



# What Do Puerto Ricans Really Think Ahead of the 2020 Elections?

Results From a National Survey of Mainland Puerto Ricans

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# Introduction and summary

Often overlooked and underappreciated until election time, Puerto Rican voters on the mainland of the United States are a diverse community with strong beliefs about the issues facing the country and a demonstrated commitment to civic and political life. As the nation heads into the final stretch of the 2020 presidential election, it is important to fully assess what is going on in the lives of Puerto Ricans and how these voters view the critical issues facing the country and the island today.

In order to get a clearer picture of the experiences, values, and beliefs of the Puerto Rican community, the Center for American Progress Action Fund, in partnership with the public opinion firm Latino Decisions, recently completed one of the most comprehensive national surveys ever conducted of Puerto Ricans living on the mainland United States. The project has several goals:

1. To examine Puerto Ricans' voting behavior, civic integration, and interest and participation in U.S. politics
2. To measure how Puerto Ricans of different backgrounds are handling the twin disasters of the coronavirus and the ongoing impact of Hurricane Maria, which devastated the island and the Puerto Rican community three years ago
3. To assess Puerto Ricans' views of specific issues facing the country at large, including their opinions about the most important priorities for the upcoming election
4. To examine views about the status of Puerto Rico and how Puerto Rican identity interacts with other political and social views

A national survey of 1,000 Puerto Ricans and those of Puerto Rican descent living on the mainland (including an oversample of 200 Puerto Ricans in Pennsylvania to allow for a state-level breakout in addition to Florida) was conducted by phone and online by Latino Decisions from September 4 to 11, 2020. The full results are weighted to reflect the distribution of the community nationally based on available census and other demographic information. Survey respondents could choose to take the survey in English or Spanish: 71 percent chose English, and 29 percent

chose Spanish. In terms of their backgrounds, 58 percent of the respondents were born in the United States; 40 percent were born on the island of Puerto Rico; and 2 percent were born in another country. Fourteen percent of survey participants have lived in the mainland United States for five years or less; 23 percent for six to 15 years; and 61 percent for more than 15 years. Slightly more than half of respondents identify as Democrats (51 percent); one-quarter identify as political independents; about one-fifth identify as Republicans (17 percent); and a small group identify with a third party (6 percent).

The remainder of the report will go over the most important findings from the study. The full results from the survey are available in the endnotes along with a slide presentation of the findings.<sup>1</sup>

# Voting and civic integration

**Three-quarters of Puerto Ricans say that they will definitely vote in the 2020 presidential election, with approximately 15 percent probably voting and about 1 in 10 saying that they will not vote.**

Overall, 90 percent of mainland Puerto Ricans report being currently registered to vote in their home state, with 10 percent reporting that they are not registered to vote. Women (12 percent), political independents (17 percent), and those with a high school education or less (15 percent) are more likely than average to report being unregistered for the 2020 election cycle. Likewise, first-generation Puerto Ricans (11 percent) are more likely than second-generation (9 percent) or third-generation (6 percent) ones to not be registered.

Looking at self-reported registration, 4 percent of registered Puerto Rican voters say they will not vote. But a full 50 percent of unregistered Puerto Ricans say they may not or definitely will not register and vote in the November 3 election.

Among those born on the island of Puerto Rico, 4 in 10 say that registering and voting in the mainland United States is easier than it is on the island, with only 13 percent saying it is more difficult on the mainland. A plurality of those born on the island (47 percent) say that the ease of registering and voting in both Puerto Rico and the mainland are about the same.

In general, the study finds a genuine eagerness to vote in the upcoming election across demographic lines in the Puerto Rican community: 70 percent or more of every age, gender, and educational group says that they will definitely vote in 2020. Partisan differences do exist, with more than 80 percent of both self-identified Republicans and Democrats reporting that they will definitely vote, compared with 59 percent of political independents.

**A slight majority of Puerto Ricans plan to vote by mail in the upcoming election, but 4 in 10 are not familiar with the mail-in voting process in their state.**

With all the focus on mail-in and absentee voting this election cycle, the study finds Puerto Ricans are basically split on whether they will vote by mail or in person. Given the choice between both options for voting, 53 percent of Puerto Ricans prefer and would be most comfortable voting by mail, and 47 percent prefer and would be more comfortable voting in person.

Preference for voting by mail is higher than average among Puerto Rican women (56 percent); younger people ages 18–34 (57 percent); voters in Pennsylvania (58 percent) and Florida (56 percent); and Democrats (58 percent). Preference for mail-in voting is lower than average among men (50 percent); Republicans (42 percent); and people living in the New York region (40 percent).

