¡EL HONORABLE FRITO-MIXTO PUESTO EN LA SARTEN!
¡Vito también Marco también Antonio presentado al público con el... bagaje de sus ideas!

MENU:
Una fritura de todos los gustos,
y un candidato de todos los colores...

Anti-Marcantonio campaign flyer directed at the Puerto Rican community. All illustrations are from the Jesús Colón Papers. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY. Reprinted by permission.
This article examines the 1949 mayoral election in New York City, a crucial event in the political incorporation of Puerto Ricans in the postwar period. In this election, Congressman Vito Marcantonio ran for mayor under the American Labor Party. Marcantonio was the representative for East Harlem, the area known as El Barrio, the political center of the Puerto Rican community in New York City at the time. In an unprecedented political move, the government of Puerto Rico, headed by Governor Luis Muñoz Marín of the Popular Democratic Party (PPD), got involved in this election by campaigning against Marcantonio. This was the first time that a governmental official of the island engaged in a political contest in the United States. Given the amicable relationship between Marcantonio and the PPD until a few years before, this maneuver may seem surprising. Although Puerto Rican independence was a factor in explaining this rift, I argue here that the issues of Puerto Rican migration to New York City and Marcantonio’s role in the Puerto Rican community were the principal causes for the PPD’s attack on Marcantonio. [Key words: Vito Marcantonio, New York politics, Puerto Ricans, migration, El Barrio, mayoral elections]
THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE ROLE PLAYED BY ITALIAN-AMERICAN

Vito Marcantonio in Puerto Rican politics, on the island and on the mainland, with a focus on his popularity with Puerto Ricans in New York City. The relationship between the Harlem congressman, the Puerto Rican community in New York, and Puerto Rico’s government clearly reflects a transnational political phenomenon. The Puerto Rican government’s intervention in the 1949 New York City mayoral election was also a way of addressing the so-called “Puerto Rican problem” in the United States. The “problem,” which emerged in 1947, refers to a particularly divisive campaign carried out by the media in New York City against the entry of Puerto Rican migrants. Furthermore, the participation of Puerto Rico’s government in the 1949 election legitimized its intervention in New York politics and positioned it as an intermediary for Puerto Ricans living on the mainland.

The 1949 mayoral election in New York City was an important factor in the political incorporation of Puerto Ricans into the city and the United States. This event represents what may be the first transnational political campaign in Puerto Rican politics, as the island’s leading parties became allies of city political forces and actively participated in its electoral process. Puerto Rican politics in Puerto Rico and New York City became intertwined in this contest. The 1949 election became a lightening rod for the debate over the “Puerto Rican problem.” Both governments found it expedient to attack Marcantonio, who ran for mayor under the American Labor Party (APL). During this campaign, the “Puerto Rican problem” resurfaced as an issue of debate. The Puerto Rican government charged Marcantonio with contributing to the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City, thus legitimizing its intervention in city politics and its campaign against the Harlem representative. Marcantonio became a convenient scapegoat in Puerto Rican politics, both on the island and the mainland. Furthermore, by launching its campaign against Marcantonio in 1949, the Puerto Rican government also positioned itself as a representative of the Puerto Rican community in New York City and cast itself as an intermediary between the community and the city establishment. The demise of Marcantonio paved the way for the Puerto Rican government and its Migration Division to represent the Puerto Rican community in the United States.

I will argue in the next section that the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City placed critical pressure on the Puerto Rican government to develop its migration policy by late 1947 and helped define its relationship with Marcantonio by 1949.
The “Puerto Rican Problem” in New York City

Immediately after the Second World War, thousands of Puerto Ricans began migrating to the United States, particularly to New York City. In 1947, specifically during the summer and the months following, a public campaign against the entry of Puerto Ricans was mounted by the media, from conservative tabloids to the liberal and respected *New York Times*. This campaign concentrated on a number of “problems” posed by the entrance of the new migrants to the city: from overcrowded housing, to unemployment, crime, and illness, and especially to the idea that they would not assimilate to American society. This wave of migration and its attendant social challenges became known in the city and in Puerto Rico as “the Puerto Rican problem.” News articles emphasized the “tropical” character of the newcomers, their rapid entry into welfare, and their ignorance of the English language. On August 2, the *New York Times* announced with concern that some 600,000 Puerto Ricans had migrated to the city. Such news reports often cited Puerto Ricans’ support of Congressman Vito Marcantonio (Meléndez 2005: 195–7; Andreu Iglesias 1984: 275–80). This was a political issue that worried the governments of both the city and Puerto Rico.

THIS WAVE OF MIGRATION AND ITS ATTENDANT SOCIAL CHALLENGES BECAME KNOWN IN THE CITY AND IN PUERTO RICO AS “THE PUERTO RICAN PROBLEM.”

Reacting to the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City, the Puerto Rican government began to address migration to the United States.1 Before the summer of 1947, the Puerto Rican government had paid little attention to this issue, yet by the end of the year, they had developed a comprehensive migration policy. During July 1947, Governor Jesús T. Piñero, the last U.S.-appointed governor of the island, created the Governor’s Migration Advisory Committee in order to formulate a coherent government policy. As the committee’s minutes indicate, the issue that prompted the creation of the committee was the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City. The committee consisted of top government officials, including the governor, the president of the Senate, leader of the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) Luis Muñoz Marín, Commissioner of Labor Fernando Sierra Berdecía, Director of Economic Development Teodoro Moscoso, and others. Many issues surrounding Puerto Rican migration to the United States were discussed, including the situation of migrants in New York City and possible alternatives for migration outside the United States (to reduce migration to the mainland). No policy was put forward by this committee (see minutes of the third meeting on August 18, the fourth meeting on August 23, and fifth meeting on September 11, 1947). By commissioning Columbia University—specifically its Bureau of Applied Social Research—to conduct in August 1947 a “survey” of Puerto Rican migration to New York City, the Puerto Rican government took a concrete step in dealing with the “Puerto Rican” problem. The so-called “Puerto Rican Study” later became *The Puerto Rican Journey*, written
by C. Wright Mills, Clarence Senior, and Rose K. Goldsen. Its purpose was to appease public opinion in New York City by hiring one of its outstanding academic institutions to carry out a “scientific” study of Puerto Rican migrants in the city. The study’s conclusions were welcomed by the Puerto Rican government: that Puerto Ricans went to New York looking for jobs, not welfare, that their socioeconomic characteristics were higher than the general standards in Puerto Rico, and that their numbers did not surpass 200,000 in New York City (Mills et al. 1948; Meléndez 2005).

In September 1947, the Puerto Rican government took a more active approach to the issue of migration to the United States. Commissioner of Labor Sierra Berdecía went on a two-month journey to the mainland to investigate firsthand the situation of Puerto Rican workers there. He visited numerous Puerto Rican communities where migrants were settling to engage in agricultural work and manufacturing; he also visited New York City to speak with city officials. On his return in November 1947, he submitted a report to the governor that would set the parameters for Puerto Rico’s migration policy. He devoted a very long section on the situation of Puerto Ricans in New York City. He characterized the news reports on Puerto Rican migrants in the city as “exaggerated” and concluded that islanders faced “the typical problems” that other migrant groups had encountered in their incorporation into a new society. His conclusions and recommendations set the parameters for the government’s 1947 migration law.

**Sierra Berdecía argued that the government should take a more active role in dealing with the “spontaneous” migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States.**

Sierra Berdecía argued that the government should take a more active role in dealing with the “spontaneous” migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States. He presented what would become the government’s position on migration: that the government should not “encourage nor discourage” the migration of Puerto Ricans, but that once such migration occurred, it should provide guidance and aid. He recommended the creation of the Bureau of Employment and Migration within the Department of Labor to advise prospective migrants on the employment situation in the United States and the creation of an office in New York to help migrants adjust to their new environment (Sierra Berdecía 1947). In December 1947, the new migration law was approved by the government. It created the Bureau of Employment and Migration and the Migration Division within the Department of Labor, thus taking a more active role in the “management” of Puerto Rican migration to the United States (Lapp 1991). It would also become more involved in the affairs of the Puerto Rican community in the United States, particularly in New York.
York City. In effect, by late 1947, the Puerto Rican government had decided to promote migration to the United States.

An impediment to achieving this goal was the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City. In terms of the public debate regarding migration to New York City, Puerto Rican policymakers framed the adverse reaction to the entrance of Puerto Ricans as similar to earlier reactions to other migrations to the city and that their incorporation would follow that of earlier migrants, with assistance by the Puerto Rican government (the scholarly argument would be made by Senior 1965). On the other hand, these policymakers argued at the same time that this reaction had been blown out of proportion by the relationship Marcantonio had with the community. Although the Puerto Rican government could not change the racist and xenophobic attitudes towards Puerto Ricans in New York City, it would try to defuse the “Puerto Rican problem” in the city by defeating Marcantonio (who was declared by the Puerto Rican policy-makers as the cause for the negative campaign). This is one reason why the Puerto Rican government intervened in the 1949 mayoral elections in New York City and campaigned against Marcantonio.

To understand the importance of the 1949 elections in New York City for Puerto Rican transnational politics in Puerto Rico and New York, a brief background on Marcantonio’s previous relationship to Puerto Rico is necessary.

Marcantonio and Puerto Rican Politics

To a new observer of Puerto Rican politics in New York City, the battle between the Puerto Rican government and Congressman Marcantonio in the late 1940s might be assumed to be the result of years of antagonism between these two political actors. But nothing could be further from the truth. This antagonism dated back only a few years and the 1949 electoral campaign was, in fact, its most blunt manifestation. Until the mid-1940s, Marcantonio was still considered “Puerto Rico’s best friend” in Washington by the governing PPD. The causes for this animosity between the PPD government and the Harlem representative are related to political issues in Puerto Rico (the struggle for independence), as well as to Puerto Rican matters in New York City and the United States. But as will be argued in this section, the attempt by the Puerto Rican government to deal with the “Puerto Rican problem” and thus to facilitate Puerto Rican migration to the mainland was perhaps the most important factor in their decision to attack Marcantonio.

