifically for the Central Valley.

Latino Political Participation in California

Across the nation, after 2020, Americans showed that they wanted to engage civically through their vote or social media activism. Yet, there continue to be barriers for Latinos to participate publicly, let alone decide that they want to serve their communities. Recent data shared by Baldassare et al. (2021) indicated that Latinos are only 22% of likely voters in California. For Central Californian counties that are of Latino majority, this reflects a bigger issue of obstacles for Latino political participation, even if it is the first step of getting to the polls. Our governmental systems need to incorporate equitable and inclusive practices to eradicate barriers to civic engagement. Existing barriers prevent Latinos from participating in one of our democracy’s greatest features, which is the public discourse designed to inform the rules and policies that govern the nation. Bryson et al. (2014) established that these investments in change would create long-lasting values where doors are opened for genuine public civic participation where they can creatively contribute to problem-solving and the building up of an inclusive and equitable environment. Acknowledging the barriers and creating solutions to meaningful political involvement could lead to more Latinos becoming public servants. Bryson
et al. (2014) displayed the importance of empowering citizens and that if public representatives are to value democratic principles, they must practice and demonstrate inclusivity and equity in dialogue and decision-making.

Central California Political Landscape

Although California is viewed as a liberal state, its regions are distinctive in their political characteristics. As demonstrated by Baldassare et al. (2021), California has an almost majority of about 47% registered Democrats, 24% Republicans, and 23% registered Independents that tend to vote democrat in the state. Yet, the southern and northern parts of the state exhibit the more liberal Democrats, whereas the central section reflects a more conservative geography. As reflected by McGhee (2020), the counties of Kern, Tulare, Kings, and Madera have a slightly increased amount of registered Republicans versus Democrats. McGhee (2020) also demonstrated that conservative Democrats are found in larger numbers in the Central Valley, with numbers as high as 31%–40% in Tulare County.

Political Ambition

Political ambition is an individual’s determination to pursue elected office or participate civically. Fox and Lawless (2008) studied the gaps in political ambition for women and discovered that compared to men, it is unlikely that women consider themselves qualified, would tolerate the adversities of elected office or are recruited over men for political office. In addition, Fox and Lawless (2008) unveiled that women who contemplate running for office are unlikely to accommodate family and work responsibilities.

Other studies shared about other specific minorities, like Reny and Shah (2018), who reported that immigrants do not necessarily have access to traditional forms of political ambition from formulated structures that ensure resources such as finances, platforms, and status. Reny
and Shah (2018) researched further to reveal that immigrants may not pursue public service due to a lack of earnings, lack of access to monied networks, professional status, knowledge, and experience. Reny and Shah (2018) strongly emphasized that personal financial investment and fundraising are required for campaigning in which a lack of deep-pocketed funding is an absolute obstacle for anyone that has political aspirations. Reny and Shah (2018) reflected that within the immigrant population that since they will have fewer connections to networks of influence and money, running for office is a far reach since they cannot leave their jobs to finance and work on a campaign. Political attitudes start to change and obstacles decrease, and as Reny and Shah (2018) shared, the potential public servant has political experience leading to participation and then becoming political ambition. Reny and Shah (2018) acknowledged that immigrants could be recruited, and encouragement to run for political office is another factor that addresses the representation gap.

Personal experiences of broken systems, racism, or discriminatory policies as young people are another aspect that propels Latinos to seek public service. One of the examples is City of Fresno Council President Nelson Esparza, as Montalvo (2022) of the Fresno Bee reported:

At 16 years old, Esparza said he experienced a “great shock” when he encountered overt racism for the first time. While walking in his East Madera neighborhood, the high schooler was stopped by the police, who said he matched the description of a suspect nearby. Esparza said he was “happy” to comply with the police in their search. But as he started to empty his pockets, Esparza said he felt “fear and confusion” when the police officers pointed their guns at him. In that moment, Esparza said, he learned that he should never “reach” (for his pockets) during an encounter with the police. (paras. 15–16)
Esparza’s story is one of many Latinos across the Central Valley. These life encounters shape one’s world view of wanting to make a change.

**Gender Politics**

With the Central Valley being more conservative, gender politics does reveal itself when women want to launch themselves in leadership or elected positions. As revealed by Paluch (2020a), California is significantly behind in women’s representation in the state legislature at 32%, with states such as Nevada leading the nation with 54%, Colorado at 44%, Oregon at 43%, and Washington at 41%. Not to mention that the numbers in the Central Valley are significantly lower, with the most populated city of Fresno only having one woman who is also Latina.

One of the manners in which this occurs is through the media. As Nielsen (2013) discussed, how the media frames Latina candidates can shape the public’s views but also guide them in their political persuasions. Nielsen (2013) shared how the coined term “Wise Latina” (p. 120) was a point of pride for Spanish media but was used as a weapon in other media outlets like the *Times* and tried to control the narrative. Nielsen (2013) showed how this one-dimensional narrative was a clear concept from CRT, which pushed a message of conflict, and the Spanish media outlet was able to reflect Sotomayor’s benefit and push a counternarrative. Nielsen (2013) ended her study by expressing the need to dig deeper into how the narratives of women of color political candidates are conceived and pushed in society.

In addition, skill-building, mentorship, and equipping of women are limited, let alone Latinas. Holman and Schneider (2018) acknowledged that there are factors for the increased gender gap in women running for office. One of those, as mentioned by Holman and Schneider (2018), is that the preliminary recruitment and encouragement messaging for Latinas to seek
office needs to be different from those of white and Asian women, which alludes to the necessity of an intersectional understanding of the political ambition of women of color.

**Effective Public Policy Change for Latino Leadership Opportunities**

Policies that create systemic change can formulate more inclusive environments for Latino leaders, such as the corporate board gender and diversity laws in California, Senate Bill (SB) 826, and Assembly Bill (AB) 979. These types of laws create economic parity and equitable representation for all minority groups. In 2018, SB 826, authored by California State Senator Hannah Beth Jackson, was especially timely given the current political and social climate surrounding women’s rights (Corporations: Boards of Directors, 2018). Women have been stepping up and speaking out against workplace sexual harassment, lack of leadership opportunities, and overall challenging the status quo.

SB 826 was signed by Governor Brown and became a state law in October 2018. This law required a publicly held corporation whose principal place of business is located in California to have a minimum of one woman on its board of directors by the end of 2019 or face financial penalties (Corporations: Boards of Directors, 2018). In 2021, if the corporation had five directors, the required number increases to two women board of directors, or up to three women directors if the corporation had six or more board members (Corporations: Boards of Directors, 2018). The secretary of state (SOS) is authorized to publish various reports on its website documenting the number of corporations in compliance with these provisions and, if necessary, impose fines (Corporations: Boards of Directors, 2018). Governor Jerry Brown was definitely the trailblazer on this issue, which impacted the population of women that make up half of the people in the United States.
Now that California corporations have this mandate, they need to change their board recruitment policies. In 2020, SB 826 was strengthened by AB 979, authored by California State Assemblymember Chris Holden, and required race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation diversity on public boards. Due to the passing of AB 979, public boards must have one member per board, nine-member boards must have at least three such directors, and eight-member boards and smaller must have two members that reflect diversity (Corporations: Boards of Directors: Underrepresented Communities, 2020).

Recent legislation that can assist with diverse representation on statewide commissions was introduced in 2021. The California legislative bill, SB 702 by Senator Monique Limon, requires the office of California Governor Gavin Newsom to convene a working group to discuss and make recommendations on the most effective way to ensure the state’s leadership on boards and commissions reflects the diversity in race, gender identity, class, region, and creed, among other things, that are representative of the state (Gubernatorial Appointments: Report, 2021). Additionally, the bill requires the governor’s office to create and deliver to the legislature a report containing the specified information relating to the demographic information of individuals appointed by the governor (Gubernatorial Appointments: Report, 2021). At the end of the fall 2021 legislative session, the bill was on the governor’s desk and was passed as law and in effect in 2022. SB 702’s annual report will serve as a tool to shed light on where inequities in representation exist, encourage outreach to communities of interest, and address any system barriers. Increasing the diversity of California’s board and commission members will reflect the rich diversity of California’s population, creating a stronger state and more equitable communities. Policies such as these can change the narrative and establish more inclusive places by appointing diverse leaders to decision-making positions, many of which are historic for
California. Legislation such as SB 702 implements an enforcement tool needed to track demographic data in board and commission appointments that will be a model for other states to mirror.

**Social Networks and Capital and Its Power**

Social networks can be power structures and how these power brokers can be the gatekeepers to the slate of public servants. Segura et al. (2001) shared that social capital can propel individuals from a volunteer level of engagement into one of social action. Social capital can be foundational to one’s reason to serve a community.

How do rising Latino leaders embark a step further into political or civic participation? They can do this by connecting with social networks. These networks can serve as introductory spaces and potential relationship-building. Networks serve different purposes and roles based on the level of action required from the partners. Agranoff (2007) recognized that networks could be an informational connection that builds awareness and is an educational hub of organizational representatives, or the directives could lead to policy development and realization in the form of an action network. These networks, at any stage, can connect policymakers to nongovernmental actors. This is also a venue for idea generation, potential policy language creation, and connection to individuals and agencies working directly with constituencies. As demonstrated by Agranoff (2007), social networks serve as training spaces for decision-makers and elected officials, and if they join a developmental, outreach, or action network, they could benefit from learning side by side with the nongovernmental members of the community. There is also the ability to gain firsthand experience and direct connection to members when active in these networks. This helps defeat the roadblocks of gatekeepers and of disconnection. McGuire (2006)
shared that the life of networks depends on the issue being addressed and if it has served its purpose and the adversity is solved, then the network ceases to exist.

However, as Klesner (2003) recognized that the Mexican and Mexican-American population in the U.S. are at reduced amounts of social capital than the rest of the nation. Networks such as the CVLLA, were created as an essential way to create social trust. The life of this social network has extended due to the necessity of increasing the Latino leadership pipeline and the desire of the public to apply and be accepted in the program. The network system can help close the divide that members have in establishing organizational relationships. Agranoff (2007) described potential barriers in networks that members should be aware of and not adhere to, such as the struggles of power dissemination and the restriction of assets and tools. Leadership opportunities in these networks should happen organically and should not be overshadowed or taken over by obvious authority figures, yet the same actors have an obligation to vacate their traditional roles to generate places of shared power. When the regular actors continue to hold power and are not willing to release the grasp of their dominion, it does not lead to up-and-coming people carrying positions of prominence.

**Latino Leadership Development Programs**

Reny and Shah’s (2018) study showed that organizations that recruit immigrants to pursue political office play a vital role but need to build their skill sets in financial creation and encouragement to run. The following includes a more in-depth case study of the CVLLA and summaries of other leadership programming targeting Latinos or Latinas in Central California.

**Case Study: The Central Valley Latino Leadership Academy**

The CVLLA was established in 2018. The idea originated from the group ‘Latino Leaders in the Valley,’ which agreed upon the lack of opportunities for advancement for
potential Latino leaders. In wanting to provide guidance and leadership capacity-building for up-and-coming leaders, established Latino leaders in Central Valley counties explored the potential for a pilot program. The original group assigned a subgroup to develop a framework and launch a preliminary project. Thus, CVLLA was born. CVLLA was founded to build the capacity of future Latino leaders to serve on local, county, and statewide boards and commissions or potentially run for office. CVLLA aims to train future leaders to apply for and achieve leadership roles to respond to pressing community needs. CVLLA seeks to help build the capacity of Latino professionals to lead in various areas in the community, such as positive education, civic engagement and participation, and health outcomes for Latino families.

Before the pilot was launched, CVLLA developed a survey to research the need, interest, and likely participation of such a program. A group of 98 respondents from Central California confirmed that there was an urgent need for this type of program and if given the opportunity, they would overwhelmingly participate. The CVLLA survey consisted of questions asking participants about the sector in which they volunteer or work, their previous participation in leadership opportunities with other Latino professionals, and their interest in mentoring and leadership-building opportunities. As the CVLLA survey (2018) stated, 88% of the 98 respondents were interested in leadership training opportunities. According to the CVLLA survey (2018), 46% had previously participated in such activities, and only 17 individuals were actively engaged in leadership development programs at the time the survey was conducted. From the responses, it was evident that there was a desire for professional peer engagement with fellow Latinos/Latinas—87% of respondents said they would be interested in these options (Central Valley Latino Leadership Academy Survey [CVLLA], 2018). When asked if they would be willing to invest time in leadership opportunities, the majority expressed a positive response.
An overwhelming 96% of participants expressed willingness to invest anywhere from a one-day training to two hours per month (CVLLA, 2018). In the CVLLA survey (2018), participants were also asked about the time they would be willing to invest in peer engagement and leadership-building activities—96% (cumulative percent) opted for training. The CVLLA survey results reiterated the need for meaningful opportunities for Latino professionals to learn from one another. As the number of Latinos in Central California continues to grow, it is vital that Latinos jointly lead meaningful conversations about the current status of our families, identify areas of need, and draft strategies to ensure that Latinos achieve success and well-being.

The first CVLLA cohort welcomed a group of rising Latino leaders and, since its founding, has graduated over 100 participants after four completed cohorts. The CVLLA leadership capacity-building program provides participants with professional leadership development in a cohort setting. CVLLA fellows explore their individual and group leadership styles through interactive talent discovery assessments such as StrengthFinders and community needs-based policy and advocacy training. Fellows learn what it means to be a productive member of a decision-making table, including learning the basics of Robert’s Rules of Order and the Brown Act. CVLLA also provides participants with an optional mentorship opportunity. Fellows participating in CVLLA’s mentorship program are linked to an established leader who provides professional and leadership guidance. CVLLA’s mentors include well-known Latino education, health, government, business, and nonprofit leaders. CVLLA’s pool of mentors also derives directly from the group of Latino leaders who sought to establish the academy.

CVLLA aimed not only to address future leaders’ individual and professional potential but also the need for “servant leaders” in the Valley. Unfortunately, the leadership of many Central California cities is not representative of the communities they serve and therefore are
unable to make decisions that address their constituents’ most pressing needs. CVLLA’s goal is to aid leaders in identifying community needs and exploring leadership roles that can be key to positive change.

CVLLA’s prime mission is to change the face of Central Valley’s leaders to look more like the populations they represent. When a community is represented by a leader who understands the life circumstances, needs, and gifts of their community, they are better equipped to make decisions that will truly positively impact a community. With this in mind, CVLLA strives to train up-and-coming leaders to identify key leadership positions in decision-making in local, county, and state boards and commissions and help them gain those roles. CVLLA does this by dispensing ongoing support by providing fellows and graduates support in achieving potential leadership posts by helping with application processes and making direct connections to key leaders with proven track records of prior engagement with target organizations or agencies. CVLLA creates a safe space where fellows can engage in open and frank conversations about issues faced by leaders of color, including leading when being a minority, elevating the voices and points of view of traditionally disadvantaged groups, and being effective leaders. CVLLA culminates a network for the benefit of the fellow by conducting wide-ranging recruitment of up-and-coming leaders from diverse, multisector entities from a five-county area: Tulare, Kings, Fresno, Madera, and Merced. Networks among fellows themselves in each cohort are cultivated across prior cohorts. There are also connections to existing leaders, as CVLLA links fellows and graduates directly to established leaders who have experience in leadership roles on boards and commissions and professional development and advancement. Since CVLLA’s founding, graduating fellows have achieved leadership roles in several sectors, including local nonprofits, city councils, workforce commissions, K–12 educational councils, and other opportunities.
Graduates have also expressed plans to run for elected office while seeking support and counsel from the CVLLA board of directors, who are themselves volunteers.

This case study assisted in deciphering the outcomes of programs such as those that equip and engage Latino leaders in a meaningful way. These programs go beyond networking and concentrate on building the capacity of individuals who desire to serve their communities.

**Latino Leadership Initiative**

Even in its early stages, the CVLLA was able to spark the interest of leadership collectives in other parts of the Central Valley. Built on an initial desire to cultivate young Latino leaders, after a day of shadowing CVLLA, this desire materialized into a leadership development program for Latinos in Stanislaus County. Northern Central Valley established Latino leaders and created another group called the LLI, which launched in 2020 for young influential community members. LLI’s purpose and goal are to enhance the opportunities and abilities to emerge Latino civic servants to encourage them to contribute to their community. The LLI uses a small cohort model that involves training from experienced practitioners and leaders from their community. As shared by one of the founders, Martin Jacobo, some skill-building activities include components of civic leadership, mentorship, self-assessment, budget development, networking, and the value of boards, commissions, and committees. This program is only for Latinos in Stanislaus County (M. Jacobo, personal communication, March 30, 2022).

**Hispanas Organized for Political Equality Leadership Institute**

HOPE (Hispanas Organized for Political Equality [HOPE], 2022) has specific programming for young and professional Latinas across California and also has national programming for Latinas established in their professions. These youth, college, and professional training institutes are specifically for women of Latina descent and are specifically to enhance
advocacy and leadership skills, with the college program going a step further to assist the participants in accessing a professional network of women (HOPE, 2022). The youth program also exposes students to financial literacy and career and college opportunities. The program for established Latinas, HOPE Leadership Institute (HLI) not only builds skill sets but also enhances their social networks statewide or nationally. The cohorts are selected each year through an application process, with only a few from the Central Valley region represented.

**Chicano Latino Youth Leadership Project**

Some young Californian Latinos have been able to participate in the CLYLP, which is offered only to high school-aged Latino leaders through an application process. This project is formatted as a conference design both in the Central Valley and in the state capitol of Sacramento. Part of the learning gained are skills and techniques on campaign organization, which can be applied to student government opportunities and beyond. Other benefits of the conference are a college and career preparedness component and a legislative day at the state capitol where youth learn about the legislative process and get connected to state senators and assemblymembers. Application requirements that the student is a sophomore or junior in high school and, for the Central Valley program, they must represent the following counties: Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Tuolumne. The CLYLP’s mission is described on its website and states:

The mission of the CLYLP is to enhance and further develop the leadership potential of California’s youth as they prepare to become the future leaders of our state and nation.

The CLYLP seeks to fulfill its mission by accomplishing the following objectives:

- strengthening students’ knowledge of state and local politics;
- emphasizing the importance of cultural and family values;
• inspiring students to realize their academic and professional potential through individual and group interaction with business, community, and political leaders; and

• encouraging students to continue their education by attending college and providing them with the information they need to ensure success at the postsecondary level.

(Chicano Latino Youth Leadership Project [CLYLP], 2022, p. 1)

**Evaluation and Gaps in the Literature**

As studied by Reny and Shah (2018), the available literature references previous and existing studies on determinants and presumed barriers for immigrants to pursue becoming elected officials but not serving the community in a volunteer capacity on boards and commissions. Although there was data on Latino political participation, information was lacking on what the actual obstacles are for Latinos living in Central California. A void in the information was, in particular, to Latinas. Fox and Lawless (2008) exhibited theories behind the political ambition of women and shared the discrepancies and gender gaps between women and men, but there was a void in descriptions of women from specific groups. Supplemental research is needed to uncover the barriers and root causes of the underrepresentation of Latinos. The issue of gender politics, specifically in the Central Valley, has not been studied, and therefore, the individual accounts and experiences of public servants are required.

The case study proved to shed light on how these types of leadership development programs helped many Latinos serve in a more intentional way, yet a more in-depth investigation was required to discover why and how these leaders wanted to launch to the next step of public service. The political ambition was described in the literature for immigrants in general but not specifically to Latinos and not specifically to Latinos living in rural regions like the Central Valley. These types of programs have not been explored as to their contribution to the
development of Latino leaders and if it enhances their political ambition toward public servitude. There were still gaps in knowing what tangible ways are needed to equip and encourage more Latinos to become public servants. Other training institutes and programs emerged in the data collected as launching points for public service, such as the HLI and the CLYLP conference. Additional research was required to unveil the mission and vision for other more recent leadership development programs, such as the LLI.

**Theoretical Framework**

To conclude Chapter 2, the theoretical framework is presented, which utilizes CRT, LatCrit, and empowerment theory (ET).

As Nielsen (2013) demonstrated, although CRT began in the legal sector to expose how political and social controls formulate society, the theory has expanded to other areas of traditions, such as political science and media studies. Lawrence and Hylton (2022) described CRT as a critical framework that has functioned as a way to assess the makeup of racism and determine why racism is prevalent in societal systems. The four key tenets of CRT adopted in this research are:

- **The Permanence of Racism.** As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) described, the fact that racism exists, whether conscious or unconscious, is imprinted in American society.

- **Interest Conversion.** As Bell (1980) acknowledged, conversion occurs when whites will permit the progress of people of color if it aligns with the goals and needs of whites or a meeting point between people of color and whites.

