



Politics

Historic Firsts: Arizona State Rep. Lorena Austin on LGBTQ+ Representation, Dress Codes, More

"A lot of people are looking for leaders that can relate to them and understand where they're coming from."



BY **LEXI MCMNAMIN**

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“If you know anything about Arizona – I’m sure you might have heard a little bit – we like to keep it interesting over here,” newly elected Democratic state representative Lorena Austin says with a laugh, just weeks into their first term. “We’re in the news a lot.” No kidding: Maricopa County was the biggest headline of the 2020 election, and the 2022 face-off between Katie Hobbs and Kari Lake kept politicians fixated for weeks.

In November, during that same election cycle, Austin was **elected to represent a district** that includes West Mesa and parts of Tempe, Arizona. Upon winning that race, Austin, who uses she/they/ella pronouns, became the first Chicana gender-nonconforming state legislator in the country. Of what they’ve seen so far, Austin admits, “I honestly thought there’d be a lot more *chancla* throwing in the beginning, but I haven’t seen that.” Instead, it’s been a busy time getting straight to work.

Austin speaks to *Teen Vogue* about her journey, including dropping out of community college five times, graduating on the dean’s list over a decade later, and, in quick succession, becoming an elected official. With goals like fighting the housing crisis and increasing access to education, Austin is most excited to redefine what a political powerhouse can look like.

*This piece is being published in coordination with **Sister District**, an organization working to build progressive power in state legislatures. Critical and life-altering policies, including abortion access, trans rights, voting rights, fair wages and conditions for working people and families are increasingly coming from often overlooked state legislatures rather than Washington, DC. Our Historic Firsts Series uplifts inspiring, historic firsts among recently elected state lawmakers, with a focus on women, people of color, young folks, LGBTQIA+ folks, and folks from nontraditional backgrounds.*

This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.

Teen Vogue: Tell me about your first few weeks in office. What were your expectations?

Lorena Austin: I didn't decide to run until late February and didn't file until March — it's just been such a wild learning curve. But I'm learning so much, more in four weeks than in years, more about different agencies and departments. Whenever I get impostor syndrome or think maybe I don't belong here — no, I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. I'm in a space and place where a lot of people like me who statistically shouldn't be there, are there. It's a very big responsibility. It's important.

TV: What has stood out to you the most so far?

LA: I'm already meeting with different groups and student organizations, and seeing the need for someone not like *me* — I don't like to surround myself, like, “Oh, me, and I'm doing these things,” but it is important for someone from this generation. I'm the first queer, Chicax gender-nonconforming legislator, I think, in the country.

I met with an organizer yesterday that said, “I grew up in LDS” — my district is seen as heavily conservative and more religious, we have a big Mormon [Latter Day Saints] community here — and they said, “Never in my lifetime would I think that I could see someone who's queer like me a legislator. That's just incredible.” I take that to heart, and I don't take that lightly.

Obviously, I will fight for all of the communities I'm a part of, but understanding that we have to recognize intersectionalities of people and how important that is, that's something that I want to promote more than anything.

TV: As you know, it's a really hard time to be an LGBTQ+ person in public right now, let alone in politics. Has it been a challenge to feel like your new position is as ready for you as you are for it?

LA: With **Missouri, when they talked about the blazer fiasco and the cardigans**, as someone who dresses nongender-conforming — I wear ties and suits to the floor, definitely not a dress or something more feminine — I was wondering if that was going to come up. Maybe in the Senate it would have, because that's where we see a lot of these bills come out of, especially anti-trans, anti-pronoun bills. So I was

waiting for it, but nothing materialized like that. I'm grateful for that, but I have been curious to see how me navigating these halls might cause some questions or concerns. *(Editor's note: In January, the Missouri State House of Representatives adopted a stricter dress code requiring jackets or cardigans for female lawmakers.)*

Our LGBTQ caucus just met. There's not very many of us. But I think it's great that we can even have that caucus and come together and talk about these things. What I think is very different, too, is the fact that while these bills have gotten attention, deservedly so, it's been nice, again, to have a **Democratic governor who has already said these bills are dead on arrival**. It's also really amazing to see young, queer legislators. Our minority leader is a queer man, and he's wonderful. I love that people know that we're there, advocating for them. I've got so many phone calls to be like, "I'm just so glad you're there." We need that visibility.

Oftentimes — and this is just my personal experience with people who are anti-our community, anti-queer anything, whatever that is or looks like — is they've never really met or had to have a relationship with someone that's just so *other* to them. They don't understand. Even at the doors campaigning: I know what I look like, I know I check off boxes for so many people, maybe in a negative way. I identify as she/they, I am brown. I'm, to a lot of people, assumably queer. I have a lip ring.

But if you're confident in who you are, that's something that once we started talking, they realized that I actually had experience in higher education, or I worked in our community, and I could empathize and relate to something they were going through. I'm a potential first-time homebuyer; I work multiple jobs, but I don't make enough to buy a half-a-million-dollar home in my neighborhood, which my family has called home for over a century. A lot of people are looking for leaders that can relate to them and understand where they're coming from: understand how much a dollar is being stretched to provide for their families, that things are just not very easy, they have concerns about water, about our schools.

I think that's been really telling. If you had told someone that a brown queer person was going to win a state race in Mesa, I don't think a lot of people would have believed you. I think that's a testament to what people are looking for now. They're not looking for these polished politicians that went to Ivy League schools and are attorneys.

I really wanted to redefine what a politician looks like, because I think it should be someone from your community that can relate and knows what's going on. That's what I tell people now who ask me, "What do I need to do to run for office?" You better know your community and be involved, or else you have no business running. I really believe that.