UNTIL THE MID-1940S, MARCANTONIO WAS STILL CONSIDERED “PUERTO RICO’S BEST FRIEND” IN WASHINGTON BY THE GOVERNING PPD.

Marcantonio’s relationship with Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans began with his election as Congressman of New York’s 17th District in 1934 (to be renamed the 14th District after the 1944 redistricting), which included Puerto Rican Harlem.
In this election, he received only 28 percent of the Puerto Rican vote. One of Marcantonio’s first manifestations regarding Puerto Rico was to support statehood for the island, a position not well regarded in El Barrio at that time (Rodríguez Berrios 1935). Marcantonio’s biographer, Gerald Meyer, argues that his support among Puerto Ricans increased when he began to support independence and nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos. He achieved 40 percent of the Puerto Rican vote in 1936, the year he submitted the first of his bills supporting independence for Puerto Rico and also became a defense lawyer for Albizu Campos, who had been accused of conspiracy against the U.S. government (Meyer 1992: 72). Puerto Rican community support did not waver after that, not even during the critical years when Marcantonio was confronted by the entire New York political establishment and the Puerto Rican government.

Puerto Rican support for Marcantonio is explained by his consistent solidarity with and advocacy for the community since the 1930s. He provided aid and support at a time when the political establishment ignored it. His office in East Harlem provided Puerto Ricans services in the areas of welfare, housing, education, and health care; services that the city government had denied them. He defended them from racism and prejudice when no one else did. He became, in words of Bernardo Vega, the community’s premier chronicler, “el campeón de los puertorriqueños” (the champion of Puerto Ricans) (Andreu Iglesias 1977: 230). But the relationship between Marcantonio and the Puerto Rican community was a two-way street. Contrary to widespread views of Puerto Ricans as lacking organizational and leadership capabilities, this was not an apathetic, disorganized, and marginal community in need of leadership. As Vega and others have elaborated, this was a vibrant, well-organized, and politically militant community. The community was represented by radical and militant workers, artisans, merchants, intellectuals, and professionals. There were many community and political organizations, many of
them espousing radical ideas and independence (Andreu Iglesias 1977; Sanchez Korrol 1994: chs. 5 and 6; Meyer 1989: ch. 7). They supported Marcantonio not because they were in need of a leader, but because they shared his ideals and actions. As Meyer has argued, the community’s political ideas and marginal socioeconomic status correlated well with Marcantonio’s progressive positions (Meyer 1992).

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Many at the time argued that Marcantonio’s appeal to Puerto Rican voters was an opportunistic stratagem to get their votes. The historical memory of the Puerto Rican community refutes this idea. Besides, his support among Puerto Ricans hurt Marcantonio more than benefitted his election. His main political base was among Italians, who often manifested prejudice against Puerto Ricans in East Harlem. Also, the Puerto Rican vote was never so significant as to assure by itself Marcantonio’s continued reelection (Jackson 1983: 55–61). Furthermore, if Marcantonio was so concerned in getting the Puerto Rican vote for his own political interests, why engage in a vicious and sustained confrontation with Puerto Rico’s government in the late 1940s? It would have been logical for him to secure their support in order to ensure his election once again. Marcantonio’s defense of Puerto Ricans in New York City and Puerto Rico was based mainly on his ideals; as he used to say, it “was due not only to the fact that I represent the largest Puerto Rican constituency... but also to my desire as a progressive to defend the most exploited victims of a most devastating imperialism” (Marcantonio as quoted in Jackson 1983: 59).

Puerto Rican endorsement for Marcantonio was based not only on his unfailing support of them in New York City, but also on his actions in and outside Congress.
Puerto Rican endorsement for Marcantonio was based not only on his unfailing support of them in New York City, but also on his actions in and outside Congress. As Meyer has argued, Marcantonio “served two constituencies in the House: his Congressional District and Puerto Rico itself” (Meyer 1992: 72). From the late 1930s to the late 1940s, Marcantonio was the major defender of Puerto Rico’s interests in Washington. He presented numerous bills and measures favoring the island. Among these were bills to apply the Fair Labor Standards Act and the minimum wage to Puerto Rico; the extension to Puerto Rico of amendments to the Social Security Act; protection of the island’s coffee industry against the buying practices of the U.S. armed forces; the establishment of Puerto Ricans born on the island after the Jones Act as U.S.-born citizens (1942). Since 1940, he had fought for Puerto Rican “expedicionarios”—contract workers in the U.S. during the First World War—to be certified as military personnel and have veterans’ benefits extended to them or their families. Other wartime measures included his submission of a bill (1942) to provide financial aid to Puerto Rico to compensate for the dire economic conditions imposed by the war and his defense of Puerto Ricans’ claims against unjust land expropriations by the U.S. armed forces. In addition, he halted the Cole Amendment that sought to eliminate the Foraker Act provision that returned rum taxes to the island. In the areas of employment, social relief, and education, he proposed numerous bills to increase congressional appropriations for the island. He was a staunch defender of the use of Spanish as the language of instruction in Puerto Rico (Meyer 1982: 67–98). Questioned by right-wing forces in Puerto Rico about his “meddling” in Puerto Rico’s affairs, Marcantonio answered that it was not only his duty as a member of Congress, but also as a representative of Puerto Ricans in New York.5

Many recently arrived Puerto Ricans to New York voted for Marcantonio because they knew his name well from the island.6 (The claim by the opposition that he paid their trips to New York was, of course, spurious.) On his 1936 visit to Puerto Rico—the only trip he made outside the continental United States—he was received by thousands and given a reception resembling that of a head of state. He had just submitted his first independence bill in reaction to the punitive Tydings independence bill of that same year. The latter forced independence upon the island with no economic compensation or continued relationship with the United States. He also arrived to take nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos’ defense in a case that the American Civil Liberties Union would later declare a mockery of justice.7

Thus during this period of the 1930s and early 1940s, as the most avid defender of the extension of New Deal measures to Puerto Rico, Marcantonio received the acclaim of most of the island’s labor movement and sectors of its political establishment. Among the latter was the reformist sector of the Liberal Party, discontent with conservative party leadership; this sector would later leave the Liberal Party and form the Popular Democratic Party. Among the supporters and allies of Marcantonio in this group was its leader, Luis Muñoz Marín. At this time, Marcantonio assumed the defense of Puerto Rico’s interests in Congress by default. The island’s representatives in Congress, including its elected Resident Commissioner, became defenders of sugar and manufacturing interests and opposed New Deal reforms on the island. Ironically, they were the presidents of the Socialist Party in Puerto Rico, first Santiago Iglesias Pantín, and later, Bolívar Pagán. During the 1930s, the Socialists formed a political pact with the right-wing Republicans, together called the “Coalition,” which won the elections in 1932 and 1936. The Socialist leadership adopted conservative postures to maintain the
Marcantonio was in the uncomfortable position of defending New Deal reforms and other policies for Puerto Rico over the opposition of the island’s Resident Commissioner. For example, his struggle to extend the Fair Labor Standards Act and minimum wages laws to the island was opposed by Iglesias Pantín and Pagán. No wonder workers from all around the island proclaimed Marcantonio as the “true representative of Puerto Rico in the American Congress.”

Not only workers appreciated his positions in Congress. Muñoz Marín, then struggling to gain support of the masses for his party, also acknowledged Marcantonio’s defense of Puerto Rican worker’s interests. The PPD was created in 1938 and would compete in its first elections in 1940. Winning the island Senate and getting control of the House of Representatives after a pact with the Laboristas, a Socialist Party splinter, the PPD became the “party of government” in 1941, with Muñoz Marín as Senate president. During this period, Muñoz Marín and Marcantonio exchanged letters regarding the Works Progress Administration’s attempt to reduce wages in Puerto Rico. After complaining that labor organizations had abandoned the interests of workers and had become entangled with business interests, Muñoz Marín wrote to Marcantonio:

> It is for this reason that they have appealed to me here and to you there as the only forces in which they have confidence. They feel that you are free to defend them there as I am free to defend them here, because we have no connection with the powerful interests that gain millions every year from low wages in Puerto Rico. *Both the men and myself place our hope in you that you may tackle this problem in Washington as successfully as you have tackled others in defense of Puerto Rico heretofore.* (Muñoz Marín 1939—emphasis added)

Correspondence between the two leaders shows they had a working relationship on many issues relevant to Puerto Rico. Letters from Muñoz Marín to Marcantonio were often addressed as “Dear Marc,” showing perhaps a personal relationship beyond politics. There are other indications of Muñoz Marín’s affinity for the Harlem Congressman. Angelita Santaella, a relative of Muñoz Marín, wrote to Marcantonio: “I do know of the great affect [sic] that Luis Muñoz Marín have [sic] for you for the valuable assistance that you have given him in all problems concerning the very life of Puerto Rico.”

Another element contributing to Marcantonio’s popularity in Puerto Rico was his campaign to remove perhaps the most brutal and despised of all the U.S.-appointed governors: Blanton Winship. Winship was installed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to bring “law and order” in the chaotic 1930s, a period characterized by the economic crisis, an increase in workers’ resistance and demands, a deterioration of the political party system, and the rise of a militant Nationalist movement (Mathews 1975). Winship’s repressive regime reached its lowest point with the Ponce Massacre in March 1936, when unarmed Nationalists demonstrators were shot by police on his orders, resulting in 17 deaths and 235 wounded. The governor was supported in Puerto Rico only by the conservative Coalition. Marcantonio became the major advocate in Washington for reformist and progressive forces in Puerto Rico seeking to depose Winship. His passionate speech in Congress, entitled “Five Years of Tyranny in Puerto Rico” and widely circulated on the island, represents a highly detailed and convincing argument to oust Winship. His tireless lobbying
of President Roosevelt and Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes succeeded in the
governor's removal. The ouster of Winship was seen on the island as a victory
for island reformist forces and for Marcantonio, in particular. Many close to the
PPD recognized this. Vicente Geigel Polanco, outstanding PPD leader and social
reformer, commended Marcantonio: “Please accept my heartfelt congratulation for
your excellent work in ousting Winship. The people of Puerto Rico is [sic] cognizant
of your timely and successful campaign” (Geigel Polanco 1939). Walter McJones,
National Democratic Party leader in Puerto Rico and close ally and advisor to the
PPD and Muñoz Marín, also acknowledged Marcantonio’s “work on behalf of the
Island of Puerto Rico,” and that to him, “more than anyone else, we owe the removal
of Winship.” McJones called Marcantonio “the only representative we have in
Congress” (McJones 1939).