- **Whiteness as Property.** Harris (1993) described this as the racist history that the United States has demonstrated how whiteness and property are interconnected and cause barriers to social change and transformation.
• The Critique of Liberalism. Crenshaw (1988) recognized that the critique was needed due to the ideas of neutrality of laws and equal opportunity for all because they perpetuate racism.

As shared by Gonzalez et al. (2021), LatCrit evolved from CRT by scholars that wanted to envelop the diverse unjust experiences and backgrounds of Latinos and Latinas in the United States with a lens of critical socio-legal knowledge. As Bender and Valdes (2021) described, one of the functions of LatCrit is to enhance social transformation. Adopted in this research are three of the seven key guideposts of LatCrit, as described by Bender and Valdes (2021). These include:

• “Build Intra-Latina/o Communities and Inter-Group Coalitions” (Bender & Valdes, 2021, p. 51). This third guidepost promotes social justice and transformation and explains the significance of cooperative practices to be collaborative and democratic toward a collective.

• “Find Commonalities While Respecting Differences” (Bender & Valdes, 2021, p. 52). This fourth guidepost is a commitment that moves toward collaboration and brings resolution while acknowledging distinctions and similarities.

• “Ensure a Continual Engagement of Self-Critique Both Individually and Collectively” (Bender & Valdes, 2021, p. 52). The sixth guidepost ensures fidelity to ethical and honorable practices for self and programmatic processes.

In addition, the researcher applied the ET as a guide for emerging themes. As acknowledged by Wallerstein (1992), empowerment includes individuals, constituencies, and other entities in a community change approach to move forward the agenda of the people and community, effective and efficient public policy, thriving families and neighborhoods, and social
justice. Zimmerman (1995) identified empowerment as the method that leads to a course of action for change and transformation. The following areas of ET were utilized:

- **Education**: potential power and powerlessness. Gutierrez and Lewis (1999) shared that the process of education can enhance a person’s ability to access their own life’s circumstances and attain a skill set to overcome challenges and oppressive systems. Kieffer (1984) suggested that for a person, powerlessness can reveal itself as the individual’s inability to influence or change the course of their life or other external outcomes. Gutierrez and Lewis (1999) studied specifically women of color and found that the increase of power will address issues of unclaimed potential and powerlessness. Lusthaus (1986, as cited in Hutchison & Lord, 1993) described key factors of the value of encouraging individuals who feel powerless by engaging them in meaningful actions that impact their communities.

- **Participation**: powersharing, own lessons, and lessons of others. Gutierrez and Lewis (1999) shared that the process of participation must begin with a trusting relationship, working together, and shared power. The individual can then reflect and analyze their own experiences or those of others to gain insight and lessons. Bellah et al. (1985) noted that participation and engagement encourage people to have a sense of understanding of one another. Kieffer (1984) added that a person could begin the steps and attain empowerment if they participate.

**Definition of Terms**

**Central Valley.** The Central Valley is part of the San Joaquin Valley and is interchangeable with Central California. For this research, the Central Valley represents eight counties: San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare, and Kern.
Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is an administrative relief from deportation. It is for undocumented young people who entered the United States as children and permitted them to apply for a social security card, worker’s permit, and driver’s license.

Latino. The United States Census Bureau (2022) states that the “United States Office of Management and Budget defines ‘Hispanic or Latino’ as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (para. 1). For Latinos, self-identification is unique personal each person and formed by facets such as geography, heritage, race, gender, and more. For the sake of continuity, this research used the term Latino.

Public servants. Public servants are defined as serving on a board of directors (nonprofit or corporate), a municipal or statewide commission, a current or past political candidate, or an elected representative.

Undocumented. Undocumented alludes to someone that resides in any country that does not have legal documents.

United Farm Workers. United Farm Workers (UFW) is a migrant farm worker labor union started by activists Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta.

Chapter Summary

The role of Latino public servants is unique and complex. The political ambition of the Latino public servant is shaped and influenced by external, cultural, and internal forces and factors. These factors can determine if the public servant chooses the path of servitude, whether as a volunteer or an elected official. All these factors can pose challenges as these public servants navigate their civic engagement life. This study understood the Central Valley Latino experience.
In the following chapter, the researcher shares the details of the methodology, demonstrating the sample description and background of the participants, the study instruments, procedures, and the analysis process.
Chapter 3: Research Method

Restatement of the Problem and Need for the Research

This research’s objective was to determine how Latinos in Central California are accessing opportunities to lead while assessing their successes or obstacles to becoming public servants, whether that is a position on a board, commission, or as an elected official. The following exhibits the research methods, the sample description and background of the research participants, study instruments, procedures, and study analysis.

The data collection has been formatted to draw out information regarding how Latino leaders access opportunities to become decision-makers and policymakers. The disparity of Latino underrepresentation has been studied, examining their direct experiences reflect the unique political dynamics they encounter in Central California. This qualitative data is coupled with existing literature and the information collected from interviews and focus groups. The overall goal has been to produce research that describes the unique backgrounds and potential challenges only public servants in Central California face.

Research Questions

This researcher investigated the following main research question. Ultimately, the goal was to discover the key determinants that allow Latino leaders to aspire to be civil servants and be appointed to boards and commissions or explore political opportunities and then launch their campaigns and elected officials. In addition, the researcher explored the following subset research questions:

- How or if leadership training opportunities increase the propensity of Latinos to pursue political office or to be appointed to boards and commissions?
• How do social networks and social capital contribute to obstacles or successes that Latino leaders face when considering serving the community or seeking political office?

This researcher proposes two primary components that impact Central California Latino leaders’ ability to gain entry into social networks and capital, making them more likely to lead politically or civically. These components include:

• Intentional cultivation of relationships with current political or civic leaders in power through social networks or capital.

• Development of their leadership skill set to engage in the community and create policy.

Methods

An interpretive descriptive method was utilized and an interview process was structured to engage participants that have unique lived experiences, especially when comparing urban and rural cities in Central California to obtain a rich perspective from the participants. As Hesse-Biber (2017) demonstrated, the interpretive position is composed of social interactions and group connections and, due to that fact, an individual’s reality can be comprehended by their viewpoints; thus, their perspectives and life stories should be heard and interpreted. This approach allowed the investigator to gauge and explore the intersections of public service on boards and commissions and the experiences of those that run for office to obtain an elected position. Uncovering understandings of Central California leaders who are Latino unveiled their unique racial and ethnic perspectives. Steps were taken to ensure that influence was minimized on the participants being interviewed or participating in a focus group. Because the investigation was to understand the human experience and factors that come into play when Latinos run for
office or become public servants in conservative places such as Central California, as described by Thorne et al. (2004), the interpretative description method was adopted, and the data retrieval was composed of in-depth interviews and focus groups. Thorne et al. (2004) described this method of the research process as a meaningful way to gather the first-person perspective and allow a holistic understanding of the participants composed of complex realities.

The investigator utilized the purposive sampling technique, which Thorne (2016) demonstrated, as the participants were recruited because of their background and experience, which will help the researcher better understand their personal accounts. Interviews were administered and focus groups were facilitated with Latino public servants in general who reside in the Central Valley. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 24 elected officials that represent Central California’s eight counties of Kern, Kings, Fresno, Madera, Merced, Tulare, Stanislaus, and San Joaquin. Three focus groups were conducted of 36 Latino public servants who volunteer or are appointed to boards and commissions. Thorne (2016) also stressed the importance of identifying that the key informants in the study were adequately diverse to enrich the data and supply a satisfactory sample to the projected recipients of the study. To capture the complexity of the participants’ experiences, each represented different gender identities (male, female, and other), different generations (boomer, Generation X, and millennial), various geographic regions in the Central Valley, and distinct Latino cultural expressions and backgrounds. The researcher requested the participation of 75 Latino public servants in the Central Valley. There were 60 of the 75 who responded to the solicitation to partake in the study, and all 60 met the criteria to contribute their knowledge and experiences. The sample size of 60 was over the traditional number of participants and, as Thorne (2016) noted, is relatively small, which is expected with qualitative research.
The researcher recruited from two main organizations in which Central Valley Latino public servants are active and engaged members. For the participant to be eligible to participate in this study, they must identify as Latino/a, Latinx, Latine, Hispanic, Chicano/a, Ingenious, or Latin American descent. The participant must have had public service experience, whether paid or volunteer, on a board, commission, political candidate, or as an elected official. Participants must have been older than 18 and served as public servants in the Central California region. The researcher belongs to a statewide and national association of Latina elected and appointed officials called HOPE, from which there was a pool of research participants for in-depth interviews. HOPE (2022) is a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization that empowers Latinas to lead, advocate, and educate for the benefit of the common good on a state and national level. HOPE offers a 9-month leadership institute called HLI for Latinas, which a portion of the participants completed. The CVLLA has over 100 graduates, most of whom were serving the community as appointed or elected officials. CVLLA was founded to build the capacity of future Latino leaders to serve on a local, county, and statewide boards and commissions, or potentially run for office. Within the CVLLA and HOPE groups, 36 participants were asked and participated in three focus groups. As a social actor in this group, this researcher used a convenience and snowball sampling process as a part of this network of public servants. Hesse-Biber (2017) shared that convenience sampling is conducted based on the participants who are knowledgeable of the subject and available to partake and the snowball method is to draw out from a familiar network.

Figure 2 includes demographic and geographic descriptions of participants in the study. Most of the participants currently reside in one of the eight Central Valley counties, except for a few that live in Sacramento County and one that lives in Alameda County.
**Figure 2**

*Participants’ Residence by County*

![Bar chart showing participants' residence by county.](image)

*Note.* This figure was created by the dissertation author.

There is a variation of generational representation, including baby boomers, Generation X, millennials, and Generation Z. Almost half of the participants are millennials, with one-third being Generation X. There is a similarity in the country of origin of their parents or grandparents, which is the nation of Mexico with a smaller number being natives of the United States.

A majority of the participants’ country, state, or county of origin was either Mexico, the state of California, or a county in the Central Valley (Figure 3 and Figure 4).
**Figure 3**

*Participants’ Parents Birth by Location*

![Bar Chart: Participants Parents Birth by Location](chart1.png)

*Note.* This figure was created by the dissertation author.

**Figure 4**

*Participants’ Birthplace by Location*

![Bar Chart: Participants Birthplace by Location](chart2.png)

*Note.* This figure was created by the dissertation author.
A majority have ancestral heritage or descendants from North or South America who identify with the phrase “Latino.” The participants showed variation in how they self-identify ethnically based on cultural expression and background, including Latino, Latina, Latinx, Chicano, Chicana, Indigenous, or Latin American descent. The researcher was mindful that, as Gonzalez et al. (2021) acknowledged, the intra-group diversities of the Latino identity are complex. Several connected with one or more self-identifications. Most of the participants identified as Latina/o originating from Mexico, and some identified as Mexican-Americans (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Participants’ Self-Identification by Ethnicity*

![Participants Self-Identification by Ethnicity](image)

*Note.* This figure was created by the dissertation author.

Latino leadership development programs and Latino-led agencies were noted if the participant had actively engaged in a program or agency (Figure 6).
**Figure 6**

*Participants by Project*

![Participants by Project](image)

*Note.* This figure was created by the dissertation author.

Participants disclosed if they were intentionally mentoring Latinos to enter into public servitude (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Leaders That Mentored Latinos*

![Leaders that Mentored Latinos](image)

*Note.* This figure was created by the dissertation author.
Each of the 60 participants interviewed in the one-on-one process or the focus group had a short summary of their background information prior to their statements. Most of the participants elected to use their actual names and titles, except for one leader that chose to use a pseudonym and one that wanted to be identified only by last name to protect their identity.

**Study Instruments**

The interview guide (see Appendix A) for the in-depth interviews and focus groups (see Appendix B) has been composed of four sections, including demographic information, their preliminary civic engagement and journey, public service, and increasing the Central Valley Latino leadership pipeline. In-depth interviews have been conducted with elected officials past, current, or candidates. Focus groups have been conducted only for Latino public servants that are not elected officials but serve on boards and commissions in Central California.

**Procedure**

This qualitative study was conducted by administering in-depth interviews and focus groups; as part of this process, the questions were open-ended to permit the participant to speak on their experience. Thorne et al. (2004) shared that this is done by using the technique of knowledgeable questioning that is contemplative with a critical lens that will shape the research.

During the research design process, the composition and configuration of the inquiry questions of the in-depth interviews that explore the social network and capital aspect of running for office or being a public servant were carefully structured to build trust and, therefore, allowed the dialogue to flow. As Morse and Niehaus (2009) suggested, the back-and-forth discussion in the interview needs to be balanced, and the investigator may connect with the participant on their own experience as a point of introspection. This occurrence did take place and was one of the factors that allowed safety to be established during the interview process. The research design
catered to the audience, which the researcher anticipated being young Latino leaders and more anchored community leaders looking to run for office, current elected officials, and former elected representatives.

Using triangulation, the researcher recruited from multiple places at myriad points in time. Merriam (1998) shared that in qualitative research, triangulation is the act of gathering data using many methods and from various sources while using ample descriptions and themes.

**Interviews**

An application to West Chester University’s Institutional Research Board (IRB) was submitted and approved in early spring 2022. After the IRB approved the dissertation study, the investigator sent letters of inquiry by email along with a questionnaire to the individuals that agreed to participate in the in-depth interviews. After participants completed the informed consent form, they were scheduled for their preference of an in-person or virtual interview and the interviews were recorded. Since the participants of the interviews were solely elected officials, they were asked if they gave permission to have their identities acknowledged; if they chose not to, the investigator omitted names. The investigator omitted names if the elected officials wanted some quotes attributed to them but also wanted some of the interviews to be anonymous. All of the participants chose to use their actual names except for one participant. If the interview was done virtually, it was done via Zoom and has been stored on West Chester University’s One Drive account using a password-protected account. For in-person interviews, recordings were done via Zoom and stored on West Chester University’s One Drive account using a password-protected account. After 3 years, the study will be completed and will be discarded.
The researcher conducted the interviews as demonstrated by Hesse-Biber (2017) in the format of a purposive sample, which was categorized as homogeneous in a race and geographical region. These interviews took place with elected officials, public administrators, and other civic leaders that have engaged in public participation (see Appendix A for interview questions). Interviews were conducted in person or virtually with a purposive sample of up to 24 elected officials (current and past) or potential candidates. These in-depth interviews were done one-on-one with the participants as a semistructured interview lasting at least one hour. All the interviewed participants had a connection or partnership with the researcher; thus, there was familiarity, and trust was already established. Participants were recruited with an email (see Appendix C for the language of the recruitment email and letter of acknowledgment). A follow-up phone call was conducted to encourage and confirm participants. Hesse-Biber (2017) acknowledged that all participants should feel as an important part of the process, secure and confident, and, therefore, the researcher must be an active listener. The interviewees were called ahead of time for the consent form and a description of the process. The interviews were developed only for those that have been elected to their position, an active political candidate, or have served as previously elected representatives.

Focus Groups

Participants of the focus groups responded to the inquiry by email along with a questionnaire to the individuals that agreed to participate. After participants completed the informed consent form, they were scheduled for a virtual focus group, and the sessions were recorded. For the focus groups, the participants were asked if they wanted to use pseudonyms for identification purposes in the research. Most of the participants chose to use their actual names. The focus groups were done virtually, done via Zoom and stored on West Chester University’s
One Drive account using a password-protected account. After 3 years, the study will be completed, and recordings will be discarded.

A focus group guide for local community leaders and elected officials or potential candidates was created for participants in the Central Valley. Before the date of the focus group, consent forms were sent and signed by the participants (see Appendix D). This saved time on the day and allowed the participant to know what to anticipate. Focus groups were facilitated for no more than 90 minutes with a minimum of 10–15 participants in each session to gather information on their knowledge and understanding of being engaged in public policy. The 36 participants represented urban and rural cities and neighborhoods in Central California. The recruitment strategies for participants included identifying volunteer or paid public service actors who were involved civically. Recruitment was done by email (see Appendix E for the language of the recruitment email and letter of acknowledgment). A phone call was conducted to encourage participants to attend and share the purpose behind the focus group. The focus groups were administered virtually, and the time was at a parent-friendly hour after work hours, and the allotted time was respected. The researcher and facilitator is proficient in Spanish and English, which allowed participants to feel safe using their multilingual skills. Although all participants were proficient English speakers and readers, some did interchange their language.

Data Collection Schedule

After obtaining IRB approval, the schedule presented in Table 1 was followed for data collection.
Table 1

Data Collection Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Research Phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 2022</td>
<td>Acquired IRB approval.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late February–May 2022</td>
<td>Obtained informed consent and conducted interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late February–March 2022</td>
<td>Obtained informed consent and conducted focus groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2022–October 2022</td>
<td>Analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis

The data collected was qualitative, with the participants’ perspectives as reported during in-depth interviews and focus groups. The researcher utilized thematic analysis, which is a step-by-step theme development process. Using thematic analysis, as Vaismoradi et al. (2016) identified as the initialization process after the researcher collected the data, the raw data was reviewed by reading transcriptions and noting meaning units. The researcher generated a spreadsheet to hold all of the data. Vaismoradi et al. (2016) shared that data will be classified, compared, and labeled during the construction phase. Once theoretical codebooks (see Appendix F) were created and finalized, the researcher coded, categorized the data, and defined and described the themes (see Appendix G) that emerged.

Thorne et al. (2004) demonstrated through the interpretive description that patterns and parallels will begin to form to discover the phenomenon and will uncover divergences within the arising themes. Coding was utilized to locate any thematic patterns in the gathered information to determine those commonalities. Saldaña (2016) shared that the process of coding is more than just designating themes. In addition, it connects the themes back to the data collected and vice
versa. The researcher used a hybrid of two processes of coding, which are live coding and in vivo coding.

As Parameswaran et al. (2020) acknowledged, using the method of live coding allows the investigator to simultaneously code manually if a video or audio recording is used. This method proved to be more effective than just transcription alone, which according to Parameswaran et al. (2020), more researchers use as more technologies are made available. As reflected by Parameswaran et al. (2020), live coding captures the social dynamics of the interview or focus group, including nonverbal responses that emerged in body language, such as eye contact, head nodding, speech emphasis, and other behaviors that provided insight into the participant’s response. This, in turn, presents a thorough and robust amount of knowledge for the recipients of the information.

By using in vivo coding, the researcher was able to demonstrate the cultural values of the participants along with their interpersonal experiences. Saldaña (2014) shared that in vivo in that which is alive coding is inclusive of the participant’s direct language in using their quotes. The researcher applied Saldaña’s (2014) technique of placing those in vivo codes in quotes to distinguish them from the participant’s firsthand responses.

By using deductive reasoning, the investigator tested the proposition of the success of Latino leaders having entry into social networks, intentionally developed, and given an opportunity to build their skill set to engage in the community as a public servant. The strategy to organize the codes has been to categorize the emerging themes according to the analytical frameworks and theories of CRT, LatCrit theory, and ET. For further analysis, as Saldaña (2014) shared, the investigator can aggregate matching codes into clusters to create a pattern in alignment with the guideposts and the tenets of the theories.
To accomplish the thematic analysis of the data, the researcher compared the data gathered from the interviews and focus groups and found parallel ideas and recurring themes during that process. Alongside the similarities, there were distinct experiences noted that the participants lived through. The themes were connected to the previously mentioned theories and were placed in an Excel spreadsheet to help the researcher sort and understand the data. The spreadsheet was a useful tool for categorizing and reassessing the data if needed. The researcher and the dissertation committee chair met monthly to discuss the themes and analysis process. After discussing the coding and emerging themes at the monthly meetings with the researcher’s chair, they revisited the raw data and revised the coding as needed. The researcher continued to refine the themes to answer the research questions. Once completed, the researcher was able to present findings and recommendations for Latino public servants across the Central Valley.

Significance of the Study

The occurrences of a Latino public servant in the Central Valley are quite distinctive from those across the state of California. Existing research has demonstrated obstacles that the traditional civic servant faces, whether in elected office or appointed in the United States, yet the data is not divided by region. A deficiency in the literature reveals the necessity to explore the lived experiences of Latinos who live and serve in the Central Valley. This study offered an opportunity to expand on this subject and fill that void to address the lack of information.

First, this dissertation project was integral to giving an increased understanding of Latino public servants by identifying factors of the individual’s actual choices and what they have lived through. This was done by discovering what external, internal, and cultural influences drive their want or desire to run for office or serve as a volunteer. This study has broadened the
understanding of why and how the Central Valley Latino public servant contributes to the community through leadership.

