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Political Participation of Puerto Rican Women: Mapping a Research Agenda

Sherrie L. Baver

This article reviews the theoretical approaches used to study Hispanic women in politics and highlights their inadequacies for studying the political behavior of low-income Puerto Rican women, who are used as a case in point. It is not an in-depth study but an effort to develop appropriate research questions and to suggest strategies for the systematic collection of data. In general, community groups are the basic arena for the political activity of Puerto Rican women in New York City. Thus, new theoretical approaches are necessary to capture Hispanic women's modes of influencing public policy.

This article presents an overview of approaches to studying the political participation of minority women, taking Puerto Rican women in New York City as a case in point. The absence of research on this topic indicates more about the inadequate conceptual lenses of political scientists than about the lack of political activity by Hispanic women in the metropolitan New York area. As a first step in examining this neglected area, it is necessary to discuss the general body of literature on women and politics, to offer a demographic profile of Puerto Rican women in New York City, and to highlight the contexts in which to begin to collect the data, which are available. Ultimately, students of low-income Hispanic women and politics may be more successful in their efforts by drawing on the approaches of other social sciences.

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THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

In general, political scientists have difficulty with gender-related research. As Githens (1983, p. 472) noted:

The use of existing definitions, conceptualizations, and frameworks to explain women's political behavior often obfuscates more than it illuminates; furthermore, it has circumscribed the research by measuring women's political participation and performance against norms predicated on male behavior.

The large-scale, systematic study of women and politics did not begin until the mid-1970s, when researchers began to compare women's political participation with standards set by white middle-class men. One important measure of participation was elite political status, that is, the holding of elected or appointed public office. It is not surprising that, according to this measure, women were shown to participate at much lower levels than were men. On the basis of this finding, the political science literature examined the constraints on women's political behavior, including differential political socialization; characteristics of the life cycle, such as leaving the labor force to raise children; unequal access to resources, especially educational, professional, and financial; and the lack of prestige associated with traditional women's jobs inside and outside the home. The subjects in these early gender-related studies were middle-class white women, who were found to be less politically active than were men. Obviously, minority women faced even more constraints than did these women and were far less visible in elite political positions.

At the level of the individual citizen, some gender-related analysis was undertaken in the 1960s. These early studies of political participation focused primarily on voting or behavior directly related to voting. Once again, women's behavior was found to be below the male norms, since women turned out to vote less than did men and frequently took their political cues from men (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). By the mid-1970s, however, the gap in voter turnout between men and women had decreased (Cavanaugh, 1981). The data show that black women's participation in voting has equaled that of black men since 1964 and that black women voted at slightly higher rates than did black men in the mid-1970s (Baxter & Lansing, 1980).

Few systematic studies have been conducted on voter turnout in New York City's Puerto Rican or larger Hispanic community. Those that have been done, however, indicate a low electoral participation rate for the community as a whole (Falcon, 1983). A rare exit poll specifically aimed at ascertaining voting patterns and attitudes of Hispanic New Yorkers in the 1984 presidential election found that more women than men voted (Hacer, 1985). Although this finding may well indicate a decline in sex-role traditionalism among Hispanic women in the New York metropolitan area, it is also true that, overall, Hispanic females outnumber Hispanic males in New York City in every age category over age 14, especially in the young adult categories.

Despite the increasing rates of women who vote, political activity is still an overwhelmingly male preserve. Although women have made significant contributions to public life, the arenas in which they have been active have not been noticed by most political scientists. Women have long been involved in and have served as leaders of community groups and social movements that have had a direct and indirect impact on public life. With a broader definition of participation that would include such organizations, one finds that women have been active in shaping public policies at the local, state, and national levels.

A second group of studies that are relevant to this discussion are those that examine the political participation of women in Latin America. The "mainstream" of Latin American social science is farther to the left politically than is the mainstream of social science in the United States, and Latin American social scientists have often been more critical of the status quo than have their North American counterparts. Therefore, analysts of Latin American women and politics have had an easier time suggesting that the pursuit of traditional elite positions may not be the only goal of politically active women. In addition, these analysts are more sensitive to the probability that women of different social classes have concerns and modes of participation that vary widely (Jacquette, 1984). This sensitivity to differential political participation in the Latin American literature provides a useful perspective on which to draw in examining Puerto Rican women in New York, a large number of whom are among the poorest citizens of the city. Inevitably, the concerns and much of the political activity of these women will differ from those of middle-class women activists.