In view of the warm ongoing political and personal relationship between the
leader of Puerto Rico’s dominant party and government and the Italian-American
Congressman, how can we explain the acrimonious relationship that had developed
by the late 1940s, when Muñoz Marín publicly proclaimed Marcantonio a
“Communist” and Marcantonio characterized his former friend as “the Nero of
Fortaleza”? Most observers of this period agree that the conflict between Muñoz
Marín and Marcantonio reflects differing notions about the island’s political
status. Such an argument is presented by Gerald Meyer, the only biographer of
Marcantonio who has devoted considerable attention to his relationship to Puerto
Rico and Puerto Ricans:

Marcantonio’s relationship with Muñoz Marín...ran a course paralleling the latter’s
changing position on Puerto Rico’s political status. As long as Muñoz Marín remained
an advocate of independence, close collaboration existed.... His eventual rejection
of independence and his authorship of Operation Bootstrap led to an acrimonious
breach. (Meyer 1989: 263-4, note 50)

This observation has merit. By 1945, Muñoz Marín had declared his opposition
to independence and his support for a political and economic relationship with
the United States. Marcantonio maintained his support for independence until
his death. He submitted bills for Puerto Rican independence in 1943 and 1945. But
what may have been also distressing to Muñoz Marín was Marcantonio’s support
for independence forces in Puerto Rico, which presented a direct challenge to his
leadership in the party and government. In 1943, independence supporters in and
outside the PPD created the Congreso Pro Independencia (CPI; Pro Independence
Congress) to pressure the PPD to promote this option in Puerto Rico and the
United States. CPI members in the PPD were expelled by Muñoz Marín in 1946;
later that year, this group and other independence supporters created the Partido
Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP; Puerto Rican Independence Party). The PIP
became the second electoral party by 1952. Marcantonio gave his support first to the
CPI and later to the PIP. His ties to these organizations extended beyond the political.
President of the CPI first and the PIP later was Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, who
had met Marcantonio as co-defense counsel for Nationalist leader Albizu Campos in
1936. Concepción de Gracia was Marcantonio’s closest Puerto Rican ally and friend
(Marcantonio was godfather to Concepción de Gracia’s daughter, Alma).

By 1947, Marcantonio had become the PPD’s and the Puerto Rican government’s
ardent foe in Washington. He became the most critical opponent of the economic
Marcantonio also became a staunch opponent of “Operation Bootstrap,” the PPD’s economic reform policy, which he sarcastically called “Operation Booby-trap.”

Marcantonio also became a staunch opponent of “Operation Bootstrap,” the PPD’s economic reform policy, which he sarcastically called “Operation Booby-trap.” In this industrialization program—approved in 1947, also the year the migration law was ratified—the PPD government sought to promote economic development through the attraction of U.S. capital in manufacturing industries by providing a number of incentives, mostly tax exemption, cheap labor, and infrastructure provisions. Marcantonio argued that the most important limitation to the island’s economic development lay in its political and economic subordination to the United States. He insisted that independence was necessary for Puerto Rico’s economic growth. He characterized Operation Bootstrap as a program to benefit U.S. interests and capital and dubbed Muñoz Marín a “Wall Street stooge.”

Marcantonio’s role in this period as the most fervent adversary of the Puerto Rican government’s economic and political proposals in Washington alone does not
explain the furious attack against him by the PPD in 1949. After all, Marcantonio’s criticism of the PPD’s reforms found no substantial echo in Washington, where by this time he was isolated and marginalized in the midst of postwar Cold War politics. In Puerto Rico, the PPD had achieved its political and electoral hegemony by 1948, and the PIP presented no real danger to it or as an alternative to the government’s economic and political reforms. What explains the PPD's attack on Marcantonio in 1949 is the congressman’s role in New York City politics and his relationship to the “Puerto Rican problem.”

By this time, the Puerto Rican government had publicly defined the “Puerto Rican problem” as a situation caused by the community’s relationship to Marcantonio. Reaction to Puerto Rican migration was due to Marcantonio’s reputation in New York City and not to prejudice and racism against the migrant group, argued the PPD leaders. If Marcantonio disappeared from the scene, the “Puerto Rican problem” would dissipate, the logic went. In its campaign against Marcantonio, the Puerto Rican government made a pact with New York’s political establishment in order to reduce the adverse reaction to the entry of Puerto Rican migrants in New York. Moreover, the campaign allowed Puerto Rico’s government to become a player in city politics.

THE CONGRESSMAN WAS ALSO CRITICAL OF THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE PUERTO RICAN GOVERNMENT IN SPONSORING MIGRATION FROM THE ISLAND. HE UNDERSTOOD THAT PUERTO RICANS WERE TREATED AS CHEAP LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES AND HAD NO PROTECTION FROM THEIR GOVERNMENT.

But Marcantonio was linked to the “Puerto Rican problem” and to government policies in other ways. As Bernardo Vega recognized at the time, the Puerto Rican government resented “the influence of Vito Marcantonio and his role in the Puerto Rican struggles.” Vega argued that the Puerto Rican government pretended to “impose its direction” on the community through the recently opened Migration Office in New York City (Andreu Iglesias 1977: 28; a similar assessment is made by Lapp 1991: 53–4; see also Meyer 1989: ch. 7). Services and support to the community provided by Marcantonio were sometimes similar and very often of a larger scale than those that the Migration Office would offer beginning in the late 1940s. In addition,
Marcantonio was an obstacle to the “leadership and organization” that the government of Puerto Rico sought to render the community in order to deal with the “Puerto Rican problem.” The congressman was also critical of the role played by the Puerto Rican government in sponsoring migration from the island. He understood that Puerto Ricans were treated as cheap labor in the United States and had no protection from their government. As long as Puerto Ricans in New York considered Marcantonio as their “defender” against abuses, discrimination, and exploitation, the Puerto Rican government could not play this role under the Migration Office.

One example illustrates how the Puerto Rican government would benefit from the exclusion of Marcantonio from New York City politics. In August 1946, Marcantonio acted in response to the complaints of Puerto Rican workers in Glassboro, New Jersey, regarding their working conditions—they likened them to those of a concentration camp—and violations to their labor contract by employers. He made public a letter to the U.S. Secretary of Labor demanding urgent measures to remedy this situation: “If the facts cited above are true then this seems to me to be a matter which requires immediate action. Treatment of this nature is comparable with treatment meted out to our boys by the Nazis in concentration camps during the war” (Marcantonio 1946). The Department of Agriculture responded that the allegations could not be investigated because the Puerto Rican had left their work quarters, and that, in any case, it was not the role of the Department to investigate such claims because the migrants’ concerns lay outside of their jurisdiction (Bronman 1946).

Puerto Rico’s Commissioner of Labor Manuel A. Pérez responded to Marcantonio that workers’ expeditions to New Jersey and Pennsylvania were not organized by his department, “since it is not a function of the Department of Labor the organization of workers’ emigrations [sic]. Migratory movements are voluntarily arranged by workers and employees themselves and salaries and working conditions are agreed upon by the parties, through this department, as provided by law.” After listing the working conditions agreed by workers and contractors, he stated:

The Department of Labor cannot prevent workers from emigration anywhere, least of all to the United States of America. Since we are American citizens and therefore there are no restrictions for our entrance, hundreds of Puerto Ricans leave daily for the States without contract, thereby running all risks. In any case, contract or no contract, emigrants are subject to the ordinary hardships of a different environment. (Pérez 1946a)

Commissioner Pérez added that these workers left for New Jersey without a contract approved by his department and denied that their living conditions were those of a concentration camp. But if those conditions existed, he continued, “We will highly appreciate your good offices for a prompt and thorough investigation” (Pérez 1946a). In a later letter to Marcantonio, Pérez claimed that an investigation by Puerto Rico’s Office in Washington found no evidence to sustain those worker’s allegations and that employers had adhered to the stipulations in their contracts. This Department of Labor policy of not interfering in the relationship between migrants and employers in the United States would change precisely with the migration law of 1947, which charged the Department of Labor’s Employment and Migration Bureau in San Juan and its Migration Division in New York City with monitoring the conditions of migrants and defending their interests. As long as Marcantonio defended Puerto Rican migrants in their struggles to improve their working and living conditions and
condemned the violations of their rights and their treatment as second class citizens, he would interfere with the functions that the Migration Division wanted to fulfill after 1947 as a representative of Puerto Ricans in the United States.

The 1949 Elections in New York City
The 1949 mayoral election occupies a significant place in New York City political history. This election and its campaign must be understood as an attempt by the city power structure to defeat Marcantonio, by then the only progressive actor in Congress. The opposition to the congressman can also be seen as tactic to undermine the American Labor Party (ALP), of which he was the leader. There were other reasons why the city political establishment wanted Marcantonio defeated. Since the 1930s, he had been elected under both the Republican and Democratic parties’ slates; beginning in 1938, he also ran as the ALP candidate. Earlier attempts to defeat the Harlem representative included the 1944 redemarcation of his 20th Congressional district, which included most of East Harlem, and the creation of the 18th Congressional district, which incorporated other East Side areas not sympathetic to him. This ploy did not work, as Marcantonio was reelected in 1944 and 1946. But in 1947, the New York State legislature passed the Wilson-Pakula Act, which prevented any candidate from entering the primary of a party of which he was not a member; this law had everything but Marcantonio’s name on it. Nevertheless, it was not sufficient to defeat him in the 1948 elections, during which he ran under the ALP banner and won again. Marcantonio decided to run in the 1949 mayoral contest to push his progressive agenda and make the ALP a political force in city politics.