**Chapter Summary**

In this study, the researcher sought to explore the direct experiences of Latino public servants. The researcher utilized semistructured individual interviews and focus groups to gather data to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. The methods section provided the research methods, the sample description and background of the research participants, study instruments, procedures, and analysis for this study. In the following chapter, the researcher presents their findings.
Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative research was conducted to understand the firsthand experiences of Latino public servants in the Central Valley publicly participating as a board of director (nonprofit or corporate), a municipal or statewide commissioner, a past elected official, current political representatives, and potential candidates or former political candidates.

The first research question examined the key determinants that allow Latino leaders to aspire to be civil servants and be appointed to boards and commissions or explore political opportunities and then launch their campaigns and elected officials. In the interviews and focus groups, participants shared that factors such as political ambition and social networks and capital did indeed affect their decision or opportunity to practice public service. Many participants stated how external, internal and cultural facets accelerated or deterred them from becoming civically engaged.

Subset research questions led to subthemes that emerged of political ambition. When asked if leadership training opportunities increased the propensity of Latinos to pursue political office or to be appointed to boards and commissions, multiple participants declared that those types of support in place are what propelled them to serve. Others did not have those measures in place and gave testimony to the difficulty they experienced when they launched to seek political office. Another subset question inquired on how social networks and capital contributed to their obstacles or successes when considering serving the community or seeking political office. Various participants disclosed their struggles to enter those spaces with gatekeepers, and others shared the support they felt when they were invited into those spaces. These themes and subthemes are woven into the findings.
There was a series of recurring themes identified that correlated to theories. The researcher’s strategy was to organize the themes by each category and the themes that emerged according to the analytical frameworks and theories of CRT, LatCrit, and ET. The findings revealed the following themes and subthemes. The first theme described is political ambition, which is the desire to seek a public position. Under political ambition was the subtheme of policies, which are rules or regulations that prompted the leader to serve civically. Next, as part of political ambition, the information collected showed the subtheme of gender politics. Gender politics, as defined in the Collins Dictionary (2022), is the “debate about the assumed roles and relations of different genders” (para. 1). Under the political ambition theme was an additional subtheme of leadership development that revealed if access to skill-building opportunities provided a launching point for those that wanted to be civically engaged. Finally, the theme of social networks and capital is related to human or organizational capital and is identified as contributing factor to the public servant’s ability to serve the central region of California.

**Political Ambition**

One of the frequent themes that emerged in the data collected was political ambition and how the influences can be external, internal, and cultural. External influences are defined as outward forces such as family, mentors, policies, systems, and experiences. Cultural influences include behaviors, beliefs, values, connections to family, and Latino mentors. Internal influences are identified as inner will, own life lessons, and self-reflection.

**External Influence**

In the external occurrences that the Latino public servants accounted for, many have a direct connection to several of the CRT tenets, the Permanence of Racism and CRT: Interest Conversion. In this section, participants were asked what event in their lives prompted them to
get involved as public servants or what encouraging or discouraging experiences they have seen or lived through that propelled them or stopped them from seeking a position in public service? Some participants described discriminatory experiences, policies, or practices that motivated them to seek out public servitude, and many shared personal situations and local or state legislation that pressed them to want to make changes. Others shared how fractured systems or systemic racism caused them to launch as public servants. Additional accounts reflected how they pursued public services because although Latinos in Central California are the majority minority, the people in power are still overwhelmingly white. Many, while experiencing systemic racism, also encountered an imposed imposter syndrome when entering leadership spaces. This was not an imposter syndrome that originated from the Latino public servant but was externally forced on them, which was then internalized. At the same time, a number of the participants shared that the ideology that Latinos are held to a higher standard was instituted, some from childhood.

Alida Verduzco Silva, CVLLA graduate and board co-chair for the Multimedia Technology Academy at Monache High School in Tulare County, shared her civic engagement sparked in middle school and stated:

My parents were farmworkers, and I remember the United Farm Workers [UFW] movement and, as a fifth grader walking out against Prop [Proposition] 187, which was a policy that was targeting immigrants and in a negative fashion. Later on, I had the opportunity to bring a bus stop to a rural transit line. I went in front of the city council and requested it. It made me see that one of the biggest challenges the rural community faced was getting from point A to point B. If you speak up and say something, something can actually come of it.
Like Alida, many participants were prompted to engage civically by the additional subtheme of policies that drove their political ambition, specifically Proposition 187. Although they have the shared experience of being exposed to this law at a very young age, the impact was long-lasting. According to Larsen (2017), Proposition 187 was led by then-Governor Pete Wilson and a majority Republican legislature, the law was passed in 1994, and its purpose was to bar undocumented migrants from attending public schools and acquiring health services. Larsen (2017) stated that public schools and state service providers would not only have to confirm legal status but report those that did not have legal status to the attorney general’s office and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

Vivian Paz, Fresno County leader and Arte Americas board chair, shared that Proposition 187 also impacted her engagement. She stated, “I remember when Proposition 187 became a really big issue, and it just infuriated me, and that is when I wanted to become an attorney.”

California State Assemblymember Joaquin Arambula of the 31st District noted that, according to the United States Census Bureau, has a 71% Latino population, which resonated with other leaders, and Proposition 187 propelled him into action. He stated:

I remember my parents’ mentorship. I spent time in the campaign office as a young kid in high school. In 1994, Kathleen Brown was running for governor, and we had an anti-immigrant Proposition 187 on the ballot. There was learning and leadership that came from organizing students at a young age toward an issue that mattered to me and to our community. Being able to work with my parents to turn our advocacy into action and to still experience a loss was a good reminder that we have to be persistent when you believe that you are on the right path despite where public opinion may go.
Minnie Santillan, former Democratic central committee delegate, a political consultant for assembly, senate, and congressional campaigns in the Central Valley, and chief of staff in the California state legislature shared her experience with Proposition (Prop) 187. She said:

Prop 187 happened, and I remember having an altercation with a white sorority sister who said, “I see those wetbacks running across the border all the time.” I asked her, “Where do you think I was born?” I told her I was born in Mexico and my parents are farmworkers. This really taught me about the people who were around me.

Former Mayor of the City of Riverbank in Stanislaus County, Virginia Madueño, shared a childhood experience that led her to launch a Democratic congressional campaign for the United States House of Representatives. She stated:

I decided to run for congress because our congressman was flip-flopping on the Affordable Care Act. I was my parents’ first American-born child, and my dad was a farmworker. They couldn’t afford health insurance, and I ended up contracting bacterial meningitis. My mom didn’t speak the language, and so I was grossly neglected and misdiagnosed by a doctor, and it wasn’t until a second doctor saw that my legs were already stiff and the physician told my mom through an interpreter. “She needs to be hospitalized or she will not live through the night.” The interpreter said, “She doesn’t have insurance, and he can only pay five dollars.” My mom said the doctor snatched me and took me up the stairs of the hospital, and they didn’t see me for 31 days. I was a beneficiary of the Affordable Care Act.

Dr. Lupe Jaime-Mileham, appointed by Governor Gavin Newsom and senate-confirmed as the deputy director of the Child Care and Development Division, recalled how her parents enlightened her at a young age. She commented:
My parents always called out the injustices that existed, such as the affluent families could go to school during parent–teacher conferences during the day. My parents couldn’t because they were working in the fields. They would point out who was actually picking the crops, us versus who wasn’t. They would ask why my brother would get pulled over by law enforcement, but his friend would not. They told us that injustices [could] only be able to be addressed if we had the desire to be able to participate civically. We needed to put ourselves out there with our broken English and with our brown skin.

Cutler-Orosi School District School Board Member Delia Martinez, community leader in Tulare County and CVLLA graduate, shared her experience of being in a monolingual Spanish-speaking household and how many others that share the same background. She said:

I have been a big advocate for school presentations and school letters to be in English and Spanish. I remember growing up and my mom attending all of my award ceremonies in English, even though her primary language is Spanish. I wished the school award ceremony was given in Spanish so my mom could understand why I was getting an award. Orosi High school graduations are delivered in English and Spanish since the community is 97% Latinos.

Assemblymember Joaquin Arambula reflected on how the pandemic shed light on how marginalized communities suffer across the Central Valley. He said:

We saw many of our Latino families in the Central Valley, who are farmworkers, face many social determinants of health. When you are not able to make a decision to protect your health and instead are then forced to work in the fields to put food on your table, to
keep a roof over your head, you expose yourself and your family to risk. I saw those disparities and that separates and differentiates us from the rest of the state.

Fresno County community leader, Tree Fresno Board Member and CVLLA graduate, Juan Carranza, also stated how COVID-19 revealed the realities of so many marginalized communities in the Central Valley and how it called for a more collective approach to address issues that were in the shadows. He stated:

The pandemic brought to light the huge difference in terms of access to vital information to resources and services, especially for rural areas. I think that was one of the biggest reasons why I decided to get involved within my community and start to create bridges and then also thinking about ways to generate and create strategic partnerships.

Former Tulare County Board of Supervisor, Lali Moheno, stated, “There is a deep history of discrimination and racism here and being brown and a woman is peor, ‘worse.’ I decided not to have a website for that reason.” Others experienced blatant racist and discriminatory incidents that caused them to want to seek change in the current systems and prompted them to be a public servant, or if they were already serving, they were motivated to stay the course. Tulare County Supervisor and first Mexican American to be elected in a second term to the Board of Supervisors, Eddie Valero, stated:

I have learned to be uncomfortable. There have been times where I’m in spaces where I’m the only Latino, or there have been times where I have had racist comments toward me. I went to a Lions Club event in Woodlake. After everything was done, I went around the room to shake people’s hands. There was a father and a son. I extended my hand, and they said, “No, we don’t shake hands with Mexicans. We don’t shake hands with your kind.”
Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) Board of Trustee and Director of the nonprofit organization Cultiva de Salud, Genoveva Islas, acknowledged that lessons were taught at her home through story-telling. Many of those stories reflected the injustices her parents experienced. She commented:

One of the stories was of my father’s coworker who was injured at work. My father drove him to the hospital. The man was bleeding; he had some type of injury to his arm. No one was attending [to] him. My father felt like they were telling them to sit and wait, and the man was bleeding. My father got enraged that his life was in jeopardy. Because my father began to demand attention, whoever was working did not like my father being uppity, so they called the police. This was in Delano, California, [in] the late ’50s or ’60s. It so happened that the officer who showed up was Filipino or Mexican—a biracial officer. He was trying to get my dad to settle down. My dad was explaining to him what was going on and that his friend needed help. My dad said to him, “You should help him because you’re one of us.” The officer told him, “I am not one of you. You are nothing like me.” It ensued into a greater fight. My dad ended up getting arrested, and his friend ended up getting served. They did help him. It was a story of standing up and challenging power and authority to fight for what was right.

The former Mayor of Riverbank, Virginia Madueño, expressed the importance of having trustworthy networks when going through the experience of racist attacks. She said:

In the American Leadership Forum [ALF], I got to meet many individuals from Central Valley counties [who] helped me during my campaign, which was ugly, and I was facing all white men candidates. One of the candidate’s last names was literally white, and he
did not want me to get elected, so he created his political signs that said “White Mayor.”

ALF gave me emotional and financial support.

Tulare County League of Mexican American Women Board Member and CVLLA graduate, Elena Nava, spoke about an experience that almost led her to want to give up her position. She reported:

At one of our events, a Republican assemblymember provided certificates, and they posted on social media a congratulations to the high school scholarship recipients of the Tulare County League of Mexican American Women. There were like 100 comments that were all negative, such as, “Why do they have to be Mexican-American,” “How many of them are illegal?” “How many of them speak English?” “Why can’t it just be for Americans?” But it was very disheartening to see how much negativity there was toward our organization and the youth.

Many of the Latino participants reflected on how broken systems inspired their ambitions to seek out public service. Stephen Avila, CVLLA graduate and Fresno Regional Workforce Development board member, wanted to give back in an industry that lacked representation. He commented:

Working in the manufacturing sector, I started to think about how I can influence this on a larger scale and help people who want to find work opportunities. Especially for people that English is not their native language. I wanted to be a voice for them and give them a pathway to be able to find employment. There are so many people out there that are underserved, and it is about giving them the support.
Stephanie Briones, CVLLA graduate and founder of the Employees of Color Association (EOCA) at Clovis Community College, also expressed her desire to be on a campus that embodied diversity and inclusion in intentional ways. She commented:

What led me to start a Latino organization on campus was when I remember myself feeling like I didn’t exist culturally in my system. I always felt like I didn’t belong, and people didn’t care about my identity, and I felt invisible. We found out that there were 75 people on our campus who felt that same exact way, and we were flabbergasted by the amount that said, “We feel like our culture is invisible on this campus.”

Assemblymember Joaquin Arambula, who is also a medical doctor, described his desire to elevate those that have lived in the shadows. He stated:

*Yo no puedo ver a mi gente solo.* ‘I cannot see my people alone.’ I was there on the front lines working. Who was there to help and to deal with the needs we have in our community? In Fresno County, I have over 20% of my community who are undocumented that go undercounted in the census that then receive[s] [fewer] resources. I felt helpless, and for an ER [emergency room] doctor, that is not a feeling you are used to. I realized I had to ask more of myself. I had to look toward a career change to be able to go and advocate and give voice to what I saw on those front lines. It became apparent if I [couldn’t] recruit doctors to the Valley, [than] I got to grow my own. Realizing I could not see my people alone, I had to transition so I could bring a medical school to the Valley. I’m glad that we are well on our way to establishing that medical school in the Central Valley. That was the clarion call for me to enter into public service, and I’m really glad I did.
Cutler-Orosi School Board Member Delia Martinez expressed her concern for the outlook of her community. She said, “I want our community not to be known for gang violence or drugs. I want it to be known for its great educational system and the wonderful students that are produced who are career driven.” Former Candidate for Fresno County Sheriff exhibited the same sentiment for the neighborhoods he wanted to serve. He replied, “I ran because I grew up in a neighborhood that experienced deaths due to a prison gang war.”

Others reflected that their determination to serve started in their childhood. Carolyn Flores, Fresno County community leader and board chair of the Lowell Community Development Corporation, described her early adolescence experience and stated:

There has always been an awareness that there are major inequities in our structure in our infrastructure. Even as a young person, I saw that there were some areas that had sidewalks and paved streets and didn’t have potholes, and had air conditioning and heating and others didn’t. The question always was, why. Until I was in high school, I took a job working with young people, who were growing up in an area of town that was not cared about, was not loved, and was forgotten. Everyone needs and deserves to have a safe space to call their home.

James Martinez, Fresno County Office of Education board of trustee, Area 3, recalled a childhood experience that triggered his longing to see community change. He said:

I grew up poor. There is this one moment where I remember going grocery shopping with my mother and they rang up the bill and the price for everything came. We had to put things back because we couldn’t afford it. I could tell it was a really embarrassing experience for my mom because there was a line behind us. Even at a young age, I was
aware that I didn’t want that to happen to me and my family. I didn’t want to have that food insecurity.

Itzi Robles, Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission commissioner, Dailey Elementary School board member, staff for Assemblymember Joaquin Arambula, and CVLLA graduate, recognized that it came full circle for her. She commented:

I think about how a lot of the social services the nonprofit organization I am a board member of provides are the same services that my parents used when I was younger. Now to be a part of advocating to continue those services is a big deal.

Several participants identified a childhood experience of being the translator of their family as what pushed them to want to transform institutionalized practices that do not serve multilingual individuals. Fresno City Councilmember Miguel Arias represents District 3, which is mainly on the west and downtown Fresno. He reflected on his experience as a young child and said:

At the age of 10, I became the translator between the farmworkers and the farmer. That is the first time that my skill set was valued by navigating two worlds. I was the translator for every parent–teacher conference and filled out the forms for my family. I went from translating to navigating American culture, filling out forms for public housing, filing for unemployment benefits, and how to pay bills at the grocery store on behalf of my family.

Fabiola Gonzalez, chief executive officer (CEO) of First 5 Fresno County and vice president of the First 5 Association of California, recalled a memory that stood out. She said:

When I was in Guadalajara, Mexico, my mom would come visit me in a span of 5 years, like for 4 months every year. She would say, one day, when I bring you to the United States, you’ll learn English, and then you’ll translate for me. I remember that I thought
that would be so cool to translate for Mom. But as I got older, I realized, wait, she is disenfranchised. If she is not able to communicate, she needs to depend on me. I remember first being super proud of being the translator and then realizing, no, that’s not what we want for our parents. We should be able to figure out a way so that they don’t have to depend on their children.

Cindy Hernandez, former board member for My Sister’s Closet Ministry, Fresno Area Community Enterprises (FACE), and a CVLLA graduate shared a similar reflection. She replied, “I think it was the experience of seeing how my parents were treated. They were mainly Spanish speaking, and I saw all the things that they had to struggle to do. As their translator, it was impressed upon me.” Lali Moheno, former Tulare County board of supervisor, discovered that she was able to shift power even as a young person. She commented:

My parents were always doing something for others. My dad took me to a growers’ meeting to translate for the farmworkers. I was 15 years old, and since I spoke English, I was the spokesperson [for] the workers. The workers told me to tell the growers that they are not allowed to go to the bathroom. My father also told me to tell them that they wanted to be paid 11 cents more. But I learned about the minimum wage in school, and I told my dad we should ask for the minimum wage. I did ask. The growers refused the minimum wage ask, but they did accept the 11-cent increase.

Fresno Unified School Board of Trustee Genoveva Islas described her exposure to fragmented systems in middle school. She stated:

When I turned 12, I became one of my family’s interpreters. I was going to doctors’ appointments, to social service appointments, to legal appointments. I wasn’t a trained interpreter, but I knew the basics and could help to convey information to my family.
That experience, being able to see that we were engaging with systems that weren’t oriented to serving non-English speakers. Systems that you needed health insurance to be able to benefit from. Systems that discriminated against you because you were not a legal citizen. Those were my childhood experiences that definitely formed my worldview—my perception of justice and injustice and right and wrong.

A couple of elected leaders shared that, as young people, they were heavily impacted by a great trailblazer of color. For City of Fresno Council President Nelson Esparza, an Afro-Latino leader and CLYLP participant, it was the first Black president of the United States that sparked an interest in civic engagement. He said:

The first time I thought it was actually possible to be an elected official was when Barack Obama was elected. Barack Obama was the first name I ever marked on a ballot because I had just turned 18 and his election opened my eyes. We elected a Black President! It made me realize it was possible for diverse communities to have representation.

Tulare County Board of Supervisor Lali Moheno recollected a significant time in her life when she heard Cesar Chavez, civil rights activist and Mexican–American labor leader for the UFW, for the first time. She stated:

I remember when my dad took us to hear Cesar Chavez speak in San Juan, Texas. I was fascinated that this man would come from California to speak to us. My dad told me, “He’s just asking for dignity and respect for the farmworkers.” He would say, “Ya basta, no nos vamos a dejar.” ‘Enough, we are not going to allow them to do this to us.’ He taught me to be proactive, not reactive.

Genoveva Islas reflected on the value of seeing those that have come before her and knowing the burden of making sure their legacy continues. She said:
I grew up with these noble ideas of Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez of fighting for my community. I wanted to be like Cesar Chavez. I still aspire to be a leader for my community. That is what influenced my decision to serve and to learn more. I remember doodling UFW Eagles on my homework assignment because of the influence of the union in the community. While I had experiences of seeing injustice, I was also seeing these magnificent experiences of leadership. Those were all very influential to my thinking.

A number of participants disclosed how they chose to run because better representation was needed. State Center Community College District Board of Trustee Candidate and Former Board Member of Fresno Barrios Unidos, Gilbert Felix, expressed his discontent with some elected officials. He stated, “I have seen some politicians act in a dismissive and transactional way. Some have a lack of preparedness and a lack of willingness to understand these issues. That is what I don’t want to be.” Amanda Renteria, CEO of Code for America, former congressional candidate 21st District, former state of California gubernatorial candidate, and first Latina chief of staff for the U.S. Senate, shared that her dissatisfaction with politicians led her to seek office. She stated:

What propelled me to run was watching a member of congress lazily represent the community I was from and who needed government services to really work. It felt painfully wrong to me. I knew that if I could get elected, I was capable, skilled, and experienced in a way that would have had huge benefits to my community both locally and nationally. I also knew I could do things immediately to be effective and set some foundational work for the future of the Valley too.
Another external influence for the political ambition theme was public service due to the efforts of trying to change the narrative with those that hold power. Many of the Latino public servants shared that although many of the communities in the Central Valley are mainly of Latino descent, the elected representation and decision-makers are mainly white. Juan Carranza shared his frustrations on the reality of closed doors for Latino leaders. He said:

There are social circles with three generations of leaders within our communities that have been a part of that role for decades, and sometimes that circle just runs in the family. So the next leader is gonna be a relative, it’s gonna be a friend of a friend. We, as Latinos, have to come in and break those cycles.

