Carlos A. Romero-Barceló
1932–

Resident Commissioner 1993–2001
New Progressive from Puerto Rico

With only a few breaks, Carlos Antonio Romero-Barceló served in public office for nearly 40 years. A leading figure in the Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party, or PNP), Romero-Barceló served two terms as Resident Commissioner in the U.S. House of Representatives, promoting Puerto Rico’s statehood and working to strengthen the island’s relationship with the federal government.

Romero-Barceló, who became the most distinguished member of a prominent political family, was born September 4, 1932, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. His maternal grandfather, Antonio R. Barceló, was president of the insular senate, and his mother, Josefina Barceló, was the last president of the island’s Partido Liberal (Liberal Party) before it dissolved. As a young man, Romero-Barceló moved to New Hampshire to attend Phillips Exeter Academy, from which he graduated in 1949. He earned a B.A. from Yale University in 1953, with a double major in political science and economics. Returning to Puerto Rico, he earned a law degree from the Universidad de Puerto Rico in 1956, passed the bar, and began working for a private law firm. He married and had two sons, Carlitos and Andres. Romero-Barceló and his second wife, Kate Donelly, also had a son, Juan Carlos.1

Romero-Barceló started his political career as the director of the pro-statehood group Citizens for State 51. From 1965 to 1967, he worked his way up to the PNP leadership. Only 36 years old, but increasingly popular, he ran for mayor of San Juan in 1968 against elder statesman Jorge Font Saldaña of the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party, or PPD). According to a city newspaper, the election quickly became “a battle between the generations at a time in which age probably has a bigger role to play in an island election than at any time in its history.” An enthraling speaker, Romero-Barceló visited San Juan’s housing projects and schools as he talked about his ambitious economic program, “Operation Rescue.” In “the most interesting, stimulating, and, at times, gaudiest campaign the city has had in recent history,” Romero-Barceló, who stumped with armed security personnel, crushed Font Saldaña in the general election.4

As mayor, Romero-Barceló modernized the city’s waste disposal services, and he worked to combat drug addiction and poor housing in San Juan.5 He advocated for a stronger tourism bureau and remade the mayor’s office, transforming it from what one newspaper called “a political outpost.” Romero-Barceló’s combined initiatives made him widely popular, and he was re-elected in 1972 by a comfortable margin.6

Romero-Barceló’s tenure as mayor made him a household name, and in 1976 the PNP picked him as its gubernatorial candidate. His opponent was incumbent Rafael Hernández Colón of the PPD, who earlier had instituted a handful of controversial financial reforms. Romero-Barceló emphasized his plan to create jobs and downplayed the PNP’s position on Puerto Rico’s status. That fall he rode a wave of anti-incumbent frustration to a convincing victory in the general election.7

By the late 1970s, Romero-Barceló had become the consummate politician. “His personality fills the room. He’s 100 percent political,” admitted one member of the press. And he acted the part, too. “The brawny governor, who looks like a silver-haired movie idol,” said the Washington Post, seemed to captivate an audience the way few others in Puerto Rico could.8

The new governor inherited an economy in utter ruin. Even with an annual allowance from the federal government of more than one billion dollars, Puerto Rico was still twice as impoverished as the poorest U.S.
state. There were no immediate solutions to the island’s unemployment problem, but Romero-Barceló began putting together a long-term agenda so that Puerto Rico could “become more self-sufficient.” The plan included education and vocational training for the rapidly growing population. Romero-Barceló emphasized growing more and different foodstuffs for domestic markets, and as part of his push to win greater borrowing privileges from Washington, he worked to curtail generous tax exemptions for many of the island’s businesses.

Romero-Barceló also made statehood a pillar of his administration. The governor had long viewed the island’s commonwealth status as a deliberately nebulous concept that was little more than an outdated “interim compromise.” Statehood, he believed, would finally generate some stability. It would end Puerto Rico’s “political inferiority,” he said, and open doors to all sorts of federal programs. However, no amount of lobbying could withstand the pressure of another recession and a new oppositional majority in the island’s legislature. Though Romero-Barceló won re-election in 1980 by a razor-thin 0.2 percent, he was never able to muster the popular support that was needed for a referendum on statehood.

Four years later he was ousted from the governor’s mansion by his longtime rival, Hernández Colón of the PPD. After the election Romero-Barceló returned to private law practice, but he was not away from politics for long. He was elected to the Puerto Rican senate and served from 1986 to 1989, having lost the gubernatorial primary election in 1987 to San Juan mayor and future Resident Commissioner Baltasar Corrada-del Río. After his senate term, a brief hiatus from public office helped him regain control of the party, and he was re-elected PNP president from 1989 to 1992 (he had served earlier from 1974 to 1985).

