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Latino Politics and the Rangel-Espailat Primary: A Preliminary Post-Mortem

By Angelo Falcón (June 29, 2014)

The reelection of incumbent Charlie Rangel to the US House of Representatives in the June 24, 2014 Democratic Primary in New York's 13th Congressional District has been the subject of much speculation about the reasons for his win over NYS Senator Adriano Espaillat, Rev. Michael Walrond and Bronx activist Yolanda Garcia. This rematch since 2012 between Rangel and Espaillat raised questions about Black-Latino relations in new ways that pointed to the growing complexities of "minority" politics today and the role of race. What follows is a very broad-stroke overview with the purpose of promoting further discussion of the issues involved.

The NY-13th CD's Diversity. New York's 13th Congressional District has been primarily Latino in population for more than twenty years. In the 2012 redistricting its voting age population became 53 percent Latino, 27 percent Black, 14 percent White and 5 percent Other. But in terms of eligible voters who were US citizens, the Latino percentage *drops* to 46 percent, while that of Blacks *increases* to 34 percent and Whites to 17 percent.

In addition, the district's Latino population is close to two-thirds Dominican, 24 percent is Puerto Rican and 8 percent Mexican. Those who are foreign born and born in Puerto Rico make up 42 percent of the district's population. The major differences in terms of voter eligibility is between Puerto Ricans, all of whom arrive automatically as US citizens, and large portions of Dominicans and other Latinos who are undocumented. The citizenship status of Dominicans in the district could reduce their share of eligible voters to one-third, depending on turnout and other factors.

2014 Mirrors 2012. The patterns of the results of the June 24th primary were similar to those in 2012. The one major difference was Espaillat's 47 to 45 percent loss to Rangel in the 71st Assembly District represented by Herman Farrell. In 2012, Espaillat won that district over Rangel, 47 to 40 percent. That district's voting age population is 48 percent Latino, 29 percent Black and 18 percent White.

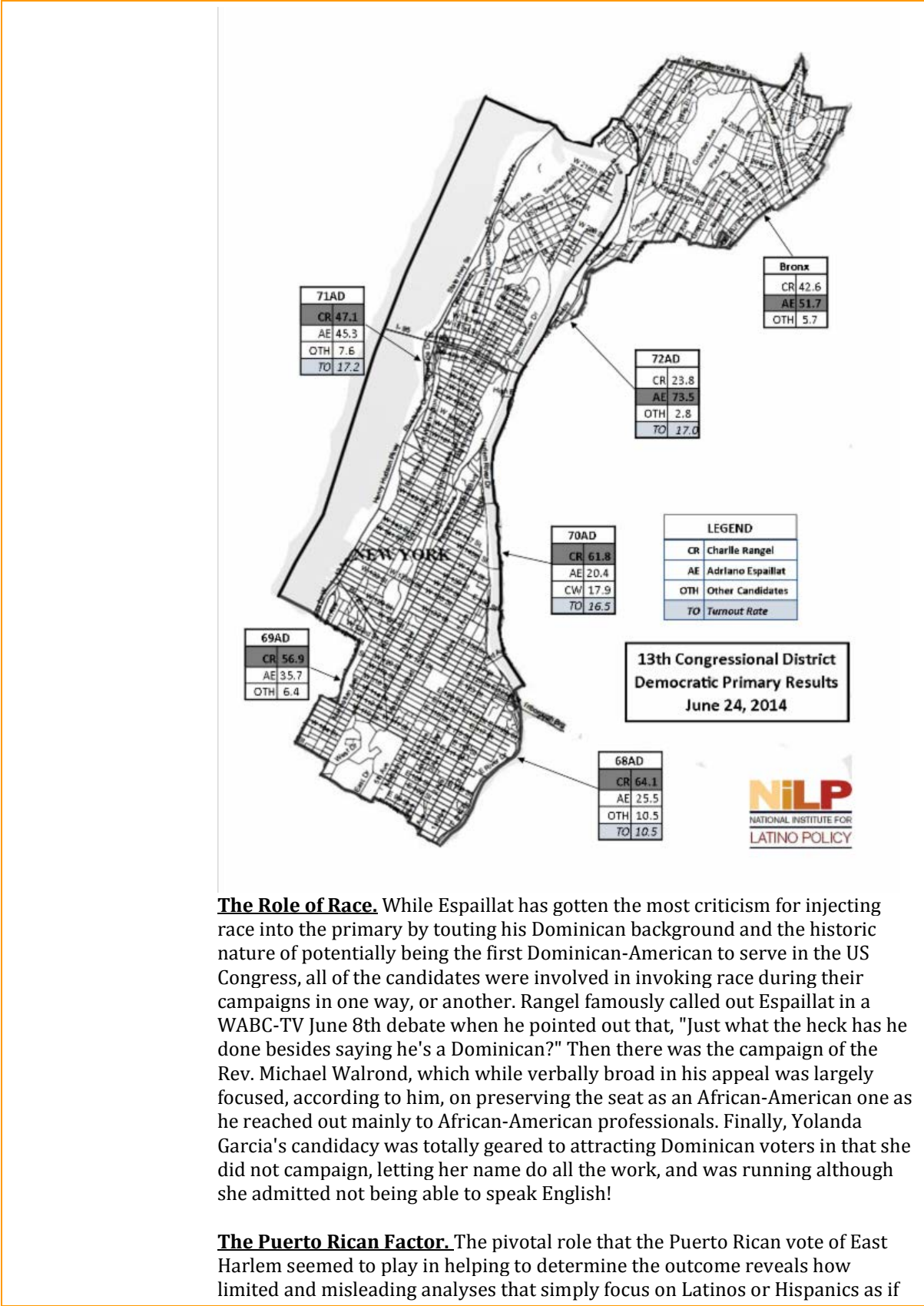
Based on [data provided by Time Warner Cable NY1 News](#), Rangel won readily in four of the 5 Assembly Districts in Manhattan and lost in four of the 5 Assembly Districts in The Bronx. The Bronx votes, however, only represented 14 percent of total votes cast in the district and 12 percent of the total votes cast for Rangel.