In addition, Carolyn Flores agreed and reflected that many cities in the Central Valley, on average, have young populations and stated:

The reality is the city of Fresno’s median age is about 32–33 years old. We are a young city, and the people who are running like our governments do not reflect more than half the population. The people who are in power keep getting reelected and won’t let go of what they have.

Patty Barahona resides in Stanislaus County and is the CEO of Youth Leadership Institute, board chair of Alianza Coachella Valley, and co-chair of the LYRIC Center for LGBTQ+ Youth. Throughout Patty’s career and volunteer efforts, they have observed how white culture has overshadowed Latino leaders. They said:

I think there are a variety of settings that have continued to propel white-dominant culture. Many of the organizations I have worked for have been led by white leaders. As a Latinx leader, this has been challenging and discouraging to work through and to begin to shift who leads organizations and the communities that they represent.
Erica Cabrera, HOPE board member and past district director of an assemblymember, redirected the responsibility to the voters of the Central Valley. She said, “The same people get elected, and shame on us for continuing to vote for those people if there is another viable candidate. Voter education is key in that and voter participation.”

Yamilet Valladolid, Latino Leadership Initiative founding member and governmental relations director of government and community affairs for Golden Valley Health Centers, spoke of the barriers that prevented Latinas from running and winning in white-dominated elected districts. She stated:

The lack of representation is a big barrier because we don’t have somebody that is going to necessarily support us. I can tell you if I were to run for county board of supervisors, there are four white men, and one is one person of color who is Indian, but he is a multimillionaire. He is a person of color, but he also has a certain privilege. They would not mentor me. It is not just the money, it is also the influence. We are the majority, but we are definitely the minority when it comes to political representation and when it comes to positions and leadership with[in] organizations.

Former Riverbank Mayor Virginia Madueño described Stanislaus County as extremely difficult to break through and said, “It is still very conservative, incredibly conservative. I think we still deal with a lot of racism in our region. We’ve never had a Latino or Latina serve on the county board of supervisors in Stanislaus County.”

City of Fresno Councilwoman Elect and first LGBTQ Councilmember Annalisa Perea described the hurdles she has faced in her campaign journey as she prepares to represent District 1 in January 2023. She commented:
Even though we are a majority of the population, we are still looked at us as a minority or less than. We still have to work that much harder just to prove our worth. I get a lot of ageism remarks. Are you even old enough to run for office? It’s about proving my age before I can even start talking about my qualifications.

Fresno Unified School Board of Trustee Genoveva Islas identified the struggles to engage Latino community members to vote. She stated:

I have a 53% Latino Citizen Voting Age Population [CVAP] in my region. If all the CVAP voted, they could ensure that it would be someone that looks like them and reflects their values. It is hard to engage them because it is the same community [that] is dealing with poverty and working multiple jobs and that can’t afford childcare for them to publicly participate. We need to invest in their engagement and remove barriers that allow them to participate.

Assemblymember Arambula stressed the importance of voter participation and said, “I think the sleeping giant must awaken. We always talk about our power as the Latino community. We still need to wake up and harness it and empower the community to become aware of the power that Latinos hold.” Minnie Santillian pointed out the fact of actual Latino voters in the Central Valley. She stated:

Even though the population of Latinos is high, how many of them are of voting age and registered? Then how many of them show up to vote? If about 20% of Latinos in CA [California] who are registered to vote are Republican, think about how many of those live in the Valley.
City of Fresno Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria and California State Assembly candidate of the 27th District revealed that power is a privilege and breaking those obstacles is challenging. She said:

In the last election cycle, when I ran against another Democrat (white male), there were those that said not to do it, and it [was] not your time. At the same time, there were those that said, “We need to hold our own accountable.” Sometimes you have to take those risks.

Participants identified external determinants that further impacted how Latino leaders are perceived in the community. One of those facets that impacted the political ambition of a leader is the viewpoint that Latinos are held to a higher standard. This notion is connected to the tenet of CRT, the permanence of racism due to the fact that it is forced upon the individual. Dr. Lupe Jaime-Mileham shared that this message was indoctrinated in her as a young person and described her past history with this notion. She stated:

My parents made us aware that because we were seen differently, we needed to work three times harder and also master the English language but also hold on to your home roots. Don’t let these injustices define you but instead utilize them as a strength because we’re able to navigate them.

Other participants have seen this ideology emerge in professional settings. Juan Carranza described it as the following:

As Latinos and as a minority, sometimes we have to work even harder to get to these public service and leadership opportunities. It’s not about what you know, it’s about who you know, and it’s a proven reality for me.
Fresno County School Board of Trustee James Martinez agreed and declared, “We have to work 10 times harder to prove ourselves. It’s not fair. I think that we are held to a different standard, and our margin of error has to be a lot smaller [than] others too.” Tulare County Board of Supervisor, Eddie Valero, recognized this to be true and said, “I don’t really let it affect me. I continue to do what I need to do in order to be effective in my role as a leader and as a Latino leader.” City of Fresno Councilman Miguel Arias revealed that outside the Central Valley, experience is valued. He stated, “In order to be placed in a position of power in Fresno, you need to succeed somewhere else. I have not seen anyone that is a minority given the opportunity to fail up.” Assemblymember Joaquin Arambula recalled past and present realities by stating, “I think when you are the first one who has broken through the glass ceilings, all eyes are always on you.” Ignacio Rendon, Kings County leader, explained that this mentality was one of the reasons he sought a higher postgraduate degree. He said:

I would say that was one of the main motivators that made me get my doctorate degree. Just to be able to say, I have this degree or have these letters after my name, [and] I can have a better stance in being able to speak and have the respect of my community members. I believe that there are a lot of Latinos who are professionals and have attained education, but there is a tendency to bypass you, ignore you, make you irrelevant. More so, if you don’t have a higher education that can gain you some respect.

Three of the Latina participants who were elected or current candidates acknowledged that this mindset is something they have acute familiarity with. Fresno City Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria expressed:
As people of color, we are definitely held to a higher standard, and for women, there is a double standard. I always look to meet that standard. As a woman, I have been questioned even in my personal relationship, where my other colleagues have not.

Nicole Parra, former California state assemblymember 30th District and past senatorial candidate, observed how she was treated on the campaign trail as a younger female candidate and how it impacted her health. She commented:

There were people thinking that you are too young and not experienced. I was constantly, as a young woman, proving through my work that I am good enough. I had an Assembly colleague that was also a young Latina that supported me. I was so worried about not working hard enough that I pushed myself to the point that I became hospitalized. I didn’t believe I was good enough until my mid-40s.

AnnaLisa Perea, Fresno City councilmember elect District 1, identified with experiences of being treated differently because of her age or youthful appearance. She said:

It’s common for me to walk into a room, and it’s me and a bunch of older Caucasian men. I feel that right away, I am judged as “Who [is] this young girl?” To some degree, there is a certain level of respect we still have to earn our place before we’re seen as equals amongst our peers. I show up, I do my homework. I know I can speak just as eloquently as they can on issues, if not better. The second I open my mouth, they realize this girl knows what she is talking about.

Many of the participants revealed a feeling of imposter syndrome that was adopted as they entered professional spaces. Sherman (2013) described imposter syndrome as a person that does not take ownership of their own accomplishments and progress, yet thinks it is by chance and can produce a sense of insufficiency and are afraid of the revelation that they are an
imposter. As demonstrated by Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017), Latinos have the lived experience of an intersectional identity that can cause them to feel imposter syndrome, which manifests ideas of not belonging or not being professionally justified. The researcher discovered an association with the CRT tenet of the permanence of racism due to the individual’s sense of alienation as a result of it being imposed on them. Not a sentiment that they already had but was forced upon them as an imposed imposter syndrome. Sal Lucatero, board member of the Fresno Arts Council and integration manager of Bitwise Industries, shared that his leadership is almost always scrutinized, but he chooses not to accept their assumptions and bias. He commented:

A lot of the organizations that I am involved in have historically not been people who look like us and look like me specifically. I walk into a room and people assume that I’m either one really young or unprofessional because I have colored hair or because I dress in the way that I dress. They see me and they are like no no no, he is not going to be able to have a say in what we are talking about. There is one board that I serve on where we were doing a fundraising event and had a debrief after the event. One of the concerns that I brought up was that everyone at the event was a white person, about 99% of the people there. One of the other board members told me they’re like, “Well, I did my job in inviting my people, you didn’t invite yours?” I think just these collective experiences have really propelled me to do more and get in there and say, “I may have colored hair, and I am gonna wear whatever the hell I want.” But I’m here to make a difference, and I’m here to make sure that everyone has access to the same things that everyone else does.

Juan Carranza encountered similar situations when in professional settings with other leaders who are not Latino. He said:
I have had instances where I walk into a meeting with high-caliber leaders. They looked at me, and they asked my age immediately. They think that I’m extremely young. Then sometimes, they don’t even give me the benefit of the doubt. As a Latino, we have to prove ourselves. We have to work even harder. It is not the same case for Caucasians. Sometimes they [Caucasians] look young, and they immediately assume they are super smart because they are in the room already. In our case, as Latinos, we are a minority, and they start asking questions such as, “What is your background? What have you done?” We have to keep repeating ourselves every time we enter a new room.

Maria Lemus shared that, at times, these assumptions and misconceptions can cause the Latino leader to accept it as truth. She replied:

Imposter syndrome is very real. A lot of times, we feel we shouldn’t be there and we’re not good enough to serve. We definitely should be at those tables, but sometimes subconsciously, we limit ourselves because we might feel we aren’t good enough or we don’t belong in those places.

Some of the Latina leader participants reflected on their experiences as women and how machista (male chauvinist) ideals contribute to the feeling of imposter syndrome, which is imposed on the leader. Sherman (2013) described this syndrome as one that impacts women as they enter leadership roles. Fresno County leader Erica Cabrera shared her story of how this happened to her when she was contemplating a run for office in a rural community. She stated:

There was a councilmember that resigned to take on a different capacity, and they were going to do an appointment process for that position. I was six months pregnant at the time and decided to talk to some of the councilmembers. They asked me, how are you going to do this when you know you’re going to have a brand new baby? Are you sure
you can take this on? Unfortunately, I thought about it and said to myself maybe they are right, and maybe I shouldn’t throw my name in the hat, and ultimately, I didn’t.

Some Latinas expressed that even though they were in the room with other Latinas leaders, they still questioned themselves. Former Mayor of Riverbank, Virginia Madueño, reflected on her opportunity to be in a Latina leadership development program on a national scale. She stated:

The National Hispanas Leadership Institute had women from all over the country, and seeing brilliant women made me question why I was there and if I could equate. But I said yes, I am good enough, had life and rich experience that helped contribute to the discussions and dialogue.

Alma El Issa, CVLLA board member and former Central California Latina Network board member, remembered moments when she also felt that she was not worthy of being in spaces even if they were with like-minded people with similar backgrounds. She commented:

The leadership training that I first experienced was at a university level for Chicano–Latino students to go to a leadership conference. I remember feeling like I didn’t belong and that I wasn’t good enough to be in that space. Then going into the HOPE Leadership Institute, which was for Latinas, I felt the same sentiment asking, why am I in this space again?

Multiple determinants of external influences coincided with ET and how the Latino leader can identify with a sense of powerlessness. The participant may feel helpless or powerless to change things. This causes the leader to choose not to pursue running for office. Carolyn Flores expressed her concern about leaping from board member status to launching a campaign
due to *machista* (male chauvinist) ideals or lack of support from even other fellow Latinas. She said:

> Part of the discouraging thing is, I don’t necessarily see a version of me in 10 years that says it is possible. You are still going to be a good mom and that your kids are gonna be fine. I know that if I were to enter in[to] the ring of elected public service, then the blowback that I would get as a single mom would be why am I not home with my kids? It just feels like a hurdle.

Alma El Issa resonated with the thought of not being able to be an elected official because of antiquated ideals and values that are forced on many Latinas. She commented:

> I have always wanted to run for school board. I’m not trying to use it as a way to move up in power. I really am passionate about education. But within my own family, they say you can’t do it. Who’s gonna raise your kids? You are going to be advocating for others, but what about your own children? I think that has stopped me because it comes from people who know you, it makes it harder.

Former Congressional Candidate, Virginia Madueño, who did not win her race, shared that because of her experiences, she does not want to be a Democrat anymore and wants to start a no party preference (NPP). She recalled, “During my political campaign, change was not accepted, recognized, or wanted.”

Other participants expressed concerns about how the Central Valley gets forgotten when compared to the Northern and Southern Californian regions, which creates barriers to attaining resources for residents in the Valley. Karla Sieja, former Merced city council candidate and Merced County leader, mentioned the clear differences. She replied:
The concerns of Latinos are represented differently throughout the state of California. It comes down to resources. Representatives from Los Angeles have more “power” in negotiations [than] Central Valley representatives have because there are more of them and [fewer] political representatives in the Central Valley due to [the] population.

Fresno City Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria shared the same concern about the distribution of resources but is starting to see a change. She commented, “In the Central Valley, we are still breaking more ceilings than Southern and Northern California. We are starting to see a shift because of mentorship and support that recent Latino leaders have been able to build.”

Others like Ana Melendez, director of Legislative Affairs at the State Water Resources Control Board, hoped there would be a different mentality. She commented, “I think the Central Valley has more in common with the rest of the state than we think. I’ve felt that the rhetoric that is regenerated time after time, of an us versus them, hurts us more than helps.”

Another sector of the community that encounters many obstacles is the undocumented population. Yuliana Franco, Madera County community leader, shared how those who are undocumented could face feelings of inadequacy and may lead them not to be involved in the community. She shared that her similar experience is why she chose to volunteer and stated:

I really want someone that looks like my mom to know that it’s possible for their children. You don’t need to figure it out alone. There are a lot of people that want to really help them get in[to] a better situation in life. As an undocumented person, I had no means of getting a driver’s license or going to college.

A few participants identified the lack of unity in the Latino community as a feeling of powerlessness. As Gutierrez and Lewis (1999) explained ET, the sense of powerlessness presents challenges for the individual to develop a skill set to address and stand up to discriminatory
systems. Angel Ann Flores, Stockton Area Unified School District (SAUSD) trustee, expressed her concern and stated:

Because of the good ol’ boy mentality, walking the community and doing a grassroots effort really matters. I have been attacked as a Latina candidate, and even the strongest Latinas need to think about what, when, and how we run for office. Men don’t have to think that way. Sometimes our own people hurt us. We don’t have enough Latino leaders to stand together.

Karla Sieja disclosed her concern about the lack of unity in the greater area of Merced and said:

Although Latinos represent a large portion of Merced, I don’t see Latino groups united for causes, issues, being politically motivated, or collectively supporting Latino candidates. We need to be more strategic, organized, and work together instead of working in silos.

Another external influence that shapes political ambition is not tapping into and maximizing the promising power of Latino leaders. Juan Carranza expressed his worry about Latinos not owning their potential and stated, “We need to trust our abilities as Latino leaders; I think we need to understand the capacity, the talents, the skills that we have to take a role within our communities.” Ernie Garcia, Fresno County leader and CVLLA graduate, also recognized this as an issue. He said, “To get more Latinos involved, there need to be more Latinos involved. As people can see themselves represented, they’ll feel more empowered to get involved.”

Virginia Madueño, former Riverbank mayor, identified with the self-belief that Latinos need to embrace a strong and powerful leadership and stated, “I think we as Latinos need to understand
how we have been underestimated, undervalued, underutilized, and how it has had a ripple effect in our valley in our society and our community and our state.”

Tulare County Supervisor Eddie Valero acknowledged that for a Latino leader to reach their potential, they must take ownership of their neighborhoods and communities. He said:

It is a constant reminder to let people know that Tulare County is important, and we are the heart that connects everything in the state. We build a collective consciousness that is motivated through actions of political, social, and economic justice. How do we get to that point where we’re all collective in a unified front and then to be able to share that message with other Latinos in California and to give us a chance at the leadership table?

A sense of powerlessness can be attributed to not having guidance or someone that is willing to devote their time and effort to the individual. Dr. Angel Reyna, Madera Community College president and former mayor, described how difficult it was to find someone to assist him in his development. He commented:

I tried to reach out to a potential mentor and asked if he would mentor me, and he shut me down and said, “I am too busy.” I don’t ever want to do that to someone because I know there are not that many of us out there. From my lived experience, I have seen some Latino males unable to ask for mentorship because, to them, it is a sign of weakness if you ask for help.

Former Madera Mayor Andy Medellin reflected on a similar experience in trying to find a mentor to encourage his growth and said, “I had some great teachers growing up and some great principles, but I didn’t really have somebody that would mentor me.” Gema Ortega, a member of the Reedley College Latino Faculty Association and CVLLA graduate, resonated with the lack of mentorship and said, “I didn’t have a mentor. I had to believe in myself and have
my own internal motivation to take on a leadership role.” James Martinez, Fresno County Board of Education board of trustee, shared how challenging it was to enter the arena of the political world because he did not have a public service mentor. He replied:

I really had to learn public service all on my own, which is why it took so long to finally get the hang of it. As many jobs that I had working for elected officials, I really had to learn the hard way. You can get a public policy degree, but they don’t teach you how to work in a government office, and they don’t teach you how to engage and interact with voters and your constituents.

Multiple leaders did not allow the lack of mentorship to prevent them from mentoring others, such as Nicole Parra, who stated, “I had so many good mentors but no one that looked like me. That is why I was one of the founding members of Latina Leaders of Kern County.”

Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria contemplated the struggle Latinos have without the essential piece of mentorship and said:

There is [a] lack of mentorship, and people don’t even know where to begin and run for elected office. I feel fortunate to be able to put the pieces together to be a successful candidate. But someone that doesn’t have that network or infrastructure, they would not even know where to start.

Dr. Angel Reyna expressed his unfulfilled desire to have a mentor and how it led to some strife. He commented:

Once I got elected, I really wished I would have had a mentor because I felt isolated when I became a mayor. In one situation, our wastewater treatment facility failed, and over the weekend, we didn’t necessarily have coverage because we were still in a smaller town, and the generators didn’t kick in. I took some advice from an older Latino mayor in
another town not to respond to the media. We had our meetings, and we would share the information [with] the community but not [with] the news outlets. The media didn’t let it go. My biggest regret was not having a mentor that would have helped me navigate that space better.

A number of participants shared that they were able to pursue public servitude once someone invested in them as a leader. This area of ET leads the leader to encounter the feeling of potential power. John Torres, a mentor in the Latino Leadership Initiative in Stanislaus County, stated, “I’m 43 years old, but I had no idea I was a leader until I was about 40. I had Latino mentors that said, no, you’re a leader, and you’re a leader of leaders.” Nicole Parra recollected how important it was to have an elected official mentor and commented:

Former Congressman Cal Dooley provided a foundation of service and appointed me as the first Latina director for a congressional office in the Valley. It wasn’t until Cal Dooley said, “You should run for this,” I don’t know what would have happened, I knew I would be of service, but someone who believed in me and had so much trust in him. Since he told me I could do it, then I knew I had a chance.

A Fresno City councilman acknowledged that many Latinos advance because of an elected official mentor and said:

I was a 1.5 GPA [grade point average] student in high school, I had to make up 3 years of school in 1 year and pulled it up to a 3.5 and was able to go to college. I chose Fresno State to stay close and provide for my family. I started my job in congress as one that didn’t have [a] connection to public policy or the farming industry, and I didn’t go to a school like Stanford or Harvard. Congressman Cal Dooley reinforced the high expectation. I was expected to perform as someone who went to Harvard. I had to work
longer and study harder. You can track a dozen local leaders to Congressman Dooley. He opened doors for people that didn’t have the political connection through internships and jobs.

Others like Adelfa Lorenzano, board member of the Greater Chamber of Commerce and CVLLA graduate, expressed how vital it was for a mentor to give her a gentle push to serve as a young person. She stated, “I was encouraged to run for student council, I believe that having the encouragement from my vice-principal made me feel better about myself. Also, a friend invited me to get involved in my church youth group throughout high school.” Julio Lopez, Tobacco Coalition member and CVLLA graduate, agreed about the outcomes of authentic youth mentorship and said, “Mentors were constantly sending me leadership opportunities. I always thought that if someone had the belief in me to offer me an opportunity, I should have belief in myself to do it.”

Another external influence for the theme of political ambition was the inspiration that came from family. Various participants expressed that the idea of serving or loving their community came as a familial motivation and became a catalyst for their quest to contribute civically. The Latino leaders revealed that the ET concept of power-sharing was something that propelled them. Carol Padilla Shaath, former board member of the Central California Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and FUSD administrator, recalled how her parents gave back to the underserved. She stated, “My dad was such a good example of showing compassion to our immigrant community who many of them were undocumented, and he always tried to help.” Dr. Lupe Jaime-Mileham echoed that the example that her parents showed her was invaluable and commented:
I did not have the English language. Although I contributed to the achievement gap because my grades were horrible growing up, my parents made sure it didn’t define who I was as an individual. I think they were always able to find our strength and say, “Mija (darling), you are showing up to school. You are one step ahead of us because of the fact that you are going to school.” Unfortunately, our system does not recognize those assets because we utilize Western-world types of matrices.

