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## Meet Some of NYC's New Generation Of Latino Legislators

*By Sandra Guzman*

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NEW YORK, NY -- A conversation with several of the recently elected Democratic New York City Latino legislators point to certain traits they share. They are bilingual, millennial and unapologetically progressive, and are quick to defend the virtues of marriage equality and affordable housing. And since their election last November, they have been garnering attention. Ritchie Torres, who at 26 is the youngest member of the New York City Council, was crowned by [New York](#) magazine as one of the 47 reasons to love the Big Apple.

Less than a year in office, what sets this new crop of politicians apart from earlier generations is their coming of age in an even more pan-Latino city than the previous generation of elected officials. With an even more diverse electorate, they insist on being driven mainly by progressive ideas. Nationality, while important, is secondary, they say.



“I know what it's like to grow up in the projects”

“I think that this is a golden age for Latino politics in New York City,” said Torres on a recent sunny afternoon, sitting in his office with sprawling views of the Brooklyn Bridge and City Hall skyline. Torres, is the first openly gay elected official from the Bronx.

“I am grateful to be a councilmember but even more grateful to be a councilmember in this particular time in history,” said Torres, a Bronx-born and raised tenant activist of Puerto Rican heritage who describes himself as Afro-Latino. “Even though our identities are important to who we are, first and foremost we are defined by the ideas that we hold; we are rooted in progressive ideas” said Torres.

In the 51-member City Council, eleven members are Latino, but the recent spotlight has focused on some of the young legislators whose elections have made history. Newly elected 34-year old Carlos Menchaca is the first Mexican American elected to public office in the state. Melissa Mark-Viverito, 45, is the city's first Latina City Council president and one of its most powerful elected officials.

Menchaca, who looks like many of Brooklyn's hipsters and is often seen biking across the Brooklyn Bridge to his district in Sunset Park, echoed his fellow councilmember.

“It’s not that I am not I am proud of my Mexican heritage,” explained the El Paso born and raised politico. He was one of seven children raised by a single mother in a housing project near the U.S. Texas border.



New York City Council member Carlos Menchaca puts on his helmet before biking to Red Hook from his office in downtown Manhattan.

“When I am around other mexicanos and I see joy in their eyes and warm smiles, it makes me feel great,” said Menchaca. “But my driving force isn’t just about ethnic loyalty, it is to bring services to the people, to have effective leadership—to make sure government works for working families.”

Baruch College School of Public Affairs professor Hector Cordero-Guzman has studied New York City politics for two decades.

“Politicians, more than any other group of people, are monsters of their time,” he noted.

“The first group (of Hispanic New York City legislators) broke down barriers for Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in elected office,” explained Cordero-Guzman. “They came at a time when the needs of this community were largely unmet and there was no one fighting for the communities they represented.” He cited the role of iconic Puerto Rican politicians like former congressman Herman Badillo and current members Jose Serrano and Nydia M. Velazquez, as well as former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, among others.

But as in many cities around the country, the city's Latinos - now comprising 28 percent of the population - have changed. Although Puerto Ricans are still the majority of Latino voters in the city, their numbers declined by 11 percent in the decade between 2000 and 2010. During the same period, New York City's Mexican population jumped by 73 percent followed by the Dominican population, which increased by 8 percent.

“This new generation of Latinos seeking public office are dealing with a much more diverse electorate,” said Cordero-Guzman, saying the concept of ethnic pride as a campaign issue is more nuanced.

He pointed to the defeat of Adriano Espaillat. Though he would have been the first Dominican American member of Congress, he lost against longtime incumbent Congressman Charlie Rangel.

Speaker Mark-Viverito, who has the second most powerful job in city government and is responsible for passing a \$75 billion dollar budget, is very aware of having to navigate a very varied urban constituency.

“I am extremely, extremely proud to be Puerto Rican, it’s where I was born and raised, and it is what gives me strength, but what guides me in elective office are issues of social justice and social equity,” she said, pointing out that those issues affect everyone, including Puerto Ricans. “I wanted to represent a community that was historically disenfranchised and show that government can be different.”



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Melissa Mark-Viverito, shortly after being elected as New York City Council Speaker. She is the first Latina to hold this powerful position.

Mark-Viverito's district has seen a seismic demographic shift. El Barrio, once the epicenter of Puerto Ricans in New York, is now a blend of pan-Latino accents and multicultural gentrifiers. The Puerto Rican population dropped by 10 percent since 2000, and is now only 39 percent of the district's population.

Former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, an elder statesman in Latino politics who came very close to winning the Democratic nomination for New York City mayor in 2001, said there was excitement with the new crop of young Latino elected officials, but was not ready declare a political post-ethnic Big Apple.

“They are great,” Ferrer said of the newly elected Latino New York City Democrats. “But the fact is we have not transcended anything. When we have a {Latino or Latina} Comptroller, Mayor, Governor, Lt Governor, U.S. Senator--then that is an impressive achievement,” he noted.