Experience with mail-in voting is mixed in the community. Forty-one percent of Puerto Ricans overall say that they have voted absentee or by mail in the past, but 59 percent say that they have never voted by mail in their state. Additionally, 41 percent of respondents say that they have not received enough information on how to request a mail ballot. And only one-third of Puerto Ricans say that they are very confident that their ballot will be delivered and counted properly in the upcoming election. Likewise, 45 percent of Puerto Ricans do not know if their state has drop-off locations for vote-by-mail ballots.

**Nearly three-quarters of Puerto Ricans express concern about being exposed to COVID-19 if they vote in person this November.**

On top of a potential lack of knowledge or confidence in mail-in voting, large percentages of Puerto Ricans say that they are “very concerned” (42 percent) or “somewhat concerned” (32 percent) about being exposed to the coronavirus if they choose to vote in person. Concerns about exposure to COVID-19 from in-person voting are higher than average among Puerto Rican women (76 percent); younger people ages 18–34 (79 percent); Democrats (82 percent); and those residing in Florida (77 percent).

Combined, these findings on mail-in and in-person voting suggest that much more needs to be done to help Puerto Ricans better understand and navigate the complicated voting process this cycle if states or parties want to ensure robust Puerto Rican participation.

**A majority of Puerto Ricans have had no contact whatsoever from political parties or civic groups encouraging them to register and vote in the upcoming election.**

With the election less than 50 days away, a large percentage of Puerto Ricans (54 percent) report that they have yet to receive any contact from a political party or nonprofit group by email, text, phone, or in person encouraging them to register and vote. Just 30 percent say that they have been contacted by Democrats; 23 percent by Republicans; and 7 percent by a nonpartisan civic group.

Among those who are currently unregistered, nearly 8 in 10 report having had no contacts from a political party or nonprofit group. The lack of contact is higher than average among older Puerto Ricans ages 50 or older (58 percent); those born on the island (58 percent); those with a high school education or less (60 percent); political independents (58 percent); and those who took the survey in Spanish (63 percent). Democrats are also more likely than Republicans to report having had no contacts about voting this cycle: 53 percent versus 49 percent, respectively.

**Discussion of political issues with family and friends is prevalent among Puerto Ricans, but other forms of civic and political participation remain low.**

The survey presented a series of political and civic participation actions and asked respondents if they have been involved in each type of action over the past 12 months, either in person or online or in both manners. Forty-four percent of Puerto Ricans overall have discussed politics with family or friends in person, and 29 percent did so online, while 40 percent say that they have not discussed politics at all. Thirty percent have discussed politics specifically on Puerto Rico in person and 27 percent online, with more than half saying that they have not discussed Puerto Rican politics at all.

Discussion of political issues is noticeably high among Puerto Ricans living in Florida and the New York region but much lower in Pennsylvania: Less than half of those in Florida and New York say that they have not discussed politics with friends or family in the past year, compared with more than 7 in 10 Puerto Ricans living in Pennsylvania.

In terms of other civic actions, the survey finds fairly low levels of civic integration across a range of measures. Attending church emerges as the most widespread activity among Puerto Ricans, with 24 percent doing this in person and 25 percent online in the past 12 months. Beyond this, anywhere from two-thirds to more than 8 in 10 Puerto Ricans say that they have not participated in things such as school activities, team or club sports, community or job events, local meetings, or business and labor union activities.

Specific political actions are even less reported among Puerto Ricans. Three-quarters to more than 80 percent of respondents in the past year have not contacted their local representatives about political issues, attended a rally or protest, contributed money to a political organization, or worked for a candidate or campaign. Petition signing and Facebook or Twitter discussions about politics or candidates emerge as slightly more prominent actions taken by Puerto Ricans.

Despite low levels of civic and political integration on the mainland, Puerto Ricans remain optimistic about their democratic citizenship, at least in terms of voting: 6 in 10 Puerto Ricans believe that their vote matters a lot when it comes to making change in their community, and another one-quarter say their vote matters some on these issues. Only 5 percent of Puerto Ricans feel their vote doesn't matter at all.

# Puerto Rican experiences with COVID-19

**Nearly 4 in 10 Puerto Ricans report that they or someone close to them on the mainland has fallen ill from the coronavirus, and nearly 3 in 10 have family or friends on the island who have fallen ill from the virus.**

The Puerto Rican community is clearly feeling the effects of the coronavirus pandemic in a personal manner. Thirty-eight percent of Puerto Ricans overall have themselves fallen ill from the virus or have a family member or close friend in the United States who has fallen ill from COVID-19. Twenty-seven percent also report that family members or friends on the island have gotten sick from the coronavirus.

