



**NiLP**  
NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
LATINO POLICY

The NiLP Network  
on Latino Issues

## Latino Policy iReport

Join The NiLP Network

### National Institute for Latino Policy (NiLP)

25 West 18th Street  
New York, NY 10011  
800-590-2516

[info@latinopolicy.org](mailto:info@latinopolicy.org)  
[www.latinopolicy.org](http://www.latinopolicy.org)

#### Board of Directors

José R. Sánchez  
*Chair*

Edgar DeJesus  
*Secretary*

Israel Colon  
*Treasurer*

Maria Rivera  
*Development Chair*

Hector Figueroa  
Tanya K. Hernandez  
Angelo Falcón  
*President*

#### To make a donation,

Mail check or money  
order to the above  
address to the order of  
"National Institute for  
Latino Policy"

#### Follow us on

[Twitter](#) and  
[Angelo's Facebook  
Page](#)

*Note: The NiLP iReport, "A Boricua Game of Thrones?," has generated some discussion on the basis of much of Puerto Rican politics in The Bronx, New York and the role of political families or "dynasties" in Latino politics in general. One of the central figures in this analysis, NYS Assemblyman José Rivera provided further commentary on it in his recent interview on NY1 Noticias' Pura Política program ([click here](#) to view this Spanish-language interview) that I thought you might find of interest. Below we repost the original NiLP iReport.*

---Angelo Falcón

## A Boricua Game of Thrones? A Critical Review of the Rise of Puerto Rican Political Families in New York City

by Angelo Falcón (July 29, 2012)

*The fact that these families are controlling our communities is ludicrous. They are like these little monarchies.*

---Eddie Ortiz (2003)

*When you look at political families, that's been part of our culture as Americans. You look at the Adams, the Kennedys, look at the Bushs, no one ever questions nepotism, no one ever questions that.*

--- Ruben Diaz, Jr., Bronx Borough President.  
[interviewed by the 219 West Magazine on CUNY TV](#)  
(aired on November 16, 2010)

*... political power is self-perpetuating: legislators who hold power for longer become more likely to have relatives entering Congress in the future. Thus, in politics, power begets power.*

---Ernesto Dal Bó, Pedro Dal Bo, and Jason Snyder,  
["Political Dynasties,"](#) *Review of Economic Studies*,  
Vol. 76, Issue 1, pp. 115-142 (January 2009)

**A**s the Latino community continues to grow in New York City, now numbering over 2.3 million, or 29 percent of the total population, there is also a growing consensus among community leaders and activists that it is in many respects in a period of political decline. There also seems to have been a significant rise in the number of Puerto Rican political families among this community's elected officials that raise questions about its relationship to this widely perceived decline.

There is concern that beyond a strong immigrant rights movement, specifically Latino advocacy in other policy areas has been on the wane for some time. It is a puzzling sentiment given that the size of this community has never been greater, it has a larger group of highly-educated professionals, the largest number of elected public officials it has ever had and enjoys a level

of increased media, political and corporate attention than it has experienced ever before.

Despite these apparently positive developments, Latinos in New York continue to exhibit high poverty rates at 28 percent, their neighborhoods are being gentrified and populations dispersed, and, except for elected public office, they are significantly underrepresented in positions of power in the government at all levels, the private sector and even in the nonprofit world. The reasons for this vary from those that point to Latinos living in what Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco in their new book, "Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt," most recently have characterized as "sacrifice zones," a development that political scientist [José Sánchez brilliantly described recently](#) for the Puerto Rican community in the South Bronx in a NiLP Network Commentary. These "sacrifice zones" or "internal colonies," they argue, are areas that have been offered up for exploitation in the name of profit, progress, and technological advancement

Others point to the outmigration of a Puerto Rican and other Latino middle class, a constant population churning that populates this community with new immigrants with vulnerable legal statuses and other limitations, the diversity of a Latino population coming from over 21 countries, and, as well, a long-term problem of a the lack of a more diversified Latino leadership that is overly dependent on elected public officials for the setting of the community's public policy agenda, among other factors.

