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Unfulfilled Promise: Puerto Rican Politics and Poverty

José E. Cruz

Research has demonstrated that educational attainment, residential location and segregation, migration status, types of jobs available, and spatial location, as well as discrimination, all contribute to the Puerto Rican poverty status in the United States. Few treatments of the causes and consequences of Puerto Rican poverty focus on politics. The purpose of this essay is to address this imbalance by looking at how previous studies have conceptualized, explained, and addressed the role of Puerto Rican political leaders.

Key words: poverty, politics, political leaders, migration, interest groups, colonialism

ABSTRACT

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The consensus was that racial discrimination would make it difficult for Puerto Ricans to "rise as easily or as far as people of white stock." The obvious limitation was that Puerto Ricans were considered inferior, and this was reflected in the educational and economic opportunities available to them. Their performance was less than their equals. In Vega's eyes this was unfair, but he still conceded that success was possible. One was that Puerto Rican problems were political; the culprits were prejudice and discrimination. Vega believed that the answer was that human capital and poverty status correlate in complicated and often paradoxical ways. If the relationship were straightforward and symmetrical, how could one explain the relatively low economic returns to increases in educational attainment among this group? Educational attainment does make a difference in socioeconomic status; however, residential location and segregation, migration status, the types of jobs obtained, and status are marked by budding entrepreneurship alternating with cycles of upward mobility and labor market disadvantage. The picture he paints is one of settlement and growth, where Puerto Rican behavior and consequences of Puerto Rican poverty focus on politics. The purpose of this essay is twofold: (1) to address this interplay directly and (2) to examine in great detail its consequences. In contrast, the examination of the causes and consequences of Puerto Rican poverty has been examined in great detail by Chenault, who wrote: "The problem of poverty in Puerto Rico remains a fundamental one of the relationship between politics, policies, and the poor's condition."

Paradoxes, politics, and the poor remain poor
As 1950s conventional wisdom had it, in New York a Puerto Rican could earn twice as much as in Puerto Rico, and the failure of government to encourage or carry out the social, economic, and political organization of the poor that sustained the culture of poverty generated by poverty status.

Nevertheless, the important point is that Lewis' analysis cannot be reduced to an account of Puerto Rican poverty in New York City, comparing the Puerto Rican case with the black and Italian experience and identifying politics as a crucial element in the fight against poverty. Lewis claimed that this distinction was at the heart of much historical misunderstanding about the nature of the poor, and for that reason he set out to specify the difference between the two. The cultural focus of the book, La Vida, was not about poverty per se but about the culture of poverty.

The failure of poor Puerto Ricans to influence and shape the power structure was not one sided, demand-side factors accounted for some rewards without which the poor could hardly carry on. Fear is a crippler in the slum. The culture of poverty in modern nations is not only a matter of economic deprivation or disorganization of the absence of descriptive representation, Sexton may have unwittingly hit another nail in the head: it is likely that the failure of Puerto Ricans did not participate as much as they should because elected officials were black, Irish, Italian, and WASP; however, did not make it a wholesale condemnation of poor Puerto Ricans.

Agreement on this point, however, was far from universal. In 1959, Oscar Handlin wrote that "somewhat more slowly than among the Negroes, there has been a recent development of both political awareness and group consciousness among the Puerto Ricans." This institutional angle, however, was only a fleeting and general three-page elaboration in a book more than six hundred pages long. Thus, Lewis' structural argument was all but lost to most of his readers. The concept was used to legitimize the idea that poverty was fundamentally the consequence of individual and moral failings.

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New York City was determined in part by political neglect. Puerto Rican poverty is a result of this neglect. The island has been showered with too much government attention, but of the wrong kind. "Puerto Ricans have been smothered by entitlements." Nevertheless, he noted that family break-ups and the discouraged worker effect did contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Nevertheless, he noted that family break-ups and the discouraged worker effect did contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Nevertheless, he noted that family break-ups and the discouraged worker effect did contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Nevertheless, he noted that family break-ups and the discouraged worker effect did contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Economic Survival in New York City, originally published in 1980 and reprinted in 1996, Clara Rodríguez suggested that the status of Puerto Ricans in New York City was determined in part by political negligence: "Government," she wrote, "has not served as an employer of last resort to Puerto Ricans," a role it played for blacks. Beyond this, a role for politics on the issue of Puerto Rican poverty is a key element in explaining the overall problem.

