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Latin America's *Presidentas*: Overcoming Challenges, Forging New Pathways

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Women's rise to the presidency over the last twenty-five years in Latin America has been dramatic. Before 1990, no woman had ever democratically won the presidency, but between 1990 and 2000, two women did so.² From 2001 to 2010, four more women won the presidency, and three successfully competed for a second term. Women have made competitive runs for the presidency in fourteen out of eighteen Latin American countries and have been elected nine times in countries as diverse as Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama, and Nicaragua. Table 2.1 lists in chronological order all female winners, runners-up, and viable candidates since 1990 and shows these candidates' wide range of ideologies and political backgrounds.

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Latin America stands out among world regions in terms of electing women to the highest political office. The growing number of women presidents and viable contenders highlights the need for a research agenda on the dynamic intersection of gender and presidential power in Latin America. This chapter outlines and advances such an agenda by analyzing three interrelated questions, each addressed in a separate section. First, what gendered challenges do women face in running for and claiming the presidency? Second, what explains the recent rise of women presidents (*presidentas*)? Third, what are the consequences of *presidentas*' rise in terms of governing success, gender equality, and women's representation?

We begin by arguing that the Latin American presidency developed as a gendered institution that poses formidable challenges for women's representation. Men's historical dominance of presidential power shaped societal expectations surrounding presidential leadership and the institution of the presidency itself. Even after women legally could participate at all levels of electoral politics, the presidency remained for decades a political office exclusively held by men. The current political opportunity structures that advantage

¹ The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, Leslie Schwindt-Bayer, and the other contributors to the volume for their insightful suggestions on this chapter. The chapter was equally co-authored.

² Janet Jagan served as the first woman prime minister in Guyana in 1997, and then was elected president by the legislature, and served as president from 1997–1999. Guyana is not a presidential regime, but instead a mixed parliamentary-presidential regime, and belongs more to the political traditions of the Anglophone Caribbean than Spanish or Portuguese Latin America.

³ Most electoral systems in Latin America have a two-round voting system. We define "viable" candidates as those who received at least 15% of the first-round vote because candidates who reach this threshold often advance to a second round.

men over women in running and winning the presidency cannot be separated from this history.

In section two, we ask: what political factors have helped women overcome these steep gendered barriers to democratically win the presidency? Recent changes in Latin America's political context, including processes of civil society mobilization, democratization, and democratic strengthening have fundamentally altered Latin American politics, providing new opportunities for women to gain the necessary experience and networks needed to run for president and changing political meanings around women's representation and leadership. These factors have facilitated increases in the number of viable women candidates, posing serious challenges to men's previously uncontested control of the presidency. We argue that the combination of Latin America's "left turn" and challenges faced by institutionalized parties in maintaining political power produced an opportunity structure particularly propitious for talented women candidates. These dual factors helped certain women overcome gendered barriers to not only capture the presidency, but also clinch reelection. Although preliminary, this explanation of presidentas' rise challenges dominant theories on how women access chief executive office worldwide.

The third section addresses the consequences of women's presidencies. We look at presidentas' performance relative to their male counterparts, their efforts to enhance gender equality and their impact on women's political participation. We argue that even though women presidents have been successful in terms of reelection, women presidents' slightly lower approval ratings compared to their male counterparts may be due to intense scrutiny of their role as the "first woman president." As a result, women presidents must continually manage gendered cultural expectations to maintain their popularity. We finally show that initial research into presidentas' impact on women's descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation is mixed, and no clear trend emerges.

In our conclusion, we call for greater theoretical development and empirical investigation into the intersection of gender and the Latin American presidency. We argue for a reconceptualization of the presidency in this region as a gendered institution. This chapter's findings, while still preliminary given the small number of cases, delineate the contours of a rich research agenda on the challenges, causes, and consequences of Latin America's presidentas.

Latin America's Gendered Presidencies: A Unique Challenge to Women's Representation

The presidency is by far the most influential and visible elected office in Latin America. All former colonies of Spain and Portugal eventually developed presidential constitutions during the 1800s, making presidentialism⁴ the most dominant form of government in Latin America (Cheibub, Elkins, and Ginsburg 2011; Foweraker 1998; Mainwaring 1990; Shugart and Carey 1992). During the past two hundred years, Latin American countries created a form of presidentialism distinguished by the concentration of

⁴ Presidentialism is a system of government where the executive (the president) is elected directly by popular vote, in contrast to parliamentary systems, where the majority of the members of parliament elect the prime minister.

lawmaking powers in the executive (Payne 2007). As Cheibub, Elkins and Ginsburg (2011, 1079) argue, “Latin American constitutions are uniquely inclined to empower presidents,” who in their “executive lawmaking authority,” more closely resemble the executive in parliamentary systems.

While the centrality of the presidency in Latin American politics is widely acknowledged, how the presidency both shaped and was shaped by gender, race, class, and sexuality has not received the attention it deserves.⁵ Specifically, the recent elections of women presidents expose the theoretical lacunae on the effects of men’s dominance in the presidency. As we argue below, the long history of men’s access to and women’s exclusion from presidential power has fundamentally shaped the presidency as a political institution. Most scholarship in Latin America assumes, as Duerst-Lahti (2008) argued in reference to the case of the United States, that (1) a president’s gender is not important to understanding presidential governance, and that (2) gender is not important in understanding the institutional functioning of the presidency. Scholarship on the Latin American presidency continues to develop absent any attention to gender, a glaring problem given the growing attention to how political institutions are gendered (see for example Dore and Molyneux 2000; Htun 2003; Waylen 2016).

