

# Escalating Political Violence and the Intersectional Impacts on Latinas in National Politics

Anna Sampaio, *Santa Clara University, USA*

## ABSTRACT

Drawing on interviews with Latina congressional members and candidates, this article examines the impacts of escalating political violence on their professional lives and political careers, as well as the implications for the growing body of women of color who are engaging in public service at the national level.

On January 6, 2021, almost two months after her reelection to the US Congress, Representative Norma Torres and her colleagues were pinned to the floor of the US House of Representatives, ordered there by armed capitol police who feared for the safety of all members gathered to certify the 2020 Electoral College election results. Those results, which clearly indicated Joe Biden's presidential victory, were aggressively contested by Donald Trump, who incited a violent mob animated by calls for white supremacy and toxic masculinity to storm the capitol. Recounting her experiences a year later, Torres described a mixture of terror and defiance as she and her colleagues were forcibly evacuated and concerned for their lives and those around them. When they finally were permitted to resume their work, she recalled her desire to return "because our constituents needed to see us finish our job," adding:

Walking back through halls that I had just been running for my life in brought a lot of trauma. I was terrified to even open my office door. I ran and grabbed my ceremonial bat and checked the three rooms in my office. Then I went to the bathroom, washed my face and arms, and then sat down and cried. (Padilla 2021)

Representative Torres' chilling recollections describe how she feared for her life and feared for her colleagues' safety, simply for doing their job. This event underscored the costs to Latinas and other women of color who engage in public service in a political context where political violence informed by racism and misogyny has escalated.


The January 6th insurrection brought into stark relief the challenges, costs, and precarity of service in an environment of increased violence. Testimony to the January 6th Select Congressional Committee from Wandrea "Shaye" Moss and her mother

Ruby Edwards highlighted how the escalating threats extended beyond elected officials to include collective impacts on unelected public service providers and their families. As Moss testified, "A lot of them were racist, a lot of them were just hateful," including one stranger who told her "Be glad [it's] 2020 and not 1920." "Others told me I should hang alongside my mom for committing treason" (Moss 2022, 3).

Although the committee hearings drew attention to the violence and the months of deliberate planning by Trump to stay in power, they left unexamined the relationship between the violence and a resurgence of white nationalism, sexism, and gender-based violence, as well as the enduring costs to democratic participation. A growing body of research on violence against women in politics (VAWIP) investigates the increasingly gendered forms of harassment and intimidation. The literature documents the psychological and physical attacks aimed at women but leaves underdeveloped the intersectional approaches and research about the impacts on women of color in public office. Drawing on interviews with Latina congressional members and candidates throughout the 2018, 2020, and 2022 election cycles, this article documents how increasing political violence aimed at public officials amplifies racialized and gendered inequality and generates intersectional impacts that undermine Latina presence in national politics at a crucial juncture in Latina candidate emergence.

## INCREASED ABUSE, HARASSMENT, VIOLENCE, AND TRAUMA FOR WOMEN IN POLITICS

Recent reports document a disturbing escalation in violence aimed at elected officials in the United States including physical violence, psychological abuse, and threats of violence to them, their property, and those close to them. US Capitol Police report that threats against congressional officials, as well as actual violent encounters, increased by 119% from 2017 to 2020 (Higgins 2021; US Capitol Police 2021). In 2021, these threats

Anna Sampaio  is professor of ethnic studies and political science at Santa Clara University. She can be reached at [asampaio@scu.edu](mailto:asampaio@scu.edu).

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reached a new high in the wake of the 2020 election, increasing by 107% during the previous year (US Capitol Police. 2021). Similarly, in 2021, the *Washington Post* found “myriad elections officials around the country who had done little more than administer fair elections that Trump lost targeted with violent threats” (Bump 2021).