Lori Natal, HLI graduate and Fresno City College counselor, expressed that her mother displayed service. She replied:

My mother became actively involved in the League of Mexican American Women locally. She also created the “Young League” of Mexican American Women. She motivated me to become involved, and I actively participated as a teen in the Young League. From then on, throughout high school, college, and in the professional realm, I continually chose to participate and serve the community.

Ms. Ojeda, Association of California School Administrators Region IX board member and former board member for Central CA Latina Network, identified with the notion that family influenced her to commit to caring for others. She said:

I believe my grandmother’s influence of working with others for the betterment of our community was my first experience with a mentor. She worked for Head Start as an educator. I would tag along in the summers and get to see firsthand how early education can help students become better prepared for school. From that point on, I wanted to help others.

Karla Sieja explained that her grandmother’s influence had an extensive impact on her path by stating:
My grandmother is what influenced civic engagement in my family. My grandmother was the founder of a community health center. She was a Mexican immigrant who arrived in Planada, California, and recognized the health disparities among migrant workers in the area. With a lack of transportation and language barriers, the community lacked access to health care. As a family, we volunteered on political campaigns, and I grew up going to board meetings at times with my grandmother and witnessed politicians meeting with my grandmother.

Vivian Velasco-Paz recognized the impact her mother’s involvement had on her life and said, “Mom was the first of 10 that went to college to become a teacher. She advocated for her students at the school board. My dad would say don’t make a fuss, my mom said yes, we need to.” Andy Medellin, former mayor of Madera, expressed how Latina trailblazers like his mother paved the way for him. He commented:

She was the first-ever Latina mayor in the state of California. There were no women that sat on city councils. They were city clerks, so she had to wear different hats to prove herself above and beyond. She was not a college graduate. She could have been helping her sister on the ranch, but she chose to wear high heels and a briefcase to be in a room full of men talking about big development. My dad was a very old school traditional Hispanic and had a wife who was appreciated and respected and asked to have lunch and dinners and coffees and drinks. When she walked into a room, people migrated to her and not to him. You can imagine how difficult that was for my dad.

Delia Martinez stated that her father was her example and challenged her to be fully committed. She said, “My dad was president of the Latin American Club in Cutler. He said, “If you are going to commit, you need to do it wholeheartedly at 100%; if you don’t, the only person
you are cheating is yourself.” Dr. Angel Reyna experienced an influence from one of his siblings and stated:

I had various conversations with one of my older sisters. I was always being critical of the city. I said they are not doing this, they should be doing that. At one point, she said, “Well, do something about it, why don’t you run for city council, and I’ll run for school board.” I hadn’t really considered it, but it was the town I grew up in, so I knew it well. We both supported each other to run, and she didn’t get elected, but I did. I recall vividly that moment when my sister said, “Well, do something about it.” I didn’t know what it meant to be civically involved, and I think if my sister wouldn’t have pushed me, I would not have.

Others like Councilwoman Elect AnnaLisa Perea are part of a family legacy that has politically been engaged for decades. She said:

I was born and raised in a family that has dedicated much of their life to public service. My father was on the Fresno County Board of Education, and he was the first council member in the newly created Fresno council District 7. He went on to be on the Fresno County board of supervisors. My older brother was on the Fresno City council District 7 and then he went on to serve in the California State assembly. My mother has served on a few different boards, so public service runs deep within my family’s core, and it was something that we were raised to do ourselves.

Juan Carranza had a different experience as his family was engaged in Mexico but not in the United States due to the lack of access to those decision-making spaces for noncitizens. He commented, “Coming to the United States, my father’s engagement changed. It is more difficult for our families to adapt to new systems. Even though he was actually actively engaged in
Mexico, he is not in the United States.” Others like Itzi Robles were not aware that they had family members that were involved in politics in their native lands and said:

   It was later in life when I started getting more involved politically that I found out my grandfather was actually a council member in Mexico. My mom said this is where you get it from, it is in your blood.

A subtheme under political ambition is gender politics and is an external influence. Many public servants, both Latina and Latino, shared their personal experiences or observations. Some participants described situations between Latinas versus white male counterparts and, in some cases, Latinas versus Latino males when rising Latinas are on the verge of leadership. The theme of gender politics corresponds to the CRT tenet of interest conversion. Maria Lemus described the reality of Latina representation in the Central Valley and stated:

   If we look at the makeup of boards, corporations tend to be more male-heavy. When it is social service or nonprofits, it tends to be more women. I think as the corporations or foundations are bigger, we need to make sure there is equity inclusive of people of color, not just gender, but also women of color. In my experience with boards, it is a lot of older white males, but it’s changing.

   Some participants shared stories and firsthand situations where gender politics took place and were disruptive in their service. Dr. Lupe Jaime-Mileham recalled an example in her position in the state of California and said:

   I oversee all the dollars when it comes to childcare and development. I’m in meetings with other states in which my counterpart is a white male, and in one particular meeting where I was a panelist, they would refer to his title, but they would not refer to my title of doctor. He was stereotyping a lot, and I just couldn’t believe there was a platform for him
there, and it felt like the males were given a lot more time than I was. I have many examples, particularly when I’m with other states that perhaps don’t have the same values as California and value diversity like California does.

Ms. Ojeda has worked for elected officials and political campaigns for most of her career and stated:

I have seen firsthand age discrimination (being too young), gender discrimination (being sexualized), and marital discrimination (being single). When young Latina women run for office, they are scrutinized more fiercely than their male counterparts. They are called derogatory names, they are characterized as something indecent for wanting this [man’s] role, they are called selfish, as they are not focused on their families. A man would not be judged at all for wanting to serve in office, a sad truth that still persists today.

Councilmember Elect AnnaLisa Perea stated, “For the past 7 years, we have had one woman on the city council. Over 50% of our population here in Fresno is female, but yet we go severely underrepresented on the city council level.” Erica Cabrera identified how many elected bodies in the Central Valley have gaps in gender, let alone have Latina representation and that Latinas have been regularly attacked and blasted in the media. She commented:

If you look at the Fresno County board, there are no females. They deal with budgets for mental health, insurance, for undocumented and documented residents, and there are no women on that board. I think that, at times, it really shows that they lack compassion because they don’t have that voice represented on that board. When you look at the Fresno city council, there’s one woman. There are times when she is attacked and under scrutiny that you would never see done to a man. For instance, an emergency situation occurred that involved the female councilmember and that 911 call tape was released.
Yet, when there was a previous councilmember that had a similar incident, there was no tape released.

Gilbert Felix spoke of the same Latina who has faced and overcome adversities as a candidate, even from Latinos. He said:

I know of a Latina assembly candidate in the north end of the Valley that gets questions like what about your children and your husband? Are they okay with you running? It is 2022, and she is an attorney and a city councilwoman, and people are still asking women these questions. It’s not just necessarily from white voters, but it is from our communities, from Latino men. It is pervasive. There is a reason why we haven’t had a single Latina member of congress.

Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria reflected on her journey and the lack of representation on the dais of the City of Fresno and how change has slowly occurred in the more urbanized city but at a slow pace. She stated:

When I decided to run for local office, I saw there were no women on the city council. I felt that it was critical when we look at the history of Fresno only one other Latina has ever held a seat on the council. The dynamics of the council have now changed, and there is more trust with some of my fellow counterparts. But before, with some of my male colleagues, they would talk about issues in spaces that I did not get invited to, like fishing or other ‘boy’ outings. It is frustrating as the only woman on [the] council. There are instances where I have had to be very uncomfortable. In order to advance the community agenda, you have to subject yourself to things that you normally would not.

Former Assemblymember Nicole Parra recounted the firsthand events in her past where gender politics played a role during her public service tenure. She said:
While working for the congressman during meetings with the Latino mayors, I was asked to leave since they thought I was the secretary. When they were corrected that I was the director, they would say, “Oh, Mija, (darling), I am sorry.” Even in the four counties I ran for (Fresno, Kings, Tulare, and Kern) that have different cultures and political leanings, the issue was my age and sex. I have to think about what I am wearing, is it too revealing? What type of nail polish am I wearing, neutral, not red?

As a Latino elected official, Councilman Miguel Arias recalled how his counterpart has been targeted and attacked on numerous occasions. He said:

A female elected official’s personal life is fair game. In no other time have other elected partners been talked about. The biggest difference is that females have more to lose than their male counterparts. In Fresno, this doesn’t translate to white women, but Latina elected are targeted. White men have openly been more aggressive toward Latinas, they feel triggered [by] women in authority and treat them with a high level of disrespect.

Everything that Alexandria Ocasio Cortez goes through at the national level, people in Fresno think they can do it to the Latina elected in Fresno. The City of Fresno has so many failed systems, and it will take multiple generations of leaders to make progress. I believe that Latinas will be better suited to do the work and be far more mature and less egocentric to get the work done.

Amanda Renteria considered the makeup of the Central Valley and the complicated situations Latinas faced when they sought office. She said:

The image and definition of leadership in the Valley [are] super masculine, some may call it traditional. A key example is that the leaders held in [the] highest esteem are farmers. And, from there, it’s big business, often run by men. We simply don’t have
examples of strong female leaders in charge or who have seemingly been powerful. As a result, it has been extremely difficult to break through. I still remember my first poll when folks were asked David versus Amanda, they didn’t know us at all (and the names wouldn’t necessarily imply race either). Just by gender alone, I was behind in the race. More with Republicans and nonparty preference, but also with Democrats too. Minnie Santillan recognized the same issues of the Valley having gender bias and systemic racism as definitely factors. She commented:

Looking at Fresno County, it has always been an issue to have women get elected, let alone Latinas. Fresno thinks like a small town. Networking is so difficult, and it is a very cliquish environment. The progress in Southern California and Northern California has not reached the Central Valley, and it is tougher for women to penetrate politics here. It is a contact sport, and you have to be thick-skinned.

Yamilet Valladolid identified the struggle that many Latinas have when they are contemplating putting their hat in a political race. She said, “A woman gets asked about seven times before they say yes to running. No matter your generation, you are judged and asked how do you balance life, children, work, and political office. Why don’t men get asked those questions?”

**Cultural Influence**

A number of participants introduced their public service experience as one that would allow them to connect to their culture in a more meaningful way. Elena Nava identified the lack of cultural presence in her city as a prompt for her to engage and stated:

I was driven by a passion of not wanting cultural events here in Tulare County to disappear because, often, the Hispanic chamber hosts business-oriented events [that are]
not culturally centered. Being a part of the League of Mexican American Women helped me lead events for Dia de los Niños and Dia de los Muertos. I helped revive the League that was going to fold due to lack of membership.

As significant as it was for the participants to have mentors, many shared that it was most impressionable and life-changing to have a mentor that looked like them and shared cultural values. Sánchez et al. (2014) described that the mentee and mentor relationship with someone of the same race could actualize spaces that are considered safe to share about social injustices around discriminatory racial experiences. In this instance, both external and cultural influences may have motivated the Latino leader to pursue public servitude. Alida Verduzco Silva stated, “As a Latina, I find value in learning from Latino leaders, some with similar backgrounds to me.” Stephanie Briones reflected, “I know the challenges that I have experienced as a Latinx leader, and I love that I can reach out to my Latinx mentor that knows what I am going through.” Various testimonies revealed that key mentorships started in their adolescence. Maria Lemus exhibited a shared familiarity with multiple participants when they recalled that their mentor empowered them as young people and commented:

I started serving through the College Assistance Migrant Program [CAMP] program when I entered college. We were all immigrants and first-generation coming from farmworker parents. I think that allowed us to bond and build a relationship. It was my introduction to leadership and self-confidence. One of my most impactful mentors, Raul Moreno, happened when I started the university. I am first generation college-going, and my parents never went to college. Being an immigrant and undocumented, there are so many doors closed.
Many of the participants, as first-generation college students, did not have pathways outlined for them. As Perez Huber (2010) recognized, a majority of Latinos do not have guides in their lives that support them in figuring out the higher education process. This was true for numerous participants, and they reflected on how leadership opportunities were even less. Perez Huber (2010) added that although many undocumented people are resilient, these inequities of access to resources and support allow for unfair chances of succeeding due to limited opportunities. This ET concept of power sharing contributed to the success of many participants. Maria Lemus and Yuliana Franco reflected on how key it was to have an authentic adult mentor that could help them maneuver unknown systems for them. They stated:

I did not know I was undocumented until I was 17 years old, when I wanted to apply for a driver’s license and go to college. Working in the fields, I remember wanting so much more, and my school counselor, Mr. Phil Gonzalez, helped me enroll in the community college. During that time, there were no programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA], so I had to pay out-of-state tuition fees. Because of his belief in me and his mentorship, I started to get involved in the community.

Dr. Lupe Jaime made a point about the impact the adult ally had on not just her education decisions and pathway but how their ability to speak the language of her parents made all the difference. She said:

I think about the hours that my mentor spent with me, my siblings, and my parents by breaking bread with having parent meetings in my home. He would lift us up when we fell and *rogando* (begging) us when we needed it too. He would talk to my parents about why I should only work in the fields during the summertime, not before and after school. Those are the kind of things that I feel vested in me to pay it forward as a mentor.
Albright et al. (2017) acknowledged how strong mentorship and cultural responsiveness starts with the mentor facilitating in partnership with the young person by hearing and lifting their voice. Patty Barahona explained that their mentoring relationship did not start until they were in college as a young adult, but their genuine relationships with allies who cared revealed their capacity to be a leader. They replied:

I had a nonprofit one-credit course in college at the National Latina Health Network [NLHN] and, for the first time, met two incredible women that saw the best in me. They celebrated my identity as a queer Latinx young person. They believed in my ability to lead HIV Aids Prevention work within the Latinx community at Rutgers University. They consistently encouraged me. They helped me see that being a public servant is core to who I am, and they positioned me to achieve success in my work.

Yamilet Valladolid expressed how much she would have benefited from a Latino mentor when she was young and said, “Sometimes people believe in us more than we believe in ourselves, and a lot of us needed that when we were younger. If that would have been an opportunity, we would have been able to accomplish even more things.” Some participants shared that they first experienced a negative experience with an adult mentor who was supposed to guide them and be an ally. Cindy Hernandez remembered that it was not until a Latina counselor invested in her that she could start on her journey. She shared:

I had a white counselor in high school that said I couldn’t go to a UC [University of California], even though I was in the top 10 of my high school. But there was a Latina, Lupe Sosa, who encouraged me to do leadership programs. I think I wouldn’t participate in leadership training if it wasn’t for my Latina mentors.
John Torres shared that in his life experience, he did not get the cultivation or verbal motivation from his surroundings. He commented:

I see the value in my own life experience of having a Latino mentor. In our culture, we are not told of how great you are. It’s usually, oh, you think you’re bad and all important now. There’s a lot of banter in that way. But at the end of [the] day, it’s nice to hear that you’re doing a good job or that you’re someone’s proud of you or they’re noticing your growth.

Cutler-Orosi School Board Member Delia Martinez expressed the importance of having Latino elected officials willing to put the time in to guide you and give you the extra nudge to launch your race and stated, “My friend inspired me to run for school board and showed me that I could be a voice or change for the community. His name recognition is strong in the community, and they introduced me to many people.” Itzi Robles contributed to this by agreeing on how important investment from a Latina leader assisted her in her public service and said, “I suffered from imposter syndrome, I never saw myself as a public servant. Every single board that I serve on, someone has pushed me. Latina mentors told me you should do this and you’d be good at it.” FUSD School Board of Trustee, Genoveva Islas, felt compelled to recognize those women who came before her and devoted their time and effort to shape her. She commented:

I want to give credit to some very powerful women that were very influential in my voice. Growing up as a daughter of traditional parents, you’re supposed to be amable (kind), and you’re supposed to be helpful and fit into all of these sorts of molds that they want to put you in. There is the gender-conforming experience, but I had my tias (aunts) who were outspoken and who would challenge the system. When I got to college, I
definitely had women of color who were professors and well-educated, and going through programs like summer bridge [was] life-changing.

Angel Ann Flores, a SAUSD board of trustee, expressed how a trailblazer and established Latina leader who questioned broken systems also invested in her life. She said:

My mentor is a very strong Latina. She had a lot of connections with Latino leaders and businesses within the community. She is now in her 70s and running our Mexican Heritage Center. I get called out for my fake accent, “tryna be Mexican” by my opposing team because my Spanish isn’t great. It has been a journey, but my mentor keeps me in line and speaks the truth. One thing I admire and respect about her is to tell me if I am wrong or if I am doing too much. She has been the one who has been there for me. She tells all the head people to support me and doesn’t hold back in any means.

The theme of political ambition is shaped by the lessons many Latino leaders learned by observing and learning from others. Multiple leaders shared examples of knowledge that they acquired. The empowerment theory of participation connects the reflections and analysis of others’ experiences, the productive and the mistakes. Many of the leaders shared a faith influence that contributed to their engagement. Carol Padilla Shaath recalled:

My mom was and is still heavily involved in her church. When I was younger, I did a lot of volunteer work for the church, and as I got into high school, I remember playing the organ for the children’s choir. My dad had a local business in the community, a grocery store, and it was always about helping people and serving a large immigrant community.

Ms. Ojeda described her great-grandmother and grandmother as a source of empowerment and stated:
My great-grandma would always feed the hungry on her front porch. These lessons of helping others [were] carried to my grandmother, who was also active in both her church and community. She would take her children to the UFW march with the farmworkers. When I was a child, she took me on my first march against the nuclear arms race.

Councilman Miguel Arias reflected on how the church was the only community his family had in the rural city of Mendota and said:

As an immigrant, my mother had to come to the United States without her children until she was able to raise money to bring us. During my childhood, she wasn’t able to attend and have involvement in school or in the community. Our community was the church, so we became altar boys since it [was] the only thing we knew in the city of Mendota.

Minnie Santillan identified with the sentiment that for her family, the church was a way to give back and helped grow the desire to care for others. She commented:

I am from an immigrant family, and being the 13th of 14 children, my sense of community comes from my parents and family. We were stout Catholics that went to church every Sunday, learned acts of service, and to give to others. Even though my family was poor, when it came to love and faith, my parents instilled that in every one of us.

Another cultural influence for leaders to seek out political engagement is values instilled by family members, such as a reminder to stay humble with respect to roots, ancestry, and faith, as well as respecting a family’s heritage and place of origin or paying homage to the elders that came before. In addition, in many Latino households, it is shameful to ask for money. The theme of political ambition with cultural influence corresponds to the theory of LatCrit as described by Gonzalez et al. (2021) and the key guidepost of ensuring a continual engagement of self-critique.
to stay principled and grounded. City of Fresno Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria reflected on how her mother instilled in her the values of benevolence and said, “My mom always taught me to whom much is given, much is required. She told me never to forget where I came from. It was clear that I had to come back home and do the work.” Angela Vega Hiyama, Fresno Chamber of Commerce and Fresno Area Hispanic Foundation board of director and former board member for Central CA Latina Network shared the root of her involvement and said:

My service has been to nonprofit boards for both community-based organizations and business associations throughout the Central Valley. The region is important to me because I was born and raised here. It is home. It is where I am rooted. It is where I am raising my family, and therefore want the region to prosper for them and for future generations.

Julio Lopez spoke of a shared experience with those that live in rural communities and how it is vital for him to lift up forgotten places. He stated, “I have served in the rural Westside of Fresno County. That’s where I grew up, and that is the community I come from. I know what it’s like to feel so disconnected from the world.” Cindy Hernandez uncovered the reasoning behind why so many Latino political candidates struggle in asking for money when they run for office. She said:

It runs counterculture to ask for money if you were raised by immigrant parents who struggled. I think my parents have asked me to borrow money once in my whole life. It was very difficult for them to do it because they had no other option.

Genoveva Islas reflected on the gender roles that are prevalent in some traditional Latino homes when it comes to borrowing or asking for campaign donations and stated:
Fundraising can be uncomfortable, especially when you are dealing with the traditions of gender roles. You have to retrain yourself and be intentional about engaging and presenting yourself and letting them know why supporting you would be [to] their benefit. There is a different language that you have to learn as an elected official.

The self-critique is quite common for the Latino elected. Tulare County Supervisor Eddie Valero said he constantly asks himself the following:

How am I being led to serve? How am I being led to give back? How am I being led to being in different or various leadership positions, even though I may not want to be in that position? What does the Lord want in terms of my development as a leader in this community?