Community-based organizations, once the base of much Latino community activism, have for the most part become extensions of government in the provision of social services and have largely abdicated their advocacy role beyond that of the maintenance and/or enlargement of their government contracts and budgets. This has also pointed to the role of the once high profile Puerto Rican left, such as the Young Lords and others, who over the years have become professionalized and whose political leadership role in the community as independent activists has become muted and fragmented. One irony of the David Dinkins mayoralty, as the first and only African-American to hold this post, was its cooptation of much of the independent Puerto Rican community activists. As a result, the space of independent Latino community-based advocacy and social movements has shrunk considerably over time.

Another problem is the marginalization of this Latino political class by the so-called liberal white establishment through its domination of the Democratic Party. A recurring complaint by Latino elected officials is how the Democratic Party and its leaders, such as whoever is Governor, relegate Latinos to lower elected positions and exclude them from any serious leadership roles in the party apparatus. So that despite the relatively large number of Latino electeds, they are continually relegated to the margins of power. In this sense, Latino politics has historically been weakened by these outside forces locally and nationally.

### **Cynicism About New York's Latino Political Class**

Much of the political discontent by the Latino community has naturally centered on a cynicism about the role of the existing Latino political class, ironically the one area where Latinos are best represented. As the most high profile and best funded leaders in the Latino community, there are high expectations for their representational role as community advocates and

great disappointment at their collective inability to effectively play this role. While there are individual Latino elected officials who are admired and highly ethical, there are many more that are viewed as mediocre at best and as crooks at worst.

For some time, news coverage of this Latino political class has been dominated by stories about the corruption of many of its members. The most recent were the convictions of former State Senators Pedro Espada and Hiram Monserrate, as well as those of former Councilmember Miguel Martinez and former State Senator Efrain González, who are both currently in prison. And then there are the stories and rumors of others being investigated for voter fraud, illegally hiring relatives, misappropriating funds designated for nonprofits they control, misuse of government employees and contractors, and so on. These acts of corruption are certainly not limited to Latinos, but I can be argued that they negatively affect Latino political development disproportionately compared to other communities.

There currently are 33 Latino elected officials in New York City from the City Council to the Congressional levels of government. The largest number of these Latino elected officials, about half, represent Bronx County. The Bronx has the highest percent of Latinos of the city's five boroughs and the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans. Although their numbers have been declining, the over 700,000 Puerto Ricans remain the largest Latino national-origin group in the city, followed closely by Dominicans and Mexicans, and The Bronx can now be described as the political center of Puerto Rican politics in New York City.

### Number of Latino Elected Officials 2012 New York City by Borough and Position

compiled by the National Institute for Latino Policy (NiLP)

Borough/County	2010 Latino Voting Age Population*	City Council	State Assembly	State Senate	Borough President	Congress	Totals
<b>Bronx</b>	51.2%	4	6	3	1	1	<b>15</b>
<b>Brooklyn</b>	18.8%	3	2	1	0	1**	<b>7</b>
<b>Manhattan</b>	23.3%	3	2	2***	0	0	<b>7</b>
<b>Queens</b>	26.0%	1	1	1	0	0	<b>3</b>
<b>Staten Island</b>	15.2%	0	1****	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
<b>NYC Totals</b>	<b>26.7%</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>33</b>

