

**THE PEOPLE OF PUERTO RICO VERSUS RICARDO ROSSELLÓ:  
A CASE STUDY IN POPULAR POLITICS**

by  
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## **Abstract**

On July 11, 2019, the Puerto Rico Center for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) published 889 pages of a private text chat between Governor Ricardo Rosselló and his closest allies. The leaked text interactions included inappropriate discussions about confidential government and policy matters. Racist, sexist, xenophobic, bullying, derogatory and potentially illegal behavior were exposed. In reaction to this, angry protests spontaneously arose against the governor. The anger was transformed into collective action and then into a social movement. After two weeks of cyber-activism and street protests, for the first time in Puerto Rico's history, a sitting governor resigned before his term expired.

This thesis analyzes the factors that caused the “Summer of 2019,” its international context, Governor Rosselló's leadership style as he faced a devastating political scandal, and the critical role of investigative journalism and social media in fueling a social movement. To accomplish these goals, this paper does an in-depth study of the events that marked the month of July 2019 in Puerto Rico as a social and political phenomenon. A significant shift has occurred in how Puerto Ricans relate to politics, access political power, and make their voices be heard. The “Summer of 2019” proved that public and media pressure is enough to unseat a governor. Additionally, it demonstrated that investigative journalism, combined with social media, can effectively educate, galvanize, and mobilize the public.

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**Chapter I:**  
**Introduction**

During the summer of 2019, the unthinkable happened. For the first time in Puerto Rico's history, a sitting governor resigned before his term expired. On July 24, 2019, Governor Ricardo Rosselló resigned in part because of a social movement rooted in an investigation published by the Center for Investigative Journalism (CIJ). On July 11, 2019, the CIJ published 889 pages of a private text chat between Governor Rosselló and his closest allies.<sup>1</sup> The leaked text interactions included inappropriate discussions about confidential government and policy matters. The texts also contained racist, sexist, prejudiced, derogatory language, and exposed potentially illegal activities. The messages discussed using government funds to create and place paid media articles and influencing the public through social media trolls. The first-hand account of Rosselló's and his cronies' interactions unleashed the public's resentment toward the government's lack of transparency, blatant corruption, and failing infrastructure. Above all, it shattered Rosselló's carefully fabricated political image of an exemplary athlete, husband, father and professional.

The public's anger quickly transformed into collective action and then into a social movement. What started as a 200-person protest on July 11, 2019, became a 500,000-person national strike on July 22, 2019. From these initial events, the "Summer of 2019" was born and the people of Puerto Rico were empowered to claim their dignity against an abusive and corrupt governor. The movement showcased the capacity for effective citizen-action through cyber-activism and street protests. For the first time in many decades, Puerto Ricans felt like their voices mattered. Additionally, Puerto Rico's financial bankruptcy, the government's mishandling

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<sup>1</sup> Valentín Ortiz, Luis J. and Carla Minet. "The 889 Pages of the Telegram Chat between Rosselló Nevaes and his Closest Aides." Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, July 13, 2019, <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2019/07/the-889-pages-of-the-telegram-chat-between-rossello-nevaes-and-his-closest-aides/>

of hurricane relief, and the indictment of several administration officials created the perfect storm for a social movement that culminated in Governor Rossell 's resignation on July 24, 2019.

This thesis analyzes the factors that caused the “Summer of 2019,” its international context, Governor Rossell 's leadership style as he faced a devastating political scandal, and the critical role of investigative journalism and social media in fueling a social movement. To accomplish these goals, this paper completes an in-depth study of the events that marked the month of July 2019 in Puerto Rico as a social and political phenomenon.

Chapter II analyzes the “Summer of 2019” and how Puerto Ricans challenged state authority and used democratic participation to question the government’s leadership and the traditional political party systems. The events in Puerto Rico had striking similarities to that in the Arab Spring, especially the movements that took place in Egypt and Tunisia. Like Puerto Rico, the Arab Spring sparked dissatisfaction with politics as usual. For example, the lack of access to power or resources, frustration over lack of transparency, and perceived corruption and/or abuse from state entities were important catalysts in triggering collective action. They were also similar in that they were youth-led, had music as the key component in energizing the participants, and effectively used social media to incite and mobilize participants. Furthermore, both grassroots efforts were fueled through platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, and ignited unprecedented uprisings.

Chapter III studies Ricardo Rossell 's characteristics as a leader and showcases how he mismanaged the political crisis. The chapter reflects on why the governor was overthrown when other U.S. state governors facing similar scandals were not. For comparison, this paper examines Gov. Rossell 's scandal and Gov. Ralph Northam’s (D-VA) black face political scandal. The

scandals eroded the standing of both officials but resulted in different outcomes: Rosselló was forced to resign and Northam was able to complete his term. Rosselló is a brilliant scientist with great analytical and intellectual capacities, yet he fell short in facing his mistakes and the public's outrage because he was unable to effectively execute crisis management. He was slow in reacting to the scandal, showed lack of humility, and was perceived as defensive and arrogant. Meanwhile, Northam was quick to face his crisis and portrayed a humble and forward-thinking attitude. He demonstrated a high level of emotional intelligence by identifying his problem before it further escalated. The two governors also faced different situations. Unlike Rosselló, Northam lacked a grassroots' movement in VA that could push him out of office. Furthermore, Northam had a steady political situation since Virginia was experiencing economic progress and social stability. In contrast, Rosselló confronted an unstable one as the government faced bankruptcy, a highly energized civil society, and partisanship.

Chapter IV examines the role of investigative journalism and social media in fueling the "Summer 2019" phenomenon. The CIJ exposed the greatest Puerto Rican political scandal of the 21st century and triggered a grassroots social movement that would overthrow a sitting governor after just two weeks of protests. The journalists helped uncover the behavior of several lobbyists and unscrupulous officials that were seen as destroying the already frail political, economic and social system. Social media was also a magnifying force that empowered the quickly emerging grassroots social movement. People's outrage found an effective outlet through digital platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Gov. Rosselló was put on trial on social media even before he had a chance to face the public and defend himself. The public reached a



point of no return from their perception of the governor as being dishonest, prejudiced, corrupt and immoral.<sup>2</sup>

The momentum generated by the “Summer of 2019” has dwindled. Social movement scholars conclude that institutions must sustain political enthusiasm in order for protests to have permanence and relevance.<sup>3</sup> Three years later, Rossello’s political party is still in power and there have been no indictments of individuals involved in the scandalous chat. Since the movement lacked a major institution to cement and perpetuate its values and political legacy, it may be considered to be fading.

Yet, the “Summer of 2019” has created a shift in how Puerto Ricans relate to politics. Voters are now more cognizant that if elected officials misbehave, they have the power to overthrow them. It was proven that public and media pressure are enough to oust a governor. In doing so, Puerto Ricans unintentionally mimicked other countries’ fights against corruption and abuse. They engaged in the global movement to defend their rights and their sovereignty. They shared a message: failed leaders and governments would no longer be tolerated.<sup>4</sup>

The “Summer 2019” mentality impacted the 2020 election cycle. New political parties and candidates emerged on the ballots and challenged the established party system.<sup>5</sup> Movimiento

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<sup>2</sup> “Crisis en Puerto Rico: Ricardo Rosselló Renuncia Forzado por las Intensas Protestas tras el Escándalo del Chat.” *BBC News Mundo*, July 25, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-49074542>

<sup>3</sup> For further background on social movement theory read:

Giugni, Marco G. "Structure and Culture in Social Movement Theory." In *Sociological Forum*, pp. 365-375. *Eastern Sociological Society*, (1998).

Benford, Robert D. "An Insider's Critique of the Social Movement Framing Perspective," *Sociological Inquiry* 67, no. 4 (1997): 409-430.

Goodwin, Jeff, James Jasper, and Francesca Polletta. "The Return of the Repressed: The Fall and Rise of Emotions in Social Movement Theory." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (2000): 65-83.

<sup>4</sup> Author interview with Armando Valdés Prieto. (2021, September 15).

<sup>5</sup> Tolentino Rosario, Carlos. “Sorpresas, Caras Nuevas y Batallas por Definir: Esto es lo que Debes Saber Sobre la Intensa Jornada Electoral.” *El Nuevo Día*, November 4, 2020.

Victoria Ciudadana (Citizen’s Victory Movement),<sup>6</sup> Proyecto Dignidad (Project Dignity)<sup>7</sup> and an unaffiliated contender Eliezer Molina<sup>8</sup> (a farmer and economist) challenged the traditional two political parties that have ruled the Commonwealth. For the first time in a general election, the party-affiliated votes were so diluted that the third of the total votes went to new parties.

Despite the dwindling momentum of the “Summer of 2019” movement, it brought hope for a better future where transparency, democracy and freedom are attainable. The events that took place must not be discounted as a short-lived phenomenon but instead should be viewed as a lesson on democracy’s triumph over abuse and corruption.

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<sup>6</sup> “Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana: A Shift in Puerto Rican Politics.” *Columbia Political Review*, December 30, 2020. <http://www.cpreview.org/blog/2020/12/movimiento-victoria-ciudadana-a-shift-in-puerto-rican-politics>

<sup>7</sup> Proyecto Dignidad website. <https://www.proyectodignidad.org>

<sup>8</sup> Eliezer Molina website. [https://gobernador.com/molina\\_page/](https://gobernador.com/molina_page/)

## **Chapter II:**

### **Puerto Rico's "Summer Of 2019" and the Battle to Remove a Governor from Office**

## Introduction

In 1898, upon the conclusion of the Spanish-American War, Spain ceded the island of Puerto Rico to the United States.<sup>9</sup> Ever since its transfer, its citizens have struggled to find their social, political, and economic identity.<sup>10</sup> Historically, the Puerto Rican government has been led by short-sighted politicians who have catered to the masses' immediate needs and have not focused on the long-term wellbeing of the country. Unfortunately, "with Wall Street's help, the U.S. commonwealth<sup>11</sup> borrowed tens of billions in the bond markets, only to squander much of it on grand projects, government bureaucracy, everyday expenses and worse. Debts were piled on debts, even as the economy gave way."<sup>12</sup> The situation has materialized by the reality that 43.1 percent of people in Puerto Rico live below the poverty line. Furthermore, a dramatic exodus occurred in the last years as people fled the island at staggering rates.<sup>13</sup>

In 2019, the Puerto Rican people challenged the government and traditional political party system. Previous movements, such as the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Arab Spring, the October 2019 movement in Chile, the South Korean Candlelight Movement, the Occupy Wall Street, #MeToo and Black Lives Matters protests in the U.S., all served to provoke abrupt

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<sup>9</sup> For further background read Trask, David. (2011). "The World of 1898: The Spanish American War." In US Library of Congress: Hispanic Division, at <https://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898>.

<sup>10</sup> Scholars such as José Trías Monge (*Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World*), Jorge Duany (*Puerto Rico: What Everyone Needs to Know*), Fernando Picó (*History of Puerto Rico: A Panorama of Its People*), Gerald L. Neuman and Tomiko Brown-Nagin (*Reconsidering the Insular Cases: The Past and Future of the American Empire*), Laura Briggs (*Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*) and Katherine T. McAffrey (*Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico*) have conducted extensive work analyzing the history and colonial status of the island. A closer look at these publications will enlighten the reader on the tumultuous journey Puerto Ricans have endured to find their voice and attain national dignity.

<sup>11</sup> Puerto Rico became a Commonwealth of the United States on July 25, 1952.

<sup>12</sup> Braun, Martin and Jonathan Levin. "Debt Island: How \$74 Billion in Bonds Bankrupted Puerto Rico." *Bloomberg News*, May 15, 2017. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-05-15/debt-island-how-74-billion-in-bonds-bankrupted-puerto-rico>

<sup>13</sup> Mora, Marie T., Alberto Dávila, and Havidán Rodríguez, "Education, Migration, and Earnings of Puerto Ricans on the Island and US Mainland: Impact, Outcomes, and Consequences of an Economic Crisis," *Migration Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016).

change and demonstrate collective dissatisfaction with politics as usual. These movements encouraged and made possible for PR to rise and follow the democratic trend.

The trend of global social awakening, combined with Puerto Rico government's bankruptcy, the mishandling of Hurricane Maria relief, and the rampant corruption generated a storm for forceful protests that demanded Governor Ricardo "Ricky" Rossell's resignation. A palpable collective frustration transcended all sectors of society. The accelerated decay was triggered by a leaked text chat between the governor's closest advisors. As historian and political commentator Nestor Duprey said, "the revelation of the chat laid bare a political culture that had been modestly, incrementally and consistently rejected by the citizens over the years."<sup>14</sup> The governor became the target of long brewing multi-sector anger and frustration. Dr. Javier Colón Morera states,

The Boricua summer was an intense demonstration focused on claiming human dignity as an expression of human personality in its various manifestations. Its intersectional strategy was very promising, calling attention to a multiplicity of sources of discrimination and oppression. It displayed a capacity for citizen action that may play a fundamental role in our collective determination to see the future as an opportunity.<sup>15</sup>

The events of that summer may be difficult to replicate, yet the collective in PR knew at the time that they had the power to improve their circumstances. Unintentionally, Puerto Ricans mimicked other countries' fights against corruption and abuse. Puerto Ricans engaged in the global movement to defend their rights and their sovereignty. Their message was clear: failed leaders and governments will no longer be tolerated. Thanks to constitutional mechanisms and social media transparency, change was possible.

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<sup>14</sup> Author Phone interview with Nestor Duprey. (2020, December 9).

<sup>15</sup> Colón Morera, José Javier. "The "Boricua Summer:" Keys from a Human Rights Perspective." *Latin American Perspectives*, (2020).

The people of PR followed other social movements and utilized social media and constitutional mechanisms to remove a corrupt governor from office. Puerto Ricans birthed a social movement when Generation Z and Millennials led the uprising against Governor Rosselló and his scandalous chat. These young people demonstrated a sharp ability for mass organization and mobilization, setting a precedent worth analyzing. They galvanized support for the cause via digital platforms including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter. People from all backgrounds followed their lead and participated in nonviolent protests that spontaneously gathered at the Governor's Executive Mansion in Old San Juan. They carried signs and chanted improvised songs that were echoed throughout the island and in the diaspora in the U.S. mainland. The movement grew organically, and as days went by, earned support from renowned artists, athletes, international figures, and others.

### **Social Movements as Antecedents to the PR protests**

Social movements are empowering and have earned a prominent role in global modern politics.<sup>16</sup> The origins of social movements are well studied. Sociologists, political scientists, and other scholars have attempted to explain the variables that trigger and move ordinary people to protest. More prominent theories include deprivation (or relative deprivation) theory, resource mobilization theory; political process theory; structural strain theory; and new social movement theories.<sup>17</sup> Social movements can be thought of as organized yet informal social entities that are engaged in extra-institutional conflict that is oriented towards a goal. These goals can be either aimed at a specific and narrow policy or be more broadly aimed at cultural change.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hardina, Donna. "Linking Citizen Participation to Empowerment Practice: A Historical Overview." *Journal of Community Practice*, (2013).

<sup>17</sup> SEN, Anindya, and Ömer AVCI. "Why Social Movements Occur: Theories of Social Movements." *Journal of Knowledge Economy & Knowledge Management*, (2016).

<sup>18</sup> Christiansen, Jonathan. "Four Stages of Social Movements." *Research Starters: Sociology*, (2009).

The modern movements are often motivated by lack of access to power or resources, frustration over lack of transparency, and perceived corruption or abuse from state entities.<sup>19</sup> Due to the development of new and constantly improving communication platforms, the process to galvanize supporters has become shorter, easier and more productive.<sup>20</sup> This was a fact during the anti-government uprisings in the Middle East in 2010, especially during the Arab Spring democratic movement. What started as an act of rebellion in Tunisia by Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi, a produce street merchant, spread through the region to the point of mobilizing people in dozens of countries.<sup>21</sup> A radio personality that had been systematically censored up until then expressed that “Bouazizi just gave us the courage to let it out.”<sup>22</sup> Citizens felt empowered to challenge their countries’ authorities and bring down governmental structures in order to fight poverty, unemployment, corruption, governmental abuse and lack of freedom, among other issues. Protesters demonstrated that it is possible for the oppressed to bring change through peaceful movements. Social media, smart phones and technology allowed for that mobilization to take place and secured ways for people to feel connected and informed. Ideas flowed freely, breaking hierarchies and harnessing a collective of citizens with a common purpose.

Ordinary people have exerted their influence and claimed their power around the globe for the past half a century. Scholar Sidney G. Tarrow claims that

In the last fifty years alone, the American Civil Rights movement, the peace, environmental and feminist movements, revolts against authoritarianism in both Europe and the Third World, and the rise of new Islamist movements have brought masses of

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<sup>19</sup> Christiansen. "Four Stages."

<sup>20</sup> Wolfsfeld, Gadi, Segev, Elad and Sheaffer, Tamir. "Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First." *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, (2013).

<sup>21</sup> Lisa Anderson. "Demystifying the Arab Spring: Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya." *Foreign Affairs*, (2011).

<sup>22</sup> Fisher, Marc. "In Tunisia, Act of One Fruit Vendor Sparks Wave of Revolution through Arab World." *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2011.

people into the streets demanding change. They often succeeded, but even when they failed, their actions set in motion important political, cultural, and international changes.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, new forms of contention have spread from one region of the world to another, and among different social and political actors, creating a political, social, and cultural awakening. Common folks have been motivated to act upon perceived injustices and oppression pushing them to participate in contentious politics.

Social movements bring with them hope for a better future where transparency, democracy and freedom are attainable. Protests activate societies' consciousness and offer hope. The movements are great social and economic equalizers. Yet, what is the motivating force behind ordinary citizens getting active, strangers uniting and being driven to demand for their voices to be heard? According to existing literature on social movements, there are key triggers to motivate group formation and civic activism. They attempt to explain why some issues motivate people and others do not. It may have to do with culture and emotion combined with the evolving technology that makes communication and connectivity more effective. At least one study describes how citizens join to seek political representation, and to express concern with a policy.<sup>24</sup> The forces that promote protests are transformational and prosper when social and political networks provide space for diversity and permissiveness to speak out. Furthermore, a minority population of significant size is necessary to achieve a goal. A cohesive constituency needs to be set to promote mobilization that will affect policy.

The participants of the "Summer of 2019" achieved cohesiveness, and united were able to expand the voices of the systematically marginalized and powerless citizens. PR protestors

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<sup>23</sup> Tarrow, Sidney G. (2011) "Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics."

<sup>24</sup> Wald, Kenneth, Barbara A. Rienzo and James W. Button. "Sexual Orientation and Education Politics. *Journal of Homosexuality* 42:4, (2002).



sought to challenge corrupt public officials and the establishment. The forces that promote protests are transformational and prosper when social and political networks provide space for diversity and permissiveness to speak out. This was true in Puerto Rico as a large segment of society set to promote mobilization focused in affecting the status quo.

