

Leaders of the Pack

HISPANIC CHIEF JUSTICES LEAD THE WAY.

WRITTEN BY DORI CONTRERAS

Service as a chief justice on an appellate court comes with special responsibilities and challenges. In addition to handling a share of the court's docket, chief justices manage the court's financial matters and day-to-day administration, including management of staff.

It was my honor to be elected as the first Latina chief justice for the 13th Court of Appeals. At the time of my election in 2018, I was the second Latina to be elected chief justice in Texas.

I first joined the court as an associate justice in 2003 and was reelected in 2008 and 2014. With my addition to the six-member court, the 13th Court of Appeals became the first all-Hispanic intermediate appellate court in the country. I am proud of my service with many groups but it's worth noting two.

The 14 Texas chief justices form the Council of Chief Justices. Every other year, the council selects a chair who serves as its representative and spokesperson. In 2022, I was honored to be elected the first Hispanic chair. Intermediate appellate courts had been underfunded for many years. Therefore, the council's top priority in the 2023 legislative session was to obtain additional funding to enable the courts to pay competitive salaries to staff. Through hard work and thoughtful collaboration, we were successful in doing so.

I also am on the leadership track for the Council of Chief Judges for the State Courts of Appeal. CCJSCA's unofficial motto is "once a chief, always a chief," which means that despite my impending retirement, I will continue moving up the ladder to eventually become CCJSCA's first Latina president. A primary reason I sought the office of chief justice was to serve as an example to the younger Hispanic generation, who need to see people they can relate to in leadership positions at all levels. I am proud of the service I have provided and hope I have inspired others along the way.

To date, there have been seven Hispanic chief justices in Texas. These pioneering individuals have inspired me and countless others. I want to tell you a bit about each of them, because their stories are worth sharing.

CARLOS C. CADENA was the first Hispanic to serve as a chief justice in Texas. Cadena's service on the 4th Court of Appeals began in 1965, when Gov. John Connally appointed him to the position. In 1977, Gov. Dolph Briscoe appointed Cadena as the chief justice. Cadena retired from the court in 1990.

Cadena received his law degree from the University of Texas School of Law in 1940. He worked as an assistant city attorney in San Antonio before World War II interrupted his legal career. Cadena also taught constitutional law at St. Mary's University School of Law prior to and after his judicial service. Cadena earned a reputation as a challenging and unconventional professor and later said that he preferred teaching to practicing law, because "when I was teaching, nobody could reverse me."

Significantly, Cadena was counsel in several major civil rights cases, including the landmark case of *Hernandez v. Texas*. He and his co-counsel, Gus Garcia, were the first Mexican American attorneys to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Cadena received many state and national awards during his more than 50 years of legal practice. The premier student society of St. Mary's School of Law is the Carlos Cadena Law Student Dining Society, and one of the University of Texas School of Law's societies is also named in his honor as is a courthouse in San Antonio. Cadena died in 2001 at the age of 83.

ALMA L. LÓPEZ broke ground as the first Hispanic woman to serve on the 4th Court of Appeals when Gov. Ann Richards appointed her to the position in 1993. In 2002, she became the first Hispanic woman in the country to be elected chief justice of a state appellate court. Prior to her appointment to the court, she practiced family and immigration law for 25 years.

López was born in Laredo and grew up in San Antonio. She attended San Antonio College and then transferred to St. Mary's University, graduating with a BBA in 1965. She earned

her J.D. from St. Mary's University School of Law in 1968. In 2007, she was named Distinguished Law Graduate. She credits her father's involvement in politics with her interest in law at a young age.

Since 2008, López has been enjoying her retirement in Natalia.

RICHARD BARAJAS was appointed as a justice on the 8th District Court of Appeals by Gov. Richards in 1991, becoming the youngest appellate judge in the state, at age 38. In 1993, Richards appointed him chief justice. Barajas is a native of El Paso. He received a B.A. from Baylor University in 1974 and his J.D. from the Baylor School of Law in 1977.

