



Why Cristina Tzintún Ramirez Wants Latinas to Be Less Humble and More Demanding

The civil rights leader behind Texas' Workers Defense Project and Jolt, and now NextGen America, shares her insights on organizing and mobilizing young and Latino voters, the biggest mistake she made while running for the US Senate, and why she grew up believing that people were jealous of her Mexican identity.

Alicia Menendez: Cristina Tzintún Ramirez is a powerhouse. Fresh out of college, she founded the Workers' Defense Project and started organizing Texas construction workers. Then she launched Jolt, Texas-wide organization focused on Latino voters. You might remember learning about Jolt registering voters at quinceañeras. In 2020, at one of the most challenging times in her personal life as a newly single mom, she ran for the U.S. Senate. And now as the executive director at NextGen America, she leads the nation's largest youth voting organization. Cristina and I talk about the political realities of organizing in Texas, the biggest mistake she made as a candidate for public office and her urgent call for Latinas to demand what we deserve.
Cristina, thank you for being here.

Cristina Tzintún Ramirez:
Yeah, thanks for having me.

Menendez: Cristina, growing up in Ohio with a mom who had grown up in Mexico, one of several kids with a dad sort of like hippie dippy person who clearly cared about social causes. What was anchoring your sense of Latinidad at home?

Tzintún Ramirez: I think that one, we always think one, there's not that many Latino images or stories that could be told in the public discourse or in media, which I think is part of the huge problem. And then when it gets told it's one dimensional or it's one story, and then if you don't fit into that story, you feel like your story isn't Latino enough. I was also blessed with that I grew up in a mostly white middle class neighborhood, and then my Mexican family, my mom was the only one in the United States besides some more distant cousins. So I would go back to Mexico several times a year to see my family. I would spend my entire summers there. I would spend every Christmas break there. And so my Mexican identity was actually very much Mexico. It wasn't Mexican in the United States, and my parents also gave us this great gift.
It wasn't really until I was in middle school that I fully understood because my parents made us believe that everyone was jealous that we were Mexican because we got to speak two languages and we got to know all these different cultures and we got to spend our breaks in Mexico doing all of these amazing things. And then it wasn't until middle school when people started to be more outwardly racist that I realized they weren't all jealous. But by then it had been ingrained in me that being Mexican was amazing. So I never had a sense of

inferiority. I had a sense that wow, I had this deep rich culture that the rest of my peers didn't have. And I felt incredibly lucky to have that.

Menendez: The sense of justice, of fairness, of wanting a country with systems that treats people equally. Where in your early life does that come from?

Tzintzún Ramirez: My dad is this white American hippie that was living on a commune in Mexico in the seventies, and he read a lot about the world and he gave me Bell Hooks book, *Ain't I a Woman?* When I was a teenager. He had me read Malcolm X's biography and really taught me very deeply about the world. But I say my dad learned how the world worked through books. But I say my mother is an organic intellectual because she is the eldest of nine kids, again, from a very poor farm working family. She only went to school until the seventh grade. But my mom knew how the world worked and studied it as a person that lived as a poor brown immigrant Mexican woman.

And my mother was also very unique because my mother is dark-skinned. And if you know anything about Latino culture, especially in Mexico, is that people that are dark-skinned are treated less than. And my mom was very rare. My mom always taught us that to be Indian was beautiful and that we should really honor those indigenous cultures. And so I feel very blessed from that, from my mother that she passed that down and my mom didn't have to read books to know that she just very deeply believed that.

My parents also gave us a great sense in responsibility, even from very small things. We went to Mexico when we were all young, me and my siblings, we were not allowed to take anything that we were not going to give away. So all of our clothes that we took, we gave to other children, we took toys that we would give away. We were told we couldn't bring anything back but the clothes on our back. Because we had to leave everything for other people that needed it more. So those very small lessons that my parents gave us that I'm very, very grateful for that have inspired me and led me to do the work that I do today.

Menendez: Speaking as we are of insider-outsider status. So when you get to Texas, what is the biggest surprise about Texan culture?

Tzintzún Ramirez: So it's so funny. Because I remember moving here when I was 21 and I didn't know a single soul. I literally just would look up in high school, the weather of Austin and the things happening in Austin, Texas. And I became obsessed with it. And I said, I'm going to move to Austin. And so I packed one suitcase and I moved into the youth hostel here in Austin. I didn't know a single soul. And I remember people thinking, "oh, they're going to think I'm not Mexican enough because, because I grew up in Ohio." And then I got here and I started working in the Latino and immigrant community. And it was so funny because all the Chicanos thought I was really Mexican because I knew all this stuff about Mexico and I speak Spanish like someone that's from southern Mexico, from a small village because that's where I learned how to speak Spanish.

