



Code for America's Amanda Renteria Lost Some Battles, but Is Winning the Political War

The former political aide says growing up in agricultural California deeply shaped her identity, especially as a Latina in powerful roles, including chief of staff in the U.S. Senate. Amanda offers candid moments from running for, and losing public office, twice. And why those experiences crystallized her mission to fight for the rest of us.

Alicia Menendez:

For much of her career, Amanda Renteria was the right-hand woman to a lot of powerful people. As economic policy advisor to U.S. Senator Diane Feinstein, as chief of staff to U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow, and national political director for Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. Amanda also ran for office herself, first for Congress, then for governor of California. Today, she's leading Code for America, which partners with government to make it work better through technology. We talk about what it's like to have a career that's constantly evolving and being an influential boss after years of working for other powerful people.

Thank you for doing this, Amanda.

Amanda Renteria:

Of course! It's good to see you.

Menendez: It's good to see you off of Twitter and email.

Renteria: I know.

Menendez: Amanda, your career zigzags, but the through line to me is a commitment to service. Growing up, what did service look like in your home?

Renteria: Service looked like really being part of the community in every way, from attending festivals, to helping at the school, to church events, so it wasn't particularly service per se in the way that I think I understand public service to be today, but it was being part of a community, being part of making sure everyone's taken care of. And I think particularly when you grow up in rural California, in Latino community households, it's about the kids and what does their future hold, so even though it's about the community, there's an eye towards what does this look like in the future?

Menendez: I found some really cute photos of you as a kid doing folklore dance.

Renteria: Oh, I love my baile folklorico. Or I loved performing, I should say. I'm not sure I loved practices, two hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Menendez: You looked great doing it. And I also had to pull up a map to understand where in California you had grown up. I now get it. San Joaquin Valley. Your dad emigrated from

Mexico in the '60s. Your mom is Mexican American, born in the States, grew up in Woodlake, California. How did they instill in you a sense of who you are?

Renteria: Well, it's funny you say Woodlake. I think my dad would say Redbanks, which was the labor camp he actually grew up in, and then everyone stayed in Woodlake after some of the toughest labor camps got dismantled in California. From the earliest ages growing up where I did, we both attended charreadas and rodeos, and charreadas are basically a Mexican rodeo, and so we lived this world, my sisters and I, of Mexican dancing, and also learning about the country culture, and mixing those two. I often described it as everybody wears a hat. Whether it's a cowboy hat or a rancho hat. My dad happens to wear a rancho hat.

And so, there was this really interesting world of combining different cultures together. All around ag, all around farming, and so it was wonderful to grow up there, and for me learning Mexican dancing was learning about my culture.

Menendez: You go to Stanford, double major in economics and political science. Here's the part of the story I love most, which is that you walked onto the softball team, third base, and the basketball team, guard, because I was like, "She's not that tall. I've stood next to Amanda before." I feel like the walking onto two collegiate sports teams, there's gotta be a lesson baked in there about not waiting for an invitation.

Renteria: Hey, I didn't know how hard it would be, which I think is probably a good thing, because you do it anyway. There's a couple reasons I did it. One, I did love sports, but I had to figure out how to pay for college. I didn't want my parents to know how expensive it was. I was really afraid that at any moment they would pull me back and say, "Mija, you can't do this. You went too far away." My academic advisor said, "You know, don't worry about it. You'll have loans at the end of this." And I was trying to explain, "Don't you under... I can't just go home and say that. It's..." at the time, \$22,000 a year, and so I tried to figure out how do you have it paid for, and she just sort of in the discussion said, "You know, the only people who really get out of here without any debt are folks who get full-ride scholarships in sports."

And I was like, "Sports? I can do that." And so, fortunately I did. I got an athletic scholarship.

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Menendez: You write your senior honors thesis on women in politics, but then you don't immediately go into politics. You go and work as a financial analyst at Goldman Sachs. Why? What motivated that decision?

Renteria: So, interesting. My honors thesis was women of color in politics, but there weren't enough, and so my professor at the time guided me and said, "Listen, you just don't have enough for an academic thesis. You should expand it to women." So, I did that as an honors thesis, but I felt like I needed to learn more about the professional world, more about business, more about how things worked, and a lot of people at Stanford were applying to all these

different jobs. I really liked math, and numbers, and economics, and financial services were there, and I fell in love with learning how to be a professional. Wearing a suit. I didn't know how to do that. Going to cloth napkin restaurants was all new to me.

And the intensity of financial markets really fit with just the energy and the competitive nature of it. I really just found it to pull me in, so that I learned a craft of business and financial services that really helped throughout policy and everything else to really understand that side of the world. My dad had always taught us, as well, to figure out business, and money, and understand it. He used to always say, "Follow the money." Anytime I'd ask him a question he's like, "Mija, follow the money."