Reported illness from the coronavirus, either personally or among a close circle of friends and family members on the mainland, is higher than average among younger Puerto Ricans (46 percent); those with some college education (43 percent); those living in the New York region (42 percent); and self-identified Democrats (43 percent).

**One-third of Puerto Rican households have lost their job at some point during the pandemic, and more than 4 in 10 have had their pay cut or work hours reduced.**

In conjunction with the health challenges from COVID-19, Puerto Ricans clearly face ongoing economic problems. One-third of Puerto Ricans overall have personally lost a job or had a member of their household lose theirs, and another 42 percent of Puerto Rican households have faced work reductions or pay cuts.

Reported job losses are higher than average among Puerto Rican women (36 percent); younger people ages 18–34 (44 percent); and those with some college education (39 percent). In comparison, reported job losses are lower than average among those living in Pennsylvania (19 percent) and among people ages 50 or older (23 percent). Pay or work-hour reductions have hit younger Puerto Ricans particularly hard (53 percent) as well as those living in the New York region (42 percent), but they appear to have affected others more evenly across gender and educational lines. Notably, among those Puerto Ricans who have been able to or have been forced to work outside of their homes during the coronavirus crisis, nearly 7 in 10 report feeling at risk of being exposed to the virus due to unsafe workplaces.

Roughly one-fifth of Puerto Ricans also report that the business they own has been shut down or faced declining revenue due to the pandemic, and a similar proportion say that they have had difficulty applying for small-business loans in the federal stimulus package.

**Approximately one-third of Puerto Ricans have had difficulty paying their rent or mortgage during the pandemic, while more than 4 in 10 have faced difficulty getting food or medicine.**

Thirty-five percent of Puerto Ricans have had trouble making rent or paying their mortgage during the pandemic, with rates higher than average among men (37 percent); younger Puerto Ricans ages 18–34 (44 percent); and those with some college education (41 percent). In addition, 42 percent of Puerto Ricans have faced difficulties buying or finding important household needs, including food, medicine, or other supplies, with challenges higher than average among women (46 percent); younger people ages 18–34 (46 percent); and those with some college education (45 percent).

**Puerto Ricans strongly disapprove of the way President Donald Trump is handling the coronavirus pandemic and have far more trust in local health care providers and Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.**

Nearly half of all Puerto Ricans (49 percent) “strongly disapprove” of the way President Trump is handling the coronavirus pandemic, and another one-fifth “somewhat disapprove” of his actions, or inaction, while fighting the virus. Only 13 percent of Puerto Ricans “strongly approve” of the president’s handling of the pandemic.

Disapproval is fairly steady across demographic lines but breaks in partisan terms: 77 percent of Republicans approve of the president’s handling of the coronavirus versus 71 percent of political independents and 82 percent of Democrats who disapprove.

Asked to rate a series of political leaders and other officials on a scale of zero to 10 in terms of how much they trust the information and advice they provide on the coronavirus, local hospitals, doctors, and nurses earn the most trust from Puerto Ricans, with a mean of 7.41 on the zero-to-10 scale, while Dr. Fauci receives a mean trust rating of 6.4.

In contrast, President Trump receives a mean trust rating of only 3.07 among Puerto Ricans—the lowest rating of anyone tested.

# Attitudes about national issues

## **The coronavirus response and discrimination against immigrants and Hispanics top the list of most pressing issues for Puerto Ricans in the 2020 election.**

Survey participants were asked to choose the two most important issues facing Puerto Ricans and Hispanics/Latinos in the upcoming election from a long list of possible areas. The most important issue for Puerto Ricans overall is clearly the ongoing response to the coronavirus, which was chosen by 31 percent of respondents. Twenty-one percent also believe that stopping discrimination against immigrants and Hispanics/Latinos is a pressing issue this election cycle, with another 16 percent selecting the protection of immigrants' rights.

Beyond these top-tier items, a range of additional issues emerge centered on the economy and health care, including unemployment and job creation (19 percent); improving wages and incomes (16 percent); and lowering the cost of health care (17 percent). Another 10 percent of Puerto Ricans pick a series of education items such as improving K-12 education and addressing the high costs of college and vocational schooling. Eight percent of respondents say that addressing the Puerto Rican status question is the most important issue for them this election cycle.

## **If political leaders or parties want to do more to encourage Puerto Ricans to vote this election cycle, they must offer specific plans on jobs, health care, and education and provide concrete solutions to clean up corruption in politics.**

Survey respondents were presented with four different options that political parties and leaders might take that would make them more likely to participate and vote in elections. Substantive issues far outweigh more symbolic acts of inclusion in the minds of Puerto Ricans.

