

The Diaspora Factor:

Stateside *Boricuas* and the Future of Puerto Rico

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The debate over the future political status of Puerto Rico has appeared once again in the U.S. Congress, raising the question of what role the nearly 4 million Puerto Ricans living stateside will play in this debate. Two competing House bills, both proposed by Puerto Rican representatives, call for Puerto Ricans to express their preference for statehood, commonwealth, independence, or even for an associated republic in a new plebiscite. The Puerto Rico Democracy Act, proposed in February by Representative José Serrano (D-NY), calls for a two-stage referendum in which voters would first be asked whether they prefer to maintain Puerto Rico's current commonwealth status or pursue a permanent solution. If the status quo option prevailed, the plebiscite would be repeated every eight years until a permanent option was chosen. If a permanent solution won, a second plebiscite would ask them to choose between statehood and independence.

The bill mirrors the recommendations of a report released in December 2005 by the White House Task Force on the Status of Puerto Rico, commissioned by President Clinton and continued by the Bush administration, to reach a permanent solution following the results of the last plebiscite in 1998. A majority of voters in that vote, 50.3%, chose "none of the above," a result of a boycott of the vote by the pro-Commonwealth party, the Popular Democratic Party (PPD), which objected to how their status option was defined in the ballot.

Meanwhile, Representative Nydia Velázquez (D-NY), who criticized the presidential task force for failing to include Puerto Ricans, introduced the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act, which calls for the formation of a constitutional convention to elect local representatives who would themselves draft the plebiscite to vote among statehood, independence, and a new "enhanced commonwealth" option. The outcome of that plebiscite would then be presented to Congress for approval.

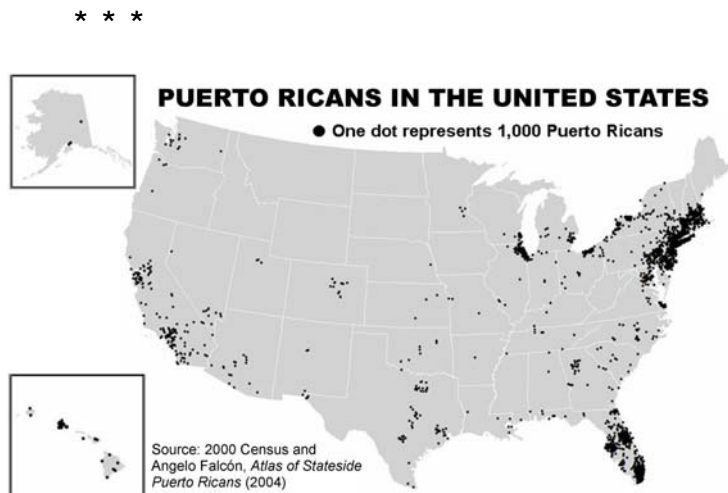
Both bills are viewed by opposing island political parties as biased—Serrano's toward statehood and Velázquez's toward a commonwealth victory. This perceived difference in perspective between two Puerto Rican politicians from the same party and the same state highlights new complications in the island's diaspora with regard to the status question, complications that make forging a common agenda difficult. Indeed, the stateside Puerto Rican population has always had a problematic relationship with Puerto Rico. Especially since the post-World War II great migration, this has been a movement of people tied to the failure of Puerto Rico's economy, symbolizing a colonial dilemma magnified by its concentration in the world city of New York for so many decades in the 20th century.^[1]

The diaspora has always been a bit of a mystery in terms of its attitudes toward its homeland. Because they were now participants in the world's most advanced economy, were they now supporters of statehood for Puerto Rico? Because they came during the long-term regime of the pro-Commonwealth political party, did they support the status quo? Or did their racialization in the United States make them support independence?^[2] And, in the end, does this matter to the future of Puerto Rico?

^[1] Gabriel Haslip-Viera, Angelo Falcón, and Felix Matos-Rodríguez, eds., *Boricuas in Gotham: Puerto Ricans in the Making of Modern New York City* (Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004).

^[2] Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

One of the most striking recent developments in the Puerto Rican experience was the realization that in 2003 the size of the stateside Puerto Rican community exceeded that of the island for the first time.^[3] The latest census figures estimate that in 2005 there were about 3,780,000 Puerto Ricans living in the States compared to about 3,670,000 in Puerto Rico.^[4] This has generated considerable discussion in Puerto Rico and in the diaspora, signaling that the stateside Puerto Rican community may now in a position to redefine its relationship to the island.



While there have always been strong connections between Puerto Rico and the stateside Puerto Rican community through family ties and migration, it wasn't until the 1990s that this relationship took on an increasingly political nature. It was then that the stateside Puerto Rican community increased its representation in the U.S. House of Representatives from one to three—two from New York and one from Chicago, all Democrats. This resulted from the growth of the Puerto Rican population and its ability to more effectively use the federal Voting Rights Act in redistricting. Puerto Rico, on the other hand, continues to elect only one nonvoting resident commissioner to Congress (currently Luis Fortuño, a Republican).



