

“The Partido Belongs to Those Who Will Work for It”

Chicana Organizing and Leadership in the Texas Raza Unida Party, 1970–1980

Dionne Espinoza

Even at the beginning stages, however, the Raza Unida Party offered the Chicana a chance to show what she could do; for the overriding rule in our experiences has been that the partido belongs to those who will work for it and who believe in it.

—Evey Chapa, 1974

Raza Unida Party strategist Evey Chapa made this statement in an article she wrote on *Mujeres Por La Raza Unida*, an initiative she co-founded within the party to recruit Chicanas and encourage them to pursue political candidacy. Offered the chance to “show what [they] could do,” women readily took up these opportunities by working for the party and rising through its ranks. As a result of their hard work and organizing skills, key Chicana Raza Unida Party leaders experienced a sense of equality within the party. When asked about women’s participation, Rosie Castro reflected, “I felt very much part of decision-making processes. I think that we have made efforts like running Alma Canales [Raza Unida Party candidate for lieutenant governor of Texas in 1972]. So, we were developing a sense of, you know, inclusion, male and female” (1996). This sense of the party as having successfully integrated women resonates in interviews conducted with Raza Unida Party (RUP) women and in the writings of key party activists such as Chapa (1974) and Martha Cotera (1976, 1977).

Ironically, while Texas RUP women recount their hard work and voice a sense of empowerment within the party, scholars who have examined Raza Unida as a third-party effort that experienced some success in Texas have

often relegated women's activism to a few paragraphs (see, for example, García 1989; Muñoz 1989). In some cases, scholars refer to women as the "backbone" of the organization but do not provide many details of their activism, despite the existence of archival materials attesting to their work.¹

By contrast, when one reviews Raza Unida Party archival materials or interviews with Chicana RUP activists, one quickly learns of women's deep commitment to the movement and the extent of their work as party builders. Women ensured the smooth functioning of party headquarters, engaged in the door-to-door work of voter registration and campaigning, documented party correspondence, and organized rallies for candidates. So to speak of the women as the "backbone" is, following Dolores Delgado Bernal (2002), to speak of women as organizers and party leaders. Their work was vital to building and sustaining the infrastructure of the party in several key counties and at the statewide level.

This essay examines Chicana organizing and leadership in the Texas Raza Unida Party between 1970 and 1980. It draws primarily on interviews with Chicana RUP activists, especially those who held leadership positions, and on archival materials of the Raza Unida Party and individual party members.² I explore how women maneuvered within the male-dominant sphere of electoral politics and its accompanying political structures as party builders on the ground (where work is often behind the scenes); in formal party offices as precinct chairs, county chairs, and statewide committeewomen; and as political candidates circulating in another space of visibility (fig. 1).

The Foundation of RUP and the Inclusion of Women

The rise of Raza Unida in Texas represented a major development in the battle for the franchise by communities that historically had been excluded from the vote by poll taxes and literacy tests or other forms of intimidation (Cotera 1980, 223–24; Gutiérrez 1998, 36–40). The first Chicano voter revolt took place in 1963 in Crystal City, Texas, when the city's Mexican/Chicano majority voted five Mexican American candidates, "los cinco candidatos," onto the City Council. Although they were voted out two

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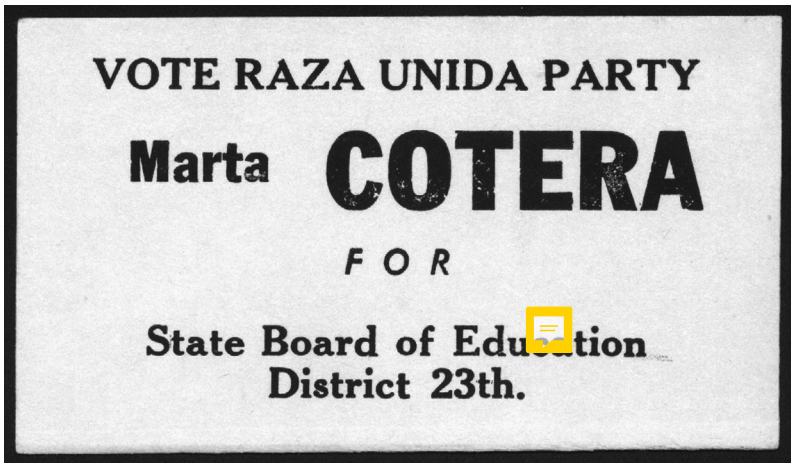


Figure 1. Campaign cards for Raza Unida Party candidates. Courtesy of Irma Mireles (top) and Martha P. Cotera.

years later in a backlash by the white power structure, a second effort to elect Chicanos to local offices under the banner of “Raza Unida” in Crystal City, Cotulla, and Carrizo Springs was successful in 1970 (Gutiérrez 1998; Navarro 1998, 62–85; Shockley 1974).

