

Expand options for N.Y. Latino judges

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Mark Lennihan/AP Photo

The New York State Supreme Court Building, originally known as the New York County Courthouse located at 60 Centre Street on Foley Square.

The legitimacy of government institutions is dependent upon a confluence of factors designed to assure the public's trust and confidence that government is representative of and working for all of its citizens.

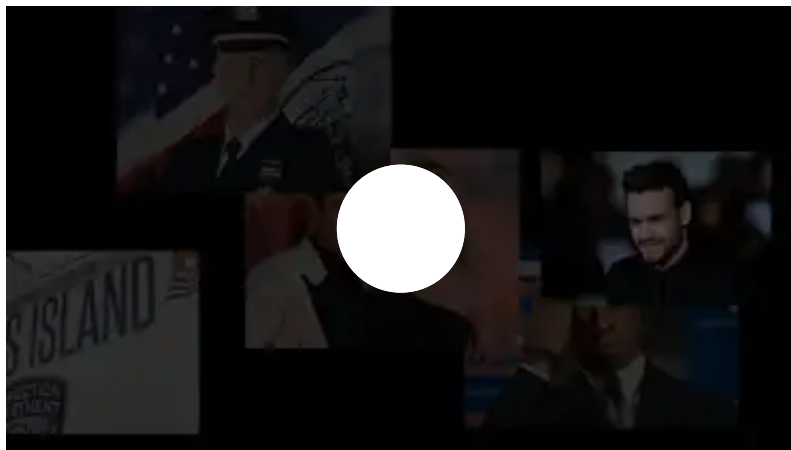
As [Hispanic Heritage Month](#) came to a close this week, this is an opportune moment to highlight both the impact Latinos have had on the administration of justice and their continuing underrepresentation among the New York State judiciary. In my opinion, it is uniquely important that the state judiciary not only strive to be "inclusive" of its entire population, but lead on this most important issue.

According to the [2020 United States census](#), 19.5% of New Yorkers are of Latino heritage. Between 2010 and 2020, 64.5% of the increase of the state's population was attributed to people identified as Latino.

However, the [New York State Latino Judges Association](#) reported that in October 2020 Latinos made up only 7.45% of the state's 1,275 judiciary members. Currently, the Office of Court Administration reports a slight improvement in Latino judicial representation with Latinos comprising 8.7% of the judiciary, a modest increase. This improvement, albeit small, is a reminder that the faithful use of data identifying inclusion concerns is a crucial component in examining and curing systemic exclusion from all institutions, including the judiciary.

In 2023, New York Chief Judge Rowan Wilson appointed the first justice of Latino descent to lead the state courts as its [chief administrative judge, Joseph Zayas](#). This well-considered appointment provides the court system with a justice who has extensive court experience, and gives all New Yorkers visible, tangible proof that a justice of Latino descent can lead our trial courts with excellence.

Further, Gov. Hochul has demonstrated her commitment to providing New Yorkers with an outstanding and inclusive judiciary. Since 2022, the governor has appointed the first Latina to serve as a judge on the Court of Claims in western New York, the first Latino justice to serve on the Appellate Division, Third Department, and the first female justices of Dominican heritage to serve the Appellate Division, in both the First and Second Departments. Each of these jurists are exemplary professionals worthy of the faith and trust the governor has placed in them.



While the ratio of Latino jurists has incrementally improved in the last four years, there are areas that require additional focus and attention. For example, according to OCA, there are 105 administrative and supervisory judicial positions throughout the statewide court system. A Latina judge has been appointed to serve in only four of those 105 positions.

In western New York, there has never been a judge of Latino heritage elected to the state Supreme Court, which serves as a primary catalyst for leadership opportunities in the statewide court system. This unfortunate circumstance exists notwithstanding the cities of Rochester and Buffalo having robust, mature Latino communities.

Downstate underrepresentation of Latinos on the bench stands out most glaringly in Manhattan, where only one Latino has been nominated and elected to the state Supreme Court in the past decade. This is a particularly curious circumstance given New York's most well established Latino communities exist in Manhattan.

It cannot be seriously argued that Manhattan lacks a large reservoir of talented Latino lawyers ready, willing and able to serve. There is clearly a disconnect and an apparent disinclination on the part of

those in local leadership to move the needle in Manhattan to identify and support well-qualified attorneys of Latino descent for elected office on its state Supreme Court, a blight on Manhattan's long-standing reputation as a bastion of inclusivity and openness.

Throughout Hispanic Heritage Month New Yorkers have heard countless civic leaders profess their respect and admiration for the Latino community. For some, words supporting inclusion have been followed by consequential action. For others, words have been little more than aspirational rhetoric spoken as an applause line with little interest in substantive results. To quote Pope Francis, "There is no inclusion if it remains a slogan, a formula to be used in politically correct speeches, a flag."

While Latinos have been making inroads into the state judicial system, the march toward appropriate representation has been slow, long and hard. This past month highlighting Hispanic heritage has reminded us of the road ahead and the power of people of good faith and intention to get the job done. The best days for New Yorkers are before us. Let us all strive to get there together.

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