Even a cursory look at the history of Latin America reveals foundational connections between elite men and presidential power. The creation of independent states is traditionally depicted through the lives of men such as Simón de Bolívar, Bernardo O’Higgins, José de San Martín, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, and José Gervasio Artigas, who are lauded as military heroes and fathers of new nations. More broadly, it was the male members of the newly dominant Creole elite who first crafted the presidential systems that fused liberalism with patriarchalism, the ideology of colonial rule (Lynch 1986; Dore 2000; Stern 1997). Latin America’s emerging political order was often conceptualized as an extended family naturally ruled by a fraternity of elite, male leaders, rather than by a distant king (Dore 2000; Mallon 1995; Thomas 2011a; Felstiner 1983; Collier 1967). Thus, on the one hand, the new states’ founding constitutions embraced liberal principles of equality, liberty, and consent among political equals. On the other, elite male leaders were quick to restrict the meaning of “political equals” by limiting the participation and power of people they considered their natural inferiors (all women, indigenous peoples, and racial/ethnic minorities, as well as poor and working-class men). They justified the new structure of political power by invoking existing discourses around the naturalized raced and gendered superiority of elite men (Dore and Molyneux 2000).

Throughout the 19th century, ongoing civil unrest over the distribution of political power plagued fragile Latin American states. However, no serious alternative to the presidential system of government emerged. Historians instead argue that the weakness of

⁵ Lack of theoretical attention to the impact of these social categories marks not only the literature developed on the presidency in the 1990s and 2000s, such as the classic institutionalist debates around the “perils of presidentialism” (Linz 1994; Linz and Valenzuela 1994; Stepan and Skach 1994; Mainwaring 1993; and Mainwaring, Shugart and Linz 1997), but also the recent scholarship on the rise of multiparty presidential regimes, the comparative differences between Latin American presidential systems, and the greater attention to presidential strategies in promoting their political agenda (Ames 2001; Amorim Neto 2006; Foweraker 1998; Pereira and Melo 2012; Raile, Pereira and Power 2010).

state institutions during this period promoted the political dominance of networks of elite families and caudillos—charismatic leaders who gained power through armed force (Lynch 1992). Elite men’s power and authority as patriarchs continued to shape presidential power, as invocations of the connections between the family and the state continued to legitimate political power and authority (Dore 2000; Dore and Molyneux 2000; Mallon 1995; Thomas 2011a).

A new form of organizing and exercising presidential power arose in the first half of the 20th century. Populist presidents sought to funnel the increasing political participation of non-elite men into their own power base (Kampwirth 2010). These presidents, like their predecessors, drew from, rather than challenged, preestablished connections between gender and political power (Kampwirth 2010). Populists such as Lázaro Cárdenas, Juan Perón, and Getúlio Vargas, reworked the links between paternalism and presidential power to emotionally appeal to citizens and justify their political agendas. Conniff argues that “virtually all populists assumed roles as paternal figures to their followers” (1999, 19). The enduring power of paternalist claims can be seen in the ideologically diverse presidential campaigns of Chilean socialist Salvador Allende in 1970, conservative candidates Joaquín Lavín and Sebastián Piñera in 2005–2006, and Brazil’s left-leaning President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva in 2002 and 2006 (Reyes-Housholder 2017; Thomas 2011b).

The gendered history of presidential power has severely limited women’s abilities to compete for the presidency. While women started winning legislative political offices at the sub-national and national levels shortly after achieving full suffrage rights in the 1940s and 1950s (Lavrín 1995; Chaney 1979; Chapters 4 and 6, this volume), it was not until 1990 that the first woman democratically won a presidential election.⁶ Women’s representation at all levels of government currently outpaces women’s access to the presidency (see chapters 4, 5 and 6, this volume). Female presidential candidates confront well-established ideological connections between men, masculinity, and presidential power, as well as negative gender stereotypes about women’s political abilities and leadership. These stereotypes, in turn, shape both the media coverage of women candidates and voters’ perceptions (Murray 2010; Franceschet and Thomas 2010; Piscopo 2010; Hinojosa 2010; Thomas 2011b). For example, in her first campaign in 2005, Bachelet was routinely criticized for her more consensual approach to leadership that differed from an authoritative, directive style strongly associated with presidential power. Her opponents claimed she simply was not “presidential” or lacked competence (Thomas 2011b). In an example of the double-bind often faced by women candidates, the Argentine press criticized Fernández for acting “authoritarian, aloof, vain and self-centered,” criticisms that show the difficulties she faced in appearing both properly “presidential” and properly “feminine” (Piscopo 2010, 201). The gendered media coverage of Fernández ultimately meant that she was not treated as a competent professional, but rather as either the “wife of” the current president or as a “spotlight-hungry starlet” (Piscopo 2010, 201, 205). In her unsuccessful bid for the presidency in Venezuela, Irene Sáez also received a barrage of sexist coverage that emphasized her femininity and past Miss Universe title, rather than her campaign platform and success as mayor (Hinojosa 2010).

⁶ Before 1990, two women had served as president without being popularly elected: Isabel Peron (Argentina, 1974–1976) and Lidia Gueiler Tejada (Bolivia, 1979–1980). We discuss these cases below.

In negotiating the pro-masculine bias around presidential power, women have sometimes invoked historical connections between women's political participation and maternal ideology. Maternalism is one of the few ideological "tools" women have historically used to justify their interest and participation in politics (see Franceschet, Piscopo, and Thomas 2016 for an overview). Maternalism might also present gendered advantages for women competing for the presidency in specific contests. For example, Violeta Chamorro, in her 1990 presidential campaign in Nicaragua, highlighted her skills as a mother in crafting peace among her ideologically diverse family to persuade voters of her capacity to end the conflict between the Sandinistas and Contras. She also portrayed herself as the "Mother of the Nicaraguans" and strategically used religious imagery associated with the Virgin Mary (Kampwirth 1996). Chamorro rhetorically leveraged characteristics associated with women (peacemakers, consensus builders, honest leaders) with issues that most mattered to Nicaraguans in 1990—the end of civil conflict and the military draft (Franceschet, Piscopo, and Thomas 2016).

Chamorro's case underscores the power of maternalism as a presidential campaign strategy for women, particularly given the existing masculine bias in definitions around presidential leadership and power. Twenty years later, Rousseff similarly leveraged a maternalist discourse in her first campaign, but she did so to soften her image as a "hard" leader and to establish shared identity with women voters. As the figurative *mãe do Pac*, Rousseff and her team emphasized her technocratic capacities to continue the legacy of Lula, who had portrayed himself as a *pai do Brasil* (Reyes-Housholder 2017). However, the strategic use of maternalism should not be overstated. Franceschet, Piscopo, and Thomas (2016) argue that very few women recently elected at the national level position themselves as a "traditional supermadre," as Chamorro did, by justifying their entry into politics mostly through appeals to maternal identities. Instead, like Rousseff, most successful female candidates craft more complex gendered personas, highlighting their competence and experience, while also promoting their general interest in public welfare and care for society.

