



## How Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto Made Room for Herself in Politics

US Senator. Mentor. Deal-maker. How Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto drives Washington D.C. into the next era of politics.

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Alicia Menendez: Hey, welcome to Latina to Latina, a Bustle podcast. I'm Alicia Menendez.

*Clip (Cortez Masto): It's not just about making history. It is about ensuring we have a seat at the table to get something done/ Right? Because, I'll tell you what, don't you think that it is about time that we had diversity in the United States Senate?*

Menendez: That was U.S. Senator Catherine Cortez Masto. In 2016, Donald Trump won by promising to build that wall and made his infamous comments about Mexico, but that same year, Cortez Masto became the first ever Latina elected to the U.S. Senate. A Mexican-American woman. We sat down in the U.S. Capitol to talk about what it means to her to be the first.

Menendez: We are in the U.S. Capitol.

Cortez Masto: We are.

Menendez: Do you still have days where you just drive up to the Capitol, and you think, "Oh my God. I work here."

Cortez Masto: Every day. Every day. And I tell people, if that changes and I become jaded, then I shouldn't be here. I think about it because my grandparents and my parents, where they've come from, how they worked so hard to make sure that my sister and I could have an education and succeed. And then, just walking in thinking, "Oh my goodness, not only do I represent them and all of their hard work, I'm here representing people of the great state of Nevada, all the people that I know and love because I've grown up there and wanna fight for."

So, yes. Not only that, it's also very intimidating, because then you think about all of the people before you who've walked these halls: the senators that have walked the halls before you who sat at the desk before you, and we have a Constitution because of them and Bill of Rights because of them, we have treaties because of--you just go on and on and on, and you could just really think, "Oh my goodness I don't know if I can move," because it's so intimidating at times. But, I'm just blessed. I'm so happy I'm here.

Menendez: And yet, no one who walked these halls and no one who wrote the Constitution looked like you and had your life experience in a number of ways, I mean, both in terms of your gender, in terms of your race and ethnicity, in terms of where you geographically come from in the United States. We won't talk about the Constitution. And so, for you, then, how do you situate yourself in that? I mean, "the first Latina U.S. senator," what does that mean to you?

Cortez Masto: That's why I'm excited to be here, because it really means that now I have a voice at the table to get something done, and I have a voice that's representing a constituency that's normally underrepresented. And so, now we're here. Hello! We've walked through this door, and now we're here and we're gonna fight.

Menendez: You grew up middle class. Dad was a parking attendant, mom was a bookkeeper. And I think so often when we talk about someone who's had your anomalous ascension, we talk about it as though, "You go to college, then you go to law school and you get a job." But, there's something more nuanced that happens, too, which is when you grow up middle class and then, all of a sudden, you're in corridors of power, there's a language to power, there's a language to wealth. So, my question to you is how did you learn to comport yourself in arenas where there was power and privilege and wealth, when that's not what you grew up knowing?

Cortez Masto: You know, that's a great question. I think because of my parents. They really planted this seed with us. To them, it wasn't about power and wealth and where you come from, it's about who you are. It's true. It's like what Martin Luther King said, "It's about the content of your character."

And, I think if you know, and you're confident in who you are, where you came from and your values and why you're there, you can walk into any room and have any conversation with anyone. And, I really learned that from my parents and, particularly, watching my father growing up, because he had a tough, tough childhood, he fought for everything that he and my mother had, and then he went on to become a county commissioner and President of the Convention and Visitors Authority. But, he never forgot where he came from. And he talked with everyone equally and with the same respect. I don't care what job you had, I don't care where you lived in the community. Everybody he treated equally, and I think that's what this is about.

That's what I learned from him. And, that's really why I do what I do every single day. To me, it's about that respect for everyone and fighting for everyone when they need that voice or they need advocate on their side.

Menendez: So mom's of Italian descent.

Cortez Masto: She is.

Menendez: Dad is of Mexican descent. Did you grow up thinking of yourself as Latina?

Cortez Masto: Both. Well, actually, it was funny. Both. Listen, you come from those big families, you can't run from it, right? One Sunday, my Italian grandmother at her house having sauce and pasta, the next Sunday at my Mexican American grandmother's having frijoles and tortillas, and so, that's how our Sundays were. You spent it with family and with your grandparents and around food and lots of people, right?

