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Unfulfilled Promise: Puerto Rican Politics and Poverty
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Research has demonstrated that educational attainment, residential location and segregation, migration status, types of jobs available, and spatial location, as well as discrimination, all play in the determination of the poverty status of Puerto Ricans in the United States. Few treatments of the causes and consequences of Puerto Rican poverty focus on politics. The purpose of this essay is to address this imbalance by looking at how previous studies have explained the participation of political leaders in the relationship between poverty and policy. This essay will examine the role of interest groups in the political process, with a focus on the influence of Puerto Rican leaders in the United States. The essay will also trace the historical development of Puerto Rican political organizations and their impact on policy making. Finally, the essay will explore the potential for future research on the role of political leaders in reducing poverty among Puerto Ricans.
areas such as educational attainment, and it was compounded by an overall decline
domination of the island. The impact of poverty was exacerbated, spilling over into
to the effects of disparities, especially for the populations over the colonial
the assimilation of Puerto Rican culture was learned more difficult—only in proportion
despite the differences existing in the new origins. In contrast with previous understandings,
admitted Puerto Rican poverty was considered inevitable by the local population.
and consequences of Puerto Rican poverty focus on politics. The purpose of this essay is
two-fold: (1) to address this problem by looking at how pressing concerns over the
demand-side factors. In this way, “there is another
poverty and power to their number of the mainland and mainland. In 1949, Vega
life, Puerto Rican poverty is the dominant theme in Puerto Rican
business and politics. The political economy of Puerto Rico.

... Puerto Rican Poverty and Politics

In his book, “Puerto Rican Poverty and Politics,” Bernardo Vega, a socialist critic from whom one would expect a grimmer assessment. In his

Ironically, an explicitly optimistic view can be found in the work of Bernardo Vega, a reader of New York. Vega’s perspective on Puerto Rican

Similarly, in part because his study was just a beginning, Chenault was cautious about Puerto Rican prospects. After detailing the negative effects of migration and settlement, nowhere did he suggest that a better future was foreclosed to them.

By 1947, the Puerto Rican population in the United States was estimated to be around 75,000, mostly residing in New York City. The visible presence of Puerto Ricans in the city was not only a result of migration but also the result of the economic and social conditions in Puerto Rico. The island was characterized by poverty, limited opportunities, and low educational attainment.

The Puerto Rican experience in the United States suggests that human capital is not the sole determinant of poverty. The relationship between human capital and poverty status correlate in complicated and often paradoxical ways. If the relationship were

The consensus was that racial discrimination would make it difficult for Puerto Ricans to "rise as easily or as far as people of white stock." If the relationship were

In this image, money was "the open sesame to a society where status definition is

... Puerto Rican Poverty and Politics.

In an article published in The New Yorker, Vega pays more attention to the racial prejudice encountered by Puerto Ricans in the United States. He highlights the discrimination faced by Puerto Ricans, which was not only institutionalized but also perpetuated by social attitudes and stereotypes.

The ultimate cause of bigotry and inequity was systemic, but to remove such obstacles from their path, Puerto Ricans need not wait for a systemic transformation. Vega ended his memoir in 1947 by noting the sympathy of Puerto Ricans for Henry Wallace—Harry Truman’s cabinet member turned political adversary—while wondering if it would be a good idea to organize the community in support of Wallace’s proposed third party.

Vega recognized that in order to succeed, Puerto Ricans had to be

By 1957, with a little over half a million Puerto Ricans living in New York, the population of the island was becoming more diverse. The Puerto Rican settlement extended all the way from Harlem to Chelsea on the West Side, illustrating the laminated quality of New York's population, where slums or near-slums are interleaved with homes of the middle class.

Similarly, the growth of Puerto Rican communities such as El Barrio had more than "a really Spanish flavor," as Christopher Lasch described in his book, "The Fine Stranger." This was the time when the Puerto Rican settlement extended all the way from Harlem to Chelsea on New York’s West Side, and it was characterized by a sense of community and resilience.

The role of these settlements in determining Puerto Rican poverty has been

"Politics, politics, and the poor remain poor"...
As 1950s conventional wisdom had it, in New York a Puerto Rican could earn twice as much as in Puerto Rico, and the only risk facing the migrants was being hired last and fired first, according to the ebb and flow of the market. But as soon as the Puerto Rican experience began to show signs of dissonance with the dominant socioeconomic conditions and a housing cooperative and a voting rights movement, the literature on Puerto Rican poverty began to shift its focus to the political economy of race and the role of government in shaping opportunity and disadvantage.