Up until the 1960s, the dynamics of contentious politics and collective action were analyzed through a static lens defined by three variables- political opposition structure, mobilizing structure and framing of contention. Scholars like Sidney Tarrow sought to make the study of social movements more dynamic and adaptable to these variables and modern times. Tarrow and his colleagues wanted to move towards the study of the culture of social movement. They claimed that the way people mobilize should be seen as dynamic and constantly changing. The Civil Rights movement redefined how movements are executed and also how they are studied. Subsequent global movements such the women, environment, and LGBTQ+ have fashioned themselves after the Civil Rights model, shaping their fight to their reality. One thing is clear, social movements have steered away from traditional structures such as unions and political parties and have rejected their influence and direction.

Scholars such as Carla Danielle Monteiro Soares have concluded that social movements appear to have been influenced by social media, particularly with respect to their organization and communication.<sup>25</sup> This fact was a reality during the Arab Spring and the mobilization of supporters through digital platforms, particularly Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. An example of the effectiveness of digital communication among citizens could be found in Egypt when the government shut down internet services as an effort to eliminate recruitment and mobilization.

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<sup>25</sup> Soares, Joia L.A. The Influence of Social Media on Social Movements: An Exploratory Conceptual Model. *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, (2015).

Howard et al. analyze how social media was able to put a face to the citizens' oppression and anger and how it catapulted a political movement: "online conversations played an integral part in the revolutions that toppled governments in Egypt and Tunisia."<sup>26</sup> The authors found that conversations about liberty, democracy, and revolution on blogs and on Twitter often paved the way for mass protests. A representation of such flow of information is when Bouazizi's cousin taped the aftermath of his immolation and protests in Tunisia and distributed it over the internet. This act pushed the movement from local outrage of witnesses, neighbors, and family members to action in the streets. The video was later posted on Facebook by a notorious blogger and within days protesters took to the streets to demand for prosecution of corrupt officers such as the ones that had abused Bouazi.

It should be noted that the Puerto Rican society is highly organized. Most people are members of diverse groups that create identity and self of belonging such as sports, music, gaming, police athletic leagues, motorcycle, aquatic teams and, community clubs.<sup>27</sup> There is a strong culture of gathering and sharing through a specific interest, hobby, or issue. Sociologist Juan Carlos Rivera points out how for the first time in the history of Puerto Rico, all these social clubs and community groups united and mobilized for a single political cause. In other words, non-political groups joined the protests to pressure Governor Rosselló to resign. Surprisingly, these groups are mostly consumeristic and oriented towards an issue such as kayaks, motorcycles, yoga, etc., yet they found a common cause. Unions and groups such as the Workers' Socialist Movement had been protesting corruption, the Fiscal Board, the abuses of

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<sup>26</sup> Howard, et al. "Opening Closed Regimes: What was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?" *Project of Information Technology and Political Islam*, (2011).

<sup>27</sup> Author Phone interview with Juan Carlos Rivera. (2021, May 10).

government and the economic crisis for years yet the spontaneous formation of these anti-Rosselló alliances transcended specific ideologies or unions.<sup>28</sup>

## **Factors that led to the 2019 Protests in Puerto Rico**

### A Crumbling Economy

The Puerto Rican economy has been contracting for over two decades. Part of the root problem is tied to the repeal of Section 936 of the federal tax code.<sup>29</sup> In 2006, Section 936 was up for renewal in Congress.<sup>30</sup> The governor at the time, Pedro Rosselló González, decided not to pursue an extension as he thought it would delay securing statehood.<sup>31</sup> The elimination of the tax incentive promoted the exodus of American manufacturers that had been based in PR to enjoy its tax benefits. Unfortunately, this exodus coincided with the recession in the U.S., deepening the fiscal repercussions on the island. The local economic crisis became so severe that the three grading agencies downgraded the government and its instrumental debt to junk status.<sup>32</sup> Puerto Rico's options to deal with the degradation were limited as the Commonwealth was not able to apply for bankruptcy due to an obscure 1980s-era congressional amendment which made it impossible for the territory and its instrumentalities to declare bankruptcy. In 2006, Governor Alejandro García Padilla declared the economic situation as a humanitarian crisis. He desperately pleaded for action from Congress to provide a mechanism to overcome the island's dire circumstances.

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<sup>28</sup> Author interview with Rivera.

<sup>29</sup> Feliciano, Zaida "IRS Section 936 and the Decline of Puerto Rico's Manufacturing." *Centro Journal*, (2018).

<sup>30</sup> For additional information see [https://irc.bloombergtax.com/public/uscode/doc/irc/section\\_936](https://irc.bloombergtax.com/public/uscode/doc/irc/section_936)

<sup>31</sup> Holton, Sean. "Puerto Rico Loses Business Tax Break." *The Orlando Sentinel*, August 3, 1996.

<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1996-08-03-9608021051-story.html>

<sup>32</sup> Staff. "S&P Downgrades Puerto Rico Debt to Junk Status." *Reuters*, February 4, 2014.

To correct this situation and help Puerto Rico keep afloat, in June 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama signed into law the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). This act was signed into law “to address the economic crisis in Puerto Rico and to provide Puerto Rico with the tools it needs to restructure its debts and embark on a path to economic recovery.”<sup>33</sup> The law directed a fiscal board the mission of restructuring the \$72 billion debt and to set up plans for paying off creditors. Seven members appointed by the President and Congress comprised the board.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the Supreme Court was to assign a judge to arbitrate the dispute. In May 2017, Chief Justice John Roberts appointed Judge Laura Taylor Swain of the U.S. District in New York, who had experience overseeing bankruptcy and financial crime cases, to preside over the unprecedented bankruptcy of Puerto Rico.<sup>35</sup> She would be responsible for establishing the legal framework to restructure the finances. The PROMESA board ensured the debt was restructured, the Commonwealth’s budget was balanced, and PR’s instrumentalities and central government were positioned to go back to the market.

PROMESA allowed the island’s debt to be restructured through Title III.<sup>36</sup> Title III refers to the section of the law that covers court-supervised restructurings of United States territories and their covered instrumentalities. A territory that files for protection under Title III can continue to operate and provide services uninterrupted in the ordinary course of affairs.<sup>37</sup> Federal

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<sup>33</sup> U.S. President (Obama). “President Obama Announces the Appointment of Seven Individuals to the Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico,” press release, March 31, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> The Board was originally composed of two nominated by House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan, two by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, one by Senate Minority Leaders Nancy Pelosi and one by Harry Reid. The last one was to be chosen by President Obama. The members fulfilled their three year mandate and new appointments are in the process of been considered.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Courts Website.

<sup>36</sup> Torres, Rosanna. “PROMESA, Four Years Later.” Center for a New Economy, September 2020. [https://grupocne.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/PROMESA-Policy-Brief\\_Final.pdf](https://grupocne.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/PROMESA-Policy-Brief_Final.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Prime Clerk, A Division of Duff and Phelps. General FAQs about the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico's Title III Cases.

officials and creditors hoped the law would promote economic growth and help secure a stable future for the Commonwealth. The finance sector and bond holders saw it as a positive move. On the other hand, it was met with great resistance and discomfort from the civil society as they perceived it as another attempt by the U.S. to keep the island's colonial status in place. Protests demanding a transparent public audit of the government debt caused disruption in the banking sector on multiple occasions.<sup>38</sup> A group of concerned citizens and labor unions attempted to raise awareness on the repercussions of the fiscal board and the PROMESA law through protests from 2016 to 2019. Their claims were mostly ignored as there was a perception of impotence in overturning the law.

### An Inexperienced Governor

On January 2, 2017, Ricardo Rosselló Nevares became governor of Puerto Rico.<sup>39</sup> He is a highly educated scientist that holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry and biomedical engineering with a concentration in development economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and a master's and doctorate degree in science from the University of Michigan. He conducted postdoctoral studies at Duke University. As the son of former governor Pedro Rosselló (1993–2001), he was interested in politics from an early age. In 2012, he published "A Better Puerto Rico is Possible" in collaboration with the Editorial of the University of Puerto Rico.<sup>40</sup> In it, he analyzes how the condition of Puerto Rico under the current political system of the Commonwealth affects the social and economic parameters of the island, as well as its

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<sup>38</sup> Meléndez, Edwin. "The Politics of PROMESA." *Centro Journal*, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> "Ricardo Rosselló Wins the Election to be the Next Governor." *The Economist*, November 21, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Rosselló Nevares, Ricardo. (2012) *Un Mejor Puerto Rico Es Posible: El Problema y La Oportunidad de la Colonia* Vol. 1, Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico.

relationship with the rest of the world.<sup>41</sup> He participated in several pro-statehood and electoral efforts both in PR and the mainland. Despite his impressive education, his lack of experience as a leader and administrator proved to be highly problematic during his tenure.

Rosselló assumed his position as governor with no management or governmental experience. He was forced to face the challenge of collaborating with the newly appointed Oversight and Management Board created by PROMESA. As part of its mandate, the board had to approve the government's annual budget. As time went by, Governor Rosselló's relationship with the Board deteriorated significantly to the point he was not willing to negotiate or sustain dialogues with its members. Moreover, there were constant public confrontations as it pertained to the budgetary process. Ultimately, the board had the final word in assessing and certifying the administration's annual budget and recovery plan. There was not much Rosselló could do.<sup>42</sup>

### The Hurricanes that Destroyed the Island

In the midst of the fiscal crisis, a new administration and the recently appointed fiscal board, two hurricanes, Irma and Maria, devastated Puerto Rico from coast to coast in September 2017. The island's electrical grid shut down in all municipalities due to the heavy winds and flooding. Over 95 percent of the cellphone service ceased to work.<sup>43</sup> This added a great source of frustration since residents could not reach their family and friends to corroborate that they were alive. There was great food insecurity when the ports and airports closed as Puerto Rico depends on the import of foods and goods from the U.S. There was also a dire need for hygiene products,

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<sup>41</sup> National Governors Association website. "Former Governors, Ricardo Rosselló."

<sup>42</sup> Soto, Miladys. "Persiste el Choque entre Rosselló y la Junta." *Metro*, June 27, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Puerto Rico One Year After Hurricane Maria. *Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, October 2018.

<https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/research/data-center/research-briefs/puerto-rico-one-year-after-hurricane-maria>

medicine and roof tarps.<sup>44</sup> The lack of basic services and hurricane destruction caused the deaths of over 4,645 people.<sup>45</sup>

The Hurricane Maria response represents many firsts in U.S. history: the longest sustained domestic air mission of food and water response, the largest disaster commodity distribution commission, the most expansive sea-bridge operation of federal disaster aid, and the biggest disaster generator installation mission.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Maria constitutes one of the largest disaster medical responses and housing operations in U.S. history.<sup>47</sup>

The PR government showed ineptitude and recklessness in responding to the emergency as aid would often get entangled in the bureaucratic web. Amid the chaos and desperation to fix the electrical grid and rebuild the power lines, the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), through a no-bid contract, hired Whitefish Energy Holdings, a small Montana company.<sup>48</sup> The public and the media speculated how a company that only had two full-time employees could secure an emergency contract of such magnitude required to recruit and manage thousands of employees. After public scrutiny and journalistic investigation, Governor Rossell ordered the cancellation of the \$300 million contract awarded to Whitefish.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, the federal government fumbled with the relief and was caught in a sea of red tape. According to a 2018 FEMA report, the federal government faced great shortcomings in

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<sup>44</sup> As of September 20, 2017 there were approximately 786,000 homes without roofs and that experienced infrastructure damage. Coto, Dánica, Associated Press. "Thousands in Puerto Rico still without Housing since Maria." *ABC News*, July 24, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Chang, Ailsa. "Harvard Research Fellow Estimates Puerto Rico's Death Toll Following Hurricane Maria" [Radio series episode]. In *All Things Considered*. *National Public Radio*, August 3, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> "The facts: Hurricane Maria's effect on Puerto Rico." (2018). Mercy Corps.

<sup>47</sup> C. (2018, October). Puerto Rico One Year After Hurricane Maria.

<sup>48</sup> PREPA awarded a \$300 million contract to a small company from Trump's Interior Secretary's, Ryan Zinke, hometown. Borak, Donna, Rene Marsh, and Greg Wallace. "\$300 million Puerto Rico Power Deal now under Government Review." *CNN Business*, October 26, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Coffey, J Brendan, Jonathan Levin and Ezra Fieser. "Puerto Rico to Cancel \$300 Million Whitefish Contract." *Bloomberg News*, October 29, 2017.

facing the storm season.<sup>50</sup> FEMA struggled to deliver food and water to victims and it underestimated how much food and fresh water it would need and how hard it would be to get additional supplies to the island.<sup>51</sup> The federal and local government's inability to respond, lack of transparency, and politization of goods' distribution outraged residents from communities all over the archipelago.<sup>52</sup> At the time, the hospitals were also struggling to function, since there was no electrical power and generators were hard to find. Additionally, fuel and gasoline shortages left people waiting in line for hours to fill their tanks. The situation in the supermarkets was equally dire as long lines to enter partially energized stores had empty shelves.<sup>53</sup>

When the government faltered, citizen groups, grassroots organizations and individuals proactively mobilized to save the nation. They were the unsung heroes who kept the island afloat. The University of Sacred Heart estimated that in the first four months after Hurricane Maria, some 200,000 people volunteered for more than 4,000 community organizations, each dedicating an average of 23 hours of work and impacting more than one million people.<sup>54</sup> The volunteer efforts promoted an environment characterized by solidarity and empathy, some qualities that would be reflected during the summer of 2019. The aftermath of the hurricane proved to be a chaotic situation, cementing Puerto Ricans' spirit and resiliency.

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<sup>50</sup> 2017 FEMA Hurricane Season After-Action Report. FEMA website.

[https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-08/fema\\_hurricane-season-after-action-report\\_2017.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-08/fema_hurricane-season-after-action-report_2017.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> FEMA Was Sorely Unprepared for Puerto Rico Hurricane, Report Says. *New York Times*, July 12, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/12/us/fema-puerto-rico-maria.html>

FEMA Report Acknowledges Failures In Puerto Rico Disaster Response, *National Public Radio*, July 13, 2018.

<https://www.npr.org/2018/07/13/628861808/fema-report-acknowledges-failures-in-puerto-rico-disaster-response>.

<sup>52</sup> Cortés Chico, Ricardo. "La Ciudadanía Otorga sus Notas sobre la Respuesta a Emergencia tras María. En una Encuesta de la Firma Estudios Técnicos los Ciudadanos le dan una "C" al Gobierno Federal y una "D" al Local." *El Nuevo Día*, July 18, 2018. <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/notas/la-ciudadania-otorga-sus-notas-sobre-la-respuesta-a-emergencia-tras-maria/>

<sup>53</sup> Robles, Frances. "FEMA Was Sorely Unprepared for Puerto Rico." *New York Times*, July 12, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> "Reconocen Heroica Labor de Voluntarios tras Huracán María durante Colación de Grados de USC." *Noticel*, June 1, 2018.



## A Corrupt Administration

As the Commonwealth recuperated from the economic and natural disasters, a federal grand jury accused several of Governor Rossell 's top officials of fraud, theft, electronic fraud and, conspiracy to incur in money laundering. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted Julia Keleher, the Secretary of Education, one of the governor's closest cabinet allies, for corruption.<sup>55</sup> Governor Rossell 's education platform was directly tied to Keleher; she embodied the government's education plan.<sup>56</sup> Rossell instructed her to reform the state's lackluster education system and to promote a 21st Century model of education. Two years into her term, she was indicted for her participation in a bribery scheme and conspiracy to commit services fraud.<sup>57</sup> Keleher allegedly offered public school land in exchange for a luxury apartment, among other felonies. The scheme involved at least other seven people and over \$15.5 million in fraudulent transactions between 2017 and 2019. Her federal indictment damaged the Rossell administration's credibility. Keleher's criminal charges further demoralized the public as there was no hope of fixing the public education system.

## **Events of *Verano del 19*, Summer of 2019 or Boricua Summer**

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<sup>55</sup> Figueroa Cancel, Alex. "Acusan a Julia Keleher y Ángela Ávila por Conspirar para Cometer Fraude y Lavado de Dinero." *El Nuevo Día*, July 10, 2019. <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/notas/acusan-a-julia-keleher-y-angela-avila-por-conspirar-para-cometer-fraude-y-lavado-de-dinero/>

<sup>56</sup> Keleher is an American consultant based in Washington, DC that was recruited with a six-figure salary and was granted a super-secretary status so she could manage with the Department's without having to deal with the bureaucracy of the government. M. Keierleber. "Take Two: Julia Keleher, Former Puerto Rico Education Secretary, Indicted in Second Round of Corruption Charges." *The 74 Million*, January 15, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Puerto Rico, "Former Secretary Of Puerto Rico Department Of Education Julia Keleher Indicted With Another Individual For Bribery, Conspiracy, And Wire Fraud," press release, January 15, 2020, at <https://www.justice.gov/usao-pr/pr/former-secretary-puerto-rico-department-education-julia-keleher-indicted-another>

Puerto Ricans joined the global trend of challenging the state's authority and engaging in democratic participation by questioning the traditional political party systems. Movements such as the Arab Spring provoked sudden change as a product of the dissatisfaction of politics as usual. These factors, combined with the PR's bankruptcy, the mishandling of hurricane relief and the rampant corruption created the conditions for the massive social movement that demanded Governor Rosselló's resignation. According to scholar and historian Nestor Duprey, "the chat summarized what people had been modestly, incrementally and consistently rejecting over the years."<sup>58</sup> Resentment had been growing toward the government due to corruption, lack of transparency, and failing infrastructure. In 2019, citizens found a convenient target in Governor Rosselló to aim their frustration.

On July 11, 2019, a private text chat between Governor Ricardo Rosselló and several advisors and allies was leaked to the press. The Telegram<sup>59</sup> chat was composed of Rosselló, high ranking administration officials and consultants.<sup>60</sup> Two of the consultants, Edwin Miranda and Elias Sánchez, had multimillion dollar contracts with several Commonwealth agencies and were influential in the Governor's agenda to further profit from their ties to the highest levels of

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<sup>58</sup> Author Phone interview with Nestor Duprey. (2020, December 9).

<sup>59</sup> "Telegram is a messaging app with a focus on speed and security, it's super-fast, simple and free. You can use Telegram on all your devices at the same time — your messages sync seamlessly across any number of your phones, tablets or computers." <https://telegram.org> Rosselló and his colleagues choose to communicate through this app because it guaranteed complete security since it is an extremely secure platform. However, they did not take into consideration that a disgruntled chat participant would leak its content to the press.

<sup>60</sup> The members of the chat group were Luis Rivera Marín, Rosselló's Secretary of State; Christian Sobrino, who held a series of economic posts; Alfonso Orona, Rosselló's former chief legal officer; Ramón Rosario, former public affairs secretary; Raúl Maldonado, former chief financial officer; one-time communications aides Carlos Bermúdez and Rafael Cerame; Edwin Miranda, a communications consultant; Puerto Rico Trade and Export Company secretary Ricardo Llerandi; public affairs secretary Anthony Maceira; and Elías Sánchez, a lobbyist and Rosselló's former campaign director. Acevedo, Nicole. "What's Behind Puerto Rico's Protests, Scandal?" *NBC News*, July 19, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/what-s-behind-puerto-rico-s-protests-scandal-here-s-n1031486>

government.<sup>61</sup> The text interaction included inappropriate discussions about sensitive and confidential government and policy matters. The group often discussed manipulating the public's opinion. They attacked the press and public personalities by mocking their style and physicality. Furthermore, they discussed using government funds to create paid-media articles and influencing the public through their social media bots and trolls.

