

IDENTITY & POWER



Puerto Rican Politics & the Challenge of Ethnicity

José E. Cruz

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*Puerto Rican Politics and the
Challenge of Ethnicity*

JOSÉ E. CRUZ



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For my extended family
and
in memory of my brother,
José Miguel Cruz Figueroa
(1958–1984)

Preface

OF THE hundreds of newspaper articles I read while doing the research for this book, two stand out. The first, written in 1957, tells the story of Zoilo Caraballo, one of Hartford's earliest Puerto Rican residents. A photograph of a cheerful Caraballo coming home to his children illustrates the article. The headline encapsulates the profile: **PUERTO RICANS LIKE LIFE HERE, THEY'RE CROWDED BUT OPTIMISTIC**. The second, published in 1970, also chronicles difficulties and hope. Titled **ETHNIC NEED: POLITICAL MUSCLE**, it summed up what some felt was necessary to achieve progress. According to Alejandro La Luz, a community organizer, Puerto Ricans needed better leadership. Most important, they needed to develop their own groups to mobilize along ethnic lines.

These articles illustrate two key features of the Puerto Rican experience in Hartford: a long-standing mix of hardship and opportunity and the use of ethnicity to correlate ascriptive traits and status, to focus social capabilities, and to confront political reality. How Puerto Ricans used ethnicity to tackle adversity and exploit opportunities, to channel the energy created by the bonds of identity into the pursuit of political enfranchisement, is what this book is about.

The events recounted in this book intersect with aspects of my own experience in the United States. Like many early migrants to Hartford, I came from Puerto Rico not speaking much English and seeking opportunities that were unavailable to me on the island. I too moved to a Connecticut city and was challenged by my new circumstances. Once on the mainland, I realized I was an "ethnic," a discovery that baffled me. I was psychologically and culturally stricken upon arrival, but I adjusted quickly and looked forward to a new chapter in my life.

During my eighteen years in the United States, ethnicity has structured my experience in both positive and negative ways. Otherness has been my ticket to the mainstream of society. But it has been the source of much misunderstanding and conflict as well. Once, while visiting Milwaukee, a fellow called me "foreigner." I am a U.S. citizen by birth, but I am not blond and blue-eyed as he was. I cannot forget the old man who, alarmed at the sound of salsa coming from my apartment, angrily told me that "bongo music" was not welcome in "his" neighborhood because "this is Little Italy!" I kept playing my music but not as loudly as before. And then

there was the cab driver who expressed his dissatisfaction with my tip by calling me a “fucking spic.” That insult left me speechless, but it drove my wife to threaten him with bodily harm. Fortunately, my run-ins with prejudice have been infrequent, partly because of the struggle of people like Zoilo Caraballo and Alejandro La Luz to gain acceptance and respect for themselves and for others like them.

Just as I find echoes of my personal experience in the collective history of Puerto Ricans in Hartford, their story resonates in other cities, big and small. Hartford is not the only place where ethnicity has been an important mobilizing factor in key social and political battles. Elsewhere, Puerto Ricans and Latinos have used ethnicity to define their needs, and ethnicity in turn has structured their positions and their choices. The claim that the political significance of ethnicity is bound to decline is by now several generations old, yet this has not happened.

In 1996, when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani marched up Fifth Avenue during the Puerto Rican Day Parade, thousands jeered him for his neglect of Puerto Rican concerns. At Columbia University students demanded a program of ethnic studies. At Cornell they protested the elimination of ethnic dormitories. In Chicago, after a long struggle against discrimination in housing, Latinos won an agreement from the Housing Authority to print bilingual forms and give priority to Hispanic families on the waiting lists for apartments. Also in 1996, Bronx congressman José Serrano maintained his stronghold on the sixteenth district with 96 percent of the mostly Puerto Rican vote. In the twelfth congressional district, encompassing parts of Brooklyn and Manhattan, Nydia Velázquez won handily with 84 percent of the ballots. Meanwhile, elected officials in Hartford struggled with budget cuts that many thought would have a disproportionate effect on Puerto Rican residents. As a result, community leaders prepared for yet another battle. There is no doubt in my mind: ethnicity will continue to be an important ingredient in the American quest for unity, diversity, democratic participation, and equality.