\* Source: 2010 Census

\*\* includes parts of Queens and Manhattan

\*\*\* on of the two includes part of The Bronx

\*\*\*\* the only Republican

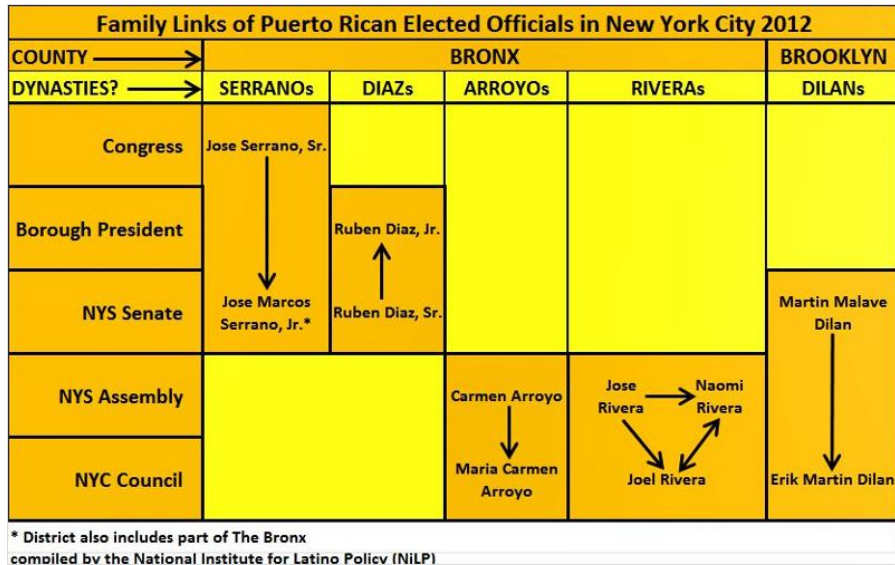
Because unlike other Latinos who come as immigrants, Puerto Ricans arrive to New York already as U.S. citizens, they also constitute a disproportionate share of Latinos who are eligible to vote. While the issue over the years has been the problem of Latino underrepresentation in these elected positions, after years of struggle and effective use of the federal Voting Rights Act (VRA), when compared to the Latino share of the city's electorate (as opposed to the total population), it can be said that Latinos have achieved parity in political representation, one of the few areas where this is the case.

### New York's Latino Political Families

The phenomenon of the rise of Latino political families, in which relatives have achieved elected public office, has been much-discussed in the Latino community. There are positive stories of the development of political dynasties like those of the Kennedys as told by Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr. and others, and there are the negative stories of the corrupt ones like those of the Espadas and Arroyos. Usually these discussions are based on individual cases and are focused on when there is a revelation of corrupt nepotism and cronyism, such as [the recent discovery](#) that Councilmember Maria Carmen Arroyo of The Bronx allegedly had illegally paid her husband from publicly financed campaign funds, or [the \\$10,000 fine imposed on Adolfo Carrion, Jr.](#) for illegally asking an architect with business before his office to do work on his home when he was Bronx Borough President.

The existence of political families and dynasties is not new in American politics, going back to at least the Adames through the Roosevelts, Kennedys and Bushes today, and in Latino politics nationally through Florida's Diaz-Balart brothers, California's Sanchez sisters, and Colorado's Salazar brothers. However, it appears that this phenomenon has reached a higher frequency in New York's Puerto Rican community to the point that it requires a critical examination for its implications for the state of Latino politics in the city today.

An analysis of the current family ties between Latino elected officials in New York from the City Council to the Congressional levels of government reveals an extremely high rate of such relationships among Puerto Ricans elected officials in The Bronx. Of the 16 Latino elected officials in The Bronx (which includes State Senator Serrano, whose district is largely in Manhattan as well), 9 (or 56 percent; 64 percent if only Puerto Rican electeds are included) are related! The only other county in the city currently with Latino elected officials who are related is Brooklyn and it is limited to only two people, the Dilans, a State Senator and City Councilmember. This high rate of Puerto Rican political families in the Bronx does not appear to exist at even close to this level in non-Latino communities in the city, despite the existence of political families like the Vallones, the Wagners, the Boylands, the Townes and others. There also does not appear to be an equivalent in other Latino communities in the United States, although this is something that will require further research to verify.



As this diagramming of these relationships shows, they extend to all levels of government that are not city- or state-wide. These 9 related Latino Bronx elected officials formed around four families --- the Serranos, Diazes, Arroyos and Riveras. The Riveras stand out by having three elected officials as relatives. All involve parents and their children. This does not include the Espada father and son who relatively recently occupied elected posts in The Bronx. In addition, although there are two Dominican elected officials in the borough, all of these political family members are Puerto Rican.

