

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

**Wednesday, April 14, 2021, 1:00 p.m. (EST)**  
**Full Committee Legislative Hearing**

**H.R. 1522, "Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act" and H.R.  
2070, "Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2021"**

**OPENING STATEMENT**

I want to begin by thanking my colleagues for taking the time to join us for this Full Committee hearing to discuss legislation to resolve Puerto Rico's political status.

For more than a century, Puerto Rico has been a U.S. territory subject to congressional authority derived from the Territory Clause of the U.S. Constitution. The Territory Clause grants Congress "Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States."

The U.S.–Puerto Rico political relationship has been the subject of past discussion in this Committee. However, recent events reinforce our responsibility to reexamine the island's territory status.

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First, a series of federal cases that affirmed the **Commonwealth of Puerto Rico's subordinate status**. For example, *Sánchez Valle* in 2016 in which the Supreme Court of the United States emphasized that – as a territory – the Commonwealth continues to derive its authority to govern from the U.S. Constitution, even after Congress approved the Commonwealth's own constitution in 1952.

Second, the **Federal government's enactment of PROMESA**, which authorizes the President of the United States to appoint members to an Oversight Board with extraordinary powers over the decisions of the Commonwealth and the island's elected government officials.

Third, the government of Puerto Rico's decision to conduct a **statehood yes-or-no plebiscite in November 2020**.

Two pieces of legislation have been introduced this Congress to resolve Puerto Rico's political status – H.R. 2070, "Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2021" by Representative Velázquez and H.R. 1522, "Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act" by Representative Soto. Each piece of legislation proposes a different process to end the island's current territory status; Puerto Rico's options for a non-territory status are statehood, independence, and free association.

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At the same time, there is existing legislation to address this issue. In 2014, Congress appropriated \$2.5 million to be provided to the Puerto Rico State Elections Commission for voter education and to conduct a plebiscite by which Puerto Rican voters would determine the future political status of Puerto Rico. The U.S. Department of Justice is responsible for overseeing and administering the plebiscite.

Despite the different views of our witnesses today, I hope we can all agree that Congress has a responsibility to play a constructive role in the resolution of Puerto Rico's political status. We must work effectively together with the Executive Branch and the island's elected government officials through this process, while respecting the will of the residents of Puerto Rico.

I am committed to continue working with the Biden Administration on this important matter and expanding access to Federal programs for residents of Puerto Rico and other U.S. Territories. The White House has already demonstrated willingness to expand programs such as the Child Tax Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit in these jurisdictions, and I will continue advocating for equity in federal assistance under the Supplemental Security Income and Medicaid.

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Now, I want to welcome our witnesses, most of which were suggested by the bill sponsors. Thank you for joining us. It is my hope that we will receive constructive feedback that will inspire the Federal government to act and continue today's discussion, which is a priority for the people of Puerto Rico.

I now yield to the Ranking Member for her opening statement.