And I think that just stuck and I felt like I needed to learn more. It was my next step of understanding the real world. And so, I did that for three and a half years.

Menendez: But as you said, three and a half years, your first career pivot point. You head home to California to teach.

Renteria: Yeah. I still say to this day the hardest decision in my career was leaving my first job, largely because that's what you're good at. That's what you know. I had just been in... I figured out how to make ends meet. Figured out how to be on my own.

Menendez: I was about to say also the compensation had to be alluring.

Renteria: Totally. And the future potential compensation, as well. But that was never a driving motivator for me. I suppose still hasn't, since I haven't gone back into the private sector, but the way I left had a lot to do with going back home, being with my mom. She's talking to her comadre. We're at a basketball game in my hometown and her comadre leans over and is like, "What's your daughter doing now?" Because people at that time remembered I was the first woman Latina from my high school to go to Stanford, so it was a really big deal at the time.

And so, here's now looking back saying, "You know, what is she doing now?" And my mom's like, "Well, she's working at a bank, kind of like a bank teller." And I remember just hearing her words and it wasn't her description, and it wasn't... It was the tone. It was the, "She was supposed to do something." And I drove back to LA going, "Man, what am I supposed to be doing? What am I supposed to be doing in this world?" And so, I moved back home to teach and coach. For a lot of folks at Goldman, it was a very strange change. I fell in love with teaching. That was my first public service job and I fell in love with the idea that you wake up every day to help empower people. It was meaningful. It meant something.

And so, thank goodness I had that moment that I overheard my parents talking. I think about that a lot with my own kids.

Menendez: I think a lot of people who have that moment of recognizing that what they want to do is commit themselves to a career in public service, they then... If they choose to get an advanced degree, turn around and get a Master of Public Policy, or a Master of Public Administration. Why go and get the MBA instead?

Renteria: I understood my skills. I understood I saw the world in economics-

Menendez: That is such a gift that young, to understand your skills.

Renteria: It is.

Menendez: To in your early twenties know that.

Renteria: Well, partly I understood it because I left it in such a stark difference, right? I went from financial services to in the classroom, and I recognized while I loved being in the classroom and I loved doing that, I knew I had something. I knew I was good at that thing I was doing for three and a half years. It just felt right to me and it felt different than the academic philosophy that I felt like I studied a lot more at Stanford.

And so, business felt like a framing I understood. It was a skillset I got. I was surprised I got into Harvard Business School, to be fair. And when I got there, it did all make sense. It did make a ton of... It fit me well for my skill set, for how I thought about the world. I certainly didn't fit in there. I think that's probably a common theme in my life, that I somehow belong everywhere and nowhere at the same time. But I was on a different coast, different experience, with a classroom full of folks who didn't grow up in the same way that I did.

Menendez: I relate to that so deeply, the fitting in everywhere, fitting in nowhere. And I suppose a lot of us do. And then as if just to continue to confound people, you go to Capitol Hill.

Renteria: I do. Well, I didn't go to Capitol Hill initially. I graduated from business school and went, "How do I get back to this combination of the rewards of teaching and the intensity and the power of financial markets?" And I thought, "Where do those things combine?" And I thought it was government. And so, I went right on the front lines, worked in the city of San Jose. Worked on community development block grants that worked directly with community empowerment, and I happened to be in Senator Feinstein's office asking her to support these, and six months later that senior advisor says, "You know, I know this is an interesting call out of the blues, but would you ever be interested in working for Senator Feinstein?" A person I wrote about it in my honors thesis.

And how could you not say yes? I thought I'd do it for a year, and then after a decade, one year after another, it was an incredibly fascinating time. I was there during the Great Recession, working at that point for the senator from Michigan, Debbie Stabenow. The Affordable Care Act was done. I was on a finance committee. And then in my final stint, she became chairwoman of the ag committee, which in some ways brought me right back home to where I grew up again.

And so, yeah, every single year built on the other, and I really did fall in love with being in the Senate. Part of the reason why I fell in love with it is because I did feel like I was able to stretch it a little bit here and there. I was eight months pregnant while we were deciding whether or not maternity care would be in the base bill of the Affordable Care Act. You know, it was moments like that that it mattered to be in the room. When Sonia Sotomayor was voted in, I was on the floor in the Senate, crying in the corner. I'd like to think that even though I was just one person there, that there were times where I pulled it in that direction. And so, I do see it as this place of hope, but also of like a slow moving piece of work.

Menendez: Well put.

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Montoya, and Tony Rodriguez, with special guests like actor Luis Guzman, first Latina Disney princess and my girl, Aimee Carrero, Hija de tu Madre designer Patty Delgado, and even Mr. 305 himself, Pitbull. And if you're asking yourself, "Do I need to know Spanish to enjoy this podcast?" The answer is no, but you might learn a little along the way. Listen to Spanish Aquí Presents in your podcast app now and subscribe so you don't miss an episode.