Research centered on VAWIP substantiates reports of physical violence and psychological abuse experienced by elected officials, specifically the gendered targeting and impacts of this violence (Herrick and Thomas 2021; Herrick et al. 2021). Empirical data demonstrate that women candidates are exposed to more sexual and psychological violence than men candidates (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 2020; Bjarnegård 2018); that women officeholders experience greater levels of violence and abuse than men (Herrick et al. 2021); and that the exposure to violence increases as women advance into the highest levels of public office (Håkansson 2021).

A resurgence in white supremacist and white nationalist movements animated by intersecting forms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and transphobia informs a significant portion of these violent encounters (Krook 2017; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016). Krook (2020) documents the sexualized and racialized discourse emanating from these movements aimed at women and its relationship to masculinized institutional behaviors that include microaggressions, sexual harassment, and violence. The resurgence of these movements in the United States parallels pervasive and global intersectional, racialized-gendered, and state-sanctioned violence targeting Black, lesbian, and transgender women in public office (Caldwell 2020).

Political violence in the United States increasingly targets women of color elected to public office whose very presence in predominantly white political institutions disrupts and transgresses norms of whiteness and masculinity and whose work often challenges intersecting modes of inequality and subordination to represent marginalized communities. Despite the increasing reports of violence, few studies focus specifically on the intersectional nature of escalating violence and its impacts for women of color serving in public office (Holm 2020). An Amnesty International (2018) study of online violence experienced by British members of Parliament (MPs) in the six months leading up to the 2017 elections found racialized and gendered patterns of abuse. The study noted that Black, Asian, and minority ethnic women MPs experienced far more abuse than their white colleagues. In addition, Håkansson (2021) found that women officeholders also experience greater penalties in the form of political

Krook (2020) argues that for women of color, the violence stems from both enduring forms of racial and gendered inequality and that it is uniquely tailored to undermine, discredit, deter, and deny their existence in politics. In this way, the violence is not merely an extension of partisan competition nor a “gendered extension of existing definitions of political violence privileging physical aggressions” but rather a collection of practices intent on denying women’s participation as women in politics (Krook 2020, 3). Moreover, intersectional violence results in attacks on the policies and practices advanced by women of color to address inequalities among their constituencies as well as attacks that are intent on curtailing their ability merely to exist in political office and public life.

Norwood and Padilla (2022) and Cramer (2022) document professional, emotional, and psychological impacts of increased violence. This includes forms of short- and long-term trauma among both elected officials and public service providers, heightened forms of fear and anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and significant expenditures of intellectual and emotional energy to simply process the onslaught of threats. For some, the violence prompts substantial changes in their life and work: changing how and where they drive, the security in their home and neighborhood, constituent outreach, mobilization, fundraising, and even whether they can safely hold in-person events in their district. These changes come with additional costs of money and time that directly impact their political future. Herrick et al. (2021) further demonstrate how violence often undermines the political careers, public confidence, and willingness and desire of public officials to serve. They note in their survey of physical violence and psychological abuse encountered by US mayors that “15.61% who experienced violence/abuse considered leaving office as a result” and “those who were threatened were more likely to have considered leaving than those who faced other types of psychological abuse” (Herrick et al. 2021, 692).

The escalating violence increases the precarity, vulnerability, and costs of public service while also creating new challenges for women of color who are considering running for national office. These challenges are especially problematic for Latina congressional candidates and officeholders in the United States because they occur at the same time that Latinas are making important political gains at the national level. In particular, Latinas figured prominently in the 2018, 2020, and 2022 general elections as major-party candidates for political office, as political organizers, and as a key proportion of the electorate in states with competitive statewide and national races—all while reports of targeted harass-

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violence in cases in which they substantively represent minority communities and their interests. The Jankowicz et al. (2021) study of online conversations among politicians across six social media platforms found widespread evidence of gendered, sexualized, and racialized abuse directed at women in office and women of color in particular.

ment and violence aimed at national candidates and officeholders were increasing (Sampaio 2019, 2021). A record number of Latinas ran for national office as major-party candidates and won in 2018, 2020, and 2022. By the beginning of the 118th Congress in January 2023, 19 Latinas were serving in national office as voting members. This included 18 Latinas in the US House of Representatives

(i.e., 13 Democrats and five Republicans) and one US Senator (Center for American Women and Politics 2018, 2020, 2022). That is, between 2017 and 2023, at the same time that US Capitol Police reported a 119% increase in threats and attacks directed at congressional officials, the number of Latina candidates for Congress increased by more than 50% and those elected to Congress as voting members doubled from 10 to 20 (Acevedo 2020; Dittmar 2020, 2022; Higgins 2021).