The participants spoke derogatorily of Hurricane Maria victims and said that they have to kill the story regarding the numbers of hurricane-related deaths. They made fun of the #MeToo movement and labeled several local and NY female politicians as *putas*, or whores. Additionally, they exchanged multiple jokes about the homosexual and transexual communities, including posting a photograph of a topless trans person, mocking a state senator by implying that he is gay, and making derogatory comments about singer Ricky Martin's sexuality. Lastly, they mocked overweight people, political adversaries and even bragged about fooling their New Progressive Party supporters.<sup>62</sup>

Dr. José Javier Colón points out that “This private exchange between government officials and contractors demonstrated how public officials and individuals representing private interests discussed highly confidential matters.”<sup>63</sup> After the chat was made public, several members of the chat resigned from their positions and apologized. The most notable of the group was Secretary of State Gerardo Rivera Marín, the second highest ranking government official in the Rosselló Administration.

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<sup>61</sup> Sosa Pascual, Omayra, Valentín Ortiz, Luis. “El Saqueo a Los Fondos Públicos Detrás Del Chat.” Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, August 11, 2019. <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2019/07/el-saqueo-a-los-fondos-publicos-detras-del-chat/>.

<sup>62</sup> There is an infamous line on the chat that says “cogemos de pendejos hasta los nuestros” that translates to we make fools of even our own. <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2019/07/las-889-paginas-de-telegram-entre-rossello-nevares-y-sus-allegados/>

<sup>63</sup> Colón Morera. “Boricua Summer.”

Researcher Félix Córdova Iturregui describes the events as follows:

This summer's mobilization has been unique in our history. The jolt threw a governor out of his seat. To achieve this, the movement employed something stronger than an organized election following the colonial mold. People took direct action, occupying the streets, overflowing the streets day and night, creating new participation scenarios, with a huge but variegated voice that was nevertheless unanimous in its two main claims: 'Leave, Ricky, and take the Financial Board with you.'<sup>64</sup>

Appendix A presents a timeline from June 24, 2019, through August 7, 2019. The chronology demonstrates an explosive chain of events that exhibit the chaos and mismanagement of governmental affairs. As the sequence demonstrates, there was abundant evidence of corruption. The Governor's former Chief of Staff and Secretary of the Treasury Raul Maldonado's claims that there was a mafia within his department and other accusations of corruption were instrumental to unleashing people's outrage.

When the Center for Investigative Journalism published the 889 pages of the Telegram chat it shocked the nation. Racist, sexist, xenophobic, bullying, derogatory and potentially illegal behavior were exposed. Angry protests spontaneously arose and started connecting over social media. The anger was transformed into collective action and then into a social movement that was exhibited on July 22, 2019, when 500,000 people joined a national strike. Ordinary people marched through the business district and blocked the main San Juan highway to protest as the country stood still. As the island struck, the businesses halted, and millions of dollars were lost creating further economic pressure. Professor Bernat Tort explains how "On one side we ha[d] the FBI arrests and on the other, we ha[d] the leaked chats which came from inside the ruling party."<sup>65</sup> As Tarrow states, in such instances ordinary people are fearless "because they challenge

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<sup>64</sup> Córdova Iturregui, Félix. "Un Verano Singular: la Democracia en la Calle." *Red Betances*, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Interview of Bernat Tort and Juan Carlos "Juanqui" Rivera Ramos. "Mubarak On Our Mind: The Popular Uprising in Puerto Rico [Part II]." *Science for the People*, August 2, 2019.

power holders, produce solidarities, and have meaning to particular population groups, situations, and national cultures.”<sup>66</sup> People’s power as a collective helps them overcome their hesitation and become courageous against their oppressors.

### **Common Traits with other Social Movements**

Successful social movements have certain commonalities. The Puerto Rican protests demonstrated three parallels with other movements in the Middle East and the U.S. Some of these activities parallel these other movements, including being ignited and led by the youth, using technology as an effective mobilization tool and using music as a mechanism of resistance.

The Puerto Rican youth, better known as the “Yo no me Dejo” generation,<sup>67</sup> established a precedent of citizen participation and mobilization in a democratic way during the “Summer 2019” protests. The generation grew up on an island plagued with political scandals, corrupt administrations, a failing public education system and a bankrupted economy. They were mostly an urban, relatively educated, female led group. Until 2019, they showed relative complacency with their reality as they did not know another alternative, yet that summer they demonstrated outraged by Rossello’s conduct and forcefully imposed their will. A contributing factor to their leadership was that the movement was not directly tied to major political parties, so they were able to take ownership of the logistics of the protests making them a reflection of what they represent as a group.

According to Tarrow, young people have a desire to flaunt authority. Their joyful and playful spirit cements solidarity and promotes a commonality among contemporary social

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<sup>66</sup> Tarrow. "Power in Movement."

<sup>67</sup> The Youth Millennials Identify Themselves as the “Yo No Me Dejo” Generation (translated to I do not let people take advantage of me) after René ‘Residente’ Calle 13’s song “Afilando los Cuchillos.”

movements. The protesters in the Middle East during the Arab Spring were also led by young, urban, relatively well-educated individuals, many of whom were women. Scholar Rama Halaseh believes that the Arab youth is gradually realizing an empowered and influential role in all the various aspects of public life.<sup>68</sup> They emerged as the driving change in the region facing authoritarian and abusive governments. The youth helped turn spontaneous collective actions into actual social movements. This was especially true with their effective use of online networking. Bloggers and influencers as well as ordinary young people were able to transform the emotion and feelings of outrage and frustration to the physical realm. The vital diffusion of protests and manifestos over the Internet outsmarted established non-technological regimes.<sup>69</sup> Technology also offered a safety net for the flow of ideas and it helped the youth overcome their fears and hang on to hope in a society with few work opportunities. Modern paradigms that provide for diversity and permissiveness help establish a wider net of supporters, recruiting peers to achieve the goal of freedom, equality, and opportunities.

The “Summer of 2019” events were led by technologically savvy millennials that effectively utilized digital platforms and the available tools to communicate with peers, family members and the public. It should be noted that there are 3.1 million residents in Puerto Rico and almost 3.4 million active mobile phones.<sup>70</sup> Due to easy access to information, the Governor’s

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<sup>68</sup> Halaseh, Rama. "Civil Society, Youth and the Arab Spring." *Change and Opportunities in the Emerging Mediterranean*. Msida: Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, 2012. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/39495>

<sup>69</sup> Brown, Heather Guskin, Emily and Mitchell, Amy. “The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings.” Pew Research Center, November 28, 2012. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2012/11/28/role-social-media-arab-uprisings/>

<sup>70</sup> Fajardo, Rosario. “Study Indicates 100 Percent of Puerto Ricans Have Internet Coverage.” *The Weekly Journal*, September 23, 2020. [https://www.theweeklyjournal.com/business/study-indicates100-percent-of-puerto-ricans-have-internet-coverage/article\\_d3f392be-fd25-11ea-ac3c-4bc3d173582e.html](https://www.theweeklyjournal.com/business/study-indicates100-percent-of-puerto-ricans-have-internet-coverage/article_d3f392be-fd25-11ea-ac3c-4bc3d173582e.html)

chat was widely and quickly distributed all over the island. The youth were among the first to react and concretize the anger into action since they are the most technologically connected.

Likewise, social networking among the Arab youth was significant. Generation Z and Millennials recognized their right to protest and identified the internet as a safe place for promoting issues of freedom and the value of human life. They galvanized support through alternative technological areas such as texts and Twitter. Youth bloggers were effective in communicating directly with the masses and with simple messages of discontent reached thousands of followers.

The Puerto Rico protests were musical and highly artistic. Sociologist Juan Carlos Rivera describes them as “Festival de Indignaci<sup>71</sup>” roughly translated to Music Festival of Outrage or Indignation. Author Charles Dobson further states that “music is often central to a social movement also relies on emotion. Music speaks to the emotions better than pictures or words. It stirs people up.”<sup>71</sup> As in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Puerto Ricans modernized old hymns during the 2019 protests. Every night there were elaborate displays of artistic performances including bomba, plena, and folk music. Bomba and plena are rooted in African resistance beats. They have accompanied Puerto Ricans through their hardest times as “the use of bomba dances was one of Puerto Rican slaves’ preferred methods to express their emotions, organize rebellions, and disseminate plans to flee to Haiti.”<sup>72</sup> Additionally, there was a strong presence of an urban music genre called reggaeton and its accompanying “perreo” dance.<sup>73</sup> The

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<sup>71</sup> Dobson, Charles. "Social Movements: A summary of what works." *The Citizen's Handbook: A Guide to building community in Vancouver*, 2001.

<http://www.urbanleaders.org/620Leadership/07social/dobsonwhat+works+insocialmovements.pdf>

<sup>72</sup> Espada-Brignoni, Teofilo and Ruiz-Alfaro, Frances. "Culture, Subjectivity, and Music in Puerto Rico." *International Perspectives in Psychology*, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> “Perreo” is a type of twerking to the beat of reggaeton deriving from the US hip-hop, Jamaican reggae, Puerto Rican, Cuban and Panamanian rap and Caribbean rhythms in general.

*perreo combativo* emerged as a new musical and dance genre in the streets of Old San Juan during the weeks leading to Governor Rosselló's resignation.<sup>74</sup> Scholars such as Sánchez-Rivera, Rivera-Rideau and Weheliye elaborate that reggaeton and its “perreo combativo” have served to question this so-called racial democracy in PR and, in turn, has created spaces to express new cultural policies based on the visibility of bodies systematically marginalized and relegated to a non-human space.<sup>75</sup> On July 24, moments before Governor Rosselló announced his resignation, there was a highly publicized “perreo combativo” session on the steps of the San Juan Catholic Cathedral, challenging all morality and social compliance.

Artists Residente, iLe and Bad Bunny recorded a reggaeton song that served as a backdrop to the movement calling the governor out on his corruption and prejudice. The song received over 11 million views on YouTube, proving its reach and support. Similar to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) marches in the U.S., music gave voice and an identity to the protesters and was used as a tool of resistance. Reporter George Varga believes that protest songs unify and provide inspiration for people seeking a better world by serving as a vital soundtrack for actions to promote positive change.<sup>76</sup> The BLM movement has been characterized by a strong musical influence from performers such as Beyonce, D’Angelo, Kendrick Lamar, Miguel and Jay Z. They have given a voice and an anthem to the pain the African American community experiences as it pertains to racism and police brutality. This was particularly true in the aftermath of the George Floyd assassination. As thousands of Americans marched the streets all over the U.S. music and chanting was an inherent part of movement.

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<sup>74</sup> Sánchez Rivera, Maricarmen. "Reggaetón, trap y masculinidades: dinámicas sociales al ritmo del perreo combativo en Puerto Rico." *Taller de Letras*, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Sánchez Rivera, "Reggaetón."

<sup>76</sup> Varga, George. "Protest Songs Capture the Times, from Black Lives Matter to Civil Rights and Anti-war Movements." *The San Diego Union Tribune*, August 2, 2020.



## **Constitutional Rights of the People**

The end result of the “Summer of 2019” was possible due to the constitutional guarantees offered by the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico’s Constitution. Sections 4 of the Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. It states that “No law shall be made abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”<sup>77</sup> This is particularly significant when confronting a corrupt and abusive government. What happened during the “Summer of 2019” was “an act of genuine popular sovereignty based on free speech and the right to association. It demanded ethical and transparent governance committed to social justice. Thus, an intersectional political practice was developed that may envisage the future.”<sup>78</sup> The Constitution of Puerto Rico has several mechanisms to overthrow a Governor- death, resignation, impeachment, and conviction, yet the Puerto Rican youth led a people’s revolution sheltered by the Constitution that used their collective voice to bring justice.

## **Conclusion**

Puerto Rico’s “Summer of 2019” and its battle to remove Governor Ricardo Rossell from office proved to be a historic endeavor. The people of PR pressured a sitting governor through massive protests to resign after a couple of weeks of civil unrest. The leaked conversation between Rosselló and his closest advisers was the last straw after years of systematic corruption, unjustifiable public debt, empty political promises and colonialism. The spontaneous and urgent social outcry that emerged that summer was a collective plea for his

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<sup>77</sup> Constitution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. <https://www.lexjuris.com/lexprcont.htm>

<sup>78</sup> Tormos, Fernando. “Intersectional Solidarity.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 2017.

resignation and a rejection of the old-ways of politics. The PR Constitution safeguarded the citizens' rights to protest, and it offered protection from corruption and institutional abuse.

On November 24, 2020, the PR Department of Justice Office of the Special Independent Prosecutor's Panel announced that they would not press charges against the Telegram chat members because they did not have enough evidence to prosecute them.<sup>79</sup> This came as a shock to the public as the leaked conversations unmasked corruption schemes, undue use of power, conflict of interests and unethical actions. Earlier that month, on November 8, Pedro Pierluisi was elected by a narrow margin as Governor of Puerto Rico.<sup>80</sup> His New Progressive Party has been immersed in Rossell conflict and corruption, yet he won.

Scholar Nestor Duprey claims that there is a sliver of hope as the political transformation shifted the Commonwealth's course during the "Summer of 2019" that has reaped new political parties, viable independent candidates, a new legislative composition and the emergence of non-traditional candidates. The next chapter of political advocacy and civic engagement remains to be seen. For now, the people of Puerto Rico stand victorious and proud of what transpired in 2019.

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<sup>79</sup> Maldonado Arrigoitia, Wilma. "El FEI no presentará cargos criminales contra los integrantes del Chat de Telegram." *El Nuevo Día*, November 24, 2020. <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/notas/el-fei-no-presentara-cargos-criminales-contra-los-integrantes-del-chat-de-telegram/>

<sup>80</sup> Coto, Dánica. "Pierluisi Received Nearly 33% of Votes Vompared with Nearly 32% Obtained by Carlos Delgado of the Popular Democratic Party, which Supports the Current Territorial Status, with 100% of Precincts Reporting." *Associated Press*, November 7, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/puerto-rico-general-elections-elections-latin-america-pedro-pierluisi-12defbcc08b4e5dbd53940c18ba87ff7>

### **Chapter III:**

#### **Political Scandals on the State Level In The Us and How Citizens have Reacted to Them Compared to the Events that Occurred During the “Summer Of 2019” in Puerto Rico**

## **Introduction**

The public expects its leaders to be honest, forward-thinking, inspirational and competent.<sup>81</sup> Unfortunately, elected officials often turn a blind eye to the expectations placed on them, disregarding socially accepted values by engaging in scandalous behaviors. Scholars Laura Vorberg and Anna Zeitler accurately state, that “politicians, more than other prominent persons, are generally expected to behave morally appropriate both in private and public while paradoxically their lapses are readily anticipated.”<sup>82</sup> A leaders’ core values, tenacity, ability to adapt, innovation, character, and endurance are constantly tested due to speedy communications, social media platforms and 24-7 news cycles. Governors Ricardo Rosselló’s and Ralph Northam’s (D-VA) scandals exemplify the scrutiny and mediatic overexposure politicians are subjected to. Both Northam and Rosselló engaged in offensive behaviors that were criticized by stakeholders, leaders, and the public alike. Each official demonstrated a different leadership approach and responded in their own way to the external pressures they faced.

This paper examines Governor Rosselló’s political demise and explores how comparable scandals triggered different levels of public outrage and protests. Furthermore, it analyzes Gov. Ralph Northam’s scandal and how he overcame it. Both official’s standing was eroded, yet their scandals resulted in different outcomes.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Political scandals, and public reactions, are well studied. As one study summarized, “outside of wars and economic downturns, scandals may be the most disruptive and damaging

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<sup>81</sup> Siegel, Michael. “Leadership Skills in the 21st Century” (Class Lecture, Johns Hopkins University, Lesson 2, Summer 2021.)

<sup>82</sup> Vorberg, Laura, and Anna Zeitler. “‘This Is (Not) Entertainment!’: Media Constructions of Political Scandal Discourses in the 2016 US Presidential Election.” *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 4, (May 2019).

force in American politics.”<sup>83</sup> Such events have become part of the social and political fabric of modern history. Scandals are troublesome because politicians’ “private activit[ies] may run counter to the high standards and expectations commonly placed on elected representatives”<sup>84</sup> often resulting in humiliation and rejection. The perceived immoral or unacceptable action of a political scandal “include one (or several) victim(s) and one (or several) perpetrator(s), most likely figures of public interest.”<sup>85</sup> As society upholds officials to high standards, they are expected to demonstrate “fairness, integrity, honesty, foster ethical awareness and are respectful of others.”<sup>86</sup>

Past scandals such as Watergate, the Clinton–Lewinsky Affair, and more recently Governor Andrew Cuomo’s resignation due to sexual harassment accusations, have demonstrated the instances when leaders steer away from societal norms and engaged in reprehensible behavior. Scholar Gary Yukl describes the unethical leadership characteristics that divert officials from their duties. These include satisfying personal needs and career objectives, favoring coalition partners who offer the most benefits, attempting to sell a personal vision as the only way for the organization to succeed, avoiding necessary decisions or actions that involve personal risk to the leader, using deception and distortion to bias follower perceptions about problems and progress, and discouraging and suppressing any criticism or dissent.<sup>87</sup> Leaders entangled in scandals may possess one or several of these characteristics; their “involvement in a

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<sup>83</sup> Dziuda, Wioletta and William G. Howell. "Political Scandal: a Theory." *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 1, (2021), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/ajps.12568>

<sup>84</sup> Vorberg and Zeitler. “This Is (Not) Entertainment!”

<sup>85</sup> Vorberg and Zeitler. “This Is (Not) Entertainment!”

<sup>86</sup> Yasir, Mohamad and Noor Azmi Mohamad. "Ethics and Morality: Comparing Ethical Leadership with Servant, Authentic and Transformational Leadership Styles." *International Review of Management and Marketing*, (2016).

<sup>87</sup> Yukl, Gary, and Rubina Mahsud. "Why Flexible and Adaptive Leadership is Essential." *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* 62, no. 2, (2010).

scandal usually results in unfavorable and negative ... evaluations.”<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, social media and news outlets offer platforms to air the flaws, miscalculations, mistakes and lack of judgement of elected officials.

A politician’s leadership styles can determine how they handle a crisis.<sup>89</sup> Emotional intelligence and the ability to support, encourage and develop others’ potential or well-being are key components to successful leadership. Unfortunately, leaders sometimes disregard the expectations of public service, misplacing their moral and/or ethical values and engaging in socially perceived unacceptable behaviors. Scholars Vorberg and Zeitler affirm that “Political scandal has become one of the most common forms of political reporting—especially because politicians, more than other prominent persons, are generally expected to behave morally appropriate both in private and public while paradoxically their lapses are readily anticipated.”<sup>90</sup> The leaders’ core values and character get tested constantly as they are in the public eye.

