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# Moving Women of Color from Reliable Voters to Candidates for Public Office


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## **POLICY BRIEF**

Moving Women of Color from Reliable Voters to Candidates for Public Office.

By Christina Bejarano and Wendy Smooth

### **Part I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In recent presidential elections, women, people of color, millennials, and new immigrants shaped the outcomes of those elections. Women of color standing at the nexus of two underrepresented groups in politics- racial minorities and women- demonstrated their commitments to democracy by maintaining their traditions as reliable voters, far exceeding expectations. In this project, we ask what is necessary to move these women of color from reliable voters to candidates for political office and locate our answer with women of color. They are doing much of the work to deepen democratic engagement in communities of color, namely mobilizing voters and political candidates. They are redefining democratic inclusion, reshaping the electorate, and they stand to change the demographics of voters and officeholders alike.

Likewise, they are redefining and disrupting traditional notions of political actors. How and why they see this as important work for themselves and their communities helps us to understand how people challenge exclusions and make a place for themselves, particularly in the political sphere which is marked by white, male dominance. Scholars have not documented this significant role women of color are playing in extending democracy and this documentation is critical to preserving women of color's historic contributions to formal electoral politics. While the existing scholarship is rich in denoting the propensity of women of color to act as social change agents, we lag behind in scholarship recognizing the richness of their contributions to formal electoral politics. Their contributions deserve to be recorded and linked to the long line of scholarly engagements with women of color activism and leadership.

We begin the project by establishing the landscape of existing WOC organizations, civic groups, collaborations and projects engaged in this work including the full landscape of programs, initiatives and organizations seeking to mobilize women of color as voters and political candidates. We explore their origin stories and contributions to civic engagement of marginalized groups. Our long term goals of the project are to strengthen the capacity of these organizations by bringing attention to their contributions; sharing best practices across groups that are not currently networked; and to leverage resources to strengthen their capacities.

## Part II. POLICY BRIEF

*Introduction:* Following the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, pundits and scholars alike pointed to these elections as evidence of a changing American electorate. In these two presidential elections, the electorate was more diverse than ever in the country's history. The electoral power of women, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, millennials and newly naturalized immigrants showed the two major political parties and the nation as a whole that these groups are considerable forces in American politics. In 2016, the number of eligible voters of color also increased suggesting that these voters will continue to play significant roles in determining election outcomes. Voter turnout among these groups and in particular women of color generated record highs in 2008 & 2012. In 2012, African American women increased their voter turnout rates exceeding all other groups including white voters for the first time in history. Whites were the only group to experience a decrease in voter turnout in 2012 compared to previous elections (Pew Research Center, 2012; U.S. Census, 2013). Although the numbers of eligible voters in communities of color are increasing with each subsequent election cycle, the power of their vote is determined largely by their "Get Out the Vote" (GOTV) mobilizations.

*Topic:* These presidential election cycles offer a glimmer into the potential political power women and minority groups might hold in determining future elections, given the projected shifts in the demographic make-up of the eligible voting age population, which is expected to grow increasingly non-white each year (Pew, 2012). These significant shifts in the electorate offer opportunities to engage new thinking about the potential of these groups to not only decide elections, but to deepen their civic engagement far beyond simply voting. Beyond their political power in determining election outcomes, the new American electorate has the potential to reshape political representation in elected bodies by becoming candidates themselves thereby changing the descriptive representation of governing bodies, which arguably changes policy outcomes in more representative ways. *This project focuses on these historic demographic shifts in the electorate and the mechanisms necessary to move these engaged citizens from voters to candidates for public office. In particular, we focus on women of color who have emerged as leading forces in voter mobilizations in communities of color.*

*Research Question:* Despite women of color participating as voters in higher than expected numbers, they continue to lag behind other groups in seeking political office (Smooth 2012). In this project, we examine the mechanisms necessary to move women of color from

reliable voters to candidates for office thereby deepening their attachments to democracy. In particular, we ask: **What types of mobilizations, civic organizations, and training initiatives are assuming this role in the democratic process to extend democratic inclusion for women of color? To what extent are specific women of color networks, civic organizations, and nonprofits engaged in this work?**