New York 13th Congressional District						
June 24, 2014 Democratic Party Primary Preliminary Results						
MANHATTAN	Represented by:	Rangel	Espailat	Walrond	Garcia	TOTALS
District 68	Roberto Rodriguez	64.1%	25.5%	9.2%	1.3%	100.0%
District 69	Daniel O'Donnell	56.9%	35.7%	6.2%	1.2%	100.0%
District 70	Keith LT Wright	61.8%	20.4%	17.2%	0.7%	100.0%
District 71	Herman Farrell Jr.	47.1%	45.3%	6.9%	0.7%	100.0%
District 72	Gabriela Rosa	23.8%	73.5%	1.9%	0.9%	100.0%
MANHATTAN TOTALS		48.2%	42.3%	8.6%	0.9%	100.0%
BRONX	Represented by:	Rangel	Espailat	Walrond	Garcia	TOTALS
District 77	Vacant	60.2%	33.6%	4.7%	1.4%	100.0%
District 78	José Rivera	34.7%	59.7%	3.6%	2.1%	100.0%
District 80	Mark Gjonaj	36.8%	56.7%	3.7%	2.9%	100.0%
District 81	Jeffrey Dinowitz	40.9%	53.7%	3.0%	2.4%	100.0%
District 86	Victor M. Pichardo	32.6%	63.3%	3.3%	0.7%	100.0%
BRONX TOTALS		42.6%	51.7%	3.5%	2.2%	100.0%
TOTAL NY-13 CD		47.4%	43.6%	7.9%	1.1%	100.0%

Source: Time Warner Cable NY1 News

In Manhattan, Espailat won handily in the 72nd Assembly District (which he used to represent and is 75 percent Latino, mostly Dominican). However, Espailat suffered his largest loss in the largely Puerto Rican 68th Assembly District (East Harlem), where Rangel attracted 64 percent to Espailat's 26 percent of the vote. The other difference between the two Assembly Districts was turnout: while in the 72nd AD it was 17 percent, in the 68th AD it was only 11 percent.

In a small slice of the largely White 69th Assembly District covering the southernmost part of the Congressional district, the 69th AD represented by Daniel O'Donnell, Rangel increased his share of the vote over 2012 from 53 to 57 percent.