There are several factors that determine whether a politician survives a scandal. Many scholars agree that how the public initially responds is consequential. The public’s reactions will depend on the “nature and magnitude of the scandal, the political environment, and how the politician responds to the scandal.”<sup>91</sup> This can be shown in four ways. First, the nature and magnitude of scandals depend on the size, scope, and duration of coverage of the transgression.<sup>92</sup> Literature demonstrates that “the more serious the alleged misconduct, the less likely the official will survive.”<sup>93</sup> After studying scandals such as President William “Bill” Clinton’s 1998 affair,

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<sup>88</sup> Rottinghaus, Brandon. "Surviving Scandal: The Institutional and Political Dynamics of National and State Executive Scandals." *Political Science & Politics*, 47, (2014).

<sup>89</sup> Siegel, Michael. "Leadership Skills in the 21st Century" (Class Lecture, Johns Hopkins University, Week 2, 2021.)

<sup>90</sup> Vorberg and Zeitler. "This Is (Not) Entertainment!"

<sup>91</sup> Newmark, Adam J., Shannon K. Vaughan, and Giovanni D. Pleites-Hernandez. "Surviving Political Scandals: Why Some Transgressions End Political Careers and Others Do Not." *Social Science Quarterly* 100, no. 4, (2019).

<sup>92</sup> Newmark, Vaughan, and Pleites-Hernandez. "Surviving Political Scandals."

<sup>93</sup> Newmark, Vaughan, and Pleites-Hernandez. "Surviving Political Scandals."

scholars expect that “the public may respond more negatively to financial scandals compared to moral scandals, when they do not involve abuses of power.”<sup>94</sup>

Second, the political environment is a crucial factor for the survival of a scandal. If the climate is favorable for a candidate, such as belonging to the state’s dominating party, it is more likely to survive a scandal. Also, it is beneficial to have a safe seat in an electoral district, having no challenger in an election, and having an established career where the electorate has a formed opinion of the official. Third, politicians’ survival depends on how they respond to the scandal. One study has determined that politicians have three strategic choices when managing a scandal: (1) aggressively defend themselves; (2) apologize to garner sympathy; or (3) ignore the scandal and hope it goes away.<sup>95</sup> The least effective strategy is for officials to offer excuses and defend themselves. Fourth and last, when “politicians with party or spousal support will more likely survive than those without support.”<sup>96</sup> Having such backing increases the public’s willingness to look past the situation and offer the offending official a second chance.

Scandals can have positive or negative effects on how the public perceives a politician.<sup>97</sup> It is possible for elected officials to emerge triumphant after a crisis. Also, the public reacts adversely when they perceive that politicians are being hypocritical and disingenuous.<sup>98</sup> Scholars Monika McDermott, Douglas Schwartz and Sebastian Vallejo state that “individuals generally react more negatively to politicians in hypocritical scandal situations than non-hypocritical ones

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<sup>94</sup> Newmark, Vaughan, and Pleites-Hernandez. "Surviving Political Scandals."

<sup>95</sup> Smith, Elizabeth S., Ashleigh S. Powers, and Gustavo A. Suarez. "If Bill Clinton Were a Woman: The Effectiveness of Male and Female Politicians' Account Strategies Following Alleged Transgressions." *Political Psychology* 26, (2005).

<sup>96</sup> Newmark, Vaughan, and Pleites-Hernandez. "Surviving Political Scandals."

<sup>97</sup> Bowler, Shaun, and Jeffrey A. Karp. "Politicians, Scandals, and Trust in Government." *Political Behavior* 26, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>98</sup> McDermott, Monika L., Douglas Schwartz, and Sebastian Vallejo. "Talking the Talk but Not Walking the Walk: Public Reactions to Hypocrisy in Political Scandal." *American Politics Research*, (2015).

... [also], a hypocritical situation affects public judgments of a politician's competence in office, above and beyond other judgments, demonstrating an added professional aspect to judgments of scandals when they involve hypocrisy."<sup>99</sup> Response to scandal matters. Research suggests that scandals must be confronted with transparency, open communication and honesty. Above all, humility and complete acknowledgment of the leaders' mistake are crucial to their political survival. In a crisis, they should be able to establish their legitimacy while developing credible and creative arguments that will lead to their absolution.

### **Gov. Ricardo Rosselló Leadership and 2019 Scandal**

As discussed in chapter one, Ricardo Rosselló joined the political arena as a young and inexperienced professional. He holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry and biomedical engineering with a concentration in development economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a master's and doctorate degree in science from the University of Michigan. Upon graduation, he conducted postdoctoral studies at Duke University. He is the son of Pedro Rosselló, a renowned pediatric surgeon and former New Progressive Party Governor. Pedro Rosselló was a highly controversial figure that oversaw a corrupt administration.<sup>100</sup>

In 2008, Ricardo was involved in his father's failed gubernatorial election comeback. In 2012, he founded the political action committee *Boricua ¡Ahora Es!*.<sup>101</sup> He later organized another political group that developed policy a document called A Plan for Puerto Rico, where

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<sup>99</sup> McDermott, Schwartz, and Vallejo. "Talking the Talk."

<sup>100</sup> Roman, Ivan. "Scandal Shakes Puerto Ricans." *The Orlando Sentinel*, September 2, 2002. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-2002-09-05-0209050304-story.html>

<sup>101</sup> Boricua ¡Ahora Es! was citizen-led effort aimed to galvanize supporters from all ideologies that aspired for a non-colonial status for Puerto Rico. <https://www.facebook.com/baepr/>



he outlined a social and economic policy agenda for the island. By creating the two groups, he attempted to establish his credibility and legitimacy in the political arena.

On September 22, 2015, Rosselló officially announced his candidacy for governor. Despite his impressive academic achievements, by the time he ran, he did not have ‘real world’ experience, nor had he had held formal employment. His campaign portrayed him as a transformational and visionary leader, looking to reform Puerto Rico’s bureaucracy and modernize its operations.<sup>102</sup> Rosselló had a plan and would constantly refer to it during his public appearances.<sup>103</sup> He sought to implement scientific approach to solving government problems.<sup>104</sup> At first, Rosselló’s leadership style was optimistic, driven and with a clear vision for the future. He leveraged his youth and energetic personality as he attempted to win the voters’ support. He wanted to transform Puerto Rico’s government into a dynamic and transparent entity.

Two months after Rosselló announced his candidacy, Pedro Pierluisi, a seasoned politician, Washington insider, and the Resident Commissioner in the House of Representatives, also announced his intention to run for governor. A heated party primary race took place with Pierluisi often accusing Rosselló of being inexperienced, not having a concrete action plan, and not being realistic about the Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico’s role in managing the island’s finances.<sup>105</sup> The Resident Commissioner brought to the public’s attention important issues about Rosselló’s character and abilities that would later prove to be relevant. On June 5, 2016, Pierluisi was defeated in the party’s primary 48.92 percent to 51.08

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<sup>102</sup> “Compromiso con Puerto Rico, Programa de Gobierno. Plan para Puerto Rico.” Partido Nuevo Progresista. <https://noticiasmicrojuris.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/pnp2016.pdf>

<sup>103</sup> “Ricardo Rosselló se Vacila su Plan.” *Metro*, February 10, 2017. <https://www.metro.pr/pr/noticias/2017/02/10/ricardo-rossello-se-vacila-plan.html>

<sup>104</sup> Locker, Melissa. “Puerto Rico’s Governor is Learning Hard-Fought Leadership Lessons.” *Fast Company*, June 12, 2018. <https://www.fastcompany.com/40568440/puerto-ricos-governor-is-learning-hard-fought-leadership-lessons>

<sup>105</sup> “Pierluisi y Rosselló Establecen sus Diferencias en “Debate Azul”.” *CB en Español*, June 1, 2016.

percent.<sup>106</sup> His loyalists cautiously showed their support to Rosselló, and by the November general election, the New Progressive Party lined up behind him, giving him victory of 9,700 votes over his Popular Democratic Party opponent.<sup>107</sup> At the time, Puerto Rico was under the supervision of a financial oversight board that had the final say in the government's budget. Rosselló expressed throughout the campaign that he was opposed to the PROMESA legislation and the board's presence in PR.

Governor Rosselló's administration had a rocky start.<sup>108</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, amid a bankrupt government and a national fiscal crisis, Hurricane Maria devastated PR from coast to coast. Rosselló fumbled to deal with a destroyed power grid, closed borders that caused lack of food and water, and displaced residents whose homes had been destroyed. The Governor's inability to manage funds and resources led to a series of corrupt actions from his allies and cabinet members. Unfortunately, "two years after the storm hit Puerto Rico, the most visible remnants of [the destruction] are the thousands of damaged homes still covered in blue tarps."<sup>109</sup> At the time, many still lived in despair and vulnerability.

Ricardo Rosselló's term was irreversibly altered on July 8, 2019, after rumors of a private and potentially politically damaging chat between him and his closest allies began circulating on

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<sup>106</sup> Eventos Electorales. Comisión Estatal de Elecciones de Puerto Rico. <http://primarias2016.ceepur.org>

<sup>107</sup> Eventos Electorales. Comisión Estatal.

<sup>108</sup> On January 2, 2017, Ricardo Rosselló swore in as governor of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. "La Juramentación de Ricardo Rosselló que el Pueblo no Vio." *El Nuevo Día*, January 2, 2017.

<https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/politica/fotogalerias/la-juramentacion-de-ricardo-rossello-que-el-pueblo-no-vio/>

<sup>109</sup> Florido, Adrian. "Two Years After Hurricane Maria, Blue Tarps Are Symbol Of Island's Slow Recovery." *National Public Radio*, September 20, 2019.

social media.<sup>110</sup> The next day, 11 pages of the chat were leaked to the press.<sup>111</sup> On July 10, the FBI arrested Rosselló's former secretary of education and the director of the Health Insurance Administration. Also arrested was the president of BDO, a public accounting firm that had contracts with the government. The operative involved corruption scams related to the PR departments of Health and Education. The following day, Governor Rosselló cut short his European vacation and returned to Puerto Rico. An hour before he landed, several protesters gathered at the airport and the Executive Mansion to denounce the corrupt administration. Upon landing in PR, Rosselló apologized for his inappropriate comments on the chat and brushed off the FBI arrests. In the meantime, a third part of the chat was leaked. On July 13, the Center for Investigative Journalism published 889 pages of the chat whose participant's interactions ranged from 2018 to January 2019. The text exchange shook the island as racist, sexist, xenophobic, bullying, derogatory, and potentially illegal behaviors were revealed.<sup>112</sup>

On July 16, Rosselló held a press conference in the Governor's Mansion affirming that he was embarrassed that his private conversation was made public but he would not resign from his position.<sup>113</sup> At the time, he stated that his duty was to continue working and that he was committed to serving the people of Puerto Rico. Furthermore, he stated that he respected the rights of those protesting and claimed that he had been coordinating with the police to safeguard

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<sup>110</sup> Valentín Ortiz, Luis J. and Carla Minet. "The 889 Pages of the Telegram Chat between Rosselló Nevaes and his Closest Aides." Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, July 13, 2019, <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2019/07/the-889-pages-of-the-telegram-chat-between-rossello-nevaes-and-his-closest-aides/>

<sup>111</sup> Rodríguez Medina, Natalia. "#TelegramGate: Leaks From a Private Group Chat Leave Rosselló Administration Exposed." *Latino Rebels*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.latinorebels.com/2019/07/09/telegramgate/>

<sup>112</sup> Valentín Ortiz and Minet. "The 889 Pages."

<sup>113</sup> Lilley, Sandra and Associated Press. "Puerto Rico Governor Says He's not Resigning After Private Chat Scandal." *NBC News*, July 15, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/puerto-rico-governor-says-he-s-not-resigning-after-private-n1029661>

the demonstrators' rights.<sup>114</sup> He mentioned that he had no access to the chat in question as chats get deleted and lose relevance when people leave them. In addition, he concluded that he had no recollection of the offensive memes and the informal banter with his subordinates.<sup>115</sup> Rosselló thought he could appease the protests by announcing that he would not seek re-election in 2020.

On July 21, over 500,000 people joined a massive, and the biggest of its kind in Puerto Rico, national strike.<sup>116</sup> They blocked the main highway in San Juan paralyzing the island's businesses for the day.<sup>117</sup> The public's shock was quickly transformed into revenge seeking and most of all the pursuit of justice. This sentiment was palpable during the strike and the protests.<sup>118</sup> People proclaimed that they would not be passive bystanders and tolerate the disrespect demonstrated in the chat. After two weeks of daily protests and civic unrest, Rosselló resigned effective August 2, 2019, at 5:00pm. When his resignation message was posted on Facebook, the nation was relieved. There was spontaneous celebration in the streets of Puerto Rico.<sup>119</sup>

On July 22, Rosselló offered his first and only one-on-one interview where he spoke to Fox News reporter Shepard Smith. The interview was the governor's attempt to redeem himself and present his side of the story. Smith confronted him by asking over and over if he was going

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<sup>114</sup> "Rosselló: Mi Responsabilidad es Continuar Trabajando." *CNN en Español*, July 16, 2019.

Rosselló's claim of safeguarding the protesters rights would later be debunked as police threw teargas and other into the crowds every night that the protesters gathered outside of the Governor's Mansion.

<sup>115</sup> Valentín Ortiz and Minet. "The 889 Pages."

<sup>116</sup> Valentín Ortiz and Minet. "The 889 Pages."

<sup>117</sup> Fernández Campbell, Alexia. "Puerto Ricans Pushed out a Sitting Governor for the First Time in History." *Vox*, July 25, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/2019/7/24/20703901/puerto-rico-protests-governor-resigns>

<sup>118</sup> Mazzei, Patricia and Frances Robles. "Puerto Rico Governor Misread Anger Brewing Against Him." *New York Times*, July 25, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/25/us/puerto-rico-rossello-profile.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>

<sup>119</sup> Romero, Iván. "Gritos y Cacerolazos en Puerto Rico tras Mensaje de Renuncia de Ricardo Rosselló." *CNN en Español*, July 25, 2019, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/video/rossello-redes-sociales-celebran-renuncia-cacerolazos-puerto-rico-digital-pkq-original-reacciones/>

to resign and, if he was willing to apologize to those he hurt, insulted and offended, particularly the families of the victims of Hurricane Maria. His answers were shaky and perceived by the public as insincere. In response to Smith's incisiveness, Rosselló claimed:

I've seen the [protests], I've heard the people talk. I've had a process of introspection and I did. I have made a decision I'm not going to run. I'm not going to seek re-election. And that way I can focus on the job at hand. . . You know, I've had the biggest recovery effort in the modern history of the United States on our hands. We're battling corruption with certain initiatives that we've already started, and certain new ones that we want to put out there, so that we can fix the problem.<sup>120</sup>

His words further enraged the masses as he was perceived as being out of touch with the social outcry asking him to step down.<sup>121</sup> People's outrage found a connector through digital platforms as "the discursive negotiation of scandals is thus no longer limited to television or newspapers but can unfold additionally and simultaneously in diversified social media channels and platforms that offer 'digital public spaces' for highly emotionalized public discourses, moralized discussion, and evaluation of candidates."<sup>122</sup> This happened with Rosselló as he was put to trial in social media. The public had no turning back from their perception of the governor as being dishonest, prejudiced, corrupt and immoral.

### **Gov. Ralph Northam Leadership and 2019 Scandal**

Unlike Ricardo Rosselló, Ralph Northam was elected as governor of Virginia with decade's worth of experience in the private and public sector. He had been an army doctor, pediatric neurologist, business owner, state senator, and lieutenant governor.<sup>123</sup> He graduated from the Virginia Military Institute with distinctions. He served for eight years in the U.S. Army

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<sup>120</sup> Kaplan, Talia. "Puerto Rico Governor tells Fox News he 'Assumes Responsibility' for Actions in First One-on-One Interview Since Scandal Began." *Fox News*, July 22, 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Oprysko, Caitlin. "Fox News Anchor Shreds Puerto Rican Governor Over Salacious Messages." *Politico*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/07/22/fox-puerto-rico-governor-rossello-1426455>

<sup>122</sup> Vorberg and Zeitler. "This Is (Not) Entertainment!"

<sup>123</sup> State of Virginia website. <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/about-the-governor/governor-ralph-northam/>

and later attended Eastern Virginia Medical School. Northam did residencies at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center and served as chief neurological resident at Johns Hopkins Hospital. As an Army doctor in Germany, he treated soldiers wounded in Operation Desert Storm.<sup>124</sup> Upon completing his military duty, he worked as a pediatric neurologist and later as an assistant professor of neurology. He showed empathy towards those vulnerable by volunteering at a children's hospital where he cared for terminally ill children. Throughout his career, Northam forged coalitions with a wide sector of stakeholders. In June 2017, he won the Democratic nomination with 56 percent of the vote.<sup>125</sup> He ran on an anti-Trump platform that promoted ending divisiveness, committing to eradicating hatred and bigotry, and vowing to bring people together by promoting inclusivity.<sup>126</sup>

Northam tried to present an image of honesty and was characterized for being upfront about his mistakes. He was open about asking for forgiveness. An example of this is when it was revealed that his ancestors had owned slaves.<sup>127</sup> He claimed that he was not aware of that part of his family's history, but that he was ashamed by it, stating, "the news that my ancestors owned slaves disturbs and saddens me, but the topic of slavery has always bothered me. . . My family's complicated story is similar to Virginia's complex history. We're a progressive state, but we once had the largest number of slaves in the Union."<sup>128</sup> Northam won the 2017 general election with a victory margin of 9 points. He showed great pride in his coalition building efforts.

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<sup>124</sup> Virginia website.

<sup>125</sup> Hagen, Lisa. "Northam Defeats Sanders-backed Candidate in Va. Gov Primary." *The Hill*, June 13, 2017.

<sup>126</sup> Schneider, Gregory, Laura Vozzella and Fenit Nirappil. "Democrat Ralph Northam defeats Ed Gillespie in Race for Virginia Governor Closely Watched by National Parties." *The Washington Post*, November 8, 2007. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/polls-close-anticipation-builds-as-virginia-governors-race-results-trickle-in/2017/11/07/68d6941e-c3d4-11e7-84bc-5e285c7f4512\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f7995805aec0](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/polls-close-anticipation-builds-as-virginia-governors-race-results-trickle-in/2017/11/07/68d6941e-c3d4-11e7-84bc-5e285c7f4512_story.html?utm_term=.f7995805aec0)

<sup>127</sup> Wilson, Patrick. "Ralph Northam's Ancestors Owned Slaves — He Found Out Only Recently." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 3, 2017.

<sup>128</sup> Wilson. "Ralph Northam's Ancestors."

