

In Puerto Rico, the 2019 Uprising Produces an Electoral Opening Toward the Left

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As the eyes of the world remain fixated on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, the U.S. colony of Puerto Rico produced a more satisfying and historic outcome for the Puerto Rican left after its local election on November 3, 2020. Puerto Rico's vote is historic (a claim that should never be taken lightly in politics) but not because of the razor-thin results of the gubernatorial race, which was the main contest of the election. Nor did Puerto Rican voters make history, as many U.S. liberals and some progressives are anxious to believe, in a concurrent nonbinding plebiscite in which the vote in favor of statehood received the majority (also by a slim margin). Nor is it especially surprising, given recent changes to the election law deregulating the process, that recounts in localities with close results—especially the capital city of San Juan—have been plagued with irregularities.

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The vote is historic because it represents a major shift in Puerto Rico's party system and a breakthrough for the independence movement, the political left, and social movements. These changes, in turn, are the direct product of the popular uprising that unseated then-Governor Ricardo Rosselló during the summer of 2019. Rosselló was forced out of office after two weeks of intense and massive street protests sparked by the publication of the text of an encrypted conversation between the governor and his all-male inner circle, in which participants mocked those killed by hurricanes Irma and María (which devastated the territory in 2017) and made violent sexist and homophobic remarks about political rivals and other public figures.

The main way in which the shift is manifested is the unprecedentedly high level of support for the third- and fourth-placing Citizen's Victory Movement (MVC) and the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), both of which publicly supported the 2019 street protests against Rosselló. In the 2020 election, MVC and PIP received 14.2 percent and 13.7 percent of the vote, respectively, according to the official first count, for a combined weight of 27.9 percent. [1] The election also reflects record-shattering low levels of turnout (52.8 percent of registered voters, which translates to approximately a third of all eligible voters), reflecting historical levels of disenchantment with the colony's political system. Fear of COVID-19, a complicated vote-by-mail system, and a disastrous primary process earlier this year also contributed, of course, but as I argue below, the three-decade-long tendency of declining participation is clear.

Nonetheless, the combined MVC/PIP result represents a major shift in Puerto Rico's party system,

which was reliably de facto “bipartisan” for all of the second half of the twentieth century. The significance of this is heightened by the fact that both parties’ candidates for governor, MVC’s Alexandra Lúgaro and PIP’s Juan Dalmau, openly support independence for Puerto Rico, which has historically not been favored by the Puerto Rican electorate since at least 1952, when the current “Commonwealth” constitution came into effect. While neither candidate made independence a central focus of their campaign, neither attempted to hide or deny their personal preference.

Breaking the Status Barrier

Puerto Rico’s party system was centered on the political “status issue” throughout the second half of the twentieth century (previously, some parties expressed “status” affiliations, but these often fluctuated). In 1968, the electoral hegemony of the pro-Commonwealth-status-quo Popular Democratic Party (PPD) came to an end, and it began to alternate power with the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP). Both PPD and PNP have included members of the U.S. Democratic and Republican parties, which hold primaries in Puerto Rico for nominating purposes but have not typically been considered relevant by most of the population.

Marginalized during periods of economic expansion linked to the ideology of U.S. colonialism, the PIP played third wheel as the electoral outlet for the historically persecuted pro-independence movement. A handful of fourth parties or independent candidates (usually splinters from one of the three main parties) also occasionally participated. Full independence from the United States as an eventual goal remains a central aspect of PIP’s identity. With its candidate receiving nearly 170,000 votes (the most in its history), in 2020 the PIP quintupled its 2016 performance. Founded in 1946, this is only the third time the party has surpassed 100,000 votes, and the first surpassing of 6 percent of the vote since 1956 (when it received 86,636 votes, 12.4 percent of the total voters in that election). [2] The feat is even more significant if we take into account that PIP was the only sector to grow significantly during this election.

In contrast, MVC does not make status part of its platform at all, hoping to attract support from all “options.” Instead, it has proposed decolonization through a constitutional convention, in which supporters would be free to support convention candidates favoring different alternatives. Lúgaro edged out PIP’s Dalmau as the third-placing candidate, but actually lost about 250 votes in comparison to her own independent run in 2016 (or about 5,700, if fellow MVC member Rafael Bernabe’s votes are taken into account—he was then running for governor on the slate of another minor party).