Menendez: For someone who doesn't know, what does a chief of staff to a U.S. senator do?

Renteria: I used to call it the land of uncomfortable conversations, because you always had to figure out how to make things work, right? You also had to be the one that says things that senators... It's not appropriate for the senator to take on, or that the staff has worked through, but there's that last thing you've gotta negotiate. So, it's both putting strategy, putting some vision and leadership on it, but really doing a lot of the behind-the-scenes work to make things happen.

Menendez: You're the first Latina chief of staff in the history of the United States Senate. How did that actually show up for you in your lived experience of doing the job?

Renteria: It's funny. There was an article on The Hill that-

Menendez: Yes!

Renteria: ... they were doing chiefs on, right? And the title was Renteria Doesn't Blend In. There were moments I just didn't fit in, but I think that was okay.

Menendez: But tell me... Do you remember any of them?

Renteria: Yeah. I mean, they were kind of all over the place, like when we'd be in a room and we were talking about immigrant communities and what it meant in healthcare, and people looked around like, "Well, how do immigrants..." I remember this conversation, like, "Well, how do immigrant communities get healthcare?" And everyone looked around and it was like, "Let me tell you." Right? It was that same story of being a chief of staff pregnant and trying to figure out how to make a coat fit so you can get on the Senate floor. And you look around, you're like, "Has anyone had this problem before? Why is it just me?"

It was when you walked into the lunch room and you looked around, or when people were talking about whether or not the Senate dining hall should be unionized, and you know your mom was part of a union and that's how you had healthcare when you were younger, because she was a secretary for the schools. It came up so often in many ways that it was just kind of like the daily life, but it was also, I think for me, a language I was learning, too. One of the things that was really interesting for me when I got to Senator Feinstein's office, calling the Senator, "Senator." I thought, "How do I advise somebody that I have to give a formal title to?" Because for me, Don and Doña means you speak a certain way. You don't give advice to your Don or Doña.

So, there was all these cultural changes that were really different for me as an advisor, for me just walking around the halls, looking at what I was seeing, what I was driving into work. It's also what I came to love over time, is that, "Okay, how do I use this to ask interesting questions? Do we need a Senators-only elevator? I get that people need to get to the floor soon, but is it really that the people's house?" Right? Does that feel like that?

Menendez: That's part of the challenge of being on the Hill, though, right? Which is that you are so far removed from a lot of the communities that you seek to serve.

Renteria: That's right, and that's been the story of my life, going back and forth. The financial services, going back home to teach and coach, that bouncing back and forth is me. Because if I get too far away, it doesn't feel like I know my roots as well. I don't know how to keep that up over time, but even this summer, we spent the time with my family trying to teach my kids what it's like to be around family, what it's like to be in rural America, what it's like to be in the kind of communities I grew up in. But I think that's what makes for good policy, the more good stewardship, good leadership. The more you keep making that connection, I think we are a better world if we don't lose that touch.

Menendez: 2016, you were hired to be the national political director for Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign. What does being the national political director for a campaign like that entail?

Renteria: So, in this case, it was two things. It was one, working with elected leaders all across the country, making sure they had what they needed, obviously getting endorsements as part of the process, because we had a super delegate race. It was a little bit structured differently. And then the other was building out our constituent services. So, making sure we had outreach leaders in the different communities, African American, LGBTQ, Latinx, et cetera, and then along that process because of those relationships, I got pulled in as the senior advisor who went to Flint, or when Zika happened, got pulled in to go and have a communication awareness effort there.

And so, it puts you in the middle of in some ways like a chief of staff, where you're working behind the scenes with a lot of folks who are in front of the camera. It was, I have to say, just seeing the country in a presidential... There's nothing quite like it. Obviously, this year is different, but there's nothing quite like traveling to like 35 different states, many more than once, talking about their lives.

Menendez: Where were you on election night 2016?

Renteria: I was in Javits Center. I was one of the spokespeople. I remember when we all had to go off air. I remember my last question before the election started, which was what you think it will mean to have a woman lead the most powerful nation in the world. Yeah. And then to go from there, just several hours later, it not happening, but the shock of it all on the drive back home, because I didn't want to stay in Manhattan. I felt like when my kids woke up, I needed to tell them. We're at 3:00 in the morning, my husband and I are in a cab back home so I could get up in three hours to tell them what actually happened.

So, it was a tough moment, and I think in some ways, again, I go back to my roots. It led me back to that same lesson learned when I ran for Congress, which is you gotta build power from the ground up. People have to feel engaged all across the country. At school board races, in local races. You don't do it one election cycle. It really is every day in and day out, building leadership and power.

