

Interviewer: Please state your name, title, and affiliation.

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Valerie Jane Martinez-Ebers. I am a university research professor, university distinguished research professor, and I was the former director of the Latino and Mexican American Studies Program at the University of North Texas, but unfortunately that program has been canceled because of Texas politics.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a bit about your personal background, specifically where you are from and what was your home or family life like for you growing up?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: I'm actually not from anywhere because I'm an army brat. I was born in Fort Riley, Kansas. My dad was in the army and we moved regularly until I went to college at the University of North Texas. So I've actually lived in Texas most of my life, but I didn't move there until I was 17.

Interviewer: And how were you introduced to the field of political science?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: By default, totally by default. My undergraduate degree is in teaching and my teaching fields were history and political science. And I thought I was gonna be a teacher. And then one of my professors in public administration, she was the only woman, she said, "You should get a master's in public administration." So I did that. And then I was engaged. My husband was in political science and he went to Ohio State University. And I applied in public administration and I didn't get in, which kind of surprised me. I thought I had done pretty well. And when I went to Ohio State to the public administration department, they complimented me on my English. And I was like, "I wish I'd spoke something other than English, thank you very much." And he was in political science. So I was there and I just went over and I had already a teaching field in political science, even though I was a MPA student. And I went for the first semester, they just let me in and then I did well and they put me in the program. And so really it was by default. Public administration didn't want me. I think the situation was I had some great professors at the University of North Texas. And one of my recommendations said she added La Familia to the classroom. So I think they imagined me as a first generation Mexican, Mexican-American student and they didn't think I would feel right or fit in. Like I said, when he said to me, "Your English," complimented me. He said, "Your English is very good." And I was just like, if anything, I always felt bad that I didn't speak Spanish. I speak a little but not very well. And it was like, "Well, it's the only language I speak." "I'm glad." So that's my story by default. And it ended up being just right.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a bit more about graduate school and your graduate school experience?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Well, remember I went, I'm old. I will be 70 in July. So when I was at Ohio State, it was a big program, but there were no students of color except for Cindy Callender and Alex. And I forgotten his name because he passed away early and he's been gone — and myself. So there were three of us of color. There were 63 students who were funded and there was just us. So it was a little bit hard. And the fact of the matter is, I'm not sure I would have even stayed in the program, but after the — it's a quarter system. In the third quarter, Jewel Prestage came to talk, right? Because she was the first, the very first. And so she's giving her speech and she's talking about what it was like to go to graduate school. And we were in this auditorium and I was up the back and I started crying because she was saying things that I experienced, that I was experiencing right then. And it was really a lovely woman. I never even spoke to her, right? I was just there. And then I went back and — like, this was before email, right? So like a week later, I got a letter written in long hand telling me that, you know, basically that she had seen me. She noticed that I was upset. She had talked to the graduate advisor and they'd given her the background because I was there kind of on probation. And I hadn't been told that I got fully funded yet. She just told me to stick it out. And I did.

Interviewer: That's so wonderful to hear.

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: She's a wonderful person.

Interviewer: You had mentioned this earlier, but were you a first generation scholar?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Yes and no. Both of my parents had gone to college for two years and they dropped out because my mom got pregnant, right? And so it was interesting. My dad never finished, he has two years, but my mom and I went and got our bachelor's degree together at the University of North Texas. We actually took classes together. So I don't think that's first generation, but it was pretty cool. We both graduated on the same day with our bachelor's degrees.

Interviewer: Now you mentioned Dr. Jewel Prestage. Did you have any other mentors along the way that made an impression on you?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: We had great mentors at Ohio State. And the first thing that I would mention is they were all white men, but for whatever reason, they took me under their wing. Randall Ripley, Augie Clauson, Samuel Patterson — and Samuel Patterson, we call Pat, was the APSR editor. So it's kind of neat too, because I got to be the APSR intern. I guess it was the end of my second year, third quarter. And then of course later I got to be the APSR editor. So it was like, started, kind of, was good. Yeah, so I had actually great mentors. They were very kind to me. They didn't know anything that was going on with me, but Patterson, Samuel Patterson — Pat had worked with Jewel Prestage at Iowa before she moved to Prairie View A&M. And apparently, again, I think she's the one who talked to them, but he really watched over me.

