



Puerto Rican Civic and Political Participation At the Turn of the 21st Century

Research Brief

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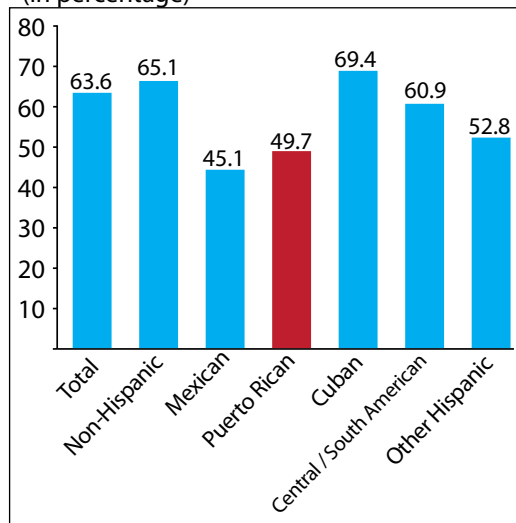
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Political Participation

Historically, the levels of political involvement for the Puerto Rican population in the United States have been lower than for the population as a whole and relative to non-Hispanic whites in particular. Results from two large surveys from the 2000s, the Latino National Survey (2006) and the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, November (2008), confirm this historical pattern.

Figure 1: Voted for President, 2008
(in percentage)



Source: Current Population Survey, Voting and Registration Supplement, November 2008

Voting is the most common form of political activity among people in the United States. In 2008, approximately 64 percent of the adult citizen population in the country reported they had voted for President of the United States (Figure 1).

Among Puerto Ricans voting also is the most common form of involvement in the political process. However, the turnout rate among Puerto Ricans (50 percent) was nearly 14 percentage points lower than for the population as a whole. Not only was the rate of voting lower for Puerto Ricans than for the population as a whole and that of the non-Hispanic population, Puerto Ricans also turned out to vote at lower levels than other Latino groups in the United States with the exception of the population of Mexican origin. For instance, 69 percent

of Cubans voted, as did 61 percent of Central and South Americans.

This lower level of participation among Puerto Ricans was also evident in other forms of political activity (Table 1). For instance, Puerto Ricans tended to contact public officials to express an opinion at nearly half the rate (6 percent) of non-Hispanics (12 percent), or attend meetings where political issues were discussed (6 percent vis-à-vis 12 percent). Yet, in these activities Puerto Rican participation tended to be greater than for most other Latino groups. In other forms of participation, such as participating in protest demonstrations, the level of Puerto Rican involvement is not different statistically from that of the population as a whole.

This political participation profile is also apparent in results from the Latino National Survey, a very large geographically stratified survey of more than 8,600 people self-identified as Latino or Hispanic in the United States from 15 states and the District of Co-

lumbia between November 2005 and August 2006. This survey is representative of approximately 87.5 percent of the Hispanic population of the United States (Fraga et al. 2006). Puerto Ricans reported turning out to vote in the 2004 elections at higher rates than some Latino groups (i.e., Salvadorans, other Central Americans, Mexicans), but lower than others (i.e., Cubans, Dominicans) (Table 2). More Puerto Ricans (45 percent)

voted for the Democratic candidate for president in that election than for the Republican candidate (36 percent), a vote split at about the same as Latinos as a whole. Puerto Ricans also reported ever having contacted government officials at higher rates than any other Latino group.

Prominent explanations for this lower level of participation for both Latinos as a whole and Puerto Ricans specifically have relied on the lower levels of politically relevant resources of these individuals. Therefore, their lower levels of socioeconomic resources, civic skills and motivation to become engaged in the political process have resulted in lower levels of political activities among

Latinos and other groups in the U.S. political system (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Vargas-Ramos 2003). Other explanations have pointed to the overall decline in membership in voluntary associations, which may

Table 1: Political activity in the last 12 months , 2008 (in percentages)

	Total	Non-Hispanic	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban	Central/S. American	Other Hispanic
Contacted Public Official (n= 68,042) Chi-square = 475.32; p< .001	10.8	11.8	3.4	5.6	2.8	3.3	10.5
Attended Political Meetings (n= 68,106) Chi-square = 420.351; p< .001	10.8	11.8	3.7	6	5.7	4.4	9.7
Attended march, rally, protest or demonstration (n= 68,185) Chi-square= 8.272; p= .142	3.2	3.3	2.3	3.8	1.4	2.5	4.2
Campaigned for or Contributed to a political party or candidate (n= 68,071) Chi-square= 400.81; p< .001	15.3	16.5	6.9	9.1	9.5	7.1	11.6

Source: Current Population Survey, Civic Engagement Supplement, November 2008.

Table 2: Latino Political Engagement (in percentages)

	Total	Hispanic	Mexican	Cuban	Dominican	Puerto Rican	Salvadorean	Central American
Registered to vote (n=4,856) Chi-square=73.39; p<.001	81	86	78	91	83	86	72	78
Voted in 2004 (n= 4,856) Chi-square=114.7; p<.001	67	75	62	84	75	72	54	67
Mobilized in 2004	35	39	36	38	29	34	25	32
Voted for ... (n= 3,236) Chi-square=95.142; p<.001								
Bush	36	29	35	57	21	36	35	38
Kerry	45	50	47	28	51	45	45	43
Nader	0.4	0.5	1.1	2.2	1.4	0	0	0.7
Other	7	4	2	6	4	2	4	4
Collective social problem-solving through... (n= 8,634), Chi-square=85.582; p<.001								
Existing Organizations	28	31	28	24	28	29	30	32
Informally	30	30	31	30	33	29	26	22
Both	9	12	9	7	12	11	6	11
None	19	18	18	27	17	22	20	21
Contacted gov. officials (n= 8,634) Chi-square = 126.992; p<.001	32	36	30	39	29	45	23	23

Source: Latino National Survey, 2006

account for the generalized decline in U.S. political participation. These explanations focus on the decline in the norms of trust and reciprocity that results from the fact that people in the United States are not interacting in social activities or taking part of formal and informal associations where these norms are created and reinforced (Putnam 2000).