Nevertheless, the important point is that Lewis' analysis cannot be reduced to an instance of "blaming the victim." To the contrary, without exempting the poor of their share of responsibility for their status, Lewis pointed out how the culture of poverty was not about poverty per se but about the culture of poverty, as developing conformism and resignation with their lot among the poor. Lewis claimed that this distinction was at the heart of much historical misunderstanding about the nature of the poor, and for that reason he set out to specify the difference between the two. The cultural focus of the book, La Vida, was not about poverty per se but about the culture of poverty.

Lewis was quite clear: "The culture of poverty in modern nations is not only a matter of economic deprivation and disorganization of the absence of something. It is also something positive and provides some rewards without which the poor could hardly carry on." Of course, this attitude was criticized, however, did not make it a wholesale condemnation of poor Puerto Ricans. Lewis pointed out how the culture of poverty was more than a human capital problem, also involving limited employment opportunities. Even though poor Puerto Ricans were able to find work, they were unable to make the government more responsive to market failures. According to Sexton, "Government is also a substitute power. When no other source is available, people will choose government over the free market. They are willing to pay taxes and fees in order to influence the free market."

In that context, it is hardly surprising that poor Puerto Ricans were unable to make the government more responsive to market failures. According to Sexton, "Government is also a substitute power. When no other source is available, people will choose government over the free market. They are willing to pay taxes and fees in order to influence the free market."

It was around this time that the best-known assessment of Puerto Rican poverty was published. As much as this work has been decried by Puerto Rican scholars, the fact is that Lewis' was not just a supply-side analysis of poverty. A careful reading of La Vida reveals the recognition that poverty was more than a matter of economic deprivation and disorganization of the absence of something. It was far from universal. In 1959, Oscar Handlin wrote that "somewhat more slowly than among the Negroes, there has been a recent development of political awareness among the Puerto Ricans." But the new awareness resulted only in increases in electoral turnout rather than in strong political organization or representation, as the principal focus of organization and action was social, cultural, and community-based.

Sexton described three community development initiatives to upgrade socioeconomic conditions in East Harlem: a community school, a study club, and a housing cooperative. In the course of these activities, Sexton noted the absence of demand-side factors. For example, the failure of government to encourage or carry out the social, political, and economic organization needed to address the needs of the poor was a consequence of unemployment, underemployment, and low wages and how it was also related to low levels of social, political, and economic organization.
New York City's experience in the 1990s, as reported in part by political analyst and sociologist William Julius Wilson in "The Decline of the Black Family" and detailed in his book "When Work Disappears," illustrates the effects of these questions on the outcome of poverty. Wilson argued that the decline of the black family, characterized by high rates of out-of-wedlock births and single-parent households, was a major factor in the rise of poverty among black Americans. He emphasized the need for policy interventions that address the root causes of poverty, such as education and job training programs, rather than simply providing temporary assistance.

However, the role of government in addressing poverty has been a subject of debate. Some argue that government programs have been ineffective in reducing poverty, while others point to the success of targeted programs in certain areas. The question of how government should address the issue of poverty remains a pressing concern.

Economic Survival in New York City, originally published in 1980 and reprinted in 1996, Clara Rodríguez suggested that...
Long after urban political machines were declared dead, machine rule could be found in many cities. Indeed, the term "machine" is still used to describe the local political organizations that perpetuated this type of politics. But Puerto Ricans were not a focus of machine politics in New York and other cities where they settled. The degree to which early political behavior reflects a "very politicized Puerto Rican community" is open to question, especially given the peripheral role that Puerto Ricans played in both machine and reform politics in New York and given the scant interest of both the Democratic and Republican parties in their incorporation.

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The Pull of the Homeland

The problem with this outlook is that it fails to show how unity about Vieques, or any other homeland issue, translates into unity everywhere. There are also countless examples of yesterday's outsiders being today's insiders, a pattern that suggests a connection rather than a gap between homeland and mainland politics. In Hartford, Connecticut, pro-independence activists doubled as the community's most committed advocates for political representation in local government; some transformed their outsider persona to work within the establishment. In Philadelphia, the Young Lords Party fought both for independence and socialism for Puerto Rico and for local political representation.

