



July 24, 2023

The Honorable Bruce Westerman

Chairman

U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources

1324 Longworth House Office Building

Washington, DC 20515



Dear Chairman Westerman:



In anticipation of the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the U.S. landing in Puerto Rico during the Spanish American War, which took place on July 25, 1898, we the undersigned organizations, write to urge you to promptly hold legislative hearings in the House Committee on Natural Resources (Committee) on the need to finally resolve Puerto Rico’s political status. Addressing this issue promptly is not only critical to the 3.2 million U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico, but to the present and future of America’s role in the world.



On December 15, 2022, during the debate on the House floor for H.R. 8393, the *Puerto Rico Status Act* (PRSA), which was approved with a bipartisan vote of 233-191,<sup>1</sup> you expressed the need to have a full and robust legislative process on the issue of self-determination for Puerto Rico, stating:



*“The Committee on Natural Resources has not held a hearing on this bill, nor have the other committees with expertise on complex issues of U.S. citizenship, taxation and entitlement programs, foreign policy, and many other matters... It is unfortunate that we are here considering this legislation on the House floor after the majority has held backroom negotiations instead of open, transparent hearings and markups. A regular and open legislative process would have allowed Members of this body and the people of Puerto Rico— more than 3 million United States citizens—to fully assess what this bill proposes and what it means for this and future generations...We should be treating these U.S. citizens with respect and letting a full and robust legislative process in the light of day take place to address the status question and the many implications for the people of Puerto Rico and for all Americans...The gentleman talked about the inherent right to self-determination. He said it is something that shouldn’t be dictated by the Congress of the U.S. to the people of Puerto Rico. He said the decision belongs to the people of Puerto Rico. Their destiny belongs to them. I think we would all agree with that in principle, but that is not what this bill says... Madam Speaker, in closing, it is obvious there is bipartisan support for Puerto Rican self-*



<sup>1</sup> Roll Call 529, Bill No. H.R. 8393, On Passage Puerto Rico Status Act, Clerk of the U.S. H. of Representatives, <https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2022529> (last viewed on June 10, 2023).



determination. That is not the issue. The issue is the process, and this is a bad process.”<sup>2</sup>

We agree with your position that there is bipartisan support for Puerto Rico’s self-determination in Congress and that there should be “open, transparent hearings and markups,” on this critical issue. In fact, even though most of the undersigned organizations actively supported and advocated for passage of H.R. 8393 in June 2022, when the discussion draft of that bill was presented for public feedback, we gave our support for that legislation but urged the Committee to consider several substantive improvements to the bill through the legislative process. We wrote:

*“While we support the PRSA discussion draft as written, and acknowledge that making any changes to it that are not agreed to by all of the parties could cause the bipartisan agreement to fall apart, we believe the Committee must consider making several critical improvements to the legislation before its introduction or during the legislative process... However, if the choice is between the implementation of these proposed changes or Congress not taking action to approve the PRSA, we would much prefer the approval of the current discussion draft over the perpetuation of the unequal, unjust and fundamentally colonial current territory status.”*<sup>3</sup>



Now that you, as Chairman, have the power to hold “open, transparent hearings and markups,” on this critical issue we urge you to use that power by calling for a hearing on the need for Congress to finally resolve Puerto Rico’s political status. By doing so you would continue the bipartisan efforts in Congress and on the island to bring an end the territorial status of Puerto Rico and to empower America to live up to its highest ideals and values. If the attempt by the previous Congress was deficient, then now you have the chance to develop a better process. Doing so will not only help Puerto Rico, but strengthen America’s democracy, security and global standing.



As you are aware, the majority of U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico have voted now on three occasions in the last decade against continuing under the current territory status and in support of statehood as their preferred non-territory option. Most recently, in the November 2020 plebiscite vote, 52.52 percent<sup>4</sup> of voters chose statehood for Puerto Rico in an election where the participation rate was 73 percent.<sup>5</sup> Every day of Congressional

<sup>2</sup> 168 Cong. Rec. H9, 874, 876, 879 (daily ed. Dec. 15, 2022) (statement of Rep. Bruce Westerman).

<sup>3</sup> Letter from P.R. Statehood Action Network, to Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva, Chair, H. Comm. on Natural Res. & Rep. Bruce Westerman, Ranking Member, H. Comm. on Natural Res. (June 24, 2022) (on file with author), available at <http://www.pr51st.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Letter-to-Congress-Calling-for-Action-on-Puerto-Rico-Status-Act-June-24-2022.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> P.R. State Elections Comm’n, *Official Plebiscite Results 2020* (Mar. 12, 2021),

[https://elecciones2020.ceepur.org/Escrutinio\\_General\\_93/index.html#es/default/PLEBISCITO\\_Resumen.xml](https://elecciones2020.ceepur.org/Escrutinio_General_93/index.html#es/default/PLEBISCITO_Resumen.xml).