Menendez: Monday through Friday must have been a lot of cardio.

Cortez Masto: Exactly, but we celebrated everything, and if you lost your tooth, “Oh! Family's coming together,” or “The Tooth Fairy's coming,” or “The first communion, oh, it's the first communion, now all the family's coming together.” And so, you don't run from it and you just embrace it, and I loved it and I did. I came from both kinds of cultures, but they're still similar in the sense that there's a lot of family, a lot of love, a lot of support.

Menendez: Mm-hmm.

I want to talk a little bit about your time as AG, a lot of emphasis on the most vulnerable communities, seniors, women, children. Why?

Cortez Masto: Because I'm an advocate and a fighter. I've always been. I just hate the idea that there's people out there that are getting stepped on or that just need a helping hand and nobody's there to help or fight for them. The best part that I feel that, of all the jobs that I've had, is when somebody calls up and says, “I'm having trouble here and I need somebody in a position that can help me maneuver through this and give me help,” and that is the best part of anything. When I was practicing law, I was most fulfilled when I was doing pro bono work. The partners didn't like that, right?

Menendez: I was about to say, I'm sure your firm was thrilled by that.

Cortez Masto: They weren't crazy about it, but that's what I loved, because people need help, and I always felt that if I can be in a position, what we call a power, whatever, that you can knock down barriers, cut through red tape, and help people. That's what this is about.

And I've always felt that way. It just hasn't changed. That's what I love about public policy and what I do.

Menendez: Let's talk about running for office, because so often when we talk about running for office, especially when we talk about women, we talk about that moment of getting women to run. But, even once you get women to run, there are all of the obstacles: institutional support, party support, fundraising. For you, what was the biggest obstacle?

Cortez Masto: Probably, for me, was at the time, there was nobody to show you how to do it, right? There's no manual. At the time, I didn't know about Emily's List, there was no Emerge of these programs now that are wonderful, that if you want to run for office you can go through this program, they can talk to you about it and what you need to do. I had no idea.

Menendez: Really?

Cortez Masto: Literally no idea. Just that I knew I wanted to do this, that there were issues I wanted to fight for, I knew my state, I knew I had to get around and talk to people and ask for their vote and explain why I wanted to represent them. And, I will tell you this, had I known now what I know, I probably would've never had run, because there's so much to it, but I love what I'm doing now and I'm so grateful that I just jumped out and said, “I may not know everything that's involved in running for office but I'm gonna do it.”

And, I think there's times when women running for office look at it differently than men run for office. Women want to make sure, well, “Did I check this box? Do I have the experience? Do I have the education? Am I gonna be able to do this job?” And men are just, the question they ask is, “How much does it pay? I'm in.” It's this kind of different way we look at things, and I think more of us just need to say, “Listen, I am passionate about an

issue. I can do this job like anyone else. I have the qualifications, and I'm gonna do it, and I'm gonna jump in."

Menendez: So, it's almost if it had not been for a little bit naïveté, we might be sitting here.

Cortez Masto: That's right. I mean, that's true, because now you look at these races, particularly the one I just came out of, it was brutal. I think many people look at those races now and say, "Oh my gosh, I don't want to go through all of that. That's just crazy." You have to put all yourself out there, they're gonna talk about you all the time, they're gonna talk about good and bad, makeup things, whatever."

Menendez: Though, how do you steel yourself for that? Because, most people won't have the experience you have of running for office and seeing headlines and fabricated things about yourself. How do you manage when people are saying really negative things about you?

Cortez Masto: I learned it when I was Attorney General for eight years. You don't read it. You stop. If you read everything that people put out there about you, good and bad, it is not healthy. You have to have a hard shell, you have to be able to take the criticism--constructive criticism I always accept, I think everybody should accept that, I think it's important. But, some of the negative stuff that you see out there, you have to have this hardened shell to be able to recognize it's gonna be there, don't read everything, don't believe everything, and focus on why you're there, what your values are, and why you're fighting.

I always tell people when they wanna run for office, the first thing you have to do is your self analysis. Why are you running? You're gonna put yourself out there, so you've gotta be honest with yourself and sincere. Why are you doing this? And, now you gotta explain to people and talk to people about it, so that you get their vote and they believe in you. That's the good part of all of this.