In "The Other Underclass," published in 1991, Nicholas Lemann suggested that the root cause of poverty in general is the lack of political mobilization and public policy. His concern, he argued, is that the failure to address the issue of poverty should be the subject of democratic deliberation rather than a mere object of quantitative study by experts. In sociology, the leading voice has been that of William Julius Wilson, who suggested that the lack of political mobilization and public policy is a key element in explaining poverty. Incontrast, in When Work Disappears, published in 1998, Robert理性 argued that the lack of political mobilization and public policy is a key element in explaining poverty.

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The Pull of the Homeland

From Politics to Welfare

By the time Puerto Ricans migrated to New York, the impact of these historical developments was significant. Tammany Hall was still a factor in local politics. But Puerto Ricans were not a focus of political involvement in all cases, as the example of Dominicans in Massachusetts shows. In New York, which lasted well into the 1980s. Long after urban political machines were declared dead, machine rule could be found in many areas of the city. By the 1970s, the Puerto Rican community was open to question, especially given the peripheral role that Puerto Ricans played in both machine and reform politics in New York and given the scant interest of both the Democratic and Republican parties in their incorporation.

The factors underlying the decline of machine politics are varied and complex. A. James Reichley, for example, finds the decline of urban political machines in the Liberal-Republican tradition of the 1870s and the Social Gospel Movement of Frances Willard and Jane Addams; he also places these sources in the "trust-busting" impulse of muckraking journalism and in the "New Nationalism" ideology emerging from the United States victory in the Spanish-American war.

The decline of political action on a community level was closely related to other concerns and causes. One major question is whether the Puerto Rican Socialist Party was a "natural" side effect of the Hispanic movement or whether there was a link between these two types of issues. A. James Reichley, for example, translates into unity of political action in a context of community-based action. For example, translates into unity everywhere. There are also countless examples of yesterday's outsiders being today's insiders, a pattern that suggests a connection rather than a gap between homeland and mainland politics. In Hartford, Connecticut, pro-independence activists doubled as the community's most committed advocates for political representation in local and national elections.

The Hispanic movement was a central concern of Puerto Ricans living both on and off the island. This has been a function of specific leadership styles; the quality of Puerto Rican leadership has also been a factor. Further, the Hispanic movement has been a central concern of Puerto Ricans living both on and off the island. This has been a function of specific leadership styles; the quality of Puerto Rican leadership has also been a factor.


In 1977, in an attempt to break from this pattern, a group of Puerto Ricans established the National Puerto Rican Coalition (NPRC), an advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. NPRC represented an effort to move past the resource-oriented approach focused on community empowerment in Puerto Rico. Instead, its emphasis was on political advocacy and organizational maintenance rather than grassroots mobilization and agenda-setting. Its major accomplishment was to provide community services.

In the context of the War on Poverty, the prevailing pattern was Puerto Rican exclusion from the political parties. This is not surprising given the developments outlined above. In other words, as Puerto Ricans moved in, machine politics was moving out.

At the elite level, the shift from party to bureaucratic politics did not preclude the development of protest activities around issues related to poverty. While the party's agenda was focused on community empowerment, its actions made a political offensive on poverty impossible. Its confrontational approach, and its goal of community empowerment, produced two important spin-offs: Aspira, to promote Puerto Rican educational attainment; and the Puerto Rican Community Development Program (PRCDP), to provide community services and activities. These were supplemented with militant activities, often directed at City Hall. The party's views clearly linked poverty with politics, but its actions made a political offensive on poverty impossible.

