



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi  
Rally in Support of Equality for Puerto Rico  
The Capitol  
*November 19, 2013*

As the representative of the 3.6 million American citizens from Puerto Rico in Congress, let me express my gratitude to the men and women from Igualdad, to my fellow Members of Congress who have taken time from their busy schedules to join us, and to everyone who is here with us this morning.

But I want to particularly acknowledge my good friend, former governor Luis Fortuño, who always carries himself with such dignity and grace, and who never shies away from the fight for democracy and equality for Puerto Rico.

I want to say just a few words about why we're here and what we're fighting for. For 520 years, first under Spain and now under the United States, Puerto Rico has had a political status that is colonial in nature. Residents of Puerto Rico are citizens of the greatest democracy in history, but they do not have voting representation in the government that makes their national laws and they are often treated unequally under those laws.

Moreover, Puerto Rico's status is the principal reason why the territory has confronted severe economic challenges for decades and why thousands of our best and brightest residents relocate to the states every month in search of better opportunities.

One year ago, Puerto Rico exercised its right to self-determination by holding a free and fair vote. The results demonstrate that 54 percent of voters do not wish to maintain the current status. To the extent that the people of Puerto Rico ever gave their consent to this status, that consent has now been withdrawn.

The results further show that, among the three alternatives to the current status, 61 percent of voters support statehood.

Finally, the results demonstrate that, for the first time in Puerto Rico's history, there are more people who want Puerto Rico to become a state than who want to continue the current status.

In addition to serving as Puerto Rico's delegate in Congress, I am also the president of the local pro-statehood party. I am proud to represent men and women who carry the Puerto Rican flag in one hand and the American flag in the other, and who know that their love for Puerto Rico and their love for the United States complement, rather than contradict, one another. We seek the same rights and responsibilities as our fellow citizens in the 50 states. Nothing more and nothing less.

We meet today in a city divided by partisanship. But the cause of statehood for Puerto Rico transcends party politics. On the local level, the statehood party I lead, unique among the island's political factions, draws support from all across the spectrum, from the most liberal to the most conservative, and every point in between.

Likewise, on the national level, statehood advocates come in every political stripe, as the attendance at today's rally underscores. Statehood has never been—and it will never become—a Democratic movement or a Republican movement. It is about right versus wrong, justice versus injustice, and equality versus inequality.

For example, Republican President George H.W. Bush was—and is—a strong supporter of statehood, calling it “the right and logical destination” for Puerto Rico. And yesterday, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a proud Democrat, said: “For me, the answer is very simple. I am in favor of statehood, and I always have been.”

Last year's referendum fundamentally changed the nature of the status debate. But Puerto Rico's status cannot change unless Congress approves—and the President signs—legislation.

In May, I introduced legislation, H.R. 2000, that would provide for a vote in Puerto Rico on the territory's admission as a state, outlining the steps the federal government would take if a majority of voters favor admission. The bill has 125 cosponsors from all over the country, including 12 Republicans, making it one of the most bipartisan bills introduced this Congress.

The U.S. government rightfully prides itself as a champion of democracy and self-determination around the world. Therefore, Democrats and Republicans in Washington should—indeed, they must—remain true to those principles with respect to their own citizens, by enacting legislation that will enable Puerto Rico to have a democratic and dignified status. Five centuries is too long. The time to act is now.