The escalating forms of intersectional violence documented in this research threatens to derail or dismantle the momentum of Latina congressional candidates and officeholders at a time when they have run more successful campaigns for national office than at any other time in US history—but their numbers fall far below parity. In 2022, Latinas constituted more than 9% of the total US population, more than 18% of all women in the United States, and 50% of the largest racial/ethnic minority community in the United States (Lopez 2023). However, they represented only 2.8% of the entire congressional body. This group of women includes US Senator Catherine Cortez Masto from Nevada—the only Latina ever elected to the US Senate. With 19 Latinas currently serving as voting members of Congress (i.e., 14 Democrats and five Republicans), Latinas remain vastly underrepresented in national politics. The gains made during the last three election cycles are jeopardized by the escalating forms of violence designed to push women out of the political sphere. Moreover, because the violence is both raced and gendered in form and also targets work that empowers communities of color, it equally threatens intersectional legislative and policy work advanced by these Latina congressional members. The research presented here that focuses on Latina elected officials who were serving in Congress or running for office in 2018, 2020, and 2022 helps to better understand the impacts of escalating racialized and gendered violence and the implications for the future of race and gender politics in the United States.

#### METHODS AND DATA

This research, which was approved by the author's university Institutional Review Board, draws from a larger project examining the emergence of Latina candidates for national office in 2018, 2020, and 2022. Grounded in critical intersectional methodology, the data represent a sample of interviews conducted from July 2020 through September 2022 with Latina congressional members and candidates from California and Texas. These two states are highlighted because the largest contingent of Latina congressional candidates has consistently emerged from them. This is due to both the concentration of Latinas/os/xs in these states and their history as sites of major Latina/o/x political organizing and mobilization. Even as more Latina candidates emerge from non-traditional states (e.g., Kansas, Georgia, and Indiana), more than half of all Latina congressional candidates who ran in 2018 (51%) and 2020 (53%) were from California and Texas (Center for American Women and Politics 2018, 2020).

Interview data were supplemented with information amassed from public databases including Ballotpedia, the US Census, Vote Smart, and Open Secrets, as well as candidate profiles archived at the Center for American Women and Politics and candidates' websites. Participants were recruited through emails, letters, telephone calls, and social media requests (i.e., when an official office or campaign site was no longer operational). All interviews were

conducted via Zoom and ranged in length from 35 minutes to 2-1/2 hours.

In total, 20 interviews were collected with Latina congressional members or candidates, including 15 Democrats and five Republicans, as well as four sitting congressional members. Questions centered on their political development as candidates and prior political experiences, as well as their experiences in the 2018 and/or 2020 election cycles. Because the project and interviews centered around public officials and a relatively small group of candidates engaged in a highly publicized process, it was important that interviewees be able to speak comfortably and be quoted directly about their experiences. For this reason, all subjects interviewed agreed to be presented with their full name and no one in the project appears anonymously. However, in accordance with the research protocol, some interviewees did share information "off the record"; that information was not recorded and any notes regarding it was maintained separately from the files and recordings of the interviews.