Roughly 3 in 10 Puerto Ricans selected an option focused on concrete plans to improve their lives in terms of jobs, health care, education, and safety. A similar proportion selected a second option focused on concrete ideas for cleaning up corruption and listening more to regular voters rather than wealthy special interests.

In comparison, only 16 percent of respondents suggested that more outreach actions aimed at the Puerto Rican community and encouraging them to participate in the democratic process would help, and just 11 percent said recruiting more Puerto Ricans into parties or campaigns would make them more likely to participate.

To further illustrate the importance of concrete solutions to Puerto Ricans in terms of their political participation, a full 85 percent of survey respondents agreed with the following idea: “Political parties like to campaign for Puerto Rican votes, but they don’t really deliver on their campaign promises in our community. We hear from parties right around election time, and then they disappear. I don’t feel that politicians truly care about the issues that matter most to Puerto Ricans on the island or the mainland.”

**Puerto Ricans strongly favor national action to raise the minimum wage, pass immigration reform, and shore up the Affordable Care Act (ACA).**

Nearly 9 in 10 Puerto Ricans overall agree that national minimum wage should be raised to \$15 per hour, including 78 percent of Republicans, 83 percent of political independents, and 93 percent of Democrats. Additionally, around 7 in 10 Puerto Ricans believe that Congress should keep and improve the ACA versus about 3 in 10 who want to repeal and replace “Obamacare.” Strong majorities of Puerto Ricans across gender, age, education, and regional lines favor keeping and improving the ACA rather than getting rid of it. In contrast, nearly 6 in 10 Republicans favor scrapping Obamacare versus two-thirds of independents and 8 in 10 Democrats who want to keep it and build on it.

Support for candidates who back immigration reform with a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants is also robust across the Puerto Rican community: 84 percent of Puerto Ricans would be “much more likely” or “somewhat more likely” to support a candidate who favored immigration reform with a path to citizenship, including more than 7 in 10 Republicans, 8 in 10 independents, and more than 9 in 10 Democrats.

# Views on island issues and Puerto Rican identity

**People on the mainland are basically divided about the job performance of political leaders on the island of Puerto Rico, and many are deeply worried about corruption on the island.**

Asked to rate the job performance of political leaders on the island, 47 percent of Puerto Rican mainlanders think island leaders are doing at least a “somewhat good job” generally, while 53 percent believe they are doing a “poor job” running the island. Similarly, 71 percent of Puerto Ricans on the mainland feel that things are going in the wrong direction on the island; this is slightly lower than the 77 percent of Puerto Ricans with a negative opinion about the direction of the United States, however.

On the issue of corruption, Puerto Ricans are united. Eighty-six percent of Puerto Ricans overall believe corruption on the island is at least “somewhat” of a problem, with a full majority (51 percent) believing that island corruption is a “very big problem.”

**Two-thirds of Puerto Ricans were negatively affected by Hurricane Maria in 2017, and majorities feel both the federal government and the government in Puerto Rico failed to adequately help Puerto Rico get back on its feet.**

Loss of life, injury, or property damage from Hurricane Maria clearly hit many members of the Puerto Rican community: One-fifth say they were personally affected; one-quarter say close friends were affected; and nearly half say family members were affected by the hurricane. More than half of Puerto Ricans say that they themselves or their close friends and family members had to leave the island and come to the mainland due to the hurricane.

However, the perceived response of the U.S. and island governments in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria is not positive. Only 13 percent believe the federal government has performed very well in terms of helping Puerto Rico get back on its feet, and only 12 percent believe similarly about the government on the island.

More telling, a full 81 percent of Puerto Ricans overall agreed with the following statement about the hurricane response: “The federal government did not do enough to help the people of Puerto Rico during Hurricane Maria, delaying [Federal Emergency Management Agency] relief for months. And in recent months, it has been too slow to help with the coronavirus pandemic on the island. The federal government and political leaders often forget about our community and turn their back to Puerto Ricans.” Half of Puerto Ricans strongly agreed with this dismal overview of the federal government’s response to Hurricane Maria.

### **Puerto Ricans lack consensus about the island’s eventual status, but large majorities across party lines would back a candidate for office who endorsed statehood for Puerto Rico.**

Asked about their position on the political status of Puerto Rico from a range of listed options, 30 percent of Puerto Ricans choose statehood as their preferred resolution, the plurality response across the community. Nineteen percent want independence, and 20 percent want to keep the current status. Twelve percent prefer a modified commonwealth status; another 9 percent would like to see a free association model for the island; and 10 percent want something else altogether.

