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Puerto Rico's left won seats in the legislature. Here's why that matters.

Friday 27 November 2020, by [TORMOS-APONTE Fernando](#) (Date first published: 18 November 2020).

After mass street protests unseated a governor, the left organized, ran — and won. What might come next?

On Nov. 3, along with the rest of the United States, Puerto Rico went to the polls. Voters delivered a blow to its mainstream parties and boosted new left-leaning parties. The center-left Popular Democratic Party/Partido Popular Democrático (PDP) and the center-right New Progressive Party/Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP) have dominated Puerto Rican politics for the past 50 years, while suppressing more progressive political party alternatives.

But during the summer of 2019, mass protests unseated Gov. Ricardo Rosselló of the PNP. From that, a new leftist (or progressive) party emerged and, along with the existing leftist party, drew a historic level of support. Here's why that matters.

Background

During the summer of 2019, hundreds of thousands of people protested against [Rosselló after hundreds of pages of leaked chats revealed not just his administration's corruption but also its contempt for ordinary voters.](#) . That [grass-roots movement objected to how Rosselló's successor was installed](#). Various civil society leaders argued that the 2020 election would be the next opportunity to change the island's political leadership.

For decades, progressives and leftists had been split over such issues as Puerto Rico's political status, protest and mobilization tactics, and organizing priorities. But the protests proved to many that they could unite. Building on that mass mobilization, various progressive civil society leaders and activist organizations formed the Citizens' Victory Movement/Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (MVC) party, which drew support from various progressive sectors and campaigned on a platform that focused on adopting social welfare policies and resisting neoliberal austerity measures.

Meanwhile, the leftist Puerto Rican Independence Party/Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP), which had traditionally focused on fighting for Puerto Rican independence while also supporting various social justice causes, sought to welcome others unhappy with the majority centrist PNP and PPD. These progressives portrayed the two major parties as jointly responsible for Puerto Rico's compounding crises, including its [fiscal crisis](#), corruption and [mismanaged disaster response](#) to Hurricane Maria.

The strategy worked. Support for PIP and MVC gubernatorial candidates accounted for over a quarter of the vote for governor, while the PNP's candidate won a third and the PDP candidate trailed the governor-elect by just one point. While the PNP won, the progressive parties won significantly more votes than in 2016, when progressive gubernatorial candidates took in less than 3 percent of the votes. The left's increase in vote share suggests that, as is true in many other democracies, the two major parties will no longer dominate the political landscape quite so

completely.

Further, every PIP or MVC candidate who ran for at-large seats in the legislature won, gaining three seats in the House and another three in the Senate. Most of these newly elected candidates have been activists for years.

What may have surprised observers most: [Manuel Natal Albelo](#), a former student activist and member of the PR House, left the PDP party and ran on the MVC ticket for San Juan mayor — and was just two points shy of capturing the job. Similarly, longtime anti-corruption activist and MVC candidate Eva Prados came in just about 100 votes short of winning a single-member legislative district seat. While at-large representatives can draw support from the entire electorate, those aspiring to win a district seat can only secure votes from their respective district. The success of the Eva Prados campaign signals that the left is making inroads in district races and developing effective canvassing field operations.

Electoral success can ignite further mobilization

Traditionally, the Puerto Rican left has adopted tactics that weakened it in the electoral arena. Many in the pro-independence movement [boycotted elections](#), arguing that elections under colonial rule were fraudulent. Others in the left lent their support to the PPD as a means of blocking the PNP's conservative policy agenda. This practice is known as “meloneo,” which roughly translates to watermeloning, referring to being green on the outside (the color of the pro-independence PIP) but red on the inside (the color of the PPD).

Leftists may conclude from their 2020 electoral gains that organizing helps them win seats and power — which could well [ignite further progressive mobilization](#) in the streets and in the polls.

But now that MVC and PIP are in the government, the left has a platform for advancing progressive causes and investigating government corruption. For instance, Natal used his seat to promote discourse against conservative policies, demand investigations into corruption allegations, and raise awareness about progressive causes. Together, the new leftist members of the legislature can make it harder for majority parties to pass unpopular austerity measures, ban abortions, sell off protected areas of ecological importance and public land, and privatize public corporations.

While the left gained support, the right also made gains. The new right-wing Dignity Party/Partido Dignidad, created to represent religious conservatives, managed to elect an at-large representative to both chambers of the legislature and garnered more than 8 percent of the vote for their gubernatorial candidate. The right will also have a platform to promote their ideas from their legislative seats.

Rigging the voting

Earlier this year, the PNP's legislative majority rushed an electoral reform that was [widely criticized](#) as giving [the PNP an unfair advantage over other parties](#). That involved [expanding the groups of citizens deemed eligible for early and absentee voting](#). According to interviews I conducted for my research, critics claimed that the PNP had done this for demographic groups it believed likely to vote for its candidates. By the time the covid-19 pandemic had made early voting urgent and PNP passed its reform, the progressive parties couldn't significantly alter field operations. Accordingly, the PNP managed to garner a large share of early and absentee votes.

Winning local district races, not just at-large seats, now seems within reach for progressives. The [irregularities emerging during the vote count](#), including the loss of memory sticks containing vote tallies and the discovery of uncounted ballots, angered the left, perhaps enough to give it a boost in

the next election.

If the left manages to sustain and expand its [fragile coalitions](#), PNP and PPD dominance might be coming to an end.

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