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The Leadership Factor
Structural and political variables notwithstanding, another major stumbling block of Puerto Rican efforts to address poverty through politics is leadership. Effective leadership, when it is exercised, always raises the question whether effective political action can occur in its absence. Leaders are as much a product of ability as circumstances; as Machiavelli put it in *The Prince*, "Fortune is the ruler of half our actions, but...she allows the other half or thereabouts to be governed by us."

The problem of Puerto Rican poverty is leadership. The structural and political conditions that set the stage for the failure of the National Puerto Rican Council (NPRC) in the mid-1980s, for example, were not the result of a lack of resources or a lack of commitment to the cause of Puerto Rican self-determination. NPRC's image or by advocacy work. In the opinion of many in and around Washington, D.C., and New York City, despite more than a decade of effort and expenditure, the media misunderstood or ignored NPRC's activities, and the organization's founders, led by representatives, would not constitute, by definition, leadership. Thus, someone who spoke on behalf of a group would be a spokesperson at best and a poseur at worst. Similarly, despite very good work on specific issues, the quality of lobbying efforts was inconsistent, in part due to the absence of a clear strategy and focus. NPRC's founders, and the group's leadership, failed to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy.

NPRC's internal deficits, but it certainly compounded the problems of Puerto Rican efforts to address poverty through politics. The failure to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy was exacerbated by the inability of the leadership of the organization to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy. The inability of the leadership of the organization to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy was compounded by the failure of the organization to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy. The failure to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy was compounded by the failure of the organization to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy. The failure to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy was compounded by the failure of the organization to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy. The failure to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy was compounded by the failure of the organization to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy. The failure to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy was compounded by the failure of the organization to develop a clear and focused agenda and strategy.
Political Leadership: A Closer Look

representation and responsiveness suggests the influence of an array of mediating factors. A working environment poisoned by hostility and suspicion among players... political mobilization and public policy are irrelevant.

...that... electoral politics matter, even though the ways in which representation translates into responsiveness are contingent and... is not as important as the interaction between elected officials and administrators in producing positive outcomes.

...the situation has been pretty much the same. The waning of the War on Poverty left many Puerto Rican organizations scrambling for increasingly scarce resources. A seven-year study conducted by NRPC in 1993 revealed that outbreaks leading to the reduction of services such as child care and employment training had a disproportionate impact on Puerto Ricans. In many cases, Puerto Rican leaders had little more than groan and moan while these cuts took their toll. Amazingly, more than one hundred Puerto Rican organizations survived the intense fiscal challenges of the 1990s, but their ability to significantly reduce the incidence of poverty among Puerto Ricans was also severely curtailed. During the 1990s, even in cases where political leaders achieved a majority in local governing coalitions, they confronted difficulties that prevented the transformation of coalition dominance into coalition power.

My own research on political mobilization and political participation suggests that a poor constituency is not as effective in producing representation as others would argue. However, the direction of policy-makers' concern is shaped by the demographic strengths and weaknesses of their electorate. The problem is that the representation of policies is not an automatic process, and it often requires a careful scrutiny of the electoral landscape and the interests of the voters. The research has shown... that a poverty-focused public policy is not as important as the interaction between elected officials and administrators in producing positive outcomes.

The problem could be tackled if... elected officials in New York, who were both elected in 1998 and 2000, and ran by the coalition that maintained its 2000 majority in the City Council, are elected with unprecedented margins. The problem could be tackled if... elected officials in New York, who were both elected in 1998 and 2000, and ran by the coalition that maintained its 2000 majority in the City Council, are elected with unprecedented margins. The problem could be tackled if... elected officials in New York, who were both elected in 1998 and 2000, and ran by the coalition that maintained its 2000 majority in the City Council, are elected with unprecedented margins. The problem could be tackled if... elected officials in New York, who were both elected in 1998 and 2000, and ran by the coalition that maintained its 2000 majority in the City Council, are elected with unprecedented margins. The problem could be tackled if... elected officials in New York, who were both elected in 1998 and 2000, and ran by the coalition that maintained its 2000 majority in the City Council, are elected with unprecedented margins. The problem could be tackled if... elected officials in New York, who were both elected in 1998 and 2000, and ran by the coalition that maintained its 2000 majority in the City Council, are elected with unprecedented margins. The problem could be tackled if...
Leadership performance cannot be judged in a vacuum. The balance of structural constraints and personal qualities among Puerto Rican leaders needs to be established more systematically. It is clear, however, that in the struggle against poverty Puerto Rican political leaders have yet to make their mark.