And I think as Latinos, what has surprised myself about my own experience and everyone else's, they were always thinking that our Latino story is not enough. Right? When I launched Jolt, Jolt was an organization focused on mobilizing young Latinos to exercise their political power. That was the fascinating thing to me, that there were people like me that were halfies that didn't feel like they were Latino enough. There were people that were fifth-generation Texans that didn't speak Spanish, so they felt like they weren't Latino enough. And then the kids that were dreamers felt like they weren't Latino enough because now they had become more gringo, more American than their parents. And so I think the big

thing I've learned is that all of our stories count and matter. And that lifting up the great diversity and tapestry of the Latino experience is actually how we build that Latino identity.

Menendez: Texas is of course the state that cried blue we're told many different election cycles that this is the year that Texas is going to swing for Democrats. And there are big structural reasons why that has proven really, really challenging for you as someone who has had a front row seat to watching that change. What is the biggest obstacle for progressives, for Democrats in Texas to really be able to deliver statewide victories?

Tzintzún Ramirez: One in five Latinos in the United States live in Texas. First off, it's one of the highest densities. Half of the people turning 18 in our state are Latino. We are now the ethnic majority in the state. And so I think people confuse demographics with destiny. And so when we talk about that Latinos are now the largest ethnic group, right? There are some structural challenges. One, Texas is the hardest state to register to vote. And we're also as Latinos, not only are we consistently under invested in as a ethnic group, as a community in our voting power, there's also the challenge that we are young and young people vote less than older people. So the most common age for white American in the United States is 58 years old. For an African-American, it is 27, for Latino American, it's 11. So our real electoral power lies with people that are younger, and yet there's an under-investment in young people. And you layer on top of that an under-investment in Latinos. And so we have never received the full economic investment that we deserve or need to shift the state. And I do believe very deeply what gives me hope is if you change Texas, you change the entire country. It's going to take time and money invested in the state, invested in young Latinos to turn out and believe that politics and government can work for them. And there can be a different vision for our state than the one we have today.

Menendez: 2020 you run for U.S. Senate and initially there is very understandable resistance on your part because you're a young mom. I'm sure there were other considerations, but the way it gets remembered in history is as though being a young mom is the obstacle. What was it that allowed you to move past that consideration and choose to run?

Tzintzún Ramirez: So the first organization I started, I started when I was 24 years old in an undergrad full-time called Workers Defense Project focused on lifting up power and mobilizing Latino immigrant construction workers. And I think two things. One, I have a great fear of regret in life. So anytime I have been asked to do something that I'm very afraid of, so I was afraid to lead workers' defense products. I was twenty-four years old and in school and I had no idea what I was doing. But I've always asked myself, will I be more afraid if I don't try then if I try and fail? And if the answer is I will be more regretful that I don't try, then I try. I also had that happen to me when I started Jolt, I was six months pregnant when Trump won, and I had not liked the rest of the world planned for him to win. I had planned to start Jolt, but I had thought I was going to have my baby and go on maternity leave. And the father of my child, my husband at the time, he's a dreamer so it very much hit home for us. And then when I was asked to run, I was recruited to run for US Senate. I was like, "oh my God, this is the worst." It was one of the worst times of my life because my husband and I were separating at that point. So I was really like a single mom at that point. And I mean, we were not even co-parenting, so just so people know, I was literally a single mom. And I just went on a long walk by myself and I said, "you'll regret if you don't try. And this

may not be the right moment for you, but maybe it's a right moment in Texas history for a progressive Latina to run and inspire other people and run the policies and vision she believes for in this state." And so I decided to listen to my gut and my intuition and I ran.

Menendez: First time candidate. What was the biggest mistake you made?

Tzintzún Ramirez: Oh gosh, there's so many mistakes I made. I think not listening to my gut during the campaign. You have a lot of people coming at you that want to guide you and tell you how to do things. And I think that I did not listen to, there were certain instances that I did not listen to my gut.

Menendez: Can you give me an example, Cristina?

Tzintzún Ramirez: Yeah. So I made a joke on the campaign trail cause I was trying to get people to remember my name. So my last name is Sinsoon, indigenous name of the Purépecha people of Mexico, which is my mother's last name. And I would make a joke on the campaign trail that my name is Cristina Sinsoon Ramirez. And Sinsoon, some people don't know that I'm Mexican. It's actually more Mexican than any Garcia or Lopez because we were the only group not defeated by the Aztecs. So I come from good lineage and I'm ready to defeat John Cornyn. It would just be a way to get people to one, recognize my name was actually Mexican and two, to remember it.

And so some people said, "oh, I was being anti-Latino.", which is absurd. And so the people in my campaign got me to apologize and I wish I hadn't apologized, to be honest. I wish I had said I've done nothing but dedicate my life to every single Latino experience. And it's a joke, and I'm sorry if it offended anybody, but it's a joke. Of course, every Latino name and experience counts. So it was just a very simple thing. But there were also times when we wouldn't go to a certain part of the state that I wanted us to go to. There were just things that I knew I should have trusted my gut on. I wanted to fight more in the campaign publicly with other candidates about policy issues. And I wish I had done that as well more.