The Plebiscite Farce

The reason PIP and MVC results are more significant than the “yes” vote for statehood is that this plebiscite is actually the third one in the last eight years, all manufactured to produce a statehood “win.” In the 2012 plebiscite, for example, when two additional named options were given (“free association” and independence—but not the non-sovereign Commonwealth status quo, which many still support), statehood received 61.2 percent of “valid” votes. However, nearly half a million ballots were deposited blank in protest, which together with the results for the other two non-statehood options would have added up to 54.7 percent of the total vote. In 2017, statehood received 97.2 percent of the vote, with only 22.9 percent participation (even lower than expected in the middle of a nonelection year). This time around, “yes” received 52.3 percent of the vote, once again amidst abysmally low turnout.

These repeated charades are desperate attempts by the corrupt governing New Progressive Party (PNP) to cling to relevance by using the mirage of statehood to mobilize supporters. The U.S. Congress, however, which has the last word on anything that happens in the colony, has never committed to supporting any such outcome, and the tenor of U.S. politics in recent years suggests that it won't do so in the foreseeable future. While Senate Democrats recently waved the specter of Puerto Rican statehood at Republicans, as retribution for the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, it now seems uncertain at best (pending the two run-off elections in Georgia) that Democrats will retake the Senate. In any case, after 122 years of false promises by Democrats and Republicans alike, most Puerto Ricans are generally unimpressed by the prospect of being blatantly used as a bargaining chip yet again.

Medium-term Precedents

In 2008, the gubernatorial electoral landscape began to change with the appearance of non-status-oriented parties and independent candidates, which nevertheless did not garner a significant portion of the vote until 2016. In that election, Lúgaro (then running as an independent) and independent candidate Manuel Cidre together generated 16.8 percent of the vote. In 2020, in addition to PPD, PNP, PIP, and MVC, a fifth party, the Dignity Project (PD) of Christian fundamentalists received nearly 7 percent of the vote. A sixth candidate, the independent Eliezer Molina, received less than 1 percent. Together, Molina and PD candidate César Vázquez received scarcely 3,200 votes more than Cidre did in 2016.

Mainstream pundits have attempted to subtract from the moment's significance by emphasizing Dalmau's supposed distancing from the party's traditional focus on independence. The numbers indisputably reflect that the PIP received the support of voters who traditionally vote for the pro-statehood PNP and voters who usually back the pro-status-quo PPD. The reality, however, is that Dalmau never disavowed either his party nor its message, and this is not the first time a PIP candidate has attempted to appeal to voters beyond the party's base by emphasizing other aspects of the party platform (for example, in 1996, PIP candidate David Noriega ran a far less status-centric campaign, receiving 75,305 votes or 3.8 percent of the total votes in that election).

MVC's success is also significant, less because of Lúgaro's result in the governor's race (which, as noted, reflected a slight decline from her earlier performance as an independent candidate) than because of the results of its legislative and local candidates. MVC elected two at-large representatives and two at-large senators, as well as members to the municipal assemblies of numerous towns. It also nearly elected the mayor of the politically crucial capital city of San Juan (the MVC candidate, Manuel Natal, came in second by a scant 2,300 votes—another first for a non-PNP or PPD candidate) and a representative from San Juan's third district. [3] PIP, as usual, elected one at-large senator and one at-large representative and numerous municipal assembly members.

Together with reelected independent Senator José Vargas Vidot (a health care activist once considered left-leaning, but who has proven inconsistent on many issues) and the at-large senator and at-large representative elected by the "socially" (but not necessarily "fiscally") conservative PD, there will be nine non-PPD or PNP legislators, the first time there are more than two or three in a very long time. However, only the six MVC and PIP legislators are considered reliably leftist or left-leaning.

The Left Reborn?

Many thus consider the success of PIP and MVC as a triumph for the newly electorally-significant Puerto Rican left. It is the first time since the original Socialist Party of the late 1920s and early 1930s (many of whose top leaders were actually pro-statehood and which self-destructed through a highly uneven “coalition” with the local Republican Party of the sugar planter elite) that some version of the political left is able to mobilize nearly a third of the electorate on its own.

