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Puerto Rico: A Chronology of Political Status History

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Summary

In 1952, Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory since 1898, became a commonwealth. Since then at least three significantly different political status options have been offered by the three major political parties in Puerto Rico.¹ On March 4, 1998, the House passed H.R. 856, a bill to address the political status of Puerto Rico, by a vote of 209-208. On June 23, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held an oversight hearing on issues raised by separate sovereignty and independence.

Introduction

At the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Spain ceded its colony Puerto Rico to the United States. Congress, in 1900, passed the Foraker Act,² to replace military rule with a civil government for the territory. Over the years, Congress has passed legislation to broaden the territory's participation in the governing process.

In 1950, Congress enacted Public Law 600,³ which established a relationship "in the nature of a compact" between the people of Puerto Rico and the U.S. government and set in motion the process for a constitution to be drafted. With passage of this legislation, however, House and Senate committee reports viewed the fundamental political, social, and economic relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States as unchanged.⁴ On

¹ For a fuller discussion of the debate on the political status of Puerto Rico and the positions of each political party, see: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Puerto Rico: Political Status Options*, by Garrine P. Laney, CRS Issue Brief 97054 .

² Act of April 12, 1900, Ch. 191, 31 Stat. 77.

³ Act of July 3, 1950, Ch. 446, 64 Stat. 319.

⁴ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Public Lands, *Puerto Rico Constitutional Government*, (continued...)

September 17, 1951, a constitutional convention convened in Puerto Rico to draft a constitution. On February 2, 1952, it passed Resolution 22, which states that the word “commonwealth ... defines the status of the body politic created under the terms of the compact existing between the people of Puerto Rico and the United States, i.e., that of a state which is free of superior authority in the management of its own local affairs but which is linked to the United States of America and hence is a part of its political system in a manner compatible with its federal structure.”⁵ In March 1952, Puerto Ricans ratified the constitution and submitted it for congressional approval. Congress made changes to the constitution, which delegates at the constitutional convention of Puerto Rico accepted.⁶ On July 25, 1952, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (the Spanish equivalent of Commonwealth is *Estado Libre Asociado*, or Associated Free State) was proclaimed by Governor Luís Muñoz Marín. Puerto Rico’s constitution established a republican form of government and included a bill of rights.

Plebiscites have been held on the political status of Puerto Rico, but the results are seen as inconclusive for a number of reasons. Consequently, the political relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico continues to be debated. On February 27, 1997, Chairman Don Young of the House Resources Committee introduced H.R. 856, the United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act, a bill to provide a process for permanent self-government in Puerto Rico. H.R. 856 provides, among other provisions, for a plebiscite to be held in Puerto Rico by December 1998. On May 21, 1997, the House Resources Committee amended the bill and ordered it to be reported. The House, by a vote of 209-208, passed H.R. 856 on March 4, 1998. Senator Larry E. Craig introduced a similar measure, S. 472, on March 19, 1997.

Political Parties. Three major political parties have led the debate on the political status issue. Founded in 1938, the Popular Democratic Party (PDP) supports an enhanced commonwealth status; its president is Aníbal Acevedo Vilá. Organized in the 1940s, the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) advocates independence for the island; its president is Rubén Berríos Martínez. The New Progressive Party (NPP), founded in 1967, supports statehood; its president is Pedro Rosselló, the current Governor of Puerto Rico.

Chronology

12/10/98 — The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1898 by the United States and Spain, ended the Spanish-American War and ceded Puerto Rico to the United States.

⁴ (...continued)

report to accompany S. 3336, H.Rept. 2275, 81st Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: GPO, 1951), p. 3; U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Puerto Rico Constitutional Government*, report to accompany S. 3336, S.Rept. 1779, 81st Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: GPO, 1951), p. 3.

⁵ Marcos Ramírez Lavandero, ed., *Documents on the Constitutional Relationship of Puerto Rico and the United States* (Washington: Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration, 1988), p. 191.

⁶ Act of July 3, 1952, Ch. 567, 66 Stat. 327.