As a result of these achievements, people in urban areas such as San Antonio, where desegregation remained incomplete and where at-large elections disenfranchised the barrio, saw the Raza Unida strategy as a means to secure more equitable representation of the working-class Chicana/o community. The Democratic Party, often seen as the party of choice for Mexican Americans, was called to account for its exclusion of Chicana/os.

The Committee for Barrio Betterment (CBB) in San Antonio ran candidates for City Council in 1967, 1969, and 1971 in hopes of opening the door to more equitable representation (R. Rosales 2000; Montejano 2010). The CBB also began the process of integrating women by inviting Gloria Cabrera and Rosie Castro to run on a slate with Mario Compean and Willie Benavides.

During 1970–71 RUP began to move to regional organizing, which soon prompted a call for a statewide party, and it also demonstrated the early integration of women into its leadership. RUP opened regional offices in Crystal City, San Antonio, and Austin.³ Two of the three offices were run by women, Alma Canales in Austin and Virginia Muzquiz in Crystal City. The third office, in San Antonio, was run by Mario Compean. With these offices in place, on October 30, 1971, at the state convention in San Antonio, RUP voted to go statewide, “to expand throughout Texas instead of remaining regional as before.”⁴ A State Executive Committee was elected: men held the offices of chair, vice chair, secretary, treasurer, and committeeman, while the office of committeewoman was filled by Alma Canales. The party went to work on developing the party structure by formulating a platform, identifying precinct and county chairs, and recruiting candidates for major statewide offices. The Platform Committee was effectively coordinated by Evey Chapa, a professional woman with a background in education, who served as recording secretary for the Platform Committee meetings and who was instrumental in the development of the “Party Platform on Women.”⁵ In terms of sheer numbers, the fact that women were at least one-third of the participants in the state convention augured well for women’s increasing involvement in the party.⁶ The inclusion of a party platform on women also encouraged women to feel a sense of belonging within the party.

RUP Women and the Gender of Politics

The inclusion of women in the Platform Committee and the State Executive Committee, and their role as candidates for precinct chairs and captains, represented a new scenario in women’s political participation. It was a leap beyond women’s second-tier involvement as party “auxiliaries,” the pattern that had largely characterized the Mexican American civil rights movement up to then (Orozco 1995). An even larger milestone was reached the following year, when Alma Canales ran for lieutenant governor of Texas on the RUP ticket. Nevertheless, this did not mean that women

in RUP did not face a gender division of labor or sexual politics. The RUP women interviewed, the majority of whom held formal leadership positions or ran for office, communicated a variety of perspectives on gender in the organization.

Asked about gender roles in RUP, Irma Mireles, who was based in San Antonio and held leadership positions in the local party, responded:

Yes, we were doing the cooking. Yes we were, you know, in some instances staying in the background, *pero*, but we were also vocal. Now, did they listen? I don't know. Sometimes they listened. I remember, the little bit I remember of the constitution that we had in Raza Unida, I remember that, that we were included. And, I think the generation that raised us, we were still fighting within us that you know, *los hombres fueron primero* [the men would be first]. We had to accept it ourselves that we would be first. (1998)

Mireles's reference to the "constitution," or party platform, spoke to its circulation among women and their sense of it as a meaningful statement of inclusion. At the same time, Mireles notes that they were making a gradual transition away from their own self-perception as women who should take a secondary role to men, a shift encouraged by the various social movements of the period, in particular the rise of the women's movement.⁷

The party platform on "La Mujer" inscribed support for women as members of a Chicano community that also faced "second class citizenship." The statement cited statistics to show that Chicanas were "actively involved" in RUP as candidates, county chairs, and precinct chairs. In a section titled "La Familia y La Raza Unida," the statement noted the women's movement call for equal rights, but it also asserted that "Raza Unida Party does not feel that a separate stand on the rights of women is necessary, as it is explicit that women are included in the fight for equal rights" within the party. In making this argument, the platform reasserted that "the strength of unity begins with the family" and called for "total family involvement." Therefore, RUP followed the more general movement discourse of *la familia* to ensure that group unity and women's interests within that group would coincide, rather than be viewed as separate.⁸ As noted by David Montejano (2010, 167–68), however, the platform appeared to move in a different direction when it ended with a list of resolutions that declared support for the Equal Rights Amendment and for the equal rights of women, regardless of their status as "working mother[s], career women, or housewives," and recommended "that the participation of women, to include decision-making positions of Raza Unida Party, be actively continued through political

education and recruitment of women.”⁹ The message of the platform thus negotiated the *familia* concept to clarify and support Chicanas’ claim to equal representation.