First, for more than a hundred years now, the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States has been a central concern of Puerto Ricans living both on and off the island. This has been a function of specific leadership styles; the quality of Puerto Rican leadership has also been a factor.

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

In 1977, in an attempt to break from this pattern, a group of Puerto Ricans established the National Puerto Rican Coalition (NPRC), an advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. NPRC represented an effort to move past the resource model of political mobilization in which the focus was on programs and services, and organizational maintenance rather than grassroots mobilization and agenda-setting became the sole reason for the existence of groups such as the PRCDP, a situation that prevails to this day.

In 1965, the victorious community action tendency received funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity. The establishment of the PRCDP was preceded by a factional struggle within the community action forum that revolved around the programmatic objectives of the proposed organization and its control. One faction argued for a resource development strategy that was mostly individualistic and technocratic, emphasizing programmatic expenditures over public sector policies. In 1970, the proportion of Puerto Ricans who identified as Puerto Rican was 54%.

The claim that the Commonwealth's office arrested the development of a political party, Puerto Rican elites concentrated their attention on achieving representation within the administrative and political institutions of the local and national government. Puerto Ricans began organizing as an interest group in the mid-1950s. This is another aspect of the Puerto Rican experience that merits more research, especially in New York City. The establishment of the National Puerto Rican Forum, established "to promote the interests of Puerto Ricans in New York City," was another important development.

Puerto Ricans and the Pressure System

Puerto Ricans have long been a part of the political and social fabric of New York City. The history of Puerto Rican political participation in the city is complex and multifaceted. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the key developments in the history of Puerto Rican political participation in New York City.

Puerto Ricans have been active in the political process since the early 20th century. In 1940, the proportion of Puerto Ricans who identified as Puerto Rican was 47%. By 1970, this proportion had increased to 54%. The increase in the proportion of Puerto Ricans who identified as Puerto Rican is indicative of the growing political influence of the Puerto Rican community in New York City.

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Structural and political variables notwithstanding, another major stumbling block of Puerto Rican efforts to address poverty through politics is leadership. The problem of invisibility was exacerbated in the mid-1980s by the emphasis on immigration that culminated in the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 and by the ascendancy of universalism in public policy. In the new political climate, groups with relatively few resources and overly ambitious programs, such as the Taller Boricua in Philadelphia, the Hispanic Housing Development Corporation in Chicago, and Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción in Boston, and the Taíno Housing Development in Hartford, just to mention a few, testify to a robust and influential—in other words, a player in its own right. This failure is one important reason why public policy has not fully addressed the problem of Hispanic poverty. Yet these are not insignificant problems, and the group's leadership was not left out in the cold.

In this example, the context and the dynamic of the political process have individual, purposeful activity, supported by followers, producing social, economic, or political change. In this sense, leadership is more important than individual attributes. A different conception of leadership would say that it is a function of the context and the leader's ability to influence events. As such, leadership can be seen as a means of achieving a desired outcome, rather than as a quality inherent in the leader himself. The problem of Hispanic poverty persists despite the work of efficient and effective Hispanic organizations, the problem cannot be explained solely in terms of organizational factors—such as being divisive. This context did not cause NPRC's internal deficits, but it certainly compounded its troubles.

Similarly, despite very good work on specific issues, the quality of lobbying efforts was inconsistent, in part due to the inability of the leadership of the organization to develop a clear and focused agenda. This failure is one important reason why public policy has not fully addressed the problem of Puerto Rican poverty. Yet this must be seen as a relative failure. In other words, since the more general development of public policies affecting Puerto Ricans in the United States is inconsistent, in part due to the inability of the leadership of the organization to develop a clear and focused agenda.
Political Leadership: A Closer Look

The positive contribution of Puerto Rican political leaders to community well-being remains to be spelled out in detail. What role have they played in the enactment of redistributive policies? Is incumbency a function of identity politics, constituent satisfaction, safe districts, absence of credible challengers, political moderation, or a combination of these factors?...
resistance in other words, the more difficult promoting change is, the better the quality of leadership that is required to make it happen. Finally, personal ability must be taken into account, understood as how well an individual is able to find wiggle room in socially, economically, or politically constrained environments.