This introduction provides a context for examining the political participation of Puerto Rican women in New York City. Although there is a paucity of Puerto Rican women in elected positions in New York City, such officeholders by no means constitute the universe of politically active Puerto Rican women. It is important, therefore, to cast the analytical net more widely to find women who have wielded power in community organizations, unions, and nontraditional political groups and who have been effective in influencing public policy. In general, researchers who study minority women need to be sensitive to alternative modes of participation and what can be accomplished by them (Githens, 1983, p. 492). Before attempting a more focused look at political activism of Puerto Rican women in New York, however, the author presents a brief statistical profile of the community to provide useful background data.

STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

Statistics from various studies conducted in the 1980s reveal disquieting findings for Puerto Ricans in general and Puerto Rican women in particular in New York City. Hispanics who were, according to the 1980 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983), 20 percent of New York City's population, are the poorest group in New York City and New York State. Puerto Ricans are the poorest Hispanics, and Puerto Rican women are more disadvantaged than are Puerto Rican men (Association of Puerto Rican Executive Directors, 1985; Governor's Advisory Committee, 1985). Thus, the perception that the large number of Puerto Ricans who have been living in New York City for over 30 years have assimilated and moved up the socioeconomic ladder while newer immigrants occupy the lowest rung is simply not true (Mann & Salvo, 1984).

The 1980 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983) revealed that New York City had approximately 1.4 million officially documented Hispanics, although the real population may have been closer to 2 million. Approximately 860,000, or 61 percent, of New York City's recorded Hispanics were Puerto Rican, and about 456,000, or 53 percent, of Puerto Rican New Yorkers are women. In 1980, the median household income in New York City was \$13,850; for blacks, \$10,716; for all Hispanics, \$9,676; and for Puerto Ricans, \$8,181. By 1985, the median income for white New Yorkers was \$25,621; for blacks, \$16,380, for all Hispanics, \$12,500; and for Puerto Ricans, \$10,332 (Rosenberg, 1987).

It is noteworthy that throughout New York City, the status of all female-headed families deteriorated between 1979 and 1985. In 1985, however, Hispanic female-headed families (the majority of whom were Puerto Rican) were most likely to be poor. In that year, 81.8 percent of the Hispanic female-headed families lived in poverty, compared to 73.7 percent of such white and 57.9 percent of such black families (Rosenberg, 1987). This devastating picture of poverty for Puerto Rican women is explained, in large part, by their low rates of education and participation in the labor force. In 1980, Puerto Rican women aged 25 and over had the lowest educational level in the city, 9.7 years, and only 34 percent of them had finished high school—compared to 41 percent of other Hispanic women (Mann & Salvo, 1984).

The statistics on education have direct implications for the rates of labor force participation, particularly in a city in which jobs increasingly demand higher levels of education. According to the 1980 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983), only 34 percent of Puerto Rican women over age 16 were in the labor force, compared to 52 percent of other Hispanic women and 47.1 percent of all women in New York City. Among those Puerto Rican women in the work force, 69 percent were in three occupational categories: administrative support, professional and related services (especially health-related services), and manufacturing. The “other Hispanic women” category also had 69 percent in these three job titles, but more Puerto Rican women than “others” were in administrative support, probably because they had a better command of English. Over 43 percent of the other Hispanic females worked in manufacturing, compared to 30 percent of the Puerto Rican women, with a majority in both groups producing nondurable goods (especially in the garment industry).