The Role of Race. While Espaillat has gotten the most criticism for injecting race into the primary by touting his Dominican background and the historic nature of potentially being the first Dominican-American to serve in the US Congress, all of the candidates were involved in invoking race during their campaigns in one way, or another. Rangel famously called out Espaillat in a WABC-TV June 8th debate when he pointed out that, "Just what the heck has he done besides saying he's a Dominican?" Then there was the campaign of the Rev. Michael Walrond, which while verbally broad in his appeal was largely focused, according to him, on preserving the seat as an African-American one as he reached out mainly to African-American professionals. Finally, Yolanda Garcia's candidacy was totally geared to attracting Dominican voters in that she did not campaign, letting her name do all the work, and was running although she admitted not being able to speak English!

The Puerto Rican Factor. The pivotal role that the Puerto Rican vote of East Harlem seemed to play in helping to determine the outcome reveals how limited and misleading analyses that simply focus on Latinos or Hispanics as if

they were politically homogeneous can be. This is a problem that also extends to the opinion polling of the electorate, where polls like that of NY1 News/Siena aggregated Latinos and in the process misrepresented the diversity of this segment of the electorate.

The relatively late discovery by the media of the Puerto Rican factor in this primary hid a number of important political developments that provided important clues to the reasons for the result. For example, while many thought that Espaillat would automatically receive the Hispanic vote, it is clear that one of his major failures was not being able to cultivate a strong Dominican-Puerto Rican electoral coalition. His attempt to do so through the endorsements of prominent Puerto Rican elected officials such as NYC Council Speaker Melissa Mark Viverito and Assemblyman Robert Rodriguez, both representing East Harlem, proved to be a seriously flawed strategy. Both were unable to deliver their own district. While Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr. and other Bronx elected officials were able to deliver for Espaillat, some see it at the cost of Black-Puerto Rican relations, especially in the dealings with a reelected Congressman Rangel and his allies.

The results of this hotly-contest primary will have a number of important consequences for politics in northern Manhattan and its relation to The Bronx. These include:

Dominican Politics. The loss of two primaries in a row by Espaillat in his quest for a Congressional seat could weaken the political machine he has established through his Northern Manhattan Democrats for Change and other vehicles, which includes Councilmember Ydanis Rodriguez, Assemblyman Mark Levine, and district leaders Marisol Alcantara, Maria Morillo, Manny De Los Santos and, until this past week, Gabriela Rosa. In this he will be almost immediately tested in his Democratic primary reelection in September for his NYS Senate seat. Although during his run for Congress he reassured everyone that he had no plans to run again for the State Senate (as he did in 2012), it appears that he plans to run for that seat once again. Already, former NYC Councilmember Robert Jackson, an African-American, has announced that he plans to run for that seat, and the word is circulating that former Assemblymember and Espaillat rival Guillermo Linares is circulating petitions for that post.

The Gabriela Rosa Conviction. Another factor that could affect Espaillat's political fortunes is the conviction of his close ally, Gabriela Rosa, who in less than a week following the Rangel-Espaillat, was convicted of marriage fraud and other charges. She was forced to give up her position representing the 72nd Assembly, a position in which she replaced Espaillat when he was elected to the State Senate. This vacancy leaves a hole in the Espallait machine and, given his close political relationship to Rosa, can taint him by association given the toxic nature of the nation's immigration debate and the ongoing political corruption cases of state and local officials.

The Rosa conviction raises questions about the broader Espaillat associations. There are the cases of corruption as well of his former chief of staff and former state Assemblyman, Nelson Castro, and his once protégé, former Councilmember Miguel Martinez. Espaillat's constant reference to himself during the Congressional primary as having come to New York as an undocumented immigrant will no doubt allow his detractors to make a

connection to the Rosa case. On the other hand, Ms. Rosa's use of marriage fraud to secure US citizenship is not completely uncommon among the documented and may be seen with sympathy in the Dominican community.

Espailat's Political Fortunes?

It is possible that Espailat, despite having come so close to unseating Rangel twice, might survive politically and continue to be influential in Northern Manhattan politics. A starting point would be his reelection to the state Senate. An important clue to his political standing now will be whether those who endorsed him for Congress will also endorse or

abandon him in his reelection bid for the State Senate. Will Council Speaker Mark-Viverito, Assemblyman Roberto Rodriguez, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the Working Families Party, Comptroller Scott Stringer, Transport Workers Union Local 100 (TWU), Communications Workers of America District 1 (CWA), Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), Hotel and Motel Trades Council (HTC) and the Democratic Club of El Barrio & East Harlem, among others, support his reelection?