CHAPTER 1 of the book, the Introduction, treats the subject topically and theoretically. It describes the object of study, its significance, and the conceptual framework underlying the narrative. Chapter 2 reviews Hartford’s political history and the place of Puerto Ricans in the city’s political system during the post–World War II period. Chapters 3 and 4 describe and analyze Puerto Rican political development in the city. Despite transient elements and travel back and forth between island and mainland, over the years Puerto Ricans have carved a permanent space for themselves in Hartford. To better understand the process of incorporation, I explain

how it developed over time. Chapter 5 analyzes a set of events during the 1970s that illustrate the tension between brokered representation and political mobilization. Chapter 6 expands this analysis by focusing on the Puerto Rican Political Action Committee of Connecticut. The origins and development of this group illustrate the connection between ethnicity, organization, and power. Chapter 7 focuses on the relationship between identity and power, beginning with an analysis of the city as the context for political action and then examining the nature and expressions of identity politics. An examination of the link between access to power and its exercise follows. The final section of chapter 7 outlines issues for future research. Chapter 8 concludes the book by reflecting on the challenge of ethnicity and the role it ought to play in the political process.

WRITING MY doctoral dissertation and then transforming it into this book required more time and energy than I ever dreamed would be necessary. Luckily, many people helped me, and I owe them an enormous debt of gratitude. I received intellectual direction, practical advice, encouragement, and support from John Mollenkopf and Marshall Berman. Their empathy during a period of personal crisis kept me “keeping on.” Early guidance also came from Krista Alstentetter, Frank Bonilla, Bernard Brown, Marilyn Gittell, Olga Jiménez-Wagenheim, William Kornblum, Howard Lentner, Frances Fox Piven, Stanley Renshon, Melvin Richter, and the late Richard Styskal. The cooperation of Pedro Juan Hernández, former director of the archives of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico’s Department of Puerto Rican Community Affairs in the United States (now located at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College), was crucial to my research. His staff, Carlos Bruno, Felipe Morales Millán, and Catrize Ortiz, kindly guided me through seventy boxes of documents containing information on Puerto Ricans in Hartford. Marisol Ramos-Aponte and María Cecilia Onetti, both graduate students at SUNY-Albany, were efficient research assistants.

In the city, I received help from Benjamin B. Barnes and Crucita D. Soto, from Hartford’s Planning Department; Juliann Butler, from the city’s Office of Management and Budget; Henry Bissonnette, from the United Way of the Hartford Capital Area; Nick Nyhart, executive director of the Legislative Electoral Action Program (LEAP); Susan Pennybacker and Eddie Pérez, from Trinity College; and John Rogan, area director of the New England Farmworkers Council (NEFC). Penny Rusnak and Janice Mathews, from the Hartford Public Library, gave me access to photographs from the library’s Hartford collection, and Juan Fuentes graciously allowed me to publish some from his. The owners of the Chester

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My wife, Elizabeth Allen, read more versions of this study than she cares to remember. If I have enjoyed my work, it is in part because of the intellectual and professional partnership we have forged over time. But she and the members of my extended family were special to this project in a deeper sense. Elizabeth, her parents and brothers gave me emotional and material support without which I could not have completed this book. Equally important in this regard were my mother, Gloria Figueroa, my grandmother Josefa Sánchez, God bless her soul; my sister, Vilma; my aunts Palmira, Elsie, and Rosa Julia; and my children, Víctor, Gabriel, and Elena. They sustained me with more than a fair share of love. So did my brother José Miguel during his short life. I dedicate this book to them and to the enduring memory of Miguelito.