Why are Puerto Rican women seriously disadvantaged in New York City? The answer to this question is complex and requires an analysis that is based primarily on structural rather than cultural factors. In other words, it makes little sense to blame Puerto Rican women’s position in the New York labor force on the supposed patriarchal values in Hispanic society, since these women previously had higher rates of participation in the labor force and are the *only* group of women in New York City whose participation has declined (Santana Cooney & Ortíz, 1985). Also, in Puerto Rico, the rate of female employment has been on the increase. Between 1960 and 1980, for example, the rate of employment for women on the island rose from 22.1 percent to 27.8 percent (Safa, 1985, p. 85).

Furthermore, cultural values cannot explain the low educational levels of Puerto Rican women in New York City. In Puerto Rico, women attend school, including the university, at a higher rate than do men (Acosta-Belen & Sjoström, 1979). The more likely explanation for the low rate of participation in the labor force by Puerto Rican women lies in New York City's labor market. Hispanic women other than Puerto Ricans have a higher propensity to work in nondurable manufacturing, especially the heavily Spanish-speaking garment industry. In contrast, relatively assimilated Puerto Rican women who were born in New York City but lack a college education may be unwilling to work in the garment industry, where their mothers and grandmothers worked and where undocumented women now work. However, for the most part, they do not have enough years of education for well-paying jobs in New York's largely postindustrial economy (Women's Task Force, 1985).

PUERTO RICANS AND CITY POLITICS

In fairness, it should also be noted that there is a scarcity of Puerto Rican men in elite political positions. The dearth of both Puerto Rican men and Puerto Rican women from the mainstream of New York City politics has as much to do with the structure of the New York City political arena after 1945 as with the purported apathy of the Puerto Rican community. The postwar history of the Democratic party in New York City and the restraining role of Puerto Rico's Office of Migration are crucial for understanding the Puerto Rican community's slow progress in New York electoral politics. Since the late 1940s, the local Democratic party gave up its role in assimilating new immigrant groups into city life, and its exclusionary practices have obstructed the entrance of new groups into New York's political life (Baver, 1984). Also important in hindering the process of Puerto Rican political integration has been the broker role of the commonwealth government with New York Puerto Ricans—a role that precluded the rise of local ethnic politicians (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963). Two additional explanations involve the dispersal of Puerto Ricans throughout the city, rather than their residing in one identifiable neighborhood, and the frequent migration of many members of the community between the island and the mainland (Fitzpatrick, 1971, chap. 5).

PUERTO RICAN WOMEN AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Even given the depressing demographic profile of Puerto Rican women and the obstacles they have encountered in the New York City sociopolitical environment, the community has produced at least some women activists who have overcome ethnic, racial, class, and gender barriers but who have often been overlooked by researchers with a traditional focus on public officeholders. Although few Puerto Rican women can claim "traditional elite" status in New York politics, there are some exceptions. Encarnación Padilla de Armas headed the Spanish division of the New York State Liberal party in the 1950s, and Olga Méndez has been a state senator from a district covering parts of northern Manhattan and the South Bronx since 1978. In addition, several women have held appointed positions in powerful city bureaucracies and thus have been able to influence public policies in areas of significance for the Puerto Rican community. Notable examples are Blanca Cedeño, who has served on the board of the New York City Housing Authority; Amalia Betanzos, a commissioner of relocation under Mayor John V. Lindsay and a member of the board of education under Mayor Edward Koch; and Lillian Barrios-Paoli, New York City commissioner of employment.

In any comprehensive study of Puerto Rican women and political activism, researchers would also want to examine women's influence in progressive political groups in New York's Puerto Rican community. Typically, these groups, such as the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, the Puerto Rican Socialist party, and the Movimiento Por Independencia, have been dedicated to broadening opportunities for Puerto Ricans on the mainland or to changing the island's political status. A fundamental question underpinning research on women's roles is the manner in which these organizations have resolved the debate that has been endemic to many leftist political associations: the relative priorities of gender versus class concerns. Not uncommonly in Latin American radical groups and apparently in the Young Lords party in New York City and Chicago in the late 1960s, feminist concerns were characterized as another manifestation of North American cultural hegemony that diverted attention from the real issue of the class struggle (Young Lords Party & Abramson, 1971).