TV: Can you tell us a little about how you got here, about your educational path? I know you're passionate about community colleges and higher education access, broadly.

LA: I was socially advanced in high school. I was always in student government, but I felt like I wasn't smart and couldn't go to higher education because I didn't know math, and I didn't have a community there, so I dropped out five semesters in a row. I joke that I have the highest dropout rate of Mesa Community College.

Then I was like, "Well, okay, F this. I can't do it, so I'm gonna go be with my brother in St. Louis, [Missouri]. I stayed with him and really found myself and came out. Then in 2014, Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson.... Ferguson really ignited the Black Lives Matter movement, and all these social movements we've seen since then.

That prompted me to realize, I don't know how to constructively convey what I'm feeling, but I know something's not right, and I know I can do something more than what I'm doing for my life. I moved back [and ended up enrolling at Mesa Community College, and getting a job in student life and leadership there].

Education's really hard, especially at a community college, because — I hate saying "untraditional," but it's not the [same] at a four year. You are in constant movement: You have responsibilities outside of your schooling, you have a family, you have a job, you've got to pay rent, you don't get to live on campus and take part in those activities. [Being] in student life exposed me to all the resources. I ended up getting to study abroad and had a scholarship for that, in Mexico City, where my great-grandparents were from. I got involved in student government and then I became student body president.... I just really thrived in community college.

In society, we deem community colleges as this "can't hack it" space to go to if you're not able to go to university, but in fact, I had better professor-to-student ratios there,

and they were able to give me one-on-one attention, and that really helped. Then I got a full ride to Arizona State University and landed in another smaller place, which was really great, the **school of transborder studies**, a smaller college within the Liberal Arts and Sciences College. I felt at home for the first time in an educational setting. My professors look like me, they have the same skin color, and I never had to correct my name being pronounced.

I went from this college dropout to graduating number one in my class. I got the dean's medal and all the things you can think of.

TV: What other issues are priorities for your first year in office, in terms of what you can do as a state-level politician? Right now, questions of policing and prisons are at the national forefront, given Atlanta's "Cop City" and after police killings in Memphis and LA.

LA: Transparency is the biggest thing, especially around budgets. That's one of our biggest things that we do [in the legislature] is create this budget. So where's that money going? And if it's going towards [corrections] departments, for what? We're not interested in writing blank checks anymore.

I think a lot of us younger legislators that are coming in, we're products of **the SB 1070 movement**. Now we're old enough to run for office, we're educated, we've been involved in our community, we've been organizing, we've been active. There are some other really great legislators: **Analise Ortiz, Cesar Aguilar, Flavio Bravo, Oscar de los Santos**. I think we're coming to meet that task. Now that we're here, we want that transparency, because we have that seat at the table now. That's been the biggest conversation, which I think is important.

Obviously, immigration is a big thing too. We talk a lot about corrections and how important that is for funneling this pipeline, especially private prisons. Where's the accountability and transparency there? **Especially with [the Department of Corrections] here in Arizona**. Then the border — I mean, I got my degree in Transborder and Immigration Policy. Everything stems from corporations not wanting to pay fair wages, when you think about it. If you were to naturalize thousands and thousands of people, then you can't exploit them.

TV: You've also spoken to the media about the importance of protecting housing.

LA: Our caucus is putting a lot of housing bills forth, which is so needed.

It's so interesting how complicated it all is, especially with building affordable housing. It's so specific: It has to be near transportation, to have all these different amenities that go with it. In order to build more transportation we have to pass a transportation infrastructure bill, which is super important. It's all these things that layer upon each other.

I think what's good to note about this new caucus is we're really ensuring that we're working collaboratively and trying not to reinvent the wheel. We've been so much more communicative, especially as new ones come in, like "Hey, what are you working on? Awesome." Even if I had a similar idea, it's cool, run with it. That's the way I've always functioned. I don't care if I get the credit for it, I just need it to get done.

So some of the other players are working heavily on housing; I will be dropping a few housing initiatives of my own that have to do with creating adjacent dwellings on your property, specifically *not* for short-term rentals like Airbnb. **That's been a big problem here, not just in Arizona, but a lot of places.**

You can be evicted for marijuana usage [**in government-subsidized housing**] even though it's legal in the state. That becomes a problem, especially when for medical patients, cancer patients who use this type of resource for their health. Something I'm looking at is eliminating that law that would cause evictions for our community members. If we're gonna make [weed] legal in the state, we better make sure that we're not criminalizing people for it anymore. In the housing crisis that we're having in the state, it's imperative that we protect people in their homes.

TV: What have you already learned from this process?

LA: I'm an advocate for people in our community to start running for things, because I am so tired of people thinking that they can't do it or they don't belong in these spaces or places. I talked to a group of students for the governor's youth initiative this past weekend and [said], "I need you to understand that your life's gonna change and

it will take you a lot of places, and you might not end up where you want to be, but don't ever count yourself out from being in a space like this.”

TV: Anything you'd like to tell *Teen Vogue* readers?

LA: I want people to know — young people, especially — that they have every right to be here, and they have every right to utilize their voice. I think that's something that I'm seeing [already from Gen Z]. I'm so proud.

I love this younger generation. I think they're badass. They're kind, they're empathetic, they're unapologetic. I'm not going to change the world, I think they are. If I can provide a pathway for them and step back when that time comes, I'm more than happy to do that. They need to take the mantle and take us to a better place, and I think they will.

I really mean that, because I went to school with them. I graduated just a few years ago, when I was way older, you know, at least 10 years older than them, and I was just so impressed. They have access to so much information, they actually give a f*ck, and they're just... they're cool, man.

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