

Why Puerto Rico deserves statehood

The island's Democratic representative argues a case to add a 51st star

By Pedro Pierluisi

Tuesday marks the 520th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in Puerto Rico. Since that time, the island's political status has been colonial in nature. After four centuries of Spanish rule, Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States in 1898. Residents were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917, and the federal government has allowed Puerto Rico to exercise authority over its local affairs in a manner similar to the 50 states. Nevertheless, Puerto Rico's status has not changed. In the 21st century, the island remains exactly what it was at the close of the 19th century: a territory of the United States.

Puerto Rico's status cannot be reconciled with the principles our nation strives to uphold at home and promotes abroad. Puerto Rico has more U.S. citizens — 3.6 million — than 21 states. Its sons and daughters have served in the armed forces in large numbers, from World War I to Afghanistan. Still, island residents cannot vote for president and are not represented in the Senate. They send one nonvoting delegate to the House, the resident commissioner, a position I have held since 2009. Therefore, Puerto Rico does not have democracy at the national level.

Moreover, Congress has a license to single out the territories for differential treatment. Puerto Rico loses out on billions of dollars annually because it is treated unequally under a range of federal programs, including tax credits available to millions of households in the states that do not pay federal income taxes. Contrary to common belief, Puerto Rico employers and workers pay federal payroll taxes, and the Internal Revenue Service collected more than \$3.5 billion in individual and corporate taxes in the territory in 2012, nearly as much as the agency collected in several states. To compensate for the shortfall in federal dollars, the Puerto Rico government must borrow heavily to provide adequate public services. This disparate treatment is the principal reason that Puerto Rico has faced severe economic problems for at least four decades, carries more than \$70 billion in debt,

and has bonds trading at near-junk levels. Inequality — political and economic — is also the main factor driving Puerto Rico's population exodus to the states. About 4,500 of my constituents depart each month; as U.S. citizens, they can do so for the price of a plane ticket.

Given the deficiencies of territory status, it should not be surprising that in a local referendum held a year ago, 54 percent of voters said they do not want Puerto Rico to be a territory any longer. At a recent Senate hearing, the committee's top Democrat and Republican agreed that it is "indisputable" and "clear" that the people of Puerto Rico oppose the current status.

Puerto Rico has two divergent paths forward. After a reasonable transition period, it could become a state. Or it can become a sovereign nation. Unlike territory status, both options are democratic and digni-

A territory cannot become a state or a nation unless Congress approves legislation and the president signs it. In April, the Obama administration sought funding for the first federally authorized referendum in Puerto Rico's history, with the goal of enabling the territory to "resolve" its political future. This funding has been approved by a Republican-controlled House committee.

In May, I introduced legislation 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 co-sponsors, including 12 Republicans, making it one of the most bipartisan bills introduced this Congress. I am working to get a senator to introduce similar legislation.

Ideally, the debate about Puerto Rico's status would be resolved based solely on principles, not politics. We live in the real world, though, so it is important to address the perception that Puerto Rico would inevitably be a blue state. To the contrary, the evidence suggests that either national party could achieve electoral success on the island. My constituents appreciate an active government that empowers individuals and assists the vulnerable, but they tend to be socially conservative. Voters in Puerto Rico have elected two Republican governors and numerous Republican senators, representatives and mayors at the local level. Of the many self-identified Republicans in Puerto Rico, nearly all support statehood. Likewise, at the national level, Republican leaders — including presidents, members of Congress and distinguished advocates — have been among the most eloquent pro-statehood voices.

In a free and fair vote, the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico said they do not consent to territory status. The federal government rightfully prides

itself as a champion of democracy and peaceful self-determination around the world. Leaders in Washington, regardless of party, should support legislation to enable Puerto Rico to become an equal member of the American family.

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fied. However, as last year's referendum confirmed, statehood has far more support in Puerto Rico than nationhood, winning 61 percent of the vote when the electorate was asked to express a preference among the alternatives to territory status. The reality is that an overwhelming majority of my constituents cherish their American citizenship. Most do not want to weaken the bonds we have forged with the United States over generations, in peace and war.