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Reseña de "Politics Con Sabor: A History of Puerto Ricans and Other Hispanics in New York State Politics" de Rafael J. Rivera Viruet
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Politics Con Sabor: A History of Puerto Ricans and Other Hispanics in New York State Politics

A documentary film project produced, written, and directed by Rafael J. Rivera-Viruet. Distributed by Terramax Entertainment (www.terramax.biz.), 2006
Part One, 73 minutes, Part Two, 88 minutes, color; DVD [$49.95]

REVIEWER: Sherrie L. Baver, City University of New York—City College of New York

Politics Con Sabor is a collaboration between filmmaker Rafael J. Rivera-Viruet and the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College/CUNY. It consists of more than two-and-a-half hours of interviews with over sixty scholars, activists, and elected officials in New York State. Many tell their own stories as well as the story of the Puerto Rican community’s political coming-of-age from the turn of the 20th century to the present. The film is meant to be a tool for researchers, teachers, and students and is almost encyclopedic in its breadth. Politics Con Sabor raises several important questions: What are the multiple causes of poverty? How much will the experience of new Latin-American immigrants resemble that of the Puerto Ricans? What are the possibilities for Black-Latino political coalitions? Is unity among the various Latino groups possible in the quest for political, economic, and social empowerment? While there are not many concrete answers, Rivera-Viruet and the numerous participants in this effort work hard to offer some educated guesses.

The story of the early migration continues with the settlement of “La Cuna,” East Harlem, the birthplace of the Puerto Rican experience in the United States. Occasionally the filmmaker looks at events in Puerto Rico to complement the story, but the central focus is New York and the search for community empowerment. While Politics Con Sabor does not offer new details about the Puerto Rican experience, putting that history into the larger framework of changes in New York over the last century makes the community’s political history more comprehensible.

Particularly to the devenir of la isla durante el siglo XX, trámite que este libro contextualiza de una manera crítica, justa y, gracias a la colaboración de Mara Robledo Arcos, encargada de organizar la relación entre los textos y la muchas imágenes del libro, estéticamente placentera. ¿El mayor placer del texto? Pues éste: transitar por los registros de Torres Martino, Álvarez Curbelo, Dessie Martínez y Fernández-Zavala, requiere repasar momentos determinantes en el Puerto Rico del siglo pasado.
the end of World War II—figures for Puerto Rican participation in Vietnam, the Gulf War, and Iraq would have been instructive. Angelo Falcon, one of several analysts interviewed in the film, notes that the interwar period for the Puerto Rican community in New York was an energetic time, and that contrary to popular perception, the islanders began to migrate north long before the Second World War.

The community’s political history in New York is not seamlessly told because of the filmmaker’s desire to include Puerto Rican accomplishments in every field. Though impressive, it is distracting to note the venues of famous musicians such as Rafael Hernandez or that José Ferrer was the first Puerto Rican to win an Oscar. There are easily enough accomplished actors, artists, musicians, and dancers for another documentary.

The Rivera-Viruet film can easily justify a focus on New York politics alone because much of the story remains underanalyzed. The 1961 victory of the reform movement over Tammany Hall with Robert Wagner’s second mayoral bid, for example, represented a “mini revolution,” because for the first time it allowed Latino candidates to run successfully at all levels of government. The Tammany defeat created an opening for political activists such as Frank Torres, Robert Garcia, and the indefatigable Herman Badillo to enter the electoral arena. The reform victory was also noteworthy because it was achieved by a coalition of Jews, Blacks, and Latinos; one wonders if possibilities for such coalitions remain available today in New York electoral politics. Finally, when the film focuses on the early 1960s, the viewer gets an understanding that the community base is shifting from “El Barrio” to the South Bronx, and this is where Puerto Rican politicians will now find their prime constituency.

The film’s spotlight on the development of community institutions is another one of its valuable contributions. Not only does it highlight what have been the key social organizations in Puerto Rican New York, it also provides a more general understanding of institutional bases of immigrant incorporation in the United States. Puerto Ricans, like other migrant groups, attached importance to hometown clubs when they first arrived, but in the 1960s, they moved to create organizations to enable the community to advance economically and educationally as well as politically. ASPIRA, the Puerto Rican Family Institute, the Puerto Rican Community Development Organization, PRACA, the Puerto Rican Forum, and PRLDEF are some of the best known of these groups. The somewhat paternalistic role of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico Migration Division is also briefly discussed as to whether it facilitated or stifled the community’s social and political maturation on the mainland in the first decades of the migration. Also discussed is the later and more positive role of the island government, for instance, in the relatively recent Atrévete campaign to register Puerto Rican voters in the United States.

Several sections of the film touch on the antipoverty programs starting in the mid-1960s, and how they proved a mixed bag for the community. On one hand, these Great Society initiatives provided much-needed funding to begin addressing the pressing needs in South Bronx and East Harlem; on the other hand, however, the large infusions of resources would later prove irresistible to several politicians including Puerto Ricans and lead to several well-publicized corruption scandals.
Father Louis Gigante, Ramon Velez, and the Del Toros, the filmmaker tried so hard to be judicious there is only a hint at how millions of dollars of antipoverty funds got misappropriated and why several politicians ended up in prison.

While older political activists were entering mainstream politics in the 1960s, some younger, mainland-born or raised Puerto Ricans were drawn to the vibrant and progressive agenda of the Young Lords Party. Influenced by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of that period, these especially media-savvy young men and women took politics out of the electoral arena and into the streets. The Young Lords and their legacy is a topic touched upon in this work but deserves more analysis in the political coming-of-age story of the Puerto Rican community in New York.

Part Two of Politics Con Sabor suggests that by the 1980s and 1990s the South Bronx was changing for the better, and a new and diverse generation of activists and politicians were grappling with both entrenched and new issues. The film contains interviews with present-day political figures such as José Serrano, Nydia Velázquez, as well as more local figures such as Peter M. Rivera, Ruben Díaz, Jr., and Adolfo Carrión, Jr. An in-depth account examines Fernando Ferrer’s two campaigns for New York City Mayor in 2001 and 2005 as part of the larger question, “When will New York City have its first Latino mayor?”

Political scientist José Cruz thoughtfully considers the question and especially the possibility of a Black-Latino coalition to elect a Latino mayor. Cruz perceptively notes that “commonalities of suffering are not enough” to sustain such a coalition. A question the filmmaker might have posed but did not acknowledge is that, since the first Latinos in New York were Puerto Rican, should a Puerto Rican be the first Latino mayor?

The second half of Part Two, “Today’s Issues,” raises several crucial policy areas, but far too many to be adequately addressed. Each issue deserves its own documentary to answer the questions of inadequacy, community development, housing, community development, education, and weakening unions.

The present New York Puerto Rican community is simply too diverse to take one position on most policy issues, especially those that are particularly sensitive because they may touch personal religious views—e.g., the right to an abortion. The film would have been better served by simply noting that there is a new generation of mainland leaders trying to formulate a common position in a limited number of areas through organizations such as the National Hispanic Forum, NALEO, the National Hispanic Council of State Legislators, and that Puerto Ricans are playing a role within the larger Latino organizational umbrella.

Politics Con Sabor raises several thought-provoking questions, but possible answers are not examined in depth because of the large number of topics presented. However, viewers may view this DVD as a political encyclopedia rather than a strict chronology of events, it is clear it can serve as an important starting point for teachers and students wanting to know more about the 20th-century history and politics of New York’s Puerto Ricans. Perhaps the film’s most important contribution is to highlight many energetic and articulate Puerto Rican and Latino women and men who have dedicated themselves to addressing both community needs and political empowerment in the mainland context.