MARCANTONIO DECIDED TO RUN IN THE 1949 MAYORAL CONTEST TO PUSH HIS PROGRESSIVE AGENDA AND MAKE THE ALP A POLITICAL FORCE IN CITY POLITICS.

By 1949, Marcantonio was a rare bird in the American political scene: a progressive running for office and winning it with popular backing. The 1948 national elections signified a reversal for progressive politics in the United States. This was the first national campaign fought under the clouds of the emerging Cold War climate. Marcantonio was one of the few survivors in the conservative tide that swept the country. The anti-communist campaign against him in the 1949 mayoral election was a consequence of these events; it was also a prelude to the 1950 Congressional election, in which anti-communist smears were an important factor in his defeat (Meyer 1989: ch. 3; LaGumina 1969: ch. 9; Schaffer 1966: 204–7). This is the context for Munoz Marín’s famous letter to Puerto Ricans and the whole PPD campaign in New York against Marcantonio.

Other factors created a context for the role played by Puerto Ricans in this election. Facing Marcantonio were Mayor O’Dwyer, seeking his reelection under the Democratic Party banner, and Newbold Morris, running for the Republican and
Liberal parties. Although most predictions saw the incumbent mayor as winning, O’Dwyer’s lead over Morris was uncertain, so any vote going to Marcantonio would hurt Democrats the most. The mayoral election would also bear on the race for U.S. Senator of New York, where Herbert Lehman faced John Foster Dulles, an important battle with significance for the Senate’s balance. Marcantonio had called for the mayoral candidates to abstain from endorsing candidates for the Senate race, which hurt Democrats and Lehman the most. (On Marcantonio and the 1949 elections, see LaGumina 1969: ch. 10; Meyer 1989: ch. 3.)

By mid-October, Marcantonio’s campaign experienced an upsurge in popularity, a cause for concern in O’Dwyer’s headquarters. Of particular interest was his popularity among the city’s “ethnic vote.” As LaGumina has argued, “There were indications that he was making considerable impact on three important New York City ethnic and racial groups—the Italians, Puerto Ricans and Negroes.... Even more telling was O’Dwyer’s efforts to cut into Marcantonio’s strength among Puerto Ricans. This was a genuine concern because Marcantonio’s name and Puerto Rican influx had become nearly synonymous” (LaGumina 1969: 127). Precisely in October, the PPD’s intensified its anti-Marcantonio campaign in the city, with the aim of weakening Marcantonio’s grip on the Puerto Rican community and to facilitate the reelection of O’Dwyer.

As mentioned earlier, a principal reason given for the Puerto Rican government’s intervention in the 1949 mayoral election was to address the recurrent “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City. By then, the PPD had blamed the “problem” on the continued association between the Harlem congressman and the Puerto Rican community: in its view, Marcantonio’s negative reputation in the city and in the country adversely affected the smooth integration of islanders to life in New York City. The PPD’s goal was to dissociate Puerto Ricans from Marcantonio, electorally and in the arena of public opinion. The party’s discourse had already become evident by the 1948 elections, with support from the island’s leading newspaper, El Mundo, whose line closely resembled the government’s on migration issues.

By supporting Marcantonio, Puerto Rican voters have shared in the national prejudice that exists against him.

Probably for the same reason, some newspapers have developed a campaign against Puerto Ricans in Harlem and, by the way, against all Puerto Rican interests.

Probably for the same reason, there is the prejudice against Puerto Ricans in the city of New York (and possibly in other parts of the United States) that we represent a group of radicals without much affection for American traditions....

The truth is that, for many of our forsaken fellow citizens, Marcantonio has been a great comfort [“paño de lagrimas”].

When nobody wanted to take care of our poorest people in that city, Marcantonio made the effort to find them employment, he fought for their right to aid from the public welfare system, and extended to others little favors that, in moments of need, represent salvation for an individual.

The electoral support for Marcantonio on the part of many Puerto Ricans could come from self-interest and gratitude, and not precisely from shared political ideas....
That is why it would be a mistake to generalize that all Puerto Ricans share his political ideals. And it would be another mistake that such a generalization be extended, which is an injustice to Puerto Rico.

In this regard, Democrats as well as Republicans in the city of New York could learn something by examining this loyalty to Marcantonio.

That loyalty could be obtained if they took the same good care of Puerto Ricans [as he has].

New York City's political establishment and its major newspapers were not as delicate as *El Mundo*; they launched a malicious campaign against Marcantonio in the 1948 Congressional elections, mostly depicting him as a Communist. However, he won handily, and once again he received most of the Puerto Rican vote in Harlem (LaGumina 1969: 127).

A year later, Luis Muñoz Marín, in his well-known letter to Mayor O'Dwyer, made the same argument as *El Mundo*. In his view, Puerto Rican support for Marcantonio came from gratitude for his service to the community; however, this relationship was the fundamental reason behind the campaign against the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City. The governor wished to clarify the “significant misconception” regarding Puerto Ricans in the city:

The relations of a sector of the Puerto Rican community to Mr. Marcantonio plus Mr. Marcantonio's particular kind of ideology have resulted in a false identification of the whole Puerto Rican community with Mr. Marcantonio's political ideology....

Many Puerto Ricans are grateful to Mr. Marcantonio because he and his organization looked after them upon their first arrival in New York and have kept in close contact thereafter. There is nothing wrong with a feeling of personal appreciation for past services. But, it is well known that there is an additional factor which many grateful Puerto Ricans frequently overlook while their continental fellow-citizens keep constantly in mind: Mr. Marcantonio is either a Communist Party member or a close adherent of the Communist Party procedures and purposes.... It is this association that, I believe, is chiefly responsible for the virulent prejudices against Puerto Ricans that frequently break out. (Muñoz Marín 1949)

According to the Puerto Rican government leaders, attacking Marcantonio and breaking his hold upon the Puerto Rican electorate in Harlem (and in this election, in the city as a whole) was one way of dealing with the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City.

In 1949, the “Puerto Rican problem” was resurrected once again as a campaign issue during the mayoral election. As before, Marcantonio was attacked for his close relationship to Puerto Ricans. The number of media attacks on Puerto Ricans increased from the previous year; moreover, they acquired a more vicious tone. Puerto Ricans became entangled in Cold War politics. A new argument emerged, insisting that Puerto Ricans were not only an aggravation to New York City but, even worse, a threat to the safety of the United States and the Western World! The most blatant example of this argument was published in an article in the right-wing
journal *The American Way*, published in the midst of the electoral campaign. The article—entitled “Our Worst Slum: Can We Save It From Going Red?”—presented a laundry list of social and economic ills plaguing Spanish Harlem and typical of the “Puerto Rican problem,” ranging from unemployment, prostitution, gambling, drugs, social dysfunction, rampant crime, and unsanitary behaviors to the maintenance of an unassimilable culture. In top of that, according to the article, Puerto Ricans’ presumed sympathies for Communism posed a grave threat to national security: “we have permitted a great Communist-breeding slum to grow up in the heart of our largest city.” If federal policies failed to improve their economic conditions and Americanize them, if the Puerto Rican government failed to improve conditions on the island to halt their migration, or if Puerto Ricans were not distributed more evenly throughout the United States, “the slum will spread like a festering sore until it endangers the social health not only of New York, but of the nation.” It further argued that if “they vote as overwhelmingly for extreme left-wing leaders as they do now, they could prove a powerful and, in certain circumstances, a sinister political force... the Puerto Ricans of New York could swing an election which might place the world's largest city, with all its shipping docks, and other vital facilities, in the hands of revolutionary conspirators, and thus pave the way for national paralysis.”

Why this identification of Puerto Ricans with Communism? Puerto Ricans were supporters of Vito Marcantonio, who is described as a Communist stalwart: “this follower of Moscow's Red line has taken them under his wing, and he will keep them there if he can” (Woodbury 1949: 30, 32).

CRITICISM OF THE CREATION OF THE COMMITTEE CAME FROM MARCANTONIO, WHO CHARACTERIZED IT AS A “TRQUIÑUELA” (A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN TRICK) TO COVER UP THE ADMINISTRATION’S “CRASS NEGLIGENCE” OF PUERTO RICANS IN THE CITY.

One important event during this time was the creation of the Mayor’s Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs in September 1949. This committee is relevant to Puerto Rican politics in New York City in several ways. First, it was openly used to campaign against Marcantonio in the mayoral election campaign, with the support of the Popular Democratic Party and the Puerto Rican government. Its most important activities before November 1949 were held in El Barrio, in Marcantonio's district, in order to gain Puerto Rican votes for Mayor O'Dwyer. The Committee’s activities
and program attempted to separate Puerto Ricans from Marcantonio. Second, the Committee represented an attempt by the political establishment to “officially” incorporate Puerto Ricans into the city’s political process: “officially,” in the sense that the city government and parties did not recognize their political presence in the city because of their support of Marcantonio. Third, the Committee’s formation and activities recognized the Puerto Rican government as representative of the Puerto Rican community in New York City. Thus the Puerto Rican government became an actor in city politics. The creation of the Committee reflected an agreement of cooperation between the government of Puerto Rico and the City of New York to deal with the issue of Puerto Ricans in the city that would last for many years.27

BY LINKING PUERTO RICANS TO WELFARE AND COMMUNISM, O’DWYER WAS ENFLAMING THE SAME PREJUDICES THAT HAD FUELED THE “PUERTO RICAN PROBLEM” CAMPAIGN.