Nevertheless, women presidential candidates' nuanced approach to managing gendered political expectations is often distorted in media coverage that explains women's political power via familial frames. Often, these frames are used to question women's competency and legitimacy as leaders. For example, political pundits in Chile attributed Bachelet's record-breaking public support at the end of her first presidency (over 80%) not to the success or popularity of her policy accomplishments, or to her skill as a political leader, but to the *cariñocracia* (caring-ocracy) founded in her charisma and likability (Franceschet and Thomas 2010; Thomas 2011b). Thus long-standing connections between women's political participation and maternalism are renegotiated as women increasingly and more successfully contest their exclusion from presidential power.

The Rise of Las Presidentas: Challenging Barriers and Creating Opportunities for Women

Above, we explored the connections between presidential power, men's historical political dominance, and women's ongoing underrepresentation. However, from 2006–2014, Latin Americans elected and reelected women seven times to the presidency, a record unmatched in other world regions. This section will show that, beginning roughly in 1990, the gendered opportunities structure around democratic elections changed in ways that

enhanced women's relative ability to win the presidency. First, region-wide conditions—namely, civil society mobilization, democratization, and democratic strengthening—helped create the necessary conditions for the rise of women presidents by creating more opportunities for women to develop the political experience and networks needed to position themselves as viable candidates. Second, Latin America's "left turn" and political opportunities granted by incumbent political parties were crucial factors in the rise of women presidents elected since 2006 in Latin America. Our analysis of Latin America's elected women presidents questions theories from existing studies on how women access executive power worldwide—namely the openings provided by regime crises and family ties. Yet, as with all studies of women executives, the small number of cases in any region, the wealth of idiosyncratic factors involved in elections, and the scarce existing scholarship limit our ability to exhaustively weigh the causes of presidentas' rise. This section nevertheless serves as a starting point for research on how and why women were elected president so many times in such a short period in Latin America.

Political context and political opportunity for women in the presidency

The spread of authoritarianism from 1950–1990 arrested both women's and men's possibilities to contest the presidency. Only Costa Rica and Venezuela remained democracies during this period, while all other Latin American countries were at least partly governed by different forms of nondemocratic rule. Women were the backbone of the social movements opposing military rule and demanding democracy (Jaquette 1994). Although social movements waned after the return of democratic elections, demands for the greater political inclusion of marginalized groups remained powerful.⁷ A lasting legacy of the women's movements in Latin America has been the recognition of women's exclusion from the state and the need to increase women's representation in democratic governments (see for example, the country case studies for Chile [chapter 8], Argentina [chapter 7], Uruguay [chapter 10], and Brazil [chapter 12] in this volume).

While gender quotas for national legislatures have dramatically increased levels of women's national representation (see chapter 4, this volume), gains at the executive level have been slower. Male candidates continue to outnumber female candidates, but women are catching up.⁸ From 1990–2014, women made up 10% of presidential candidacies. In the 2010–2014 election cycle, women comprised about 17% of all candidacies.⁹ Women have taken advantage of the opportunities offered by the increasing stability of democratic rule in many countries to gain political experience and consolidate their networks—two assets that are often necessary for viable presidential runs. Case studies suggest that women's experiences and networks within institutionalized parties have helped position

⁷ Cuba remains the exception.

⁸ We built on Baker and Greene's (2011) presidential candidate dataset and coded the gender of over 750 candidates that competed in 101 elections from 1990–2014 in 18 Latin American countries. Unlike other databases used in literature on women executives around the world, this dataset examines actual as well as potential winners, female as well as male candidates. Our analysis of the first rounds of 101 presidential elections in 18 Latin American countries between 1990–2014 shows women's intensified presence in presidential contests over time.

⁹ While the overall trend is for greater participation, during the 2000–2004 election cycle, women ran less frequently than they had in previous or subsequent cycles, but the fewer women garnered more of the vote, perhaps reflecting the increasing viability of women as candidates.

them as competitive contenders (see, again, Table 2.1). For example, many recent winners served as cabinet ministers in their respective countries; Bachelet as Minister of Health, then Defense under President Lagos; Chinchilla as Minister of Justice, and the First Vice President for President Arias; Rousseff as Minister of Mines and Energy and later as President da Silva's chief of staff. As a powerful senator, Fernández led efforts in Congress and the Peronist party to advance the legislative agenda of then president (and her husband), Néstor de Kirchner. In Panama, Moscoso led the Arnulfista Party both before and after her presidential term. Second-place presidential contenders, such as Nora de Melgar in Honduras, Keiko Fujimori in Peru (twice), Elisa Carrió in Argentina, Blanca Ovelar in Paraguay, Evelyn Matthei in Chile, and Sandra Torres in Guatemala, all possessed extensive experience within political parties.¹⁰ Although women are often seen, or able to position themselves, as political outsiders because of historical patterns of gender exclusion, the biographies of women presidential candidates suggest they actually were not political newcomers and had built extensive political careers through their own efforts, rather than relying on family connections or dramatic political events.

Women's increasing experience in political parties might also help explain a finding that emerges from our analysis of viable female candidates—women's growing success in garnering votes. Figure 2.1 shows a notable jump in women's average vote shares in terms of mean vote percentage by presidential candidates in the past five election cycles. Women's average vote share rose from 6.6% during the 1990–1994 election cycle to 8.4% in 1995–1999. From there, this average dipped during the third election cycle to 6.9%, only to jump again to 14.4% and then reached 20.3% during the most recent round of presidential competitions. While women increased their vote share, Figure 2.1 also shows that men outperformed women during the first three election cycles. Male candidates on average earned about 12.9% of the total vote while female candidates captured 7.0% from 1990–1994. Women's relative performance improved slightly during the next election cycle (12.0% for men and 8.4% for women from 1995–1999). During the third election cycle (2000–2004), women's average vote shares again dropped relative to men's (13.5% for men compared to women's 6.9%).