Journalists Gregory Schneider and Laura Vozzella state, “instead of charisma, he had authenticity—the warbly accent of an Eastern Shore waterman—and that built a web of loyalty that paid off.”<sup>129</sup>

On February 1, 2019, Big League Politics published a page from Governor Northam’s Eastern Virginia Medical School yearbook.<sup>130</sup> The page showed a man dressed in blackface and another one in Ku Klux Klan regalia. The images shook Virginians and spread through social media and was widely reported in the news.<sup>131</sup> Northam took responsibility for the content of his page in the yearbook and apologized, calling it “racist and offensive.”<sup>132</sup> He offered a statement and press conference where it was expected for him to announce his resignation; yet he did not resign. In a dramatic turn, the next day, Northam clarified that it was not him on the yearbook photo yet accepted that while in medical school, he dressed in blackface for a Michael Jackson costume.<sup>133</sup> He said that he would not step down and that his intention was to remain in office working for his constituents.

State and national leaders and the public demanded Northam’s resignation and a series of protests occurred.<sup>134</sup> U.S. Senators Mark R. Warner and Tim Kaine and U.S. Representative Bobby Scott demanded his immediate resignation and deemed the behavior as unacceptable and an affront

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<sup>129</sup> Schneider, Gregory S. and Vozzella, Laura. “This Isn’t Me: Gov. Northam’s Defiance Caught Advisers Off Guard.” *Washington Post*, February 5, 2019.

<sup>130</sup> “YEARBOOK: Ralph Northam In Blackface & KKK Photo.” *Big League Politics*, February 1, 2019.

<sup>131</sup> News of the blackface scandal were published in local and national publications including [The New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), [NPR](#), [Richmond Times](#), [NBC](#), and [Roanoke Times](#) among others.

<sup>132</sup> Schneider and Vozzella. “This Isn’t Me.”

<sup>133</sup> Vozzella, Laura and Schneider, Gregory S. “Gov. Ralph Northam Admits he was in 1984 Yearbook Photo Showing Figures in Blackface, KKK Hood.” *Washington Post*, February 1, 2019.

<sup>134</sup> Anne, Ashley. “Protesters Demand Governor Northam Resign Following Controversial Yearbook Photo.” *WDBJ7*, February 2, 2019.

to people of color.<sup>135</sup> Democratic National Committee chair Tom Perez called his actions anti-ethical and asked him to step down as “his ability to govern has been compromised.”<sup>136</sup> NAACP president Derrick Johnson categorically demanded the governor’s resignation stating that “We are deeply disappointed in Gov. Ralph Northam decision to not resign today. His failure to take accountability for his actions is sickening ... This is unacceptable for any leader. He contradicts his earlier decision to admit responsibility to now say he had nothing to do with the photo... Racism of any kind cannot be excused nor overlooked. We stand by our call for his resignation.”<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus stated,

In light of his public admission and apology for his decision to appear in the photo, he has irrevocably lost the faith and trust of the people he was elected to serve. Changing his public story today now casts further doubt on his ability to regain that trust...his ability to govern for the over 8 million Virginians has been eviscerated.<sup>138</sup>

A state and national choir of leaders demanded his resignation.<sup>139</sup> Despite the public pressure, Northam stood his ground and refrained from leaving office.

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<sup>135</sup> Hon. Tim Kaine Senate website. “Statement Of Sen. Warner, Sen. Kaine & Rep. Scott On Governor Northam.” <https://www.kaine.senate.gov/press-releases/statement-of-sen-warner-sen-kaine-and-rep-scott-on-governor-northam>

<sup>136</sup> Richardson, Valerie. “Tom Perez says Northam’s Ability to Lead ‘Compromised’.” *The Washington Times*, February 24, 2019.

<sup>137</sup> Washington Post Staff. “‘He Should Step Down’: Racist Photo Sparks Near-Universal Calls for Northam to Resign.” *Washington Post*, February 2, 2019.

<sup>138</sup> Washington Post Staff. “He Should Step Down.”

<sup>139</sup> Leadership that demanded the Governor’s resignation: Virginia House Democratic Caucus, Virginia Senate Democratic Caucus, Former Gov. Terry McAuliffe, Reps. Bobby Scott, Don Beyer, Rob Wittman, A. Donald McEachin, Virginia Attorney General Mark R. Herring, U.S. Senators Cory Booker (D-NJ), Kamala Harris (D-CA), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass) and Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio). Richmond Mayor Levar M. Stoney, Dr. Leana Wen, president, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the chairs of the Democratic Committees of Alexandria City, Arlington County, Fairfax County, and Falls Church City, NARAL Pro-Choice Virginia Executive Director Tarina Keene and Rep. Karen Bass (D-Calif.), chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, among others.

Washington Post Staff. “‘He should step down’: Racist photo sparks near-universal calls for Northam to resign.” *Washington Post*, February 2, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/shocked-saddened-and-offended-swift-reaction-to-va-gov-ralph-northams-racist-photo/2019/02/01/ee319196-269c-11e9-ad53-824486280311\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/shocked-saddened-and-offended-swift-reaction-to-va-gov-ralph-northams-racist-photo/2019/02/01/ee319196-269c-11e9-ad53-824486280311_story.html).



Months later, during an interview, in CNBC's "Squawk Box," Governor Northam stated that "the occurrences in February hurt Virginians, confused Virginians. I regret that. We didn't handle it as well as we should have . . . I have traveled around Virginia. I have listened and learned a lot. I still have a lot to learn, but the more I know the more I can do."<sup>140</sup> It also worked to Northam's advantage that his two potential successors were facing scandals of their own. The lieutenant governor, Justin Fairfax, was accused of sexual violence and the attorney general, Mark Herring, also admitted to using blackface in the 1980s. This worked in the governor's advantage as those in the line of succession were not eagerly pressuring him out of office since they were busy dealing with their own situations. Reporter Astead Herndon summarized the circumstances as "a series of twists helped Mr. Northam stay in office, including simultaneous scandals that engulfed his possible successors, a cross-generational coalition of Black activists who decided to defy national politics and stick by him, and a commitment from Mr. Northam's administration to prioritize racial justice."<sup>141</sup> The governor was able to secure his position through the end of the term.

African American leaders leveraged Northam's vulnerability and willingness to redeem himself. In exchange for their support, they required the governor's assistance in furthering their agenda, one that had not been a priority for Virginia governors through the decades. Northam needed their support, and they needed his policy. He took radical acts to redeem himself such as becoming "the first state in the South to abolish the death penalty, allocating more than \$300 million to the state's financially struggling Black colleges, passing sweeping police reform

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<sup>140</sup> Pound, Jesse. "Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam: I Regret How the Scandal Over a 1980s Racist Photo was Handled." *CNBC*, July 10, 2019.

<sup>141</sup> Herndon, Astead W. "Ralph Northam Reflects on his Journey Back from the Edge." *New York Times*, June 14, 2021.

measures, and creating the country's first state cabinet-level position for diversity, equity and inclusion."<sup>142</sup> Scholars Vorberg and Zeitler describe this as a negotiation of values.<sup>143</sup>

## **Analysis**

Ricardo Rosselló and Ralph Northam's scandals triggered different levels of public outrage and protests due to a series of factors that determined their survival. Both governors engaged in offensive behaviors that were condemned by other leaders and the public. However, due to their different approaches to their scandals, one governor remained in office while the other did not.

At the time the scandal broke, Rosselló was an inexperienced elected official that had lost his political base and was facing the possibility of an impeachment. He had nothing to offer to his base and had no allies as he had offended a plethora of constituencies including women, the LGBTQ community, and victims of the hurricane, among others. His chat evoked deep resentment and anger in people from all sectors. By engaging in unethical activities, such as silencing hurricane victims' families or using social media trolls, he satisfied his personal needs over the people's needs. Additionally, the Puerto Rican political environment was charged and the public was biased against Rosselló due to a frail and bankrupt system, the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria, corruption and, years of increasing resentment towards unscrupulous elected officials. After all, his administration was corrupt, the government he was leading was bankrupt, and people had lost their faith in him as an elected official. Furthermore, the leaders in his political party had announced that they would start an impeachment trial. Rosselló was alone and possessed no leverage and no constituencies to turn to. He also responded poorly to the

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<sup>142</sup> Herndon. "Black Virginians."

<sup>143</sup> Vorberg and Zeitler. "This Is (Not) Entertainment!"

scandal as he was defensive and not humble. The citizens' frustration and outrage against him was palpable in the daily protests demanding his resignation.

Northam's story had a series of twists that worked in his favor. He was a seasoned politician that had forged solid alliances in multiple sectors of society. Even though he first lost his political base after the yearbook photo scandal broke and many leaders demanded his resignation, he embarked in a listening tour where he went directly to his constituents, especially those in the African American community, to express his regret and to make amends through progressive public policy that promoted racial justice. The African American leadership seized the opportunity and chose to forgive him so concrete measures could take place and benefit people of color. His legacy of "becoming the most racially progressive governor in the state's history, whose focus on uplifting Black communities since the 2019 scandal will have a tangible and lasting effect."<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, Virginia had a strong economy. CNBC named it America's "Top State for Business" in 2019.<sup>145</sup> Northam was perceived as being in control of the state's governance and finances. Additionally, he handled his blackface scandal with humility. He flipped flopped at first, acknowledging that was him in the photo and then retracting his statement yet he was able to weather the crisis and establish his legitimacy. In Northam's case, the first scandal-free person in the line of succession was a Republican. Therefore, there was a political calculation to be made so Democrats would not lose their seat.

## **Conclusion**

In 2019, Ricardo Rossell and Ralph Northam experienced comparable political scandals. Both governors engaged in offensive behaviors that were condemned by other leaders and the

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<sup>144</sup> Herndon. "Ralph Northam Reflects."

<sup>145</sup> "Virginia Reclaims "Top State for Business" Title in CNBC Ranking." Commonwealth of Virginia website.

public. The two governors had several ostensible similarities including promising to reform the status quo and having progressive energy as strong base of support. However, each official demonstrated different leadership styles and responded to the external conditions in distinct ways.

Rosselló was not humble, nor forward thinking. He was not able to effectively manage his scandal and have constituents look beyond the crisis at hand. His lack of humility propelled his downfall and eventually ensured his resignation. Furthermore, he lacked emotional intelligence as he did not have the ability to recognize and understand his emotions and channel them into proactive crisis management. He did not possess self-awareness, nor the ability to manage himself and others. Rosselló showed disdain for his supporters and citizens of PR, and it was hard to come back from that, even with contrition (which was absent). Rosselló was a brilliant scientist with great analytical and intellectual capacities, yet he fell short in facing his mistakes and the public's outrage.

On the other hand, Northam was humble, forward thinking, strategic and calculating when facing his crisis. As a leader, he was able to 'go out and make things better' for the people in his state. He demonstrated a high emotional quotient by identifying his problem before it further escalated. He had political and 'real-world' experience that allowed for him to manage the blackface scandal and hold difficult conversations with his peers and constituents. The political situation in Virginia was steady and Northam was ruling an economically stable state.

Rosselló was not able to focus on those efforts and failed at securing his tenure. The public's disdain and hatred pushed him out of office. The political situation in Puerto Rico was tense and residents were frustrated and angered after the economic and social crises they had been facing over the decades. On the other hand, Northam was able to focus on the big picture,

the necessary, the possible and on his response. He demonstrated to be flexible and agile in his response. Both governors' situations offer future leaders great lessons, positive and negative, in leadership, accountability and political survival.

## **Chapter IV:**

### **The Role of Investigative Journalism in Exposing Political Scandals and Triggering Social Movements: A Case Study of Puerto Rico's "Summer of 2019"**

## Introduction

In the early morning of July 13, 2019, the Center for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) posted evidence of inappropriate and potentially illegal behavior through a cloud, searchable document.<sup>146</sup> After weeks of negotiation, Omayra Sosa Pascual, the co-Founder of the CIJ secured a pen drive with information that would change the social and political future of Puerto Rico. The memory drive contained 889 pages of a private chat between Governor Ricardo Rosselló and his closest allies. The CIJ had been working for years on an exposé of government corruption and this piece of information represented a key component of their findings. Since the organization's conception, they have investigated issues such as the fiscal crisis and governmental bankruptcy, illegal influences on government officials and illicit contracting practices.<sup>147</sup>

The private leaked text conversation exposed the group's contempt for the people of Puerto Rico and also unveiled a pattern of abuse of power where the Governor and his closest allies concocted public policy decisions beneficial to their party. As the day progressed, Puerto Ricans went on a standstill as they read the document on different technological and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and the CIJ's website.<sup>148</sup> Meanwhile, CBS investigative reporter David Begnaud had been following the government's mishandling of the Hurricane Maria relief and quickly jumped on the chat scandal. Begnaud amplified the Center's reporting.

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<sup>146</sup> Valentín Ortiz and Minet. "The 889 Pages."

<sup>147</sup> Centro de Periodismo Investigativo website. <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com>

<sup>148</sup> Rivera Clemente, Yaritza. "Reciben a Rosselló con Manifestación en el Aeropuerto." *El Vocero*, July 11, 2017. [https://www.elvocero.com/gobierno/reciben-a-rossell-con-manifestacion-en-el-aeropuerto/article\\_b2df9266-a3ea-11e9-acd8-63bb83fa6d72.html](https://www.elvocero.com/gobierno/reciben-a-rossell-con-manifestacion-en-el-aeropuerto/article_b2df9266-a3ea-11e9-acd8-63bb83fa6d72.html)

He used his social media platforms and network reporting to keep Puerto Ricans part of the diaspora and the general public informed on the phenomenon that was unfolding.<sup>149</sup>

The Center and Begnaud exposed Puerto Rico's greatest political scandal and awakened a grassroots social movement that for the first time in history would overthrow a sitting governor after two weeks of protests. It served as the catalyst that prompted members from all sectors of society to engage in a massive protest that no counter-political tactic could mitigate or eliminate. This chapter studies the crucial role of investigative journalism and social media in igniting a movement that in a short span of time was able to overthrow a democratically elected governor and fuel a new political generation. The journalists helped uncover a group of lobbyists and unscrupulous officials who were taking advantage the already frail political, economic and social system. Lastly, this chapter analyzes how social media was a magnifying force that enabled the quickly emerging grassroots social movement.

### **“Summer of 2019”/Exposé of a Political Scandal**

In 2007, Omayra Sosa Pascual and Oscar Serrano, two seasoned journalists known for their incisiveness and dedication to seeking governmental transparency and accountability, founded the Center for Investigative Journalism.<sup>150</sup> They both had worked at the largest publications in Puerto Rico for decades and were disillusioned by the commercialization of media in the island. They aspired to create an investigative hub where resources leaned on investigative reporting models.<sup>151</sup> The Center was incorporated as an independent, non-profit entity that sought to promote access to information through three paths: investigative journalism,

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<sup>149</sup> Begnaud, David. “David Begnaud on his “Passion” for Covering Puerto Rico.” *CBSN Originals*, September 23, 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hurricane-maria-begnaud-reporters-notebook-puerto-rico/>

<sup>150</sup> Centro Periodismo Investigativo website. <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/historia/>

<sup>151</sup> Such as the Center for Investigative Reporting (USA, 1977), Center for Public Integrity (USA, 1989), Investigative Reporters and Editors (USA, 1975), “Centro de Investigación e Información Periodística” (Chile, 2007), “Fundación Poder Ciudadano” (Argentina, 1989) and Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism (Filipinas, 1989).



litigation to pursue transparency, and training of fellow journalists.<sup>152</sup> The Center grew from an entity fueled by volunteers and freelance journalists to a 20 person operation in 2021. Since its launching, the CIJ has produced over 350 reports on political corruption, favoritism in government agencies, financing of electoral campaigns, public policy, the public debt, the PROMESA law and vulture funds.<sup>153</sup>

After Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in 2017, the CIJ launched an unprecedented grassroots investigation to uncover the destruction in the island. Their reporting unveiled the ineptitude of the state and federal governments in providing relief. As a result, they launched two websites to help citizens visualize the gruesome data: [www.loschavosdemaria.com](http://www.loschavosdemaria.com) and [www.losmuertosdemaria.com](http://www.losmuertosdemaria.com).<sup>154</sup> The hashtag #LosChavosDeMaría (“the maria funds”) was launched to help organize information on social media about the recovery efforts and to explain how the public funds were allocated. It gave people a common rally point to post information and experiences. This initiative was supported by the Puerto Rico Foundation Network, Oxfam and Report for America. The hashtag #LosMuertosdeMaria (“the dead people of Maria”) was a grassroots effort to document the deaths related to the hurricane due to the controversy and inconsistencies over the data surrounding the fatality count.

On October 3, 2017, President Donald J. Trump visited Puerto Rico and met with Governor Rosselló and a group of elected officials. During a press conference, Trump downplayed the casualties and stated that the hurricane devastation had not been as fatal as

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<sup>152</sup> Centro Periodismo website.

<sup>153</sup> Centro Periodismo website.

<sup>154</sup> Centro Periodismo website.

Hurricane Katrina's in New Orleans since Puerto Rico allegedly only had 16 hurricane-related reported deaths.<sup>155</sup> He went on to say,

Now, I hate to tell you, Puerto Rico, but you've thrown our budget a little out of whack because we've spent a lot of money on Puerto Rico. And that's fine. We've saved a lot of lives. If you look at the - every death is a horror, but if you look at a real catastrophe like Katrina and you look at the tremendous - hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people that died and you look at what happened here with really a storm that was just totally overpowering - nobody's ever seen anything like this.<sup>156</sup>

After that visit, the CIJ received dozens of calls from health care providers and funeral homes directors denying the low death rates that the President and Governor had presented during the visit. Ms. Sosa Pascual visited municipalities and documented what had been significantly unaccounted and miscounted deaths. The information that she found was astounding, as she was discovering hundreds of unreported cadavers. To the public's shock, the CIJ discovered multiple stories about families that were burying their loved ones in their backyards due to the lack of access to main roads. The #Muertosdemaria project was launched with the support of Quartz and the Associated Press and it helped account for each person that passed away by telling their story. The center's reporting on both the funds and death toll made visible the trauma experienced by Puerto Ricans<sup>3</sup> due to the government's inability to face the natural disaster.

Upon concluding the reporting on the hurricane aftermath, the Center refocused its investigations on the unethical activities of public officials and the questionable leadership patterns within the Rosselló Administration. On June 24, 2019, Raul Maldonado, Secretary of the Treasury and former Chief of Staff to Governor Rosselló, publicly announced that there was

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<sup>155</sup> "In The Aftermath of Hurricane Maria, President Trump Visits Puerto Rico." *NPR All Things Considered*, October 3, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/03/555425750/in-the-aftermath-of-hurricane-maria-president-trump-visits-puerto-rico>

<sup>156</sup> Relman, Eliza. "Trump in San Juan: 'I hate to tell you, Puerto Rico, but you've thrown our budget a little out of whack'." *Business Insider*, October 3, 2017.

an institutional mafia in the department that he headed.<sup>157</sup> He claimed that there was a scheme within the agency that was used for illicit purposes including selling licenses, allowing manipulation and destruction of tax related documents, accessing confidential taxpayer data and, other fraudulent activities.<sup>158</sup> Maldonado claimed to be a victim of a vendetta from disgruntled employees that he had referred to the federal and state authorities due to corrupt and illegal actions. Several hours after his public statement, the Governor fired Maldonado, casting a shadow of suspicion over the Rosselló Administration.<sup>159</sup>

To investigate the alleged mafia that Maldonado was forcefully denouncing, CIJ's reporters Luis Valentin, Omayra Sosa Pascual, and Carla Minet interviewed more than 30 past and present government officials. As the CIJ explored the scandal, a handful of pages of a mysterious private chat were leaked to the press in social media.<sup>160</sup> The pages contained sections of what seemed like part of text interaction between Governor Rosselló and his aides. The chat invigorated the Center's research and the journalists sought to establish contact with anyone that could shed light on the legitimacy of the document. They identified an anonymous source that claimed that it had additional portions of the chat. The source was offering fragments of the conversation but, Sosa Pascual and her colleagues were not interested in publishing just

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<sup>157</sup> Rodríguez Medina, Natalia. "Governor of Puerto Rico Ricardo Rosselló Is Being Accused of Corruption: A Breakdown." *Latino Rebels*, June 15, 2019.