The Mayor’s Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs specifically addressed Puerto Ricans and welfare. The creation of an “Advisory Committee on Puerto Ricans” was one recommendation of a report submitted in early September by the Commissioner of Welfare, Raymond M. Hilliard, to Mayor O’Dwyer. One conclusion of this report was that the Puerto Rican community in New York City needed “guidance and leadership” (Hilliard 1949).28 The implication, of course, was that this “guidance and leadership” would be provided by the city and the Puerto Rican governments. Hilliard was appointed to chair the Mayor’s Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs, which served to remind the city’s residents that their government was dealing with the “Puerto Rican problem.” Of the 46 members on the committee, 20 were Puerto Ricans, many with direct links to the Puerto Rican government or sympathizers of the Popular Democratic Party. José Cabranes, Director of Puerto Rico’s Migration Division in New York, was appointed vice-chairman of the committee.29 Criticism of the creation of the committee came from Marcantonio, who characterized it as a “triquiñuela” (a political campaign trick) to cover up the administration’s “crass negligence” of Puerto Ricans in the city. Marcantonio questioned the supposed need to develop Puerto Rican leadership in the city, arguing that Puerto Ricans “do not need advice on their leadership. Their traditions of democratic struggle are as old as those of the American people... They have as good a leadership as any other group.” He accused the city’s Welfare and Housing departments of discriminating against Puerto Ricans. Marcantonio argued that the defamatory campaign against Puerto Ricans in New York City increased the discrimination against this group, “imposing upon them a condition of second-class citizenship and forcing them into a cheap labor market.”30

The “Puerto Rican problem” surfaced once again in New York City and became an issue in the 1949 electoral campaign. Two widely discussed subjects
in this campaign were welfare and Puerto Ricans. These two, in turn, were linked to Marcantonio’s supposedly Communist tactics. Besides accusing Puerto Ricans of inflating the city’s welfare rolls and of being welfare cheaters, there was the question of welfare itself. Marcantonio censured O’Dwyer and Welfare Commissioner Hilliard for trimming welfare assistance to some 300,000 recipients, and of trying to construct a “false economy at the expense of those who can least afford it.” The mayor reacted by stating that Marcantonio wanted candidate Newbold Morris elected so he (Marcantonio) could “keep his Commy friends in the Welfare Department.” He argued that Communists exploited
welfare recipients for their own political and economic interests. O'Dwyer claimed he had named Hilliard—a Republican—precisely to clean out the Welfare Department of any Communists. Marcantonio responded, saying that the Mayor's statements were "red herrings" to cover up his administration's inadequacies and that its policies had been detrimental to the poorest of the poor. In a meeting with Puerto Ricans during the last days of campaign, O'Dwyer accused Marcantonio of trying to convert the Welfare Department into "a Communist clubhouse." After enumerating his administration's policies in favor of Puerto Ricans, the Mayor accused Marcantonio and his "Communist stooges" of leading Puerto Ricans away from "the channels of patriotism" to that "dread enemy of our
nation, the Communist Party." Marcantonio and "his Communist stooges" tricked Puerto Ricans into believing they could get city services from them. He added that no one in the city “need be led down the blind alley of Communism to get fair treatment in this city.” Speaking directly to Puerto Ricans, O'Dwyer declared that when “the hour of need comes, there is an agency known as the Welfare Department. We have receptionists so that we can have at least a common channel of communication.” He concluded by pronouncing that Puerto Ricans “don’t have to go to any clubhouse to get relief.” By linking Puerto Ricans to welfare and Communism, O'Dwyer was enflaming the same prejudices that had fueled the “Puerto Rican problem” campaign. Marcantonio recognized this, arguing that the Mayor “uses my friendship for the Puerto Rican people against me” and in so doing “incited racial hatred against the Puerto Ricans.”

The 1949 mayoral election in New York City was also important for Puerto Rican politics in that it was the first Puerto Rican transnational political campaign. Although Puerto Ricans had been indirectly involved in New York politics before, with island politicians going to the city to campaign for party ideals back home, and Puerto Ricans in the city using island-based political organizations and ideas for their local organizing, the leading parties in Puerto Rico were now directly involved in the mayoral campaign. They not only backed one of the candidates but also used the event to discuss island issues. While New York politics moved to Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican politics moved to the other island, Manhattan.

The Puerto Rican campaign in support of Mayor O'Dwyer began in earnest by mid-October. In a meeting organized by the Puerto Rican Committee to Reelect O'Dwyer, headed by Laura Santiago (a well-known PPD supporter and also president of the United Puerto Rican Committee), City Council President Vincent Impelliteri declared that the Puerto Rican vote was important to reelect O'Dwyer and enumerated the administration’s policies in favor of the island community in New York. On October 14, Josefina (Fini) Rincón, then Acting Mayor of San Juan during her sister's absence, was received by Mayor O'Dwyer at City Hall. Rincón publicly backed the mayor, citing his administration’s support to Puerto Ricans in the city, and promised to actively campaign for his reelection. She stated that she would also solicit the Puerto Rican vote for the election of Lehman for the Senate and Robert F. Wagner for Borough President of Manhattan, that is, the Democratic slate. As her sister did later, Rincón not only lobbied for O'Dwyer within the Puerto Rican community, but she also took the opportunity to denounce the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP). In reaction to the PIP president's comments on her campaigning in New York, she responded that the PIP did not represent the people of Puerto Rico, since they had not elected a single public official in the past elections. Rincón replied that Puerto Ricans in New York believed in “democratic ideals” and would “vote for democracy by voting for the reelection of Mayor William O'Dwyer.”

On November 1, Mayor of San Juan, Felisa Rincón de Gautier, was received at the airport by Mayor O'Dwyer, where she announced she would campaign for him during the next ten days; her sister, Acting Mayor of San Juan, would also remain in the city. “Doña Fela,” as Rincón de Gautier was popularly known, was honored at a gala at the Hotel Empire, where guests-of-honor included New York City administration officials such as Impelliteri and other well-known Puerto Ricans; the event was organized by her sister, Josefina, and Laura Santiago. Rincón de Gautier declared the Puerto Ricans “should not allow themselves to be fooled.
Marcantonio responded by insisting that she should have stayed in San Juan, where she was needed more by the city’s poor. 41 On November 3, Rincón de Gautier was officially received by O’Dwyer at City Hall. There she once again proclaimed her support for him and thanked him for projects benefitting Puerto Ricans in the city. 42

Like her sister before, Rincón de Gautier used her podium to attack the Puerto Rican Independence Party. She declared that Marcantonio was linked to a party that did not represent the vast majority of Puerto Ricans and that was “opposed to everything that is good in Puerto Rico.” 43 She fiercely attacked Marcantonio, arguing that “my constituents were being misled by individuals of an ideology foreign to us and contrary to our principles of democracy.” She saw her role in the mayoral campaign as helping to “dissuade my countrymen of this ideology and to assist those who, I feel, are friends and champions of our democratic form of government, among whom I count the Hon. William O’Dwyer.” 44

MUÑOZ MARÍN THEN CLARIFIED THE OTHER “SIGNIFICANT MISCONCEPTION CONCERNING PUERTO RICANS” IN NEW YORK: THAT THEY WERE ALL FOLLOWERS OF MARCANTONIO.

Perhaps the most significant PPD tactic during the 1949 campaign was Muñoz Marín’s letter of October 6 to O’Dwyer, in which he accused Marcantonio of being a Communist and indirectly asking all Puerto Ricans in New York to vote for the incumbent mayor. Governor Muñoz Marín began his letter by recognizing O’Dwyer for his administration’s attention to Puerto Ricans, including the Mayor’s Committee on Puerto Ricans Affairs, and his “defense” of islanders in the city. He also acknowledged him for “clarifying in the minds of all that the overwhelming majority of Puerto Ricans in New York City are neither on relief nor seeking relief....” Muñoz Marín then clarified the other “significant misconception concerning Puerto Ricans” in New York: that they were all followers of Marcantonio. He asserted that the vast majority were not, and that the actions of the minority of Puerto Ricans who supported Marcantonio “resulted in a false identification of the whole Puerto Rican community with Mr. Marcantonio’s political ideology.” The problem, he argued, was that most Puerto Ricans in New York had not registered to vote in city elections. He then contended: “I believe that if most Puerto Ricans would vote, the unfair tinge placed upon New York Puerto Ricans by Marcantonio would be incontrovertibly and definitely shown to be false. That tinge is what creates such harmful hostility against the whole group.” After explaining that Puerto Rican support for Marcantonio came from gratitude for services provided to the community
and that there were extremely few communists in Puerto Rico, Muñoz Marín indicated that it would be best for Puerto Ricans to get “rid of this deplorable identification” with Communism.

In my opinion, the best thing for Puerto Ricans to do to wash themselves of this false paint that makes them appear as followers of communist or communist fellow-travelers is to come out and register in mass and go to the polls on November 8 and vote in a clear and overwhelming manner to show there is no more communist tinge in the New York Puerto Ricans than there is here in the Island.45

Muñoz Marín never asked Puerto Ricans point blank to vote for O’Dwyer in this letter—he would avoid taking sides in New York politics for many years—but the PPD’s campaign in New York for O’Dwyer left no doubt who the governor supported. While he abstained from any direct intervention in the campaign for fear of inflaming tensions over the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York, he allowed O’Dwyer to make the letter public and use it in the campaign.46

Muñoz Marín’s letter was made public on October 16 in New York City and Puerto Rico. Marcantonio reacted by accusing the governor of doing nothing for his people, that he had “double-crossed the Puerto Ricans,” and that his “administration [was] filled with graft and corruption.” He predicted that with the publication of this letter, “the Puerto Rican vote will be the most important contributing factor” to O’Dwyer’s defeat.47

Among Marcantonio’s supporters was PIP President Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, who said the letter was “a pretty unfair statement” by Muñoz Marín. He accused the governor of using Puerto Rico’s government machinery to defend O’Dwyer, particularly its New York office and its sending of Rincón de Gautier to campaign for the New York Mayor. “It is a political patronage office,” Concepción de Gracia said, referring to the Migration Office in New York, “and they have been working for O’Dwyer.” He accused Muñoz Marín of sending 25,000 letters to Puerto Ricans in New York asking them to vote for the incumbent.48