#### DISCUSSION: LATINAS RECALL MOUNTING THREATS, ATTACKS, AND VIOLENCE

For some Latinas serving in Congress, the escalating violence has invoked past trauma, such as the violence encountered by immigrants escaping authoritarian governments, economic upheaval, and militarized unrest. Congresswoman Norma Torres, representing the 35th Congressional District (CD) in California, fled political violence in Guatemala with her family at age five, following thousands of other Central American migrants who sought refuge in the United States. As a naturalized immigrant who had witnessed state violence, the January 6, 2021, insurrection prompted painful parallels with the conditions that her family faced:

I get a little emotional because I think about that day [January 6] and being a woman of color, an immigrant, and the same reasons why my parents sent me to the US, what my parents were trying to protect me from experiencing, I experienced in the US Congress. Think about that for a moment, how violent of a work environment it has become. And even as we were running for our lives, I remember talking to a reporter who reports on Latin America, and he asked the question, "Wow, you're an immigrant from Guatemala. This is something that happens there quite often." And I responded to him with, "Yes, this is what my parents sent me to the US to protect me from." So, I think that more than ever, the sacrifice is real and it has to be done.

Significantly, Congresswoman Torres bore the weight of escalating violence while still retaining a deep-seated commitment to serve. Like other women of color, she linked her election to office and commitment to service in the face of escalating threats to a strongly held relationship with her district—one that is grounded in her own identity—and her pledge to defend and protect marginalized communities who increasingly were the targets of racialized and gendered attacks.

Congresswoman Veronica Escobar (representing the 16th CD in Texas) drew similar parallels in describing her landmark run for Congress in 2018 during the height of the Trump administration:

I felt like somebody running toward a war...that impetus and that feeling of having to run toward a conflict. It was overwhelming, and it was overwhelming in large part because of what Trump was

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doing to my community, to immigrants, to people of color, to women. I thought, my God, I've got to serve and I've got to prevent him from continuing to do these horrific things that he was doing to vulnerable populations.

Along with Silvia Garcia from the 29th CD in Texas, Congresswoman Escobar won election to Congress in 2018 and they became

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the first Latinas from Texas to win in a national election. Her fears about the targeted threats of political violence aimed at Latina/o/x populations proved prescient. Less than a year after her election, a 21-year-old man—motivated explicitly by the desire to kill “Mexicans” and stop “the Hispanic invasion of Texas”—opened fire in a crowded shopping mall on a Sunday afternoon, killing 22 people and wounding 24 more. The racially motivated mass shooting was one of the deadliest in US history.

Whereas the impacts of escalating threats of violence were noted prominently in interviews with current Latina congressional members, several Latina congressional candidates also described racialized and gendered threats stemming from the resurgence of white supremacy. Reflecting on her 2020 campaign in the 24th CD in Texas and the types of racist comments and scrutiny she experienced as an Afro-Latina, Candace Valenzuela noted:

We had a significant transition in March of 2020 when we had the pandemic. I think that the racist echo chamber was enhanced by the fact that people were locked in their homes with *Fox News*, that they were locked in their homes with a great deal of access to misinformation, to some really bad campaigns....I was going up against the *Fox News* apparatus and that is something that is a significant bolster to the racism and misinformation. It's astounding to me that they are able to say some of the things that they say, like the replacement theory—the idea that we are intentionally coming in to replace people. These are things that people hear and believe and there were lots of people just taking aim at me from that perspective. I had a lot of people who spent time wearing me down.

The intense psychological, emotional, and physical impacts of racist narratives, such as the replacement theory and its amplification and enabling among conservative media, generated costs for candidates including Valenzuela that extended far beyond the election outcome. These racist narratives were replete in campaign ads, mailers, and even national debates (Sampaio 2020).

One of the most common and pervasive forms of abuse and harassment occurred through email and social media platforms, where trolls are rewarded for incendiary messaging and relative anonymity makes accountability more difficult. Republican candidate (16th CD in Texas) Irene Armendariz-Jackson noted: “There were trolls on social media calling me derogatory names, saying, ‘go back to Mexico,’ ‘pura India’...‘wetback.’”