Menendez: One of the early jobs during my career was working at Rock the Vote, and I would often talk when I was at Rock the vote about the fact that I would only be young for a few more years, but I would be a millennial. I'd be a member of the millennial generation for my entire life, which I found to be helpful in terms of people disaggregating this idea of millennials and youth because you and I are millennials and I think you are, I think you're a cusper. And definitely by the numbers we use when we're talking about voter turnout. Not young anymore, right? We are-

Tzintzún Ramirez: I am young at heart forever Alicia, so are you. Go on.

Menendez: So am I. Thank you for that. Thank you for that affirmation. I find myself even on my side of things in the media struggling to make sure I understand what young people want and need and the ways in which that may be different than what I want and needed when I was a young person. Even just the way that there are different cross pressures now, housing, for example, is so expensive in this moment and you layer on student debt, you layer on car payments coming back. It's a lot. And so I wonder how you as a person who is in the youth empowerment space has stayed close to what it is that young people want.

Tzintzún Ramirez: Well, I think first off, it's just making sure you're talking to and engaging with a lot of young people. And I think the truth is this is one of the hardest times to be a

young person. Gosh, I can't imagine what it would have been like to grow up with the pressure of social media on top of everything else that young people have to deal with. To grow up with the full face and the consequences of the climate crisis that are hard to ignore for the future. To come into a place when income inequality is at its worst in our country's history. Those can feel like pretty bleak, insurmountable odds for a generation of young people. But I think what definitely has not changed from when you and I were young, and just people in general, is that people need to feel a sense of their own agency and power. And I think what's exciting about the work I get to do leading the country's largest youth voting rights organization is that young people now make up the largest, the most diverse and progressive voting bloc in our country's history. And they're turning out in record numbers and they are seeing what their collective power can do and achieve. And so I feel like if you had to sum up what I've done in my life, I would say the thing I've done in the gift I have is making people that are seen as not having a lot of power in our society, whether that's immigrant workers or young people or the Latino population or working class, is holding up a mirror to them and bringing them together to see just how damn powerful they are when they come together. And so that's what I think ultimately, no matter what young people face in any future generation is that's what people need to be able to shift and address the circumstances they're facing of their generation.

Menendez: Cristina, you have one of those sort of choose-your-own-adventures careers where things could go in a lot of different directions for you. I could just as easily see you doing what I do. I could see you running for office again. I could see you continuing in the nonprofit advocacy space. Do you have a sense for yourself of what is your best and highest calling?

Tzintzún Ramirez: I know that for me, making social changes like oxygen. When I was in high school, I was speaking of being young, if you've ever seen 10 Things I Hate About You, I was that girl only Mexican. So it meant I had very few friends. I was very self-righteous, didn't have a lot of friends. Luckily I've grown out of that. But I had a lot of pain, anxiety, sadness for injustice in the world and feeling like I didn't know how to address it. And so ever since I discovered, "oh, I can actually make change. I don't just have to be an observer of injustice in the world. I can be a person that helps shape different responses to it." That has made me know that I have to do this work to feel okay in a world where we do face a climate crisis, where we do face so much injustice. And very deeply believing that yes, the arc of history is long as the saying goes and it bends towards justice, but we have to be the ones to bend it. At this moment in my life, I know that I get to have a huge impact leading next Gen. Last election, we connected with one in nine of the young voters that turned out across the country. And so that's a huge impact I get to have. I don't know where I'll be in a few years from now, but I know that it will always be in the realm of doing social change work because it's the only way I feel like I can exist in the world that we exist in.

Menendez: Cristina, what did I miss?

Tzintzún Ramirez: One of the things I think about is just the future of this country and Latino power, right? One in four American children are now Latinos. And so I really feel like we're at this moment when I think about the future of the country that is so Latino and yet we don't have the full cultural recognition that we deserve in media and representation. We definitely don't have the political power that we deserve in this country. And we don't have the level of investment in our communities and in our

children. So I think that we have a real moment over the next 20, 30 years as a community to organize and shift how power institutions, whether they are cultural media institutions, government institutions, corporate institutions, respond not only to our numbers, but our real desire for equality as a community. And the last thing I would say about that is, especially as Latina mamas, I think we have a lot to instill in our children. And it is never lost on me that one of the great things I appreciate about, especially like Mexican culture, is our great humility. If you go to a village, like people are so humble, so sweet, so loving, so caring, and at that same time, sometimes we are humble to a detriment. And people have asked me, how could I go stand in these rooms with these, when I was like twenty-something, with these big Republican business owners or these Republican legislators and stand up for people that were so vehemently denied their rights. And it was because I was half white and it was because I grew up and I knew what other people were eating in the other room and what they got and what the other people didn't get. That I think is sometimes not lost on me. So I guess I challenge us to, yes, celebrate our culture and some of the things that are very special to us. I do love our humility, but to not be humble to a detriment where we do not demand what we fully deserve.

Menendez: What a perfect note to go out on Cristina. Thank you so much for doing this.

Tzintzún Ramirez: Thanks so much. I really appreciate it and for making the space for Latina voices to be heard.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola at latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com slash shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Good Pods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Cristina Tzintzún Ramirez Wants Latinas to Be Less Humble and More Demanding." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios, January 29, 2024. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by

