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Latinos and the NYC Council: The Impact of Speaker Melissa Mark Viverito

By Angelo Falcón (January 22, 2014)

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The election of Melissa Mark Viverito as the new Speaker of the NYC Council was historic in making her the first person of color, a Puerto Rican, to lead that legislative body in its 116 years. It also set in motion the reorganization of the Council's broader leadership in terms of the assignment of its 35 committees with oversight of various functions of the city government. This year's committee assignments, which are scheduled

to begin to be announced today, take on a certain dramatic turn because of the contentiousness of the election of the Speaker. Although the nature of these assignments is currently only open to speculation given the closed door nature of the selection process, this NiLP Latino Policy iReport discusses the issues involved for the Latino community.



Committee Chairmanships and Latino Politics

In broad terms, the election of the Speaker and the internal decisionmaking process in the NYC Council has changed in significant ways this year. Most notably this has been the case in the much smaller role that the Democratic Party county chairmen, especially those of the Bronx and Queens, are playing. Other actors, especially the Council's Progressive Caucus, labor unions like 1199 and 32BJ, the Working Families Parties and some community-based organizations are bigger players than in the past. A recurring question is whether the new Speaker and her coalition will be retaliating against her opponents in committee assignments, an issue raised by the initial membership elected by the Speaker of the powerful Rules Committee that determines these assignments.

In terms of the Latino community, this question of committee assignments can have important consequences for the nature of local Latino political leadership. The tradition is that whoever is elected Speaker rewards his or her supporters by giving them plum committee chairmanships and punishes opponents by giving them less favorable committee assignments.

There are currently 11 Latino members of the total 51 membership of the New York City Council (23 percent of the total). This is about the same percentage that Latinos make up of the city's eligible voters, which makes the City Council one of the most representative elective bodies in New York.

Here is a list of the Latino members of the current NYC Council:

Latino Members of the NYC Council 2014						
Councilmember	Elected	District	Party	Borough	Ethnicity	
Maria del Carmen Arroyo	2005	17	D	Bronx	PR	
Fernando Cabrera	2009	14	D-WFP	Bronx	DOM/P	
Rafael Espinal	2013	37	D	Brooklyn	DOM	
Julissa Ferreras	2009	21	D	Queens	DOM	
Melissa Mark Viverito	2005	8	D-WFP	Bronx/Manh	PR	
Carlos Menchaca	2013	38	D-WFP	Brooklyn	MEX	
Rosie Mendez	2005	2	D-WFP	Manhattan	PR	
Annabel Palma	2003	18	D-WFP	Bronx	PR	
Antonio Reynoso	2013	34	D-WFP	Brooklyn	DOM	
Ydanis Rodriguez	2009	10	D-WFP	Manhattan	DOM	
Ritchie Torres	2013	15	D-WFP	Bronx	PR	

The following is a listing of their committee chairmanships from the previous session (please note that four of the members are newly elected and have not had committee assignments):

Previous 2013 Committee Chairmanships of the Current Latino Members of the NYC Council

Councilmember	2013 Committee Chairmanships
Maria del Carmen Arroyo	Health
Fernando Cabrera	Technology
Rafael Espinal	<i>New Member</i>
Julissa Ferreras	Women's Issues
Melissa Mark Viverito	Parks and Recreation
Carlos Menchaca	<i>New Member</i>
Rosie Mendez	Public Housing
Annabel Palma	General Welfare
Antonio Reynoso	<i>New Member</i>
Ydanis Rodriguez	Higher Education
Ritchie Torres	<i>New Member</i>

The Latino Councilmembers most at risk of losing their committee chairmanships or being assigned to less important committees are those who did not initially support the candidacy of Melissa Mark Viverito and supported instead Daniel Garodnick. These are three Bronx Councilmembers (Maria del Carmen Arroyo, Fernando Cabrera and Annabel Palma) and one from Manhattan (Rosie Mendez). As this indicates, the opposition of most of the Bronx delegation to Mark Viverito's candidacy put the Bronx Democratic County organization in a weak position within the Council. The one exception, newly-elected Councilmember Ritchie Torres, was an early supporter of Mark Viverito and can be expected to be rewarded. Manhattan Councilmember Rosie Mendez' lack of initial support for Mark Viverito was, to many, puzzling given her strong association with Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez who was a Mark Viverito supporter, although a tepid one.