It is important to note here that there were differences in the organizational incorporation of *la familia* as a discourse as well as in regional and state-level political cultures. Given that the party had to conform to a set of preestablished rules governing party structure and procedures and was also decentralized, the patriarchal resonance of *la familia* was somewhat submerged. F. Arturo Rosales, comparing Texas to California, describes Chicano cultural nationalism in Texas as drawing “more from existing culture, family values, Tejano music, and the use of Spanish” (2000, 333). If we agree with this assessment, then we may regard the *familia* discourse more as an organizing tool than as a dictate to be upheld in the party structure. Although the *familia* narrative could be used to both recruit and restrict women, I would argue that within the context of the party, the existence of a set democratic structure for filling party positions along with the explicit statement of equal rights served to mitigate the patriarchal connotations of a family-centered ideology and allowed women to rise through the ranks.

The fact that strong women were at the forefront early on influenced other women also to challenge traditional gender divisions of labor. Mireles, speaking again to gender in the organization, reflected:

I think at first many of the women were seen as relegated more to the back, staying in the background. We got our courage, the rest of us, from women like Rosie Castro. I mean, if she can do it and she can speak up and she’s not allowing herself [to be] typing away or cooking, why did we have to? But then the other thing we did, because we did have parents, a lot of our mothers provided the food. (2010)

Virginia Muzquiz was also cited by many activists for her mentorship and leadership in the party and as a role model for all of the women (Castro 2010; Cotera 2010; Martínez 2010). Women’s mentoring, role modeling, and friendship networks forged in the course of their party activism also served as buffers against acts of exclusion or sexism they encountered as party leaders. This, along with the party’s Chicana Caucus and the Mujeres Pro Raza Unida organizing (described below), helped ensure that women’s voices would be heard within the party.

Women continued to struggle to negotiate gender within the party and in the male-dominated sphere of electoral politics. But the party’s stated support for equal rights and the women’s ability to access formal party offices

such as precinct chair and county chair gave rise to a kind of consensus: while indeed there were gender inequalities in the RUP, ultimately women did have a place in the party—because they claimed it.

Building the Party Structure

Third party politics have provided success for many Chicanas at the local level. However, even more than actual officeholding has been the effective political training that Chicanas and other women have been able to provide for each other through participation in these two political institutions in their formative stages where bodies and brain power are in short supply, where sexism has had to be cast aside. (Cotera 1976, 171–72)

To understand women's leadership within Raza Unida, we must look at the ways in which RUP structured the party platform and at its early inclusion of women in party offices and as political candidates, beginning with the 1972 campaign. But we must also consider the agency of the women activists who took up these opportunities. Cotera's observation on the participation of women in the early stages of party building underscores the fact that Chicanas became part of the structure by helping build it. As Cotera stated, "We really had the opportunity, being in Crystal City, to work on structuring the party from the bottom up" (2010). The ability to work from the bottom up enabled women to move into formal party offices such as precinct and county chairs in San Antonio, Crystal City, and Austin.

It may also be the case that the rational structure of the party, which included preestablished rules and procedures, favored women. While the party was a pyramid with the State Executive Committee at the top, it also provided leadership roles at several lower levels—from precinct chairs, who were responsible for their designated voter areas, to county chairs, who convened meetings of the precinct chairs, to county-level executive committees just below the State Executive Committee. The State Executive Committee depended on the county and precinct levels to carry out the work of the party. Ironically, while these rather bureaucratic and rationalized formal structures established a hierarchy, they also built in mechanisms of accountability, such as role definition and verification of follow-through, and were undergirded by the principle of equality enshrined in notions of democracy.

Across interviews and writing by and about Raza Unida women activists, the idea that many women did the "hard work" of building the party structure emerges repeatedly. To make the party a reality required

mobilization at the grassroots level to bring the party structure in line with formal election procedures. In San Antonio, Rosie Castro, who served as Bexar County RUP chair from 1972 to 1974, noted, “I had come up as an organizer in the county and the Young Democrats, so my focus was okay, how do we get this structure built?” (2010). As Castro’s statement suggests, those women who emerged as leaders often had experience in organizing. She herself had started a chapter of the Young Democrats at Our Lady of the Lake University, had become president of the Bexar County Young Democrats, and had run for City Council on the Committee for Barrio Betterment ticket in 1971. To pull the party together required tremendous effort: “You literally had to do everything, everything from election law, gathering people to do the election, then worrying about putting office space together, having a place for meetings, everything” (Castro 2010).