Interviewer: How would you characterize the political and social environment in the US while you were in graduate school?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Interesting. The political and social environment was — I think I'm more aware of what's going on, I guess, in academia at that time than I was in the politics of the day, except for the fact that I was at Ohio State when Jesse Jackson ran for president. So I got to go to his rallies and whatnot. So to me, it was a very exciting time. And that's about all I remember, is that I was part of the Jesse Jackson group of students there at Ohio State. Yeah, we were sad, but we were also very idealistic.

Interviewer: We were sad that he didn't make it, right?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: We were very idealistic at that time.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a bit more about your research trajectory? So what was your dissertation topic? What is your current main area of focus?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: My dissertation was senior citizens as an emerging force in American politics. And the reason I chose that was my mentors were all old white men. And they were very interested in it, and they didn't know a lot about it. And I said, "I can look this up." And so that's what my dissertation was about. And of course, my research has evolved, and I focus on the political behavior of racial and ethnic minorities, marginalized groups in general. And I have no formal training in it. Never took a class. It's all self-taught.

Interviewer: That's incredible.

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: It's very different now than when I went to school. Again, an enormous graduate program, only three people of color, no courses on racial and ethnic politics, because there wasn't anybody to teach them. I took courses from women, and there wasn't — that I recall — but one women in politics course. And it was a comparative course taught by Goldie Shabad, and I took that. And that was the only exposure I had formally to, if you want to call it, marginalized groups, because of course women were marginalized quite a bit then. But nothing in racial, ethnic politics. I just read and studied, because that was what I was interested in.

Interviewer: So we're going to shift gears a little bit. What does being a political scientist of color mean to you?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: It's changed over the years. For many years, I felt like — of course, I had imposter syndrome, big time. And it was as much being a woman as it was being a woman of color. Because back then, I would go into rooms and I would be the only woman. Even when we formed the Latino caucus, there were — well, I know exactly — there were 24 people in the room. There were three women. And when they talked about wanting to form a caucus, the other two women left. I was the only woman in the room. So I think I was more aware of my gender than I was my being Latina. I would go to conferences and I like bright colors. I tend to wear bright colors. And normally I wear dresses, I don't wear suits. I thought for this, I'd wear a suit. But I would go down the elevator at the Midwestern and I would have on pink. And all you would see is gray and maybe navy. And they would all be in suits. And I'd be in a dress. So it was actually more being a woman — that is what it was like then. Then we went into this period where we were in the Latino caucus. And I'll confess to you, I was part of perestroika, if you know what that is. That was kind of the rebellion among political scientists to diversify the leadership of APSA — not by a lot of ways. Women, racial ethnic minorities, and also qualitative research. So at that point then, I ended up being the first president of the Latino caucus. And at that point is when I really became aware of being a person of color and that their eyes were on me. And I still feel that way. So maybe I'm going back to imposter syndrome, because if I mess up this new position — some people want me to be — they'll never let it, I feel like they may never pick a Latino again. So I'm very much aware of being both a woman and being Hispanic.

Interviewer: Now you've been touching on this already quite a bit, and you mentioned Dr. Prestage's impact on you while you were in graduate school. So can you tell us a bit more about what challenges, if any, you have faced throughout your career, either due to your race, gender, or your chosen field of study?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Marginalized — and they did not — they underestimated me. That's the word to say. Marginalized and underestimated me. My first job was at my undergraduate alma mater, the University of North Texas. And I was openly an affirmative action hire. I mean, that's what they called me in front of everybody, because that was just the way you did it back then.

And when they hired me, normally they hire you in a field like comparative politics, American politics. Public administration was in political science at that time. They just hired me, and I said, well, what am I in? Well, you can be in whatever you want, maybe you should be in — and then they put me in a group that had public administrators that were all again white men. But it was very unusual, because the way they always counted me was the affirmative action hire. So again, that's why I think one of the reasons I had imposter syndrome so bad, because they were open about that we — basically we had to hire you.

Interviewer: That must have been very difficult.

