

CULTURAL ASPIRATIONS VS. POLITICAL CALCULATIONS

By Eliut D. Flores-Caraballo

Puerto Ricans have long been divided over the political relationship of Puerto Rico with the United States: Some would like the island to become the 51st state; others support an autonomous yet permanent relationship with the US. A third, smaller group would prefer to see Puerto Rico a sovereign republic.

Much of the status debate has centered on economic and political matters. The cultural dimensions have not, however, received as much attention. The US is a predominantly English speaking country, and Puerto Rico a Spanish speaking, Latin American country. The two simply don't share a common cultural base. Supporters of independence claim that Puerto Rican culture can survive and flourish only if the island becomes a sovereign country. Commonwealth backers argue that the *Estado Libre Asociado* (Free Associated State) status protects Puerto Rican cultural sovereignty and ensures the country's prosperity through a permanent tie to the US. Those who favor statehood want to gain formal representation and participation in all of the power institutions of the American Union. They call openly for *political* integration. But does a desire for political integration imply support as well for *cultural* assimilation of Puerto Rico into the United States?

I address this question using survey and focus group data. The door-to-door survey was conducted in the summer of 1989, with a stratified convenience sample of 450 Puerto Ricans ages 12 and older, belonging to 160 households in the cities of San Juan, Adjuntas, and Quebradillas. Interviewing was done by upper division and graduate students from the School of Public Communication of the University of Puerto Rico in San Juan. Questions covered several areas, among them, cultural and political attitudes and media use.

Cultural Pride is Not a Dividing Line

My study found that respondents exhibited high levels of cultural pride regardless of their political beliefs. For someone familiar with Puerto Rican politics, this isn't surprising. Since its inception, the *Partido Nuevo Progresista* [New Progressive Party] (PNP) has promoted the concept of *estadidad jibara* [Puerto Rican-culture-styled statehood]. PNP's official position has been that statehood would bring a financial bonanza to the island, and that the people would be allowed and able to maintain their Hispanic language and culture under statehood. In

fact, during the first Congressional hearings on the proposed plebiscite held in Washington in the summer of 1989 and broadcast live on Puerto Rican radio and television stations, the PNP delegation made an ardent defense of Puerto Rican culture. They urged their party's position that the US Senate definition of the statehood option include provisions guaranteeing that Spanish and English would remain the official languages on the island. The senators were baffled by this position of the annexationist party, and rejected it. Back in Puerto Rico, the PNP leadership rationalized this refusal as an understandable action meant to avoid anything controversial which could ultimately jeopardize the statehood bill. The PNP argued that the people of Puerto Rico need not worry, that in the end Spanish would continue as the lingua franca on the island, whether protected by law or not.

The latest episode in this struggle over the cultural implications of status options is now being played out. On March 5, 1991, the Puerto Rican legislature overwhelming approved a bill that would make Spanish the sole official language. The legislature is controlled by the PPD, *Partido Popular Democratico*, the pro-commonwealth party; and has delegates from the PNP and from the PIP, *Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño*, the pro-independence party. Only the PNP legislators voted against the bill. The Official Languages Act of 1902 designated both Spanish and English as the Puerto Rican government's official tongues. This is the state of affairs supported by the PNP. The PPD and the PIP, however, were more interested in arousing nationalistic feelings, to reinforce the appearance of cultural distance between Puerto Ricans and Americans. The language bill was signed into law by the governor on April 5, 1991, an event seen as a blow to the statehood movement because it underscored how culturally "different" Puerto Rico is and apparently wants to be.

Respondents in my survey were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of seven statements representing a range of attitudes toward English and Spanish, and toward Puerto Rican culture, to assess their "cultural pride." Table 1 shows the distribution of support for each language/culture statement for all respondents and those supporting each of the political status formulas. The average respondent felt proud of Puerto Rican culture. However, many also valued learning English in Puerto Rican schools, and most believed that all Puerto Ricans should know how to speak English. These findings suggest that cultural pride is not unconditional, and that even people who otherwise prefer Puerto Rican culture nevertheless recognize the need to widen their horizons and to adopt/learn those foreign skills/values that can help them.

Cultural Pride and Political Preferences

Responses to several of the cultural pride measures varied significantly when analyzed by political status preference (Table 1). A significantly larger percentage of independence and commonwealth supporters agreed with the more "political" statements, such as "All classes in public and private Puerto Rican schools should be taught in Spanish," and "Spanish should become the official language of Puerto Rico." Likewise, proportionately fewer independence and commonwealth supporters agreed with the pro-English language statements that "All Puerto Ricans should know how to speak English," and "English should become the official language of Puerto Rico."

