

How Left Became a Relevant Player in Puerto Rican Electoral Politics

Via [The Wire](#)

Since 1968 Puerto Rico has had a stable two-party system, split on the so-called status question rather than the traditional left-right divide. The once-dominant Popular Democratic Party (PPD) supports maintaining the current commonwealth arrangement with the United States, while the New Progressive Party (PNP) advocates statehood. Both parties embrace neoliberal policies, though PPD is generally more liberal on social issues like LGBT rights.

For decades, the PNP and PPD have alternated power, normally garnering 95% of the vote. The Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), social-democratic leaning but prioritising the issue of independence, has usually brought up the rear. The non-nationalist left, while relatively well-rooted in the labor and student movements, has never been able to break through electorally.

Until now. In the November 3 general election, as many eyes focused on the US presidential race, progressives in Puerto Rico dealt a serious blow to the two-party system. The PNP-PPD's combined vote total plummeted, the PIP and a new left party attracted broad support, and neoliberalism was put on notice.

The neoliberal consensus starts to break

The island's duopoly showed its first signs of cracking in 2016. The PNP-PPD's total vote fell from 96% to 80%, and while the losing gubernatorial candidate in 2008 received 42% of the vote, the winner in 2016 received 41%. Two independent

candidates, expressing moderate but vaguely anti-establishment positions, were able to tap into workers' growing frustration at decades of corruption and austerity, coupled with the lingering recession. Still, the explicitly left parties did relatively poorly, leading to mixed verdicts at the time. While support for the two neoliberal parties fell sharply, left forces were not able to fully capitalise.

Then came the historic summer of 2019. After the leak of a chat between PNP governor Ricardo Rosselló and his top aides that revealed their racism, misogyny, corruption, and contempt for the poor, the island exploded in the largest popular mobilisations in its history. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets demanding the governor's resignation. The "Ricky Renuncia" slogan became an instant social phenomenon. Young people, particularly young women, led the way. Rosselló resigned within weeks, the first governor in Puerto Rico's constitutional history to do so. The island of Puerto Rico hasn't been the same since.

Following the 2016 elections, several progressive forces had discussed creating a broad anti-neoliberal party that would welcome all views on the status question, aside from a general repudiation of colonialism. The aim: to uproot the political landscape by realigning it along the left-right axis rather than the national question.

These conversations culminated in the formation of the Citizens' Victory Movement (MVC) in 2019. The new party's "[Urgent Agenda](#)" emphasised the fight against corruption, the restoration of labour rights, and the rescue of public spaces and institutions from privatisation. Meanwhile, the PIP, while declining to join the new project due to its insistence that independence should be part of any political programme, also seemed to shift course and focus on socio-economic issues instead of the national question.

The Left makes a breakthrough

This month's elections rocked the two-party system and their neoliberal consensus even more than in 2016. The MVC and PIP gubernatorial candidates obtained 14% each, while the winning candidate, from the PNP, barely obtained 33%. In other words, only 5% separated the winning candidate from the progressive parties' combined vote. The 2016 electoral earthquake, it seems, was no fluke. In fact, it appears the aftershock was even more powerful than the original blow.

And the MVC-PIP's breakthrough was not just a gubernatorial phenomenon. They also ran well in the legislature.

Historically, parties outside the PNP-PPD duopoly have only been able to elect a single member in each house of the legislative assembly. Puerto Rico's system combines first-past-the-post in individual legislative districts with cumulative at-large seats. There are eleven at-large seats for each house, and no political party can nominate more than six. Normally, this means that the winning party elects its entire slate of six legislators, the second-place winner elects four, and the third party is able to elect a single member.

In this month's election, the PNP-PPD only managed to elect six of the eleven at-large seats between them in the senate and seven of eleven in the House of Representatives. The PIP retained its historic single member in each house, while MVC managed to elect two senators and two representatives. In the senate, a fairly progressive independent candidate was able to win re-election – a first in Puerto Rican electoral politics.

But the progressive insurgency may not be done yet. The MVC's candidate for San Juan major is currently locked in a close battle for first place with the PNP. While it seems the PNP will be able to eke out a victory under a cloud of irregularities, the MVC candidate Manuel Natal – himself a member of the House of Representatives and a former PPD member who broke with that party because of its neoliberal tendencies – was able to garner more than 30% of the vote, a

stunning performance for a new progressive electoral project.

The same can be said about Eva Prados, MVC candidate for one of San Juan's single-member House districts. She is currently knifing it out with the PNP candidate after leaving behind the PPD in third place. She would be the first-ever single-district House member outside the PNP-PPD duopoly.

The new at-large MVC members of the legislature have strong roots in the Left. First, the House: [Mariana Nogales Molinelli](#) was president of the Working People's Party (PPT) and its candidate for resident commissioner in 2016. She is a tireless activist and permanent presence in Puerto Rico's social movements. Nogales received over 80,000 votes, the highest tally of all MVC at-large candidates. José Bernardo Márquez is a young progressive, the son of a well-known PNP mayor who exemplifies his generation's break with the traditional parties.

In the senate, Ana Irma Rivera Lassén is a long-standing activist in anti-racism and LGBT struggles. And Rafael Bernabe, the former gubernatorial candidate for the PPT, has solid socialist bona fides.

Looking to the future

Although the MVC did not win the election in terms of vote totals, it has transformed the political map, made impressive legislative inroads, mobilised important sectors of society – particularly young people – and now has a viable path to victory in 2024.

Many are now proposing an MVC-PIP alliance. And while the Puerto Rican left has an unfortunate history of sectarianism (and even though the national question serves as a seemingly permanent fracture point), some form of electoral unity appears possible.

The next four years will be critical to see if the Left can

build on its initial success. The PPD was able to muster a bare majority in the legislature, which means there will be a divided government with the PNP-led executive.

The Left's position is still tentative. But, for the first time in decades, it has become a major force in Puerto Rican electoral politics.