1 Introduction

One November night in 1992, while sitting at his kitchen table with a reporter from the *Hartford Advocate*, Edwin Vargas, Jr., then chairman of the Hartford Democratic Town Committee and leading light of the Puerto Rican Political Action Committee of Connecticut (PRPAC), reviewed his twenty years of political activism. "I really don't like politics," he said. The reporter, after nearly choking on a mouthful of food, exclaimed, "That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. Everything you do, everything you say, screams politics! Your pores sweat politics. How can you tell me something like that?" Vargas offered a simple explanation: altruism. Puerto Ricans were poor, disfranchised, ignored by the power structure, and they needed him. He was in politics not for his sake but to do something for the community. Vargas allowed that this explanation was corny but true. The journalist later wrote that it was not believable.[1]

When I read the story, I too was puzzled by Vargas's admission. I was sure that his explanation was sincere, although I also understood how it could come across as self-serving. Still, this professed dislike of politics did not make sense. I remembered the afternoon in August 1991 when, with a broad smile and shining eyes, Vargas told me that PRPAC was risking its political future in an all-out challenge against six Democratic incumbents. The more he talked, the more I realized how significant the risk was. Yet his voice and his demeanor exuded only confidence and excitement. Likewise, when he shared the story behind his election as the Democratic party's town chair—a truly Machiavellian tale of wily maneuvers and unsavory alliances—his sense of satisfaction and exultant tone were nearly palpable. These recollections did not jibe with the image of a reluctant player. How could he say that he hated politics when his behavior indicated that to him politics was what the hunt is to the predator?

The answer to this question echoes in the story this book tells. Vargas did not really hate politics; he hated its messiness, its burdensome demands, and its mixed outcomes. During his term as president of PRPAC Vargas and his allies devised a strategy that focused the energy drawn from Puerto Rican identity on achieving political power. By 1991, the results were dramatic: two state representatives were Puerto Rican, as well as a department head, several members of commissions, the corporation counsel, a deputy city manager, and three members of the city council.

True, almost one-third of Hartford's population was Puerto Rican, but the community also was barely two generations old. Yet, although the accomplishments had been significant, important campaigns had not turned out as expected, substantial agendas remained unfinished, and a trail of friends had turned bitter enemies.

Six months after the interview with the reporter for the *Advocate*, Vargas shared his mixed feelings about politics with me as he talked about Hartford's 1993 budget. Proposed cuts included a $27 million reduction in the allocation for education, just when the majority of students were Puerto Rican and black. "Politically, we have arrived," he said, "at a time in which, instead of deciding who gets what, we have to decide who will be left out."[2]

THIS BOOK is about political mobilization and political change from below. It is about identity politics and urban power, about how ethnicity contributes to political action and how previously excluded actors access power. The focus is on Puerto Ricans and how they organized and mobilized to demand accountability from Hartford's political stratum. It chronicles and analyzes a process of empowerment—a process entailing incorporation and responsiveness—in which ethnicity played a major role. In fact, ethnicity played a *positive* role, thus casting the relationship between identity and power in a favorable light. For reasons related to the context and character of political action, however, success was only partial. Rewards were limited and costs substantial, accruing over an extended period of time.

Fueling this political mobilization were demographic growth, leadership development, and a relentless organizational drive. Puerto Ricans used ethnicity for political purposes in ways that represented a challenge both to the city and to themselves. To satisfy their social and political needs, they sought power. In this they succeeded, but access to power became only a threshold beyond which new difficulties lay. Ethnicity prompted expressions of cooperation and solidarity, but conflict was often the result as well. Finally, the relationship between political representation and socioeconomic gains was problematic.

The struggles of PRPAC from 1983 to 1991 epitomized this effort. Its leaders demanded accountability and respect for the Puerto Rican community. Before the creation of PRPAC, Puerto Ricans directed many of their claims to Nicholas Carbone, the city's deputy mayor from 1970 to 1979. Puerto Ricans focused on him after realizing that his obligation to them, and more generally, to the neighborhoods in which they lived, could not be taken for granted. For this reason, the generally cooperative relationship they had with Carbone and with the Democratic party was

punctuated by challenges that sought to address the imbalance between political rhetoric and political reality. That these challenges occurred was not surprising. But the Puerto Rican case added issues of identity to the mix of change and continuity that characterized the dynamics of power in Hartford.