However, political parties are not where activist Puerto Rican women or, for that matter, most activist women of any ethnic group in the United States participate. Community organizations are the most common arenas for women to exert leadership and to influence public policy. To date, researchers other than political scientists have been more successful in studying the impact on policy of women in community organizations. No doubt, it is in these organizations that Puerto Rican female activists also will be found.

The intent of this article is only to map the contours of a study of political activism among Puerto Rican women. The systematic study of the political participation of Puerto Rican women in New York City would require a focus on both middle-class and working-class associations, such as groups that provide social and educational services, parents' organizations, tenant associations, and unions. The two most important Puerto Rican community agencies in New York City are the Puerto Rican Forum and *Aspira*, both of which were led by Antonia Pantoja in the 1960s. A less well-known but key community organization is United Bronx Parents, founded by Evelina Antonetti to influence New York City's educational policy, especially to promote bilingual education.

Yolanda Sanchez and Genovena Clemente also are leading activists in New York's Puerto Rican community. Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias, long dedicated to influencing health policy on the local, state, and national levels, has used CARASA and other national women's health organizations to focus attention on the abuse by the medical establishment of the sterilization of Puerto Rican and other minority women (Rodriguez-Trias, 1978). In sum, Puerto Rican women in numerous organizations have affected public policies that are important to their communities. Therefore, these are the community groups on which students of female political leadership need to focus.

Public opinion research that links gender and political attitudes is another area that requires systematic analysis. The author is aware of only one public opinion survey that explored differences in political attitudes between Hispanic men and women in New York City. The November 6, 1984, presidential election exit poll, conducted by the National Hispanic Women's Center (Hacer, 1985) included respondents from several Hispanic groups, the majority of whom (73 percent) were Puerto Rican. The study found agreement between Hispanic men and women on most issues, including support for bilingual education and opposition to federal cuts in social programs.

It is important to note that men and women differed little in their attitudes toward the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA); 76 percent of the men and 84 percent of the women supported the legislation. The only large difference between the Hispanic men and women was in their choice of presidential candidates; 40 percent of the men but only 28 percent of the women had voted for Ronald Reagan. Both findings offer additional indications of a decline in traditional sex roles among Hispanic men and women in metropolitan New York, since the men supported the ERA and the women did not follow the men in their choice of candidates. Indeed, the women's preference in this regard showed that New York's Latinas are contributing to the growing national "gender gap."

CONCLUSION

The key theme of this article is that social scientists will be remiss if they use narrow definitions to study the political participation of minority women. Thus, it is incorrect to dismiss Puerto Rican women as politically "passive" or "apathetic" without examining nontraditional forms of participation. To conduct an in-depth study, researchers must examine women's informal public and private roles to see how they influence public policy on various levels of government (Jacquette, 1977). Clearly, students of political behavior must cast their conceptual nets beyond the arena of traditional elite political roles. Political scientists, in particular, must borrow tools from other disciplines to examine the processes by which women's social organizations may turn to political activity (Brana-Shute, 1981) or how women have used social networks in poor urban areas to gain resources from public officials to meet family and community needs (Bolles, 1979). Studies of this type, along with gender-related public opinion surveys, not only would yield valuable data on political activism among New York Puerto Rican women but would contribute to a more comprehensive picture of minority women's political behavior in the national arena. Furthermore, the relevance of findings from such studies for policy should be made explicit; researchers have a responsibility to use their data to enhance the quality of life for the entire community under study.

Finally, this article has demonstrated that the Puerto Rican community has produced many women leaders who have changed public policies indirectly by developing a repertoire of political skills. In addition, an increasing number of Puerto Rican and other

Hispanic women are holding elected and appointed offices. Yet this overview was not intended only for researchers who need to broaden their definitions of leadership and political participation. The material presented here should also prove useful to social workers who are involved in organizing in Hispanic communities throughout the country. One effective way to politicize low-income Hispanic women is to link the most obvious forms of political participation—registering and voting—to the concrete consequences for their neighborhoods of not registering and voting. Inadequate health care, schools, housing, job training, and day care are the most prominent consequences. These poor conditions will continue to exist until these women become knowledgeable about and involved in the political process.

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