Menendez: What do you think the ratio of people who want to be of service versus just straight-up narcissists, when they do that self analysis?

Cortez Masto: Well, you know what's interesting? And, I will say this, it's actually fantastic. Over the course

of this last year, from the Women's March--in what? January 4th of 2017 to now--there are more people that are looking to run for office than we've ever seen before. I think that's fantastic. That tells me people are engaged, they're listening, they care, and they're really willing to step in and make a difference.

When you came here, did you have a sense--here being in Washington D.C.--did you have a sense of these are the things that I need to get done, and when I get these things done, then I will know that I've done my job?

When I got to the legislature, particularly in Congress, I realized it takes patience. What they do here is a lot of networking, it is a lot of working with your colleagues and talking about important policies, and then working to get that passed. It takes patience, and it could take years to get something done.

And, I think many of us that came from the executive branch and then stepped into this legislative branch, are realizing, "Okay, you need to throttle back in the sense" and just be patient, take our time, have a strategy, have a blueprint where we wanna go and then stay on that path.

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Menendez: We're in the Me Too moment, and I think the sort of, larger cultural conversation around Me Too is around power, and around power differentials between men and women, between people who are public and have public stature and people who are private citizens, and so much of what we hear is just that women feel like they have no power as individuals. And, here you are, one of one hundred U.S. senators. I think you're probably often referred to as a powerful person. Do you feel powerful?

Cortez Masto: No, I don't feel-.

Menendez: Of course, you don't. I feel like I knew the answer to that question before I asked.

Cortez Masto: But, I'll tell you what, what I do feel is that the need to make sure that those women have the power they need to succeed. And, whether it is breaking down this culture of--and, listen, I spent a career working in domestic violence prevention, sexual assault prevention, sex trafficking prevention. And, you said it, it's all centered around power and control. Listen, the conversation we have now with this Me Too movement is fantastic because we're bringing attention to it. We're educating. The first step in prevention I always say is, education and awareness, that's what's happening now.

But, now we need to take that cultural change and institutionalize it, That means we need to change our systems and our processes that we have in place to ensure that everybody has the ability to succeed, and that is what I am focused on working on here now.

Menendez: One of the first things you did when ... in addition to your exterior stuff you do on behalf of your constituents, you brought together all of the Latina staffers on the Senate side to get a sense of what they felt their opportunities, obstacles were. What was the number one thing you heard from them?

Cortez Masto: I can tell you, I've done several of those. One of the first things for me was to increase the diversity here in Congress. You can just walk in and see there's not enough of it, and so, I wanted to understand what were the barriers. So, I had roundtables with Latinos that work on the hill, I've had round tables with African Americans working on the hill, with Asian American Pacific Islanders, with LGBTQ, to really talk about what were the challenges, what were the barriers, what can we do to open that door, promote and move forward? And, we've had some great conversations, and the first thing I really learned was the first step in getting in a door of those internships.

Menendez: Which is, in part, connections, class.

Cortez Masto: Right, because they're unpaid and-

Menendez: You have to move to Washington D.C to take an unpaid internship.

Cortez Masto: That's right, and who can do that? Well, if you come from a wealthy family, you can afford to do that, but if you come from a family where we're trying to pull sometimes, diversity, where there's economically challenged-

Menendez: You come from a middle-class family, that's hard to swing.

Cortez Masto: You can't afford to do that. So, that was to me the first understanding: "Okay there's a barrier. What do we do?" The first thing I did is created a scholarship in my office. We're gonna have a scholarship and then reach out and find those fellowships where we can find and give scholarships for first generation, where we can find those people and bring

them in. And, then, the next step is, “Okay, now we have or we're opening that door to diversity. How do we continue to promote them within?”

Menendez: Thank you so much.

Cortez Masto: Thank you. I've enjoyed it.

Menendez: That's it for now, but we want to hear from you. Email us at [latinatolatina@bustle.com](mailto:latinatolatina@bustle.com).  
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us ideas for awesome guests or whatever it is you're thinking about right now. Remember to subscribe to Latina to Latina on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, or wherever you're listening. And, please, leave a review. We love hearing from you.

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