City of Fresno Councilman Miguel Arias acknowledged that self-critique requires a leader to hear from those more seasoned and who have lived out challenges yet have survived them. He said:

The elders have [a] deep loyalty to one another because there are so few of them. In the past, I was annoyed to have to pay homage and respect. Ten years into leadership, I want to spend more time with them than less. Every time I go to them about a struggle on the council, they share a story that was much harder, and it gives me [a] perspective that I am not the first one. The elders have set a foundation and have had battles for us, and now it is just a matter of us as current leaders to execute and govern effectively.

Dr. Angel Reyna contemplated the reminder and call to be humble, the self-critique that Latinos need to remember where they came from and the struggles they have overcome, and stated:
I had to navigate and struggle with pulling myself back and not believing that I was more than who I really was because people were elevating me. I can’t lose myself in this process. You get into these positions where you may think I’m better than them because I’m a mayor. When I would start to feel that, I would always intentionally say no, you’re not. You just have greater authority, but you also have greater responsibility. I think that’s another challenge that people lose themselves and become the position. If they lose the election, they lose who they are and they fall down even more. The higher you elevate yourself, the harder you fall. A reality that people need to understand is that you are a servant, and that is it, regardless of your title.

Itzi Robles expressed how there needs to be a change in how regular Joe voters perceive politicians and said, “We need to change what we think an elected official is supposed to look like, act like and do. People see them like movie stars instead of just identifying with them because they are promoting good policy.”

An additional cultural influence and subtheme of political ambition is tied to the guidepost of the LatCrit theory, as explained by Gonzalez et al. (2021), of building intra-Latina/o communities and inter-group coalitions to promote justice struggles. Latino leadership development academies and initiatives were created to advance opportunities for Latinos, and the following are reflections on how these spaces have cultivated their development. The lack of access to these types of leadership development programs was a shared concern from many participants. Stephen Avila stated, “I don’t even know what the first step even looks like to run for office. Where do you even begin? There might be an interest, but how do I get [my] foot in the door?” Former Tulare County Supervisor expressed that there is a learning gap from a direct service mentality to being a policy maker and said, “Our Latino community needs to learn that
social service is different from social change. Policy-making is on a different level. Many stay in the area of social services.” Vivian Paz observed that there needs to be a more concentrated effort from Latino leaders and replied, “I think the outreach efforts of the parties to Latinas have not been strong or effective. We need Latinas to champion around one to help her get elected and figure out the process together. It is overwhelming.” Erica Cabrera identified that there is a desire of Latinos who want to embark in public servitude, yet there are no tools for them. She stated, “There [are] lots of people that want to serve the community and have no clue about the legal aspect of it. It is not as easy as just putting your name on a sign and saying, vote for me.” Alma Martinez, a former school board candidate, pointed out that during her campaign, the rules and regulations were not as accessible. She said, “I didn’t know the requirements from the Fair Political Practices Commission. It isn’t easy to understand, and I speak English. It was the hardest part about running. I got advice, but there is not a user-friendly handbook.” Marvin Jacobo explained that Latinos need a place of connection and community and stated, “Our people are communal, and we need to journey together with mutual support [and] encouragement. There needs to be intentional training of how government works, how leadership works, and how boards work.” Fresno City Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria revealed, “You can’t be what you can’t see. If I had never been exposed to opportunities, my vision would have been limited [in] what I could do. There is no infrastructure in place that supports Latinos to run for office.”

Rita Gallardo Good spoke about the links made for Latino public servants when they can connect culturally and said:

Latinos need more meaningful leadership-building opportunities and not just checking boxes. Many of us experience cultural taxation because it is the same Latinos being asked
to serve. We need for more Latinos to be interested in public service as board members or to run for office. But they need to be encouraged and equipped. They need to see other people that look like them so that they have the confidence to step up into those spaces. Nobody talks about how to get appointed to a board or a commission. People need to receive ‘animos’ (encouragement).

Yamilet Valladolid agreed with the necessity of culturally focused leadership development, especially in a region where the Latino population is so dense. She stated, “There are leadership programs, but there is no cultural sensitivity. Latinos are very people-centered, and most of those leadership programs are self-centered.”

An example of one of those programs is CVLLA, which was established in 2017 to equip and grow Latino leaders’ potential. One of the CVLLA founders, Alma Martinez, and former Dinuba Unified School Board candidate and former board member for Central CA Latina Network, recognized that “One of my main motivations for CVLLA is representation. All of these white men are making these decisions for us, and I want to change the face of the Valley to look like who lives here.” Many of the graduates of the program connected to their roots such as Alida Verduzco Silva who stated, “CVLLA helped me connect more deeply with aspects of my Latina background that I could leverage for the good of the world, including upbringing and cultural subtleties.” Elizabeth Fraire, board member of the Disabled American Veteran Thrift Stores, resonated with how graduating from the CVLLA program equipped her. She said, “I took different courses in the military, but something was missing. It wasn’t until I was able to participate in the CVLLA that showed me a different type of leadership, and I felt more connected culturally.” Stephanie Briones shared that CVLLA elevated her courage and skill sets to launch the Employees of Color Association (EOCA) at Clovis Community College. She
commented, “Thank you so much to all of the founders of the CVLLA. This leadership truly changed my life. It was a strong prompting from the CVLLA to create the EOCA.” Delia Martinez described CVLLA as a retention tool for leadership and said, “CVLLA inspired me to continue to be in my school board member role. It gave me different skills to better myself, and the networking helped me know who else I can reach out to in the community.” Sal Lucatero acknowledged the impact of CVLLA and stated:

I realized the importance of being able to be in a group of like-minded individuals. People who are going through similar things, have similar goals and obstacles that warrant the community to be shaped in a certain way. Seeing that you’re not the only one has helped me continue to build that drive to do better for our community. Being a part of the CVLLA brought [to] my view of what else we can do in the community. I joined a board, and I was the first non-old, non-white person to serve on this board in a span of 40 years.

Angela Vega Hiyama recognized how key Latina leadership networks and development programs grow a person’s desire to serve. She replied:

It was very critical. I am a first-generation college graduate, so I didn’t have any examples of women around me who worked in public service, much less served in elected office. I was young in my career when I found comfort and inspiration through my engagement with the Central California Latina Network. There I found women who looked like me, were passionate like me and served the public like me. There I was accepted. I was educated. I was empowered. In 2009, I participated in the HOPE Leadership Institute. The training exposed me to more options in serving the public—not just elected office, but to public commissions appointments and service on nonprofit
boards. It also provided me with exposure to a statewide network of Latina activists and leaders.

Dr. Lupe Jaime-Mileham agreed with how HLI prepared and embraced her and said, “These leadership development programs get you out of your circle and broaden your village. I got the most out of the ones that were centered around women and Latinas like HOPE.” Carolyn Flores revealed the same belief of how HOPE affected her by stating, “HOPE helped me build a skill set and gave me a level of confidence. I knew there was something stirring in me in regard to leadership. But it is the voices that you connect to that see this in you.” Nicole Parra said that HOPE allowed her to acknowledge that she could and should invest in her development. She further commented, “HOPE gave me the confidence to know that I needed to be committed to invest and improve myself. It was my first time in a room of Latinas who were doing similar work and meeting Latinas from outside the Valley.” Lori Natal shared that HOPE gave her awareness of statewide networks and stated, “The HOPE Leadership Institute exposed me to a much broader network and base to better understand politics and the requirements to become active in the political arena.”

Vivian Velasco-Paz looked to her past as a young person and saw how the Ivy League Project assisted her earlier on. The Ivy League Project gives underrepresented, high-achieving students access to Ivy Leagues by helping them apply or visit the campus. She commented:

I learned about mentorship through the Ivy League Project. I was a sophomore in high school, and I got great training on things I’d never heard of, networking, and have never heard of the word mentor before. Mr. Martin Mares was good at introducing us to those concepts. I remember him having us create business cards and ask[ing] people, can you
be my mentor? I know that is not the case for most people, especially Latinos. I got amazing opportunities because of people who were my mentors.

Additionally, the CLYLP was foundational to several elected officials, such as City of Fresno Council President Nelson Esparza, Former Riverbank Mayor Virginia Madueño, and City of Fresno Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria. The following are their reflections on how CLYLP exposed them to public policy at a young age. Councilman Nelson Esparaza recalled:

The summer before my senior year of high school, I did CLYLP locally in Fresno (weekend program) and a weeklong program in Sacramento. It led to a fellowship [in] my first year of college. I got to take a crash course in California politics and public policy. They set us up with nonstop schedules from morning to night with mixers to luncheons, networking events [and] seminars, but the bulk of our day was spent with the legislature and the capital and the board. I didn’t know what I was going to do within the field, but I knew I loved it and that I wanted to work in public service. When I did the program in high school, I got to meet the city council president. Fast-forward about 15 years, and I’m the actual city council president.

Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria described CLYLP as a motivator and stated, “I had the opportunity to participate in the CLYLP and go to the capitol. It kept cementing that it is important to have people like us to represent our communities.” Virginia Madueño reflected how having CLYLP communicate with her parents was key and commented, “In junior year, I was involved with the Mexican American Youth Association, and my mentors encouraged me to apply for CLYLP. They came and talked to my parents to ask for permission for me to go to Sacramento.”
Only a few years ago, Yamilet Valladolid and other Latino leaders in Stanislaus County gathered and concluded that they needed a Latino leadership development program. She said: I feel that there is not a lot of Latino representation and positions of influence where we are able to make impactful decisions. A few Latino leaders came together to create a people-centered initiative called the Latino Leadership Initiative [LLI]. We fostered leadership and mentorship in them. We can see them flourish and their confidence increased. They are more aware of the importance of being in a position of influence and using their influence for the greater good.

Marvin Jacobo, the cofounder of LLI in Stanislaus County, reflected, “We needed to begin to create systems and practices to develop our young people. The purpose of LLI is that we want to increase the number of skillful Latinos that serve our community in civil service positions.”

Latino leaders have shared how mentoring other Latinos is key to increasing the Latino leadership pipeline. Intentional mentorship builds potential power and is the act of power sharing. Some mentor in a more informal way, while others mentor within these Latino intergroup coalitions that have started mentorship programs. Some elected leaders declared how helping others through mentorship and passing the baton can ensure pathways for potential Latino leaders. School Board Member and Commissioner Itzi Robles observed, “I think we can’t forget that there are other Latinas who are coming behind us, and who need that extra push and that we need to also bring them with us and to open that space.” Juan Carranza stated that those in power need to recognize the younger generation:

We need more commitment from our current leaders to actually let go of the positions and start a succession plan by mentoring the younger generation. They want to keep a
monopoly for themselves, and I feel like they need to commit to creating a new
generation of leaders.

Vivian Velasco-Paz described the same circumstance of lack of available positions for
younger leaders and said, “Senior leaders have to let others lead. What bothers me is when you
see a person who’s been in a leadership role and they are just occupying a space. At some point,
we have to let others lead.” Erica Cabrera exposed the reality of white structures that are in place
for leadership and commented, “Look at it from a white man’s perspective, there’s a pipeline
already created when they know someone is going to retire. Latinos are not as structured in that
regard. We don’t have our pipeline, and it’s natural for them.” These are the reasons why more
established Latino leaders have and need to take [the] initiative to cultivate others. One of those
is City of Fresno Councilman Miguel Arias, who expressed that the work is immense and the
workers are few, which is why he ensures that those that come after him are well-prepared and
ready to take his place. Councilman Arias was reminded of wise counsel he received from his
mother that he has adopted as part of his leadership philosophy and stated:

I promoted my staff member, who is young and a DACA recipient, to be the interim chief
of staff. We have to be able to take risks in developing Latino leaders and convincing
them to do it. The primary reason I groom folks to lead is because the abundance of work
is so vast and the burn rate is so high and it will destroy us as a generation of leaders. I
know that if a kid from Mendota with no political background or mentorship or
experience can figure it out, there are so many people who can. My mom once told me
that we all go through the door of opportunity and it is up to us to decide if we hold the
door open for the person behind [us] or close it. The next person could be the next Miguel
Arias. If Congressman Cal Dooley would have closed the door, numerous leaders would
not exist in Fresno. The mess that was left is so hard to clean up and rebuild a city that we cannot afford to do it alone.

As many have reflected, Fresno City Councilwoman Elect AnnaLisa Perea shared that others paved the way for her. She said:

As I am moving up, I make sure that we’re bringing others up with me. Councilmember Esmeralda Soria appointed me to committees. She is somebody that did a good job building that pipeline for young people and for young women of color. She did what she said she was gonna do, which is she pointed more women to committees and commissions and boards. I want people to hold me accountable. I want to make sure that I am doing my part to appoint young people or to appoint women of color to leadership positions.

Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria expressed that it is her duty and calling to empower others to serve and commented:

I have encouraged folks to serve on boards and continue to build their network, which, in turn, become their supporters. We need to expose young people to local government. That is why I started the youth council members program. I noticed in our Latino community that we never thought about people coming behind us. For me, a succession plan has always been critical. In order for our community to succeed and for the work to continue, someone has to be prepared. I feel very proud that I have been able to do that for my council seat. Change doesn’t happen overnight, and I can only do so much in an 8-year period. If you want longevity, you need to think long-term.
Internal Influence

Participants’ insight on the political ambition theme highlighted their experiences with an internal influence. Some shared knowledge that was gained from their own life lessons. The empowerment theory of participation is demonstrated in the participant’s reflection on their own experiences, whether they were hard or easy life moments. They recalled what they learned about public service and what advice they would impart to others. Alida Verduzco Silva contemplated the richness of spirit and those who are passionate about social justice in the Central Valley and said, “As a child, seeing the impact that community activists had in securing labor rights for farmworkers was inspiring. Later in life, seeing the role public servants continue to have in striving for quality of life has been powerful.” Gilbert Felix shared the example his grandmother gave him and stated:

My grandparents, who helped raise me, being from a single mom, showed me nontraditional civic engagement in the way they served their neighborhood. It’s imprinted on my life, in my grandparents’ neighborhood, there were many mixed-status families and undocumented people working in the field. My grandma would babysit kids for free and helped create community up and down the neighborhood block. They lived in the neighborhood for 50 years and were the center of it.

Maria Lemus gave her story as an undocumented person and how she had to make some tough decisions to separate from her family and make Fresno County her home. She said:

When my parents decided to leave 17 years ago (back to Mexico), they said, “We can’t leave you, you should come, or do you want us to stay?” I knew if they stayed, they would continue working in the fields. I knew if I were to leave, at that time, I was still undocumented, I would not have the same opportunities that I was creating for myself
here. I saw myself in a lot of the first-generation migrant students that were coming to Fresno State. That became my community. We need to have those voices. This is home. Fabiola Gonzalez recognized that the strength of her immigrant mother was passed on to her and to her family. She replied:

I do remember that in the year 2000 when she was able to become a citizen, I helped her with the paperwork. Mom and I are immigrants, and we had this collective experience. I remember coaching her at the age of 20. She passed the test, but it was so ingrained in her that she has voted in every single election since then. Now my family and I try to figure out ways to serve others. Getting involved civically isn’t something that I grew up with directly, but because of the immigrant experience, we give back.

Others like Minnie Santillan shared that it was a personal attack that caused them to want to address injustices in a meaningful way. She shared:

I was student body president, and during my campaign, I remember some classmates calling me a stupid Mexican or a dumb wetback. As a young person, they tried to recall me. In high school, I started to think about who votes and the dynamics of well-to-do Caucasian students who didn’t want to see a daughter of a farmworker run the school.

Multiple participants expressed their concern about unity among Latinos in the Central Valley and how that can disrupt community change efforts. Yamilet Valladolid expressed the disappointment she has experienced and said, “Latinos need to work together and be inclusive and not in silos. People have to feel that they are part of this leadership development movement so they can leverage that movement. Otherwise, we’re gonna continue to work in silos.” James Martinez reported the same concern about silos and stated, “Our community is siloed. There are not a lot of times when we reach out to each other to work together to uplift not just each other
but also those that are coming behind us to take our place.” Julio Lopez shared that many times people move away from the Central Valley for the next best thing, which has been disheartening. He reported:

I have seen people turn their back on the community that they said they were going to help and support in search of their next opportunity. It was discouraging because, to me, it was the exposure, the position, that steered them off course. That’s what held me back for so long, but now I’m ready to step into my leadership.

Tulare County Supervisor Eddie Valero shared his unsettling story of when he saw Latinos were not united and said:

Latino leaders gathered in Tulare County and talked about an open seat. Everyone wanted to run for it. I said we are going to go back to square one, and no one is going to get it. We have seen examples where there was a fight between two Latinos, and who ended up getting it was not Latino. Why can’t we just identify someone and support that individual to move forward? I said, “Don’t let history repeat itself.” I honestly think that we need Latinos here in the County of Tulare to step up that are ready and prepared because, specifically in this county, people are ready to tear you down.

Dr. Angel Reyna explained that, at times, Latinos will get in the way of each other’s success and stated:

I think that, at times, we, as Latinos, are our own worst enemies. We will step on one another. There is an attitude of I want my status to be elevated, and I don’t care who I step on, instead of looking at the long game of sacrificing myself a little bit here for the greater good and the collective.
Angel Ann Flores contemplated heavily on her own past history as an elected official and commented, “We need to be brave and courageous and not allow ‘family secrets’ to be unspoken. We need to break curses of defending the favorites even if they are Latinos.” Karla Sieja shared her hopes that more Latinos gather to support one another by stating, “We as Latinos need to work together. If a person is interested in public service or running for office, guide or connect them with individuals who have the experience so they can mentor them and teach them.” Carolyn Flores identified an issue that has prevented her from launching as an elected official and said, “I don’t know if other Latinas will come to my aid as a single mom to build comunidad (community) with me. Because it seems that a majority of women who have chosen public office don’t have young kids.” While many have an insight into the division in their communities, many participants were aware that the fight continues and that there must be an effort to strive for unity. Even though FUSD School Board of Trustee Genoveva Islas is familiar with being attacked during her campaign, she leans on the strength of her ancestors. She commented:

Somebody intentionally and maliciously created a negative attack ad, and it was targeting me specifically as a person. It can be very disheartening and discouraging to the point of not wanting to put yourself out there for fear of more of that happening. I was very angry when it happened, but I think about historically all the impactful figures who had to go through things of that nature. We have to fight back and build our resilience.

Fresno City Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria expressed that there is strength in numbers. She said, “In the Valley, there are more folks that look like us, and we need to not be afraid to ask for help and work with each other.” Some personal lessons involved participants acknowledging their eyes being opened when they listened to certain constituencies in a more
intentional manner. Former Madera Mayor Andy Medellin discovered the power of youth voices and said, “Because I listened to youth, the Youth Commission was launched. Ninety percent of the Youth Commission were Latinas, and the youth of Madera [is] now seen and heard.” Tulare County Supervisor Eddie Valero described an inner strength and reminder to move forward through adversities through the rapper Eminem’s song ‘Lose Yourself’ and said, “You got to lose yourself in the music the moment you own it. You better never let it go. You only get one shot. Do not miss your chance to blow this opportunity up. Once in a lifetime.”

**Social Networks and Capital**

When analyzing the theme of social networks and capital, many participants started by stating the lack of access to these formalized structures that could lead to resources, including financial and human assets. Lori Natal described the importance of these connections for potential public servants and stated:

A pressing barrier to public service is name recognition. There needs to be a local network that supports Latinos, more specifically, Latinas, in becoming engaged in the political arena. This would include exposing them to the right people, connecting them with potential donors, helping to develop their “brand” and name recognition.

Others shared how their white counterparts do not struggle to gain entry into these networks. Many of their experiences are linked to the tenet of CRT, the permanence of racism due to biased practices. Vivian Velasco-Paz endured a discriminatory situation as a young adult in college and stated:

I was always very intimidated in the Ivy League setting to interact with people who were not Latinos, and in fact, when I did, I felt like I had really bad experiences. I went to a professor to try to get into international aid work in DC [Washington, D.C]. The
comments that he made were very demeaning such as you might want to dress more professional, you might not want to wear lipstick, women will be intimidated by your youth and your background. I was very uncomfortable with a white male telling me that.

Fabiola Gonzalez recalled an encounter she had with a white politician. She replied: Somebody told me I never had to fundraise in my life. As soon as I announce that I’m running, the money comes. I thought, what a privileged statement to say. There is absolutely no way that I could say I’m running and money would just appear.

Some elected officials, like former Mayor of Riverbank Virginia Madueño, faced closed doors when trying to break through the gatekeepers of these establishments. This rejection was from a female politician. Virginia stated:

My county supervisor had told me don’t waste your time to run for city council since it was already determined who they would have on there. To hear a woman tell me not to, I said no, we are going to try. I was deflated, but I put my name in. But at the end of the day, I got the 4-year appointment.