When forced to choose whether Puerto Rico should become a state, remain in its current status, or become an independent country, nearly half of Puerto Ricans (48 percent) desire statehood, compared with one-third who want the status quo and around one-fifth who favor complete independence. These proportions basically hold across demographic and geographic lines, but a majority of Democrats (51 percent) prefer statehood status over the others, compared with about 4 in 10 Republicans (43 percent).

The political status of Puerto Rico clearly influences the political decisions of those on the mainland. Nearly three-quarters of Puerto Ricans overall say they would be more likely rather than less likely to support a candidate for office who endorsed statehood for Puerto Rico. This includes 77 percent of both Republicans and Democrats, respectively, and 69 percent of political independents. Likewise, 70 percent of those who initially support options for Puerto Rico other than statehood still say they would be more likely to support a candidate for office who endorses making Puerto Rico a state.

Interestingly, this overall figure rises to 86 percent of Puerto Ricans who are more likely to support a candidate who endorsed statehood using a fuller description noting “that the people of Puerto Rico would have the same rights as every other American and have five members of Congress and two U.S. senators representing them in Washington, D.C.”

**More than 6 in 10 respondents say that “being Puerto Rican” is a very important part of how they view themselves—a sentiment particularly strong among older generations.**

Helping to explain some of the findings on the desired status of Puerto Rico, as well as other opinions about issues facing the community on the mainland, the survey finds that Puerto Rican identity matters a great deal to a range of people. For 63 percent of respondents overall, being Puerto Rican is a very important part of how they view themselves, and another 26 percent say that being Puerto Rican is somewhat important to them. Only 11 percent say that being Puerto Rican is not very important or not at all important to their own identity.

More than 7 in 10 first-generation people living on the mainland say that being Puerto Rican is very important to how they view themselves, compared with 58 percent of second-generation people and 54 percent of third-generation mainlanders.

# Conclusion

Heading into the final stages of the 2020 election, it is critical that political leaders and policymakers better understand the dimensions of Puerto Rican identity and Puerto Ricans' views about critical issues facing the country. Overall, it is clear that many Puerto Ricans feel overlooked and ignored in many aspects of public and political life, and particularly in relation to the challenges their community faces from both Hurricane Maria three years ago and the coronavirus today.

Although many Puerto Ricans are fully integrated into political life stateside, others remain excluded from the norms and actions of political life here. Importantly, many Puerto Ricans express a desire for clearer information and assistance with the voting process this November. Confusion about mail-in voting among key segments of the community, coupled with genuine fears about exposure to the coronavirus if they vote in person, could lead to diminished turnout rates for Puerto Ricans if nothing changes in the next few weeks.

Above all, Puerto Ricans want concrete solutions to the problems facing their communities and policies that can improve the overall economic security and social well-being of their families and neighborhoods. They want real steps to battle corruption here and on the island. They will reward candidates and leaders who take their concerns seriously. And although mainland Puerto Ricans hold different views about the long-term status of the island, they will strongly support candidates who take an affirmative position on making Puerto Rico a state.

Puerto Rican identity matters a great deal to people in the community, and leaders who understand this and offer tangible ideas for improving their lives rather than symbolic steps around election time will be rewarded with increased support.

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## About the authors

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## Endnotes

- 1 For the full survey results, see Center for American Progress Action Fund and Latino Decisions, "Survey of the Puerto Rican Electorate in U.S. in 2020" (Washington: 2020), available at <https://cdn.americanprogressaction.org/content/uploads/sites/2/2020/09/21135123/CAPAF-Puerto-Rican-Survey-Toplines.pdf>; Center for American Progress Action Fund and Latino Decisions, "CAP Survey of the Puerto Rican Electorate in U.S. in 2020 – September 2020 Crosstabs" (Washington: 2020), available at [https://cdn.americanprogressaction.org/content/uploads/sites/2/2020/09/28093335/CAPAF-Puerto-Rican-Survey-Crosstabs\\_1.2.pdf](https://cdn.americanprogressaction.org/content/uploads/sites/2/2020/09/28093335/CAPAF-Puerto-Rican-Survey-Crosstabs_1.2.pdf). For a slide presentation of the findings, see Center for American Progress Action Fund and Latino Decisions, "National Survey of Puerto Ricans in the United States" (Washington: 2020), available at <https://cdn.americanprogressaction.org/content/uploads/sites/2/2020/09/21135300/Latino-Decisions-CAPAF-Slide-Deck.pdf>.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

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