Like the social-democratic PIP (initially a traditional Latin American “social Christian” party that declared itself in favor of “democratic socialism” and joined the Second International in the 1970s), MVC is a left-leaning party that emerged as an alliance between various groups and individuals seeking to “overcome” the traditional status deadlock. Among these, in addition to Lúgaro’s campaign, it’s worth highlighting former members of the short-lived Working People’s Party (PPT), which ran candidates in 2012 and 2016 (with candidate Bernabe receiving 1 percent or less in the gubernatorial races). PPT was an electoral incursion spearheaded by a Puerto Rican Trotskyist organization now known as Socialist Democracy (Democracia Socialista, DS). The other major factions within MVC are the Sovereign Union Movement, the Pro-sovereignty Network (former members of yet another defunct minor party), and the labor union Sindicato Puertorriqueño de Trabajadores (SPT), a local affiliate of the stateside Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Both Lúgaro and the SPT/SEIU have been criticized by other sectors of the left for either personal involvement in suspect privatization deals (in the case of Lúgaro, who now claims her position on privatization has evolved) or opposing the 2008 teachers strike and attempting to raid the teachers union’s bargaining unit (in the case of SEIU). [4] However, DS members have long insisted a tactical alliance with sectors receptive to critiques of neoliberalism is the only way to make inroads into the electoral field in order to amplify the DS anti-capitalist message. [5]

Whether this theory holds is yet to be seen, and many are rightly skeptical. However, the MVC’s results can be seen as at least a partial and delicate victory for another reason: It brings bona fide active participants of the social-movement left to the legislature for the first time since at least the 1970s. In addition to Bernabe, who is an openly socialist supporter of many progressive causes, and longtime feminist advocate Ana Irma Rivera (both elected to the Senate), newly elected Representative Mariana Nogales is a prominent movement lawyer and radical feminist.

Underlying Tectonic Shifts

Most importantly, both PIP’s and MVC’s electoral successes can be traced directly to the uprising that unseated then-Governor Rosselló. That event was preceded by several years of combative anti-austerity protests, most markedly on each May 1, in the wake of the island’s debt crisis and the appointment of an unelected “fiscal control board” (the Junta, as it is locally known) by the U.S. Congress in 2016 to ensure the colony’s crippling, odious debt is paid off. Those protests, in turn, built on decades of mobilizations and strikes by teachers, university students, and communities threatened by displacement and environmental damage, stretching back—at least in its contemporary incarnation—to the successful 1999-2003 struggle to force the U.S. Navy out of the island municipality of Vieques.

Both PIP and MVC actively supported protests against Rosselló, and their rank-and-file members participated in them to a greater or lesser extent. Both parties also developed campaign platforms opposing not just PNP and PPD corruption but also against neoliberal privatization and austerity policies and the presence of the Junta. Like Representative-elect Nogales, the narrowly defeated

candidates for San Juan's third district and mayoralty are also vocal critics of the Junta and products of Puerto Rico's combative student and feminist movements.

Whether or not these electoral incursions will lead to demobilization, as is often the case, is an open question. However, the large anti-Junta movement that was at the epicenter of the 2019 Uprising has so far remained stubbornly independent. Even some vocal leftist critics of MVC leadership see the election results as a product of the uprising, reflecting new opportunities for the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial movement to expand in both qualitative and quantitative terms. [6]

In my assessment, striking the right balance between institutional participation and street mobilizations will be crucial in the next few years. However, and more importantly, at least for now the electoral result confirms and inscribes the popular victory onto the larger political landscape in a way that is strikingly different from the recent past and which will make it very hard for traditional politicians to deny, minimize, or reverse in the foreseeable future.



To understand the magnitude of this change, it is important to consider recent history. For instance, in the 1970s, the PIP and a now defunct, openly Marxist, pro-independence Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) competed for scarce votes. Starting in 1980, some PSP leaders eventually opted for a highly uneven, unspoken "alliance" with "pro-Puerto Rican" sectors of the PPD in order to "stop" the advance of the pro-statehood movement. Whether it was this tactic that stopped statehood is debatable. What is certain is that it resulted in four decades of the dilution of the pro-independence vote through the phenomenon locally known as melonismo (adherents of this Puerto Rican variant of lesser-evilism are popularly known as melones, or "watermelons": green on the outside, red on the inside, in reference to the PIP and PPD's party colors), whereby thousands of pro-independence or independence-leaning voters supported the PPD.

This did not happen in 2020. As even the mainstream pundits insist, the opposite may now be true, with thousands of pro-status-quo and even pro-statehood voters turning to pro-independence and left-leaning candidates to represent them. [7] To visualize this, one need only consider the collapse in the vote totals of both PNP (from 655,626 or 41.76 percent to 406,830 or 32.9 percent) and PPD (from 610,956 or 38.92 percent to 389,896 or 31.6 percent). It seems melonismo is dead, at least for now, as a dominant tendency.

These results suggest there is now a possibility, for the first time since the 1970s, of forging a left-leaning bloc that can aspire not just to represent electorally, but to lead politically (that is, not just institutionally, but seeking "intellectual and moral" leadership or hegemony in Gramsci's sense), in which the pro-independence left can participate on its own terms. MVC and PIP leaders have suggested their newly elected officials will seek to collaborate with each other, and many are hoping for some sort of electoral front or alliance heading into the 2024 elections.

