Martinez, Susana, 2010 Gubernatorial Election

*See also:* African American Representation; Asian American Representation; Descriptive and Substantive Representation; Gerrymandering; Latino Representation; Racial Gerrymandering; Redistricting

**Further Reading**


**Martinez, Susana, 2010 Gubernatorial Election**

Sworn into office in New Mexico in January 2011, Susana Martinez, a Republican, was the first Hispanic woman governor of the United States. She won a five-way primary race, and then beat Democrat Diane Denish by almost seven points in a contest focused on illegal immigration, corruption in state government, and improving educational outcomes. Martinez was reelected in 2014 by an even larger margin but ended her term in office with approval rates significantly lower than in her first term: just 35 percent of general election voters said they approved of her performance.

Born in El Paso, Texas, Martinez was raised as a Democrat in a middle-class family. She graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and went on to receive a law degree from the University of Oklahoma. In 1995, Martinez switched her party affiliation to Republican. She served as district attorney of New Mexico’s Doña Ana County, encompassing the city of Las Cruces, from 1996 to 2010, having been elected four times.

As a prosecutor, Martinez gained a reputation for being tough on crime. After securing the conviction of family members of an abused infant girl, she lobbied the state legislature to revise criminal laws to permit judges to impose life sentences for child abuse resulting in death. Martinez told the story of “Baby Brianna” during her primary and general election campaigns in 2010, winning support as a law-and-order leader in a state with high violent crime rates, particularly in Albuquerque, the largest city. It also helped that she received $450,000 from a wealthy Texas donor, Bob Perry, among other out-of-state contributions, and that former Alaska governor and vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin held a pro-Martinez rally near the end of the GOP primary cycle.

During the general election race against Democrat Diane Denish, Martinez endorsed the repeal of state laws permitting undocumented immigrants to receive driver’s licenses. She swore to root out corruption, allegations of which had stained
the previous administration of Democrat Bill Richardson (a former member of congress who had served in the Bill Clinton administration as energy secretary and United Nations ambassador).

Martinez’s two terms in office were marked by highs and lows. On the one hand, she bucked the trend set by other Republican governors and agreed to expand the Medicaid provision under the Affordable Care Act enacted by the Barack Obama administration. As a result, about a quarter of a million more New Mexican adults received health insurance, leading to a five-point drop in the share of uninsured citizens, one of the largest changes in any state. She enacted legislation creating an A-to-F grading system for the state’s schools and adopted PARCC testing to measure student outcomes. She launched a tourism campaign called “New Mexico True,” which succeeded in attracting more visitors to the state, and she led the New Mexico GOP to victories in major down-ballot races in 2014.

On the other hand, New Mexico’s economy took many years to recover from the 2008 financial crisis. The state’s economy grew by an average of only 0.6 percent between 2010 and 2017, while job growth averaged only 0.5 percent. The unemployment rate remained one of the highest in the country by the end of her term. Martinez’s controversial decision, in 2013, to suspend Medicaid payments to over a dozen behavioral health organizations working in disadvantaged communities in the state, alleging financial improprieties that were never confirmed, created chaos and interrupted care to many patients.

Many politicians in the state believed that Martinez became increasingly combative and reluctant to work with Democrats in the legislature. Though Martinez had led Republicans to victory in the state House of Representatives in 2014, the Democrats retook control of both chambers in 2016. Objecting to tax increases approved by the legislature, she vetoed all higher education funding in the state’s budget in 2017.

Observers inside and outside of the state criticized the large role that Martinez’s political consultant, Jay McCleskey, played in her administration. Insiders perceived that McCleskey led the governor astray, pushing her to endorse primary challengers at odds with the state party in state legislative elections, while withholding support from other viable candidates. In 2012, former GOP state party chair Harvey Yates wrote a public ten-page letter to the governor, urging her to cut ties to McCleskey and expressing disappointment with her record in office. Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation launched an investigation into McCleskey and the inaugural committee.

Some observers perceive that Martinez’s strong stand on illegal immigration, especially in the 2010 election season, is incongruent with the position of many Latino voters in the country. However, in New Mexico, Latinos are the largest social group, making up 46 percent of the population. Their views are diverse. Many Latinos come from old families with roots in the original Spanish colonization of the region and do not consider themselves Mexican.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Martinez criticized Republican candidate Donald Trump’s comments about women and about Mexican immigrants. For his part, Trump criticized Martinez for not producing greater economic growth in New Mexico during two campaign stops in the state. After Trump took
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office, Martinez became more conciliatory, and even sent sixty National Guard troops to help defend the southern border.

In 2018, Democrat Michelle Lujan Grisham defeated Republican Steve Pearce to become the country’s second Latina governor and first Democrat Latina governor.

Samantha Cooney and Mala Htun

See also: Latino Representation; Latino Representation in New Mexico; Women Governors; Women’s Representation

Further Reading


Mayoral Elections

The government of U.S. cities and towns (“municipalities”) are understudied in the social sciences and often ignored by ordinary Americans, even though the decisions made in city halls arguably have a greater impact on day-to-day life than the decisions made in state capitols or Washington D.C. In addition, the vast majority of U.S. elections and elected officials are at the local level. Many municipalities have a directly elected chief executive officer, whose title is usually mayor. However, there are a handful of alternative titles, such as first selectman. Despite the importance of municipal government and the importance of the mayor, turnout rates in mayoral elections tend to be very low. Furthermore, the pool of citizens who do vote (the electorate) is usually not representative of the overall population.

The power of the mayor varies a great deal across municipalities. In some municipalities, the mayor is quite powerful, as important at the municipal level as the governor is at the state level. In other municipalities, the mayor is little more than a ceremonial leader. In contrast to the federal and many state governments, most (though not all) municipal politicians are paid little, if any, money and spend only a small portion of their time on their mayoral duties (Oliver et al. 2012). In essence, being mayor is usually a part-time job. In some municipalities, control of day-to-day government operations is yielded to an appointed administrator, often called the city or town manager, which further weakens mayoral power. However, this option is not available to every municipality in every state.