Three stateside Congresspersons (l. to r.): Luis Gutierrez (Chicago), Jose Serrano (New York), and Nydia Velazquez (New York)

During this period, political elites and activists in Puerto Rico increasingly turned to the stateside Puerto Rican leadership for support on local issues. Whether it was getting favorable U.S. federal policies toward Puerto Rico in terms of tax policy or social welfare expenditures, or the campaign to get the U.S. Navy out of Vieques, the three stateside Puerto Rican congressional representatives became invaluable, reliable allies, along with many Puerto Rican officials at the state and local levels.

Supporting this relationship was the strong nationalist identity of many stateside Puerto Ricans. Manifesting itself in myriad parades, festivals, and cultural events throughout the United States, culminating in early June every year with the massive National Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City, Puerto Rican nationalism and interest in Puerto Rico remains high. This was buttressed by the "Latin music explosion" starting at the end of the 1990s in which Puerto Rican entertainers played a major role. The successful campaigns to free Puerto Rican

^[3] Angelo Falcón, *Atlas of Stateside Puerto Ricans* (Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration, 2004). The figure for Puerto Rico indicates the number of residents who identified as Puerto Rican in the census's so-called Hispanic question.

^[4] U.S. Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2005.

political prisoners, which led to pardons and clemency under presidents Carter and Clinton, demonstrated a level of nationalism that many in the United States found confounding.

But new socioeconomic and political developments both stateside and in Puerto Rico have complicated this relationship in ways that make building a common agenda difficult. The model for some is the powerful U.S. Israeli lobby, but this has proved hard to emulate in the Puerto Rican case. First, as mentioned above, the stateside Puerto Rican congressional delegation doesn't always agree on central issues, especially as their seniority increases and their ties to different political sectors in Puerto Rico deepen.

Second, while historically concentrated in the Northeast, especially New York City, and the Midwest, the U.S. Puerto Rican population has not only increased but has become more dispersed during the last two decades.^[5] In the 1990s the Puerto Rican population in Florida dramatically increased, making it the state with the second-largest concentration. Puerto Rican populations are also growing fast in other parts of the South, in smaller cities, and in suburban and ex-urban areas where a Puerto Rican presence is new. This new spatial distribution was accompanied by new patterns of migration from Puerto Rico and new professional and middle classes moving to these new areas, raising the potential for a new north-south economic polarization whose political implications are yet to be fully clear. This raises challenges to the more traditional stateside Puerto Rican political and economic narratives as a Northeast urban population loyal to the Democratic Party and New Deal policies.



Third, in Puerto Rico the traditional status-based colonial political party system has become increasingly difficult to manage, with political deadlock among the parties and the loss of the tax incentives that formerly attracted U.S. capital, along with ineffective economic management and multiple corruption scandals. With the U.S. Congress now considering proposals for resolving Puerto Rico's status in the midst of a presidential election, this polarization will only intensify.

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Although Puerto Ricans have been migrating to the United States since the mid-1800s, it wasn't until after World War II that the size of this migration became enormous and subject to efforts to manage it from both the colony and the metropolis. The out-migration from Puerto Rico as an integral part of its economic development planning, which was based on neo-Malthusian principles, led in 1948 to the establishment of New York City's Migration Division of Puerto Rico's Department of Labor. This became the mechanism by which the government of Puerto Rico tried to steer Puerto Rican labor flows and negotiate on workers' behalf with U.S. local, state, and federal authorities. In 1986, this division, which now had offices in several states, was seen as a way to create a U.S. Israeli lobby-type operation, and the then pro-commonwealth governor elevated it to the status of the cabinet-level Department of Puerto Rican Affairs in the United States. This was short-lived when the statehood party candidate was elected to the governorship in 1992, which

^[5] Carmen Teresa Whalen and Víctor Vázquez-Hernández, eds., *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives* (Temple University Press, 2005).

resulted in the new department being replaced by a lobbying operation called the Puerto Rican Federal Affairs Administration (PRFAA).^[6]

Depending on which political party was in power, this new office's relationship to the stateside Puerto Rican community changed in dramatic ways. Generally similar in function to foreign consulates, PRFAA differs in technically being a part of the U.S. government and in representing people who are all already U.S. citizens. Under the commonwealth party, this office collaborated closely with the stateside Puerto Rican political leadership, but under the statehood party the relationship was less friendly and often hostile. With the current divided government, the pro-commonwealth governor, Aníbal Acevedo Vilá, has turned the office into a Washington, D.C.–focused lobbying and public relations operation that has made its relationship to the stateside Puerto Rican community focused on narrowly partisan concerns. Pressure to change the mission of this agency in this way came in large part because the divided government in Puerto Rico replicated itself in Washington, D.C., where Resident Commissioner Fortuño is a pro-statehood Republican, while the governor is pro-commonwealth and identified with the Democratic Party.

