



Puerto Rican Cultural Differences in Politics

Curriculum Unit 80.06.08
by Italo Mongillo

The unit deals with the culture, history and government of Puerto Rico. It also introduces an outlook on the political involvement and participation of Puerto Ricans in New Haven, Connecticut.

In order to have a better understanding of Puerto Rican participation in politics, one should have some knowledge of Puerto Rican history. History and culture alike shape the political attitudes. The unit will focus on the political agencies which indirectly affect the attitudes of the Puerto Ricans. It is designed to cover five school days, and may be adapted for a high school history or current events class in grades 11 or 12.

The unit will consist of the following format:

DAY 1: Introductory—The culture of the Puerto Rican people and their role within the political environment.

DAY 2: Brief History—The structure of the government of Puerto Rico, the American take-over of the island and the political changes which have occurred since then.

DAY 3: Puerto Ricans and the City Government of New Haven, Connecticut. The political socialization of Puerto Ricans.

DAY 4: Film—Puerto Rican culture and beliefs.

DAY 5: Film—Puerto Rican history.

CULTURE

The Puerto Ricans have remained, to a large extent, greatly influenced by the old Spanish culture which first was introduced during the period of Spanish settlement. Their language, religion, literature, folklore and style of living came to them from Spain when she was at the height of her power. The culture, however, was modified after the first group of settlers came from Spain and other countries. Indian culture was based primarily on customs left to them by their ancestors. Their religion played a major factor in the life and the role of their government.

Indians in Puerto Rico believed in one god called “Yocahy”, who was the protector of evil spirits. Their government was divided into different classes. Each class had a leader and a subleader. The principal chief, or Cacique had the power to govern the island. The sub-chiefs were called Nitaynos, and also operated as administrators of justice. The Bohique was the high priest of the Indians. He had the power to predict future events, and carried out many such predictions by acting as advisor to the chief. The remainder of the Yucayeque was composed of Naborias (working class). The chief’s position was hereditary. The oldest son was given the right to rule after the death of the chief. The economy was limited to trade in personal items.

The population of Puerto Rico is made up of people who have ancestry composed of the world’s three major races (white, black and yellow). The culture has remained much the same, but it has become more nationalistic. During colonial rule, the Puerto Ricans were in no way full-fledged Spaniards. They slowly began to alter their early heritage into something truly “Puertorrique-o.” They developed their own folklore, music, arts and their own ways of living together, which in many ways set them apart from the Spanish officials. What is typically called Puerto Rican culture was developed in large measure as a social mechanism for defense against alien overlords and against poverty. The foundation of the island’s social structure came to be the family, each one closely related and large, including relatives of all ages a vast and smoothly functioning mutual aid society, held together by the fact that there was no other social resource and no political power for attaining it.

During the 1940’s, however, Puerto Ricans approached a turning point in the cultural sense, as well as in the economic. The Spanish oriented Puertorrique-os had never before been able to achieve great and constructive accomplishments for themselves, except for the miracle of their survival as a people. They began to encounter a number of cultural traits from Anglo-America for the first time. For instance, after 1940, the Anglo-American culture of the United States effectively joined forces with Puerto Rico’s Latin American culture in the effort to reach a common goal. The passing of Public Law 600 by the Congress of the United States in 1950 made an agreement with the people of Puerto Rico. They became United States citizens. Compulsory English was introduced into the public schools of Puerto Rico at that time. As one of several conscious efforts to preserve and respect old cultural values, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture was founded because the island’s culture was changing at a fantastic speed. Old social orientations were disappearing, to be replaced by new relationships and new values. The movement accelerated today because of Puerto Rico’s vast industrialization, and the present government has taken some steps to curtail the desertation of rural Puerto Rico.

If we compare the cultural aspects of the island and the mainland we can see many changes. Even though they have the same background, the same Latin American structure of life, Puerto Ricans become influenced by new cultural experiences. In a sense, they become “Americanized.” Life begins to change in the American manner. The family begins to lose its closeness. The children are influenced by their friends in school. The children learn the English language in order to communicate with their friends, but at home the Spanish tongue takes over.

The younger generation of Puerto Ricans have a better understanding of the American culture. These people are exposed to the history, language, and the politics of America at an early age. Even though, they still maintain their Puerto Rican nationalistic attitudes toward their own society, they become “Americanized” and they behave differently than their elders.

HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT:

Under Spanish rule, Puerto Rico had several governors. The governors were selected by the King of Spain. Ponce De Leon was one of the first governors selected by the King. Under the leadership of Ponce De Leon, the culture and political environment that existed in Spain was imposed on the island. The people of Puerto Rico had no other choice but to follow the order imposed by Spain. It was not until the nineteenth century that political conditions began to change on the island. Many small groups began to form political sects, and these in turn produced political parties and confrontations with Spanish rule.

The two major groups to form during the years 1869-1890 were Conservatives and the Liberals. Puerto Rico was fortunate because during this period Europe had experienced revolutionary outbreaks, thus inspiring Spain to give Puerto Rico formal voice for the first time. Many patriarchs such as Ramon Powers began to rise. The Intendencia de Hacienda de Puerto Rico was separated by the government. The political parties formed during this century were basically anti-Spanish. Even though they maintained the same cultural attitudes which were first introduced to them, their political attitudes were now more nationalistic. The Asimilista Party of 1837 wanted to maintain these cultural differences, while also giving equality to Puerto Ricans. The Autonomista Party of 1887 was formed by the revision of the Liberal Party. The spectrum of political parties changed according to the differences of opinions which their leaders had concerning the ever-changing political situations.

In 1897, the Queen of Spain signed the Autonomy Papers, which gave Puerto Rico the right to govern itself. Under the Autonomy Government, Puerto Rico had a Parliament consisting of two houses: The House of Representatives and the House of Administrators. The members of the House of Representatives were elected by the people. The House of Administrators was composed of members nominated by the General Governor, who represented Spain on the Island. The General Governor had supreme authority under the new regime, following the recommendation of the Council Ministers of Spain. The Governor had the authority to nominate the members of the Cabinet and the power to interpret the Spanish Laws on the Island. At the same time there were many revised parties formed from the existing major parties. These new political groups began to adopt a new philosophy and to restructure their government within the outline set up by the Autonomy Papers. The Liberal Party was reformed as the Autonomista Party; the Reformist Party was revised, and new parties such as the Popular and Republican were formed.

People who were dissatisfied with one political party structure became involved in the establishment of a new political party. These changes in participation were caused by the economic situation of the Island. The population was never united into two major parties, as we have been; they rather changed and developed new groups. Ever since 1808 Puerto Rico's people have passed through a succession of such way stations, not one of which was regarded by them as the final goal in their political evolution.

The acquisition of Puerto Rico by the United States after the Spanish-American War was a drastic turning point; the Foraker Act of 1901, Puerto Rico's first American constitution, drafted by Congress without consultation, proved to be a political setback. The Jones Act of 1917 repaired some of the damage done by its predecessor, but the right of Puerto Ricans to elect their own governor was not recognized until 1948. There still were many remnants of the old colonialism.

Under the present arrangement, the United States continues to operate the army, navy, air force, post office, customs, and various Federal agencies, such as the Soil Conservation Service in Puerto Rico. Excise taxes collected on goods manufactured in Puerto Rico and duties collected in Puerto Rican ports continue to be

returned to the Puerto Rican treasury instead of being kept by the Federal Government. Puerto is eligible for Federal Grants in aid for roads, school lunches and housing on a basis of equality with various states. Such financial advantages, plus the fact that Puerto Rico remains within the economic structure of the United States and has free access to America's markets and pool of capital, help to compensate for the Island's lack of natural resources. Puerto Rico does not contribute to the Federal Treasury and has no vote in Congress, according to the old American principle of "No taxation without representation." On the other hand, however, the Commonwealth continues to be represented in Congress by a Resident Commissioner who has a voice, but no vote. He can prepare legislation pertaining to Puerto Rico, and can argue for or against such legislation, but he cannot vote on it.

Puerto Ricans have been citizens of the United States since 1917, but only in a limited sense. They come and go freely within all the areas that are under the American flag. They enjoy all the civil rights and legal protection of the United States citizens. They lack, however, some of the political rights enjoyed by the citizens of the United States. They vote for their own officials in their own government, but as long as they remain in Puerto Rico they cannot vote for the President of the United States or for the members of Congress.

The people of Puerto Rico govern themselves under a constitution of their own drafting which was ratified by Congress and accepted by the Puerto Rican voters in a plebiscite. Neither the Congress nor the executive branch of the United States government can today veto a law by the Puerto Rican Legislature. In theory, Congress can and does pass laws pertaining to Puerto Rico without submitting them to formal acceptance by the Commonwealth; in practice that ability has been voluntarily curtailed on several occasions.