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1 Introduction

ONE NOVEMBER night in 1992, while sitting at his kitchen table with a reporter from the *Hartford Advocate*, Edwin Vargas, Jr., then chairman of the Hartford Democratic Town Committee and leading light of the Puerto Rican Political Action Committee of Connecticut (PRPAC), reviewed his twenty years of political activism. “I really don’t like politics,” he said. The reporter, after nearly choking on a mouthful of food, exclaimed, “That’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. Everything you do, everything you say, screams politics! Your pores sweat politics. How can you tell me something like that?” Vargas offered a simple explanation: altruism. Puerto Ricans were poor, disfranchised, ignored by the power structure, and they needed him. He was in politics not for his sake but to do something for the community. Vargas allowed that this explanation was corny but true. The journalist later wrote that it was not believable.¹

When I read the story, I too was puzzled by Vargas’s admission. I was sure that his explanation was sincere, although I also understood how it could come across as self-serving. Still, this professed dislike of politics did not make sense. I remembered the afternoon in August 1991 when, with a broad smile and shining eyes, Vargas told me that PRPAC was risking its political future in an all-out challenge against six Democratic incumbents. The more he talked, the more I realized how significant the risk was. Yet his voice and his demeanor exuded only confidence and excitement. Likewise, when he shared the story behind his election as the Democratic party’s town chair—a truly Machiavellian tale of wily maneuvers and unsavory alliances—his sense of satisfaction and exultant tone were nearly palpable. These recollections did not jibe with the image of a reluctant player. How could he say that he hated politics when his behavior indicated that to him politics was what the hunt is to the predator?

The answer to this question echoes in the story this book tells. Vargas did not really hate politics; he hated its messiness, its burdensome demands, and its mixed outcomes. During his term as president of PRPAC Vargas and his allies devised a strategy that focused the energy drawn from Puerto Rican identity on achieving political power. By 1991, the results were dramatic: two state representatives were Puerto Rican, as well as a department head, several members of commissions, the corporation counsel, a deputy city manager, and three members of the city council.

True, almost one-third of Hartford's population was Puerto Rican, but the community also was barely two generations old. Yet, although the accomplishments had been significant, important campaigns had not turned out as expected, substantial agendas remained unfinished, and a trail of friends had turned bitter enemies.

Six months after the interview with the reporter for the *Advocate*, Vargas shared his mixed feelings about politics with me as he talked about Hartford's 1993 budget. Proposed cuts included a \$27 million reduction in the allocation for education, just when the majority of students were Puerto Rican and black. "Politically, we have arrived," he said, "at a time in which, instead of deciding who gets what, we have to decide who will be left out."²

THIS BOOK is about political mobilization and political change from below. It is about identity politics and urban power, about how ethnicity contributes to political action and how previously excluded actors access power. The focus is on Puerto Ricans and how they organized and mobilized to demand accountability from Hartford's political stratum. It chronicles and analyzes a process of empowerment—a process entailing incorporation and responsiveness—in which ethnicity played a major role. In fact, ethnicity played a *positive* role, thus casting the relationship between identity and power in a favorable light. For reasons related to the context and character of political action, however, success was only partial. Rewards were limited and costs substantial, accruing over an extended period of time.

Fueling this political mobilization were demographic growth, leadership development, and a relentless organizational drive. Puerto Ricans used ethnicity for political purposes in ways that represented a challenge both to the city and to themselves. To satisfy their social and political needs, they sought power. In this they succeeded, but access to power became only a threshold beyond which new difficulties lay. Ethnicity prompted expressions of cooperation and solidarity, but conflict was often the result as well. Finally, the relationship between political representation and socioeconomic gains was problematic.

The struggles of PRPAC from 1983 to 1991 epitomized this effort. Its leaders demanded accountability and respect for the Puerto Rican community. Before the creation of PRPAC, Puerto Ricans directed many of their claims to Nicholas Carbone, the city's deputy mayor from 1970 to 1979. Puerto Ricans focused on him after realizing that his obligation to them, and more generally, to the neighborhoods in which they lived, could not be taken for granted. For this reason, the generally cooperative relationship they had with Carbone and with the Democratic party was

punctuated by challenges that sought to address the imbalance between political rhetoric and political reality. That these challenges occurred was not surprising. But the Puerto Rican case added issues of identity to the mix of change and continuity that characterized the dynamics of power in Hartford.

PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

The story of Puerto Rican migration to the United States is a familiar one and need not be retold here except in its barest outline.³ The presence of Puerto Ricans in Connecticut goes back to the antebellum period,⁴ and, according to popular lore, the nexus between New England and Puerto Rico has not only been long-standing but culturally significant. The origin of the fritter known as *bacalaíto*—which consists of chunks of cod deep fried in flour batter—is related to trade between Massachusetts and Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century. Similarly, the machete, which in Puerto Rican culture alternates between agricultural implement and national symbol, is said to have come from the U.S. Northeast as a result of nineteenth-century trade.⁵

The larger forces behind Puerto Rican migration to the United States were colonialism and capitalism. The so-called change of sovereignty, a euphemistic way to refer to the substitution of U.S. for Spanish colonial rule in 1898, opened the door for systematic population movements between the island and the mainland. By 1910, stateside Puerto Ricans numbered three thousand. By 1920, three years after the Jones Act granted them American citizenship, that number had increased sixfold.⁶ Colonialism gave Puerto Ricans freedom of movement between island and mainland. Capitalism gave them incentives to move, and easy access to steamship and air travel made the trek possible. Citizenship made them eligible for military service in World War I. Through their experience in the service, Puerto Ricans became acquainted with life in the United States and this prompted many to stay.

In 1921, Congress passed the Johnson Act to curtail European immigration, and this contributed to the opening of job opportunities for Puerto Ricans, to whom alien restrictions did not apply. Furthermore, top government officials in San Juan and Washington, D.C., promoted the importation of Puerto Rican labor, arguing that as U.S. citizens they ought to be considered before foreigners.⁷

From the migrants' point of view, the fundamental motive for leaving the island was economic. In their study of Puerto Rican migration, C. Wright Mills, Clarence Senior, and Rose Goldsen suggested that "economic pull could not operate unless there were sources of favorable information about

New York City on the island.”⁸ They failed to note, however, that economic pull was matched not just by sources of information but by a favorable legal and political context created by the state.

Colonialism and capitalism and economics and politics provided the conditions that made migration possible, but individual Puerto Ricans, with help from institutional actors, such as Puerto Rico’s Department of Labor, the U.S. Employment Service, and representatives of interested corporations, made the decision to come. What Senior and Donald Watkins called the “family intelligence service” also played a role, as spouses and relatives rejoined on the mainland and acquaintances lured others to make the move.⁹ All took the promise of American citizenship seriously, hoping that Americans on the mainland would welcome them as equals.

Since Puerto Ricans arrived on the mainland, people have been studying them, but the focus of this research has been New York City, where before 1980 the majority of Puerto Ricans lived. By 1980, however, although New York still had the largest single community on the mainland (43 percent), the majority of mainland Puerto Ricans lived elsewhere,¹⁰ and by 1990, only one-third lived in New York. During this period the growth was most pronounced in medium-sized cities, that is, jurisdictions with populations of between 150,000 and 250,000, such as Hartford.

In 1990, 27 percent of Hartford’s total population was Puerto Rican. Nowhere else were they as concentrated (see Table 1). The reasons will not be explored here, but the implications for ethnic politics are crucial to my analysis.¹¹ Demographic concentration facilitated ethnic political mobilization, promoting the development of leaders and organizational efforts and acting as a counterweight to the forces of poverty and marginality. Context, as the reader shall see, was not everything, but its importance was cardinal.

Puerto Ricans came to Hartford propelled by the force of circumstance but motivated by desire and ambition. Some followed their American spouses, others wanted a better life, a few came just for the excitement of discovering what lay beyond island boundaries. Unemployed farmworkers and impoverished *arrimaos* (sharecroppers) were part of the mix, but skilled workers and a few professionals also made it, lured, respectively, by the prospect of work in tobacco farms, the possibility of industrial employment, or simply the desire to rejoin family members. Not all were poor, but poverty and marginalization became the defining elements of life, even for those to whom Hartford appeared “a perfect city.”