Maria Elena Martínez had moved to Austin to attend the University of Texas and continue her work as a bilingual educator at the university, and she moved with MAYO into RUP activism. She was among the many students who provided a firm support base for RUP organizing in Travis County, and she was the county chair. She noted that many of the women party activists were students who had the skills needed to build the party and make it viable:

We organized the party. I mean, it was basically the women. It was like we, there was a complement of what we could do and what, you know, the guys could do. But I think it was the women in Austin that pretty well set up the polls, set up the party structure, initiated some of the . . . started the first paperwork trying to get signatures so that we could have the party on the ballot and begin that process. (Martínez 1997)

As Martínez says, the first task was to put Raza Unida on the ballot. RUP activists went door to door, gathering signatures and registering voters. For some, this grassroots work may have been their first encounter with the ways gender played out in the electoral arena. Castro remembers women stating that they had to ask their husbands’ permission to register: “I can remember the women coming out and saying, ‘Well, you know what? That would be nice. I would like to register to vote, but why don’t you leave them [registration papers] because I have to ask my husband’” (1996).¹⁰

To be a “party woman” was to quickly become an expert on the electoral process. RUP women activists had to learn the Texas Election Code, an opaque set of rules that had to be followed in order to ensure the party’s legitimacy in the campaign and at the polls. Mireles, who was a poll

watcher in several primaries and elections, recalls, “I used to walk around with . . . a book-size Texas code, election code. I knew that election code. But just in case I didn’t know something I had that little book with me so that I could quote it.” She accompanied Castro, who was chair of the Bexar County RUP in 1972, to meetings with the County Election Board and the county clerk: “I think the only two brown faces there were Rosie and I, but Rosie would question him” (Mireles 2010).

As some of the earliest recruits to the party, Chicana RUP activists were able to prepare themselves for leadership roles by organizing the party structure and learning the Texas Election Code and other procedures involved in running elections. From there it was a logical step for them to become party officers at the precinct, county, and state levels. In essence, Chicanas earned their roles as formal leaders of precincts and counties by their tenacity in helping lay the framework of the party bureaucracy and doing the hard work of organizing campaigns and mobilizing voters on the ground.

Chicanas in Formal Party Leadership: Precinct, County, and State Levels

One way to evaluate the extent to which RUP offered an effective political opportunity for women is to look at the number of Chicanas who became formal leaders in the party. In San Antonio and Austin, women moved quickly into party offices as precinct chairs, county chairs, and county and state executive committee members.¹¹ In these positions, Chicana RUP activists put their skills to work organizing statewide elections, including primaries, as well as precinct, county, and state conventions.

Precinct chairs were in charge of voter mobilization and education. They organized the volunteers who would canvass their designated areas, set up voting locations, and ensure that those living in their precinct went to the polls on election day. A list of twelve items defined the “duties and responsibilities of precinct chairpersons.” Item number one stated: “Must work to organize party in precinct through party structure and support organizations.”¹² Precinct chairs were also responsible for holding monthly meetings in the precinct, representing the precinct at party meetings, maintaining communication with the county executive committee, and attending county meetings. For example, the minutes for a meeting of Precinct 433 in Austin record as main items of business the election of county delegates and the drafting of resolutions.¹³ There seemed to be little

barrier to women serving as precinct chairs: a document listing candidates in Bexar County in 1972 shows that eleven precincts out of thirty-seven had at least one woman running for precinct chair.¹⁴ In Austin, a letter to the county clerk of Travis County in 1978 identified ten women running for precinct chair in twenty-three precincts. This suggests that in these two counties, at least, women were well represented at the precinct level.

The next level of formal party organization was the county. At this level there was a chair and an executive committee with a vice chair, secretary, and treasurer. Irma Mireles, who served as Bexar County chair in 1974–76, described her duties as follows:

The primary. Making sure that all the paperwork was submitted so that our primaries were funded. . . . And making sure that . . . we had election judges and clerks, that we had . . . counted the votes and . . . getting the word out about Raza Unida. Making sure we got the candidates first of all. And that we, what's the word, we certified the candidates. And had precinct chairs in each precinct, especially the key precincts. (1998)

Maria Elena Martínez, who was Travis County chair, recalled,

My focus was really on the county and working in the county and working with precinct chairs that were going to carry out the voting, organizing that, organizing all the material that we had to buy, the training of the precinct chairs, making sure we crossed all our *t*'s and our *i*'s. (2010)