Leadership performance cannot be judged in a vacuum. The balance of structural, political, and systemic constraints they face. Historically, militant political leaders did not meet them because by definition they were involved in movements that pursued goals that were not aligned with the socioeconomic condition of Puerto Ricans, they invested it in shoring up their organizations. At times they did this by appropriating the resources they controlled, while in effect securing "nothing more than patronage troughs for political opportunists."

The simple truth of the matter is that the political system has failed the test of responsiveness, this is evident from the examples addressed in this chapter. The issue of poverty has not been satisfactorily addressed in the political process; instead, the agenda-setting or policymaking process increases the chances that important priorities might be overlooked. A lack of knowledge about the precise degree of affinity between representation and responsiveness, the question is whether contemporary leaders will be able to bridge the gap between representation and responsiveness; this is the system's unfulfilled promise to Puerto Ricans in the United States. Further, Puerto Rican political efforts have not succeeded in promoting goals that are not aligned with poverty issues. At worst, they used poverty to develop their own fortunes, political or ideologicaally oriented. moderate leaders, on the other hand, were more concerned with good management of existing resources and long-term objectives (i.e., independence for Puerto Rico). As a consequence they fulfilled neither one.

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In our media-driven political culture, name recognition enhances this ability even more. Similarly, brokered representation in the agenda-setting or policymaking process increases the chances that important priorities might be overlooked. A lack of knowledge about the precise degree of affinity between representation and responsiveness; this is the system's unfulfilled promise to Puerto Ricans in the United States. Further, Puerto Rican political efforts have not succeeded in promoting goals that are not aligned with poverty issues. At worst, they used poverty to develop their own fortunes, political or ideologically oriented. Moderate leaders, on the other hand, were more concerned with good management of existing resources and long-term objectives (i.e., independence for Puerto Rico). As a consequence they fulfilled neither one.
in the labor market is that of a pregnant teen with a history of welfare recipiency. If she is lucky, whose English proficiency is limited (as a result of being born in Puerto Rico) and is a high school dropout. This profile suggests some clear areas of improvement.

Elected officials also need to take a hard look at policies for immigrants, particularly refugees, in search of effective models for resettlement programs aimed at first-time movers from the island. Intervention in these areas might not have an impact on the structural factors that contribute to concentration of poor people in central cities, fiscal shortages, and inter-generational cycles of poverty more likely.

Indispensable to make those changes happen is cooperation. It follows that effective leadership is not just important but indispensable through massive federal and state aid and/or some form of regional cooperation. On the other hand, if the number of effective state-sponsored and federal intervention programs is not large enough to test the validity of the hypothesis in regards to their experience, it is certainly true that Puerto Rican access to local structures of representation has coincided with socioeconomic deterioration and fiscal shortages. On the other hand, if the number of Puerto Ricans in the electoral arena as an avenue for anti-poverty mobilization and action.

At the local level there is the so-called “hollow prize” problem. Initially formulated during the last fifty has been one of oblivious disregard—even though they are in sight, they are out of mind. In the closing chapter of Gosnell, abridgement of Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1949, p. 2. There are no simple tasks here. The enormity of what needs to be done is not large enough to test the validity of the hypothesis in regards to their experience. If political will translates into a commitment of resources, as was the case with the War on Poverty, the impact of policy is inevitably weak, thereby reducing further the level of policy intervention: sex education, family planning, employment training, English proficiency, and dropout prevention programs. Elected officials also need to take a hard look at policies for immigrants, particularly refugees, in search of effective models for resettlement programs aimed at first-time movers from the island. Intervention in these areas might not have an impact on the structural factors that contribute to concentration of poor people in central cities, fiscal shortages, and inter-generational cycles of poverty more likely.

Meanwhile, Puerto Rican interest groups failed to influence the policy process. The result is a vicious circle: policies are not adopted because political will is low, and political will remains low because policies are not adopted. There is a coincidence of minority access to representation with socioeconomic and fiscal downturns. The idea of a hollow prize in local politics refers to the attitude toward Puerto Rico during the past one hundred years has been one of selective inattention, governmental neglect.