The Puerto Rican settlement in the insurance city coalesced during the 1950s. The review of the political development of the community shows the protracted nature of interest articulation and how it responds to both endogenous and exogenous factors. This micro-history is useful because

Table 1. U.S. Cities with Large Puerto Rican Concentrations, 1990

State and City	Total Population	Puerto Ricans	% of Total
California			
Los Angeles	3,485,398	14,367	0.4
Connecticut			
Bridgeport	141,686	30,250	21
<i>Hartford</i>	139,739	38,176	27
New Haven	130,474	13,866	11
New Britain	75,491	10,325	14
New York			
New York City	7,322,564	896,763	12
Rochester	231,636	16,383	7
Yonkers	188,082	14,420	8
New Jersey			
Camden	87,492	22,984	26
Elizabeth	110,002	12,062	11
Jersey City	228,537	30,950	14
Newark	275,221	41,545	15
Paterson	140,891	27,580	20
Massachusetts			
Boston	574,283	25,767	4
Lawrence	70,207	14,661	21
Springfield	156,983	23,729	15
Ohio			
Cleveland	505,616	17,829	4
Pennsylvania			
Philadelphia	1,585,577	67,857	4
Reading	78,380	11,612	15
Florida			
Miami	358,548	12,004	3
Illinois			
Chicago	2,783,726	119,866	4

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1990 Census of Population.

it reveals that Puerto Rican politics in Hartford is not New York City politics writ small. New York City was important to Hartford—intercity migration did take place, and Puerto Rican politics was not disconnected from developments elsewhere. But if one assumes that point of origin determines the character of politics in the receiving society, Puerto Rican politics in Hartford should be a mixture of island, mainland, and local influences rather than a small-scale version of Puerto Rican politics in New York. This is indeed the case.

This review also shows how the story of Puerto Ricans fits within broader developments. For example, it is inappropriate to see their ethnic-based mobilization as an epiphenomenon of the struggle of African Americans. Was ethnicity “quickly taken up” by Puerto Ricans after its expression was legitimized by blacks?¹² To be sure, the black movement caught the attention of intellectuals, publishers, the media, and government, and,

assuming that it is reasonable to label their movement as “ethnic,” it gave visibility to ethnic politics. But this says nothing about why there was a resurgence of ethnicity during the 1970s and even less about the Puerto Rican case. Puerto Rican identity politics in Hartford dates from the 1950s, before black militancy became widespread. Puerto Ricans were not impervious to contextual influences, but their history reveals that identity politics preceded not just the civil rights movement but its corollaries and the so-called ethnic revival of the 1970s as well. In their case, ethnic awareness was shaped by life in the United States but rooted in their island experience.

To be sure, the decline of Americanism brought about by racial conflict and the Vietnam War made ethnicity more acceptable during the 1970s than it was during World War II, when it was associated with fascist sympathies and betrayal. But the changed context alone does not explain why Puerto Ricans engaged in identity politics. It is by reviewing their political history that one realizes that their ethnic identity was strong before these conditions set in and that identity politics was a way of achieving representation and a means to negotiate individual and group benefits. To some, ethnicity meant a rejection of Americanism—to the extent that embracing the United States meant sanctioning colonialism in Puerto Rico—but to the majority, ethnicity was a code that structured their entrance into mainstream society and politics.

THE PUERTO RICAN POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE OF CONNECTICUT

In 1989, when this study began, there were signs of a political emergence among Puerto Ricans in Hartford that contrasted with the traditional and better-known New York experience. PRPAC was emblematic of this process. As I began to gather information on the community, it quickly became apparent that PRPAC was the leading political force among Puerto Ricans in the city. Its importance as object of study was clear. The contrast of Hartford with New York City, where, despite being the oldest and largest settlement, Puerto Ricans had no representation, was notable, and the saliency of PRPAC was a departure from situations of nearly complete political invisibility. Elsewhere, Puerto Ricans were excluded from political parties, policy-making bodies, and even from the antipoverty programs that other groups used to promote political mobilization and political access.¹³

I was fortunate to chance upon a group that provided an opportunity to fill a gap in the literature on Latino studies and that also fit within broader political science themes.¹⁴ A focus on PRPAC enabled a look at