



The Hon. Pedro R. Pierluisi
Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico and President of the New Progressive Party
Oral Testimony
Hearing on the Political Status of Puerto Rico
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
August 1, 2013

Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Murkowski, and Members of the Committee:

Last November, Puerto Rico held a free and fair vote on its political status.

The ballot had two questions.

Voters were first asked if they want Puerto Rico to remain a territory. 54 percent said “No” and 46 percent said “Yes.” A party in Puerto Rico, the PDP, urged a “Yes” vote. Nevertheless, voters rejected territory status by a wide margin.

The current status has now lost its democratic legitimacy. To the extent that the people of Puerto Rico ever consented to this status, such consent has been withdrawn.

This result should not be surprising.

I represent more U.S. citizens than 42 senators. My constituents have fought side-by-side with your constituents, from Korea to Afghanistan. They can move to the states for the price of a plane ticket. But if they stay in Puerto Rico, they cannot vote for president, have no representation in the Senate, and elect one member to the House. I can only watch as my colleagues cast floor votes on bills affecting every aspect of life on the island. I depend on the goodwill of senators elected to protect the interests of their constituents, not mine. I request assistance from a president who is not required to earn our vote. To expect a presidential administration to feel the same obligation to support Puerto Rico as it does the states

is to substitute hope for experience. The failure of the current administration to send a witness to testify today is a sad reminder of this point.

Moreover, territory status gives the federal government license to discriminate against Puerto Rico, and the island is treated unfairly under numerous federal laws, including most safety-net programs.

There is a consensus that territory status is the root cause of the economic problems that have persisted in Puerto Rico for at least four decades.

The best evidence that the status quo has failed is this: in the brief period from 2004 to 2012, Puerto Rico's population decreased by 4.2 percent, with hundreds of thousands of residents leaving for the states in search of improved quality of life.

I turn now to the second question in the referendum, which asked voters to express their preference among the three valid alternatives to the current status. Of those who chose an option, 61 percent voted for statehood. And, for the first time ever, the number of votes for statehood exceeded the number of votes for the current status.

Before the vote, the PDP claimed the second question was unfair because it did not include its status proposal, known as "Enhanced Commonwealth." Party leaders urged voters to leave the question blank, and some did. They now cite this abstention as the basis for their argument that statehood somehow *lost* the vote.

That is nonsense. Self-determination is a choice among options that can be implemented, not an exercise in wishful thinking. The PDP's proposal has been repeatedly rejected by federal officials, including this Committee, on legal and policy grounds. Therefore, it could not have appeared on the ballot.

Ultimately, those blank ballots do nothing to detract from the main point, which is that a majority of voters reject territory status, a supermajority favor statehood among the alternatives, and more voters want statehood than any other status option.

No senator would accept territory status for *their* constituents. So you must respect that *my* constituents do not accept it either.

With my support, the administration requested an appropriation to conduct the first federally authorized status vote in the territory's history, with the declared goal of "resolving" the issue. That funding was approved by the House Appropriations Committee, confirming that the effort to secure justice for Puerto Rico is not a partisan issue.

For Puerto Rico to "resolve" its ultimate status, it must become a state or a sovereign nation—either independent from, or in free association with, the U.S. Territory status should not be an option because it has *failed*, and "Enhanced Commonwealth" cannot be an option because it is *fiction*.

I have filed legislation that outlines the rights and responsibilities of statehood, provides for an up-or-down vote in Puerto Rico on the territory's admission as a state, and prescribes the steps the federal government would take if statehood obtains a majority. Those supporting statehood and those opposing it would have equal opportunity to express their views. My bill already has 105 cosponsors, and it is my hope that a senator will introduce a companion bill.

The U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico deserve—and now they have *demanded*—a democratic and dignified status. Congress must take action.

Thank you.