Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 9, 2009

Dear Colleague:

As the current and former chairmen of the House Committee on Natural Resources, which has jurisdiction over issues relating to the U.S. territories, we write to strongly encourage you to support H.R. 2499, the Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2009. H.R. 2499 was introduced by Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi and referred to the Committee on May 19, 2009. As of this writing, H.R. 2499 has over 120 co-sponsors of every political stripe and from every region in the country. As two Members who have long experience with the debate on Puerto Rico's political status, we believe H.R. 2499 represents a simple and fair first step in the effort to resolve this longstanding issue.

Puerto Rico has been under the American flag since 1898, when the U.S. acquired sovereignty over the Island pursuant to the treaty that ended the Spanish-American War. A federal statute conferred U.S. citizenship on residents of Puerto Rico in 1917, and the Island adopted a local constitution in 1952. Notwithstanding these events, Puerto Rico remains an unincorporated territory of the United States, subject to the control of Congress under Article IV, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution. Although federal law applies in Puerto Rico, its four million U.S. citizens cannot participate in national elections. Residents of Puerto Rico cannot vote for president and, despite having a population size equal to or greater than almost half the states, have no representation in the Senate and send only a single non-voting member to this chamber.

Because the Constitution vests Congress with the power to determine how to regulate and "dispose of" the U.S. territories, it is incumbent upon this body to take the lead in facilitating resolution of this issue. In the 111 years that Puerto Rico has been under the U.S. flag, not once have the Island's residents been able to express their preference, in the context of a fair, democratic and meaningful process sponsored by Congress, as to whether Puerto Rico should remain a U.S. territory or whether it should seek a non-territorial status.

H.R. 2499 would bring this era of inaction to an end. Through this legislation, Congress would sponsor a series of referenda in Puerto Rico to formally consult voters regarding the Island's future political status. In a first plebiscite, voters would be asked whether they wish to maintain the current political status or to pursue a different political status. If a majority express the preference to pursue a different status, the government of Puerto Rico would be authorized to conduct a second plebiscite between the status options recognized under federal and international

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law: (1) statehood, (2) independence, and (3) sovereignty in association with the United States. The results of these referenda would be certified to the President and to Congress.

The premise of H.R. 2499 is simple: the four million U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico, currently voiceless, should be given a voice. We would be grateful if you would join us as co-sponsors of this worthy and long overdue legislation.

Sincerely,

Nick J. Rahall
Chairman, House Committee on Natural Resources

Don Young
Member, House Committee on Natural Resources