Black and Puerto Rican Caucus; Series I; File 20

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A Fractious Coalition
Twenty-one years after its founding, the Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus is divided by differing views on what its role should be in state politics and whose interests it represents.

by Rehna Basu

The portrait and background of the state's Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus is the result of a growing tension among the two groups. The caucus was created in 1967, and its current co-chair, Marilyn Moore, says that it has been meeting regularly since then. The caucus has two co-chairs, and each group has its own set of priorities.

In its ability to pass legislation, 20 votes out of 150 in the Assembly and 21 out of 60 in the Senate (all Democrats) may not be enough to carry a bill, but a solid bloc of support can influence other Democrats on key issues, most observers agree.

"The idea is to vote as a bloc," says caucus Executive Director Carol White. "But it's a forceful organization and there is no way to merge 25 members with really disparate constituencies."

Although caucus members upheld a high degree of conformity in voting, some political matters as critical as electing a black Assembly speaker, there has been little cohesion. During the last session, the caucus leadership and most of its members opted to stay with regional and state electorates and elect Miller, from Brooklyn, rather than black Deputy Assembly Speaker Arthur Eve of Buffalo, a senior caucus member who has played a leadership role in the past, who declared himself a candidate.

"We could see the split here," says Manhattan Assemblyman Angelo Difilippo. "The caucus has 20 votes in the Assembly. That's a formidable base. It's probably more than any candidate started out with."

But, continued the Hispanic assemblyman, who himself voted for Miller, "the Puerto Ricans took their cue from the blacks."

"You can't get to the Puerto Rican community until you resolve the problems within the black community," Difilippo says of the caucus's black leadership.

Eve declined to comment on the lack of support for him in the speaker's race, but he expressed his displeasure with other caucus members for switching their votes in the Regents reappointments.

"It was very shocking to me," he says. "I'm very disappointed that I had an agreement that caucus Chairperson Roger Green was going to lead off the debate."

Much of the schism between the Black and Puerto Rican caucuses resulted from the New York City mayoral campaign in 1989 when blacks withdrew their support from Herman Badillo and backed Manhattan Assemblyman Powers Sanders, instead, declaring the minority coalition essential to a minority candidate's success. That resulted in a lasting bitterness on the part of Hispanic legislators and members of the Hispanic Caucus.

Roger Green, a veteran of the Caucus, is leading caucus members into a meeting with Governor Cuomo. Green sees the Caucus' mission as working toward full employment, decent health care, and housing, rather than just civil rights.
McConnors attributes some of the urban between caucus members to the more aggressive differences. "Other, when the past few years have increased the expenditure of resources. Very few Hispanic groups have received funds to carry out state-supported social service programs such as those programs, including housing for the homeless and health care, says DeFeo.

The caucus is the major advocacy group for people people, he says. The feeling is that they are not very strong in their own

While the caucus has done much to increase black employment in the upper levels of state government, it has not paid the same attention to Hispanic employment, according to DeFeo. Over a three-year period, he says, the caucus has been instrumental in increasing Hispanic representation in state and local legislative bodies from 3 percent to 12 percent through the formation of active networks and groups. He says, Hispanic employment, in the other hand, declined from 1 percent to 0.5 percent in the same period, according to DeFeo.

One influential Hispanic state representative, who asked not to be identified, claims that some black representatives have Hispanic ties but are too weakly held in office when they become

Arnie Ballenger, who represents the Brooklyn Assembly District in New York state, is a key figure in the caucus. He is a member of the caucus and is a member of the Democratic Assembly Caucus. When he was in the minority in the Assembly, he was a member of the caucus and was influential in the caucus. He is a member of the Democratic Assembly Caucus and the Democratic Assembly Caucus. He is a member of the Assembly Caucus and the Democratic Assembly Caucus. He is a member of the Assembly Caucus and the Democratic Assembly Caucus.

SPEAKING OUT

Despite the success of the caucus, there remain many issues that need to be addressed. According to Assembly member Arthur Eve, black and Hispanic members of the caucus have been working hard to address the needs of their constituents. Arthur Eve, left, often creates waves with his outspoken manner, while Farrell, right, was in the center of a confrontation between black and Hispanic caucus members during the 1983 New York City mayoral race.
De/Toro (left) says "you can't get to the Puerto Rican community until you (resolve) the strains within the black community." Here, he meets with Assemblymen Eve, Diaz and Rivera.

Carol White says, "I think all of the people we've been talking with are people of good will. We are all about being certain that the educational system in the state educates the children."

Both Hazel Dukes, who heads the New York State chapter of the NAACP and Dr. Frank Pinder, chancellor of the State University of New York, praised the caucus for representing issues that affect all New Yorkers, not just minorities. Dukes said the NAACP had worked with the caucus on implementing legislation changing the districting of school districts and on criminal justice issues—issues which are common but not strictly racial.

"The caucus asks the numbers when they do not pick up white votes," she says. "But they do have to bargain with them."

Green claims that caucus members have been among the most "creative" in Albany by developing programs to benefit the larger society and not just their constituents. "But there are times when it's also necessary for us to be a voice for our constituency," he says.

On the internal politics of the caucus, he says it was wrong to expect the caucus to be any more monolithic than any other group, and that internal competition was natural.

"There are differences of opinion. Sometimes it's on substance and sometimes it's just on strategy," he says. "But nobody's going to disagree on the base issues."

An example of the difference over strategy cropped up after Green was quoted in a newspaper saying he was pleased to start off the next session with $20 million for low-income housing. One legislative aide involved with the caucus grumbled that the statement could give the impression "we're starting out too ahead of the game," instead of as "the underdog."

Green says while there is an amazing degree of confidence on issues of public policy, the problems tend to crop up in the protocol arena. However, referring to the clash over the 1985 New York City elections, he says he believes crucial lessons have been learned, and blacks and Hispanics are increasingly supporting one another's candidates.

Green observes that the role of the caucus has undergone substantial changes since its inception in the 1960s, during the Civil Rights movement, when the goal was to establish civil laws for protection of minorities.

"My sense is that the struggle is different now," he says. "We're 30 years away from the next century. In many of the urban centers of the state, we're fast becoming not the minority but the majority. But we still suffer in the economic sphere."

The caucus' mission, therefore, is to work toward full employment, decent health care and housing, rather than just civil rights, Green says.

Eve, for his part, contends that black people are worse off today in every way than at any other time in the 21 years he's been in the Assembly.

According to McConney, the caucus' ultimate effectiveness will depend on the extent to which minority communities begin to take the lead again.

"Ultimately the community has to become the real activist forum for itself," says McConney. "The caucus is just like a thumb in the dike."