- 04/12/00** — The Foraker Act terminated the military administration of the island and established a resident commissioner to Congress.
- 03/02/17** — The Jones Act granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, provided a bill of rights, and established a locally elected House and Senate.
- 04/10/22** — The Supreme Court, in *Balzac v. People of Puerto Rico*, unanimously endorsed the theory of incorporation. The Court ruled Puerto Rico an unincorporated territory, i.e., a territory to which all provisions of the Constitution are not extended.
- 08/05/47** — P.L. 362 authorized the election of a governor. Luís Muñoz Marín (PDP), the first governor, served from 1948 through 1964.
- 07/04/50** — P.L. 600 permitted Puerto Rico to draft its own constitution, thereby modifying the Jones Act of 1917.
- 07/03/52** — President Harry S. Truman signed a congressional joint resolution (H.J.Res. 430), which approved the constitution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico adopted by the people of Puerto Rico on March 3, 1952.
- 11/21/53** — Resolution 748 (VIII), adopted by the U.N. General Assembly, recognized the new status of Puerto Rico and, thus, eliminated the need for the U.S. to report on Puerto Rico as a non-self-governing territory.
- 12/14/60** — Resolution 1514 (XV), adopted by the U.N. General Assembly, declared that “colonialism in all its forms and manifestations” must be brought “to a speedy and unconditional end.”
- 12/15/60** — Resolution 1541 (XV), passed by the U.N. General Assembly, provided 12 principles to guide a member in determining whether it is obligated to transmit information on non-self-governing territories to the U.N.
- 02/20/64** — P.L. 88-271 established the U.S.-Puerto Rico Commission on the Status of Puerto Rico to study factors bearing on United States-Puerto Rico relations.
- 11/03/64** — Roberto Sánchez Vilella (PDP) was elected governor.
- 08/05/66** — A report issued by the U.S.-Puerto Rico Commission on the Status of Puerto Rico found that the three status alternatives were equally valid and recommended that a plebiscite on status be held.
- 07/23/67** — Based on the recommendation of the Commission on the Status of Puerto Rico, a status plebiscite was held. Voting results: 60.4%, commonwealth; 38.9%, statehood; and .06%, independence.
- 11/05/68** — Luís A. Ferré (NPP) was elected governor.
- 08/28/72** — Cuba requested that in light of Resolution 1514 (XV) the United Nations declare that Puerto Rico has a right to self-determination. Subsequently, the United Nations has kept Puerto Rico under continuing review.

- 11/07/72** — Rafael Hernández Colón (PDP) was elected governor.
- 10/01/75** — Ad Hoc Advisory Group, appointed by Governor Ferré and President Nixon in 1973, submitted a report recommending that the President refer the Compact of Permanent Union Between Puerto Rico and the United States to both houses with his endorsement for congressional action.
- 12/17/75** — H.R. 11200, a modified version of the proposed Compact, was introduced in the House. Subsequently, the House Subcommittee on Territorial and Insular Affairs approved an amended bill, but no further action was taken by the 94th Congress.
- 11/02/76** — Carlos Romero Barceló (NPP) was elected governor.
- 12/31/76** — President Gerald Ford became the first President to endorse statehood for Puerto Rico.
- 01/19/77** — Representative Ruppe introduced H.R. 2201, a bill to provide for statehood for Puerto Rico. The bill was referred to the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, but it died in committee.
- 11/06/80** — Governor Carlos Romero Barceló (NPP) was reelected.
- 11/06/84** — Rafael Hernández Colón (PDP) was elected governor.
- 11/08/88** — Governor Rafael Hernández Colón (PDP) was reelected.
- 01/17/89** — A letter and a Joint Declaration advocating a political status referendum on the island were signed by Puerto Rican political leaders.
- 08/06/89** — Introduced by Senator Johnston, S. 712 called for a referendum on the political status of Puerto Rico. The Committee on Energy and Natural Resources reported the bill to the Senate (S.Rept. 101-120).
- 01/04/91** — Introduced by U.S. Virgin Islands Delegate Ron de Lugo, H.R. 316 authorized a referendum on the political status of Puerto Rico.
- 01/23/91** — Introduced by Senator Johnston, S. 244 provided for a referendum on the political status of Puerto Rico.
- 02/27/91** — Committee on Energy and Natural Resources did not approve S. 244 by a tie of 10-10.
- 12/08/91** — Puerto Ricans rejected, by a vote of 619,028 to 525,023, provisions of a referendum (which was authorized by the legislature and governor of Puerto Rico) that called for the constitution of Puerto Rico to be amended to guarantee certain self-determination principles that would form the basis for future action on the political status of Puerto Rico.
- 11/03/92** — Pedro Rosselló and Carlos Romero Barceló of the NPP were elected governor and resident commissioner of Puerto Rico, respectively.

