



GOVERNMENT OF PUERTO RICO

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

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Written Statement to the Delegation of the Natural Resources Committee of the U.S. House
of Representatives
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Chairman Grijalva and all members of the Delegation from the House Natural Resources Committee.

It is a pleasure to welcome you to Puerto Rico and I particularly thank you for your work to resolve the century-old Puerto Rico status issue. For 124 years Puerto Rico has been a territory of the United States, *“separate and unequal”*.

During the past decade the colonial nature of the powers of Congress over Puerto Rico has been revealed for all to see. The PROMESA law with an unelected Oversight Board controlling our local government; several opinions of the U.S. Supreme Court upholding unequal treatment for Puerto Ricans under federal law, including denying them access to SSI just because they reside on the Island; the year-to-year funding debacles for important programs such as Medicaid, and limited block grants for nutritional assistance are all examples of the unfair use of the plenary power of Congress over Puerto Rico.

In fact, these matters have been a catalyst in our fight to have the democratic self-government that Puerto Rico deserves either through statehood or through nationhood.

This Committee, and all Members of Congress, have the great responsibility of heeding our people's call to put an end to the territorial status of Puerto Rico. For many years this body has been called to deal with this issue. For over thirteen years, Resident Commissioner Jenniffer González and I, in my previous role in Congress, have been urging Congressional action to resolve Puerto Rico's status and to achieve equality.

All those born in Puerto Rico have been American citizens for over 105 years. Congress approved Puerto Rico's constitution in 1952. Since then, almost 70 years ago, Congress has never even asked the American citizens of Puerto Rico if they continue to accept the Island's territorial form of government or if they want to become a state or a sovereign nation.

This context is important because since the late 80s and early 90s the U.S. House of Representatives and this Committee have had multiple bills that purported to resolve Puerto Rico's status problem, only two of which were approved by the House (HR 856 in 1998 and HR 2499 in 2010) and none of which made it through the Senate.

Nonetheless, all of those bills, as well as a variety of plebiscites held on the Island, have been steps forward towards a permanent solution to our territorial status. Moreover, since 2012, when a majority of Puerto Rico's voters clearly rejected the current status in a local plebiscite, there has been no consent of the governed in Puerto Rico.

The American citizens of Puerto Rico have taken this issue up themselves six times since the late 1960s, and during the past 50 years statehood has grown to be the option preferred by the majority of the people. That is fact.

Now we have entered a new and promising phase. We have a draft consensus bill that offers constitutional, non-territorial options to the people of Puerto Rico. Real options that do away with pie-in-the-sky alternatives that have no place in the United States form of government. This proposed bill not only asks Puerto Ricans what they want their Island's status to be, it also commits Congress to implement the status option chosen by the people. After all, that is one of the most basic principles of American democracy: *a government of the people, by the people and for the people*.

That is why Puerto Ricans are hopeful with this new draft bill. Because let us be real, no Member of Congress would accept a status like ours for their constituents.

Having reiterated why it is important for Congress to deal with this issue, I want to make a few comments about the proposed bill.

1. It is important that Puerto Rico's territorial status is not included in the proposed plebiscite. Nobody can deny that Puerto Rico lacks full democracy under its current status. Remaining a colony cannot be an option.
2. I agree that the preferred option should have a majority of the votes, like the bill proposes.
3. The bills' options are fair, reasonable and constitutional. Let me make some suggestions on them:
 - a. Statehood option:
 - i. The bill could acknowledge that Congress has the power to increase the number of members of the House of Representatives to account for the new members from Puerto Rico.
 - b. Sovereignty with Free Association option:
 - i. The social security issue could be explained further.
 - ii. The bill could address what happens to the accumulated, but not realized, benefits of the members of the U.S. Armed Forces residing if Puerto Rico becomes a sovereign nation.
 - iii. The citizenship allowance in the bill means that Puerto Rico as a sovereign nation would have a considerable number of its population with U.S. citizenship. As the bill currently proposes, the duration of this allowance should not be afforded beyond the first term of the pact of association.
 - c. Independence:
 - i. Clarifying the social security plan and the Armed Forces members' benefits could also be helpful in this option.

I will end by reminding you of the responsibility I alluded to at the beginning of my remarks. The process to approve this bill must be expeditious. Puerto Ricans deserve to be heard. Congress must ensure the United States democratic ideals fully apply in Puerto Rico.

Some have said that this is a futile attempt. That you are not really serious about actually resolving the status issue. That there is not enough time. That the Senate will not take it up. That Puerto Rico is not a priority in Congress.

You must prove the naysayers wrong. I know how hard you all worked to achieve this consensus. I recognize your commitment to Puerto Rico. And I am glad that President Biden supports your efforts.



The 3.2 million American citizens of Puerto Rico demand swift action.
The more than 5 million Puerto Rican-Americans living in the states expect it.
We deserve equality, we have earned it and we will not stop this fight until we achieve it.