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: It was difficult. And again, that made me marginalized. I wasn't even really in a group, because I wasn't in public administration anymore. That was my master's degree. I had a PhD in political science and I studied political behavior, American political behavior, but they put me in public administration. The public administration department split off from political science and they were like — they were assuming I was gonna go with public administration. And I was like, no, I'm a political scientist. They just — they underestimated my ability to make my own decisions. And it's been that way. And again, marginalized to a great degree, that they would talk about me as an affirmative action hire in front of my face.

Interviewer: In your view, what is necessary in order to further diversify the discipline and make it more equitable and welcoming to scholars of color in the profession?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Well, first of all, I have to congratulate APSA, because I think — I don't care what anybody else says — that after perestroika, there has been great progress. Now, I think we still have a long ways to go, but it's working. And doing the things we do, just maybe a little bit more and modified, because I think that the problem of scholars of color is not static. It also kind of changes with the situation. I live in Texas. We're a red state, right? DEI is gone. Any kind of programs in racial and ethnic studies — not just politics, but everything — is gone. And for whatever reason, scholars of color, we tend to like to study other people of color. And so that puts all of these people in very precarious positions. I think they're gonna start — well, I know they're gonna start — losing their jobs in Texas, and I suspect they've already lost jobs in Florida, maybe in Iowa. And so if anything, what APSA and WPSA could do is we need to respond to the faculty who are gonna lose their jobs. My idea is it's gotta be fairly rapid too, because when they let these people go, they don't have the opportunity.

Interviewer: Like when you don't get tenure, you get to stay for a year, right?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: When they end your job, you're gone. And so we have got to formulate some sort of program that has a rapid response, particularly for people who study in the areas — not just race and ethnicity, but gender and sexuality. I mean, those people are greatly at risk of their jobs. So we need to think of something, some way we can place those people.

Interviewer: And in addition to the existing diversity, equity, and inclusion programming, what is your advice to associations like the APSA or WPSA on how best to support scholars of color in the profession as they approach milestones in their career?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Yes, that's wonderful, that was a great question. I thought about that one a lot, in terms of — you're talking about milestones, finishing their PhD. And of course we do give an award for the best dissertation, and the sections do a pretty good job recognizing this. If anything, the publicity could always be increased. I know we spotlight people. Maybe we need to take pictures of everybody who graduated or got their PhD, put them on the front of PS. Maybe rather than one spotlight per year — or excuse me, per PS — we always have a spotlight that has these major milestones for them. And again, it goes back to my idea of a rapid response. Maybe — we already have a good mentoring system, I know you match a mentor with a student. My experience at UNT is it takes more than one mentor. One of the things which I strongly believe in is: you don't agonize, you organize. We need more groups — maybe a la colectiva — where we have five or six faculty members per younger, junior faculty member who needs assistance, and have recommendation letters ready to go, and their social networks and the people they know, to get the word out about these important milestones. Promotion and tenure is a big deal, and lots of times, particularly faculty of color may be hesitant to make the contacts for people they would like letters written for them. We can help with those sorts of things. There's a lot of us who write promotion and tenure letters. I do them as much as I can, but I only do them when people ask me. We could make lists of faculty in the areas of their expertise who would be willing to write letters for promotion and for tenure, various things like that. I have ideas, they're not clearly formulated, but that's what I think right now — being able to respond quickly and with more public relations coverage of their major achievements. Does that make sense?

Interviewer: It does, thank you. Shifting gears again — you have held a number of leadership positions in the profession, including as former vice president of the APSA, former president of the WPSA, and now president-elect of the APSA. So what, in your view, makes a good leader?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Listening — listening to people. You gotta listen first before you can make decisions. And then after you listen, it's nice to get everybody's opinion, but then you've gotta be bold. After you listen, you have to be bold. And again, don't agonize, organize. And it could be creating a new organization, like the Latino Caucus — I think how I got these leadership positions was being in that room where it happened, and we formed the organization. And then I was there when we formed REP. So you just gotta be bold. But first, you have to