<https://www.latinorebels.com/2019/06/25/rossellocorruptionaccusation/>

<sup>158</sup> "Raúl Maldonado dice que Ricardo Rosselló Protegió la "Mafia Institucional"" *Jagual Media*, May 5, 2021.

<https://jayfonseca.com/raul-maldonado-dice-que-ricardo-rossello-protegio-la-mafia-institucional/>

<sup>159</sup> Ruiz Kuilan, Gloria. "Rosselló Saca de su Cargo al Secretario de Hacienda, Raúl Maldonado." *El Nuevo Día*, June 24, 2019. <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/notas/rossello-saca-de-su-cargo-al-secretario-de-hacienda-raul-maldonado/>

<sup>160</sup> Rivera Clemente, Yaritza. "Reciben a Rosselló con Manifestación en el Aeropuerto." *El Vocero*, July 11, 2019. [https://www.elvocero.com/gobierno/reciben-a-rossell-con-manifestacion-en-el-aeropuerto/article\\_b2df9266-a3ea-11e9-acd8-63bb83fa6d72.html](https://www.elvocero.com/gobierno/reciben-a-rossell-con-manifestacion-en-el-aeropuerto/article_b2df9266-a3ea-11e9-acd8-63bb83fa6d72.html).

segments. They coveted the complete document to establish context about the dynamics of the conversations, the tone, relationships and timeline.<sup>161</sup>

On July 13, 2019, at 2:43 am, after a week-long negotiation with an anonymous source closely tied to the chat, the Center released what would later result in the begging of the end of Governor Rosselló.<sup>162</sup> They published 889 pages of a private text chat between Governor Rosselló and his closest advisors. The participants included his chief of staff, general counsel, communications director, private lobbyists and consultants, among others.<sup>163</sup> The CIJ's team knew they had a bombshell in their hands but had no idea the magnitude of the chaos that their reporting would unleash.

Thanks to social media, the content of the chat went viral by mid-morning. The Center's reporting on what they originally characterized as #RickyLeaks detonated a national cry for justice and outrage as it revealed how Rossello's inner circle operated. Sosa Pascual team's exposure of the story allowed for the public to have the pertinent information about who Governor Rosselló was and unmask the corruption within his administration. The CIJ cleverly formatted the contents of the chat in a user friendly and searchable manner. The Center's work allowed readers to search for the issues and people that interested them most.<sup>164</sup>

As expressed in the previous chapters, the governor and his cronies insulted and mocked feminists, obese people, religious leaders, Hurricane Maria victims, and the LGBTQ community, among others. The information that transpired from the conversations revived the post-hurricane

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<sup>161</sup> "El CPI en Boston" Panel. *Holyoke Media*. Cristela Guerra, moderator. January 26, 2020, Boston, Mass. <https://www.facebook.com/HolyokeMedia/videos/1354380324735723/>

<sup>162</sup> It was speculated and later confirmed that the anonymous source was Raul Maldonado. It was not until December 2019, that he official admitted he was the source that made the chat public. "Maldonado se Revela como el Informante del Chat." *Noticel*, Dec 22, 2019.

<sup>163</sup> Chapter 1 outlines the names and titles of the staff members, advisors and consultants.

<sup>164</sup> "El CPI en Boston" Panel. *Holyoke Media*.

hurt and unleashed collective anger. The governor’s chat violated society’s basic civic values by mocking even the members of their own political party.<sup>165</sup> The abuse of power percolated through the multiple conversations where the group consistently strategized about the misuse of funds by manipulating the press and the people of PR.

The Center’s reporting exposed the figures of Elias Sánchez and Edwin Miranda. Among the 12 members that interacted in the chat, these two were the ones that raised the most suspicion as they were private citizens that did not hold official positions within the administration. It was widely speculated that they “constitute[d] the top of the Government, with more power than any of the secretaries of the constitutional cabinet of Governor Rosselló.”<sup>166</sup> According to the CIJ’s sources, Sánchez and Miranda “generated millions through their businesses and have decided a good part of what has happened in the Government in terms of hiring, dismissals and public projection since Rosselló took office.”<sup>167</sup>

Elias Sánchez was a lawyer and lobbyist that served as Rosselló gubernatorial campaign manager. Sánchez and Rosselló were longtime friends, with Rosselló serving as Sánchez’s best man at his wedding. Upon Rosselló election, Sánchez worked for six months as the representative of the Administration to the Fiscal Control Board, created by the PROMESA Law.<sup>168</sup> After resigning as representative, he returned to his private practice, enjoying access to

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<sup>165</sup> Neiman Foundation website. “Puerto Rico’s Centro de Periodismo Investigativo Receives 2020 Louis M. Lyons Award.” January 27, 2019.

<https://nieman.harvard.edu/events/centro-de-periodismo-investigativo-receives-2020-louis-m-lyons-award/>

<sup>166</sup> Centro de Periodismo Investigativo. “Aquí está Detallado el Esquema de Saqueo detrás del Chat de Telegram.” *El Calce*, July 19, 2021.

<https://elcalce.com/contexto/aqui-esta-detallado-esquema-saqueo-detras-del-chat-telegram/>

<sup>167</sup> Centro de Periodismo. “Aquí está detallado el esquema.”

<sup>168</sup> “Renuncia Elías Sánchez a su Puesto en la Junta Fiscal.” *Noticel*, July 20, 2017. <https://www.noticel.com/junta-fiscal/ahora/20170720/renuncia-elias-sanchez-a-su-puesto-en-la-junta-fiscal/>

the Governor’s cabinet and obtaining privileged information on large contracts that he would connect with his clients .<sup>169</sup>

As demonstrated in the leaked chat, Sánchez inappropriately participated in the discussion of sensitive public policy and the award of multimillion contracts. It was evident that he used privileged information to benefit his firm and allies financially. Sánchez charged up to 25% in government contract commissions and his retainers with administration agencies reached \$50,000 per month, per agency.<sup>170</sup> He was later accused of leveraging his position as government lobbyist to trade in influence with government agencies.”<sup>171</sup>

Like Sánchez, Edwin Miranda worked in the private sector. He was a publicist that owned several agencies including KOI Inc., IXS Digital Media, IXS LLC, KOIIXS LLC, FP+1 agency, KOIGC, KOI Americas LLC, KOI Arise, and ICrossing. The last four billed over \$112 million during two New Progressive Party (NPP) administrations.<sup>172</sup> More specifically, the Center reported that Miranda billed over \$50 million in contracts with over 22 governmental agencies.<sup>173</sup> KOI was founded in 1994 and reached its greatest success under Governor Luis Fortuño’s NPP Administration. Miranda had over \$59.6 millions in publicity contracts under Fortuño. By the time the “Summer of 2019” unraveled, Miranda had reached earnings of \$52.2 millions in contracts from the Rosselló Administration, including 52 contracts from 15 agencies during the first two years.<sup>174</sup> The CIJ revealed that Miranda additionally obtained a contract of \$45,973 from FEMA to deal with the publicity around the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

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<sup>169</sup> Centro de Periodismo. “Aquí está detallado el esquema.”

<sup>170</sup> Rodríguez Medina, Natalia. “Former Rosselló Campaign Manager Under FBI investigation for Alleged Influence Peddling.” *Latino Rebels*, June 12, 2019.

<https://www.latinorebels.com/2019/06/12/formerrossellocampaignmanager>

<sup>171</sup> Rodríguez Medina. “Former Rosselló Campaign Manager.”

<sup>172</sup> Rodríguez Medina. “Former Rosselló Campaign Manager.”

<sup>173</sup> Centro de Periodismo. “Aquí está detallado el esquema.”

<sup>174</sup> Centro de Periodismo. “Aquí está detallado el esquema.”

Furthermore, he claimed in several statements that his interaction in the leaked chat was appropriate and that his billable hours were charged by FP+1, his entity that provided advertising services to Ricardo Rosselló's political fund. He also claimed that no public funds were used to compensate his work. However, between November 2018 and January 2019, the period of the chat published by the CIJ, there is no report of payments to FP+1 by the Ricardo Rosselló political committee. FP+1 agency belongs to Miranda-Reyes and was in charge of the campaign publicity efforts. FP+1 does not appear either with pending bills during said period of time.<sup>175</sup> Undeniably, Miranda played a crucial role in activating the statehood party supporters through social media and public polls, among others.

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Miranda's publicity firm managed the Unidos por Puerto Rico effort. Unidos was created to "provide assistance to individuals and small businesses that have been devastated by Hurricanes Irma and María, accelerating their recovery and helping to restore their home, food, health and well-being needs, making it easier for them to rebuild their lives, communities and Puerto Rico."<sup>176</sup> The entity, headed by the First Lady, was controlled by the Governor's staff. They raised over \$41 million in the months after the hurricanes hit. However, a few months into the launching of Unidos, the public questioned the transparency of the organization. The FBI headed an investigation into the management of the funds.<sup>177</sup> Since Miranda was closely involved with Unidos, there was speculation of his dealings with the organization.

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<sup>175</sup> Suárez, Damaris. "Publicist Edwin Miranda Tried to Conceal his Propaganda Work, but Reports say Otherwise." Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, January 21, 2020.

<https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2020/01/publicist-edwin-miranda-tried-to-conceal-his-propaganda-work-but-reports-say-otherwise/>

<sup>176</sup> Unidos por Puerto Rico website. <https://www.unidosporpuertorico.com/nosotros/>

<sup>177</sup> Correa Velázquez, Melissa. "Apunta el FBI a Unidos por Puerto Rico." *El Vocero*, July 16, 2019.

[https://www.elvocero.com/ley-y-orden/apunta-el-fbi-a-unidos-por-puerto-rico/article\\_4ed8e534-a77c-11e9-a7e0-ff53b7a5f82b.html](https://www.elvocero.com/ley-y-orden/apunta-el-fbi-a-unidos-por-puerto-rico/article_4ed8e534-a77c-11e9-a7e0-ff53b7a5f82b.html)

As it was later exposed by the CIJ, Miranda destroyed the reputations of many people, manipulated government information, manipulated the media and had the general rejection of the industry.<sup>178</sup> After the chat was leaked, he was suspended from the Puerto Rico Association of Advertising Agencies. It has been reported that he moved to Miami, Florida and that he established his residence in the same building as Sánchez.<sup>179</sup>

### **Investigative journalist and political transparency**

Scholars have extensively researched the role that investigative journalism and social media platforms have in exposing political scandals. I intend to explore several of the theories and apply them to the “Summer of 2019” events. The Carnegie Endowment hosted a panel that poignantly describes the phenomenon,

As digital technology reshapes the interactions between citizens and the state, demands for accountability have never been greater...there are innumerable examples where digital technology has helped stem the tide of illiberalism and has empowered citizen activists to take down corrupt governments and challenge authoritarian regimes. Grassroots outlets, NGOs, investigative journalists working for news organizations, and academic programs have proven especially critical in these movements as they undertake open source intelligence (OSINT) investigations as a form of diagonal accountability to probe government violations. These accountability actors are key to curbing the tide of digital authoritarianism.<sup>180</sup>

Investigative journalism is defined as in-depth reporting that has several characteristics, including systematic inquiry, forming a hypothesis, using public data, exposing hidden public facts focusing on social justice and accountability.<sup>181</sup> Investigative journalism is not just about

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<sup>178</sup> Rodriguez Cotto, Sandra. “Amenaza ó “Advertencia” de Edwin Miranda de KOI.” *En Blanco y Negro*, January 1, 2020. <http://enblancoynegromedia.blogspot.com/2020/01/amenaza-o-advertencia-de-edwin-miranda.html>

<sup>179</sup> “Elias Sánchez.” *El Nuevo Día*, January 27, 2020. <https://www.pressreader.com/puerto-rico/el-nuevo-dia/20200127/281642487144209>

<sup>180</sup> “Watching the Watchers: Investigative Journalism in the Digital Age.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 28, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/28/watching-watchers-investigative-journalism-in-digital-age-event-7451>

<sup>181</sup> Kaplan, David. “What Is Investigative Journalism?” *Center for International Media Assistance*, A Report to the Center of International Media Assistance, 2nd Edition, January 14, 2014. <https://www.cima.ned.org/resource/global-investigative-journalism-strategies-for-support/>



leaking information. Just because a journalist leaks data does not mean that they are engaging in-depth reporting or a systematic inquiry. However, leaking data is a first step to beginning an investigation, generating leads and cultivating additional investigations. Investigative journalism is also not just about crime and corruption. It may be about any topic that has public pertinence and that follows the aforementioned characteristics, as the journalist needs to go beyond the basic questions of who, what, when, where and how by diving into the substance of an issue.<sup>182</sup>

It may be debated whether the Center for Investigative Journalism engaged in pure investigative journalism by uncovering Gov. Rossello's political scandal. Following the definition of investigative journalism, the CIJ pursued a systematic inquiry, as they had been investigating for years the Rossello administration's corrupt actions at the departments of the Treasury, Housing and Health, among others. The CIJ formed a hypothesis as their investigations were leading with the premise that there were unscrupulous lobbyists and members of the Administration that were engaging in corrupt actions such as selling influences, manipulating public opinion through paid trolls and granting millionaire contracts to political supporters.

The Center used public data to support their claims in unleashing litigation against the government, especially with the records of the PR Demographic Registry and PR Department of Health with the death toll after Hurricane Maria. Lastly, the CIJ exposed governmental facts that were deliberately hidden, focusing on social justice and accountability. Because of the information that the Center uncovered, the public was able to witness the reality of the executive branch. Lastly, the CIJ engaged in a negotiation process to obtain an electronic copy of the Telegram chat that would culminate in the bombshell article published in the early morning of July 13, 2019.

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<sup>182</sup> Kaplan. "What Is Investigative Journalism?"

Journalist David Begnaud had an instrumental role in unmasking a corrupt administration and giving the people of Puerto Rico a national and international platform to highlight their reality. In September 2017, he flew to the island and engaged in what would develop into a deep journalistic relationship with Puerto Ricans and their struggles. His passion for the island and its people led to his journalistic work making a difference, as Begnaud used his position with CBS and his social media platforms to highlight the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Through his reporting, he validated what the CIJ had been denouncing for years. The public trusted Begnaud. He reached a celebrity status very quickly. He was perceived as a protector or guardian of journalism and truth telling.<sup>183</sup> As time went on, Begnaud kept engaged and consistently reported on local issues. His humane and candid reporting helped establish his credibility and trust among Puerto Ricans both on the island and the diaspora. When the CIJ leaked Rosselló chat, he quickly flew to Puerto Rico to cover the story.<sup>184</sup> Begnaud kept engaged and consistently reported on local issues. His humane and candid reporting helped establish his credibility and trust among Puerto Ricans both on the island and the diaspora.<sup>185</sup>

Begnaud's reporting might not neatly fit all of the characteristics of investigative journalism, yet he was instrumental in supporting the Center's work and engaging key stakeholders with incisive and inquisitive questions. He would often confront the Rosselló administration officials with issues that local reporters retracted from. For example, on July 16,

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<sup>183</sup> Begnaud was honored by the Puerto Rico Day Parade as a champion as his reporting gave voice to the people of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico Day Parade Facebook Page.

<https://www.facebook.com/NationalPuertoRicanParade/photos/we-recognize-david-begnaud-cbs-news-correspondent-as-campeón-puertorriqueño-puer/1855269494491611/>

<sup>184</sup> "David Begnaud le Grita al Gobernador desde las Afueras de SBS." *Metro Puerto Rico*, July 15, 2019. <https://www.metro.pr/pr/noticias/2019/07/15/david-begnaud-le-grita-al-gobernador-desde-las-afueras-de-sbs.html>

<sup>185</sup> Puerto Rico Day Parade Facebook Page.

2019, Begnaud probed Governor Rosselló in a press conference demanding to know why he was tone deaf to the people's demands, political collapse, and lack of support. He further questioned the governor about what it would take for him to resign, why would he threaten the mayor of San Juan and if he thought that his actions were ethical and legal.<sup>186</sup> The American journalist became a fixture in the protest scenes and local press conferences echoing what the CIJ and other local outlets were reporting. Begnaud stated that no other story had given him a sense of duty towards journalism, stating that "I realized I had a responsibility to help [Puerto Ricans] reach each other, and a responsibility to get it right."<sup>187</sup> PR taught him that good journalism can be effective and life changing. Begnaud summarizes his role and responsibility with the people of PR as follows;

I just want to be the guy who with the absolute best intentions and with absolute accuracy tells you what I know, how I was getting the information and what else I want to find out. I wanted to be very, very clear on my lane: prioritize the story of Puerto Rico to people around the world who are watching. That is what I feel my role is, and I want to stay in my lane.<sup>188</sup>

He was able to fulfill his mission of transparent and accountable journalism. Puerto Ricans all over are appreciative of his reporting.<sup>189</sup>

## **Social Media and Social Movements**

Social media platforms were instrumental in removing Governor Rosselló from office. Social media pressure was possible because most Puerto Ricans have Internet access. In order to comprehend the level of connectivity, it should be noted that 91% of the population, had a smart phone in 2019. Furthermore, the smart phone was and still is the main medium from which users

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<sup>186</sup> "David Begnaud Questions Puerto Rico's Governor." *CBS News*, July 16, 2021.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGMTvsJjXXw>

<sup>187</sup> Begnaud. "David Begnaud on his "passion."

<sup>188</sup> Begnaud. "David Begnaud on his "passion."

<sup>189</sup> Ho, Karen. "Q&A: CBS's David Begnaud on covering Puerto Rico when few others did." *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 4, 2018. [https://www.cjr.org/q\\_and\\_a/cbs-correspondent-david-begnaud.php](https://www.cjr.org/q_and_a/cbs-correspondent-david-begnaud.php)

connect at 94.3 percent. The principal activities they engage online are communications, research, and entertainment.<sup>190</sup> 93.2 percent of Puerto Ricans have a presence on a digital platform. The number of users who follow public figures and / or “influencers” on social networks figure at 53 percent.<sup>191</sup> High levels of access to social media allowed for fast communication and realization of the severity of the chat.