We note that local political parties commonly engage in the related tasks of mobilizing voter turnout and identifying, grooming and training potential candidates for political office. Recent scholarship, however illustrates that political parties more often fail to mobilize voters of color on their own without substantial assistance from outside groups.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, political parties fall short in their recruit of women candidates for office.<sup>2</sup> Rather than robustly supporting organizations that do the work of mobilizing voters of color or recruiting and training women candidates for office, these organizations receive limited support or seasonal support, mostly limited to get out the vote (GOTV) funding from the parties during critical elections. However, sustained civic education and organizing in minority communities between election cycles is most associated with building deeper connections with voters and ensuring that voting becomes habitual for minority group members (Garcia Bedolla and Michelson 2012). Largely replacing local political party efforts, civic organizations and community networks are assuming the responsibility and creating alternatives to the GOTV centered approaches of the major political parties as it relates to minority communities. Bedolla and Michelson (2012) argue, sustaining democratic engagement among low propensity voters between elections requires intervention. Activism on the part of organizations is needed to connect voters to the process, build a greater sense of civic engagement, and sustain long term commitments to voting among these citizens.

While scholars find evidence of more civically engaged citizens of color with greater interests in voting emerging in recent elections, we need more systematic analysis of the groups at center of these mobilization efforts, particularly the gendered dimensions of their outreach and engagement. Equally critical is understanding to what extent these groups have remained engaged in linking citizens to the democratic process. To what extent are they continuing the work of sustaining these now more civically engaged, voting groups and most importantly

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<sup>1</sup> Garcia Bedolla, Lisa and Melissa R. Michelson. 2012. *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Sanbonmatsu, Kira. 2015. "Electing Women of Color: The role of campaign trainings." *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy* 36(2): 137-160.

moving them from reliable voters to participate in other forms of civic engagement such as running for public office?

While most of these civic organizations focusing on democratic engagement are centrally focused on the monumental task of converting low propensity voters into habitual voters, others are also pushing beyond GOTV campaigns to engage voters in more sustained democratic practices including running for office. Women of color networks, groups, and organizations are uniquely situated to do both aspects of this work of deepening democratic engagement.

*Significance/Innovation:* Women of color community activists are doing much of the work to deepen democratic engagement in communities of color. A significant contribution of this project is extending the political legacies of women of color as democratically engaged political actors. While women of color, particularly African American women and Latinas have been at the forefront of community organizing and social movements across history, far less attention is afforded to their activism in formal politics, thereby erasing them from the history of formal electoral politics. This project assists in ongoing efforts in fields such as Women's Gender & Sexuality Studies, History, Ethnic Studies and Political Science that seek to establish the roots and trajectories of civic participation among underrepresented groups, and in particular the ways these groups shape democracies over time.

*Method:* We begin the project by establishing the landscape of existing organizations, civic groups, collaborations and projects engaged in this work including the full landscape of programs, initiatives and organizations seeking to mobilize women of color as voters and political candidates. We explore their origin stories, noting the reasons why the groups organized to move women of color into political office, and the political moment and structural arrangements that necessitated their development. We will conduct face to face interviews with leaders from targeted groups emerging from the initial phase of the project.

*Initial Findings:* We have established the existence of the WOC organizations and the types of work they do and audiences they target, which includes the states they are most active. The organizations are occupying a space that traditionally we expect political parties to address, but they don't so these groups have emerged to mobilize their communities.

**We compiled a list of Latina-Specific or related organizations which include<sup>3</sup>:**

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<sup>3</sup> The list does not include other more established Latina organizations like National Hispana Leadership Institute MANA (a National Latina Organization).