listen to what everybody wants and be sure you get their opinions before you go off and say what you think you're gonna do.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a bit more about your experience with the formation of the Latino Caucus, as well as the Race, Ethnicity, and Politics section?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Well, fortunately for the Race, Ethnicity, and Politics section, we had some really strong leaders, so all I basically was, was there. Tony and Tony were the two instigators, and I was just like, yes, let's do this. But with the Latino Caucus, it was very different. We had a status committee, and many people in the room — again, men — they were very cynical about the APSA. They didn't think the APSA would respond or do anything. And I think they were tired. I think they fought a long time to get their status committee and they were just worn out. So we decided that we needed to have an organization, and we needed bylaws, and we needed leaders. And there were common experiences among all of us, that we didn't feel that we were part of the APSA like we wanted to be. And so Tony Affigne missed that meeting, but I happened to be there, and I said, well, we need an organization. We need to organize, don't agonize. Let's form one. And there was John Bredding, Manny Avalos — Luis got there late, but he was there — John Garcia was there, and me. And I think that was us. And John Bredding and Manny Avalos and I, we wrote up the bylaws for the Latino Caucus. And then we had our first meeting. Of course, back then, all we had was a listserv to communicate with one another. And it was like, well, who's gonna lead it? And nobody would. And that was why I said, okay, I'll do it. I mean, nobody would. And so that's when you gotta be bold. And that's how it happened. And I think I've been the president of the Latino Caucus twice, and it's kind of interesting — I was the first, and I was the twentieth. So I've been involved with them for a very long time.

Interviewer: That's phenomenal.

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: This happens when you're old.

Interviewer: As you reflect over all those years, do you have any reflections you want to share with us regarding all of the organizing, the impact on Latino scholars in the profession, as you've gone through this work?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: One of the things that I wish I had done is document things. Having information in a paper trail keeps greater continuity, and I think one of the things that APSA is stronger at is that they do that. The REP section as well as the Latino Caucus — John Bredding, who hasn't been in APSA since I can remember, is still the keeper of the bylaws. And we need — we haven't done documentation. That's important. Data collection — here we are trained to

collect data on political behavior, right? But we don't keep good records on our own actions. We have websites where we try to list previous leaders and whatnot, but unless you put them down right away, it's amazing how these things get forgotten. So yeah — document everything you do, write it down. It's much easier now that we have smartphones and Zoom that automatically make transcripts of meetings and communications. When you rely on one person, the secretary, to take notes, it's not reliable. So: documentation of everything.

Interviewer: Can you tell us about your experience with the APSA or WPSA conferences over the years?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Well, it used to be that the APSA was not comfortable for me, until we formed our organization, the Latino Caucus. And we started having more joint — I guess, social events — as a group. And then with other, likewise marginalized, groups. I mean, the Latino Caucus was, I hope, very instrumental in even getting a status committee for Asian Americans. I know I was on the executive council when that happened, and I stood up and was the one who made the presentation to make the argument for them. So then, when they formed APAC, we started doing things with them. And so now we have, I think, a community at APSA, which is wonderful. At the same time — and this has happened at the WPSA too — I don't want us to be in silos. One of the things that I have to keep remembering is: we are mainstream political science. What we study is as important, and part of what everybody else who's not in our group is studying. And so we've gotta get out of our silos. Now that we're more comfortable at the APSA, we need to get out more and go to panels that aren't just REP panels or Latino politics panels. We have to show up at the other things, and I wish we did more of that. That's what I wish we would do. And the WPSA — it's the same thing. We need to get out and go to more things, more communication.

Interviewer: And do you have any advice for junior scholars coming up in the profession? Or, what do you know now that you wish you knew as a graduate student?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: Imposter syndrome is what holds a lot of scholars of color back. One of the first things that I learned when I was an APSR intern — we did the research for Pat about who publishes in APSR — and you know the variable that explains the most? How many times you submit. So you can't be an imposter — you have to submit your papers even if you don't think they're ready. And I think that scholars of color, we have a tendency — we are very tough on ourselves. We hold ourselves to high standards and we're perfectionists. Send it out, just send it. I know graduate students who are not of color, who go to more prestigious schools, they send every graduate paper they write for every seminar, and they'll send it to APSR. That's where they start. And among us, it's like we'll go around the room: who has submitted to the APSR? And nobody will — there'll be silence. I tried to increase the number of publications in REP when I was the editor — I was a co-editor, right? You can't publish them if they're not submitted. So submit your papers. Do not be as hard on yourself. Let the reviewers help you fix your papers.

Interviewer: That's very good advice. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us today?

Valerie Martinez-Ebers: I don't think so, except for — like I said — if anybody criticizes the APSA, I would defend it.