After law school, Barajas was commissioned and served on active duty in the U.S. Naval Judge Advocate General's Corps. For his distinguished naval service, Barajas was awarded the Joint Service Commendation Medal, the Navy & Marine Corps Commendation Medal, and the Humanitarian Service Medal, among other awards.

Barajas retired from judicial service in August 2006 and moved into academia at his alma mater, Cathedral High School. He served as the founding director of the Center for Advanced Studies and as a mentor to 59 Gates Millennium Scholars.

He served on the board of the National Organization for Victims Assistance. A nationally recognized lecturer on the proper balancing of the constitutional rights between the criminal defendant and the intended victim, Barajas was honored by former President George H.W. Bush at a White House ceremony as a national recipient of the National Crime Victim Rights Award.

ROGELIO "ROY" VALDEZ, my predecessor in office, was elected chief justice of the 13th Court of Appeals in 2000 and was reelected in 2006 and in 2012. Valdez was the first Hispanic to serve as chief justice of the 13th Court.

Valdez was born and raised in Raymondville. He graduated from Texas A&I University in Kingsville in 1976 (now known as Texas A&M University-Kingsville), and he received his J.D. from Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law in 1979. From 1980 to 1981, he served as an assistant district attorney in Cameron County. He was elected judge of the Cameron County Court at Law No. 1, a position he held from 1983 to 1986, after which he was elected district judge of the 357th District Court of Cameron and Willacy counties, where he served until 2000. While serving as district judge, Valdez also served as local presiding judge of district courts for Cameron and Willacy counties from 1991 until 2000.

Valdez retired from the court of appeals in 2018 and has remained active as a visiting trial judge and a mediator.

REBECA C. MARTINEZ was first elected to the 4th Court of Appeals as an associate justice in 2012. She was reelected in 2018 and was elected chief justice in 2020.

Martinez graduated from Southern Methodist University in Dallas and Boston University School of Law in Boston.

Among numerous positions held in various organizations, Martinez is the immediate past chair of the State Bar of Texas Judicial Section.

Some of her awards include the prestigious Faculty Award from Boston University School of Law in Boston, where she currently serves on the Law School Dean's Advisory Board. Martinez is the recipient of the 2023 American Judges Association Harold V. Froehlich Award for Judicial Courage and the 2021 Judge of the Year presented by the State Bar of Texas Hispanic Issues Section.

YVONNE T. RODRIGUEZ was elected chief justice of the 8th Court of Appeals in 2020, becoming the 16th chief justice of that court and the first Latina to serve in the role. Rodriguez was first elected as an associate justice in 2012, and she previously served as judge of El Paso County Probate Court No. 1. She was the first Hispanic female probate judge in Texas. She graduated from the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor with a B.A. in psychology, and she obtained her law degree from Baylor Law School.

Rodriguez resigned in 2023 and is currently serving as a senior judge.

MARIA SALAS-MENDOZA, who has served as judge of the 120th Judicial District Court in El Paso since 2007, will be the newest Hispanic chief justice.¹ Salas-Mendoza is running unopposed this November and will become chief justice of the 8th Court of Appeals on January 1, 2025.

After graduating from Harvard University, Salas-Mendoza earned her law degree from UCLA School of Law. Salas-Mendoza has served on the Supreme Court Advisory Committee and on the councils of the State Bar of Texas Judicial, Hispanic Issues, and Women and the Law sections.

Salas-Mendoza is also a founding member and immediate past president of Texas Latinx Judges, a nonpartisan, nonprofit professional association. I will proudly succeed her and serve as president in 2024-2025.

Each of these men and women—the Hispanic chief justices of Texas—have contributed to the jurisprudence of our state. Their unique stories reflect determination, perseverance, and achievement at the highest level of the law. Every day, I am proud to continue in their footsteps. **TBJ**

NOTES

1. My successor will also be Hispanic; however, the race is contested between Justices Gina Benavides and Jaime Tijerina.



DORI CONTRERAS

is the chief justice of the 13th Court of Appeals and was raised in Pharr. She graduated from the University of Texas with a BBA in accounting in 1980 and obtained her J.D. from the University of Houston Law Center in 1990, licensed that same year. Throughout her career, Contreras has been recognized for her contributions to many professional and community organizations.