Although the preponderance of Latina candidates who reported online harassment described aggressors as associated with alt-right and conservative groups, escalating harassment and threatening behavior were not limited to one party or ideological sector. Running in a highly competitive race in the 50th CD

in California in 2020, Democrat Marisa Calderon recounted threatening behavior from supporters of her Democratic challenger:

The bulk of the opposition and the patrolling and the vitriol that was in our direction—it came from the other Democrat, and really the other Democratic operatives, if you will. From the moment of

filing in the district, we were at the registrar's office and a person from the other Democrat's campaign was shouting at us in the registrar's office so much so that my campaign manager had to serve as a body shield to keep that person from entering my space. And we were accosted verbally on the streets, same person shouting at us, none of which I feel like would've happened had I been a man. It was gendered stuff meant to try and intimidate me. And, truth be told, it's alarming when a grown man who is larger than you starts shouting at you in a public crowded space. It doesn't feel good and it doesn't feel good to have to lean on another person to help to make you feel safe in that space. I consider myself to be a pretty independent person, but I didn't feel safe with that man yelling at me. And that continued.

Calderon's description highlights how frequently the violence draws on forms of aggressive masculinity to intimidate and undermine the safety, security, and autonomy of women and to push them out of the political process. In this case, Calderon needed a physical shield simply to file her candidacy papers. Elsewhere, women described needing bodyguards and support from local law enforcement or capitol police to ensure their own safety and that of their staff and family members in their daily work.

Finally, common throughout the interviews was a mindfulness about recovery and care for themselves and those around them in the wake of mounting abuse and violating experiences. Far from atomized efforts intent on strengthening personal resolve, many of the women formed supportive coalitions with other Latinas and women of color similarly situated around the country. They pressed for accountability against trolls and attackers, and they made significant investments in therapy and recovery for themselves and those around them who were left traumatized by violence. In summary, the women tethered care for themselves to coalition building, accountability, and efforts to address the underlying sources of violence. Reflecting on both the trauma and the recovery that she endured after a deeply racialized and abusive campaign season in 2020, Candace Valenzuela reiterated this theme:

I was getting all kinds of terrible things thrown at me. And there's an intellectual part of my head that said the people who are yelling the loudest aren't representative of what the entire district is like. And those people that are yelling the loudest are not the people who are struggling to eat.

I can't speak for every candidate of color. We don't have the same hard luck story. But we come to this process, I think, with a significant amount of trauma and we spend our lives dealing with that trauma by helping other people. And this process is so punishing that it almost takes you out harder than somebody who's just good intentioned and has had a relatively easy experience. It eats a

certain chunk out of you. And I'm lucky that after my campaign, I was able to have the space. I had the access to healthcare.

I still advise campaigns right now and I tell every candidate I run across, they need to have a therapist that they're regularly talking to so that they can treat themselves well and so that they can treat their staff well and so they can treat their family well, because abuse becomes pretty bad.

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Valenzuela's account underscores the vital need for attending to the unaccounted costs of violence being borne by women of color—especially with structured and resourced support that understands the intersectional impacts and provides direct and meaningful care while addressing the underlying sources of escalating threats.

## CONCLUSION

Data gathered from Latinas engaged in national politics highlight the chaotic, traumatic, and increasingly threatening nature of work that they encounter as they increase their presence in national office and as they attempt to legislate and serve marginalized communities in an environment inflamed by decades of racism, sexism, misogyny, transphobia, immigrant bashing, and xenophobia. As political violence aimed at women in politics proliferates, it is important to examine the particular impacts of this violence on Latinas. The costs to Latina candidates and officeholders bear particular attention because Latinas made important gains as major-party candidates for national office during the 2018, 2020, and 2022 election cycles, doubling their number elected to Congress since 2017.

