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Q&A with Leaders and Practitioners: State Senator Ricardo Lara

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Our understanding of the politics of race, indigeneity, and ethnicity is informed not only by the work of scholars, but also by the work of leaders and practitioners, many of whom are pioneers in their respective fields. The *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics (JREP)* is proud to inaugurate this Q&A series with State Senator Ricardo Lara. Our hope is that forums like these will help advance our collective scholarship by better informing our research agendas, validating some of our claims, and building more bridges between the worlds of research, politics, and policy.

Ricardo Lara is a State Senator (D-Bell Gardens, CA) and chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee. He quickly rose up the ranks in the California state legislature: from working in legislative and district staff positions for leaders in the Assembly and Senate, to being elected one term in the Assembly, and subsequently to the State Senate, where he chairs one of the most powerful committees in the chamber. Lara, the son of undocumented immigrants, grew up in the Los Angeles area and attended San Diego State University (SDSU), where he received a B.A. in Journalism and Spanish, with a minor in Chicano Studies. He has authored many pioneering laws in the California legislature, particularly those focusing on immigrant rights, educational equity, and civil rights. He is part of a new crop of Latino legislative leaders in California, the "post-Prop 187 generation" (Mason and McGreevy 2014; McGreevy 2013).

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This interview was conducted over email on January 25, 2016, and has been edited to meet the journal's style guidelines.

Q1: Proposition 187 was very consequential for immigrant politics and Latino politics in California, and has widely been seen as destroying the Republican Party's chances in California for more than a generation. How did Proposition 187 affect you personally, and how did it shape your political career?

Proposition 187 was a turning point, not only for me, but for Latino involvement in politics in California. As the son of two immigrants from Mexico, I remember 187 being the first time I felt personally attacked and vilified. I was a student at SDSU, involved in MEChA and several of us were utterly appalled that this level of attack was being waged on our community. There were commercials in grainy black and white footage of families running across the freeway—families that looked like mine—who were being vilified. They called it the "Save our State" Initiative. It was an interesting name. What were they trying to save the state from? Mexicans? Immigrants? My family? It was a personal attack on my family and I was motivated to act.

Q2: Other than Proposition 187, what other factors were important in your decision to get more involved in politics?

Getting involved in politics had a lot to do with college. I had grown up my entire life living in East LA but had never been taught about the

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political history of my community. I didn't know about the Mexican American Civil rights movement or the leaders who sacrificed so much so that I could even attend college. It wasn't until my time at San Diego State that I began to learn about Chicano history, the resilience of the Latino community and the important role we played in civil rights and shaping LA and the Southwest.

Q3: You were served in various staff capacities (as Chief of Staff, district director, and communications director) before running for office. How did your staff positions prepare you for your legislative career?

When I graduated, I wanted to continue my advocacy to effect change in communities like the one I grew up in. I worked for several electeds who were more than bosses—they were mentors and friends. And these legislators tackled issues near and dear to my heart such as immigrant rights and civil rights. For example, while I worked for Marco Firebaugh, I staffed AB540 which was the first bill of its kind in the country to allow in-state tuition for undocumented students at public universities. Now, as a Senator, I continue to push for the undocumented community by supporting legislation such as one that expands professional licensing for those same students who graduate and can't practice in their fields of study.

Working as staffer helped me navigate the Capitol, learn the legislative process and get familiar with the structure. I also worked alongside many other staffers who still work in and around the building and find that I collaborate with old friends on areas of common interest to pass legislation. This experience has helped me narrow my focus and develop a legislative agenda that is realistic and, in my opinion, effective.

Q4: You are widely credited for helping to bring together an impressive array of pro-immigrant legislation in California. Why do you think it is important for the state to be pushing this kind of legislation?

Immigrants are an integral part of our state's cultural and economic vitality. Its families like mine that come to this country looking to get their chance at the American Dream, while not asking for anything in return. That's why I support and author pro-immigrant legislation. When families come to America they are fleeing terrible situations. They work hard, build a life for themselves and their families and

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contribute immensely to our communities and our economy. We all benefit when our communities prosper and immigrants help them prosper.

Q5: Passing many of these laws have involved balancing various interests and considerations. Do you have any insights on trying to translate the wishes of constituents and advocacy groups into legislation that can win broad support, both in the legislature as well as the Governor's office?

For me it's always about what's best for my constituents and those directly impacted by the legislation. In Sacramento, there is no shortage of opinions on how to advance legislation and there are infinite interests constantly competing. I believe that there are many paths forward to getting legislation passed and never any "right" way to getting things done. I am interested in what impacts the most people in a realistic and impactful way? Can we support legislation that may be imperfect but will improve the quality of life for working families? Can we take incremental approaches to tackling some of our biggest issues of equality for immigrants by building broad coalitions? It's about doing the right thing for the people who stand to gain. For me it's always about building strong Californians.

Q6: In addition to being a pioneer on immigrant rights legislation, you are the first openly gay person of color to be elected to the CA State Senate and were named by the White House as a Harvey Milk Champion of Change. How has this intersectional identity made a difference, if at all, in your campaigns—especially with your first run for office?

Growing up, there were few people who portrayed gay life that looked like me. Even when I was running, I was often told I couldn't be myself and run in a community like East LA or Southeast LA. I was told that I would need to run in communities like West LA because that's where they would "accept" me. For me, it's always been about the work I do, the relationships I build with the community and public service. I am fortunate to be able to be myself and work for the communities I come from—whether they be the LGBT community, the Latino community or working class communities. It's an honor to be part of breaking down barriers for communities who are traditionally excluded from accessing institutions like the California State Senate or elected office in general.

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Q7: In addition to your work in California, you serve on the Executive Committee of National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). What have you gained from being involved in that capacity (or, what role do you think that NCSL can play in improving the work of state legislatures?)

It's important for leaders across the nation to exchange ideas and initiatives with one another. What works in one state may work in another. Or, adversely, the challenges in one state may be avoided in another. That's why I enjoy working with organizations like NCSL that connect leaders to discuss what we're working on. I've used these platforms to share ideas about California's leadership on issues like immigration and climate change.

Q8: Finally, any thoughts on how we get more diversity in state legislatures and Congress?

Increasing diversity among our elected officials is crucial to helping advance fair policies that reflect the electorate. When we talk about issues like immigration it's important to have decision-makers at the table who not only understand the issue, but those that have a personal connection. This helps us move beyond sympathetic-politics and into empathetic-politics. And we have so much work to do until we get to true parity in those who represent us. I try to do my part in both formal and informal ways. For example, we started a young senators program in my district to get inner-city youth exposed to leadership opportunities in different sectors. I'm also happy to be involved in the National Association of Latino Elected Officials, the New American Leaders Project, and the National Council on State Legislatures, and see mentoring as something that is part of my job. I'm proud to see more Latinos, LGBT, women, and other racial minorities get elected. It adds a layer to political decisions that is lacking. In a time when communities of color are standing up for representation, it is important that we keep pushing. It's a form of improving our democracy and true representative government.

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