It is important to offer a caveat about role definition in organizations and the ways that some Chicanas may rearticulate gendered roles, such as secretary, as positions of power in the context of a political party structure. In 1972, because of her secretarial and clerical skills, Mireles served as secretary of the Bexar County Executive Committee (whose chair was then Rosie Castro) and was also asked to take minutes at the national Raza Unida Party meeting in El Paso that year. While women activists have often expressed concern about the gendered division of labor within social movement organizations, Mireles asserted that secretarial work offered space for women's leadership: "There was a lot of power in that position if I wanted it. Because what I heard and what I transcribed was very important to the history of what was happening" (1998). Such work could be empowering when the party desperately needed these skills and when women held key formal positions in the party structure such as county and precinct chairs (and eventually, state chair). Who did the secretarial work seemed less contentious when women's skills were recognized and appreciated—and when they enabled a woman to be in a key position of power, as Evey Chapa

was with respect to the Platform Committee. Chapa's role as recording secretary for the committee enabled her to oversee the development of the Party Platform on Women and document its evolution.¹⁵

Moving Up in the Party Ranks

Precinct chairship was often a starting point for upward movement through the party to positions at the county or statewide level. Women who became political candidates also served as precinct chairs, both before and after their candidacy, including Martha Cotera (Travis County), María Jiménez (Harris County), and Virginia Muzquiz (Zavala County).

Irma Mireles is an example of a party activist who filled several leadership roles. She initially connected with the party through a friend, Anna Benavides, who had recruited her to MAYO. From MAYO she moved to RUP, serving as a precinct chair in Bexar County (San Antonio) from 1972 to 1974. In 1974 Mireles became county chair when her friend Rosie Castro, who was the founding county chair in 1972, had to step down to raise her sons. Among her various roles, Mireles managed the RUP headquarters and served on the County Executive Committee as secretary and treasurer, suggesting the various formal leadership possibilities that were available.

The example of Mireles succeeding Castro as county chair also demonstrates how women's friendships undergirded their networks of leadership in the party. In Austin, Maria Elena Martínez described her work as Travis County chair, but she noted that her friend Linda Del Toro was at her side, helping her with the work of putting the primary together and training the precinct chairs (2010). When Martínez became statewide party chair, Del Toro stepped into the role of Travis County chair. Just as men have long used male networks to consolidate their access to leadership and ensure that successive leaders continue similar agendas, women also could draw upon their networks to ensure women's equality and access to formal leadership positions.

As Chicanas rose through the ranks of the party, they faced one final hurdle before they could accede to its highest office, statewide party chair. According to Maria Elena Martínez, the highest position offered to women in the party was vice chair. At the 1974 state convention in Houston, Martínez went to the Mujeres Caucus meeting and questioned this "party rule" after coming to the realization that the women in the party had internalized their status as vice chair. It troubled her to think that there was a glass ceiling in RUP: "I said, 'And why are we not running for chair?"

Why, why can't women run for chair? . . . We work the party and we've organized the party. I do not understand why we have to automatically assume that we can only be vice chairs" (Martínez 1997). The candidates for state chair that year included Guadalupe Youngblood, Ernest Calderon, and Martínez. Youngblood came in first with 177 votes, and Martínez second with 75 votes.¹⁶ Martínez then ran for vice chair against Juana Luera and was voted in.

Although she did not win state chair that term, Martínez ran again in 1976 and was elected.¹⁷ When asked why she challenged the party rule, she stated, "I think I was trying to make a point that . . . we were serious about changing the structure. And [in] our thinking about party and party independence, then we also had to deal with the structures within our own heads about the positions and the relationships between men and women" (1997). Rather than reproduce gender norms within electoral politics that placed men in the highest office and women as secondary, Martínez felt that RUP should go beyond these norms to transform structures in ways that would transform gender relations as well.

Elected at the statewide convention in Seguin in 1976, Martínez became the first woman to head a major political party in the state of Texas.¹⁸ Unfortunately, she found herself holding together a party under attack. With its continued successes in local elections such as city council and school board races, RUP was perceived as a threat. By 1976, the party had endured four years of attacks in the media and legal challenges to its validity.¹⁹ Internal splits and factionalism in places such as Crystal City had also caused conflicts that Martínez, along with Linda Del Toro, the Travis County chair, had to travel to mediate (Del Toro 2010; Martínez 1997). Perhaps the most devastating blow to the party was the arrest of former party candidate Ramsey Muñiz on charges of drug trafficking.²⁰ Muñiz had run for governor in the 1972 and 1974 statewide elections. He was a powerful speaker, and his middle-class professional image helped put the party in the media spotlight. Though some party members believed that his arrest was a frame-up, given the extensive surveillance of RUP at the time, it nonetheless severely damaged the credibility of RUP. Taking leadership of a battle-weary party, Martínez rose to the challenge of keeping the party active even under very difficult circumstances. She even stayed on as chair for a second term because someone was needed to serve in that leadership role. She was "going to stay with the party" until the end—"and do whatever I needed to do to keep the organizations going and the structure going" (Martínez 1997).