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These statistics are not terribly surprising, given that the gendered opportunity structure historically has favored male presidential candidates. What is less expected, however, is that women presidential candidates outperformed men during the two most recent election cycles. From 2005–2009, women earned, on average, 1.4% more of the vote share than their male competitors, and during the most recent round of competitions (2010–

¹⁰ Latin America has had three non-elected women presidents, two of whom also had extensive experience in national politics. Lidia Gueiler Tejada (Bolivia, 1979–1980) was a long-time political leader on the left. While serving as the elected president of Bolivia's Chamber of Deputies, she was appointed president in order to oversee new elections in the face of the contested results of the 1979 presidential election. Previously Minister of Education, Culture and Sports, Rosalía Arteaga Serrano (Ecuador 1997) was vice-president of Ecuador when Congress voted President Abdala Bucaram Ortiz out of office in 1997. She served as president for just six days, after which Congress nominated Fabián Alarcón to replace her. Only Isabel Perón, who as vice-president, took over the presidency after the death of the elected president and her husband, Juan Perón, lacked extensive political experience in her own right.

2014), women captured 4.0% more of the vote share than men.¹¹ This analysis reveals that the growth in popular support for female candidates reflects the post-2005 surge in women's victories. Women triumphed in one presidential election in each of the first two cycles (1990–1994; 1995–1999); none in the third cycle (2000–2004); two in the fourth cycle (2005–2009) and then five in the last cycle (2010–2014). Yet the number of female candidates from 1990–2004 (38) is the same number of female candidates during the 2005–2014 period. The uptick in women's election success, therefore, has far outpaced the influx of female presidential contenders.

What accounts for the success of women winning the presidency starting in 2006? Women's growing political experience and political contexts more propitious for women's political representation seem to function as necessary rather than sufficient conditions for women's recent string of victories. As Table 2.1 shows, both winners and runners-up have boasted substantial political experience. Here, we argue that two recent changes—Latin America's left turn and challenges and opportunities related to incumbent parties—created the conditions that opened a path to victory for women presidents.

To begin, women presidential candidates may have been able to capitalize on what Baker and Greene (2011) argue was a regional shift in preferences for state intervention. Most scholars believe the string of presidential victories for the left (the so-called “pink tide”) began in the late 1990s with Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (Levitsky and Roberts 2011). While the causes of the left turn are still debated, one prevailing theory is that popular support for free market reforms dwindled during this period as voters gave their presidential candidates a leftist mandate (Baker and Greene 2011).

A leftward shift in public preferences and potentially an increased salience of state provision for social welfare may have tipped the balance in favor of some female presidential candidates. We found that the ideological difference between all male and female contenders from 1990–2014 in Latin America is statistically significant, meaning that women have tended to run as slightly more progressive candidates than men.¹² While the difference is small in terms of magnitude (one point on a 20-point scale), it is important in light of the fact that presidential elections are often won by narrow margins. This means that female presidential candidates may have been seen as more in line with public demands around social welfare than their male counterparts.

Ideological orientation helps draw a line between female winners and almost winners. Since the beginning of the “left turn,” three out of the four women presidents—Bachelet, Fernández, and Rousseff—have been standard bearers for the center-left. Looking back at Table 2.1, we see that, with the exception of Sandra Torres in Guatemala in 2016, every woman who has finished in second place has professed a more conservative ideology than the eventual winner: Nora de Melgar in Honduras in 1997, Blanca Ovelar in 2008 in Paraguay, Keiko Fujimori in Peru in 2011 and 2016, and Evelyn Matthei in Chile in 2013. These comparisons bolster our argument on the relationship between a leftward

¹¹ Nevertheless, none of the candidate sex differences in percent vote share are statistically significant for any of the election cycles. This is likely due to the small number of observations.

¹² A score of 1 indicates extreme left and 20 indicates extreme right (Baker and Greene 2011). Female presidential candidates' scores average to 10.3, while males' are 11.3.

shift in preferences and women's recent successes. Ideology seems to have benefited left-leaning women and potentially hurt some conservative women.

Another consequence of the left turn—growing salience of social issues—could also have benefited some female presidential candidates relative to their male counterparts. Gender stereotypes that portray women as more concerned with and capable of handling issues of social protection could provide electoral advantages to women presidential candidates, even on the right. In Costa Rica, the center-right Chinchilla was able to distance herself from the deeply unpopular positions taken by her political predecessor and party leader (Óscar Arias) in supporting the Central American Free Trade Agreement by touting her concern for social provisions for children and the elderly. Chinchilla shored up her centrist claims by signaling her support of Costa Rica's welfare state (Thomas 2014). Women candidates from center or center-right parties might also have particular advantages when competing against similarly ideologically situated men within a political context marked by a desire for greater attention to social issues.

Josefina Vázquez in Mexico provides a “negative” case that supports the importance of the “left turn” as a factor. Mexico is one of the few Latin American countries that has not participated in the region-wide left turn. The increasingly center-right PRI governed Mexico for about seventy years until the center-right PAN won two consecutive presidential elections (Vicente Fox in 2000 and Felipe Calderón in 2006). In 2012, Vázquez became the only Mexican woman to make a viable presidential run, emerging as the candidate for the PAN. She finished third, behind Andrés López Obredor of the left and Enrique Peña Nieto of the right, who went on to win in the second round.

In addition to the left turn, political challenges faced by incumbent parties also help explain the post-2005 emergence of *las presidentas*. Women might have gendered advantages as presidential nominees of incumbent parties in a context shaped by corruption scandals, voter fatigue with political elites, and the desire for change. As the introduction of this volume describes, growing popular discontent over democratic representation and accountability has spread across the region. At the same time, demands for the political inclusion of previously marginalized groups and their concerns continued. By 2005, it was often left-leaning presidents in office and facing growing citizen dissatisfaction. Left political elites—even those that emerged from democratization movements—were seen as disinterested in and removed from the everyday concerns of citizens. The advantages offered by women candidates might be particularly attractive when the challenge for a party or coalition was not to gain but to maintain presidential power.

