



Puerto Rico Statehood Action Network

Statement for the Record U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources Hearing on “The State of the U.S. Territories” Tuesday, February 1, 2022 Washington, D.C.

Dear Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso and members of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources,

The American flag has flown over Puerto Rico for 124 years. Its residents are proud U.S. citizens that contribute to the economic and cultural fabric of our nation, proudly wear its uniform in the Armed Forces, and in many cases have made the ultimate sacrifice for our great country. These sacrifices continue today with service members from Puerto Rico being among the 8,500 troops that have been put on high alert for possible deployment to Ukraine at any moment.

Despite these contributions and despite sharing the same citizenship as any other American residing in one of the 50 states, the residents of Puerto Rico are subject to unequal, unfair, and un-American treatment by their own federal government. In recent years, Congress has made progress in rectifying some of the many areas where Puerto Rico residents are treated as second-class citizens. For example, until 2021, Puerto Rico residents were not eligible for the Child Tax Credit until having three or more children, a different standard from their fellow citizens on the mainland. Yet in other instances, such as the exclusion from the Supplemental Security Income program, Congress has failed to act, and Puerto Rico residents have been forced to petition federal courts for equal treatment under the law. Meanwhile, even under the territorial condition, more income tax revenues are collected yearly by the Internal Revenue Service in Puerto Rico than in at least two states, not to mention what is collected in Social Security and other federal payroll taxes.

As this committee evaluates the myriad of issues afflicting Puerto Rico, from debt restructuring, healthcare, to disaster relief and everything in between, we strongly urge you to address the root cause of what has led us here today: the current territorial status. The outdated, undemocratic and dysfunctional territorial governing structure denies U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico the right to vote for President, denies Puerto Rico any representation in the Senate, affords 3.2 million Americans in Puerto Rico only one House member with limited voting rights, and allows Congress to discriminate against Puerto Rico under federal laws.

The incoherence in how Congress treats Puerto Rico under federal laws and the lack of certainty on what the island's ultimate political status will lead, fundamentally undermines the capacity of both federal and local policymakers to chart a course for sustainable economic growth. And every day that Congress fails to act on the fundamental issue of Puerto Rico's political status, more people leave the island to come stateside, further weakening the territory and imperiling its present and future. This reality was highlighted by the 2020 Census, which revealed a devastating loss of 11.8% of the island's population in the last decade alone.



This has to stop. Addressing the symptoms of the territory's structural inequality and disenfranchisement on a piecemeal basis is simply not good enough. Using the excuse of needing to wait until Puerto Rico's economy recovers or until its debts are restructured as a precondition for taking legislative action on solving the territory status, while simultaneously subjecting the island to an uneven playing field that inhibits growth, is simply unreasonable. Congress must look at the central issue of political status in the face, and work with Puerto Rico's elected leaders and civil society to craft legislation that enables island voters to make a definitive choice on their relationship with the federal government.

As you are aware, voters in Puerto Rico have repeatedly rejected continuing under the current territory status, and have favored statehood among the non-territory options three times in the last decade. In the most recent vote, held on November 2020, a clear majority of voters expressed their desire for Congress to admit Puerto Rico as a state of the Union. Article IV, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution vests Congress with the authority of admitting new states into the Union or disposing of territories by making them independent. Your committee has direct jurisdiction over these issues and has a moral responsibility to take action to address them in order to uphold the fundamental American principle of government by consent of the governed.

While we understand that political status is not the topic that the committee intends to focus on during this particular hearing, we strongly urge the committee to dedicate a separate hearing to address the topic of political status directly in the coming weeks. When it does so, the committee should consider S.780, the Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act which rightly responds to the petition of the majority of voters in Puerto Rico by offering them the opportunity to ratify their decision to become a state through a simple "Yes" or "No" referendum. This follows the clear precedent set by Alaska and Hawaii during their transition from territories into statehood. We also strongly urge the committee to engage with the ongoing bi-partisan legislative negotiation process happening on the House side regarding a possible compromise bill.

Neither Puerto Rico nor the U.S. can afford to delay this any further. Justice delayed is justice denied. Your fellow citizens in Puerto Rico are eager to resolve the more than century old question of their ultimate political status. To give them the chance to do this, your committee must exercise its moral duty and jurisdiction to take legislative action. We encourage you to do so and will stand ready to assist in collaborating on this matter. Working together, we can make America a stronger and more perfect Union.

About the Puerto Rico Statehood Action Network: We are an ad-hoc group of [25 organizations](#) based both in Puerto Rico and in the states that share the common goal of achieving full equality and democracy for the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico through statehood. Our organizations represent people from across the country and across the political spectrum. We work to unite and empower supporters of the Puerto Rico statehood cause to take collective action, engage in citizen activism and impact Congress. Find out more at: www.puertoricostatehoodaction.net