The main questions addressed in the literature on Puerto Rican politics are (1) the degree to which Puerto Ricans have been involved in the political process; (2) the role that the national question has played in the political mobilization of the mainland community; and (3) the impact of antipoverty programs on the socioeconomic condition of Puerto Ricans, both in Puerto Rico and in the United States. Further, Puerto Rican political efforts have not succeeded in prompting a meaningful public policy response. The explanation of this double failure is complex and multivariate and this analysis focuses on factors endogenous to the community. To recapitulate those factors: historically, Puerto Ricans have been suspicious of the ability of politics to impact on poverty status. For a long time, the community and its leaders were skeptical of the capacity of the political process to change the socioeconomic conditions of the Puerto Rican community. Historically, militant political leaders did not meet their goals because by definition they were marginal to the economic system. Effective politics, when needed (e.g., automation of agriculture, and long-term policies for economic development), were often absent or incoherent. Political participation in Puerto Rico is not related to participation in the national political process, and political participation in Puerto Rico is not related to participation in the national political process.

Leadership performance is not only about decision-making and policy formulation. It is also about how well leaders can inspire and mobilize others. In the case of Puerto Rican leaders, this has been a significant challenge. The political and economic context in which they operate is highly constrained. The political system in Puerto Rico is often characterized by corruption, patronage, and clientelism. This has made it difficult for leaders to effectively represent the interests of their constituents.

Personal ability must be taken into account, understood as how well an individual is able to find wiggle room in socially, economically, or politically constrained environments. To the extent that these conditions result in an environment of uncertainty, unpredictability, and flux, it is more difficult for leadership to be effective. Conversely, the more control leaders have over these variables, the more likely it is that they will make a positive impact.

In our media-driven political culture, name recognition enhances this ability even more. Similarly, brokered representation in the agenda-setting or policymaking process increases the chances that important priorities might be overlooked. A lack of knowledge about the precise degree of affinity between leadership and the resources they control, while in effect securing "nothing more than patronage troughs for political opportunists."
The Puerto Ricans in New York City 
[170] 

As we enter the new century, the profile of the Puerto Rican most likely to be in the labor market is that of a pregnant teen with a history of welfare recipiency. If she is lucky, whose English proficiency is limited (as a result of being born in Puerto Rico) and is a high school dropout. This profile suggests some clear areas of policy intervention: sex education, family planning, employment training, English proficiency, and dropout prevention programs.

Puerto Rican Poverty and Migration: We Just had to Try
[171] 


The enormity of what needs to be done is not large enough to test the validity of the hypothesis in regards to their experience, it is certainly true that Puerto Rican access to local structures of representation has coincided with socioeconomic deterioration and fiscal shortages.

Meanwhile, Puerto Rican interest groups failed to influence the policy process in any meaningful way. The result is a vicious circle: policies are not adopted because political will is low, and political will remains low because policies are not adopted. To restore confidence of poor people in central cities, fiscal shortages, and inter- 

The hypothesis suggests that the inability of minority elected officials to exert coalition power at the local level is rooted in factors such as white flight, the attitude of the policy establishment towards mainland Puerto Ricans, and political leaders were unable to use the administrative, legal, and policy powers of the state to make change happen.

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In New York this was true of both community leaders such as Luis Felipe Weber and José Serrano, who represents the 16th Congressional District, and Nydia Velázquez represents the 12th. Serrano is a member of the House Education and Labor Committee; Velázquez serves on the House Small Business and House Banking and Financial Services Committees. In Illinois, Puerto Rican elected officials in the United States. A total of 143 officials were identified and 105 or 73.4 percent provided additional information, including a ranking of public policy concerns.


The author was an NPRC staff member from 1988 to 1992.

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