Women candidates, particularly as possible “first woman” presidents, seem to provide the desired—but often elusive—qualities of “continuity and change,” as Bachelet's 2005 campaign slogan proclaimed (Adams and Thomas 2010; see Thomas 2014 for a discussion of this argument for Chinchilla's case). Corruption scandals recurring in many of Latin America's parties appear to structure opportunities in ways that may benefit female presidential candidates. Female candidates are stereotypically viewed as more honest and less corrupt than male politicians (Murray 2010). Elites from a sitting president's party or coalition may perceive nominating experienced women candidates as a strategy to maintain control of the presidency where a woman candidate is seen as responding to a desire for

change in light of corruption accusations and when the sitting male president is prohibited from running for (consecutive) reelection.

Bachelet, Fernández, Chinchilla, and Rousseff all fit this pattern. Presidents from their own parties preceded them, and all received the backing of their male predecessors. In Chile, Bachelet's popularity during her first campaign was partly based on voters' perception of her emergence from "the people" rather than via elite party networks. She capitalized on growing dissatisfaction over political scandals and with the traditional political elites from the center-left coalition, the Concertación, which had governed for sixteen years (Franceschet and Thomas 2010; Thomas 2011b). Fernández in Argentina was clearly seen as the candidate that would continue her husband's Kirchnerismo policies that she had helped formulate and advance within the Senate while also offering political change (Piscopo 2010). In Costa Rica, Óscar Arias' reasons for supporting Chinchilla's nomination to succeed him as the Partido Liberación Nacional's candidate were also gendered. In light of ongoing corruption scandals related to other members of Arias' government, Chinchilla's identity as a woman coupled with her lack of involvement in previous scandals boosted her presidential prospects (Thomas 2014).

Finally, Rousseff was one of the few high-level members of the PT who was not implicated in the mensalão corruption scandal that rocked Brazil during Lula's second term, and this undoubtedly contributed to Lula's support for her nomination as the PT's presidential candidate. For a brief period, many perceived Rousseff as the faxineira or "cleaning lady" for Brazilian corruption. This politically advantageous, gendered image faded as the lava jato corruption scandal erupted during the beginning of her second term and helped pull her approval ratings down to 8%, opening the door for her eventual impeachment in 2016.

Furthermore, all presidentas in Latin America, with the exception of Chamorro, benefitted from the support of political parties already holding presidential power. If we look at all the presidential candidates from 1990–2014 who obtained at least 25% of the vote, we find initial statistical support for the importance of incumbent party support. Of the 176 candidates, (17 were women, 159 were men), women were candidates of incumbent political parties 65% of the time, whereas men were candidates of incumbent parties 39% of the time. These sex differences are statistically significant ($p = 0.04$). Comparing female winners and runners-up in Table 2.1, we observe that five women finished as runners-up in presidential contests. Three of the five of the second-place female finishers were challengers: Alba Gúnera de Melgar (Honduras 1997), Carrió (Argentina 2007), and Fujimori (Peru 2011, 2016). In Chile, Evelyn Matthei (2013) emerged as a candidate for the right political coalition of the sitting president, Sebastian Piñera, after a number of political scandals led to the resignation of more well-known male candidates. However, in Matthei's case, she ran against former president Bachelet, who returned to presidential politics with high levels of popular support after sitting out one constitutionally mandated term. Blanca Ovelar (Paraguay 2008) was the only other female candidate sponsored by the incumbent party who lost, and as noted above, she maintained a more conservative ideology than the female presidential candidates who won.

In short, we have argued that Latin America's broader social changes, including women's participation in social movements and political parties, and the sustained focus on

increasing women's political representation created the conditions for more viable women candidates for the presidency. We also argued that the region-wide ideological shift toward the left and the opportunities found within the context of incumbent parties facing scandal were crucial factors that increased the likelihood of women candidates being able to overcome gendered barriers and win the presidency.

Latin America's challenge to existing research on women executives

Our argument for how women have accessed presidential power in Latin America, however, differs from existing explanations for female chief executives worldwide. That research points to the importance of facilitating factors such as weak or divided executive power, extreme political instability or democratic transition, and close familial ties, particularly as wives or daughters to past executive leaders, in overcoming gendered barriers (Jalalzai 2008; Jalalzai 2013; Jalalzai and Krook 2010). Yet, the recent success of women presidents in Latin America provides little support for these factors. To begin, presidents in Latin America possess some of the strongest formal powers of any executives in the world. Yet it is in this region that women have been democratically elected and reelected to the presidency the most often. Thus the barrier to women's success posed by the concentration of executive power and advantages offered by weak or divided executives seems a less relevant explanation than previously believed.

Our analysis also casts doubt on the global applicability of arguments that women access executive power during moments of extreme political instability where the rules—of tradition—of democratic succession are unclear, such as immediate post-conflict situations or during transitions from military rule. Of the elected women presidents, only Chamorro's election in 1990 was set in a context of ongoing conflict. Her candidacy was explicitly seen as a way to end ongoing armed conflict between the Contra rebels and the Sandinista government. Instead, since 1998, women presidential candidates and women presidents have emerged in the context of long-standing connections to institutional political parties. Women candidates in Latin America have benefitted from the electoral advantages offered within the context of institutional political parties seeking to hold onto political power.

Lastly, our analysis leads us to question the argument often made in reference to Latin America that leveraging family ties is a primary way that women overcome gendered barriers to presidential power. We would argue that of all women presidents in Latin America only in the case of the nonelected Isabel Perón were ties to her husband clearly explanatory in her gaining the presidency—he had appointed her as vice president. Other women may have had some family ties, but those ties were less important for explaining their elections than other factors, such as the left turn, ties to incumbent parties, and these women's own political prowess. While two out of six of the region's elected presidentas—Fernández and Moscoso—were married to former presidents (with Fernández serving as first lady before becoming president), both were accomplished politicians in their own right. Fernández and her husband Néstor Kirchner jointly accrued power, beginning in the 1970s until Kirchner's sudden death in 2010. While many have pointed to the ways in which her first lady status helped launch her presidential campaign, few have recognized how Fernández, a powerful Peronist legislator, helped her husband clinch victory by 2003. In other words, the family ties argument should work both ways in the case of Argentina—helping Kirchner and helping Fernández. Although it is true that Kirchner won the

presidency before Fernández, existing family ties theories applied to Fernández tend to undermine the relevance of her own mastery of Argentine politics. Although she and her husband built their political careers together, Fernández's presidential victories are better explained by her political skill, by the electoral advantages offered by Latin America's left turn, and the advantages offered by the incumbent Peronist party.

