

MÉNDEZ, OLGA A. (1925–)

“A very poor, humble Puerto Rican woman with a sick baby was in anguish because she could not speak English; the clerk was treating her very badly. When I spoke for the woman there were tears of relief and gratitude in her eyes. My social conscience was raised. If I would have walked out, I would not be the Olga Méndez I am now.”

Olga Arán Méndez was the first Puerto Rican woman elected to a state legislature in the continental United States and the longest-serving Latina in New York state government. She represented the Thirtieth Senatorial District of New York State since 1978, more than a quarter of a century.

Born and raised in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, Méndez came to live in New York after graduating from the University of Puerto Rico. Involved in both educational and political issues, Méndez created the first Spanish branch of the League of Women Voters, was vice president of the Puerto Rican Association of Women Voters, and launched numerous national voter registration drives. In 1978 Méndez was elected state senator in a special election. She was reelected in twelve consecutive elections with equally impressive percentages. Devoted to advancing the Puerto Rican and Latino communities of New York, Méndez has received numerous awards for her contributions.