“Melissa Mark-Viverito is great and she is very, very special—she is focused, smart, clear in what she wants to accomplish - but I don’t think she could have been elected in Riverdale,” said Ferrer, referring to a more non-Latino white enclave in the city. “The same goes for all of the other (newly elected Latino) ones. This is shorthand to say that she (and other Latino candidates) have to come from somewhere, to have a foundation, a base,” he explained.

“Look, we have achieved milestones that are important and having the Speakership is huge, but we are not post racial and post ethnic anything,” observed former Bronx borough president Fernando Ferrer.

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“Look, we have achieved milestones that are important and having the Speakership is huge, but we are not post racial and post ethnic anything,” observed former Bronx borough president Fernando Ferrer. “Melissa (Mark-Viverito) was compared in the media to a voodoo priestess. When those kinds of stereotypical stories are not considered stories, then we are making strides.”

According to Ferrer, who is Co Chair of Mercury LLC a public affairs consulting firm, Latino candidates who run for citywide office still experience unfair stereotyping. He said he was a victim of bias when he ran for mayor and recently witnessed how the tabloids resurrected tired Hispanic stereotypes during Mark Viverito’s campaign for speakership.

Still, Ferrer, who twelve years ago ran on the same “Tale of Two Cities” platform that the current mayor successfully campaigned on a decade later, recalled with great satisfaction a recent event which illustrated to him just how far Latinos politicians have come in the city of 8million people. It was a Latino event held in the midtown offices of a union for Mark-Viverito.

“There were so many of us, the elders, the young ones—united and backing Melissa. At one point I thought the platform was going to buckle under. What struck me were the numbers--there are many more leaders, elected officials, and many others in positions of power,” he said. “And we are very diverse of opinion and nationality,” he noted. “It was a great moment for Latinos.”

### **A progressive agenda**

In the eight months since taking office, each of the legislators say they have made headway in tackling the biggest goal they share with Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio - tackling the city's deep income inequality. In Manhattan alone, the income gap between rich and poor is as stark as in Sierra Leone and Namibia, according to Census data.

The first law passed under their nascent tenure granted over one million New Yorkers paid sick leave, followed by a guarantee of universal pre-K for city children and free meals for middle school kids. This summer the council passed a municipal ID program which had languished for decades in the previous administration.

Under the law, which takes effect in January, all New Yorkers regardless of their immigration status will have equal access to city services. It also grants residents free and discounted entry to cultural institutions and can serve as a formal identification. For the progressive mayor, Speaker and the new members of the City Council, the ID harbors hope that it will bring undocumented residents out of the shadows.

One of the issues that Speaker Mark-Viverito’s is most enthusiastic about is bringing participatory budgeting to New York City. This is the idea of allowing constituents to decide how a percentage of their tax dollars is spent. According to the Speaker, this year it became the largest participatory budget program in the country.



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Speaker Melissa Viverito meets with a resident during a walk through her district in Upper Manhattan.

“I was one of the first city council members to bring this idea forth and we started four years with four members. This new fiscal year we have twenty one members,” said Mark-Viverito. “It’s a fraction of the budget, \$25 million, but it’s a great process pointing out that this was not an experiment but the way the budget will move forward,” she said.

Torres for his part touted his success in securing \$1.5 million for the next fiscal year to build the first elderly LGBT community center in Bronx. He said that his district is more like the Bible Belt and would never be confused for a "gayborhood." In fact, his borough's Democrat Assemblyman Ruben Diaz had voted against marriage equality. “Imagine that, building an elderly LBGT center in the middle of the Bronx.”

Torres, who chairs the council's committee on public housing, made history by convening the first City Council hearing outside of City Hall - in a Coney Island housing project. Torres was raised in the Throgsneck Houses, a large public housing development in the Bronx, with his twin and sister by a single mom.

“We held the hearing and two months later FEMA agreed to provide hundreds of millions of dollars for the replacement of boilers,” said Torres of his victory to get residents permanent heating systems destroyed during Hurricane Sandy.

Menchaca, who chairs the Committee on Immigration, said he draws on his experience growing up in the border to inform him of the tinderbox issue. He recently co-sponsored a bill that pushed for the creation of a fund--the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project—that secured \$4.9 million to provide undocumented New York City residents with free legal services.

Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito said they were trying to inspire other municipalities with the idea of inclusion, collaborative decision making, and progressive ideals.

“When I became speaker, that is what I wanted to bring, that new kind of leadership that is not top down. Power can be shared,” she declared.

Menchaca, who is openly gay, agreed.

“Very soon we are going to see this trend in other cities, to export new models of governing to other places and inspire other young Latinos and Latinas to run on progressive ideas,” said Menchaca, “to continue to build on the legacy of those who were elected before us. It’s how we will elect a Latino or Latina president.”

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