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Good afternoon (morning). Thank you to the Committee leadership for convening this hearing and for the opportunity to speak in support of H.R. 1522. This hearing is an essential step in the desegregation of the American citizens of Puerto Rico and the full recognition of our rights as American citizens.

As a former three-term mayor of the city of Ponce, current shadow representative, and a lifelong resident of the Island, I can attest to the dire effects the current territorial status has had on our economy, our institutions, and our people. For the past two- decades we have experienced an unprecedented demographic crisis. Almost twenty five percent (25%) of our fellow citizens have had to move from the Island to the States fragmenting our families and distressing our socioeconomic fabric. Unequal treatment and lack of political participation at the federal level have placed us in a subordinate position, a state of structural disadvantage with dire implications. We are not talking about purely theoretical or philosophical concepts but about realities that we face daily.

Effective political participation, and thus fundamental civil rights, requires the right to participate in all these public affairs that impact us. The interrelation between effective political participation and social and economic development does not arise exclusively from our experience. Instead, it constitutes a principle recognized in multiple international instruments, including the Inter-American Democratic Charter of the

Organization of American States, which provides in its preamble that: "... economic growth and social development based on justice and equity and democracy are interdependent and mutually reinforcing." This is why we cannot isolate Puerto Rico's problems from the status discussion; they are intricately connected.

The perils of our political condition have become more visible and critical at a time when even the exercise of the most elementary rights and political prerogatives at the state level are subject to review by a federally appointed financial oversight board. The coexistence of what in essence, constitute two parallel governments has weakened public confidence in their institutions. There is an urgent need for fundamental changes! This demand is not mine, but of the American citizens of the Island that have acknowledged the harmful effects of this deprivation and have rejected the current status in free and democratic elections.

During my frequent visits after the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria, most members of this honorable Congress privately confessed that one of the biggest problems facing the Island was the lack of complete and permanent presence at the federal level. However, some of these same distinguished representatives are the first to disparage our claims publicly and distort our reality.

Let us be clear! On election day, November 3, 2020, the American citizens of Puerto Rico reiterated the public expression on multiple previous electoral events: We demand change, and we demand statehood!

Procedural arguments cannot be used as a subterfuge to impose the individual will over the collective will or extend this discussion indefinitely

in the hope that the public's decision would be different in the future. If these same arguments were deemed valid and applied to the elections of most federal elected officials, their legitimacy would be questionable.

It is because of this legitimate demand by the American citizens on the Island that I urge all members of this Committee to recommend the approval of H.R. 1522.

This bill is the only one that takes into consideration the expression of the people of Puerto Rico. The form, structure, and forcefulness of that vote can hardly be questioned. Voting for statehood on a simple and direct question is a mandate for all public officials. Precisely, the bill presented makes the execution of said mandate feasible through a process similar to that followed by other territories that were admitted as states, including the holding of a ratifying vote and other transitory processes. Furthermore, this project brings with it the legitimacy of the direct vote of the people and the support of the public official who obtained the most votes on the Island.

The obligation to solve this century-old issue is reciprocal. We must close the gap between the American citizens who live in Puerto Rico and those who live on the continent. We are not requesting special considerations or exceptions; we are only asking for fair, equitable, and dignified treatment. We should not be required to abandon our families and our communities to reap the benefits of citizenship. There are no persuasive or logical arguments to support our continued treatment as second-class citizens. It is impossible to talk about effective governance without access to the rights that serve as a precondition to its exercise. It is impossible to address the issue of individual rights without simultaneously addressing the collective

structural problem. Governance and legitimacy require that citizens feel that their claims are being heard, that their aspirations are part of the conversation, that democracy is not a mirage.