In 1992 Romero-Barceló became the New Progressives’ candidate to challenge Antonio J. Colorado, the incumbent Resident Commissioner in the U.S. House of Representatives. After fighting a smear campaign by the insular legislature, Romero-Barceló began positioning himself more as a populist than as a party stalwart: “As resident commissioner,” he said, “I would not be representing the government of Puerto Rico. I would be representing the people of Puerto Rico.” Opponents criticized his rather gruff political style, but the former governor was a seasoned fundraiser. He sought to reform the island’s tax code and promised to bolster Medicare and Medicaid, establish a minimum wage, and secure Pell grants for the island’s schools. On Election Day, Romero-Barceló captured 48.5 percent of the vote, besting Colorado by less than 1 percent. In 1993, when Romero-Barceló took his seat in the U.S. House, he became the first former Puerto Rican governor to serve as Resident Commissioner.

Though the federal-insular relationship was downplayed during the election, securing statehood for Puerto Rico moved to the top of Romero-Barceló’s agenda after he arrived in Washington. He framed the island’s political status, and his own unique position in the House, as part of a larger civil rights narrative, caucusing with the Democratic Party because he had “no doubt that it is easier to work with Democrats than Republicans on civil rights.” In addition to the constitutional limits placed on the Resident Commissioner’s ability to vote, another part of the problem, especially as Romero-Barceló saw it, had to do with taxes. Since the territories and the commonwealth of Puerto Rico paid no federal income taxes, their representatives in the House—the Territorial Delegates and the Resident Commissioner—had been denied the right to vote on pending legislation, preventing them from raising taxes, which their constituents did not pay. Romero-Barceló found the pay-to-play mentality unfair, noting that he had “never heard of such a thing as no representation without taxation.” The final version of the House Rules adopted in 1993 gave Romero-Barceló and the other Delegates a vote in the Committee of the Whole as long as they did not determine the outcome of any particular measure. While Romero-Barceló appreciated the modest amount of leverage he had acquired, he said it was “not really a vote, just an opportunity to participate.”

In his first four-year term, Romero-Barceló was placed on the Committee on Natural Resources and the Committee on Education and Labor, where he focused most of his legislative energy on improving Puerto Rico’s
school system. He sat on multiple conference committees but struggled to increase funding for the island. In early March 1994, as the House debated the specifics of the Improving America’s Schools Act (H.R. 6), Romero-Barceló introduced an amendment to lift the cap on the island’s funding. Federal policy, he said, had created a “second-class, underfunded educational system” in Puerto Rico, but though Romero-Barceló won support from more-progressive House Members, his amendment was voted down, 358 to 70. The next day a similar amendment failed to pass by a similar margin. For years, Romero-Barceló had also wanted to replace the island’s corporate tax breaks with wage-based credits, but he opposed the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996 because it promised to upend Puerto Rico’s revenue program.

Though Romero-Barceló’s legislative record was modest during his first few years in the House, he often pursued policy that was outside Puerto Rico’s immediate interests. An active member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), Romero-Barceló was elected vice chairman at the start the 104th Congress (1995–1997). At a time when Hispanic voters were growing increasingly powerful—every Hispanic member who ran for re-election in 1994 had won—Romero-Barceló and the CHC worked to shape national policy. He readily backed William J. (Bill) Clinton’s presidency, hoping his plans to stimulate the economy and reform health care would improve living conditions in the poorest areas of the United States. He pushed to limit occupational hazards, spoke passionately about protecting Medicare benefits, and argued to raise the minimum wage. In spring 1996, Romero-Barceló attacked the English Language Empowerment Act of 1996 (H.R. 123), which would have required all federal documents to be printed only in English. He called the measure “absurd” and questioned its constitutionality. House Rules prevented him from voting against it, however, and the bill passed but died in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Romero-Barceló won re-election in 1996 with 50 percent of the vote and returned to Washington on the eve of the 100th anniversary of America’s sovereignty over Puerto Rico. The timing intensified the federal government’s effort to permanently define America’s insular policy, and in late February 1997, the 105th Congress began considering the United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act (H.R. 856). Co-sponsored by Romero-Barceló, the bill would “provide the first Congressionally-sponsored process leading to full self-government for Puerto Rico,” a later committee report argued. Months of horse trading in Congress and heated discussions in Puerto Rico preceded a contentious debate on the House Floor that lasted nearly 12 hours. Romero-Barceló helped manage the bill, which passed the House 209 to 208, but died in the Senate. “What is regrettable in the saga of Puerto Rico’s century-old colonial relationship with the United States is not the recent one-vote majority in the House to permit Puerto Rico to begin a process of self-determination,” Romero-Barceló said, “but rather Congress’s long history of indifference to and inaction on the political status of Puerto Rico.”