The True “Winner”

What neither MVC nor PIP (nor their fellow travelers and critics further to the left) must forget is that the true “winner” of this election is electoral abstention. Participation by registered voters shrank for the eighth consecutive time since the historical high point of 1992 (83.9 percent), to an all-time low of 52.8 percent, a number that shrinks even further if we consider the vote total as a percentage of all eligible voters. (Continuing reductions in population size since 2004, as a result of outward migration caused by economic contractions and the impact of two major hurricanes, must also be taken into account).

The deposed Roselló entered his four-year term with the support of 41.8 percent of voters, the weakest mandate of any Puerto Rican governor since the first gubernatorial election in 1948. The newly elected Pedro Pierluisi (who has served as the Junta’s attorney and is mockingly known as “Pedro the Brief” after being illegally appointed Roselló’s successor and removed by the Supreme Court) will come to govern with only 32.9 percent of voters’ support.

In addition, it is likely that neither PNP nor PPD will fully control either legislative chamber when the counting and recounting is done, with a staggering five independent or minor-party senators, and four independent or minor-party representatives, all but ensuring the already weak Pierluisi (widely perceived as a Junta shill) will be a lame-duck governor for the entirety of his term—if he is not ousted by protests before his term ends. This also means the PPD will have to play to the left if it hopes to have any chance of co-opting MVC/PIP growth, which the left can easily outflank by taking the lead in proposing social-justice legislation supported by pressure from “street” mobilization. MVC’s left faction thus seems, for now, to have an upper hand in preventing its right flank from sliding back toward or into the PPD and PNP. Indeed, MVC’s pro-statehood candidate for resident commissioner, largely considered its most conservative public figure, has already announced she is leaving the party.

The left is therefore in a unique historical position to grow quantitatively by nurturing disaffection among the 1.2 million registered voters who did not participate (and even more eligible voters who didn’t even bother to register), and qualitatively by strengthening its ties to social movements. At the same time, it should not make the mistake of assuming that all 1.2 million abstaining registered voters will lean left or support disruptive protests. The challenge is to make use of the opportunity to build counter-hegemony by continuing to echo the demands of key, strategically positioned, disaffected sectors without seeking to control them (specifically workers, women, LGBTQ+ youth, and environmentally threatened communities), while providing political content to both conventional and disruptive mobilizations.

Beyond MVC and PIP lies a significant extra-parliamentary left, which includes organizations like the Feminist Collective Under Construction, the Socialist Workers’ Movement, the anti-control-board Promises Are Over Campaign, several rank and file labor unions, and dozens of mutual aid groups along with hundreds of unaffiliated young people. Its potential role in keeping the electoral left in check from the inherently demobilizing pull of the colonial capitalist regime’s institutions is enormous. All the same, the more combative sectors must not lose sight of the political character of these struggles, which will continue to oscillate rapidly between Gramsci’s “war of position” and “war of maneuver.”

Mutual patience on all parts, respect for tactical diversity (and each other’s spheres of action or “lanes”), a long view toward shared goals, and an understanding that not all goals will be shared were all decisive to the outcome of the 2019 Uprising. They will continue to be the key to the qualitative and quantitative growth of the Puerto Rican left. If a solid leftist electoral front can be

built while maintaining the pressure of street mobilization on a much weakened colonial capitalist regime, a true sea change is not just possible but within reach.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] All 2020 election results are taken from the official Puerto Rico State Elections Commission 2020 [election results website](#).

[2] Official pre-2020 election results are available [here](#).

[3] In Puerto Rico, a portion of representatives and senators are elected at-large from party lists based on total number of votes, and another portion represent winner-take-all electoral districts.

[4] The stateside SEIU's attempt to raid the bargaining unit of the Federation of Teachers of Puerto Rico (FMPR) in the aftermath of the 2008 teachers strike (as a result of which, the FMPR was decertified as the representative of Puerto Rico's teachers, numbering 40,000 at the time) is documented in Steve Early, *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor: Birth of a New Workers' Movement or Death Throes of the Old?* (Haymarket Books, 2011). The SEIU-affiliated SPT, which represents other employees of Puerto Rico's public school system, joined other business unions that refused to support that strike against an incumbent PPD government (for example, see [here](#)).

[5] For a sample of this ongoing debate, see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

[6] See, for example, [here](#).

[7] See, for example, [here](#).