<sup>5</sup> After the *Official Plebiscite Results 2020* were issued by the P.R. State Elections Comm’n indicating the voter participation rate of 54%, the Commission conducted a more precise analysis of turnout statistics focused on “effective voters” which showed that the real participation rate is 73%. Given the massive population loss seen in Puerto Rico since 2000, the measure of “effective voters,” which counts those voters who participated in the current and most recent





silence on this issue is a day that betrays America's core founding value of government by consent of the governed. What is worse, territory status has severely weakened Puerto Rico by pushing out hundreds of thousands of island residents who feel forced to move stateside in search of equal rights and opportunities.<sup>6</sup>



Additionally, with the continued news about China's growing global ambitions, including the recent revelation of their ongoing negotiations with Cuba to grow their military intelligence and training operation in that country to spy on and challenge America's role in the world,<sup>7</sup> Congress must also address Puerto Rico's political status as a critical national security issue. The Committee has already taken actions to address the national security threats from China in the Pacific. On June 14, 2023, the Committee's Indo-Pacific Task Force held a hearing titled *"How Compacts of Free Association Supports U.S. Interests and Counter the PRC's Influence;"* and on July 18, 2023, it held another hearing titled *"The Biden's Administration's Proposed Compact of Free Association Amendments Act of 2023."* We urge you to also give attention to how these geopolitical challenges are playing out in the Caribbean, where Secretary of State Anthony Blinken expressed they would cause the U.S. "deep concerns."<sup>8</sup>



As important as the compacts of free associations are in terms of U.S. national security, addressing the political status of Puerto Rico and ending the inequality of its U.S. citizens must be of equal if not greater importance. As multiple former military officials have made clear, the U.S. Congress simply cannot afford to continue keeping Puerto Rico under the weak and deteriorating territory status and must present island voters with a definitive choice about the island's future and its relationship with the U.S.<sup>9</sup> How Congress addresses its relationship with Puerto Rico, or fails to do so, sends a clear signal to the rest of the world about whether or not we are committed as a country to continue building the conditions for democracy and prosperity in the world, or whether we are resigned to allow America's position of global leadership to diminish.



With the introduction of H.R. 2757 this year, our organizations have committed to support this bill as the only current legislative proposal that seriously attempts to address this complex issue. However, we believe that like its predecessor the current bill can be

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elections in Puerto Rico, is a more accurate measure of voter participation than the participation rate calculated based on registered voters which includes hundreds of thousands of people who left the island but still appear as registered to vote; see also P.R. State Elections Comm'n, *Plebiscite 2020 Voter Turnout Certification* (Mar. 24, 2021),

[https://358ddb9e-e21b-4859-b142-3a5f01616d9d.usrfiles.com/ugd/358ddb\\_3af945b0321f48edb8df2e3abbca1d7e.pdf](https://358ddb9e-e21b-4859-b142-3a5f01616d9d.usrfiles.com/ugd/358ddb_3af945b0321f48edb8df2e3abbca1d7e.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Nicole Acevedo, *2020 census overcounted people in Puerto Rico, hinting at larger population loss*, NBC News, Aug. 17, 2022,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/2020-census-overcounted-people-puerto-rico-hinting-larger-population-l-rcna43384>.

<sup>7</sup> Nora Gámez Torres, *China has had a spy base in Cuba for decades, former intelligence officer says*, Miami Herald, July 5, 2023, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article277028208.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *US would have 'deep concerns' about China military activities in Cuba, Blinken say*, Reuters (June 20, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-would-have-deep-concerns-about-china-military-activities-cuba-blinken-says-2023-06-20/>.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Military Leaders and Veterans, to Congressional Leadership (Nov. 11, 2022), available at [https://358ddb9e-e21b-4859-b142-3a5f01616d9d.usrfiles.com/ugd/358ddb\\_110b3d4866704258b8374560c5a8c192.pdf](https://358ddb9e-e21b-4859-b142-3a5f01616d9d.usrfiles.com/ugd/358ddb_110b3d4866704258b8374560c5a8c192.pdf); see also Letter from Military Leaders and Veterans, to Congressional Leadership (May 25, 2023), available at [https://www.puertoricostatehoodaction.net/files/ugd/358ddb\\_6a81392796dd484b88d7a8b99d7510c5.pdf](https://www.puertoricostatehoodaction.net/files/ugd/358ddb_6a81392796dd484b88d7a8b99d7510c5.pdf).