On the other hand, Mark Viverito received strong support from key Dominican Councilmembers Ydanis Rodriguez (Manhattan) and Julissa Ferreras (Queens). Ferreras' support was notable in that, like Ritchie Torres of the Bronx, she bucked her country organization and its chairman, Congressman Joe Crowley, in doing so. Mark Viverito also had the support of the newly-elected Latino Councilmembers from Brooklyn. The Kings County Democratic organization under chairman Frank Seddio broke with the other county leaders in a deal with Mayor de Blasio to support Mark Viverito. Although Brooklyn Councilmembers Antonio Reynoso and Carlos Menchaca would have probably supported Mark Viverito even if the Brooklyn county leader didn't, this allowed Councilmember Rafael Espinal, a Brooklyn county organization loyalist, also to support her (he was appointed by Mark Viverito, as a result, to the Rules Committee).

In terms of what the committee assignments will be, all that exists at this time is just speculation. Among the rumors are the following: The word has gone out that Rosie Mendez would be losing her chairmanship of the Public Housing Committee, to be replaced by the Bronx' Ritchie Torres. Julissa Ferreras is reportedly seeking to chair the powerful Finance Committee. There is also talk of Ydanis Rodriguez moving from chair of the Higher Education Committee to that of the Transportation Committee.

There was some talk of his interest in chairing the Education Committee, but Daniel Dromm has expressed interest in Education and has stated publicly that Rodriguez indicated he was not interested in this committee. Although totally based on speculation, this provides a flavor of the nature of the discussions currently taking place within the Council.

Some have expressed the concern that this committee reward system might have a disproportionate impact of specifically Puerto Rican leadership in the Council. The irony of the Speaker's election is that although Mark Viverito is Puerto Rican she did not have the support of the majority of the Puerto Rican members of the Council (3 of the 5 did not support her). If they are blocked from more important committee chairmanships, this could result in a major shift in internal Latino power relations, weakening the former gatekeeper role that Puerto Ricans and the Bronx Democratic organization once played. Others see this as a positive development in promoting more equitable power-sharing among the different Latino national origin communities.

In addition, the Latino Councilmembers are all members of the Black, Latino and Asian (BLA) Caucus. The BLA Caucus consists of 27 of the 51 members (53 percent) of the City Council. The divisions in the election of Speaker Melissa Mark Viverito has also created strains with the BLA Caucus so it will be interesting to see how this will affect this group's cohesiveness in working with the Speaker.

The NYC Council and the Latino Community: An Overview

The election of Melissa Mark Viverito as its Speakers has increased awareness of the role of the New York City Council in the governance of New York. This is certainly the case for the Latino community, and we provide here an overview of the nature of Latino leadership in the Council.

Background. Although a Puerto Rican, Oscar Garcia Rivera, was first elected to public office in New York City in 1937 (as a Republican-American Labor Party candidate to the State Assembly from East Harlem), it was not until 1965 that someone from this community was elected to the City Council. This was Carlos Rios, also of East Harlem, who was elected as Manhattan's Councilmember At-Large. At that time, two Councilmembers were elected at-large to represent each borough and, for the rest, two were elected from each State Senate District. Latino representation on the City Council was exclusively Puerto Rican until 1991, when the first Dominican, Guillermo Linares, was elected to this body. In 2013, Carlos Menchaca became the first Mexican-American elected to the Council.

The role, structure and terms of the City Council have been changed since 1965 a number of times. In 1983, the courts found the at-large positions to be unconstitutional. In 1989, the Supreme Court determined that what was then the Board of Estimate was also unconstitutional, prompting the city to enlarge the role of the City Council, along with its members from 35 to 51 seats to be elected each from their own Council Districts. As part of this change, the Council was granted full power over the municipal budget, and authority over zoning, land use and franchises. This led to the creation of an independent New York City Districting Commission to draw these new districts every ten years based on the enumerations of the decennial Censuses.