Puerto Rican Migration to the United States

The story of Puerto Rican migration to the United States is a familiar one and need not be retold here except in its barest outline.[3] The presence of Puerto Ricans in Connecticut goes back to the antebellum period,[4] and, according to popular lore, the nexus between New England and Puerto Rico has not only been long-standing but culturally significant. The origin of the fritter known as *bacalaíto*—which consists of chunks of cod deep fried in flour batter—is related to trade between Massachusetts and Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century. Similarly, the machete, which in Puerto Rican culture alternates between agricultural implement and national symbol, is said to have come from the U.S. Northeast as a result of nineteenth-century trade.[5]

The larger forces behind Puerto Rican migration to the United States were colonialism and capitalism. The so-called change of sovereignty, a euphemistic way to refer to the substitution of U.S. for Spanish colonial rule in 1898, opened the door for systematic population movements between the island and the mainland. By 1910, stateside Puerto Ricans numbered three thousand. By 1920, three years after the Jones Act granted them American citizenship, that number had increased sixfold.[6] Colonialism gave Puerto Ricans freedom of movement between island and mainland. Capitalism gave them incentives to move, and easy access to steamship and air travel made the trek possible. Citizenship made them eligible for military service in World War I. Through their experience in the service, Puerto Ricans became acquainted with life in the United States and this prompted many to stay.

In 1921, Congress passed the Johnson Act to curtail European immigration, and this contributed to the opening of job opportunities for Puerto Ricans, to whom alien restrictions did not apply. Furthermore, top government officials in San Juan and Washington, D.C., promoted the importation of Puerto Rican labor, arguing that as U.S. citizens they ought to be considered before foreigners.[7]

From the migrants' point of view, the fundamental motive for leaving the island was economic. In their study of Puerto Rican migration, C. Wright Mills, Clarence Senior, and Rose Goldsen suggested that "economic pull could not operate unless there were sources of favorable information about

New York City on the island."[8] They failed to note, however, that economic pull was matched not just by sources of information but by a favorable legal and political context created by the state.

Colonialism and capitalism and economics and politics provided the conditions that made migration possible, but individual Puerto Ricans, with help from institutional actors, such as Puerto Rico's Department of Labor, the U.S. Employment Service, and representatives of interested corporations, made the decision to come. What Senior and Donald Watkins called the "family intelligence service" also played a role, as spouses and relatives rejoined on the mainland and acquaintances lured others to make the move.[9] All took the promise of American citizenship seriously, hoping that Americans on the mainland would welcome them as equals.

Since Puerto Ricans arrived on the mainland, people have been studying them, but the focus of this research has been New York City, where before 1980 the majority of Puerto Ricans lived. By 1980, however, although New York still had the largest single community on the mainland (43 percent), the majority of mainland Puerto Ricans lived elsewhere,[10] and by 1990, only one-third lived in New York. During this period the growth was most pronounced in medium-sized cities, that is, jurisdictions with populations of between 150,000 and 250,000, such as Hartford.

In 1990, 27 percent of Hartford's total population was Puerto Rican. Nowhere else were they as concentrated (see Table 1). The reasons will not be explored here, but the implications for ethnic politics are crucial to my analysis.[11] Demographic concentration facilitated ethnic political mobilization, promoting the development of leaders and organizational efforts and acting as a counterweight to the forces of poverty and marginality. Context, as the reader shall see, was not everything, but its importance was cardinal.

Puerto Ricans came to Hartford propelled by the force of circumstance but motivated by desire and ambition. Some followed their American spouses, others wanted a better life, a few came just for the excitement of discovering what lay beyond island boundaries. Unemployed farmworkers and impoverished *arrimaos* (sharecroppers) were part of the mix, but skilled workers and a few professionals also made it, lured, respectively, by the prospect of work in tobacco farms, the possibility of industrial employment, or simply the desire to rejoin family members. Not all were poor, but poverty and marginalization became the defining elements of life, even for those to whom Hartford appeared "a perfect city."

