



STAR photo by Gerald López Cepero
Holding a primary to choose the president of the Popular Democratic Party may have served to invigorate the PDP, says Aida N. Montilla. But she notes other issues could arise to derail a gubernatorial bid by Héctor Luis Acevedo, shown above on the day he won the primary.

Some implications of the PDP primary

March 20 election invigorated *populares*, but their struggle for La Fortaleza just begun



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Primaries in Puerto Rico always have been considered a "risky proposition." All throughout the years, bulwarks in both major parties have tried hard to prevent intra-party contests based on the premise that party splits were the only outcome of this kind of struggle.

The reasoning was that "primary wounds" could not be healed before the electoral process took place, thus leading to the defeat of the party engaged in choosing its candidates through the primary mechanism.

These considerations were set aside by the Popular Democratic Party, much to the surprise of many people both within and outside the party rank and file.

When the decision was made to hold the primary in the framework of a four-month campaign, the PDP was in such a bad shape — disorganized, indebted, having lost two electoral process — that many believed the primary could either be a shock treatment, leading to political survival, or merely the last blow to a sinking ship. Accordingly, there was not much choice.

On March 20, information given by the PDP as to the voting results seems to prove that the primary invigorated the party. Working with a registered list of 800,000 voters in the 1992 elections, the party was able to mobilize about 400,000 to vote in the primary. If this is a true figure, it was quite an accomplishment.

Usually, in any primary, less than one-third

of the party faithful are motivated to participate. To achieve the 50 percent figure means that close to 400 persons per polling station voted in 1,200 electoral colleges distributed around the island.

The news media was somewhat reluctant to admit such a large turnout of voters, because in many schools the movement of voters was rather slow and poll-watchers representing all five candidates were the exception and not the rule.

In some places where the prospective "non-winning candidates" lacked representation, Acevedo's officials candidly admitted that they worked also as Antonio Colorado's poll-watchers, when needed, because this was a "family affair within the PDP."

I covered the primary process in Ponce for WPAB radio station, and statements such as this were gathered at some polling places.

Though there is no proof supporting the accusation that voting lists were subject to manipulation, the opposition has been actively spreading the rumor that Acevedo followers, without the authorization of the

Please see PDP, Page 24

Making science classes more enjoyable

Finding alternatives for animal dissections could alter destructive lesson being taught

It was our first year of high school, so the pig dissection inspired occasional human squeals and the fun of transplanting a liver from the pig to somebody's folder. But seven years passed before I ventured into another science class, and only then because time had run out: It was either bow to the science requirements or forget the bachelor's degree.

When I reluctantly returned to this field of study, I lucked across some good courses — first, a summer session in



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environmental biology, then a professor who used his Space and Planetary Sciences class to breathe life into even physics and chemistry.

These lessons highlighted the value of science, and did much to reverse my

initial revulsion. Eventually I returned to college to spend years studying science, along with the math needed to understand the various formulas.

So I was glad to hear that hundreds of Puerto Rico's teachers had gathered in Humacao last week with a mission to make the study of math and science more enjoyable. A two-day seminar focused on creating a curriculum with a hands-on approach, an experiment in molding these seemingly obscure subjects into something lively.

Easing into science through an appreciation of the environment, too, seems to be gaining popularity. Many teachers used the recent oil spill to hone in on learning, and the typical field trip to El Faro in Fajardo or El Yunque in Luquillo can help students revel in the wonders of the life sciences.

This branch of learning includes "biology," although I suspect "necrology" would be a more accurate term for a course that often revolves around cutting up dead animals or examining pickled specimens floating in jars.

Here in Puerto Rico, dissection involves the use of frogs and lizards for high school students at some point in their last three years, depending on the courses they take, explained Science Supervisor Nancy Lebrón.

However, administrators issued a circular letter in the late 1980s that prohibits cutting live animals. This effectively prevents the practice of *pithing* frogs, a euphemism invoked to cover the act of stabbing the live frog's

Please see SCIENCE, Page 24

VIEWPOINT

From Page 23
Science

brain stem so as to paralyze it, cut open its body and view its beating heart.

This obvious cruelty seared the conscience of many a young biology student over the past few decades, perhaps cutting off the pursuit of science for some of the nation's more sensitive minds.

Island educators also prohibit the killing of animals as part of a school science experiment, unless working with an adult scientist or veterinarian, Lebrón said, and even goes so far as to exclude animals from being on display in science fairs. (Experimental animals may be shown in photos, though.) These actions deserve kudos.

Still, it seems to me that studying living frogs and lizards in their own environment — perhaps creating that environment inside a terrarium — would be a better use of these creatures. Lizards in particular have a quizzical look that speaks of awareness, a look that doesn't survive the preserving solution.

The cruelty in using animals for science classes touched a nerve of many people who saw "E.T.," Steven Spielberg's blockbuster of the '80s that showed a young boy's compassion toward other life forms grow as he gets to know an amphibian-looking extraterrestrial. During a school science class, he incites the class to free the frogs they are supposed to destroy.

