



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

OPENING STATEMENT

Thank you, Chairman and thank you to the witnesses for being with us.

With the many technical issues this committee has experienced with virtual hearings this year and given that most of us are now vaccinated, I sincerely hope we can return to work in person soon.

At the end of the Spanish American War in 1898, the United States acquired Puerto Rico along with several other Islands.

It wasn't until 1917 that Congress, through the Jones Act, extended U.S. citizenship to those residing in Puerto Rico.



In 1950, Puerto Rico gained authority over its internal governance and in 1952 its Constitution was ratified by the United States.

After approval of the Puerto Rico Constitution, the Island formally became known as the “Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.”

At the time, this was a another major step for Puerto Rico but it did not resolve the relationship ambiguity with the United States, as some held that a “commonwealth” provided Puerto Rico a status that was beyond territory but less than a state.

Recent Supreme Court decisions and enactment of PROMESA resulted in the legal determination that Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory.

Puerto Rico has tried to gain consensus from its people on how to proceed on the status issue.

On November 3, 2020, Puerto Rico held its sixth nonbinding status referendum that asked voters in the territory one simple question: “Should Puerto Rico be immediately admitted as a U.S. State?”

The results of the plebiscite were 52.52% (655,505) voting in favor of statehood and 47.48% (592,671) voting against it.

Today we have two bills on the agenda.

The first, H.R. 1522, attempts to build upon the November 2020 plebiscite. If enacted, the Puerto Rico voters would need to ratify being admitted to the union. If a majority of Puerto Ricans vote no, nothing would happen, and the bill would cease to be effective.

The other bill before us today, H.R. 2070, seeks to establish a Status Convention, which would include Puerto Rican elected “delegates” who would define status options for Puerto Ricans to vote on. The status option chosen by voters would require ratification by Congress.

While I believe the sponsor is well intentioned to help Puerto Ricans, it is unclear why electing delegates to lifetime terms, to define what status options are available, is necessary or accomplishes anything.

Additionally, the “delegates” would have to put forward status options for the people of Puerto Rico to vote on. However, the bill does not specify how and if those choices will be narrowed

down before selection or if they need to be voted on or unanimous.

In fact, the Status Convention could be stymied by the same internal disagreement that is playing out between the current Puerto Rican political parties.

If the elections for the “delegates” are lopsided for one particular party, the other parties may disengage and eventually boycott the referendum as has happened in the past.

I believe that it is undemocratic that delegates elected under this provision could receive a lifetime appointment, which could result in an endless cycle of debate.

Lastly, this bill raises significant concerns as the bill sponsor’s intent is for the Convention to consider statehood, independence, free association, or quote “any option other than the current territorial agreement” End quote.

However, there are no “other” options outside of statehood, independence, or free association.

If another option beyond these were selected, Congress would be in a position to potentially bring forward a status option that isn't obtainable under the Constitution.

While I have reservations about this bill, I look forward to hearing from the witness's and continuing to engage in meaningful dialogue so Congress can make informed decisions.

Thank you, Chairman.

I yield back.