From Running the Office to Running for Office

Although women did not achieve 50 percent representation in most formal party leadership positions, their significant presence gave RUP a different feel compared to other Chicano movement organizations where women did not attain formal leadership roles that were also substantive (Chapa 1974). At the same time, it proved to be a challenge to expand women's participation beyond the formal roles that made use of their organizing skills. Martha Cotera noted that in Crystal City women were comfortable in their roles as organizers: "The important people were the organizers and the organizers were often women. But they were not necessarily the ones running for office" (2000, 391).

The 1972 statewide campaign showed promise for women's political candidacy, particularly given the nomination of a Chicana as candidate for lieutenant governor. Alma Canales was an accomplished journalist who had written for such papers as the *Edinburg Daily Review*, *Rio Grande Herald*, *Ya Mero* (a farmworker newspaper), and *Castro County News*. She was born in Starr County to a migrant family and raised in Edinburg, in rural South Texas. She joined MAYO at Pan American College after attending some of the first meetings, which she also wrote about in the *Edinburg Daily Review*.²¹ As she became more involved in RUP, she moved to Austin to head the party's office there. As Canales describes it, the process of recruiting the party's political candidates was largely a matter of finding enough people to run. When the party had to choose a candidate for the lieutenant governor's race, someone turned to her and asked, "Will you do it?" Feeling that the women of RUP "had trust in me," she said yes. Although she was still in her twenties and felt inexperienced, she jumped into the campaign (Canales 1997; Gutiérrez, Meléndez, and Noyola, 2007, 80–82).

Canales ran a grassroots campaign that contrasted markedly with the more middle-class presentation of RUP gubernatorial candidate Ramsey Muñiz, whose charisma and powerful speaking style charmed voters. As a young woman from rural South Texas, Canales felt a strong connection to the state's working-class and rural communities. When she gave speeches, she focused on "sentimientos" and emphasized a "family theme," because these were the worldviews she felt most comfortable with (Canales 1997; Gutiérrez, Meléndez, and Noyola 2007, 81–82). She garnered 88,811 votes—not a bad showing given the lack of resources and grassroots nature of her campaign, and 3,000 more votes than the Chicano male candidate on another party's ticket managed to attract (García 1989, 130).

Generally speaking, women running for office in the early 1970s entered a very male-dominated terrain. To push for more women to enter politics, the National Women's Political Caucus was founded in 1971 in Washington, DC. The Texas Women's Political Caucus (TWPC) was formed shortly thereafter, and a number of RUP women became involved in it. In 1972, with Sissy Farenthold running for governor of Texas, there was hope that the TWPC would also support Alma Canales for lieutenant governor. Evey Chapa, writing as a committeewoman of the RUP State Executive Committee and a TWPC council member, and Ino Alvarez, of the Travis County RUP and also a TWPC council member, sent a letter to "Sisters of the TWPC," stating: "We need support from the women of Texas on the local level in order that Alma and the women who support her bring success to women in politics." They asked for help in raising funds for her campaign, including the names of women and men who might be willing to contribute money to "Amigas del Alma Canales."²²

In addition to Canales, the RUP slate in 1972 included Martha Cotera as a candidate for the Board of Education, District 23. They lost in these two statewide races, but another RUP woman, Elena Díaz, was successfully elected as Zavala County commissioner for Precinct 3.

It remained difficult to recruit women for political candidacy. Becoming a political candidate raised concerns around women's involvement in the public sphere and perceptions of political women. Understanding this, Martha Cotera and Evey Chapa developed a recruitment project, interchangeably referred to as *Mujeres Por La Raza Unida* or *Mujeres Pro Raza Unida* (MPRU), as a means of demystifying party involvement and, they hoped, encouraging more women to run for office. Cotera later stated, "We organized a group of *Mujeres Pro Raza Unida* and a lot of people think that we developed a group because we were not getting recognition from the men. As a matter of fact, we developed a group to get more of the women to be aware that they needed to assume a political position" (2000, 391).

Cotera and Chapa were both professionals whose work in the areas of education and information science contributed to their skills in developing curricula, handouts, and other materials for MPRU trainings (Cotera 2010). In an article "*Mujeres Por La Raza Unida*," Chapa described MPRU's mission as to convey "a working political knowledge to la mujer envuelta en el Partido de la Raza Unida, and to involve more women" (1974, 3). Although Cotera initially felt that men in the Chicano movement were not drawing sufficiently upon women as a resource, women's participation soon became expedient: "Guys wanted us to run for office not necessarily because they

felt that we had any good issues to carry forth or a different perspective, but because they were running out of guys” (Villareal 2000, 283–90).