Interviews with several Latina congressional members and candidates underscore the particular impacts of escalating violence to both their personal and professional lives. These impacts include heightened forms of fear, anxiety, and precarity—as noted by congressional representatives Norma Torres and Veronica Escobar—as well as increased physical, financial, and psychological costs of running that challenge them. The violence often undermines their political careers, public confidence, and willingness and desire to serve, as noted by candidates Candace Valenzuela and Marisa Calderon. Moreover, the impacts of these violent encounters generate collective damage because the policies and practices advanced by women of color are impacted and staff, constituents, and family members experience emotional and psychological harm. Recalling the extended impact of the racialized and gendered violence that she endured during her congressional campaign, Candace Valenzuela noted:

It took a toll on me psychologically, and it took a toll on the people who worked on my campaign psychologically. What happened to me in the campaign is not quantifiable, but it caused some real psychological damage, some real physical, mental, emotional damage, especially in the aggregate.

Although it is too soon to know the full impact of escalating violence, initial reports suggest a reduction in vital election service

providers in places such as Fulton County, Georgia, in the wake of increased violence and attacks on women of color (e.g., Wandrea "Shaye" Moss). Potential long-term effects include more women and people of color who are targets of racialized and gendered abuse leaving office, cutting short their term or their candidacy, or avoiding public office altogether. Undermining the candidacy or tenure of women of color in Congress not only threatens the

political institutions; it also specifically undermines advances in racial and gender justice, inclusion, and expanded forms of democratic representation embodied in their work. Ultimately, addressing the violence requires a structured and resourced response that includes attention to the racism and sexism that animates so much of the violence; attention to the intersectional impacts that weigh disproportionately on women of color; and investments in critical care and accountability for those impacted by the violence.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research. ■

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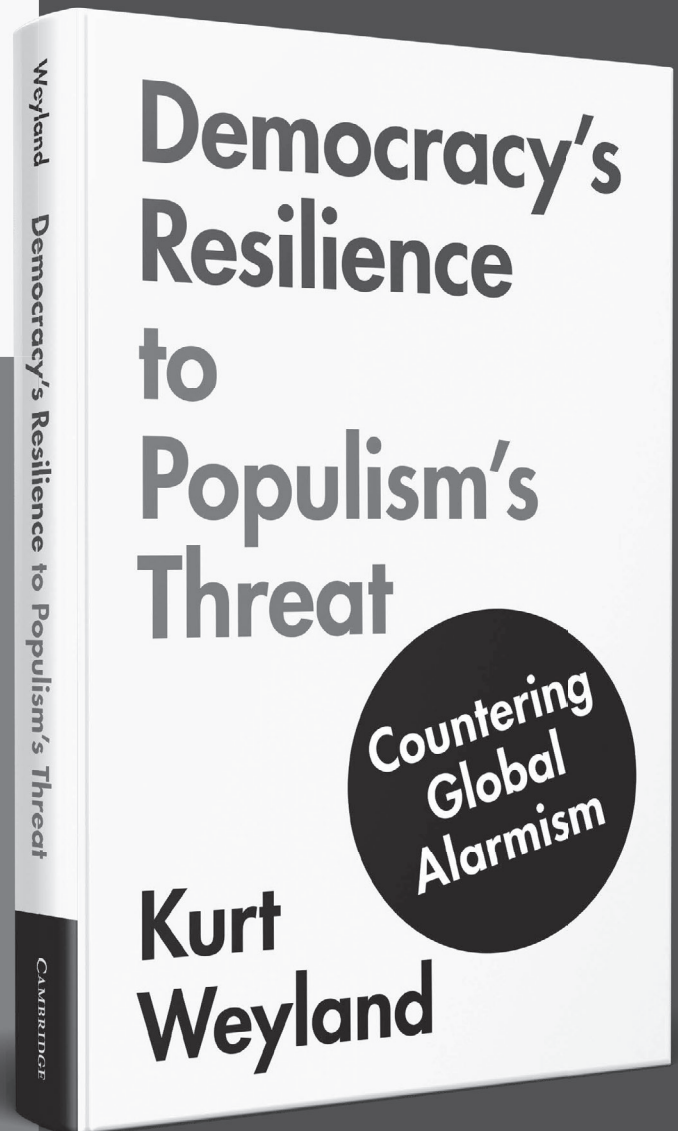
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