Puerto Rico's political debate since the establishment of its Commonwealth status has centered largely on the question of whether that status is permanent or is merely another way station to something else. The Popular Democratic Party insists that as a result of its present arrangement, Puerto Rico has at last attained its final, ultimate status. They do not claim that it is perfect; they do insist that it is sufficiently flexible to permit adjustment and improvement. For instance, they agree that Congress can still pass laws pertaining to Puerto Rico without consulting the Puerto Ricans, but they also maintain that the same good working relation with Congress that led to the establishment of the Commonwealth status permits its eventual amendment to take care of that defect. On the other hand, the two minority parties, one for independence and the other for statehood, choose to differ with the philosophy and ideology of the Popular Democratic Party.

Political Parties in Puerto Rico Under the Spanish Rule: 1870-1900.

Conservatives—Organized as a party in 1869 and consisted of opposed liberalizing reform in the colonial government. It gradually acquired the pejorative name of "Unconditional Spaniards."

Separatists—A very small group that separated from the Liberal Party and sought the complete independence of Puerto Rico.

Liberals—Organized as a party in 1870 and desired the extension to Puerto Rico of the reforms of the Spanish Revolution of 1868. It was named the Reformist Liberal Party and developed two tendencies: (1) Traditionalist assimilation into the political party system of Spain, and (2) autonomist decentralization away from the Spanish control.

Reformist Liberal Party—(1870) Formed and organized by liberals.

Republican Autonomist—(1874) Monarchical Assimilist.

Autonomist—(1883-1885) Assimilist.

Republican Autonomist—(1887-1897)

United Autonomist Liberal Party—(1898-1899) Was known as the Historical, Orthodox or Pure Party. Various meetings were held in order to arrive at an accord between Puerto Rico and Spain.

Political Parties in Puerto Rico Under the American Rule: 1900-1980.

Partido Federal—(1900) It wanted Puerto Rico to become one of the States in the United States.

Partido Union de Puerto Rico—(1904) Reformation of the Federal Party of 1900.

Partido Socialista—(1908) It wanted better conditions for the working class.

Partido Nacionalista Puertorrique-o—(1922) It wanted radical changes within the economy and social welfare programs.

Partido Constitucional Historico o Republicano Puro—(1924) Formation of the Puerto Rican Alliance with the Unionist Party and Republican Party against the Socialist Party.

Partido Liberal Puertorrique-o—(1929) Independence of Puerto Rico. It wanted to dissolve the alliance between Puerto and the United States.

Partido Union Republicana—(1932) Reformation of the Partido Constitucional Historico. Powerful during the critical years of 1930-1940, during the national revolt.

Partido Popular Democratico—(1940) During the 1936 election the Liberal Party became divided into two groups: Liberals and Populares. This party controlled the government from 1940 to 1956.

Partido Independista—(1948) It wanted independence for Puerto Rico.

Partido Estadista Republicano—(1952) It wanted Puerto Rico to become a state in the Union.

Partido Comunista (Organization)—Castroite philosophy toward government and people. It does not participate in elections.

PUERTO RICANS AND THE CITY GOVERNMENT OF NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT

The political involvement of Puerto Ricans and other minorities in New Haven and throughout the United States is very small in comparison with their ratio to the entire population. Moreover, the political and cultural behavior of Puerto Rican adults is totally different from that of the younger Puerto Ricans.

Less than half of the Puerto Ricans have at any time taken advantage of their voting privileges in New Haven. In view of the highly politicalized atmosphere of the Island, the recent migrant's tendency to refrain from political activity in New Haven deserves discussion. Some 80% of the eligible voters exercised their vote on the island in 1976, where as 45% did so on the continent. According to Junta Organization of New Haven, about 93% of the Spanish-speaking electorate in New Haven are ignorant of candidates and issues. Another reason is the process of the election; for example in Puerto Rico there is more excitement, parades, bands and the election is considered a feast day. In New Haven everything is quiet.

Yet as the Puerto Ricans become more settled residents, they are drawn into political participation. As of today about 20% of the Puerto Rican residents belong to political parties. Many of them feel that they are "Being Taken" when it comes to solving crucial problems in the community. Another reason the Puerto Ricans are not involved in the political life of New Haven is due to the adjustment to the American type of politics. Many Puerto Rican residents, whether they are new arrivals or not, are inclined to search for better economic conditions rather than to become a member of a political party. The majority of these immigrants are non-English speaking and are not able to join or participate in an election.

Many of the Puerto Ricans who do participate in political parties have strong ties with local agencies in supporting candidates of their choice. They receive information either by agency leaders or religious organizations.