In *Profile on the Mexican American Woman*, Cotera applauds the success of *Mujeres Pro Raza Unida*, noting that “more than ten women pledged they would seek office in Fall of 1973” (1976, 177). In the 1974 election, two Chicanas ran for state representative positions: María Jiménez (Harris County, District 87) and Orelia Hisbrook Cole (Travis County, District 37, Place 2).²³ In Frio County, Gloria V. Cantú ran for county clerk and Amalia Yáñez for county treasurer. In Zavala County, Rosa Mata ran for district clerk, Virginia Muzquiz for county clerk, Carmen Flores for county treasurer, and Hortencia Treviño for county commissioner. Additionally, two women in Frio County and two women in Zavala County were candidates for justice of the peace. The effort proved particularly fruitful in Zavala County, where Chicanas ran in significant numbers and in some cases won offices such as county clerk, justice of the peace, and mayor (Navarro 1998, 313). Located in South Texas, Zavala County’s Crystal City had a strong community organizing base forged in the Crystal City walkouts through *Ciudadanos Unidos*, an organization made up of community members. These experiences, along with the MPRU trainings and mentorship work and the role modeling of Virginia Muzquiz, served as a vetting and grooming process for candidates (Navarro 1998) and contributed to a culture of Chicana political candidacy that continues in the county to this day.²⁴ Zavala County and the Crystal City area in particular have fielded a good number of Chicana candidates, an interesting case of female political activism in a part of Texas that many think of as having a traditional, rural culture.

Beyond these advances in the partisan electoral arena, a nonpartisan election provided an additional success story. Irma Mireles, who had taken over the county chair position from Rosie Castro in 1974, filed and ran for a position on the San Antonio River Authority in late 1976. With very few resources, she ran a grassroots campaign, beginning with the submission of signatures rather than payment of a filing fee to run for the office (Gutiérrez, Meléndez, and Noyola 101–2; Mireles 1998). A reporter who interviewed her noted,

While she didn’t campaign as a *Raza Unida* candidate per se, her win and the attendant publicity concerning her political affiliation is the only positive news the public has read about the party in months. “*Raza Unida* will never die as long as people like me believe in it,” Irma says somewhat defiantly.²⁵

Despite the county and San Antonio River Authority victories, by the primary on May 6, 1978, all the Raza Unida candidates listed statewide were men. It may not have mattered much, as by that time the party was quickly fading. Nevertheless, the fact that women ran for office and in some cases were elected demonstrates the ways in which the RUP party structure enabled Chicanas to see themselves as political candidates for the first time.

Conclusion

While RUP women activists helped build the party structure and became party leaders in major counties, the party ultimately remained, like electoral politics generally, top-down and very male. But the Chicana activists demonstrated the dynamic readiness of women to be political actors and the possibility of transforming structures that had historically excluded women by encouraging and enabling women who were committed to equal rights, justice, and community to seek and fill those positions.

In the final accounting, we also have to consider the losses to women as party members and party officers when RUP lost credibility as a result of the Muñiz drug charges. Many of the women interviewed stated that this was a major blow that effectively stopped the party in its tracks. The party never completely recovered at the statewide level, despite the tremendous work done to maintain it by Martínez and the other women activists.

By 1976, a Chicana had run for lieutenant governor of the state, a Chicana had been elected state party chair, and in major cities such as Austin and San Antonio, the leadership of the party at the precinct and county levels was in the hands of women. In this way, the RUP opened the door for the pioneering political candidacies of Chicanas in Texas at the city, county, and state levels. In a larger sense, women RUP activists carried out major work in the enfranchisement of Tejano communities, where the legacy of poll taxes and literacy tests hindered working people's access to the vote. Chicanas were fundamental to the grassroots mobilization that made accessible a political arena often viewed as out of reach for these communities.

Notes

This essay draws from a chapter in my manuscript “Bronze Womanhood: Chicana Activism in the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, 1965–1980,” which examines women’s involvement in the Crusade for Justice, Brown Berets, Raza Unida Party, and El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA). I wish to thank Rosie Castro, Martha Cotera, Linda Del Toro, María Elena Martínez, Irma Mireles, and Yolanda Santos for their interviews; Rudolfo Rosales, María Cortera, and Susana Almanza for helping me connect to some of the activists; José Angel Gutiérrez for granting permission to use interviews from the Tejano Voices Collection, archived at the University of Texas, Arlington, Special Collections; and my colleagues, Jorge Mariscal and Richard T. Rodríguez, for reading versions of this essay.

1. In her article “Beyond Machismo, La Familia, and Ladies Auxiliaries,” Orozco (1995, 19 and 32 n. 82) sets forth a critique of García’s failure to give a full account of women’s activism in his book on the Raza Unida Party, *United We Win* (1989). See also Cotera’s remarks on García’s book quoted by Villareal (2000, 288). More recently, David Montejano (2010) has devoted a chapter of his book, *Quixote’s Soldiers*, to Chicana activism in the Raza Unida Party.