The Puerto Rican settlement in the insurance city coalesced during the 1950s. The review of the political development of the community shows the protracted nature of interest articulation and how it responds to both endogenous and exogenous factors. This micro-history is useful because

Table 1. U.S. Cities with Large Puerto Rican Concentrations, 1990

State and City	Total Population	Puerto Ricans	% of Total
California			
Los Angeles	3,485,398	14,367	0.4
Connecticut			
Bridgeport	141,686	30,250	21
Hartford	*139,739*	*38,176*	27
New Haven	130,474	13,866	11
New Brjtain	75,491	10,325	14
New York			
New York City	7,322,564	896,763	12
Rochester	231,636	16,383	7
Yonkers	188,082	14,420	8
New Jersey			
Camden	87,492	22,984	26
Elizabeth	110,002	12,062	11
Jersey City	228,537	30,950	14
Newark	275,221	41,545	15
Paterson	140,891	27,580	20
Massachusetts			
Boston	574,283	25,767	4
Lawrence	70,207	14,661	21
Springfield	156,983	23,729	15
Ohio			
Cleveland	505,616	17,829	4
Pennsylvania			
Philadelphia	1,585,577	67,857	4
Reading	78,380	11,612	15
Florida			
Miami	358,548	12,004	3
Illinois			
Chicago	2,783,726	119,866	4

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1990 Census of Population.

it reveals that Puerto Rican politics in Hartford is not New York City politics writ small. New York City was important to Hartford—intercity migration did take place, and Puerto Rican politics was not disconnected from developments elsewhere. But if one assumes that point of origin determines the character of politics in the receiving society, Puerto Rican politics in Hartford should be a mixture of island, mainland, and local influences rather than a small-scale version of Puerto Rican politics in New York. This is indeed the case.

This review also shows how the story of Puerto Ricans fits within broader developments. For example, it is inappropriate to see their ethnic-based mobilization as an epiphenomenon of the struggle of African Americans. Was ethnicity "quickly taken up" by Puerto Ricans after its expression was legitimized by blacks?[12] To be sure, the black movement caught the attention of intellectuals, publishers, the media, and government, and,

assuming that it is reasonable to label their movement as "ethnic," it gave visibility to ethnic politics. But this says nothing about why there was a resurgence of ethnicity during the 1970s and even less about the Puerto Rican case. Puerto Rican identity politics in Hartford dates from the 1950s, before black militancy became widespread. Puerto Ricans were not impervious to contextual influences, but their history reveals that identity politics preceded not just the civil rights movement but its corollaries and the so-called ethnic revival of the 1970s as well. In their case, ethnic awareness was shaped by life in the United States but rooted in their island experience.

To be sure, the decline of Americanism brought about by racial conflict and the Vietnam War made ethnicity more acceptable during the 1970s than it was during World War II, when it was associated with fascist sympathies and betrayal. But the changed context alone does not explain why Puerto Ricans engaged in identity politics. It is by reviewing their political history that one realizes that their ethnic identity was strong before these conditions set in and that identity politics was a way of achieving representation and a means to negotiate individual and group benefits. To some, ethnicity meant a rejection of Americanism—to the extent that embracing the United States meant sanctioning colonialism in Puerto Rico—but to the majority, ethnicity was a code that structured their entrance into mainstream society and politics.

THE PUERTO RICAN POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE OF CONNECTICUT

In 1989, when this study began, there were signs of a political emergence among Puerto Ricans in Hartford that contrasted with the traditional and better-known New York experience. PRPAC was emblematic of this process. As I began to gather information on the community, it quickly became apparent that PRPAC was the leading political force among Puerto Ricans in the city. Its importance as object of study was clear. The contrast of Hartford with New York City, where, despite being the oldest and largest settlement, Puerto Ricans had no representation, was notable, and the saliency of PRPAC was a departure from situations of nearly complete political invisibility. Elsewhere, Puerto Ricans were excluded from political parties, policy-making bodies, and even from the antipoverty programs that other groups used to promote political mobilization and political access.[13]

I was fortunate to chance upon a group that provided an opportunity to fill a gap in the literature on Latino studies and that also fit within broader political science themes.[14] A focus on PRPAC enabled a look at