improved upon. Given that H.R. 2757 has already gained six Republican cosponsors, including Resident Commissioner and a majority member on the Committee, Jenniffer González-Colón, we believe that opening the discussion on the topic of Puerto Rico's status can create space for this bipartisan support to grow. Just as you helped lead the establishment of the Bipartisan Task Force Combatting Chinese Government's Influence in the Indo-Pacific,<sup>10</sup> we believe that you can also help lead a bipartisan effort to look at the issue of resolving Puerto Rico's status with a fresh set of eyes and a broader perspective on the implications of this issue. Simply put, these matters are the most important policy issues that the Committee has under its jurisdiction.



Under your leadership, the 118th Congress can bravely continue the momentum from the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, and allow for the perspectives of Republicans, Democrats and other stakeholders to be heard. By holding legislative hearings, the Committee will have the opportunity to discuss and debate the substantive concerns you and other members raised prior to the House vote last year. This will create an opportunity for you to situate the discussion of this issue in a broader context, including the newest revelations regarding China's attempt to reshape the global geopolitical landscape by establishing a presence in the Caribbean. As proud American citizens and supporters of statehood for Puerto Rico, we share your vision and commitment for a stronger and more prosperous America. We believe that our island has contributed greatly and has much more that it can contribute, not only to America's prosperity and security, but also to the prospects of democracy, stability and peace at the global level.



However, for Puerto Rico to truly thrive, prosper, and reach its full potential, it needs full democracy. The current territory status of Puerto Rico not only disenfranchises our fellow U.S. citizens and disregards their sacrifices and contributions to the Nation, but also fails to meet America's founding democratic principles of representation and equality. Moreover, if Congress continues to keep Puerto Rico in a perpetually weak and underdeveloped status as a U.S. territory, it is ignoring a major threat to America's national security interests and standing in Latin America, the Caribbean and worldwide.



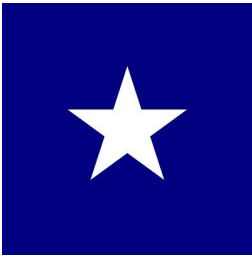
As Chairman of the Committee with jurisdiction over this issue, you have the power to transform the gridlock on this issue into an opportunity for both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Therefore, we strongly urge you to build on the progress made in H.R. 2757, hold legislative hearings in the Committee to address substantive concerns, clarify ambiguous sections of that bill, and, if needed, present new legislation that can address this critical issue in a way that helps unleash Puerto Rico's potential and strengthens America's prosperity, security and global standing. Thank you in advance for your attention and efforts on this matter.



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<sup>10</sup> Committee Announces Bipartisan Task Force Combatting Chinese Government's Influence in the Indo-Pacific, H. Comm. on Natural Res., (June 7, 2023), <https://naturalresources.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=413401>.





Sincerely,  
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 President  
**Puerto Rico Escogió Estadidad**

Hon. Nellie Gorbea  
 Former Secretary of State  
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Hon. Maria Rivera  
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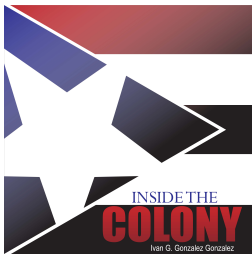
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Ismael Olmeda  
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Jesús Orona Marrero  
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Pedro Villafañe  
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Nestor Irrizary  
Citizen Advocate (Lajas, PR)

Gabriel Wilkinson  
Citizen Advocate (Kent, WA)

Sylvia Benitez  
Citizen Advocate (Carolina, PR)

Justo Morales Santiago  
Citizen Advocate (Lakeland, FL)

CC:

The Honorable Raúl M. Grijalva, Ranking Member, House Committee on  
Natural Resources

The Honorable Jenniffer González-Colón, Vice-Chair, House Subcommittee  
on Indian and Insular Affairs

The Honorable Mike Gallagher, Chairman, House Select Committee on the  
Chinese Communist Party

The Honorable Raja Krishnamoorthi, Ranking Member, House Select  
Committee on the Chinese Communist Party

The Honorable Mike Rogers, Chairman, House Committee on Armed  
Services

The Honorable Adam Smith, Ranking Member, House Committee on Armed  
Services