2. I draw on interviews conducted by José Angel Gutiérrez, interviews that I conducted, materials shared with me by individual activists, and archival materials housed at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas, Austin. Interviews that Gutiérrez conducted with Canales, Castro, Irma Mireles, and Virginia Muzquiz were edited as biographies in *Chicanas in Charge: Texas Women in the Public Arena* (Gutiérrez, Meléndez, and Noyola 2007).

3. *Por Mientras*, 1st ed., 1971, p. 1, box 1, folder 3, Raza Unida Party Collection.

4. Pamphlet, “A Special Invitation,” and Meeting Agenda, box 1, folder 1, Raza Unida Party Collection.

5. “State Raza Unida Convention, Oct. 30, 1971, 10:00” notes, box 1, folder 1, Raza Unida Party Collection.

6. State Convention Attendance List and List of Delegates, 1971, box 1, folder 2, Raza Unida Party Collection.

7. This section draws on a more extended discussion of *Mujeres Pro Raza Unida*, the Party Platform on Women, and Chicana feminism in the Raza Unida Party Texas that will appear in my forthcoming book.

8. For a discussion of some of the rhetorical strategies used by Chicana activists to co-opt cultural nationalist discourses of the *familia* for women’s empowerment (despite the often patriarchal family that was actually imaged), see my essay “Rethinking Cultural Nationalism and La Familia Through Women’s Communities: Enriqueta Vasquez and Chicana Feminist Thought” (Espinoza 2006). For examples of the “imaging” of *la familia*, see Richard T. Rodríguez, “Serial Kinship: Representing *La Familia* in Early Chicano Publications” (2002).

9. “Texas Raza Unida Party: A Political Action Program for the ‘70s,” [1972?], 38–40, box 1, folder 6, Raza Unida Party Collection.

10. Also discussed in *Chicanas in Charge* (Gutiérrez, Meléndez, and Noyola 2007, 110).

11. Women's involvement varied in each locality, of course, and these local nuances need to be fleshed out in more extensive studies. Based on preliminary research, it appears that there were several counties in which women were significantly represented in party leadership: Travis, Bexar, and Zavala. Austin and San Antonio are areas for which extensive archival materials and oral histories already exist, so they are the main areas discussed here. There is a need for more local studies that consider how gender and political cultures may be different or similar in extending political opportunities to Chicanas.

12. "Duties and Responsibilities of Precinct Chairpersons," box 7, folder 5, Martha Cotera Papers.

13. "Minutes" [1973–74], box 10, folder 4, Raza Unida Party Collection.

14. "Official Candidate List," box 2, folder 3, Raza Unida Party Collection.

15. Chapa's careful preservation of the various versions of the platform can be found in the Benson Latin American Collection's Raza Unida Party Collection. The Party Platform on Women began as number 37 on a list of possible resolutions and issues under "Politics" and evolved into a rather extensive statement of its own, as described above.

16. Handwritten notebook, box 5, folder 13, Raza Unida Party Collection.

17. "Austinite's Involvement Natural," Austin American-Statesman, September 22, 1976, box 7, folder 7, Martha Cotera Papers. In *Profile on the Mexican American Woman* (1976, 172), Martha Cotera documented Martínez's intention to run for state chair again in 1976.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Examining the backlash against RUP success, Rivera (1972) notes several incidents of harassment during elections in Zavala County in the 1970s, including the use of literacy tests and firings of individuals who were elected. See also Gutiérrez (1998), Shockley (1974), and Navarro (1998).

20. Flores Amaya, who had run for U.S. Senate, also had been arrested on possession charges the previous year, 1975. According to Ignacio García, however, the arrest of Muñoz, given his role in the party, was more devastating to party credibility (1989, 197–200).

21. "Mexican American Youth Mood Originated in SA," *Edinburg (TX) Daily Review*, November 15, 1968, box 53, folder 1, José Angel Gutiérrez Papers.

22. Letter from Evey Chapa and Ino Alvarez to "Sisters of the TWPC," June 15, 1972, box 7, folder 9, Martha Cotera Papers.

23. Correspondence to secretary of state on letterhead, box 5, folder 7, Raza Unida Party Collection.

24. Research by Chapa and Gutiérrez (1977) describes the highly mobilized population of Crystal City and the way in which this transformed, to a large extent although not completely, gender roles. Cotera also made this point in an interview I conducted with her in 2010.

25. "'Chicana' Breathes a Little Life into Raza Unida," *San Antonio Express*, January 25, 1977, A3. Clipping courtesy of Irma Mireles.

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Note: Interviews carried out for the Tejano Voices Project at the Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Arlington, are available in transcript and audio recording at <http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/interviewlist-about.jsp>.

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