

MONKEY CAGE

# Afro-Latino politicians could bridge the African American-Latino divide

In the U.S., Dominicans are the Hispanic group with the largest Black population. Many are pressured to identify as either Black or Latino, not both.

Analysis by Michelle Bueno Vásquez, Yalidy Matos and Domingo Morel

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As the United States marked the end of [Hispanic Heritage Month](#), prominent Los Angeles Latinos [were revealed](#) to have made casually racist remarks about Black people. Anti-Blackness Latino sentiment is no surprise; within the Latino community, Afro-Latinos are rarely represented. Popular media tend to show primarily light-skinned Latinos. For instance, the movie “In the Heights,” meant to portray New York City’s Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights, was criticized for [whitewashing the Dominican community](#).

That’s not unusual. Afro-Latinos face pressures from the Latino and Black communities to pick a side: to identify as Latino or Black, not both. Many Latinos deny that Afro-Latinos are Black; some Afro-Latinos themselves deny being Black rather than denying their Latino heritage. [Hollywood and TV](#) contribute to constructing Latinos as entirely light-skinned, [rarely showcasing Afro-Latinos](#).

Similarly, U.S. politics and political institutions have struggled to recognize the increasing number of Americans who are both. Consider the struggles of Rep. Adriano Espaillat (D-N.Y.), the nation’s first Dominican American and first formerly undocumented member of Congress. Although [Espaillat identifies](#) as “a Latino of African descent,” the Congressional Black Caucus [declined](#) to extend him membership, at least in part because he is also a member of the Latino caucus.

The CBC’s rejection could be a missed opportunity. Our findings suggest that Black Latinos — and Dominicans, in particular — could help bridge two marginalized communities that are often divided, as we’ve seen most starkly on the [Los Angeles City Council](#) recently.

## In the U.S., Dominicans are the Hispanic group with the largest Black population

The Dominican Republic has the [fourth-largest Black population](#) in the global African Diaspora, with an estimated 80 percent (and upward) of its population descended from Africans. Dominicans are also the [fifth-largest Hispanic group](#) in the United States, after Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans and Cubans, respectively. And yet they are rarely covered by Latino and U.S. media and are ignored in national politics.

While other Latino groups are distributed around the United States, 70 percent of the Dominican population resides in New York, New Jersey and Florida. In New York and New Jersey, Dominicans are the second-largest Hispanic group, second to Puerto Ricans, making up 24 percent and 18 percent of the Hispanic population for these states, respectively.

In the past decade, the Hispanic population growth in New York and New Jersey [surpassed that of the general population](#). Although Dominicans make up 4 percent of Latinos nationally, they represent the Hispanic group with a population above 1 million with [the most growth since 2010](#). Dominicans have the potential to be politically instrumental in these states experiencing exponential Hispanic growth, which happens to be where Dominicans abound.

With Mexican Americans making up around [62 percent of Hispanics nationally](#), politicians and analysts often overlook how other Hispanic subgroups can affect state and local elections.

Despite their growth, Dominicans lag in traditional measures of assimilation. Among Latinos in the United States, around a third are foreign-born, while over half of Dominicans in the United States are foreign-born. However, 43 percent of those foreign-born Dominicans have lived in the country for more than 20 years and more than half are U.S. citizens. Additionally, the median household income for Dominicans in the United States is around \$10,000 less than for Hispanic households. Dominicans are also more likely to be unemployed, to say that they don't speak English well, and have a homeownership rate nearly 20 percent less than other U.S. Hispanics.

A higher proportion of Dominicans have bachelor's and graduate degrees than other U.S. Hispanic groups. However, Dominicans in the United States still face economic challenges, much as do African Americans. In fact, Afro-Latinos' socioeconomic status most closely resembles that of non-Hispanic Blacks, while White Latinos' standing is closest to non-Hispanic Whites.

### **Dominicans are gaining political influence**

That socioeconomic profile makes Espaillat's exclusion from the Congressional Black Caucus particularly poignant.

Espaillat has championed Dominican representation in national politics, founding the annual Dominicans on the Hill, a program that spotlights Dominican Americans' civic engagement. In fact, while Dominicans have not lived in the United States as long as Mexican Americans in general, they have recently been getting elected to public office at equal to or greater rates than Latino subgroups of similar size in the United States.

So how do Dominican American elected officials themselves identify their race and ethnicity? To find out, we conducted an original online survey using Qualtrics of all known Dominican American elected officials in the United States at the municipal, county, state and federal level. To identify the Dominican American elected officials, we relied on multiple sources, including a list provided by Espaillat's staff. We also used machine-learning algorithms to search for Dominican officials in the United States using news articles, campaign websites and news releases.

Our search yielded a list of 49 current officials whom we asked to participate in an online survey we fielded from November 2021 through January 2022. We heard from 28 respondents with a 57 percent response rate. Our survey results showed that out of 28 respondents, 11 identified as Black, and 17 identified as Afro-Latino.

When asked whether their political future was bound to that of other Latinos and African Americans, most Dominican officials said they felt politically linked to both. This may be useful in government coalition-building, which is necessary for any underrepresented U.S. group to achieve its goals. In other words, Dominican elected officials may be in a position to close the gap between Latino and African American coalitions at local and state levels, where most Dominican elected officials serve.

Our findings suggest that Dominican elites may be able to help link Black and Latino coalitions. However, these possibilities will continue to be limited until Afro-Latino inclusion becomes a priority for Latino politics.

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