

# Latinas and leadership

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Josefina Vazquez Mota is not giving up. As Mexico's first female presidential candidate, she is counting on a last minute "trajectory" that will propel her back into the lead and, ideally, through one more glass ceiling in another Latin American nation.

"I am absolutely convinced," she told *The Washington Post*. "Not only because of the fact that I am a woman, but also because as a woman, I have been able to head two of the most important ministries in my country: education and social development. In both I have accomplished important results. In social development, we were able to decrease poverty as never before — 9 million Mexicans overcame the conditions of extreme poverty."

The election is July 1 but many will argue Vazquez Mota has already won. She defeated several favorites to win the nomination of National Action Party (PAN), making history in Mexico and another step forward for women in a region well known for supposed macho standards.

"What needs to continue is for voters to exercise independence and to be open to good female candidates," says Diana Villiers Negroponte, senior fellow for foreign policy at the Latin America Initiative at Brookings Institute. "Women will win and women will lose. We must not base an election on strong personalities, which is the sociological challenge in society, but on the ability to do the job."

At the recently concluded Sixth Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia, the "family photo" of the leaders underscored a significant change. Five of the presidents and prime ministers representing the 34 countries in the summit process were women: Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner of Argentina, Dilma Rousseff of Brazil, Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica, Portia Simpson Miller of Ja-

maica and Kamla Persad-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago.

That is up from two at the 1994 Summit of the Americas in Miami (Dame Mary Eugenia Charles of Dominica and Violeta Chamorro of Nicaragua) and the 2009 summit (Argentina's Cristina Fernandez and Chile's Michelle Bachelet.)

Five is a small number but the direction is impressive, moving to a place where a female running for office is less a novelty and more a force to be reckoned with. So why Latin America and not north of the Rio Grande? And what is next?

"They are people who are better than others who come up with good public policy," says Dr. Cynthia J. Arnson, director of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. "The fact that there are more women leaders in politics does tell you of the quality of their leadership and of their political programs."

Others are coming. In Peru, Keiko Fujimori, daughter of the former president, came close to winning last year and will run again. Female candidates are already poised to run in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Some have linked women's more visible presence in politics to a yearning for change among Latin Americans, a general feeling that a new approach is needed to reinvent broken political systems. Others attribute women's gains to quota decisions adopted by several countries, including Argentina, which led the way in 1991 when it adopted a law establishing that women must make up at least 30 percent of the candidate lists put forward by political organizations.

Finally, there are raw electoral numbers.

"Women represent over 50 percent of the voters in many nations, 53 percent in Salvador to 52 percent in Mexico," Negroponte said. "Also, more women turn out to vote so appealing to this electorate is good. Women have also shown they can make executive leaders

and, with people like Bachelet and the president of Panama [Mireya Moscoso], voters know that women make good leaders."

Rousseff, who had never previously held elective office, won largely due to her ties to her mentor, outgoing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a beloved figure credited with transforming Brazil into a world player. In her victory speech, Rousseff promised to further attack poverty in Brazil — but in a reference to her historic win, she also said, "I hope the fathers and mothers of little girls will look at them and say yes, women can."

Rousseff, daughter of a Bulgarian immigrant and a teacher, became active in Brazil's guerrilla resistance movement during the military dictatorship that lasted from 1965 to 1985. She was jailed and tortured.

So was Bachelet, who was a member of the resistance during the Pinochet dictatorship, Bachelet is often regarded as the template for the breakthrough. She was the first female defense minister and health minister in Latin America. A pediatrician and epidemiologist with studies in military strategies, Bachelet became Chile's first female president in 2006 under the Socialist Party winning 53.5 percent of the vote. During her term, Bachelet focused on free-market policies and increasing social benefits to close the gap between the rich and the poor. In March 2010 her term ended, Chile's constitution does not allow a second term. But in September 2010 she was appointed the head of U.N. Women.

"They are known, established and earned their stripes within the political group," Negroponte said. "There is the expectation that they are choosing a woman candidate because they are choosing a strong candidate, not merely because she is a woman."

*The writer, a Washington, D.C., commentator, contributed this view to the International Edition of The Miami Herald.*