The focus on frogs reflects reality, as an estimated 4 million frogs end up on dissection tables every year, said Sue Brebner, education director for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals based in Washington, D.C. This is about two-thirds of the approximately 5.7 million animals who meet this fate, including worms, fetal pigs, cats and dogs, she said.

Almost all of these frogs come from

a region in Mexico from 50 to 150 miles east of the Baja Peninsula, according to PETA. (This sounds rather unfair to the locals who do not profit, as this region must surely suffer an increase in malaria and other diseases from the removal of these insect-eating amphibians.)

The destruction of these creatures sends a bad message to students.

"What students learn more than anything else is callousness," Brebner said, addressing pithing in particular and use of animals for dissection in general. "It encourages them to stifle their natural feelings of compassion."

There are alternatives for those who would prefer to teach science hands-on using methods other than dissection. Brebner suggests using computer programs, books or animal models to teach biology, anatomy and physiology. Cambridge Development Laboratory in Massachusetts is one company that provides a catalog of options, particularly computer programs. (Any teachers interested? CDL is at 800-637-0047.)

Frog models (available through Denoyer-Geppert in Chicago) run about \$400; this sounds outrageous, until compared to the annual cost of purchasing dead frogs — which can run about \$100 a dozen, Brebner points out.

Models can be effective, as I can verify. Upon my re-entry into the scientific field as a graduate student, I convinced my biology teachers to let me take an alternative approach to learning anatomy. In one class, instead of dissecting fetal pigs, I worked with a life-sized human model with colorful innards.

Many of my classmates came to wish they had taken this route as they daily faced the stench of formaldehyde fumes and the paradox of studying life through death. Surely many of Puerto Rico's students would feel the same.

Using alternative methods can help to teach compassion along with science. And in this age of escalating violence, who can say which is more important?



STAR file photo

Frogs are the main victims of dissection practiced by school in Puerto Rico and the United States. Melanie Lenart argues that this practice can give the wrong message to students, perhaps turning some of them away from the study of what should be the "life" sciences.

From Page 23
PDP

winning candidate, emptied the voting list so as to magnify the winning margin and pave the way for the general elections of 1996.

It is doubtful that a candidate favored in the polls by a 60 percent to 70 percent margin would agree to enter into such a questionable strategy.

Acevedo has begun to reorganize the PDP with strength and determination, placing people loyal to him in the official PDP structure, almost all of them coming from his municipal staff. This is as it should be.

The weak point in this arrangement is that there are two more years for him to administer the city-capital and his success as mayor of San Juan would provide his best chance for winning the governorship. How much time his work as party president will demand of him is something that he has to manage with great care. Likewise, in whose hands he

leaves San Juan affairs is of utmost importance.

Another point that requires a lot of thinking is, who is going to be the person to replace Acevedo in the 1996 mayoralty race? The PDP must recognize that San Juan is a New Progressive Party stronghold and elections were won by Acevedo, both in 1988 and 1992, only with the split vote.

On both occasions the majority of the municipal assembly was won by the NPP. In order to win La Fortaleza, the San Juan votes are very important. If San Juan is lost, La Fortaleza might be unattainable.

Thus, winning the primary by a landslide is something very important, but winning the governorship is something else.

Although Acevedo has been identified by NPP leaders as a "dreadful candidate," he has on his side that he is a well-organized man. He knows his work well as a politician, having come up the ladder with ease and determination. He proved he was cunning and clever in the primary campaign. By not debating with

his contenders, he closed a vulnerable flank.

He has the ability to raise funds and use them well. He likes to be called "pragmatic," at a time when this attribute seems to have some sort of holding bond with the voters. He portrays the image of a well-meaning fellow and he has a beautiful family, willing to support him in all his endeavors.

However, counting against him are various factors. He still has to carry the load of outworn politicians who cling to party structures like leeches. Party reorganization is an uphill struggle within this framework, especially considering the NPP won 54 municipalities in the last election. His immobility on the status issue has led him to believe in the piecemeal approach in restructuring the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico.

On this issue he has to be more in touch with Washington, where the four petitions included in the PDP plebiscite ballot seem to be out of reach, considering President Clinton's program.

Acevedo has to recognize that in the

last four elections the independent vote (not affiliated) has been the one deciding which party wins. Neither of the two major parties has enough rank-and-file votes to outdo the other.

If immobility on the status issue is not the position favored by this independent vote, Acevedo will not be able to win it and thus will not be able to win the 1996 elections. You can promote immobility within the party in a primary election, but you cannot manage that strategy with people who are not regular members of the PDP.

Acevedo has two more years to rectify his political positions. In those 30 months he will also have to give cohesion to his party, incorporating all those who lost in the intra-party struggle, but have a lot to contribute in the reorganization and restructuring.

Only in that sense could Acevedo's victory be seen as an event fortifying the party. Otherwise, the "risky proposition" will prevail.

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