



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi  
Five-Minute Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery  
An Update on Puerto Rico's Political Status  
*July 23, 2014*

Mr. Speaker:

I rise to provide an update on Puerto Rico's political status, which is an issue of national significance.

Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the United States. Territory status is undemocratic. Although Puerto Rico is home to more American citizens than 21 states, island residents cannot vote for president, are not represented in the Senate, and have one non-voting delegate in the House. Territory status is also unequal. As a recent GAO report confirms, Puerto Rico is deprived of billions of dollars each year because it is treated worse than the states under a range of federal programs.

Every objective observer understands that territory status is the underlying cause of the economic, fiscal and demographic crisis that has enveloped Puerto Rico. History teaches a simple lesson: no people have ever reached their potential while deprived of political rights and denied equality under law. Puerto Rico is no exception to this rule.

If the people of Puerto Rico wish to discard territory status, there are two—and only two—paths forward.

The territory can become a state, on equal footing with the other states.

Or the territory can become a sovereign nation, either fully independent from the U.S. (like the Philippines) or with a compact of free association with the U.S. that either nation can terminate (like the Republic of Palau). If Puerto Rico becomes a sovereign nation, future generations of island residents would not be American citizens and would receive reduced federal support.

In a 2012 referendum sponsored by the Puerto Rico government, a majority of my constituents expressed their opposition to territory status, which means that Puerto Rico is being governed without its consent. Statehood received more votes than territory status, which is unprecedented. And statehood obtained far more votes than either of the two nationhood options, which demonstrates that Puerto Rico has no desire to break or weaken the bonds forged with the United States over nearly 12 decades.

At my urging, and in response to this landmark vote, the Obama Administration proposed an appropriation of \$2.5 million dollars to fund the first federally-sponsored referendum in Puerto Rico's history, with the stated goal being to “resolve” the territory's status. Earlier this year, Congress approved this appropriation with bipartisan support.

Although the law does not specify how the ballot should be structured, it does require the Department of Justice to ensure that any option on the ballot is compatible with the Constitution, laws and public policy of the United States.

Therefore, the ballot cannot contain the status proposal, known as “enhanced commonwealth,” that one political party in Puerto Rico has consistently put forward over the years, and that federal officials—including the Obama Administration and Senators Wyden and Murkowski—have just as consistently rejected as impossible.

Moreover, the ballot should not contain the current territory status as an option because it was rejected in the 2012 referendum, it is the primary source of Puerto Rico’s problems, and it does not “resolve” the island’s status—since, as long as Puerto Rico remains a territory, it has the potential to become either a state or a sovereign nation.

Last week, the Governor of Puerto Rico announced his intention to use the \$2.5 million dollars to conduct a federally-sponsored vote by the end of 2016.

I have proposed that the federal funding be used to hold a yes-or-no vote on whether Puerto Rico should be admitted as a state, just as Alaska and Hawaii did. This approach would yield a definitive result that nobody could reasonably question. And it has broad congressional backing, garnering support from 135 Members of the House and the Senate.

If the Governor resists this approach, he will face a problem. The party he leads has never been able to agree upon a status proposal that does not conflict with U.S. law and policy.

But let me be clear: if a vote does occur, statehood advocates will show up in force. Any time, any place—an army of men and women will be there to seek equality and justice. And we will prevail.