- (1) **Hispanas Organized for Political Equality, HOPE** (founded 1989): The organization is statewide in California and is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to ensuring political and economic parity for Latinas through leadership, advocacy, and education to benefit all communities and the status of women.<sup>4</sup> Their three-pronged mission is to (1) advocate for issues and policies impacting Latina communities and mobilize Latina leaders to address these concerns; (2) provide statewide education on the policy concerns facing Latinas; (2) and offer leadership training and networking to Latinas throughout California.
- (2) **Latina Vote!** (founded 2015/2016): A part of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project. A nonpartisan effort to develop Latina talent to organize and lead the community.<sup>5</sup> Area focused on southwestern states, primarily Texas and California. Their strategy includes (1) targeting Latina voters for education and mobilization during local elections in selected communities, (2) providing candidate training for Latinas running for local office in 2015/2016, and (3) providing training for Latina organizers.<sup>6</sup>
- (3) **LatinasRepresent** (founded 2013): Initially a joint initiative of Political Parity and the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda to elevate and support Latina leaders. The national organization is now focused on their website which includes valuable resources for Latina leadership, including resources to get ready to run for political office; get inspired to create LatinasRepresent organizations in your community; and get inspired by accessing a wealth of information/videos on Latina leaders.<sup>7</sup>
- (4) **National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health (NLIRH)** (founded 1994): National organization whose mission includes: building Latina power to guarantee the fundamental human right to reproductive health, dignity, and justice.<sup>8</sup> NLIRH seeks to build the power of Latinas throughout the country through community organizing, civil engagement, and training and leadership development.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.latinas.org>

<sup>5</sup> <http://svrep.org/latina-vote-2015.php>

<sup>6</sup> <http://svrep.org/latina-vote-2015.php>

<sup>7</sup> <https://latinarepresent.org>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.latinainstitute.org/en>

- (5) **San Antonio Latina Leadership Institute** (founded 2016): The San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Latina Leadership Institute is a six-month program designed to build the skills, knowledge, and confidence that today’s Latina Leaders need to succeed in their political aspirations of 1) running for elected office, 2) applying for positions on local, state, federal, or corporate boards and commissions, and/or 3) are interested in leadership roles within political campaign management.<sup>9</sup>
- (6) **PODER PAC** (founded 2008): motto- ‘By Latinas For Latinas’, A nationwide political action committee designed to increase the number of Democratic Pro-Choice Latinas serving in Congress. Their strategy: (1) highlight Democratic Latina federal candidates, (2) connect candidates with a national network of Latina leaders, and (3) raise early money so that Latina candidates become viable contenders.<sup>10</sup> They endorse a list of Latina candidates, each federal election cycle, which is facilitated through a vetting process to ensure that candidates are ‘viable’ and ‘committed to winning.’<sup>11</sup>
- (7) **Texas Latina List** (founded 2013): A progressive political action committee committed to promoting and increasing active participation of Latinas at all levels of elected and appointed offices and encouraging participation in all realms of the political process for the enhancement of public policies that empower Latinas.<sup>12</sup> The statewide organization in Texas endorses and financially supports political candidates.
- (8) **iGNiTE** (founded 2010): Non-partisan national organization based in California, Texas, and Colorado. The organization works to build a movement of young women (high school and college) who are ready to own their fair share of political power. They focus on encouraging young women to ‘think critically about policy’ and the relationship of policy to their communities.<sup>13</sup> The majority of their participants are women of color, especially Latinas. Their programs include supporting the creation of college chapters, holding annual political leadership conferences and small local

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sahcc.org/news/apply-today-the-latina-leadership-institute/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.poderpac.com>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.poderpac.com>

<sup>12</sup> <https://texaslatinalist.org>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ignitenational.org>

events (including training webinars), hosting an online ‘elected women network’, and fellowship for in-depth political leadership training.<sup>14</sup>

(9) **Emerge America** (founded 2005): Mission to increase the number of Democratic women leaders from diverse backgrounds in public office through recruitment, training, and providing a powerful network.<sup>15</sup> The organization offers three primary training programs nation-wide for candidates, ranging from six-months to one day programs.

*Policy & Practice Recommendations:* Our long term goals of the project are to strengthen the capacity of these organizations by bringing attention to their contributions to civic engagement of marginalized groups; sharing best practices across groups that are not currently networked; and to leverage resources to strengthen their capacities.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.ignitenational.org>

<sup>15</sup> <https://emergeamerica.org/about/>