In 1986, the Council created the position of Speaker, and in 1993, the Council replaced the position of Council President with that of Public Advocate as a result of a Charter revision change. That same year, as a result of a referendum by the city's electorate, two year term limits were imposed on Councilmembers. In 2008, at the urging of then Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the Council, in a highly controversial vote, extended term limits to three years.

Council members are elected every four years. The exception being for two consecutive two year terms every twenty years to allow for redistricting between the terms as a result of the decennial U.S. Censuses.

Party Representation. All the Latino Councilmembers are in the Democratic Party. All but three were also endorsed by the Working Families Party.

Gender Representation. While the perennial problem of the underrepresentation of women among Latino elected officials remains in general, this is not the case with the New York City Council. Of the 11 Latino Councilmembers, 5 (46 percent) are women (down from the 7, or 64 percent of the previous session). This is in comparison to women representing only 25 percent of the non-Latino Councilmembers. In addition, among Latino elected officials in New York State, women hold only 47 elected positions (35 percent of the total). Of these 47 elected positions held by Latinas statewide, 94 percent are in local positions (among male Latino elected officials, 83 percent hold local office).

In the 2013 elections, the Latino Council delegation lost two women, both from Brooklyn. One was term-limited, Williamsburg's Diana Reyna, who is now Deputy Brooklyn Borough President, and Sunset Park's Sara Gonzalez who was not reelected.

Ethnic Representation. The majority of the Latino Councilmembers is Puerto Rican or part Puerto Rican (6, or 54 percent). The next largest group is made of those who are Dominican or part Dominican (5, or 46 percent). Among those of mixed ancestry, one is of Puerto Rican and Dominican parents. There is one Mexican-American Councilmember, and one who was born in Belize but raised in Puerto Rico. At least two Latino Councilmembers are foreign-born, and two were born in Puerto Rico.

As a result of the 2013 elections, the Latino Council delegation lost a net two Puerto Rican members, the Bronx' Joel Rivera, who was term limited (replaced by Ritchie Torres, a Puerto Rican), Brooklyn's Sara Gonzalez who was not reelected (replaced by Carlos Menchaca, a Mexican-American), and Brooklyn's Erik Martin Dilan, who was term-limited (replaced by Rafael Espinal, a Dominican).

Geographic Representation. The Bronx has the largest number of Latino Councilmembers (4.5, or 41 percent), followed by Brooklyn (3, or 27 percent), Manhattan (2.5, or 23 percent) and Queens (1, or 9 percent). Staten Island has no Latino Councilmembers. Based on population distribution, Latinos in Queens and Staten Island, using this measure, are the most underrepresented on the City Council.

Conclusion: The Future of Latino Politics in NYC

While the election of Melissa Mark Viverito has been most characterized as historic because of her being the first Latina and person of color to hold this post, it, along with the election of Mayor Bill de Blasio, has a perhaps greater significance for the future of Latino politics in New York City. The election of Mayor de Blasio and reelection of Mark Viverito to the City Council, as well as Speaker, revealed a vacuum in the city's Latino political leadership. The once powerful Bronx Democratic organization, which was so politically dominant for years in the Latino community, was not able to deliver the Latino vote to its candidate, Bill Thompson, and was not able to defeat Mark Viverito, half of whose district was redistricted from Manhattan to the Bronx. This was the result in part of the internal divisions within the Bronx county organization between the Ruben Diaz father and son-backed chairmanship of Carl Heasties and the followers of the former county chairman, Assemblyman José Rivera. The opposition of the Bronx organization to the Mark Viverito candidacy for Council Speaker was another defeat for what was once the center of Latino political influence in the city.

With the ascendancy of Mark Viverito as Speaker, and her alliance with Mayor de Blasio, she is now in a position to strengthen newer voices in Latino and progressive political leadership throughout the city. The assignment of committee chairmanships is one of a number of factors that can serve to redistribute power among Latino Councilmembers in ways that can result in a politics that is more responsive to the needs of this community and develop a stronger pipeline of a much-needed new generation of progressive Latino leaders. This is the legacy to which Speaker Melissa Mark Viverito and her supporters will hopefully aspire to achieve.

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