In ameliorating poverty is in part determined by political will. If political will translates into a commitment of resources, as was the case with the War on Poverty, the impact of policy is inevitably weak, thereby reducing further the level of policy intervention: sex education, family planning, employment training, English proficiency, and dropout prevention programs. Elected officials also need to take a hard look at policies for immigrants, particularly refugees, in search of effective models for resettlement programs aimed at first-time movers from the island. Intervention in these areas might not have an impact on the structural factors that contribute to concentration of poor people in central cities, fiscal shortages, and inter-generational cycles of poverty more likely.
Carlos Tapia and political leaders such as Oscar García Rivera, who was elected to the New York State legislature in 1938. See Sánchez Korrol, "Puerto Rican Politics in New York City," p. 48.

In New York this was true of both community leaders such as Luis Felipe Weber and Community, pp. 192–193.


The most prominent example of this is Hartford, Connecticut. See Cruz, "Organizational Politics," p. 63. Baver makes a similar point in "Puerto Rican Radicals in the United States." See Tórrres and Velázquez, eds. Puerto Rican Community Organizations in New York City, "Report to the National Puerto Rican Coalition on Organizational Strengths and Weaknesses and Future Directions I: 6 (Summer 1989): 35–47.

For two good treatments of what makes interest groups at the national level succeed (and fail) see John P. Heinz, et al., Organizational Strengths and Weaknesses and Future Directions I: 5 (Spring 1989): 21–31.

The main purpose of this survey was to compile a directory of Puerto Rican elected Ballots, Latino Politics in the 1990 Elections to the National Puerto Rican Coalition on Organizational Strengths and Weaknesses and Future Directions I: 6 (Summer 1989): 35–47.

In 1976, Congress added section 936 to the U.S. tax code to allow corporations with branches in Puerto Rico to repatriate profits while receiving a tax credit. In August 1996, Congress approved, and President Bill Clinton signed, legislation to phase-out section 936 within ten years.

In 1984, the Prince from Colonia to Community, pp. 192–193.

 speaks to the possibility of a visionary figure such as Antonia Pantoja. See Velázquez, Memoir of a Visionary: Antonia Pantoja, pp. 157.

Stone, "Political Leadership," p. 98.

The Prince, pp. 99–100.


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Puerto Ricans: immigrants and migrants. Clara E. Rodríguez. Introduction by Joseph Monserrat Photographs Compiled by Michael Lapp. Today Boricua means Puerto Rican, and many Puerto Ricans refer to the island as Borinquen in verses, songs or conversations. A Mining and Trade Center. After the arrival of Spanish explorers, Puerto Rico, which means “rich port,” became a mining center for gold and silver. Even today, Puerto Ricans, while subject to US laws and given US aid, can’t vote for president or elect full, voting members of Congress. Despite all that, young Rodriguez remained enchanted by American culture. He loved Western movies and books and grew up galloping the family’s horses down from the mountains and into the valley, which was home to the town square, not far from a lighthouse and the radiant turquoise coast. The couple raised three children together, primarily on the US mainland. For him, the 50 states were a place of promise and of hope -- a place of purpose and duty. Still, strangely, that first New York impression -- the muck on the street -- stuck with him, too. He never felt fully settled, his wife told me. Cruz, Jose E. “Unfulfilled Promise: Puerto Rican Politics and Poverty.” Centro: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies 15.1 (2003): 153-75. Elbaum, Max. Ogbar, J. O. G. “Puerto Rico in My Heart: The Young Lords, Black Power and Puerto Rican Nationalism in the US, 1966-1972.” Centro: Journal 18.1 (2006): 148-69. Plowman, Edward E. “Lords Leave, Litter Lingers.” Christianity Today January 1, 1971: 45. Ramos-Zayas, Ana Y. “Delinquent Citizenship, National Performances: Racialization, Surveillance, and the Politics Of "Worthiness" In Puerto Rican Chicago.” Latino Studies 2.1 (2004): 26-44. Roseman, Marina. Puerto Rican families are more than twice as likely as black families to be on welfare, and are about 50 percent more likely to be poor. In the mainland United States, Puerto Ricans have nothing like the black institutional network of colleges, churches, and civil-rights organizations; there isn’t a large cadre of visible Puerto Rican successes in nearly every field; black politicians are more powerful than Puerto Rican politicians in all the cities with big Puerto Rican populations; and there is a feeling that blacks have. The statistical evidence of Puerto Rican progress out of poverty evaporated. For many years the politics of Hunts Point was dominated by a rivalry between Gigante and Ramon Velez, another legendary figure who was also a New York city councilman.