- 01/05/93** — The House agreed to a rule change that gave Delegates and the Resident Commissioner a floor vote in the Committee of the Whole.
- 01/28/93** — The Puerto Rican legislature passed and the governor signed into law legislation making both Spanish and English the official languages of Puerto Rico.
- 05/05/93** — Representative Serrano introduced H.Con.Res. 94, expressing the sense of Congress on self-determination for the people of Puerto Rico. Subsequently, hearings were held, but no further action was taken on the measure.
- 05/12/93** — Delegate de Lugo introduced H.J.Res. 195, to amend the U.S. Constitution to allow residents of territories to vote in presidential elections.
- 11/14/93** — Results of the political status plebiscite (which was authorized by the legislature and governor of Puerto Rico) were 826,326 votes for commonwealth (48.6%), 788,296 for statehood (46.3%), and 75,620 for independence (4.4%). (Blank ballots received 1% of the vote.)
- 11/22/93** — Representative Young introduced H.R. 3715, to offer Puerto Rico “incorporation” as a new measure of political empowerment.
- 05/17/94** — Representative Young introduced H.R. 4442, to amend H.R. 3715.
- 08/19/94** — Representative Torricelli introduced H.R. 5005, to require periodic plebiscites in U.S. territories. Later, the bill was referred to its committees of jurisdiction but no further action occurred.
- 12/05/94** — The Inter-Agency Working Group was established by President Clinton to construct positions on issues related to Puerto Rico.
- 12/14/94** — Through Concurrent Resolution 62, the Puerto Rican legislature requested that Congress respond to the principles contained in the commonwealth status political formula that Puerto Rican voters chose in the 1993 plebiscite.
- 01/04/95** — The House revoked rules providing the Resident Commissioner and delegates floor votes in the Committee of the Whole.
- 01/20/95** — Representative Gallegly introduced H.R. 602, to redesignate the Resident Commissioner a Delegate and to reduce the term of office from four to two years. Hearings were held on the bill, but no further action was taken.
- 03/06/96** — Representative Young introduced H.R. 3024, to provide a process for full self government for Puerto Rico. A major provision of the bill is the call for a plebiscite to be held in Puerto Rico by December 1998, at which voters would indicate their political status preference for either commonwealth or full self government (i.e., independence/free association or statehood). Subsequently, the Native American and Insular Affairs Subcommittee held hearings on the bill, amended it, and forwarded it to the House Resources Committee by a vote of 10 to 0. The bill was referred to the Rules Committee.

- 09/27/96** — Representative Young introduced H.R. 4228, a revision of H.R. 3024. It provided for the President to include in the transition plan proposals and incentives to increase opportunities for Puerto Ricans to become fluent in English, including a provision for English to become the language of instruction in public schools.
- 09/28/96** — Representative Young introduced H.R. 4281, another revision of H.R. 3024. Its provision concerning language anticipated that, upon accession to statehood, English would become the official language of the federal government in Puerto Rico to the same extent as federal law then requires throughout the United States. (At present, there is no federal official-language law in the United States.)
- 09/28/96** — Representative Young withdrew H.R. 3024 from consideration, after Resident Commissioner Romero Barceló objected on constitutional and other grounds to certain language provisions in H.R. 4228.
- 11/05/96** — Both Governor Rosselló and Resident Commissioner Romero Barceló of the NPP were reelected.
- 01/23/97** — NPP legislators filed a resolution asking Congress and the President to support a 1998 plebiscite on status.
- 02/27/97** — Representative Young introduced H.R. 856, the United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act. The bill's provisions are identical to H.R. 4281 that was introduced in the 104th Congress.
- 03/19/97** — Senator Craig introduced S. 472, the Puerto Rico Self Determination Act of 1997. Its provisions are similar to H.R. 856.
- 05/21/97** — The House Resources Committee amended H.R. 856 and ordered it to be reported by a vote of 44 to 1.
- 06/12/97** — The House Resources Committee referred H.R. 856 to the Rules Committee.
- 07/11/97** — The Rules Committee referred H.R. 856 to the Committee of the Whole House.
- 03/04/98** — The House passed H.R. 856 by a vote of 209 to 208.
- 04/02/98** — The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held a workshop on the political status of Puerto Rico.
- 05/19/98** — The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held a hearing on the fiscal and economic implications of Puerto Rico's status.
- 06/23/98** — The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held an oversight hearing on issues raised by separate sovereignty and independence.