Fresno City Councilman Miguel Arias resonated with the issue of human capital being held by only a certain segment in Fresno and commented:

Fresno urban is still a good ol’ boys club. The challenge for Latinos is that we see our social network as a safety net and as a socializing network. Everyone else uses it as a professional and upward mobility network. We are in leadership positions but do not exercise its authority.

Genoveva Islas described the experience of many first-generation Latinos who cannot break through the barriers and do not have entryways past the gatekeepers. She said:
As young first-generation Latinos who don’t have parents who are college educated and don’t have relatives that have gone through the educational system. We don’t come with these built-in networks of support, and we have to figure out how we establish them because they’re crucial to our success. I can definitely point to networks that I’m excluded from. They are influential, that have power and who may be conservative folks with money and intentionally don’t want someone with progressive thinking or ideas in positions that could affect them.

Some participants, such as the City of Fresno Councilwoman Esmeralda Soria, had access to networks but only due to the leadership opportunities she has had. She said:

Because of the leadership programs that I did, it gave me access to social capital. These types of programs teach you to network and make meaningful contacts that have helped me. But for future leaders, there has to be a lot of intentionality from current leaders to help others. Many elected think about their next steps, but they do not think about the person that comes behind you.

City of Fresno Councilman Nelson Esparza described the process of getting into social networks as difficult. He stated:

I had to build up networks because I wasn’t born into them. I’m not political royalty. I’m this guy who left the Central Valley and came back and wanted to help; I had to earn that trust from everybody. It’s not just me, a lot of people born into working-class families, low-income communities are not connected in any way.

Financial resources were one of the many limitations that the participants described. Several spoke to the issue of fiscal sponsorship to get the training needed to start the exploration process of what it means to lead, let alone run for office. Carolyn Flores disclosed:
The only reason why I was able to do the HOPE Leadership Institute is because I was in a situation that afforded me the ability to apply, take that time off, and to pay for me to be there. I know it is a privileged position to be in because I know that it has helped me. For some Latinas, structurally, it is not a reality to be able to be in those spaces to learn.

Fresno County Board of Education Board of Trustee James Martinez stated that without the monetary means, leadership development opportunities are limited. He said, “Leadership programs cost thousands of dollars to participate [in]. I wanted to become civically engaged and participate in training, but it was never going to be an option. It’s actually really prohibitive. They are geared towards one specific population group.”

Multiple participants related this fiscal resource issue as a barrier to launching a political campaign. Patty Barahona stated, “We need to create more funding to support those who are interested in public service and running for office. The financial barrier feels insurmountable for many Latino leaders.” Ms. Ojeda made a comparison of the Central Valley to other regions in the state and stated, “Fundraising is quite a unique struggle here in the Valley. You represent a conservative area, and as such, you are not given the same financial support as if you were running anywhere else in the state.” Others shared how difficult it would be for them to seek public office because of the vast amounts of money that [have] to be raised. Fabiola Gonzalez disclosed, “One of the things that [have] stopped me when I think about running is what is needed in terms of raising money. You have to devote all kinds of time to fundraising. I cannot ask people for money.” Erica Cabrera shared the differences between professional networks and political connections and said, “We may have a professional network, but I think it’s much different when you’re running for office. There are people that you work [with] within a professional setting that may not support you when you’re running for office.” Virginia Madueño
uncovered that the Latino community does not traditionally donate to candidates. She commented, “Our people are not used to doling out 100 bucks. Our community is still so young with regard to that portion of running for political office.” Genoveva Islas expressed the burden of fundraising for a grassroots campaign and said, “The cost scares me. It is not easy, especially for those of us who have come up from limited economic means. A lot of the community that I work for don’t have a lot of money at their disposal.” Assemblymember Joaquin Arambula recognized how challenging it is for some Latino leaders to aspire to run for office with the dollars that are out of reach. He said:

It’s difficult to be able to run for office and take the time to be a public servant. You often have to make sacrifices for your own family and finances. When you come from an area as poor as ours, our Latino community really struggles to envision themselves in these positions of power because of that lack of access to resources. Amanda Renteria reflected on the difficulty of running in a region that has low voter turnout and engagement and stated, “Today, a barrier is having the ability to raise money to overcome mis/dis information and resourcing a strong organizing effort to areas that have never voted.” Alma Martinez acknowledged that paying for leadership development programs and running for office was costly and said, “I do feel that for Latinas, it takes us longer to get there because we can’t afford it and because we’re not in those circles. I feel that we do have a disadvantage and it’s money.” A majority of Latino public servants disclosed that bivocational service is a necessity. Yamilet Valladolid expressed, “Unfortunately, there’s not a lot of wealth that is accumulated to invest in these efforts. When running for office, Latinos need to have a job to provide for their family.” City of Fresno Councilman Miguel Arias explained the reality for many Latinos, especially those from Generation X. He said, “We are the sandwich generation, as
Latinos, we are supporting not only our children but also our parents.” Maria Lemus agreed that it is traditional for Latinos to take care of their families and stated:

As Latinos, we often care for our parents. As our parents get older, we care for them more, and we just don’t put them in a home. It’s our culture, and it’s our bloodline. Not everybody makes a six-figure salary, and you want to make a difference, but for a lot of people, that’s a barrier because they have children and elderly parents to take care of. If they were compensated, that might make a difference.

Yamilet Valladolid disclosed her truth by stating, “I would never be able to run for office, I need to make a living. I am not independently wealthy, and I don’t have friends that are wealthy.” Dr. Angel Reyna shared his experience of needing two vocations while in public office and said:

The biggest barrier was the financial aspect because I still had a family, and even if I wanted to be a state senator, I couldn’t afford it. That was a challenge for me. Even if it would have been great for me personally and professionally, at what cost? My family would suffer, but I’m publicly serving the greater good. Who supports you and your family while you do that? Privilege benefits certain populations that were made for white or older males that are well-to-do and do not need to have two jobs. People do not distinguish that you have a full-time job. To them, if they see you as their councilmember or mayor, then they see you that way, all the time, regardless of your reality.

City of Fresno Councilman Nelson Esparza contemplated the disadvantage of generational wealth being almost nonexistent in Latino communities and remarked:

We are taught to work hard, earn your keep, and support your family. So it is a foreign concept to ask everyone else for money. For hundreds of thousands of dollars and
sometimes millions to fund your campaign. Traditionally, there is no established or old wealth.

Many participants described the Central Valley as one that is still extremely conservative, and equity is still far from being reached. This social network and capital theme have a correlation to the CRT tenet of the critique of liberalism. City of Fresno Councilman Miguel Arias declared, “The Latino community’s challenge is that we have been served by a system that is not led by us.” Juan Carranza shared, “We have a conservative region, and Latinos have to work harder to demonstrate why we would be the perfect candidate for our communities, even though we are the majority within the Central Valley. The monopoly is still primarily white.” Adelfa Lorenzano exhibited the same concern and stated, “If I intend to run for an elected office, I believe that there are still areas in the Central Valley that are not ready for change and will continue to elect the same people they are comfortable with.” Patty Barahona agreed that in especially rural Central Valley, there is a hesitancy to elect progressive candidates and stated:

Being a gender nonconforming leader in the Central Valley is consistently challenging. Given the conservative landscape and the deep cultural binary that exists, I do stand out in all meetings and spaces. I think that gender identity and gender expression do drive who gets a seat at the table and to what extent.

Stephanie Briones explained how difficult it is for anticonventional Latino leaders and constituencies. She said:

Central Valley Latinos live in mainly conservative counties. In addition to the issues that affect most Latino communities (immigration problems, racism, inequities in health, education, and public spaces), we also must combat with local government officials that
do not share the same perspectives. When we are dealing with an opposing system, changes are twice as hard to achieve.

Yamilet Valladolid is concerned that even within the Latino community, there is less and less support for liberalistic candidates and commented:

Some people that are second- or third-generation do not consider themselves Latinos. Not a lot of them will lend an extra hand to someone that is Latino because of [the] political biases we lived through [during] the Trump era. It was horrible here in the Valley, we saw it reflected in the people of power, and we saw Trump in some of their faces. I feel that that’s one of the reasons why there are not many Latinos in positions of power.

FUSD Board of Trustee Genoveva Islas described that even though some conservative politicians were clearly divisive and discriminatory, they continued to get elected. She said:

Unfortunately, one of my counterparts on the board has a constituency who supports him despite all the crazy things he has done. He grabbed and assaulted a student, was demeaning to cheerleaders, he told a Latino minister to go back to the ghetto, and absolutely nothing happened to him. We have censured him twice, but we do not have the power to vote him out. Unfortunately, he lives in a conservative area and has a constituency who is okay with what he does. It is his privilege and arrogance that, as a white man, he feels like he should not be questioned.

Alma El Issa reflected on how difficult it has been for existing Latinos elected officials and said, “The few Latinos that are in office are attacked. I think politics has gotten really polarized, especially in the Valley.” Others expressed their hesitancy to run for office because of the political climate. Angela Vega Hiyama stated:
I will share that the polarization of politics has definitely validated my reasons to not venture down that (elected office) path. There is no way I would subject my family to the grossly negative political environment. It’s ugly. You are either on one side or the other. There’s no middle ground. There’s no place for politically moderate/centered candidates these days.

A few expressed their concern about how their families would be impacted if they embarked on a political campaign. Dr. Lupe Jaime-Mileham talked about the distress she would feel for her loved ones. She commented:

Campaigns have become very personal, you worry about your family. There has been a shift in culture that really has looked at everyone in a microscopic way. When you are running, it’s not just you and your immediate family but your extended [family]. I think that might deter Latinos from running for office; at least, it would deter me.

Fabiola Gonzalez stated concerns she would have for her family members that are immigrants or undocumented by remarking:

I have family members that are still undocumented, and the thought of running for office makes me think they are gonna dig all kinds of stuff about you, and you will have to drag your family along. That is scary, and I will say no to that because I will not put any family member at risk. The current environment that we sadly live in right now is frightening for families that have immigrants or come from an immigrant background.

Several elected participants shared that although it is difficult, they are not allowing institutional racism and discrimination to stop them from governing, like SAUSD School Board Member Angel Ann Flores, who stated:
I can’t get movement here because of the political dynamics. I am not one to be subjected to ‘I can get you money and power, but you have to do what I say.’ I don’t do that. That is the only way to really survive politically out here without being the target of attacks. I haven’t quit. I ran for my seat three times before I won it.

Some elected representatives like Tulare County Supervisor Eddie Valero are trying to make an impact in their districts as the only progressive person in the delegation. He said:

I’m very keen and privy to observation, and know that if I want to make sure that Tulare County advances, that I need allies that will also make that possible, and right now, I really haven’t had that. But it is okay, just because I believe now is not the time, and I’m willing to forego some of my ideas or thoughts on how we can improve until I feel that the situation is ready or critical in which to do so. I need three more on the dais. It doesn’t necessarily have to be Latino, just someone that is willing to open or be willing to step outside their own comfort zone to allow for an opportunity for change, progress or move forward.

Itzi Robles observed that due to the conservative climate, some elected officials are reluctant to make tough decisions and commented:

I think we really need to change [and] looking at politics as a career, but more so, looking at being a public servant in politics as really doing what’s good for the community. You see a lot of politicians that say, “Well, I’m not gonna take this risk because that might cost me ever moving up in a higher office or maybe me running for this other position.” That, for me, is like this is hurting us. This mentality is not letting us get [things] done and doing what’s right because they are so worried about their next move.
When assessing the theme of social networks and capital, there is a link to the LatCrit theory guidepost of finding commonalities while respecting differences to chart social transformation. Latino public servants enter social networks and leadership spaces where they are invited to join. Erica Cabrera expressed that it helped her advance when a Latino elected representative was intentional about connecting her with networks and said:

A former Latino assemblymember expanded my network beyond anything I could have ever imagined. I did have a leader that introduced me to his network and people that have access to capital. I think that really contributed to where I am today and my ability to serve.

Alma El Issa described that entering these spaces can be difficult unless a person is tapped. She said, “I think that for nonprofit professionals, you have to build years of experience before you’re tapped to serve. I waited until I was tapped. My first experience on a board was for a nonprofit that supported Latina leaders.”

Former Assemblymember Nicole Parra said it was not until her former boss, Congressman Cal Dooley, encouraged her to run and said:

I didn’t see myself as a young Latina being the elected official. I saw elected officials from farmer’s money with kids and a wife, and I saw my father (a former elected in Kern County) with his family. I saw myself as a chief of staff and helped men get elected. It wasn’t until my boss, a man and white congressional representative said, “You should run for this seat,” and I thought it was insane, and he said, “Why not, you know the issues, and you are a hard worker.”

James Martinez identified that networks that welcome and cultivate leaders help prepare people to serve and commented, “I served on the board of the Fresno County Young Democrats,
and it helped me test and determine whether I want to serve. It is clubs like these that are incubators of leadership.” Gilbert Felix attributed networks as one of the aspects of his public service journey and said, “Social networks are my currency. I am a connector, if I don’t know something, they know something and let me connect you. Over the years, I’ve developed a Rolodex, and I definitely developed a strong network over the years.”

Ignacio Rendon explained that if he were to run, he would need to be very strategic to enter the networks in Kings County. He said:

The social networks in Kings County are very eclectic circles. They are very exclusive circles and very conservative. I would say the circles are very tight. They are not easy to get into and just difficult to maneuver. Even in consideration of being an elected official, I would need to be aware of how to navigate the political ideology in order to strengthen relationships and network rather than alienate myself and be considered irrelevant. I would need to sit down, listen very carefully, and not be labeled or tagged because of my skin color or my surname. I tend to be careful when I speak, and I do a lot more listening than speaking in order to be able to navigate more wisely those political situations.

Most Latino public servants declared how important it is to have more places where Latinos can learn, connect, and advance together. Marvin Jacobo’s sentiment was, “We do need to create a space for all of these leaders of leadership development groups to get together across the Central Valley, the leadership teams, just for mutual support and encouragement.”

**Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to discover how rising Latino leaders begin their experience as public servants. The 60 Latino public servants representing eight Central Valley counties all exhibited a commitment to serving the region. The study served its purpose of
identifying common patterns in shared insights that the participants had in addition to their unique lived experiences. The analysis showed numerous elements that contributed to their civic service journey, inclusive of successes and barriers. Common themes that arose were political ambition and social networks and capital. Political ambition had the subthemes of policies, gender politics, leadership development, and skill-building opportunities.

The findings allowed for a better understanding of the triumphs and barriers Latino civil leaders face when they are on the trajectory of public servitude. The researcher desires that potential Latino leaders can adopt this study to implement necessary changes or programming to encourage Latinos to serve their communities.
Chapter 5: Interpretation, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Summary of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted to comprehend the successes and lived experiences of rising Latino public servants in the Central Valley. There was a determination of factors contributing to how Latinos in Central California are accessing opportunities to lead while assessing their successes or obstacles. The researcher’s methodology included in-depth interviews and focus groups and utilized thematic analysis, which is a step-by-step theme development process. Theories used to categorize the themes that emerged were CRT, LatCrit, and ET. The 60 participants that engaged in this study all publicly participated as a volunteer or paid board of director (nonprofit or corporate), a municipal or statewide commissioner, a past elected official, a current political representative, and a potential candidate or former political candidate.

Due to the existing literature’s lack of content on the Latino civil servant journey, in general, this study filled the void of information, especially as it pertains to the Central California region. The first research question examined the key determinants that allow Latino leaders to aspire to be civil servants and be appointed to boards and commissions or to explore political opportunities and then launch their campaigns and become elected officials. The available literature referenced previous studies on the facets that women or the immigrant population face if they embark on running for office but not if they want to be civil servants in a volunteer capacity on boards and commissions. The data lacked any insight into the paths of Latina leaders. The research uncovered the direct experiences of the barriers and root causes of the underrepresentation of Latinos.
In the interviews and focus groups, participants shared aspects of their public service history. These factors led to developed themes such as political ambition and social networks and capital, which impacted their decision or opportunity to practice public service. Many participants stated how external, internal, and cultural facets accelerated or deterred them from becoming civically engaged.

Subset research questions led to subthemes that emerged of political ambition. When asked if leadership training and skill-building opportunities increased the propensity of Latinos to pursue political office or to be appointed to boards and commissions, multiple participants declared that those types of programs are what launched their public service. Many did not have those measures in place and provided their stories of the hardships they encountered when they sought public office. Another subset question inquired on how social networks and capital contributed to their obstacles or successes when considering serving the community or seeking political office. Various participants disclosed their struggles to enter those spaces with gatekeepers, and others shared the support they felt when they were invited into those spaces. Overall, the information collected provided answers to the research questions and bridged the existing literature gap.

This chapter presents the researcher’s interpretation of the results with recommendations in addition to the limitations, future research, and conclusions. The researcher’s intent was to inspire Latino leaders and promote the creation of programs and projects that will equip potential public servants.

**Interpretation and Recommendations**

This section shares the study’s results with recommendations. First, discussions will be disclosed on what elements drove political ambition as an integral part of the Latino leader’s
experience with leadership development opportunities and mentorship being at the center. Then, facets of what participants shared in their personal stories will reflect on how important it is to address obstacles such as access to social networks and capital to increase the Latino leadership pipeline in Central California. Lastly, throughout the recommendations will be the inside accounts that the participants described as lessons that they learned from their own path or lessons they acquired from others that should be passed to potential Latino public servants.

Political ambition is an area that requires the transformation of systems and structures in place to give access to nontraditional public servants. One of those areas of needed change is the process of learning and knowledge acquisition for Latinos. A recommendation is that these types of learning opportunities should start early when young people start to discover that they have leadership abilities. There should be a focus on training middle and high school teachers so they can then guide and mentor youth. This could be a policy proposal for the state of California legislature to create legislation to mandate civic engagement to fill the void of lack of knowledge in the civic process. This act would encourage public service exploration and then elevate the growth of youth in civic engagement.

More programs like CLYLP should exist to expose youth to public service and public policy opportunities. Only three of the participants were able to take advantage of the CLYLP program, but they truly benefitted from it. Engaging and training young leaders as decision-makers ensure relevance to the communities served by nonprofits and add a rich lived experience in service. Recruiting and training youth places the next generation of leaders on local nonprofit organization boards and embarks them on a journey of public service. Many of the participants shared that it would have made a difference if they had been equipped at a younger age.
More leadership development training, programs, institutes, and academies are necessary for the underrepresentation of Latinos to change. What the CVLLA and other similar programs demonstrated is that when these programs are available they contribute to the leader’s development. Another key factor is funding of these leadership development programs to ensure their sustainability. HOPE (2022) recently gained incredible strides on behalf of the State of California where Assemblymember Wendy Carrillo secured one million dollars as an investment towards equipping Latinas. Governmental budget allocations like these are groundbreaking investments that can change narratives.

In addition, these leadership development opportunities potentially open doors for mentoring relationships and give access to social networks. These deliberate measures with teachings on leadership and other issues, such as how to deal with imposter syndrome, could impact the confidence level of the leader. Especially since many shared that the imposter syndrome was forced on them and therefore is more of an imposition than something they inherently had. Training and capacity building for Latinos interested in volunteering civically or in running for office should be bolstered in order to ensure that there are future generations of Latino leaders.

Yet, current leadership development programs lack the steps to pursuing political office. Another needed change is opportunities to gain the tools and skills for those seeking to run for office. There are existing programs for specific groups in California, such as Emerge, that are only for Democratic women who are pursuing to run politically. Very few participants were able to partake in the Emerge candidate training and curriculum, but they benefitted greatly from it. Training grounds need to be created for Latinos that serve the unique communities of the Central Valley.
As part of the curriculum of leadership development, it is recommended to include a mental wellness and self-care portion. Many stories were shared about how the Latino leader cares for others including the community yet language about taking care of oneself was non-existent. Various participants shared about experiencing some of imposter syndrome that according to Urwin (2018) states a connection to between depression. This link alludes to the fact that those who cultivate and develop leadership programs must include mental health and wellness in the content of their trainings.