Scholars have also used the case of Moscoso and Chamorro to illustrate the family ties argument but neither case provides clear support for the theory. Moscoso ascended to the presidency eleven years after the death of her husband whom she had married after his short-lived third (and final) presidency of only eleven days. Her election was built on her work as a long-time party leader and power-broker in Panamanian politics. Chamorro was a well-known widow of a prominent newspaper editor who had been killed by the Somoza dictatorship, but she rose to political prominence because of her opposition to the Sandinista revolutionary government that had overthrown this dictatorship. In neither of these cases, does the existence of family ties provide a persuasive explanation for how they achieved the presidency. In addition, half of the presidentas—Bachelet,¹³ Chinchilla, and Rousseff—had no marital or close family connections to powerful male political leaders. Like Fernández, their elections and re-elections are better explained by the factors explored above.

Family ties nevertheless do often affect the campaigns of female presidential candidates in both positive and negative ways, but this scholarship often focuses on how family ties always help female candidates. There is evidence that family ties to powerful male figures can be hurtful. Female candidates have faced media framing of family ties that distort their own self-branding as efficient, independent executives (Murray 2010). Family ties may act as a double-edged sword for some viable candidates, such as Keiko Fujimori who lost extremely close elections in Peru in 2011 and in 2016. The antidemocratic legacy of her father and past president, Alberto Fujimori, may ultimately have tipped the balance against her.

Finally, much of the family ties research fails to verify the extent to which men have used similar family connections to capture the presidency. This means that women are singled out in the scholarship for their family ties in contexts where presidential power itself could be embedded within political families, making familial ties important advantages for both men and women. For example, President Eduardo Frei in Chile (1994–1999) is the son of a former president; President Enrique Bolaños of Nicaragua (2002–2007) was married to a relative of three former presidents; President Martín Torrijos of Panama (2004–2009) is the son of a former dictator; and President Felipe Calderón of Mexico (2006–2012) is the son of a cofounder of the National Action Party (PAN). In

¹³In some quantitative studies (Jalalzai 2008; Jalalzai 2013), Bachelet is wrongly coded as having family ties to a powerful male political figure. This error occurs because of the lack of country specific knowledge of Chile. While her father, Airforce Brigadier General Bachelet, had served in a minor appointed post at the end of President Allende's presidency, he was not considered a member of the Chilean political elite, and he had no political career. He was targeted for detention as a member of the "constitutionalist" officers who supported the principal of civilian rule during Pinochet's consolidation of military power shortly after the 1973 coup d'état. Before Bachelet served as Chile's first woman defense minister, when her personal biography—including her family connections to the military—became well-known, many Chileans had probably never heard of her father.

short, our analysis advances the scholarship developing around women and executive leadership worldwide by providing greater insights into the specific factors that have helped women overcome gendered barriers in their election to the presidencies in Latin America.

When a Woman Leads: Consequences of *Presidentas*

Research around the consequences of women's presidencies, and specifically around issues of gender equality and women's political representation, is sparse given their relatively small numbers and recent presidencies. In addition, the media, voters, and political actors intensely scrutinize, and often judge, women presidents' governing abilities in relationship to their gender, an issue not faced by men whose gender is seen as an unremarkable factor in their presidencies. This poses difficulties in conducting more objective scholarly analysis into the successes and failures of women's presidencies. Given these limitations, we assess women's presidential performance relative to their male counterparts in three areas: (1) reelection rates and approval ratings; (2) the degree to which they promote gender equality in their government through appointments, policies, and legal changes; and (3) their symbolic impact, particularly on female citizens' political participation.

To begin, presidentas' reelection rates are generally on par with those of their male counterparts. Fernández and Rousseff successfully ran for immediate reelection and Bachelet sat out the constitutionally mandated one term before successfully winning a second term in a landslide. This means that every presidenta constitutionally enabled to run for reelection has done so and won. From 2005–2012, all male presidents who ran for immediate reelection were also successful (Zovatto 2014).

A second indicator of performance in office is popular support measured by opinion polling. Presidential approval can help capture public satisfaction between elections. We looked at LAPOP's biennial surveys in 18 Latin American countries that asked a presidential approval question from 2004–2014. These surveys thus capture snapshots of public opinion during the Moscoso government in Panama 2004; Bachelet in Chile 2006, 2008, and 2014; Fernández in Argentina 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014; Rousseff in Brazil 2012 and 2014; and Chinchilla in Costa Rica 2010 and 2012. Male presidents governed the rest of the countries and years.

Overall, women presidents have sometimes struggled to maintain high approval ratings in public opinion polls. About 8% of citizens governed by male presidents rate their performance as "very good," whereas this number is about 5% for citizens living under female presidents (see Table 2.2). The difference between male and female presidents' average approval ratings is statistically significant, although fairly small: average approval for female presidents was 0.07 and 0.23 for male presidents, a difference of just 0.16 points on a 5-point ordinal scale from -2 ("very bad") to 2 ("very good"). Interestingly, interaction models reveal that female respondents attribute less lower—that is, relatively higher—ratings than male respondents to female presidents, showing a possible interaction effect between the sex of the president and the sex of the respondent (models not shown). The slightly lower approval ratings for women presidents could be due to many factors, one of which may relate to gendered bias against women presidents, possibly because of media

attention to the “first woman” frame, where male voters hold “first” women presidents to higher standards than men presidents.