Largely due to outrage over this letter, Concepción de Gracia decided to campaign for Marcantonio. On October 26, he arrived in New York, where he was received at the airport by the congressman. Calling Marcantonio “the best friend Puerto Rico ever had in this country,” Concepción de Gracia announced that he would campaign for him throughout the Puerto Rican community in New York. He proclaimed Marcantonio’s defense of Puerto Rican independence and of Puerto Ricans’ rights in the United States, as well as his success in ousting Winship, as reasons for his support.49 He accused the San Juan mayor of campaigning in New York at the expense of the people of Puerto Rico and of having no support within the community in the city. Concepción de Gracia argued that the recent media campaign against Puerto Ricans in city tabloids like The Daily Mirror and The World Telegram were part of a “defamation campaign” against islanders by the reactionary forces opposing Marcantonio with “the purpose of confusing the non-Puerto Rican electorate in the city.”50 He labeled Muñoz Marín and Rincón de Gautier—whom he accused of trying to “indoctrinate” Puerto Ricans in the city—as “passing birds” (aves de paso) that did not know the problems and reality of the New York community. Concepción de Gracia called O’Dwyer’s Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs “a pre-elections electoral trick to fool the incautious and satisfy the ingenuous.” The PIP president condemned the mayor for doing nothing to improve the living conditions of the community in New York City and for not hiring a single Puerto Rican to serve in his
administration. Neither the O'Dwyer administration nor the Puerto Rican government had defended the Puerto Rican community against the brutal and racist attacks they suffered at the hands of the city's media. Only the election of Marcantonio could guarantee the two fundamental issues of interest to Puerto Ricans in the United States: (1) the end of the colonial system in Puerto Rico, which lay at the root of the migration; and (2) the provision of needed services for and the protection of rights of Puerto Ricans on the mainland.51

The last days of campaigning before Election Day were very active for the Puerto Rican community. Both PIP President Concepción de Gracia and San Juan Mayor Rincón de Gautier kept to a busy schedule of meetings and electoral activities.52 El Mundo described tremendous enthusiasm among Puerto Ricans, conscious of their new political strength and hopeful that their interests and needs would be taken into consideration from then on. The newspaper argued that the revived “Puerto Rican problem” campaign during the year had convinced many that “with their votes they could put an end to the offenses, scurrilous criticism and negation of rights they have experienced in different occasions.” It estimated that between 50,000 to 75,000 Puerto Ricans would go to the polls.53

In the end, Marcantonio lost the 1949 mayoral contest by a wide margin, coming in a distant third. O'Dwyer won the mayoralty with over 1.2 million votes, while Morris received 956,170, and Marcantonio, 356,423. O'Dwyer was reelected without a majority, and the American Labor Party increased its vote from the previous mayoralty race in 1945.

This critical election of 1949 in New York left its imprint on future city politics. The anti-Communist campaign against him contributed to Marcantonio’s defeat in the 1950 Congressional election. O'Dwyer was accused during the 1949 campaign of having links to the mob; he was forced to step down as mayor in 1950 amidst a controversial corruption scandal. In contrast, Marcantonio proclaimed that his progressive ALP program received more votes than ever before. Significantly, according to news reports, Puerto Ricans voted in large numbers in this election.54

Indeed, the 1949 election results were not all negative for Marcantonio. He publicly thanked Puerto Ricans for their support during the campaign and declared that the election results represented “the repudiation of Muñoz Marín by the Puerto Rican people.” In his words, “[a]lthough I lost the elections, Muñoz Marín was completely defeated. An analysis of the elections shows that in each of the electoral districts where Puerto Ricans predominate I defeated O'Dwyer on an average of 3½ to one; so Puerto Ricans rejected Muñoz Marín on a proportion of 3½ to one.” 55 Muñoz Marín was, of course, not a candidate in the 1949 mayoral election. Even so, for many supporters as well as opponents he was part of the race. Transnational politics had become an important aspect of Puerto Rican politics, on both the island and the mainland.

Although Marcantonio may have exaggerated his margin of victory over Muñoz Marín in the last quotation, he was correct regarding his support among Puerto Ricans. He won over O'Dwyer in his congressional district 35,900 to 34,600; he increased the percentage of votes in his district from 36 to 39 percent. In the predominantly Puerto Rican area of Harlem, he won 26,154 to 22,574 (Meyer 1989: 39). In Puerto Rico, Marcantonio’s defeat more than O'Dwyer’s victory was celebrated by his opponents, as an El Mundo editorial attests: “Luckily, the candidate who had the greatest support in our island’s environment was elected.” According to the island’s leading newspaper, the Puerto Rican vote was an important factor...
accounting for the reelection of New York City’s mayor, which came as a result of O’Dwyer’s actions in support of the island community. It concluded that Puerto Ricans expected O’Dwyer’s program in the city to “continue... without interruption and in an increasing manner.”

But contrary to the wishes of Puerto Rico’s leading political forces, Marcantonio’s relationship with Puerto Ricans would last until the end of his career. Marcantonio ran again for reelection to the House of Representatives in his congressional district in 1950. This time only an unprecedented alliance of the city’s political forces made possible his defeat. The Democratic, Republican, and Liberal parties joined forces to support a common candidate against Marcantonio. The PPD campaigned again against Marcantonio and again for the incumbent, Democratic Mayor Vincent Impellitteri, who had replaced O’Dwyer after the latter stepped down. Marcantonio’s opponents launched the anti-Communist campaign once again, and the “Puerto Rican problem” was resurrected as well. This time, Marcantonio’s ties to the Puerto Rican issue were too problematic. A few days before the election, two Puerto Rican Nationalists attempted to murder President Truman, and Nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos was charged with conspiracy. Marcantonio had been defense counsel for Albizu Campos in his 1936 trial and had supported him over the years. More damaging to Marcantonio’s campaign was the fact that one of the Nationalists accused in the attempt against Truman’s life was Oscar Collazo, who had worked in Marcantonio’s Harlem office years earlier. Yet while Marcantonio lost the 1950 congressional election overall, El Barrio delivered 60 percent of its vote to him (Meyer 1989: 169–70).
José Monserrat, Director of the Migration Division, acknowledged the impact that the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City had on Puerto Rico’s migration policy in a February 1961 confidential memo to Governor Muñoz Marín: “Although certain factors in the “reality of migration” have been recognized, and in fact led to the development of what is now the Migration Division, these factors were primarily the ‘pathological results’ of migration in the field of public relations in the States and the adverse effects of this ‘bad publicity’ on Puerto Rico.... I wish to recall the fact that this law [Migration Law of 1947] and the limited programs developed therefrom were motivated primarily by the negative effects of migration in the United States and consequently were generally aimed at minimizing these effects.” “Suggestions for a New Approach to Migration,” Confidential Report from Joseph Monserrat to Governor Luis Muñoz Marín, February 9, 1961. In Archivo de la Fundación Luis Muñoz Marín (AFLMM), section V, series 1, folder 137, doc. 1, p. iii.

Among the few that raised their voice in defense of Puerto Ricans during the “Puerto Rican problem” was, of course, Marcantonio; see “Defends Puerto Ricans: Marcantonio Sees Them Forced Into Second-class Citizenship,” New York Times, September 23, 1947: 18.

Support for independence was strong in El Barrio even in the late 1940s, as reflected in a February 1948 Cleveland Plain Dealer article on New York Puerto Ricans: “The nostalgia for their little home in the Caribbean is the general affliction of those Puerto Ricans that settle here.... [Puerto Rico] for them ‘is my fatherland’.... Although they will never return permanently to Puerto Rico they support the independence of the Island.... Puerto Ricans feel that way because they believe that their prestige will increase if Puerto Rico becomes a nation.” “Cleveland Plain Dealer trata de la vida de boricuas en New York,” El Mundo, February 28, 1948, p. 12. Author’s translation.

“El Barrio’s leftist organizations and existing support for left causes created a political force which directly fed into Marcantonio’s electoral campaigns. It was Marcantonio’s legislative and political advocacy on behalf of Puerto Rican causes, however, which widened his appeal for the entire community.” (Meyer 1992: 72). See also Schaffer (1966: 195–8).

The Vito Marcantonio Papers at the New York Public Library have abundant documentation that affirms his deep involvement with Puerto Rico’s affairs. See, for example the following folders in the Puerto Rico File: “Education, Federal Aid to 1949”; “Citizenship”; “Coffee Industry”; “Expedicionarios”; “Wage and Hour Administration”; “Works Progress Administration.”

Regarding the issue of U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans, Efrén Rivera Ramos explains: “The citizenship provision of the Jones Act amounted to a collective naturalization of Puerto Ricans. However, people born thereafter in Puerto Rico would not acquire citizenship automatically, although they could do so derivatively, in accordance with the relevant statutes then in force. Subsequent enactments produced the current legal situation whereby all Puerto Ricans become U.S. citizens at birth” (Rivera Ramos 2001: 146).

In response to attacks by a follower of Puerto Rico’s Commissioner of Labor, Prudencio Rivera, a former member of the Socialist Party who argued that Marcantonio had no right to intervene in Puerto Rican affairs, he replied: “The economic, social and civil rights problems of Puerto Rico are my problems. The sufferings of the people of Puerto Rico are my concern. The exploitation of the Puerto Rican masses is an enemy against which I shall wage daily warfare. The use of the public treasury for the benefit of poltroons, loafers, political bums and phoneyes is a practice which I have been endeavoring to stop. As a member of the House of Representatives of the United States, it is not only my constitutional duty, but also my moral obligation to my constituents to defend the best interests of the people of Puerto Rico” (Marcantonio 1939).
Marcantonio’s popularity in Puerto Rico is exemplified in the letter from Gregorio Carrión Rivera, editor of *El Martillo* Newspaper, to Marcantonio, May 18, 1939: “I will like to tell you that your name in Puerto Rico is mentioned by everybody and the great, great majority, appreciate your fight in congress [sic] for the removal of [Winship].... You have won so many simpatizers [sic] in Puerto Rico, that you do not realize how many they are.” In Marcantonio Papers, Box 54, General Correspondence.

Marcantonio’s notoriety in Puerto Rico was transferred to New York, as a Puerto Rican woman supporter stated: “Before I came to the U.S. two years ago my father told me about the wonderful American Vito Marcantonio who had helped the Puerto Rican people so much” (Meyer 1989: 99).