During the summer of 2019, the governor’s leaked private conversation was shared and forwarded from household to household. A searchable document prompted a collective outcry of anger, frustration, and indignation. Different from previous social movements in Puerto Rico, such as the 1999 Vieques’ protests against the U.S. Navy, the 2019 movement against Rosselló was not politically or union led.<sup>192</sup> It was a spontaneous, grassroots effort that would have been impossible to launch without social media.<sup>193</sup>

Scholars Dustin Kidd and Keith McIntosh study how social media can create the tipping point that leads to a social movement's success. They elaborate on three types of perspectives dealing with this phenomenon: the techno-optimistic, the techno-pessimistic and the ambivalent. The optimistic approach argues that change can come from a post or tweet, “showing great faith in the revolutionary power of social media.”<sup>194</sup> This theory outlines that social media has the capability of potentially solving social problems such as climate change and elections. The

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<sup>190</sup> “Aumentan las Compras Locales por Internet; 2019 Digital & Mobile Behavioral Study.” SME Puerto Rico website, June 11, 2019. <https://www.smepr.org/index.php?src=news&srctype=detail&category=News&refno=298>

<sup>191</sup> “Aumentan las Compras Locales.” SME Puerto Rico.

<sup>192</sup> On February 21, 2000, over 150,000 people attended the “Peace for Vieques” protest to demand the departure of the United States Navy from the island of Vieques in Puerto Rico's eastern coast. This was a historical number of people present at a march. “Más de 500,000 personas Marcharon en Paro Nacional por Renuncia de Rosselló.” *Primera Hora*, July 22, 2019. <https://www.primerahora.com/noticias/puerto-rico/notas/mas-de-500000-personas-marcharon-en-paro-nacional-por-renuncia-de-rossello/>

<sup>193</sup> Mazzei, Patricia and Frances Robles. “Ricardo Rosselló, Puerto Rico’s Governor, Resigns After Protests.” *New York Times*, July 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/24/us/rossello-puerto-rico-governor-resigns.html>

<sup>194</sup> Kidd, Dustin, and Keith McIntosh. “Social Media and Social Movements.” *Sociology Compass* 10, no. 9 (2016).

pessimistic approach “argue[s] either that social media is incapable of ushering in a social revolution or even that social media hinders positive social change.”<sup>195</sup> The ambivalent approach “weighs the evidence on balance and recognizes that change is both difficult and possible.”<sup>196</sup>

Kidd and McIntosh favor the ambivalent approach as they acknowledge the power of social media platforms, such as Twitter, in promoting self-expression, in using effective communication tools and in helping decentralize leadership. Social media is productive in convening supporters and offering a collective sense of unity. The authors realize movements cannot solely rely on technology as social movements need human presence in the real world to be effective and have a long-lasting impact. Furthermore, social media can be hyperbolic and superficial, providing little impact in the issue at stake. Lastly, they argue social media has the potential to be used to suppress the freedom of speech as authoritarian governments and companies can censor and undermine the movements with the click of a button. They claim that ambivalent theory acknowledges the power of technology in educating and communicating in real time yet recognize the lack of physical human passion cannot be replaced.<sup>197</sup>

The Puerto Rico “Summer of 2019” showcases the importance of social media platforms in contemporary movements and validates various characteristics of Kidd and McIntosh’s theories. The techno-optimism theory is displayed by the fact that social movement that transpired in PR was leaderless as there were no specific political parties, unions, or elected officials heading the effort. Additionally, it may be attributed to the optimistic approach due to the power of social media in rallying citizens into action. The public was summoned to the streets through authorless digital flyers and posts. Social media was responsible for

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<sup>195</sup> Kidd, Dustin, and Keith McIntosh. "Social Media and Social Movements."

<sup>196</sup> Kidd, Dustin, and Keith McIntosh. "Social Media and Social Movements."

<sup>197</sup> Kidd, Dustin, and Keith McIntosh. "Social Media and Social Movements."

communicating the protests in real time. The hashtag #RickyRenuncia (Ricky Resign) “became a symbol of resistance.”<sup>198</sup> On July 16, 2019, the online conversation peaked, reflecting the largest number of mentions reaching 249,262 tweets in one day.<sup>199</sup> The hashtag engaged followers from both the island and around the world promoting a digital revolution.<sup>200</sup> Scholars Perez-Rivera, Torres-Lugo, and Santos-Lozada believe that the hashtag “RickyRenuncia” ended up being used approximately 1,000,000 times throughout the two weeks of protests.<sup>201</sup>

According to communications specialist and journalist Juanita Colombani, during the “Summer of 2019,” protesters used the different technology platforms to mobilize, educate, and communicate in real time.<sup>202</sup> Several different platforms played a major role in coordinating protest activities and spreading information. These included:

- Facebook was used for education and mobilization efforts among friends and family. Also, it was an effective platform for documenting the protests in real time.<sup>203</sup>
- WhatsApp was used as a call-to-action platform.
- Twitter was mostly used by influencers, celebrities/personalities, artists and other leaders to inform and address issues.
- Instagram was a powerful platform to present the imagery of the protests.

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<sup>198</sup> Nieves-Pizarro, Yadira, and Juan Mundel. "# RickyRenuncia: The Hashtag That Took Collective Outrage from Social Media to the Streets." *Latin American Diasporas in Public Diplomacy*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021.

<sup>199</sup> Nieves-Pizarro and Mundel. "# RickyRenuncia."

<sup>200</sup> Perez-Rivera, Danilo T., Christopher Torres-Lugo, and Alexis R. Santos-Lozada. "Engaging for Puerto Rico:# RickyRenuncia (and# RickySeQueda) During El Verano del 19 and Digital Identities." Social Science Research Institute (SSRI), Pennsylvania State University, (2019).

<sup>201</sup> Perez-Rivera, Torres-Lugo, and Santos-Lozada. "Engaging for Puerto Rico."

<sup>202</sup> Author interview with Juanita Colombani. (September 20, 2021)

<sup>203</sup> According to Facebook’s website a Facebook Live lets you livestream events, performances and gatherings on Facebook. Viewers can watch from a phone, computer or connected TV. Reactions, shares, comments, and other interactive features enable you to engage with your audience. Live streaming on Instagram is separate from live streaming on Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/626637251511853>

Actors, athletes, musicians, teachers, yogis and, religious leaders, among others effectively engaged the public in all of these platforms amplifying the sentiments of the people. According to Open Democracy, “the use of social networks for news coverage, the expressions of the artistic class of the country and the dissemination of the expressions of the Governor assured that every citizen had access to information that encouraged the protests.”<sup>204</sup>

The “Summer of 2019” also had techno-pessimistic characteristics. Social media played a significant role in the protests, but it was not the deciding factor in ousting Ricardo Rosselló. There was a significant physical presence in the protests all over the island, especially outside of the Governor’s Executive Mansion. The human passion and collective solidarity against Rosselló quickly increased from what started as a 200-person march on July 11, 2019, growing into a 500,000-participant national strike on July 22, 2019.<sup>205</sup>

## Analysis

The CIJ showed exemplary reporting in exposing critical stories such as the deaths after Hurricane Maria in 2017 and the Summer of 2019 social movement.<sup>206</sup> Puerto Rico’s traditional media outlets have typically focused on corporate profit that ties them to special interests.<sup>207</sup> Since the Center is a nonprofit independent organization, they have been able to expose

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<sup>204</sup> Adorno-Cruz, Daniel Edgardo. “Social Media, Mass Mobilization and Political Change in Puerto Rico.” *Open Democracy*, August 12, 2019.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/redes-sociales-movilización-y-cambio-pol%C3%ADtico-en-puerto-rico-en/>

<sup>205</sup> “Más de 500,000 Personas Marcharon en Paro Nacional por Renuncia de Rosselló.” *Primera Hora*, July 22, 2019. <https://www.primerahora.com/noticias/puerto-rico/notas/mas-de-500000-personas-marcharon-en-paro-nacional-por-renuncia-de-rossello/>

<sup>206</sup> “Puerto Rico’s Centro de Periodismo Investigativo wins Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism at Harvard.” Nieman Foundation, December 19, 2019. <https://nieman.harvard.edu/news/2019/12/puerto-ricos-centro-de-periodismo-investigativo-wins-louis-m-lyons-award-for-conscience-and-integrity-in-journalism-at-harvard/>

<sup>207</sup> Author Interview with Colombani.

governmental corruption without worrying about marketing sponsors, private investors and/or stockholders. As a result of the CIJ's investigative journalism on the "Summer of 2019" and the protests it ignited, "14 people . . . were referred by the Justice Department to the Office of the Special Independent Prosecutor Panel (SIP) to investigate whether they committed crimes during those conversations."<sup>208</sup>

The 2020 election cycle was different due to the social awakening that took place that summer. New political parties and candidates emerged on the ballots, challenging the established party system.<sup>209</sup> Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (Citizen's Victory Movement),<sup>210</sup> Proyecto Dignidad (Project Dignity)<sup>211</sup> and an unaffiliated contender Eliezer Molina<sup>212</sup> (a farmer and economist) challenged the two political parties that have ruled the Commonwealth since its inception. These two parties are Partido Nuevo Progresista (The New Progressive Party) and Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party). It should be noted that Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (The Puerto Rican Independence Party) has long been established; yet, they have never won the governor's seat.<sup>213</sup>

In November 2020, the Nuevo Progresistas won the governor's seat with a narrow margin of 33.24 percent of the votes.<sup>214</sup> The Popular Democrático received 31.75% of the votes, losing by approximately 17,000 votes or 1.37% margin.<sup>215</sup> The remainder of the votes were distributed among other candidates "together, Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana and the Puerto Rican

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<sup>208</sup> Suarez, Damaris. "Publicist Edwin Miranda."

<sup>209</sup> Tolentino Rosario, Carlos. "Sorpresas, Caras Nuevas y Batallas por Definir: Esto es lo que Debes Saber Sobre la Intensa Jornada Electoral." *El Nuevo Día*, November 4, 2020.

<sup>210</sup> "Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana: A Shift in Puerto Rican Politics." *Columbia Political Review*, December 30, 2020. <http://www.cpreview.org/blog/2020/12/movimiento-victoria-ciudadana-a-shift-in-puerto-rican-politics>

<sup>211</sup> Proyecto Dignidad website. <https://www.proyectodignidad.org>

<sup>212</sup> Eliezer Molina website. [https://gobernador.com/molina\\_page/](https://gobernador.com/molina_page/)

<sup>213</sup> Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño website. <http://www.independencia.net>

<sup>214</sup> Comisión Estatal de Elecciones website.

<sup>215</sup> Comisión Estatal.



Independence Party took up about a third of the total vote, a little less than the winning candidate Pedro Pierluisi of the statehood party.”<sup>216</sup> Movimiento secured four legislators: two in the House and two in the Senate. Independentistas secured two legislators, a senator and a representative.<sup>217</sup> Lastly, in an unexpected political upset, two of Proyecto Dignidad’s candidates were elected to the Legislature.<sup>218</sup> Such a fragmented electorship is relevant as the traditional political elite significantly narrowed on election day.<sup>219</sup>

The shift in mixed votes, votes across party lines and votes for independent candidates in the 2020 elections prove that there is collective understanding that the people are not power-less. This may prove to be a significant trend in Puerto Rican politics in the years to come.

## Conclusion

The 2020 Nieman Fellows at Harvard University honored the Center for Investigative Journalism with the Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism. They commended the CIJ for its

relentless drive in investigating the most pressing issues on the island, including the government’s mismanagement of public funds; the death count after Hurricane Maria; the ongoing debt crisis; and the secret communications among the island’s top political leadership in an encrypted messaging app, which when revealed by CPI, sparked protests and ultimately led to Gov. Ricardo Rossell ’s resignation from office... CPI’s reporting quickly led to demonstrations that unified many Puerto Ricans who demanded an end to corruption, leading to the governor’s resignation on July 24, 2019.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> “Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana.” *Columbia Political Review*.

<sup>217</sup> Comisión Estatal.

<sup>218</sup> “Proyecto Dignidad Logra Escaño en Cámara y Senado en Su Primera Aparición Electoral.” *Noticel*, November 4, 2020. <https://www.noticel.com/elecciones/ahora/top-stories/20201104/proyecto-dignidad-logra-escaño-en-cámara-y-senado-en-su-primera-aparición-electoral/>

<sup>219</sup> “Proyecto Dignidad Logra Escaño.”

<sup>220</sup> “Puerto Rico’s Centro de Periodismo Investigativo wins Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism at Harvard.” Nieman Foundation, December 19, 2019. <https://nieman.harvard.edu/news/2019/12/puerto-ricos-centro-de-periodismo-investigativo-wins-louis-m-lyons-award-for-conscience-and-integrity-in-journalism-at-harvard/>

Indeed, the Center single-handedly changed the political future of Ricardo Rosselló and ignited a social movement that awoke a nation. The journalists exposed the most significant political scandal to date. The grassroots movement that overthrew the governor will model future social efforts in holding elected officials accountable for their unethical and corrupt actions.

Investigative journalism and social media were responsible for fueling a new political generation. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook served as a magnifying force that fueled the power of the people and launched a movement.

The investigative journalism that occurred during the Summer of 2019 does not compare to the grandiosity of the impact of the Panama Papers, Wikileaks, or even Pandora Papers.<sup>221</sup> Yet, the 889 pages of Rossello's chat launched a social phenomenon that unseated a ruling governor in two weeks.

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<sup>221</sup> For further reading on the topic:

O'Donovan, James, Hannes F. Wagner, and Stefan Zeume. "The value of offshore secrets: Evidence from the Panama Papers." *The Review of Financial Studies* 32, no. 11 (2019): 4117-4155.

Brevini, Benedetta, Arne Hintz, and Patrick McCurdy, eds. *Beyond WikiLeaks: implications for the future of communications, journalism and society*. Springer, 2013.

Oxford Analytica. "Pandora Papers to compound Latin American public anger." *Emerald Expert Briefings* oxan-es (2021).

**Chapter V:**  
**Conclusion**

Scholars, political analysts, and sociologists are still attempting to comprehend the events that shaped the “Summer of 2019” in Puerto Rico. To contribute to these academic efforts, this thesis presents the factors that triggered the social movement, Governor Ricardo Rosselló’s leadership style as he faced a devastating political scandal, and the critical role of investigative journalism and social media in fueling the movement. It can be concluded that the momentum from the “Summer of 2019” will be difficult to replicate and has proven challenging to sustain. A significant shift has occurred in how Puerto Ricans relate to politics, access political power, and make their voices be heard. Voters are now more cognizant that if elected officials misbehave, they have the potential to overthrow them. Furthermore, the “Summer of 2019” has proved that public and media pressure is enough to unseat a governor. Additionally, it has demonstrated that investigative journalism combined with social media can effectively educate, galvanize, and mobilize the public.<sup>222</sup>

After analyzing the factors that triggered the protests against Gov. Rosselló and how Puerto Ricans unintentionally mimicked other countries’ fights against corruption and abuse, this thesis concludes that all societies have a specific tolerance for enduring governmental abuse, lack of transparency, and corruption. Puerto Ricans had accepted decades of governmental abuse without significant uprisings. The crass language and behavior of Governor Rosselló’s inner circle were the last straws for the masses. The leaked chat that started Telegramgate demolished Rosselló’s artificially-constructed façade of being an exemplary father, husband, athlete, and professional.

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<sup>222</sup> Juris, Jeffrey S. "Reflections on# Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation." *Youth, Space and Time* (2016).

This thesis also compares Puerto Rico’s social movements to those in the Arab Spring, because they were all part of a global trend. The common message was clear: people would no longer tolerate failed leaders and governments. Protestors flooded the streets to express their dissatisfaction with their respective governments. Their commonalities stem from the same sources - having a strong digital component, being mobilized by the youth, and being leaderless. Ultimately, protesters used peaceful demonstrations to defend their rights and to establish their sovereignty. Both social movements proved to have strengths and weaknesses.<sup>223</sup>

### **Strengths of Social Movements**

The Arab Spring and the “Summer of 2019” social movements have several shared factors. Both effectively used social media as a tool for education and effective mobilization, which facilitated the protests and helped fuel political transformations. In Puerto Rico and Arab countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, citizen coalition power in the streets provided hope and generated enthusiasm for the possibility of a more democratic future. These protests fed the youth’s desire for change and brought with it fearless energy. The leaderless nature of the movement and its youthfulness proved beneficial. Since the movements did not have structured hierarchies commanding the protests, they earned wider support from people skeptical of the establishment. Furthermore, since the efforts were youth-led, their actions and decisions were tactically flexible. In addition, Millennials and Generation Z-members did not want to go back to authoritarianism and/or politics as usual. They remained committed to promoting a new perspective of what their governments and societies should be. These generations believed that through cyber-activism and street protests, words could turn into action.

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<sup>223</sup>“Revisiting the Arab Uprisings at 10: Beyond Success and Failure” Zoom Panel. Protests and Mass Movements Events. The Wilson Center, February 24, 2021.

Social media also tends to energize both social movements and a country's diaspora.<sup>224</sup> Diaspora members are an instrumental component of social movements since they have resources and connections to amplify the protesters' message. This was the case in Puerto Rico and the Middle East. Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram united those in exile and provided a space to echo the sentiments of their fellow citizens in their home countries. From the distance, shadow protests and events took place in solidarity of the occurrences back home.

### **Weaknesses of Social Movements**

The Arab Spring and the "Summer of 2019" had several weaknesses as movements. They were mobilized through social media, but cyber-activism tends to be short-lived. In both cases, the force and energy secured during the first weeks of the protests fizzled out quickly for several reasons. First, social media was not necessarily inclusive and left important sectors of society unconnected or under-connected. Second, grassroots social movements tended to lose momentum if they did not have an institution in charge of them, such as political parties and unions. Leaderless movements proved hard to sustain. According to scholar Marina Ottaway, "one of the weaknesses of the protest movement in Arab countries is that the youth reject[ed] organization, reject[ed] hierarchies, they d[idn]'t want to have formal leadership. . .it's very admirable. . .ideologically—but it's not a recipe for success."<sup>225</sup> Not having continuity may be disastrous and can further demoralize the citizens of oppressed societies.

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<sup>224</sup> Van Hear, Nicholas, and Robin Cohen. "Diasporas and Conflict: Distance, Contiguity and Spheres of Engagement." *Oxford Development Studies* 45, no. 2 (2017).

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13600818.2016.1160043>

<sup>225</sup>"Revisiting the Arab Uprisings."

Puerto Rico and some of the countries that participated in the Arab Spring had similarly dire economic conditions.<sup>226</sup> Unfortunately, that added with the fact that elites continue to dominate politics and economies and take advantage of corrupt and unstable governments. The powerful control tends to trump civil societies' efforts to maintain democratic values. Unfortunately, elites have historically had a strong grasp on elected officials and ruling officials, making social, political and economic change hard to occur.