The immigrants are more inclined to be members of religious organizations because they are accustomed to these organizations in Puerto Rico. Religion plays a major role in the family and political life. Many Catholic and Protestant Churches have special services in the vernacular for Spanish-speaking people. The priest or minister informs the people of the political, economic and social events which occur in New Haven.

Several organizations do exist in the City, among people who may have come from the same town in Puerto Rico, among people who may have the same occupation in New Haven, or some other such link. Some of the clubs or organizations have been in operation for over 30 years. The Puerto Ricans, in fact, may not become interested in organizations until a certain period of residence in the City has passed. When in the acculturation process, the Puerto Rican becomes aware of the need to strengthen his links with Puerto Rico via a home town or other insular club, he or she may join.

The local Puerto Rican agencies such as the Junta Organization, the Puerto Rican Cultural Association, and the Concerned Hispanic Citizens of New Haven, have supported local candidates during elections and have helped to bring about a large turnout of voters from the Puerto Rican sections of the city. These agencies do play a major role in the political choices Puerto Rican Americans make. The majority of the Puerto Rican families, directly or indirectly, have some affiliations and receive some information from these local agencies.

The Junta Organization has a weekly newspaper which reports on local problems and political activities occurring in the City and in Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican agencies have transmitted their goals to the role expectation of individuals who have a great affiliation with the agencies.

I have illustrated that there are Puerto Rican cultural differences in politics by discussing the culture, history and present day participation in the political system of New Haven, Connecticut by Puerto Ricans. This unit may be used as a tool to motivate students toward discussions concerning the Puerto Ricans' views on many aspects of political life. In their discussions and study the students should find many of my points to be true for they can see them in many cases, first hand.

SAMPLE LESSONS

First Lesson: The culture of the Puerto Rican people.

Activities:

I. Identify: Yocahy, Cacique, Nitaynos, Yucayeque, Naborias, Puertorrique-o, Puerto Rico, Institute of Puerto Rican Culture.

II. Events in Review:

A. Describe in your own words the cultural traits of the Puerto Rican people.

B. Compare the cultural traits of the Puerto Ricans on the island and the Puerto Ricans on the mainland.

C. Did the Puerto Ricans accept the Anglo-Saxon culture? Describe the turning point of the American take over.

III. Project:

A. Write a two to three page paper on the life of a Puerto Rican family in your neighborhood comparing it to your family.

B. Draw a map of Puerto Rico showing important cities and economical resources.

IV. Films:

A collection of films pertaining to different aspects of Puerto Rican culture is available through the Connecticut Migratory Children's Program lending library at the Hamden New Haven Co-operative Educational Center. The films cover a variety of cultural aspects such as: The Festival of Saint James, the History of the Taino Indians, Puerto Rican Composers, picturesque scenes of Puerto Rico and the History of Puerto Rico.

A. *La Buena Herencia (The Good Heritage)*

Color. 28 minutes. The theme of this film is historical. It presents the life and customs of the Taino Indians, as well as some aspects of the cultural legacy that present day Puerto Ricans have received from the Taino Indians.

B. *La Plena (color) 28 minutes.* A documentary which presents many scenes of Puerto Rican life, from the mountains to the sea.

C. *The Mountain Sings (color) 11 minutes.* This film presents the music of the "Jibaro" stringed instruments, such as the cuatro and the guitar are used.

D. *The Saintmaker (color) 26 minutes.* A documentary which shows the arts and crafts of an old carver of wooden Saints and emphasizes the dignity of the old man's manual labors.

E. *Miracle on the Mountain (color) 31 minutes.* The film depicts the story of two boys. One displays good attitudes and feelings; the other one does not.

F. *Cantares (color) 9 minutes.* Music sung in the "Seis Chorro" manner by the group

“Trovadores,” Typical Puerto Rican instruments are used by the group.

G. *Pedro Flores* (color) 28 minutes. A documentary based on the life and works of the Puerto Rican composer Pedro Flores. Scenes of the Puerto Rican landscape are shown. The plot revolves around a monologue of the composer.

Second Lesson: The History and Government of Puerto Rico.

Activities

I. Identify: Autonomy Papers, Jones Act, Foraker Act, Colonialism, Resident Commissioner, Governor, Conservatives, Liberals, Ponce deLeon, Autonomista Party, Reformist Party.