Civic Engagement

Insofar as Puerto Ricans are concerned, the relatively lower level of associational membership has historically been noted as a reason for their lower level of social and political incorporation or assimilation (Mills, Senior and Goldsen 1950; Moynihan and Glazer 1963; cf Sánchez-Korrol). Results from the 2008 Current Population Survey, Civic Engagement Supplement underscore the lower levels of associational membership among Puerto Ricans relative to the population as a whole and to the non-Hispanic population in particular (Table 3). Indeed, Puerto Ricans reported belonging to significantly fewer associations of any given type over the previous twelve months when compared to the U.S. population in general and even other Latinos. Approximately, 77 percent of Puerto Ricans reported not belonging to any association whatsoever.

Yet, it is worth noting that even as a very large proportion of Puerto Ricans do not join voluntary associations, the vast majority of people in the United States - two thirds - do not belong to any type of voluntary association either. These data put in perspective, and serve as a corrective to, the perception that Latinos in general and Puerto Ricans in particular are largely socially disengaged while the U.S. population is one of high voluntaristic tendencies, as first noted by de Tocqueville. Latinos are marginally less voluntaristic than the rather poorly voluntaristic U.S. population as a whole at the turn of the twenty-first century.

This social disconnectedness may also be appreciated partially in the results for neighborliness reported by respondents to the Current Population Survey (Table 4). While Puerto Ricans may have been about as likely (16 percent) as the population to speak to neighbors practically every day in a typical month during the previous year, they were also more likely (24 percent) not to speak to a neighbor. Similarly, Puerto Ricans were as likely (4 percent) as the population as a whole to do a daily favor for a neighbor during a typical month the previous year. They were also more likely (49 percent) not to do any favors at all during that same period of time.

After nearly a century of a Puerto Rican presence in the United States, the levels of Puerto Rican political and civic engagement continue to be lower than those of the population as a whole. While Puerto Ricans

Table 3: Membership in voluntary association in the last 12 months, 2008 (in percentages)

	Total	Non-Hispanic	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban	Central/S. American	Other Hispanic
Community, Neighborhood, School or PTA (n=150,799) Chi-square = 7.82e9; p< .001	15.2	16	10.1	9.9	8	10.3	13.1
Service or Civic (n=150,799) Chi-square = 1.45e10; p< .001	6.6	7.3	1.6	2.3	1.9	1.3	5.6
Sports or Recreation (n=150,799) Chi-square= 7.11e9; p< .001	11.4	12	7.4	8.2	5.1	5.9	9.3
Religious Religious (n=150,799) Chi-square= 1.18e10; p< .001	17.5	18.6	10.2	12	8.5	13.4	14.6
Other type Other type (n=150,799) Chi-square= 8.18e9; p< .001	5.5	6.1	2	2.3	2.5	2.5	6.83
Does not belong to Any (n=150,799) Chi-square= 2.48e10; p< .001	66.7	64.9	78.2	76.6	82.6	76.8	70.9
Served as Officer or in Committee (n=150,799) Chi-square= 1.83e10; p< .001	9.8	10.8	2.9	5	2.2	3.6	7.7

Source: Current Population Survey, Civic Engagement Supplement, November 2008

in the United States have made great strides in the political arena, with four federal representatives in the Congress of the United States, and scores of state legislators, mayors and municipal legislators throughout the different jurisdictions of the country, they continue to be unequal participants in the political process, with a voice that is muted as a result of an unequal distribution of politically meaningful resources.

Table 4: Neighborliness in the past year (2008)

	Total	Non-Hispanic	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban	Central/S. American	Other Hispanic
Frequency of speaking with a neighbor during a typical month (n=67,309)							
Basically every day	15.3	15.4	14.5	15.6	9.8	12.9	18.6
A few times a week	31.5	32.2	27.8	27.3	24.1	25.2	34.1
A few times a month	22.7	23.3	18.6	22	23.2	19.6	16.1
Once a month	12.3	12.4	11.1	11	13.1	13.5	10.2
Not at all	18.2	16.7	28	24.2	29.8	28.9	21
<i>Chi-square= 2.42e10; p< .001</i>							
Frequency of doing favors for a neighbor during a typical month (n=67,006)							
Basically every day	4	4.1	3.6	4.2	1.9	3.2	5.8
A few times a week	12.8	12.9	12.6	11.8	9.3	11.2	13.6
A few times a month	20.8	21.5	17.1	18.6	17.4	14.4	21.8
Once a month	20.4	21.1	16.4	16.6	14.1	16.3	15.6
Not at all	41.9	40.4	50.3	48.8	57.2	54.9	43.2
<i>Chi-square= 1.51e10; p< .001</i>							

Source: Current Population Survey, Civic Engagement Supplement, November 2008. Weighted results

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The Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro De Estudios Puertorriqueños) at Hunter College, City University of New York, is the only university-based research institute in the United States solely devoted to the interdisciplinary study of the Puerto Rican experience in diaspora. It is the oldest and largest Latino research and archival institution in the Northeast, and boasts the world's only repository of archival and library materials dedicated exclusively to the Puerto Rican migration. Since its inception in 1973, Centro also has developed notable ties to academic, advocacy, and community-based constituencies, enabling it to document and respond to critical cultural and social conditions within the stateside community. This report is part of a series designed to provide up-to-date information on demographic changes in our communities.