### The Origins of New York's Latino Families

How did this unique situation come to be? It would appear that [it has its origins in the adoption of term limits](#) for the City Council by referendum back in 1993, although efforts at political family building by the Montanos and others predate this. The key figure in this political family phenomenon in The Bronx was, by all accounts, [Assemblyman José Rivera](#) (although some put the real power behind Rivera being people like former Assemblyman Roberto Ramirez, who chaired the Bronx Democratic County Committee from 1996 to 2002 and is currently a founding partner of the lobbying, public relations firm, the MirRam Group, or like the influential political consultant Stanley Schlein). [According to one reporter](#), Rivera once told him that "I guess I am going to be given another credit, that I'm finally trying to imitate Fred Trump,' he added, referring to the real estate magnate who was the father of master developer Donald Trump."

Responding to this NiLP Latino Policy iReport on July 29, 2012, Assemblyman José Rivera wrote the following in his effort to fill in the gaps of this report:

"I didn't make Joel and Naomi politicians, I only fathered them. It was Roberto Ramirez who asked Joel to run and it was Jeff Klein who asked Naomi to run. I was against it, but Jeff Klein said, 'Why should a father deny a daughter the benefit from his work.' True story.

My friend Roberto Ramirez might also say to you that Joel became

a politician after his father helped to make just about everyone in politics in The Bronx elected officials some 20 years in between. You just don't want us to do what white people started on their way up in politics.

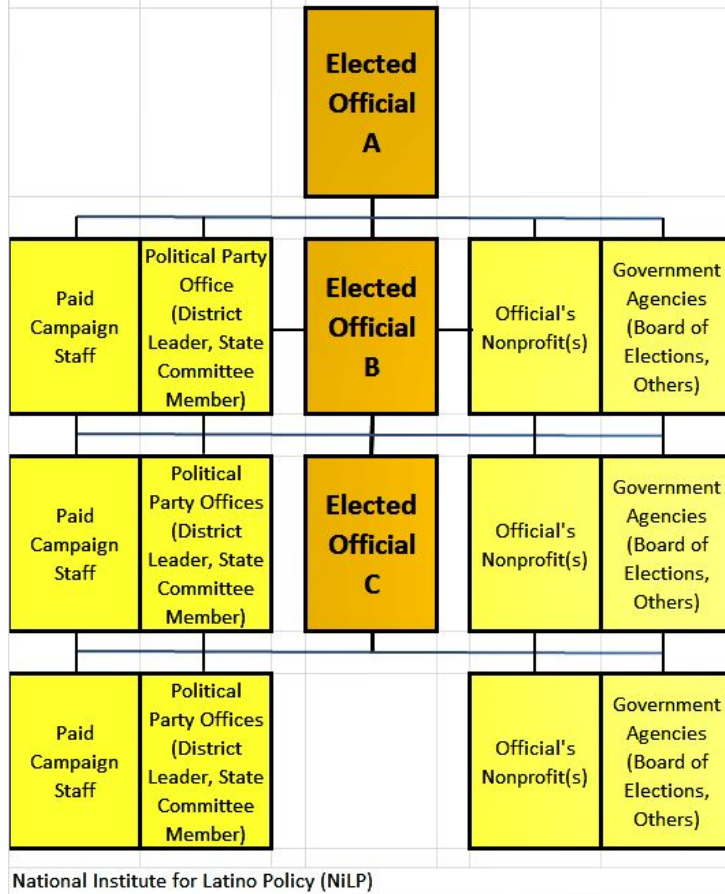
Me, I got the idea when Robert Wagner Jr. came and spoke to my high school class and said, 'Help to elect me, I want to follow in my father's (US Senator Robert Wagner Sr) footsteps.'

Rivera was a member of the City Council at the time, went on in 2000 to the State Assembly and in 2002-2008 was Chairman of the Bronx Democratic Committee. He was first elected to office in 1982 to the Assembly, making this his 30th continuous year in elective public office in The Bronx. As a result of these positions and connections, he has over the years developed a strong patronage base, leading some to refer to it as his personal "employment agency." As a result, he was responsible for the recruitment and promotion of his two children, Joel and Naomi, to elected posts, and of many others. The [latest rumor circulating](#) is that he plans to step down from his Assembly seat after November to switch positions with his term-limited son, who is in the City Council.

