



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Five-Minute Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery
“The Strength of the Puerto Rico Statehood Movement”
January 13, 2015

Mr. Speaker:

Last week, I spoke about Puerto Rico’s mission to discard its status as a U.S. *territory* and to become a U.S. *state*. Today, I rise to inform my colleagues about the most recent phase of this mission.

A brief word of background. Puerto Rico has been a territory since 1898. Its status is incompatible with the principles this nation strives to uphold at home and promotes abroad. There are 3.6 million American citizens in Puerto Rico. My constituents cherish their U.S. citizenship, and have made countless contributions to this country—in law, science, business, government, the arts, the armed services, and every other field of human endeavor. Yet, they cannot vote for president, have no U.S. senators, and send one delegate to the U.S. House who has a voice but no vote in this chamber.

The people of Puerto Rico, beyond lacking democratic rights, are deprived of equality under law. Congress has a license to discriminate against the territories, and Puerto Rico is treated worse than the states under a range of federal programs. To compensate for the shortfall in federal funding,

the Puerto Rico government has borrowed heavily in order to provide adequate public services. This disparate treatment is the principal reason why Puerto Rico has endured severe economic problems for decades.

Inequality—both political and economic—is driving thousands of my constituents to depart for the states every month. It is human nature to go where you believe you can secure a better future for yourself and your family.

However, residents of Puerto Rico have finally said “enough is enough.” They demand a status that is democratic and dignified, a proud status for a proud people. In an historic referendum organized by the local government in 2012, voters in Puerto Rico rejected territory status and expressed a clear preference for statehood.

In response, Congress provided an appropriation of \$2.5 million dollars to fund the first federally-sponsored vote in Puerto Rico’s history, with the declared goal of “resolving” the territory’s status. This is the most significant step the federal government has ever taken to settle the status debate.

I have proposed that the funding be used to hold a federally-sponsored, yes-or-no vote on whether Puerto Rico should be admitted as a state. Some have complained that Puerto Rico already voted for statehood and should not have to vote again. This argument is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of history and how Washington works. After expressing a strong desire for statehood in local referenda, the territories of Alaska and Hawaii each held federally-sponsored,

yes-or-no votes on admission that led to statehood. If Puerto Rico wants to become a state, it must do the same.

My proposal has broad *congressional* support, since a bill I filed last Congress that endorsed this approach obtained 131 cosponsors and led to the filing of an identical Senate bill.

My proposal also has significant *local* support. Yesterday, in a remarkable display of unity and resolve, all 22 members of the statehood delegation in the Puerto Rico House and all 8 members of the statehood delegation in the Puerto Rico Senate introduced identical bills that propose to use the appropriation from Congress to conduct a federally-sponsored vote on admission.

Now, all that remains is for the Puerto Rico Governor, Speaker of the House, and Senate President—each a defender of the failed *status quo*—to show some courage and schedule this vote. Real leaders do not fear the democratic process or its results.

Meanwhile, statehood forces continue our forward march, expanding in size and strength. Indeed, this morning, statehood supporters are rallying outside the White House and will then hold meetings here in Congress. In the coming weeks and months, our advocacy efforts will only intensify. As individuals, our ability to affect change is inherently limited. But, as a united movement, we are as strong as steel. We are fighting for equality, and we will not stop until we achieve it.

Thank you.