In addition to leadership development, mentorship was a key factor in the support system of the Latino leader. As reflected in the stories of the participants, culturally relevant mentoring relationships can encourage a volunteer public servant to seek out potential service at a higher level. Those that shared about a having a Latino mentor reflected that it was the cultural influence that was a significant factor. These mentors functioned as gatekeepers who were trustworthy and helped them enter social networks and navigate around social justice issues and had a political pulse of the community. Yet, this has to be intentional, and mentors should be trained in the art of mentorship. Some lessons learned were that not all leaders are mentors or have the time to invest. A broken or mismatched mentoring relationship can sometimes cause more harm than good. That act of connection and coaching creates a support structure for the public servant. Solid mentorship could also assist in addressing the issue of gender politics in the Central Valley. Many Latinas found they were the ‘first’ Latina to run or serve on a board. Being the first sometimes means a person starts their path alone. Yet, if there was a formalized mentoring relationship between those Latinas who have served to those that seek service, the barriers that gender politics poses could be addressed earlier in the development of the Latina leader.
These interpretations of the inside accounts of the participants led to the recommendations. First, there should be an intentional preparation of the younger Latino population that would continue the growth of the Latino leadership pipeline in the Central Valley. Second, political training grounds and curriculum need to be developed and accessible to Latinos with an emphasis on the Central Valley experience. In addition, these programs must be sustainable with intentional funding. These programs must also address the mental health and support for Latino public servants. Next, more leadership development opportunities need to be available in more regions. Currently, only a few Central Valley counties have deliberate efforts in this area. Lastly, extensive mentorship programs need to be established and maintained for a continuous growth and advancement of Latinos.

Limitations

There were minimal risks for the participants of the focus groups. The focus groups could have included staff and middle managers of elected officials who were also public servants. With this in mind, these participants would have engaged on a completely separate and different day from the elected official to ensure the emotional safety and confidentiality of the participants. Setting apart staff of elected officials from their direct supervisors helped ensure this emotional safety by not allowing elected officials into the focus group process. Another identified limitation was during the focus group recruitment process, some who work and live in less populated municipalities. Knowing the nature of smaller rural communities, it was inevitable that focus group participants might know each other. The investigator thought it could cause hesitation for participants to be honest and open. People are more likely to reveal their opinions and beliefs and to talk about sensitive issues when they are with people who they perceive to be like themselves. Since the investigator was familiar with the participants, if there were any
known conflicts between participants, they were put in separate focus groups. Also, there was geographical separation, and public servants that worked in different counties were invited to participate in a specific group. This effort ensured less familiarity with each other. In addition, one other limitation was the administration of virtual focus groups or interviews. There are quite a few things the investigator cannot assess online that they do in person. Some of those barriers were unanticipated interruptions and technological issues and access, especially in rural communities. However, in some cases, this could benefit the participant. As Hesse-Biber (2017) stated, conducting an online interview may potentially be better for the participant and the investigator since there could be sensitivity in the topics discussed. Since the virtual interviews and focus groups were recorded on video, the investigator was aware of verbal and physical cues and behavioral responses to the process. As society has adapted to virtual meetings and navigated and perfected the digital platform experience, the virtual interview method proved to be an asset in gathering qualitative data.

A majority of the participants were Democrats, no party preference, or independents. In the Central Valley, a small percentage of Latino Republicans are public servants. Despite the low numbers, the researcher extended requests to Republican Latino elected officials, and they chose not to participate. Another limitation was the initial description and definition of social networks and capital, especially to the millennial and Generation Z participants. The investigator needed to describe the concept in depth and that its meaning did not refer to social media platforms but to human and organizational capital.

**Future Research**

Several areas could be explored in further research. Those potential subjects are public financing of campaigns, the differences between the Latino public service in the Central Valley
compared to the Southern and Northern regions of California, and imposed imposter syndrome for Latinos.

Another way to address the issue of lack of financial support is the idea of public financing, especially to combat the issue of gender politics, which many Latina participants acknowledged as one of the main issues they faced when running for office. The lack of generational wealth and fiscal resources as related to the CRT tenet, permanence of racism, could be addressed if public financing is implemented to assist Latinas. Gender-specific public financing, as described by Ohman (2018), is the ability to receive dollars from public funding based on gender and could promote gender equality. At local levels of government, this could change the political playing field.

Many participants expressed unique differences that Central Valley Latino leaders encounter compared to other regions in the state. Quite often, delegations of Valley leaders have to work together to uplift the interests of this region. This is largely due to factors around the rural landscape, high poverty levels, and minimal to low-wage work options. The lack of access to resources across the board is challenged by sheer geographic reach.

Finally, an additional area of future research is the idea of an imposed imposter syndrome. This research led to the discovery that many participants did not enter rooms with negative self-views associated with this syndrome, yet it was forced upon them when they walked through the door of leadership spaces. Prospective research should include a CRT and a LatCrit lens as it is the study of structural power dynamics and how it perpetuates inequities for marginalized communities. The imposed concept should most definitely be explored further to decipher the implications of this syndrome and how to prevent it.
Conclusions

This study was to determine how Latinos in Central California are accessing opportunities to lead while assessing their successes or obstacles to becoming public servants, whether that is a position on a board, commission, or as an elected official. Overall, the research has identified evidence of the need to have a concentrated effort to equip and develop Central Valley Latino leaders who have the initial desire to be change agents but do not have the tools. The investigator conducted a qualitative study and utilized the interpretive descriptive method through interviews and focus groups of 60 Latino public servants to attain stories and personal accounts to discover findings. Political ambition and social networks and capital were common themes that arose. Political ambition had the subthemes of policies, gender politics, leadership development, and skill-building opportunities. The goal of verifying key determinants of Latino public servitude in the research was achieved.

The conclusions identified successes and barriers from the personal stories that were shared by the participants. In addition, ideas were reflected by the participants and advice was given on how to address the obstacles that Latinos encounter when seeking to politically participate. The researcher recommends further studies on the political ambition of Latinos since the existing data is void of this specific population. To address the issue of increasing the number of Latino leaders to pursue public service in the Central Valley, the researcher has specified some recommendations. The suggestions the researcher proposes is intentional preparation of the younger Latino generation as well as sustainable funding. Additionally, the Central Valley experience needs to be a concentrated point for leadership development programs and political training curriculums. These programs need to be created for more counties in the Central Valley and must include mental health and wellness for Latino public servants. Finally, a concentrated
effort to expand the number of mentors is needed by establishing an extensive mentorship programs for the continuous growth and advancement of Latinos. Ultimately, the researcher wants to share the valuable insight gained from the Latino public servants to encourage programs to be created and current systems to be changed.
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Appendix A: Central Valley Rising Latino Leaders Interview Questions

Part One: Demographic Information

1. How do you describe your gender identity?
2. What generation are you from?
3. What city were you born in, and where do you live now?
4. Where were your parents born, and if immigrants, from what country?
5. How do you identify ethnically based on cultural expression and background?

Part Two: Preliminary Civic Engagement and Journey

6. Were your parents actively engaged in civic engagement, and if so, how?
7. What event in your life prompted you to get involved as a public servant?
8. How was mentorship or external motivation a part of your decision-making in being a public servant?
9. Did you participate in leadership training, institutes, or academies to build up your skill sets to engage in public participation? How did they assist you in your development?
10. If you are elected, did your previous service on boards and commissions create a launching point for you as a potential candidate? If so, how?
11. In what ways did social networks and social capital provide gateways for you into public service?
12. What encouraging or discouraging experiences have you seen or lived through that propelled or stopped you from seeking a position in public service?
13. How does gender politics impact Latinos who want to serve in the Central Valley?

Part Three: Public Service

14. What areas have you served in the Central Valley? Why is this region important to you?
15. As a public servant, please share what changes or impact you have been able to create through policy change.
16. What do you see as the most pressing barriers to winning office?
17. Do the issues impacting Latino leaders in the Central Valley set them apart from Latino leaders in Northern California and Southern California?

Part Four: Increasing Central Valley Latino Leadership Pipeline

18. How do you engage and motivate potential Latino leaders to become civically engaged?
19. Do you mentor Latino leaders, and if so, why?
20. What actions are you taking to groom the next person to succeed you? Will it be a Latino?
21. What needs to change or occur for more Latinos to be interested in public service or run for office? What advice would you give to them?
Appendix B: In-Depth Interview Questions for Participants and Focus Group

Part One: Demographic Information

1. How do you describe your gender identity?
2. What generation are you from?
3. What city were you born in, and where do you live now?
4. Where were your parents born, and if immigrants, from what country?
5. How do you identify ethnically based on cultural expression and background?

Part Two: Preliminary Civic Engagement and Journey

6. Were your parents actively engaged in civic engagement, and if so, how?
7. What event in your life prompted you to get involved as a public servant?
8. How was mentorship or external motivation a part of your decision-making in being a public servant?
9. Did you participate in leadership training, institutes, or academies to build up your skill sets to engage in public participation? How did they assist you in your development?
10. In what ways did social networks and social capital provide gateways for you into public service?
11. What encouraging or discouraging experiences have you seen or lived through that propelled or stopped you from seeking a position in public service?
12. How does gender politics impact Latinos who want to serve in the Central Valley?

Part Three: Public Service

13. What areas have you served in the Central Valley? Why is this region important to you?
14. If you have or were to run for office or if you have in the past, what do you see as the most pressing barriers in winning office?
15. Do the issues impacting Latino leaders in the Central Valley set them apart from Latino leaders in Northern California and Southern California?
16. If you work for an elected official, what type of policy change have you been able to implement?

Part Four: Increasing Central Valley Latino Leadership Pipeline

17. Do you mentor Latino leaders, and if so, why?
18. What needs to change or occur for more Latinos to be interested in public service or run for office?
Appendix C: Central California Latino Public Servant Acknowledgement Letter

Dear Elected Representative,

As you may already know, I am currently a candidate for the Doctorate in Public Administration with a concentration in Public Policy at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania. I am respectfully requesting an opportunity to interview you for approximately 45 minutes to an hour for my dissertation on Central California Latino leaders. I am requesting your participation in this interview that will help inform my analysis and understanding of how Latinos in the Central Valley build their leadership and influence and support their communities as public servants. The title of my dissertation is “Factors Contributing to the Success of Rising Latino Leadership in Central California, a Qualitative Inquiry.”

The firsthand experiences you have as a Latino elected official are invaluable; therefore, your knowledge would be most appreciated. I am confident that your contribution will greatly benefit the current and future Central Valley leaders. For your review, I have enclosed the proposed questions. Individual responses will be shared in the dissertation but will not have names attributed unless permission is granted. Thanking you in advance for your consideration for a virtual or in-person interview. I look forward to hearing from you as to when you have availability, and please don’t hesitate to call me if you have any questions (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

With Gratitude,

Yammilette Rodriguez
DPA Doctoral Candidate
West Chester University
Appendix D: Interview and Focus Group Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

Project Title: Factors Contributing to the Success of Rising Latino Leadership in Central California, a Qualitative Inquiry—Interview

Investigator(s): Yammilette Rodriguez

Project Overview: Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Yammilette Rodriguez as part of her doctoral dissertation on how Latinos in Central California are accessing opportunities to lead and assessing their successes or obstacles to becoming public servants, whether that is a position on a board, commission, political candidate, or as an elected official. Your participation will take approximately an hour for an interview. The interview will be recorded and later transcribed, removing all identifying information.

If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form.

You may ask Yammilette Rodriguez any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

The objective of this research is to determine how Latinos in Central California are accessing opportunities to lead and assessing their successes or obstacles to becoming public servants, whether that is a position on a board, commission, political candidate, or as an elected official.

If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:

Complete an in-depth interview; this study will take up to one hour of your time.

Are there any experimental medical treatments? No

Is there any risk to me? None

Is there any benefit to me? None

How will you protect my privacy?

- The session will be recorded.
• This process is qualitative, and the researcher wants to ensure that all information is documented correctly. The recording will allow the accuracy of the information, and it will be housed in the password-protected West Chester University One Drive account. The subject will be asked if they give permission to have their identities acknowledged; if they choose not to, the investigator will omit names. If they want some quotes attributed to them but also want some of the interviews to be anonymous, the investigator will omit names.
• Your records will be private. Only Yammilette Rodriguez, Mia Ocean, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
• Your name will not be used in any reports.
• Records will be stored:
  • If done virtually, it will be done via Zoom and will be stored on West Chester University’s One Drive account using a password-protected account. For in-person interviews, recordings will also be stored on West Chester University’s One Drive account using a password-protected account.
  • Records will be destroyed three years after study completion.

Do I get paid to take part in this study?

No

Who do I contact in case of research-related injury?

○ For any questions about this study, contact:
  • Primary Investigator: Yammilette Rodriguez at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxx@wcupa.edu
  • Faculty Sponsor: Mia Ocean at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxx@wcupa.edu

What will you do with my identifiable information or biospecimens?

Not applicable.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

I, _________________________________ (your name), have read this form, and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

____________________________ Subject/Participant Signature       Date:_______________

____________________________Witness Signature                Date:_______________
Focus Group Consent Form

Project Title: Factors Contributing to the Success of Rising Latino Leadership in Central California, a Qualitative Inquiry—Focus Group

Investigator(s): Yammilette Rodriguez

Project Overview: Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Yammilette Rodriguez as part of her doctoral dissertation on how Latinos in Central California are accessing opportunities to lead and assessing their successes or obstacles to becoming public servants, whether that is a position on a board, commission, political candidate, or as an elected official. Your participation will take approximately an hour for a focus group. The focus group will be recorded and later transcribed, removing all identifying information.

If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form.

You may ask Yammilette Rodriguez any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

The objective of this research is to determine how Latinos in Central California are accessing opportunities to lead and assessing their successes or obstacles to becoming public servants, whether that is a position on a board, commission, political candidate, or as an elected official.

If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:

• Be a part of a focus group, and this study will take up to an hour of your time.

Are there any experimental medical treatments?

No

Is there any risk to me?

None

Is there any benefit to me?

None

How will you protect my privacy?

• The session will be recorded.
• This process is qualitative, and the researcher wants to ensure that all information is documented correctly. The recording will allow the accuracy of information.
• Your records will be private. Only Yammilette Rodriguez, Dr. Mia Ocean (dissertation chair), and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
• Your name will not be used in any reports.
• You will be asked to use a pseudonym for identification purposes in the research.
• Records will be stored: If done virtually, it will be done via Zoom and will be stored on West Chester University’s One Drive account using a password-protected account. For in-person interviews, recordings will also be stored on West Chester University’s One Drive account using a password-protected account. After 3 years, the study will be complete and disposed of.
• Records will be destroyed 3 years after study completion.

Do I get paid to take part in this study?
No

Who do I contact in case of a research-related injury?
For any questions about this study, contact: Primary Investigator: Yammilette Rodriguez, at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxx@wcupa.edu or the Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Mia Ocean, at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxx@wcupa.edu

What will you do with my identifiable information or biospecimens?
Not applicable.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

I, ___________________________ (your name), have read this form, and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all the possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

______________________________ Subject/Participant Signature Date:______________

______________________________ Witness Signature Date:______________
Appendix E: Central California Latino Public Servant Acknowledgement Letter

Esteemed Colleague,

As you may already know, I am currently a candidate for the Doctorate in Public Administration with a concentration in Public Policy at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania. I am respectfully requesting an opportunity to have you participate in a focus group for approximately 45 minutes to an hour for my dissertation on Central California Latino leaders. I am requesting your participation in this focus group that will help inform my analysis and understanding of how Latinos in the Central Valley build their leadership and influence and support their communities as public servants. The title of my dissertation is “Factors Contributing to the Success of Rising Latino Leadership in Central California, a Qualitative Inquiry.”

The firsthand experiences you have as a Latino community leader are invaluable; therefore, your knowledge would be most appreciated. I am confident that your contribution will greatly benefit the current and future Central Valley leaders. For your review, I have enclosed the proposed questions. Individual responses will be shared in the dissertation but will not have names attributed unless you grant permission. Thanking you in advance for your consideration for a virtual or in-person focus group; dates will be determined in the near future. I look forward to hearing from you as to when you have availability, and please don’t hesitate to call me if you have any questions (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

With Gratitude,

Yammilette G. Rodriguez, DPA Doctoral Candidate, West Chester University
### Critical Race Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme and Theory Tenets and Guideposts</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Code</th>
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<td>Political Ambition</td>
<td><strong>CRT: The Permanence of Racism</strong>&lt;br&gt;The permanence of racism suggests that racism controls the political, social, and economic realms of U.S. society, privileging white individuals over people of color in most areas of life, including education and employment examples.</td>
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<td>Social Networks and Capital</td>
<td><strong>CRT: Whiteness as Property</strong>&lt;br&gt;Due to the embedded racism in American society, whiteness can be considered a property interest. Previously only white males were recognized as landowners. Being white continues to translate into benefits in financial gain and in a higher quality of life.</td>
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<td>Political Ambition and Gender Politics</td>
<td>White people only combat racism when it simultaneously serves their own interests. White individuals benefit from a structure that was initially implemented to offer equal opportunity to people of color.</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRT: Interest Conversion</td>
<td>- Although Central CA is majority minority of Latinos, the people in power are still overwhelmingly white.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Gender politics—Some Latino males also benefit from this when rising Latinas are on the verge of leadership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Networks and Capital</td>
<td>Liberalism includes the ideas of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and equal opportunity for all. These ideas need to be critiqued because they perpetuate racism, ignoring it as a problem rather than speaking about it and investigating it directly.</td>
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<td>CRT: The Critique of Liberalism</td>
<td>- Central Valley is extremely conservative, and equity is far from being reached.</td>
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<td>LatCrit Theory</td>
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<td>Social Networks and Capital</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political Ambition</td>
<td>- Latino public servants entering social networks and leadership spaces where they were invited to join.</td>
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<td>LatCrit: Find Commonalities</td>
<td>- Paying homage to those the elders.</td>
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<td>While Respecting Differences to Chart Social Transformation</td>
<td>- Latinos helping others through mentorship, passing the baton.</td>
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<td>Political Ambition and Leadership</td>
<td>Latino leadership development academies and initiatives were created to advance opportunities for Latinos.</td>
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<td>Development</td>
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<td>LatCrit: Build Intra-Latina/o</td>
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<td>Communities and Inter-Group Coalitions</td>
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<td>to Promote Justice Struggles</td>
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<td>Political Ambition</td>
<td>Reminder of staying humble as respect to roots and ancestry.</td>
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<td>LatCrit: Ensure a Continual Engagement of Self-Critique to Stay Principled and Grounded</td>
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<td><strong>Empowerment Theory: Education</strong></td>
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<td>Political Ambition</td>
<td>Forgotten skills, personal qualities that could increase social influence, other social networks or resources not currently using; Areas of promise or power that may be overlooked.</td>
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<td>PA: Potential Power</td>
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<td>Code 19</td>
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<td>● Lack of mentorship</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Not maximizing Latino leader’s potential</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political Ambition</td>
<td>Conditions of powerlessness; isms; ID social structural origins; participant may feel helpless or powerless to change things (give up, check out, does not have options); voice, experiences, or circumstances may be devalued; structural barriers; may describe situation of another.</td>
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<tr>
<td>PA: Powerlessness</td>
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<td><strong>Empowerment Theory: Participation</strong></td>
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<td>Political Ambition</td>
<td>Two-way conversation; two mutually respected parties; situations described in which someone else or an institution is invested, helping, caring, explaining, respecting, or taking other points of view or circumstances into consideration.</td>
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<td>Power: Sharing</td>
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<td>Code 22</td>
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<td>● Mentorship</td>
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<td>● Familial inspiration</td>
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<td>Political Ambition</td>
<td>Reflection and analysis of others’ experiences; advice given by others, learning from watching others or others’ mistakes; may include watching or learning from relatives, friends, teachers who were public servants, or parents who were engaged civically or in church.</td>
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<td>Political Ambition</td>
<td>Reflection and analysis of own experiences; what they may have learned the hard or easy way; what they know about public service, and advice they would share with others.</td>
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<td>Lessons: Own</td>
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Appendix G: List of Themes and Relevant Categories

**Political Ambition**

Lack of access to training and development.

Lack of access to social networks and capital.

The ideology that Latinos are held to a higher standard than others.

Imposed imposter syndrome that is then adopted by the Latino leader.

Discriminatory experiences, policies, or practices that activate public participation.

People in power are still overwhelmingly white in the Central Valley.

Broken systems or systemic racism launches Latinos to propel to be public servants.

Latinos helping others through mentorship and potentially passing the baton.

Reminder to stay humble and to respect one’s roots and ancestry.

Conditions of powerlessness where Latinos may feel helpless to change things.

Experienced mentorship or peer mentorship.

Cultural connection in adult or peer mentorship.

Familial inspiration to participate publicly.

Reflection and analysis of others’ experiences.

Reflection and analysis of own experiences.

**Social Capital and Networks**

Access to financial resources.

Need for bivocational service.

Generational wealth is nonexistent.

Central Valley is extremely conservative and equity is far from being reached.

Latino public servants entering in leadership spaces where they were invited to join.
Gender Politics

Latinas versus white male counterparts. In some cases, Latino males versus Latinas.

Leadership and Skill-Building Opportunities

Examining the number of Latino public servants in the Central Valley.

Latino leadership development academies and initiatives for Latinos.

Not maximizing Latino leaders’ potential.

Formal knowledge gained from or related to coursework, training, or academies.