Romero-Barceló continued to sit on the Education and Resources Committees in the 105th and 106th Congresses (1997–2001) and became the Ranking Minority Member of Resources’ Subcommittee on National Parks and National Lands. In addition to statehood, Romero-Barceló devoted his attention to health policy, resource conservation, and education. His bill to remove the caps on funding for veterans’ Medicaid programs in Puerto Rico faltered from the start, and he found “it unconscionable that the Federal government would uphold a policy where the health and lives of the people of Puerto Rico are considered to be of less value than the lives of other citizens.” Neither of his bills to conserve and protect Puerto Rico’s sensitive ecosystems passed committee review. Romero-Barceló adamantly opposed the English Language Fluency Act, which required non-native speakers of English to master the language in just two years. The bill, he said, amounted to outright discrimination and threatened to overturn nearly 30 years of more progressive policy.

At the end of his House career, Romero-Barceló was still fighting the same battles he had fought at the start. “Puerto Ricans are first-class citizens in times of war,”
he said, observing that the island’s residents had fought and died in U.S. conflicts, but “second-class citizens in times of peace.”38 He called the island’s unequal privileges with regard to federal health programs an “abomination,” questioning how America could “stand as a model for the world when it maintains a policy of discrimination, a policy of economic and political apartheid.”39 When the U.S. Navy accidentally killed a Puerto Rican civilian during a training mission on the island of Vieques, debates about the island’s self-governance began anew. Romero-Barceló supported moving naval operations elsewhere, calling the Vieques question “a defining moment in Puerto Rico’s relationship” with the federal government.40 Despite a tenuous agreement with the Clinton administration that would allow the U.S. Navy to continue using the island, Puerto Rico’s new pro-commonwealth administration began calling for the navy to leave.41

Romero-Barceló was one of the many New Progressives who were swept out of office in 2000; he lost the election to Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá of the PPD by about 4 percent.42 Though Romero-Barceló received endorsements from President Clinton and a handful of sitting members and raised significantly more money than his opponent, accusations of corruption against the PNP’s entire roster cost him the race. “Theirs was a campaign of insults and defamation,” he said of the PPD before vowing to support the New Progressive agenda in the coming years. “We are going to fight to bring statehood to the island because we want equality.”43 After the election, he returned home to Puerto Rico, becoming president of the Puerto Rican delegation to the League of United Latin American Citizens.44 In 2003 he was passed over for the New Progressive nomination to his former post as Resident Commissioner, but he remained active in the party’s leadership.45

FOR FURTHER READING


_____. El hombre, el amigo, el político (Puerto Rico: Oficina de Información de la Campaña Carlos ’76, 1976).

_____. La estabilidad es para los pobres (San Juan, PR: n.p., 1976).


NOTES


19. The tax legislation had been introduced by Rep. Dan Rostenkowski of Illinois and sought to recoup the estimated $2.5 billion the island lost every five years because of the loopholes in section 936.

20. Regarding the office of Resident Commissioner, Romero-Barceló argued, "During the years of Popular Democratic Party power, the resident commissioner has been a tool of the party, a puppet. The governor pulled the strings and the resident commissioner spoke." See Robert Friedman, "CRB Says He Will Back Cutting 936," 6 August 1992, San Juan Star: 3.


24. During the 104th Congress (1995–1997), the Committee on Education and Labor was renamed the Committee on Economic and Educational Opportunities. It was renamed the Committee on Education and the Workforce in 1997, and remained so until 2007 when Democrats regained the majority and the panel was renamed Education and Labor. The Committee on Natural Resources was renamed the Committee on Resources from the 104th Congress through the 111th Congress.


31 Congressional Record, House, 104th Cong., 2nd sess. (1 August 1996): 21175, quotation on p. 21198.


35 Carlos Romero-Barceló, “Puerto Rico: Still Only a Colony,” 3 April 1998, Washington Post: A30. For the debate, which lasted nearly 12 hours, see Congressional Record, House, 105th Cong., 2nd sess. (4 March 1998): 2484–2551. Many islanders complained that the bill’s language would have precluded the appearance of the island’s commonwealth status on the ballot. For a brief explanation, see Ayala and Bernabe, Puerto Rico in the American Century: 293–294.


37 Romero-Barceló’s conservation bills were H.R. 4668, introduced on June 14, 2000, and H.R. 5651, introduced on December 8, 2000. For the English Language Fluency Act, see Congressional Record, House, 105th Cong., 2nd sess. (10 September 1998): 19952.


“I am convinced, both as a Latin American and as a U.S. citizen, that statehood for Puerto Rico would constitute a boon for the nation, as well as for the island.”

Carlos A. Romero-Barceló

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