

A reflection on the Puerto Rican elections - Possibilities for the growth and development of the left

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In the 2020 Puerto Rican general elections, the trend of decreased support for the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) and Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP), the principal political forces for the last half a century, continued. After decades of neoliberal politics, after the government's complete unwillingness to deal with an economic crisis that started in 2006 and continues 14 years later, Puerto Rico will have Pedro Pierluisi as governor.

Pierluisi, of the PNP, amassed a mere 33% of the votes for the most important position in the Puerto Rican government. That is almost 10% less than his predecessor, Ricardo Rosselló, who was later kicked out of office following massive demonstrations in the summer of 2019. The number is even more dramatic once we consider the low participation rate (50%) in a polity that was until relatively recently known to participate en masse in the general elections (96% of the eligible population voted in 1996).

The runner-up, Charlie Delgado of the PPD, received almost 32% of the votes. The remaining 35% were divided between three forces:

- The emerging Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (MVC) was able to achieve third place with 14% of the votes. MVC is a recent creation: an alliance of different groups, including the former Partido del Pueblo Trabajador (PPT, Working People's Party), and Alexandra Lúgaro, who as an independent candidate in 2016 received 175,000 votes;
- The pro-independence Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP), a third party that, after failing to achieve even 3% for 4 elections in a row, had a historic 13% in 2020; and
- An emerging conservative and fundamentalist party, Proyecto Dignidad, received 7%.

As is usual in times of crisis, traditional political forces weaken and new forces spring up. This could mean radicalization to either the right or the left. The results of these elections show that the second option is still possible.

In 2016, 20% of the total votes were for options that were not PPD or PNP. However, only 2.5% can be unambiguously considered a "progressive" vote: the votes for the PIP and PPT. Now, in 2020, when adding the votes received by PIP and MVC, we can see that 28% of the total votes went to anti-neoliberal, pro-decolonization movements, with a clear opposition to the un-democratically U.S. appointed Fiscal Oversight Board, or "Junta", which decides the budgets of the government and its entities and imposes neoliberal measures more radical than any party would be able to implement without fear of losing mass support. Both PIP and MVC also have a strong position in favor of auditing the immense public debt, which has created another crisis in the Puerto Rican economy. MVC, in particular, has combined its position on auditing the debt with the call to cancel it, on the

grounds of “change of circumstance” after Hurricane María and the earthquakes of 2019-2020. A year after massive demonstrations against Ricardo Rosselló, the possible consolidation of a progressive front, both within and outside of institutional politics, could mean a significant force for the years to come.

What do these results and numbers mean? For one thing, a rising lack of legitimacy for the Puerto Rican government. For many, the 2016 elections were the first indication that something was wrong in a system that would allow someone to govern but who the majority did not approve: Ricardo Rosselló won the election with only 41%. Now, Pierluisi’s 33% has intensified the debate around reforms to our political system. Many call for a “second round” in the electoral process, or legalizing electoral alliances or coalitions (possible in the first half of the 20th century in Puerto Rico but made illegal after constitutional and legal reforms in the 1950s).

However, Rosselló was able to govern with some ease for a while, for the PNP had won by a landslide in the legislature, holding more than 2/3 of the positions both in the House and the Senate. After his demise, the new governor, Wanda Vázquez, was able to do the same—internal conflicts within the PNP notwithstanding.

The scenario is very different in 2020. The PNP has no control in either house. The PPD has a simple majority in the Senate, by just one vote. No party has control of the House. The increasing lack of legitimacy within the traditional institutions might also be combined with the fact that these same institutions are now ungovernable institutions.

More significantly, for the first time in contemporary Puerto Rican history, there will be an important number of senators and representatives outside of both of the historical and neoliberal political parties. Many of these are clearly progressives, some even anti-capitalist.

The Puerto Rican Senate has 27 members; 5 will not be PPD or PNP. MVC has elected two senators; PIP has elected one; the fundamentalist Dignidad has elected one; and there is an independent senator. Out of these 5, 3 are clearly anti-neoliberal. One of the 3, Rafael Bernabe of MVC, is a known Marxist.

The Puerto Rican House has 51 members; 5 will not be from the PPD or PNP. MVC has elected three representatives; PIP has elected one; the fundamentalist Dignidad has elected one. Once again, the representatives from MVC and PIP are clearly anti-neoliberal.

Before the results on Election Day, it was difficult to imagine this type of favorable scenario for the left in the legislature. The possibilities for ongoing internal struggle and conflict in the House and the Senate are high. The fact that anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist discourse will now have an important platform within institutional politics and the media is significant. However, we will have to see how much these alliances can turn the opposition into a creative force; we will have to see how far they can drive and implement the progressive political programs both forces (MVC and PIP) share. It is evident this will require constant mobilization and militancy; it will require an organic relationship between the institutional struggles within the legislature and the struggles that workers, feminists, and environmentalists continue to experience all over the island. These different spaces—separate but in dialogue—might also strengthen the opposition to the Fiscal Oversight Board. These are the possibilities that the electoral results have opened, but only organized and concrete action can make them a reality.

Socialists will have their work cut out for them. Although both clearly have anti-neoliberal platforms, both MVC and PIP lack an emphasis on class struggle and class-consciousness, which can greatly limit the potential to spread and promote their political programs. There is a significant number of

socialists within MVC (either within Democracia Socialista or in emerging socialist groups), which will face the task of dealing with a rather un-coordinated and unorthodox organizational structure. The PIP, although with strong support this time around from socialist militancy, does not actually have many socialists working within it.

The positive electoral results have seemed to dissipate what seemed to be a rather sectarian electoral struggle. Does the broad (although still relatively small) socialist movement have the capacity to act in coordination in these different political spaces, uniting in the struggle without hiding our differences, moving forward without canceling each other? Time will tell, but the present needs this.

Without falling into easy triumphalism, or thinking that these results will automatically develop into an anti-capitalist movement, we should still recognize the possibilities for the growth and development of the left that these results might ignite. There is no other choice but to continue.

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P.S.

- Democratic Socialists of America. November 7, 2020:
<https://www.dsausa.org/democratic-left/a-reflection-on-the-puerto-rican-elections/>