### **The Full Extent of Their Reach?**

It is important to note that this analysis limited itself to looking only at those elected officials in posts from the City Council to the Congress. The extent of these political family relations [go beyond these positions to a wide range of other positions](#) in government, the political parties, nonprofits controlled or funded by these elected officials, and other positions, as well as the awarding of government contracts. In the chart below, the types of these lower positions that could pose potential illegal acts or serious conflicts of interests are outlined to give an idea of the possible reach of these family ties for up to three elected officials. Most recently, for example, there has some concern expressed about the employment of relatives and spouses of elected officials in such politically sensitive city agencies like the Board of Elections.

## Potential Extended Political Family Networks



### The Implications

What are the implications of this for the development of Bronx politics?

On the positive side the following can be said:

1. This is in the tradition of American politics where political family dynasties have played a positive role in the history of the country.
2. This reflects that ability of the Puerto Rican community to maintain a much-needed political continuity by transferring important political knowledge and traditions to family members, in this way replacing the function that the old-time urban political machines once played.
3. These political family ties support greater political unity and coordination for the Puerto Rican community.

On the negative side, it can be said that:

1. These political family relationships foster corruption and conflicts of interest, kind of political incest.
2. They serve to limit participation to a small clique of relatives.

3. They support the worse form of political patronage that fosters incompetence in office.
4. It promotes a political hierarchy that discourages political participation in the community.
5. It undercuts the transparency that should be part of governmental hiring and contracting processes.

While, on an isolated basis, the negative implications of political families may not be all that significant, when it reaches the high level it has in The Bronx's Puerto Rican community, it raises many red flags. Is this simply a Puerto Rican adoption of the more general American legacy of political families and dynasties, or is it unique to Puerto Ricans as a colonized people? Has it contributed to the decline of Latino politics in New York, or is it the consequence of that decline? There is also the question of whether it is a situation that is sustainable over time, or is it simply a temporary aberration?

With the upcoming primary race for State Senate in upper Manhattan between the incumbent Adriano Espaillat and challenger Guillermo Linares, the issue of political families will become the subject of debate in the Dominican community. As he seeks this position, Linares' daughter, Mayra, is running to replace her father as the Assemblyperson in the area. Some have already been critical of the relationship between the two, while others see the daughter as a competent candidate. The question is whether within this long term competitive rivalry between Espaillat and Linares means that the fielding of his daughter indicates that Linares is seeking to build his political power through the recruitment of a political family? If successful, will this serve as a model of a political strategy that will be adopted by others in the Dominican community? In this regard, it will also be interesting to observe the political trajectory of State Senator Martin Malave Dilan and term-limited Erik Martin Dilan, who are Puerto Rican, in Brooklyn in the aftermath of the younger Dilan's recent failed challenge to incumbent Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez.

**W**hile this brief and preliminary analysis does not provide easy answers to these important questions, it does point, I hope, to the need for the Latino community to take a closer and more serious look at this phenomenon and think through its implications for the future of Latino politics in New York. While the focus here has been on the local level, it raises issues that also affect Latino politics nationally. Is keeping Latino politics all in the family a good thing or something that should be resisted? Is it, like the cable television series, *The Game of Thrones*, a colorful throwback to another era or a political innovation that will lead us to who knows where as a community? And are we, ultimately, asking the right questions about the critical issues facing Latino politics in New York and elsewhere?

**Angelo Falcón** is President of the National Institute for Latino Policy (NiLP), for which he edits *The NiLP Network on Latino Issues*. He is a longtime student of Latino politics in New York, most recently writing the chapter, "The Costs of Loyalty: The 2008 Latino Vote in New York" in the forthcoming book edited by Rodolfo O. de la Garza, Louis DeSipio and David Leal, *Latinos and the 2008 Elections* (University of Notre Dame Press). He can be contacted at [afalcon@latinoppolicy.org](mailto:afalcon@latinoppolicy.org).