In this letter, sugar workers from Humacao criticize Pagán for abandoning workers’ interests and declare: “It seems paradoxical that an American like yourself be the spokesman for the suffering and exploited masses in Puerto Rico.... Keep going mister Marcantonio, it does not matter the obstacles that you face in your noble and disinterested fight....” In Vito Marcantonio Papers, Box 55, Puerto Rican Papers, Wage and Hour Administration Folder, CIH, roll 4. In another letter, sugar workers from Arecibo asserted: “For us you are the loyal Representative of our rights, in you we trust.... For the workers, Mister [Bolívar] Pagán is our worst enemy.” Letter from Juan Pellot, President of Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Azucarera del Distrito de Arecibo, to Marcantonio, May 4, 1940. In Vito Marcantonio Papers, Box 55, Puerto Rican Papers, Wage and Hour Administration Folder, CIH, roll 4. Author’s translations. Many worker’s letters expressing their gratitude to Marcantonio for his support in their struggles appear in the “Puerto Rico: Wage and Hour After Recommittment [sic]” in the Marcantonio Papers.

There is abundant correspondence between Muñoz Marín and Marcantonio in the former’s archives in AFLMM, mostly from 1939 to 1944 dealing with constituents’ issues. See AFLMM Section IV, Series 1 (General Correspondence), Folders 8, 119, and 123; Section IV, series 3 (Individuals), folders 360 and 361.

Letter from Angelita Santaella to Vito Marcantonio, November 5, 1941, in Vito Marcantonio Papers, Box 55, Puerto Rican Papers, General Correspondence, CIH, roll 3. English translation of this letter is found in Marcantonio’s papers. Santaella was Muñoz Marín’s cousin. In this letter she adds: “... I always have felt a great estimation and admiration for you—because of your struggle in behalf [sic] of labor and the Porto Rican colony residing in New York .... When are you coming back to P.R.? I hope it will be soon. You have captured the sympathies of our country-men because of the gallant defense made in several occasions, and because of your participation in taking Governor Winship out of P.R.” She then concludes: “I’ll put an end to my letter—wishing that you will always be our representative, I do know that Porto Ricans will always support you as they do realize that your merits deserve such support. Those of us who are in the island feel the same way, and it is to be lamented that we and the Popular party in general—which is the majority party in P.R.—could not give our support to a man who has done his best for the welfare of P.R.”
11 Documents on Marcantonio’s efforts to oust Winship, including letters to President Roosevelt, are found in Marcantonio Papers, box 55, Puerto Rico File, “Investigation” Folder, in CIH, roll 5. On Marcantonio’s venture to depose Winship see (Kaner 1968: 53–59). An original copy of “Five Years of Tyranny in Puerto Rico” is found in Marcantonio Papers, Box 55, CIH, roll 4, William Leahy Folder.

12 Marcantonio’s characterization of Muñoz Marín as the “Nero of Fortaleza” must have been irritating to him, since it was used earlier by the Congressman to depict Winship (whom the Governor also opposed).

13 According to Marcantonio: “This bill is not a reform in any real sense. The mere election of the Governor of Puerto Rico does not give the people of Puerto Rico any kind of sovereignty. It merely adds a decorated facade to an ugly and rotten colonial structure.” “Marcantonio denuncia la posposición del status,” El Mundo, 19 de junio de 1947: 2. Author’s translation.


16 “V. Marcantonio niega a Muñoz mandato en reforma política,” El Mundo, June 20, 1950: 10. Author’s translation.


18 Marcantonio concluded: “This is not a constitution for Puerto Rico. It is a deceit and an illusion. It is a tightening of the chains of the exploitation of the Puerto Rican people and it is a contract that gives a full title deed to the gang of Wall Street over the nation and the people of Puerto Rico.” “Marcantonio pide derrotan Constitución,” El Mundo, May 31, 1951: 2. Author’s translation.

19 According to Marcantonio, Operation Bootstrap was “a program to sell Puerto Ricans as peddlers to the biggest bidder of the continent.” ”Según Marcantonio, el azúcar es el mayor problema insular,” El Mundo, August 1, 1950: 16. Author’s translation. He proposed an eight-point plan for the immediate economic recovery of Puerto Rico, which included an increase for the island’s sugar quota; defense of agriculture; an extension to Puerto Rico of Social Security benefits and other federal programs; return of the land taken by the U.S. Navy to the people of Vieques; and to the taking of “measures to end discrimination against Puerto Rican workers in the United States.” See (Marcantonio 1950); and “Congresista hace fuerte ataque a gastos propaganda Muñoz,” El Mundo, August 7, 1950: 14; also “Marcantonio cita consecuencias leyes de cabotaje y cuota azúcar,” El Mundo, August 5, 1950: 12.

20 It is once again José Monserrat who acknowledged the official Puerto Rican version of how the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City was caused by a reaction to Marcantonio’s politics and not as a response to Puerto Rican migration per se: “It became obvious that in order to defeat Marcantonio his grip on his constituents had to be broken. Here, in my opinion, is where the ‘Puerto Rican problem’ was created. In order to break Marcantonio’s stronghold on his community, the people had to be divided and to do this required an issue, a scapegoat. The Puerto Ricans became the scapegoat: the ‘Puerto Rican problem,’ the issue. Marcantonio, as the ‘creator’ of the issue and the ‘protector’ of the scapegoat, could thus be defeated and in fact was.” (Monserrat 1961: 8).

21 Governor Piñero was surprised by Marcantonio’s accusations; see “Sorprendió a Piñero queja Marcantonio,” El Mundo, August 28, 1946: 1, 22.

22 Pérez concluded: “However, as I told you in my previous letter, any expedition of this kind has to meet a number of circumstances from which emigrants can not [sic] escape. Laborers were fully advised by this Department before signing their contracts, and they were well aware of the eventualities implied in such undertaking” (Pérez 1946b).

This position is elaborated by members of the PPD government in response to inquiries by Puerto Ricans in New York: “Marcantonio, in the American public opinion, is deeply identified with the political theories and practices that the vast majority of the country repudiate. The attacks in the press, in which the Puerto Ricans in New York have been wrongful victims, are due precisely to the fact that Puerto Ricans are been identified with Vito Marcantonio.... I am sure that through the combined efforts of the Insular government and the municipal authorities of New York we can achieve that all Puerto Ricans that live in that city receive the acknowledgment of the rights and opportunities that belong to them by virtue of their citizenship. If we can dissipate the atmosphere misunderstanding that some fellow citizens in the Mainland have formed without reason about Puerto Ricans, the living conditions and coexistence of our people there would improve automatically.” Letter from Luis Laboy, Secretary of the Governor of Puerto Rico, to Leocadio Martínez, New York City, November 15, 1949; in AGPR, Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, box 2280. In a letter to the Governor, Martínez criticized the Puerto Rican government’s campaign against Marcantonio and stated: “All Puerto Ricans will vote for him. A victory for Marcantonio is a victory for all Puerto Ricans that live in America.” He asserted that O’Dwyer had done nothing for the community and questioned why Muñoz Marín and Mayor Rincón did not visit the Puerto Rican colony on their trips to New York City. Letter from Martínez to Muñoz Marín, October 18, 1949; in AGPR, Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, box 2280. Author’s translations.

As *El Mundo* reported: “The so-called ‘Puerto Rican problem’ in New York has come to occupy an important role in this election not only because of the participation of Vito Marcantonio, in whose district lives a powerful nucleus of Puerto Ricans, but also because of the number of the articles recently published in newspapers and magazines of the country, giving prominence in some occasions in a sensationalist and openly anti-Puerto Rican form, and in other occasions in a more impartial way, to the situation of Puerto Ricans that live in the so-called Hispanic Harlem, stronghold of the Marcantonio forces.” “Crece interés pro campaña en New York,” *El Mundo*, November 2, 1949: 1. Author’s translation. See also on this issue, Julio Antonio, “El voto boricua en Nueva York,” *El Mundo*, October 23, 1949: 6.


The city government had previously tested several social programs in El Barrio in an attempt to disassociate Puerto Ricans from supporting Marcantonio. See “Block Plan is Beginning to Yield Results in East Harlem’s Slums,” *New York Times*, March 12, 1947: 27.

An extensive analysis of the Mayor’s Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs is presented in Sánchez, 2007: chapter 3. Sánchez argues that the committee’s creation was linked to Marcantonio’s political relationship with the Puerto Rican community and the support for the Puerto Rican government’s reforms in Puerto Rico: “The emergence of the MCPRA can be attributed to the threat posed to local leaders by the radical Marcantonio machine.
and a militant Puerto Rican community carrying on a tradition handed down from the cigar makers. The MCPRA did not emerge, however, because of any real potential for 'social disruption' in the city. Its birth was more closely connected, as we have seen, to economic and political developments in Puerto Rico. The MCPRA, as we claimed, helped directly to consolidate the Operation Bootstrap program as well as the political power of Muñoz-Marín and his Populares movement in Puerto Rico" (Sánchez 2007: 117).

27 An official committee document acknowledged the creation of the committee “as a result of official discussions between the Mayor and officials of the City of New York and the Governor and officials of what is now the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Both groups sought to establish machinery which could benefit the City of New York, the island of Puerto Rico and, most particularly, the people of New York, whether these were long-time residents or newly-arrived citizens” (The Mayor’s Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs in New York City: 5).

28 The creation of the Mayor’s Committee on Puerto Ricans Affairs was linked officially to the issue of the city’s welfare program. O’Dwyer argued that with the committee’s creation “it is certain that the constructive steps proposed will not only improve greatly the whole situation affecting our Puerto Rican fellow-citizen, but will also result in a substantial reduction in relief costs.” “Press Release,” Press and Public Relations of the Department of Welfare, September 12, 1949. In AGPR, Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, box 2280.

29 “O’Dwyer pide se continúe emigración,” El Mundo, September 18, 1949: 1, 3; and “Alcalde O’Dwyer de Nueva York toma juramento a grupo asesor,” El Mundo, September 24, 1949: 1, 14.