Still, virtually all of the supporters of the three political options agreed with the more "strictly cultural" statements, such as "I believe that Puerto Rican culture is worth preserving," and "All Puerto Ricans should know how to speak Spanish." Pro-statehood respondents are as proud of their Puerto Rican culture as commonwealth and independence supporters.

Respondents from all political orientations agree on basic cultural pride tenets. Differences by political preferences appear when people are asked to operationalize their cultural pride into political actions to protect their culture. Statehood supporters feel compelled by their political beliefs to legitimate a role for the English language in Puerto Rico. Not too strong a role, though, as suggested by the fact that only 9% of them wanted English to become *the* official language of the Island.

Findings of the Qualitative Study

In addition to the survey, I conducted eleven focus groups with survey participants. Eleven households were chosen from the total sample to represent a wide cross-section; each constituted a kind of mini-focus group. The discussions were held in each family's home and audio recorded. The discussions offered an opportunity to probe

deeper into respondents' political beliefs and behavior. In the majority of the families chosen, all of the immediate members supported the same political party. Among the eleven families, 5 backed statehood, 4 supported commonwealth, and 1 was for independence. The remaining family had divided allegiances.

Two things came across strongly: (1) discussants wanted to preserve their Puerto Rican-ness; and (2) most were convinced that Puerto Rico would not survive without US assistance. The average discussant exhibited strong cultural pride. He perceived himself as very different from the people of the US, and had no desire to assimilate to the culture of the US. Still, a majority of the discussants expressed a sense of fatalism regarding Puerto Rico's ability to sustain and govern itself. They feared that with independence, chaos, communism, poverty and hunger would take hold of the Island. Many were negatively impressed by the experience of Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Their conclusion was that small republics cannot make it without US aid. Several said that if Puerto Rico becomes a republic, they would move to the US.

We see, then, the extent to which cultural aspirations and political calculations diverge. Pro-US ideologies have achieved hegemony: the large majority of those interviewed seemed convinced that Puerto Rico does not have the resources to live and prosper on its own, without the help of the US (whether through commonwealth or statehood status). However, nationalist ideologies have succeeded in keeping alive in the hearts of the people (regardless of their political status preference) pride in Puerto Rican culture and in their Spanish language.

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Table 1

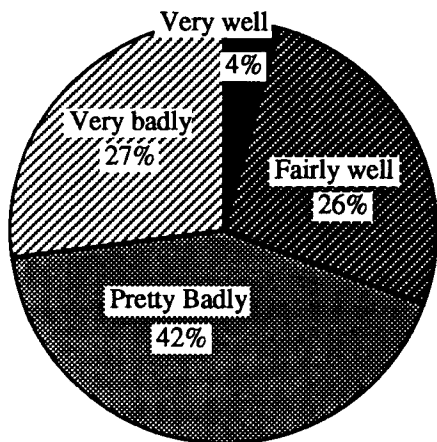
Cultural Pride Measures by Political Status Preference
(% agreeing with each statement)

	Statehood	Commonwealth	Republic
<u>Pro-English Attitudes</u>			
1. All Puerto Ricans should know how to speak English	91%	80%	70%
2. All classes in Puerto Rico's private and public schools should be taught in English	10	10	0
3. English should be the official language of P.R.	9	6	0
<u>Pro-Spanish Attitudes</u>			
1. All classes in Puerto Rico's private and public schools should be taught in Spanish	45	53	80
2. I believe Puerto Rican culture is worth preserving	98	98	100
3. All Puerto Ricans should know how to speak Spanish	97	96	97
4. Spanish should be the official language of P.R.	83	92	100
n=(Plebiscite aware) 370	139	158	30

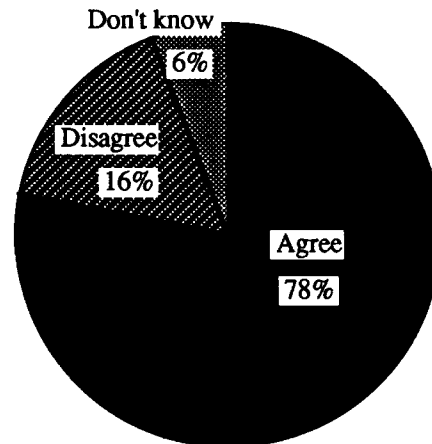
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Question: How well do you feel that things are going in Puerto Rico these days...very well, fairly well, pretty badly or very badly?



Question: In the Middle East crisis, how would you say President Bush is handling the situation..? Would you say you agree strongly with the job he is doing, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly?



Source: Survey by Kaagan Research Associates for El Nuevo Dia, January 1991.