Insert Table 2.2 Here

Case studies provide some insights into the intersection between gender expectations, media framing, and public opinion of women presidents. In terms of public opinion, Bachelet during her first term would qualify as the most successful presidenta. She handed over power in 2010 as the most popular president since the advent of polling in Chile, with approval ratings over 80%, and won reelection in 2013 in one of the country’s most lopsided elections. On the other hand, one of the least popular presidentas in recent history was Chinchilla, whose approval rating dipped almost to single digits. Criticisms of Chinchilla were disproportional to her actual presidential record and general social indicators (such as rate of economic growth and crime), and seemed at least partly rooted in sexism as she faced harsh criticisms from even elites in her own party (Thomas 2014; see also chapter 9 on Costa Rica in this volume).

The recent experiences of Bachelet and Rouseff also highlight how women presidents might face harsher public reactions to corruption accusations because of gendered expectations about women’s honesty. During Bachelet’s second term, Chile was rocked by a successive stream of political corruption scandals around the financing of political parties and election campaigns that implicate politicians from across the ideological spectrum. Within this context, Bachelet faced a political crisis due to accusations that her son and daughter-in-law used political connections to arrange a sweetheart loan and real estate deal that netted them millions. While there was no evidence of Bachelet’s involvement in or knowledge of the deal, her poll numbers never recovered and the scandal damaged Bachelet’s political standing and her ambitious reform agenda.

In Brazil, from 2011–2016, Rouseff experienced extreme variations in her approval ratings—from as high as mid-60% approval to as low as single digits. In her second term, Rouseff was caught up in the lava jato scandal over the connections between Brazil’s state-owned oil company Petrobras and her PT party. Although not personally implicated, Rouseff was impeached in August 2016 on technical charges of fiscal mismanagement. However, many political analysts interpreted this as the opposition taking advantage of public discontent over Brazil’s growing economic crisis and widespread corruption to grab political power. Numerous commentators noted the irony of removing the president on corruption allegations given the corruption charges against many sitting congressmen, as well as the President of the Chamber of Deputies,¹⁴ the President of the Senate, and the Vice President (and Rouseff’s successor). Many Brazilian feminists took to the streets after the impeachment to protest sexism leveled against Rouseff by her opponents. Rouseff herself suggested that she might have finished her second term had she been a man rather than a woman (Lissardy 2016). Sexism thus complicates researchers’ efforts in assessing public perceptions of women presidents.

In sum, much evidence suggests that women presidents face unique challenges in managing the public’s gendered perceptions of their presidencies. But do women presidents

¹⁴ This former President of the Chamber of Deputies, now in jail, has received a fifteen-year sentence.

make a difference in terms of appointing more women to ministries, promoting gender equality policies, and inspiring women to become politically active? One area of fruitful research examines whether women presidents have used one of the most important presidential powers—the ability to nominate ministers—to augment women’s descriptive representation in executive cabinets. Here, the impact of presidentas appears mixed. In a study of all ministerial appointments in 18 Latin American countries between 1999 and 2015, Reyes-Houholder (2016c) found that presidentas are making a small, but statistically significant, difference in women’s representation in cabinets (see also chapter 3, this volume). However, presidentas are also more likely than male presidents to name women to ministries with stereotypically feminine portfolios, such as social welfare, health, and culture. Thus, while appointing more women, presidentas might also be reinforcing gender stereotypes within the executive branch.¹⁵

More research has examined the extent to which presidentas have used their legislative prerogatives to promote women’s equality. Scholars have focused on Bachelet’s presidencies because of her explicit agenda to improve gender equality. During her first term, Bachelet increased the attention to legislation that promoted women’s equality (Reyes-Houholder 2016b; Thomas 2016; Valdés 2012; Waylen 2016). She also pursued gender-mainstreaming goals during both terms by asking all ministers to develop specific gender equality goals and providing mechanisms to assess progress. These policies have helped, more broadly, to legitimize issues of gender equality within the Chilean state (Thomas 2016). Many of the signature achievements of Bachelet’s first presidency (namely the massive expansion of state-supported childcare and pension reforms) targeted women given the unequal distribution of carework and access to formal employment (See chapter 8, this volume).

Other scholars are more critical about the extent to which Bachelet actually achieved her ambitious gender equality agenda, pointing to Bachelet’s failures to address more controversial areas of women’s inequality, such as reproductive rights and political representation (Borzutzky and Weeks 2010). Bachelet, in her second term passed electoral reforms that include Chile’s first quota legislation and introduced legislation to liberalize Chile’s complete ban on abortion. No other president (women or man) has yet to match Bachelet’s legislative successes in promoting gender equality nor has made gender equality central to their presidential agenda. Explanations for Bachelet’s use of presidential power to advance gender equality point both to her feminist consciousness (Staab and Waylen 2014) and her constituencies. Bachelet seems unique among female presidents in that she successfully mobilized a core constituency of women behind a pro-women platform and networked heavily with elite feminists, meaning she possessed both the incentives and capacity to use her power to promote significant change favoring women (Reyes-Houholder 2017).

In addition to Bachelet, Rousseff’s impact on women’s status in society has also generated considerable debate. Jalalzai and dos Santos (2015) use evidence from personal interviews with elite officials to argue that Rousseff had a greater impact on women’s status in society than her male predecessor Lula. Reyes-Houholder (2017) employs interviews

¹⁵ Michelle Bachelet named a gender parity cabinet at the beginning of her first term in 2006 but not when she was reelected in 2014 (Franceschet and Thomas 2013).

with leaders of Brazilian women's movements and an original dataset of hundreds of legislative bills to find results that challenge Jalalzai and dos Santos' conclusions. While Rousseff did name more women to her inaugural cabinet than Lula, pro-women change policies were not a higher priority for Rousseff than for Lula in terms of legislation. This could be related to the fact that Lula and Rousseff maintained the same core constituencies and many of the same political advisers (Reyes-Housholder 2017). In short, more research is needed to explore the consequences of women's administrations in terms of legislative and policy gains for gender equality and women's status in society.

Finally, preliminary research suggests that women presidents might exert a symbolic impact by subtly shifting gender-related attitudes and behaviors at the mass level. Historically, women in Latin America have participated in politics less than men, but Reyes-Housholder and Schwindt-Bayer (2016) reveal that the presence of a woman president is correlated with higher campaign participation, intention to vote, and local meeting attendance among women. The exact causal mechanisms linking presidentas to enhanced participation among women are still unknown, but some evidence suggests that presidentas are associated with increases in men's and women's support for female political leadership, which in turn, could lead to greater female political participation.