On early October 1949 the New York Times published a report on the dire situation of New York’s Puerto Ricans. The article began by stating that these migrants “whose number is a guess between 160,000 and 600,000, are the displaced persons of the Western Hemisphere.” It goes on saying that “these refugees from an overpopulated tropical island... have more trouble adjusting to this city’s life than do the survivors of Europe’s concentration camps.” It repeats some of the themes of the 1947 “Puerto Rican problem” campaign, including the elevated number of Puerto Ricans on welfare and, of course, their support of Marcantonio. “City Puerto Ricans: Complex Problem,” New York Times, October 3, 1949: 11.


33 Marcantonio Plot Charged by Mayor,” New York Times, November 7, 1949: 5; also “Espérase acudan en Nueva York a las urnas 2,500,000 personas,” El Mundo, November 8, 1949: 1, 12. Commissioner of Welfare Hilliard, also the Chairman of the Mayor’s Committee on Puerto Ricans Affairs, also joined the attack on Marcantonio. He declared
that the Congressman “is seeking to frighten the good people of Harlem into voting like Communists.” “Hilliard Declares Marcantonio ‘Liar,’” New York Times, November 1, 1949: 12.


35 There are many references to transnational political manifestations in the literature on Puerto Rican migration to New York City before 1945. See particularly: Andreu Iglesias (1977), Sánchez Korrol (1994: chs. 5 and 6) and Sanabria (1991).

36 An El Mundo report described the situation as follows: “These short weeks should be pleasant for those Puerto Ricans residing in the Great City that feel nostalgia for their native land. They are enjoying an electoral campaign that could not be better thought nor could be more exciting if it were taking place on the Island.... If our Puerto Rican could close his eyes for a moment he could imagine, without any difficulty, that he is back in San Juan or Utuado. The Island has been brought to him.” Thomas S. Hayes, “Azúcar y vinagre,” El Mundo, November 8, 1949: 6. Author’s translation. See also, “Crece interés por campaña en Nueva York,” November 2, 1949: 1, and “La colonia puertorriqueña vivió hasta ayer intensa actividad,” November 8, 1949: 15, both in El Mundo.


42 “La Alcaldesa es recibida por O’Dwyer,” El Mundo, November 4, 1949: 1, 26. Rincón de Gautier was also received by Cardinal Spellman and given a mass in her honor at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral. While in New York, she enjoyed a three-car escort provided by O’Dwyer. “Felisa Rincón fue huesped durante misa,” El Mundo, November 8, 1949: 1, 12.


45 Letter from Muñoz Marín to Mayor O’Dwyer, October 6, 1949. In AGPR, Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, box 2280. My emphasis. Muñoz Marín expands this perspective on related correspondence, arguing that his government’s and Mayor O’Dwyer’s actions will separate Puerto Ricans from Marcantonio: “The linking of the Puerto Ricans residing in New York City with Vito Marcantonio has been very detrimental to the good will that they deserve.... I feel most certain that if the Puerto Ricans in New York were living in the Island they would be voting for me with the same determination that they do here. It seems that Marcantonio knows how to work a political machinery capable of extending personal favors now and then to people who seek his help. Some Puerto Ricans, whose number I can not determine, will continue voting for him as long as they think that whatever they get comes from him. Mayor O’Dwyer, whose sincere interest in the welfare of Puerto Ricans is beyond doubt, is conscious of this fact and I am certain that through his efforts and our own, in a very short time we can show to Puerto Ricans how little they get in comparison to what they lose from their association with Vito Marcantonio.” Letter from Muñoz Marín to Alexander G. Haldane, Greenwich, Conn., November 29, 1949, in AGPR, Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, box 2280.

46 Muñoz Marín rejected Cabranes’ idea for a recorded message because he thought it would
be “counterproductive,” according to his Executive Assistant Gustavo Agrait. In a letter to Cabranes, Agrait insisted that: “With the climate that has been created regarding Puerto Ricans for some time now, the intervention of the Governor in the elections will bring more acutely before New Yorkers our situation there.” After announcing to Cabranes that the Governor had sent the letter to O’Dwyer and authorized the Mayor to publish it, Agrait stated about Muñoz Marín, “I do not think he is ready to go beyond this position.” Letter from Agrait to Cabranes, October 10, 1949. In AGPR, Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, box 2280. Author’s translation. The fact the Cabranes was informed about the letter to O’Dwyer after the fact shows how little confidence Muñoz Marín had in the Migration Division director.


An El Mundo columnist reported that the 25,000 letters to Puerto Ricans, which included Muñoz Marín’s letter to O’Dwyer, were mailed by New York’s Democrats. See E. Combas Guerra, “Desde La Fortaleza,” El Mundo, November 8, 1949: 6.

There is circumstantial evidence to indicate that indeed the PPD may have used its political and governmental machineries to campaign for O’Dwyer. In the AGPR Governor’s Fund there are numerous electoral lists of registered voters dated October 1949 for several districts in Manhattan with all Hispanic names check-marked. See AGPR, Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, box 1608. Additional evidence, which certainly is extremely circumstantial for the 1949 campaign, is a letter from San Juan Mayor Rincón de Gautier to Muñoz Marín regarding the 1950 Senate and Governor’s campaign in New York. The Mayor reported to the Governor about the mailing of letters to Puerto Ricans in New York asking their vote for Lehman to the Senate and Walter Lynch for Governor. She stated:

“This campaign has been made through the mayors of the different municipalities of Puerto Rico and in San Juan, where it has been more intense, through municipal employees and the presidents of the Neighborhood Committees of our party.

The names of the people whom we have written are filled in a ‘form’ that has been completed by those who have been directly in charge of the campaign.”

She concluded by adding that the campaign has been very effective so far. See Letter from Felisa Rincón de Gautier to Muñoz Marín, October 26, 1950. In AGPR, Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, box 2280.

49 New York Times reported on Concepción de Gracia’s trip to New York: “The stage was thus set for a last-ditch fight to corral the so-called Puerto Rican vote, estimated at 50,000 to 75,000, with Mayor O’Dwyer and Mr. Marcantonio the leading protagonists.” See “Muñoz Marín’s Foe Comes to Steer Puerto Rican Vote for Marcantonio,” October 27, 1949: 1. Also, “Líder del PIP hace campaña a Marcantonio,” El Mundo, October 25, 1949: 1, 12.

50 “Dr. Concepción de Gracia dice boricuas elegirán Marcantonio,” November 2, 1949: 3, and “Dr. Concepción ataca táctica de Gobernador,” October 27, 1949: 1, 14, both in El Mundo. Author’s translation.

leader Francisco Susoni—former speaker of the House and PPD leader—also gave his support to Marcantonio; in “Dr. Susoni insta boricuas voten a Marcantonio,” El Mundo, November 3, 1949: 1, 16. Also attacking the O’Dwyer administration and the Puerto Rican government in the campaign was Encarnación Padilla de Armas, Hispanic coordinator for the Liberal Party. She accused New York Democrats of not paying any attention to the needs of Puerto Ricans in the city. She also denounced the Puerto Rican government for trying to impose its view on the community and declared that “Puerto Ricans in New York do not want the Government of Muñoz Marín.” The lady was no friend of Marcantonio either, as one of her party’s goal was to defeat Marcantonio, whom she accused of being a Communist. “Dama boricua alude a votación Partido Liberal en Nueva York,” El Mundo, November 15, 1949: 5. Author’s translation.

52 Concepción de Gracia’s accusation that Rincón de Gautier was not close or involved in the community’s affairs were not unfounded. While the newspaper reports alluded to the PIP president’s campaigning in street meetings and other mass events, alone or with Marcantonio, all of the activities reported on the San Juan Mayor dealt with events organized by the O’Dwyer campaign or with the city’s elite organizations. See, for example, “Arrecia brega eleccionaria en Nueva York,” El Mundo, November 3, 1949: 1, 16; “La colonia puertorriqueña vivió ayer intensa actividad,” El Mundo, November 8, 1949: 16, 20; and “Espérase acudan en Nueva York a las urnas 2,500,000 personas,” El Mundo, November 8, 1949: 1, 12.

53 “Espérase acudan en Nueva York...” Author’s translation. The Puerto Rican vote in New York City was not exempted from discord. Opponents of Marcantonio, including the O’Dwyer administration, accused him of illegal registration of Puerto Ricans, arguing that many did not comply with English literacy requirements or residence qualifications. Marcantonio charged his opponents of political persecution of Puerto Ricans and of preventing their registration to vote in the election. See “Los 4 partidos están activos en Nueva York,” El Mundo, October 10, 1949: 3. Also, on previous incidents on this type see “State Opens Check on Vote Charges,” New York Times, October 8, 1948: 5.

On the last days of campaigning, see LaGumina 1969: 127–132. On the reception of the elections results in Puerto Rico, see “O’Dwyer y Lehman triunfan por una abrumadora mayoría; boricuas invaden los colegios,” El Mundo, November 9, 1949: 1.

55 “V. Marcantonio agradece voto de los boricuas,” El Mundo, November 11, 1949: 5. Author’s translation.


58 Meyer 1969: 169–170. This was not the first time that Marcantonio’s opponents used his relationship to Puerto Rican Nationalists to attack him; see, e.g., “Convicts, Traitors, Thugs Campaign for Marcantonio,” The Daily Mirror, October 29, 1946, in AFLMM, Section IV, Series 3, folder 360, doc. 1. There are two letters from Oscar Collazo to Marcantonio dated November 16 and 22, 1949, in Vito Marcantonio Papers, Box 55, Puerto Rican Papers, Wage and Hour Administration Folder, CIH, roll 4. Donovan used Marcantonio’s relationship to Puerto Rican Nationalist in his campaign against the Harlem Congressman; see New York Times, November 4, 1950: 6.

Puerto Rico’s leading forces celebrated Marcantonio’s defeat. Governor Muñoz Marin congratulated James Donovan stating that “The vast majority of Puerto Ricans are very happy because of your triumph.” “Puerto Ricans Glad for Donovan,” New York Times, November 12, 1950: 24. An El Mundo editorial indicated: “Now that Marcantonio disappeared from the political scene it will be possible for many of his followers to realize
that the political future of Puerto Ricans in New York lies in a different path.” “La lección de las elecciones,” editorial, November 9, 1950: 6. Author’s translation.


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