Ad: *I want to recommend a podcast that offers big ideas and surprising stories. It's called Pindrop from TED. You'll journey across the globe with filmmaker Saleem Reshamwala in search of the most imaginative ideas from each place. This season, hear from a handful of musicians, like Renata Flores, who are bringing pride back to Quechua, Peru's native language, with their music. And listen to locals from Rapa Nui, AKA Easter Island, to find*

out what happens to the tourism paradise when people stop showing up. Be sure to check out Pindrop wherever you listen.

Menendez: You've run for office twice, first for Congress, then for governor of California. What went into that first decision to run for Congress?

Renteria: After being on the Hill for 10 years, you look around and you say, "If you really want to change policy, what's the next step?" It's not lost that you can be the first Latina chief of staff and recognizing you can only take the ball so far, and then you need to make sure that if you want to change policy, you gotta change the policymakers. That really was the first step of it.

Menendez: Did that occur to you first or did someone come and recruit you and plant that seed?

Renteria: What I knew is we needed to change the way policy was made and fought for in the place that I grew up, and so I wanted to get a policymaker that could do that kind of work. It wasn't necessarily me, but when I was talking to my girlfriends and I was like, "God, this is what we need in the Central Valley, and so I'm thinking about how can I get someone there to fight for this stuff?" In the same way that Senator Stabenow fights. Right? How can I get someone from my hometown to do that? And like any good girlfriend, looks around and is like, "Come on, man. You're the one that says if not you, who?" That's the part that stuck, which is if not you, who? So, then you throw your hat in the ring and you do it, and I gotta say one of the biggest lessons from running, I was talking to one of my base audience, right? Older Latina woman, like my mom. They were my strongest base where I grew up.

She says to me, "Pero mija, don't you think we need someone like them to represent us?" And for me, that just stuck, which was, "Oh my goodness. We're not just running for office. We are trying to change what the image of leadership is." I want people to look in the mirror as who should be your leader and it looks like you, no matter who you are. And so, we changed our campaign at that moment from the ads we were telling, it was much more about the story, so that they could see someone like them could lead, even if we weren't gonna lead in this one.

And that's largely why I also joined the presidential campaign, because I thought, "God, if we can change the image of leadership in one cycle, what a difference that can make, again, at that local level." As people would see themselves. I think it makes an impact on anyone that's been left out.

Menendez: In general, we don't talk a lot about losses. What did you learn from those two defeats?

Renteria: What you're fighting for. My biggest lesson of defeat was when I saw my poll numbers in the congressional race and realized it was nearly impossible to win a general election. It's that no matter how hard I worked, no matter the fact that we put in a modern campaign, that we raised more money than anyone had ever raised by a long shot during that period of time, we reached out to more communities, et cetera, et cetera, it just... Not gonna happen. And that moment of, "What are we fighting for? Why did we do this," became so crystal clear to me that by the end of the general election, even though we're all crying. The campaign team was hugging, and I loved that team no matter what happened, I told them. Because we were fighting for something and that fight doesn't end at that point.

And that's given me some clarity. To fight for... to have your voice heard is a win.

Menendez: How can our listeners prepare and help others prepare in the months ahead? Like we keep hearing plan your vote. What do we need to be doing inside our own families and friend groups?

Renteria: We are really good at community. One of the things that we do is we hang out. We bring everyone together. That's what you learn to do. It is now time to do that for voting. And I will say this, which is there's a lot of questions this year about when to vote, how to vote, and I think it is incumbent on all of us who are in these networks, who are in these circles, to not only get people to vote, but educate folks both on what they're voting for, as well as deconstructing some of the misinformation that's out there. The biggest I think massive effort we can put in is this misinformation campaign about whatever it is including the difficulty of voting.

We need to educate folks not only on how to vote, but why to vote. I think we're in the perfect nexus as Latinas to do that.

Menendez: You're now the CEO of Code for America. How does running a nonprofit compare to working on Capitol Hill, or working on a campaign, or running for office?

Renteria: In some ways, it's not too different than being behind the scenes working on the Hill. Because it's about the work and what you're doing, so it very much feels a little bit like when I was at the city of San Jose and first started out at the local level. The difference is that we are working with a tool and a medium, technology, that has the ability to make change at scale. That part for me is pretty remarkable. We often talk about you can make change at scale in government and you can make change at scale in technology and bringing them together really has an opportunity to change how systems work in our country.

We're gonna use technology. We've gotta make sure that we are bending technology for good. And so, we spend a lot of our time not just doing programs that are out there making government systems better, but it's how do we make government systems that are particularly focused on communities that have been left out. Food stamps, earned income tax credit, that's the kind of programs that we're doing.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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