One reason for this uncertainty about how Puerto Rico political elites related to the stateside Puerto Rican community was the lack of information about the political status preferences of the diaspora. This became a practical political problem for these colonial politicians as the stateside population grew larger and more politically engaged and began in the mid-1960s to demand a voice in determining Puerto Rico's future status. After a 1967 plebiscite held on the island, the stateside community demanded, with increasing intensity, the right to participate in these votes. Today, the major bills before Congress make some provisions for the participation of the stateside Puerto Rican community to directly participate in this status-definition process.

But knowledge on how stateside Puerto Ricans would vote on the future political status of Puerto Rico remains a problem because they have not been recently polled on this issue, despite extensive polling on this status issue in Puerto Rico. The most reliable survey conducted on the subject was the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS), conducted in 1989–90.^[7] It found that more than two thirds (69%) of stateside Puerto Ricans supported commonwealth status. But since then there have been major changes in the social, geographic, and political composition of this community, it is not at all clear what its status preferences are today. One further complication is that most stateside Puerto Rican leaders and activists support independence. In a national Web survey conducted of this elite group in 2006, it was found that 45% supported independence, while in the 1989–90 LNPS, less than 4% of stateside Puerto Rican adults did.^[8] It is doubtful that there has been a large pro-independence surge in the stateside community since then and more likely that pro-statehood sentiment has grown, as has been the case in Puerto Rico. The status preferences of the stateside community may now be similar to those of Puerto Rico, but this is only speculation.

The pro-independence preference of a plurality of the stateside leadership and activists has complicated the process in interesting ways. This has made the stateside Puerto Rican more open to controversial issues like freeing the Puerto Rican political prisoners and supporting

^[6] Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), chapter 7.

^[7]^[7] Rodolfo O. de la Garza, DeSipio, F. Chris Garcia, John Garcia, and Angelo Falcón, eds., *Latino Voices: Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Perspectives on Americans Politics* (Westview Press, 1992), p. 104.

^[8] Angelo Falcón, *Stateside Puerto Rican Activist Findings* (unpublished manuscript, National Institute for Latino Policy, August 2006).

the ouster of the U.S. Navy from Vieques. It has also made it easier for the pro-commonwealth party to deal politically with them, while the pro-statehood party finds itself at odds with this large sector of the stateside Puerto Rican political leadership. This is a characteristic of the politics of the diaspora community's experience that has been little studied or understood, but which continues to have a major impact on its relationship to the politics of its homeland.

The role of the stateside Puerto Rican community in determining the future political status of Puerto Rico becomes further complicated by new socioeconomic changes and the changing narrative of race in the United States. Stateside Puerto Ricans, once the poster children for the urban underclass, have developed a more layered economic reality over the last couple of decades. Whereas once the major policy agenda for the stateside leadership was the issue of persistent poverty, there are now more voices joining the U.S. left in focusing the political agenda on the plight of the middle class. But while the community's poverty rate has dropped significantly over the last 30 years, in 2005 it stood at 23%, compared with 8% for non-Latino whites (for further comparison, in 2006, the poverty rate in Puerto Rico stood at an appalling 45%).^[9]

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While experiencing a persistent high poverty rate, the stateside Puerto Rican community finds itself challenged to reframe its agenda in ways that may undermine its economic base. Poverty remains a serious problem in the stateside communities of the Northeast and Midwest, but less of a problem in the newer ones in the South and Southwest. How can the stateside Puerto Rican community recast its policy priorities as it also experiences such a potential economic polarization along regional lines? And how will this affect its relationship to the politics of Puerto Rico and the status question?



The stateside Puerto Rican community has been formally a part of the United States since the annexation of Puerto Rico in 1898 and as U.S. citizens since the 1917 Jones Act, and has even had a presence within the states well before then. But along with second- and later-generation Latinos, Puerto Rican issues have been made less visible by the growing attention to the controversial problem of immigration. Although Puerto Ricans have been negatively impacted by the racist backlash from this immigration debate, policy makers at all levels of government and in the private sector have difficulty focusing on the specificities of the Puerto Rican condition and how it differs from those of new immigrants and noncitizens.

With its policy and political agendas at one of those messy crossroads, it is not particularly clear which road the stateside Puerto Rican community will be taking, now that the issue of its formal participation in resolving the status issue is no longer a matter of debate. But whether the diaspora will come down on the side of statehood, commonwealth, or associated republic is not at all clear. Independence? Well, that's another story about the failure of a movement and the power of the United States' new imperialism.

^[9] Edna Acosta-Belén and Carlos E. Santiago, eds., *Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), chapter 5.

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