### **Investigative Journalism and Social Media**

The Puerto Rico Center for Investigative Journalism played a critical role in exposing Gov. Rossell's dubious administrative tactics. The journalists uncovered the most significant Puerto Rican political scandal of the 21st century by leaking Rossell's private chat. According to Open Democracy, social networks and digital media proved to be a vital tool in the fight for democracy for the first time in the history of Puerto Rico.<sup>227</sup> Digital platforms like Twitter and Facebook amplified the story and fueled the movement. They echoed the public's sentiment with multiple viral hashtags and slogans such as #RickyRenuncia. It can be concluded that social media and online interactions through mediums, such as WhatsApp, helped fueled the movement and connect citizens from all age, social and economic groups. The digital bonds created transpired into street protests and action.

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<sup>226</sup> Gordon, Michael Gordon. "Forecasting Instability: The Case of the Arab Spring and the Limitations of Socioeconomic Data." The Wilson Center, February 8, 2018. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/forecasting-instability-the-case-the-arab-spring-and-the-limitations-socioeconomic-data>

<sup>227</sup> Adorno-Cruz, Daniel Edgardo. "Social Media, Mass Mobilization and Political Change in Puerto Rico." *Open Democracy*, August 12, 2019. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/redes-sociales-movilización-y-cambio-pol%C3%ADtico-en-puerto-rico-en/>

## Rosselló's Leadership

Governor Rosselló's inexperience and poorly-executed crisis management in response to the chat drove his downfall. He was defensive, did not show humility, and pretended that it was "business as usual." He dismissed the crisis; by the time he reacted to the story publicly, he could no longer control the narrative. Professor Carlos Dalmau defines the summer movement not as an awakening of a country but as a time of high emotional intensity when Puerto Ricans reacted to the insults and disrespect in a very personal way.<sup>228</sup> The chat shed light on Rosselló's character and demonstrated that he was a narcissist who only prioritized himself. According to psychologist Lizzedia Santana, "the absence of introspection and remorse denotes that the governor d[id] not take into account the feelings and rights of others."<sup>229</sup> Santana further explains that he has shown traits from an antisocial personality disorder patient, or sociopath, including lack of guilt, lack of empathy for others, and lack of remorse about harming others.<sup>230</sup> Rosselló displayed this deviant behavior throughout his term and particularly after the chat was leaked. He consistently demonstrated lack of humility, self-awareness, remorse or contrition and being out of touch with his reality.

## Looking forward

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<sup>228</sup> Author interview with Carlos Dalmau. (2021, October 13).

<sup>229</sup>Venes, Pablo. "Psicóloga ve Actitud Antisocial en Rosselló ." *Metro*, July 24, 2019.

<https://www.metro.pr/pr/noticias/2019/07/24/psicologa-ve-actitud-antisocial-en-rossello.html>

<sup>230</sup> According to the Mayo Clinic website "antisocial personality disorder, sometimes called sociopathy, is a mental disorder in which a person consistently shows no regard for right and wrong and ignores the rights and feelings of others. People with antisocial personality disorder tend to antagonize, manipulate or treat others harshly or with callous indifference. They show no guilt or remorse for their behavior. Individuals with antisocial personality disorder often violate the law, becoming criminals. They may lie, behave violently or impulsively, and have problems with drug and alcohol use. Because of these characteristics, people with this disorder typically can't fulfill responsibilities related to family, work or school." <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/antisocial-personality-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20353928>



The long-term consequences of the “Summer of 2019” are still unknown. Ever since Rosselló’s resignation and exile to Virginia, he has attempted to rebuild his image and to reintroduce himself to Puerto Ricans. One such attempt occurred as Puerto Rico pushed for statehood. On November 3, 2020, voters participated in an island-wide status referendum and answered if Puerto Rico should be immediately admitted into the Union as a state.<sup>231</sup> In response to the referendum, on December 2020, Act 167 was passed in the PR Legislature. The Act provides for the creation of an mock shadow congressional delegation to advocate for statehood in Washington, DC.<sup>232</sup> The delegation consisted of four delegates to the U.S. House and two delegates to the U.S. Senate who are tasked to promote the statehood political ideology. On May 16, 2020, Puerto Rico held an election for the shadow delegation.<sup>233</sup> To the public’s surprise, Rosselló was elected as a write-in candidate to the shadow delegation.<sup>234</sup>

Rosselló has effectively used his platform as a congressional delegate/lobbyist for statehood to reinvent and jumpstart his credibility and political career. On October 21, 2021, he officially traveled for the first time back to Puerto Rico to testify at a public hearing on the lobbying statehood initiative. Ultimately, the hearing was canceled because his political opposition realized that they were playing into his strategy to rehabilitate his image. Instead, Rosselló participated in a poorly attended rally and publicly addressed his political opposition by

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<sup>231</sup> Ballotpedia website. [https://ballotpedia.org/Puerto\\_Rico\\_shadow\\_delegation\\_to\\_the\\_U.S.\\_House#cite\\_note-creation-1](https://ballotpedia.org/Puerto_Rico_shadow_delegation_to_the_U.S._House#cite_note-creation-1)

<sup>232</sup> Torres Gotay, Benjamin. “Gana la Estadidad en el Plebiscito.” *El Nuevo Día*, November 3, 2020. <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/politica/notas/gana-la-estadidad-en-el-plebiscito/>

<sup>233</sup> Out of a universe of 2.260.804 voters, only 100,000 went to the ballots, representing a low voter turnout. “Ricardo Rosselló Figura como uno de los Delegados Congressionales para Cabildear por la Estadidad.” *Telemundo PR*, May 17, 2021. <https://www.telemundopr.com/noticias/puerto-rico/https-www-telemundopr-com-noticias-puerto-rico-https-www-telemundopr-com-noticias-puerto-rico-ricardo-rossello-entre-los-delegados-congresionales-cee-aun-no-lo-certifica-2214537-2-2214537-2/2214537/>

<sup>234</sup> “Certifican la Victoria de Ricardo Rosselló como Cabildero por la Estadidad.” *Noticel*, June 2, 2020. <https://www.noticel.com/ahora/top-stories/20210602/certifican-la-victoria-de-ricardo-rossello-como-cabildero-por-la-estadidad/>

stating, "I tell them that I do not hold a grudge in my heart for their actions. . . People that are against me are doing the only thing they know how to do: destroy and try to divide."<sup>235</sup> He further stated that "I am back...It's so good to be home...they cannot silence me...they cannot silence us all."<sup>236</sup> Two and a half years later, he still pretends that nothing happened and that the 2019 protests against him are no longer relevant. Future scholars will study his next moves and analyze if Rosselló was able to successfully reintroduce himself as a viable politician. It is yet to be witnessed if people will forget his fraudulent actions and allow him to return. Will Puerto Rican voters forgive and forget Rosselló's wrongdoings?

Despite the dwindling of the momentum achieved during the "Summer of 2019," the social movement brought with it hope for a better future, where transparency and freedom are attainable. The undertaking is bound to have many step-backs. It is the beginning of a long process of transformation. The author's hope is that the events that took place are not discounted as a short-lived phenomenon, but instead serve as a lesson on democracy's triumph and the supremacy of the Constitution over a corrupt official. A united public can make a difference, even if it is a short-lived difference.

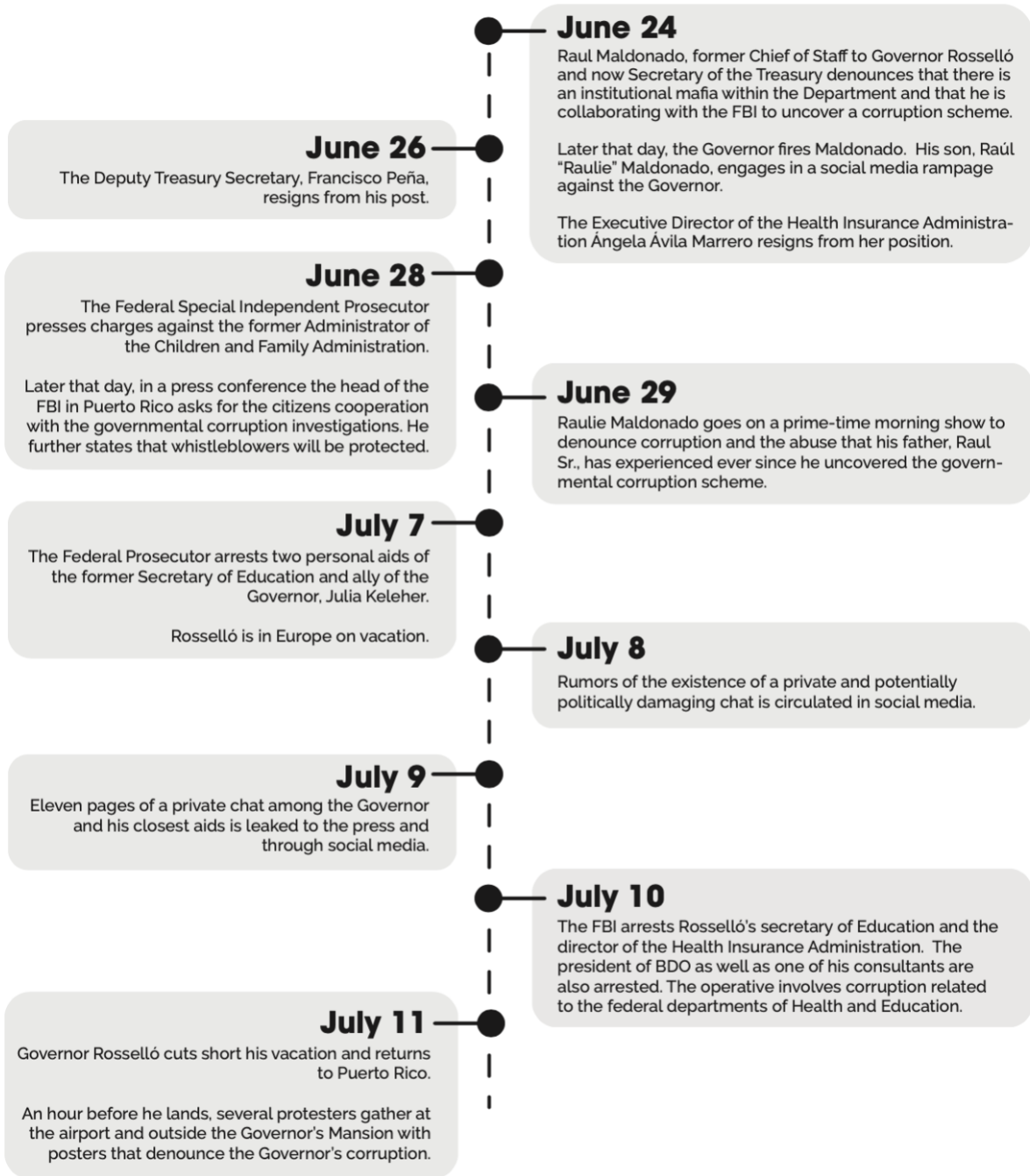
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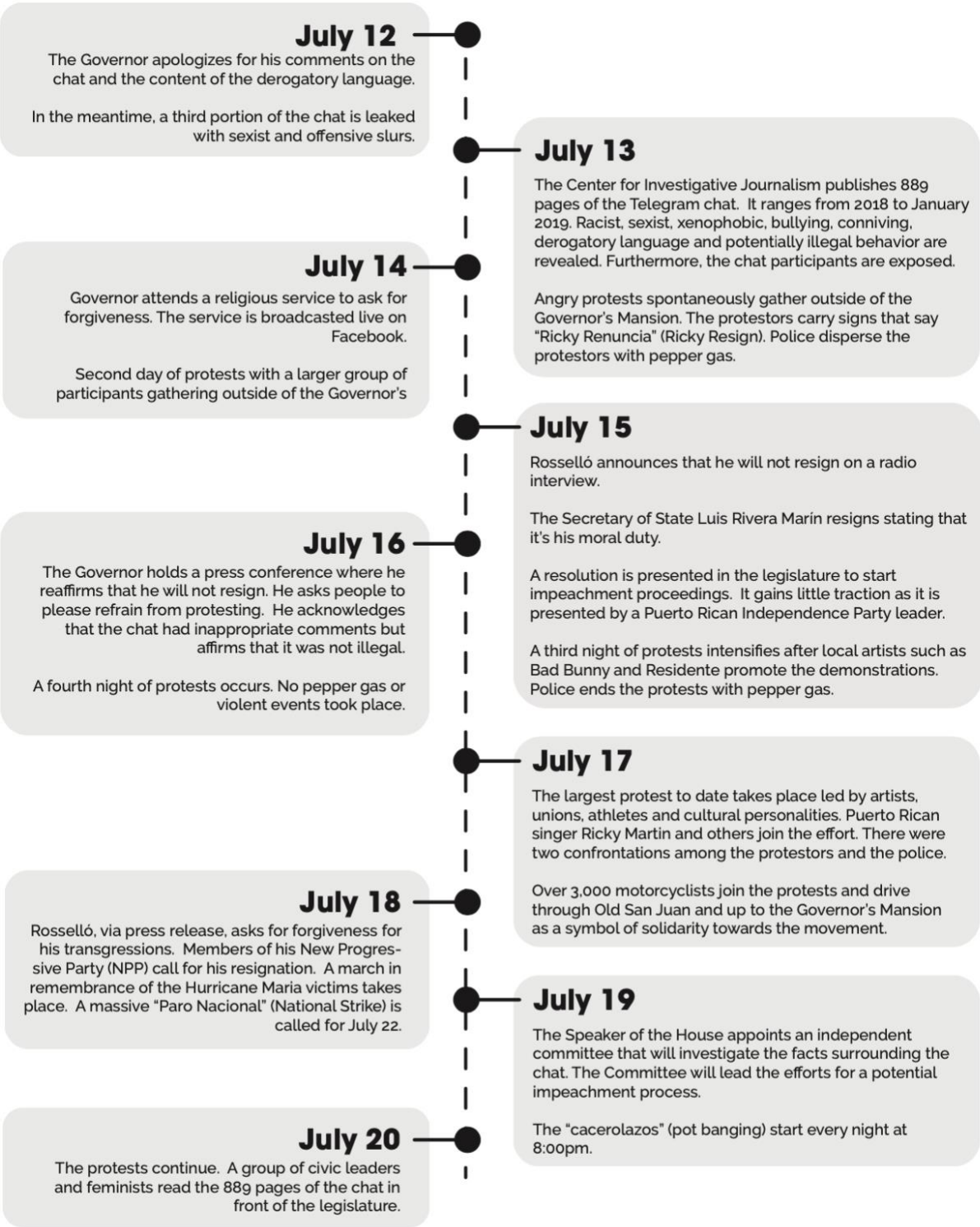
<sup>235</sup> "Rosselló en su Primera Aparición Pública Tras Renunciar: Ya regresé." *Noticel*, October 21, 2021. [https://www.noticel.com/ahora/20211021/en-vivo-habla-ricardo-rossello-tras-cancelacion-de-vista-en-la-camara/?fbclid=IwAR1uMa\\_XAxIqkBRReE4D0aos-fF19VbBHtBFj2z3vaM1uCIA7J6bTxr5lgsM](https://www.noticel.com/ahora/20211021/en-vivo-habla-ricardo-rossello-tras-cancelacion-de-vista-en-la-camara/?fbclid=IwAR1uMa_XAxIqkBRReE4D0aos-fF19VbBHtBFj2z3vaM1uCIA7J6bTxr5lgsM)

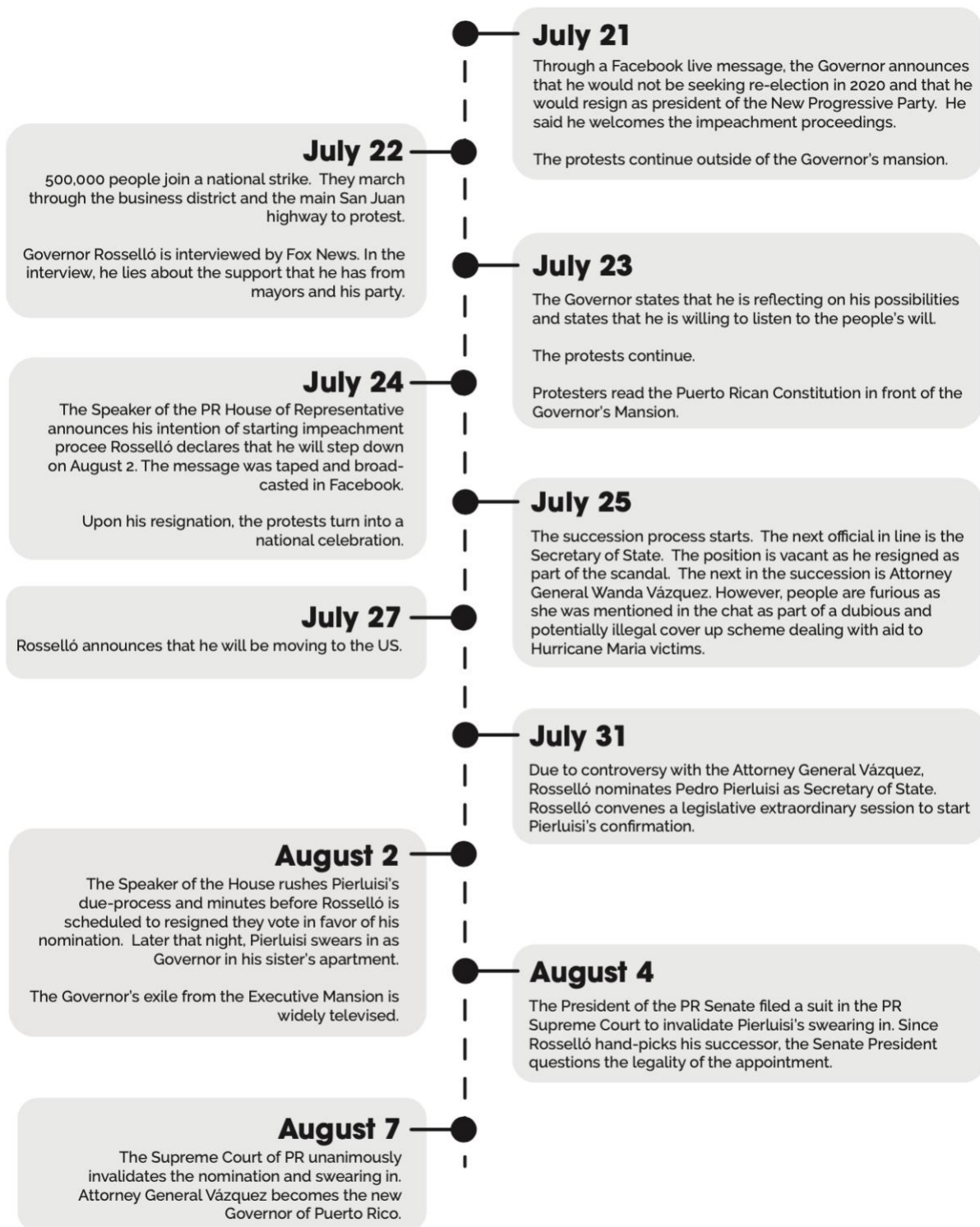
<sup>236</sup> "Rosselló en su Primera Aparición."

## Timeline

June 24, 2019 to August 7, 2019







Source: Author compilation from analysis of Summer of 2019 Puerto Rico events.

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