II. Events in Review:

A. Discuss the political parties under the Spanish rule and what happened to them after the American takeover.

B. Compare the United States government cabinets to the Puerto Rican cabinets.

C. Name and list some of the Puerto Rican Creoles celebrated today by the Puerto Ricans.

III. Projects:

A. Write a report on the background, society, political life, and economy of Puerto Rico under the Spanish rule and the American rule.

B. Write a biographical sketch of Luis Mu-os Marin. Compare him to an American President.

C. Compare the economy of Puerto Rico with one of the states of the United States.

IV. Films:

A. *El Resplandor* 51 minutes. The film relates an episode in the history of slavery in Puerto Rico.

B. *Las Manos del Hombre (The Hands of Man)*. 36 minutes. This film portrays the story of a Puerto Rican worker who is oppressed by his Spanish masters during the colonial period.

C. *A Voice on the Mountain* 35 minutes. Based on actual events, this film presents an example of collective community action to solve a particular problem, namely, the establishment of a school for adult education.

D. *Ignatus* 33 minutes. This film shows how timidity and pessimism contribute to the problems of a rural community.

E. *When Parents Forget* 51 minutes. This film dramatizes the anxiety of youngsters in a rural community, due to the lack of recreational facilities.

V. Records:

The following Puerto Rican records could be used as another resource to familiarize students with the Puerto Rican culture. The variety of records range from boleros to the national anthem of Puerto Rico.

A. Danzas, by Juan Campos.

B. Danzas, by Irem Paventad.

C. Danzas, by Jose Ignacio Quinton.

D. Danzas, by Juan Rios Ovalle.

E. Puerto Rican Danzas, piano instrumental.

F. Cancion del Arte, by Marla Esther Robles.

G. Cancion del Arte, by Luisita Rodriguez.

H. The Songs of Julio Alvarado, Boleros, by Tito Enriquez and his Boricua Quartet.

I. Puerto Rico Presents the Music of Rafael Hernandez.

J. National Anthems of Puerto Rico and the United States.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books Recommended for Teachers.

1. Anderson, Robert W., *Party Politics in Puerto Rico* , Palo Alto, CA, Stanford University, 1965.
This book presents an analysis of political parties and political campaigns in Puerto Rico.
2. Benitez, Jose A., *Puerto Rico and the Political Destiny of America* , Birmingham, AL, Southern University, 1958.
It studies the political ties between the United States and Puerto Rico.
3. Berbusse, Edward J., *The United States in Puerto Rico , 18 98-1900* , Chapel Hill, NC, Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1966.
A detailed history of the Federal Acts passed on Puerto Rico.
4. Brameld, Theodore A., *The Remaking of a Culture: Life and Education in Puerto Rico*. New York, NY, Harper, 1959.
This book explains the turning point of cultural aspects under the Spanish rule and under the American system.
5. Burma, John A., *Puerto Ricans in the United States*, Chicago, IL, Quadrangle, 1961.
Analysis and historical background of Puerto Ricans living in the United States. It presents: problems, movements and political involvements of the Puerto Ricans.
6. Hanson, Earl P., *Puerto Rico: Land of Wonders* , New York, NY, Knopf, 1960.
It deals with geographical, historical and cultural history of Puerto Rico.
7. Miller, Paul, *History of Puerto Rico* , New York, NY, Rand McNally, 1947.
An excellent book on the history of Puerto Rico.
8. White, Trumbull, *Puerto Rico and Its People* , New York, NY, Stokes, 1938.
It describes the history, economy and culture of Puerto Rico.

Books Recommended for Students.

1. Babin Maria T., *The Culture of Puerto Rico* , New York, NY, Migration Division, Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, 1960.

This book goes into detail on the cultural traits of the Puerto Rican people. It deals with the past and the present.

2. Burma, John A., *Spanish-speaking Groups in the United States* , Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1955.

A historical analysis of Puerto Ricans living in large cities of the United States.

3. Greenstein, Fred, *Children and Politics* , New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1965.

It describes the attitude that children have with regard to political beliefs imposed upon them by their parents.

4. Lockett, E., *The Puerto Rican Problem*, New York, NY, Exposition, 1964.

It deals with problems which Puerto Ricans encounter on the mainland, especially in the cities.

5. Mills, Wright, *Puerto Ricans in New York* , New York, NY, Harper and Row, 1950.

It describes the life, the economic conditions, the political involvement of Puerto Ricans in New York City.

6. Roberts, Lydia and Stefani, *Pattern of Living in Puerto Rican families* , Puerto Rico, University of Puerto Rico Press, 1949.

It explains the role of the family and its members.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>