Dominican Destiny. Many have also speculated that given the district's demographics that the election of a Dominican to represent it in Congress is just a matter of time. Since the 2001 and 2011-12 redistricting, groups like the Latino Voting Rights Network and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (now called LatinoJustice PRLDEF), have been advocating a third majority-Latino Congressional district in northern Manhattan. This has been a long-term agenda shared by Dominican and Puerto Rican leaders for a district that would allow Dominicans to elect a Congressperson of their choosing.

One question in this regard is whether it would be Espailat or someone else. Can Espailat remain the standard-bearer for the Dominican community for this post, having already lost twice? Or will new players emerge in the Dominican community to challenge him and provide new leadership. The possible reemergence and fate of his old rival, Guillermo Linares, will be one important



indicator, as well as the rise of new voices.

Beyond Washington Heights. It should also be noted that Dominican politics in New York is no longer simply identified with Manhattan's Washington Heights. There are now more Dominicans living in The Bronx than in Manhattan. There are also Dominicans in elected and significant appointed offices in the other Boroughs. In the Bronx, In Queens there is a Dominican Councilmember who chair's the Council's powerful Finance Committee, and there is a Dominican State Senator. In Manhattan and Brooklyn, Dominicans serve as Deputy Borough Presidents. As the political influence continues to growth across the city, it will be interesting to see how it affects the influence of Espaillat and his Washington Heights-Inwood political machine.

Puerto Rican-Dominican Relations. Because Puerto Ricans and Dominicans voted differently in this Congressional primary, this has generated some commentary about the relations between these two communities. The general take of the media has been that this illustrates that there exists much tension between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. Some have pointed out that since Puerto Ricans are automatically US citizens because of Puerto Rico's political status, that they have no interest in the immigration issue that is so important to Dominicans and other immigrant groups. These facile observations, unfortunately, reveal a deep ignorance of the history of nature of Latino inter group relations in New York.

The Latino experience in New York, spanning more than a century and a half, has been defined by a diversity of Latino national-origins throughout. The level of support that Espaillat received from Puerto Rican elected officials was well-known during the primary but apparently ignored to promote an exaggerated Puerto Rican-Dominican competition. On the immigration issue, Puerto Ricans in New York have been in the forefront of that issue since at least the 1970s before it became fashionable, and today the most progressive advocates of immigration reform in Congress are Puerto Ricans like Chicago's US Representative Luis Gutierrez, who is probably the best known national advocate on this issue. The relationship between these two communities has not been without its tensions, but these have not taken a serious political form to date. It is disturbing that given the size of the city's Latino population and its long history in New York that the general public and clattering class seem to know so little about it.

The Political Aftermath. However, given the demographic diversity of the district's electorate this is not necessarily guaranteed to be a Dominican seat. There is still the considerable influence of the district's Black political players. Rangel will no doubt play an important role in selecting his successor, which could include the likes of former Governor David Paterson, Assemblyman Keith Wright and others. who are influential in the state;s Democratic Party. There is also the Reverend Al Sharpton camp, which includes the likes of Rev. Michael Walrond and Clyde Williams, as well as Sharpton himself. There are others waiting in the wings, like former Assemblyman Adam Clayton Powell and Assemblyman Mark Levine, among others.

A Latino Political Realignment? In New York City's Latino politics, the election of Bill de Blasio as Mayor has resulted in a realignment of sorts. The traditionally largely male power brokers in Puerto Rican and Dominican communities have been displaced by newer players characterized by a more

open identification with a progressive labor and gay agenda with a strong focus on immigrant and low-wage worker rights. This was, in part, the result of the traditional Latino political players not only backing a loser in the mayoral race, but also not being able to deliver the Latino vote for their preferred candidate, Bill Thompson. The ascendancy of Melissa Mark Viverito, as well as the election to the Council of Ritchie Torres, Carlos Menchaca and Antonio Reynoso, can be largely traced to this shifting in the city's power relations, which will help frame the nature of the aftermath of the Rangel reelection in northern Manhattan and beyond.

A careful analysis of the results of and dynamics in the Democratic primary in New York's 13th Congressional District provides rich insights to the nature of the broader New York City political process. The rise of new immigrant Latino and Asian communities, the political challenges of a declining Black population, the impact of White and Black gentrification, the role of a new progressive mayoral regime in an increasingly majority-minority city, and the nature and future of the beginnings of a Latino political realignment are just some of the issues requiring further analysis in helping us to understand the future of New York City and, in the process, urban America as a whole.

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