For example, another experimental study conducted in Brazil examined whether a positive impact of female executives on citizen's symbolic representation could be due to their presence in office or their novelty as "first females" (Schwindt-Bayer and Reyes-Housholder 2017). The results showed different effects for presence and novelty, with presence emerging as the more important factor increasing women's symbolic representation. Thus just the presence of a woman president seems to represent a symbolic opening of presidential power to women. Electing a woman as president breaks the previous hold by men on the most powerful elected office in a country. Given persistent gender inequalities and barriers to women's political entry, a woman president can play a uniquely powerful symbolic role in advancing gender equality, an idea repeatedly mentioned to the authors during fieldwork in Chile, Brazil, and Costa Rica.

In sum, this analysis on the consequences of women's presidencies provides further evidence for this chapter's main arguments on the gendered nature of the presidency. Men and women presidents may enjoy similar "success" rates in terms of reelection. Yet female presidents must continually confront sexist expectations that may hurt their approval ratings and media evaluations of their political successes and failures vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Women and men presidents also often employ their appointment and legislative powers in different ways. Finally, presidentas appear to exert a symbolic impact on women's political participation as well as on citizens' support for female leadership.

Conclusions

We conclude by outlining future directions for the emerging scholarship on how gender shapes the causes and consequences of women's presidential representation. First, researchers could examine the gendered strategies presidents use to maintain public approval, pursue their legislative agenda, and seek possible reelection. For example, we have suggested ways and reasons why both men and women presidents strategically deploy gender ideology and symbols—including those related to paternalism and maternalism.

This research would help trace the current gendered expectations around presidential office and how the experience of having a woman president might challenge the historical connections between masculinity, paternalism, and presidential power discussed above. This scholarship could enrich existing work on the functioning of Latin America's diverse presidential systems (Raile, Pereira, and Power 2011; Foweraker 1998). In focusing overwhelmingly on formal institutional mechanisms, the current literature has also positioned the president as a strategic actor unmarked by gender, race, class, or sexuality (e.g. Amorim Neto 2002; Ames 2001; Pereira and Melo 2010; Raile, Pereira, and Power 2011). Placing gender at the center of the analysis could direct more attention to both the role of informal institutional practices in promoting presidential agendas as well as how powerful social hierarchies shape the strategies of individual presidents.

Concomitantly, scholars should further analyze how gender ideologies have shaped political expectations about what qualities and characteristics presidents need to successfully govern. The existing work on the gendered media treatment of presidential candidates in Latin America could provide a basis for expanding research into the media's treatment of female and male presidents throughout their presidency. The fact that many recent presidentas have served two terms might help illuminate how traditional gender stereotypes around presidential leadership might be changing. More attention to the media's gendered treatment might also provide new insights into how gender, as well as race and class, helps shape public expectations around a presidency, as well as how different presidents manage these expectations. Finally, so little research has explored the effects of women's presidencies, including their successes and failures, that almost any systematic study is welcome.

A more robust development of the comparative scholarship on the gendered presidency in Latin America could help correct explanations from global studies on women in the executive position. Scholars need to examine both men and women from different regions of the world. Finally, a focus on the presidency as a gendered institution demands more attention to how male presidents also must negotiate gendered proscriptions around presidential power, even though the historical development of the presidency provides much greater opportunities and fewer challenges for men vis-à-vis women. Our analysis has paved the way for several promising avenues for future research. The study of women's representation and the Latin American presidency is wide open.

Table 2.1

Female Winners and Viable Candidates 1990–2017

Year	Country	Candidate	First-Round Vote %	Ideology	Political Experience
1990	Nicaragua	Violeta Chamorro*	55	Center- right	Opposition leader
1997	Honduras	Nora de Melgar**	43	Right	Mayor, First lady
1997	Bolivia	Remedios Loza	17	Center-left	Congress
1998	Colombia	Noemi Sanin	27	Right	Minister
1999	Panama	Mireya Moscoso*	30	Right	Party leader
2001 / 2006	Peru	Lourdes Flores	24 / 24	Center- right	Congress
2005 / 2013	Chile	Michelle Bachelet*	46 / 47	Center-left	Minister
2007 / 2011	Argentina	Cristina Fernández de Kirchner*	45 / 54	Center-left	Congress, First lady
2007	Argentina	Elisa Carrió**	23	Center-left	Congress
2008	Paraguay	Blanca Ovelar**	32	Center- right	Minister
2009	Panama	Balbina Herrera	38	Center	Mayor, Congress, Minister
2010	Costa Rica	Laura Chinchilla*	47	Center- right	Minister
2010 / 2014	Brazil	Marina da Silva	19 / 21	Center-left	Congress
2011 / 2016	Peru	Keiko Fujimori**	21 / 39.8	Center- right	Congress, First lady ¹⁶
2010 / 2014	Brazil	Dilma Rousseff*	41.6 / 41.1	Center-left	Minister
2012	Mexico	Josefina Vázquez	26	Right	Minister
2013	Honduras	Xiamora Castro de Zelaya	29	Center-left	First lady
2013	Chile	Evelyn Matthei**	25	Right	Congress, Minister
2014	Colombia	Marta Lucía Ramirez	16	Left	Congress, Minister
2014	Colombia	Clara López	17	Right	Mayor, Minister
2015	Guatemala	Sandra Torres**	19.8	Center-left	First lady
2016	Peru	Verónica Mendoza	18.8	Center-left	Congress
2017	Ecuador	Cynthia Viteri	16	Center- right	Congress

Source: Reyes-Housholder (2016c)

* Elected

**Second-place finisher

¹⁶ The daughter of Alberto Fujimori, Keiko, served as Peru's first lady from 1994–2000.

Table 2.2

Presidential Approval Rates by Presidential Sex, 2004–2014 in 18 Latin American Countries

	Female Presidents	Male Presidents
Very Good	5.0%	7.9%
Good	28.5%	31.7%
Neither Good nor Bad	43.3%	42.6%
Bad	15.2%	11.8%
Very Bad	8.2%	6.1%
N	17,688	144,834