



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Five-Minute Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery
The Puerto Rico Political Status Plebiscite
September 20, 2012

Mr./Madame Speaker:

On November 6th, the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico will hold a plebiscite on the Island's political future. Voters will be asked if they want to continue the current status or to seek a new status. Voters will also be asked to express their preference among the three alternatives to the current status recognized as legally and politically viable by the federal government and international law: independence, nationhood in free association with the United States, and statehood.

This plebiscite is different from previous plebiscites in Puerto Rico. It will be the first time that Island residents have an opportunity to answer "Yes" or "No" to the question of whether they support the status that Puerto Rico has had since 1898. This question has inherent value in a democracy, where a government's legitimacy is based on the consent of the governed. And this plebiscite will include only the status options identified as valid by Congress and the White House. True self-determination is a choice among options that can be implemented, not an exercise in wishful thinking.

If a majority of voters express satisfaction with the current status, Puerto Rico's status would not change at this time. Likewise, if there is majority support to change the current status, but not majority support for one of the three alternatives, Puerto Rico's current status would also continue.

However, if a majority votes against the status quo, and in favor of statehood, free association or independence, Congress and the President should take action that honors that choice.

Top Democratic and Republican leaders have indicated they will take the results of this plebiscite seriously. That is as it should be. The United States is the greatest democracy in history and a champion of peaceful self-determination around the world. Consistent with this principle, I am confident that federal officials will respect the choice made by their fellow American citizens from Puerto Rico if they express a clear desire to change the Island's status.

Now I want to speak directly to the men and women I represent in Congress. This plebiscite will have a real impact on you, your family, and the future of the Island we love. It is important that you make your voice heard and your vote count.

It is well known that I oppose the current status and advocate statehood for Puerto Rico. Whether it is called territory, commonwealth, or colony—the current status denies us the most fundamental rights in a democracy: the right to choose the leaders who make our national laws and the right to equal treatment under those laws.

In my view, the current status is an affront to our dignity. In my office hangs a framed photo of service members from the Island who have lost their lives since 2001. They are the latest in a long line of Puerto Rican patriots who have fought—and fallen—for this nation. This photo inspires me, but it also makes me sad. I cannot understand how we, such a proud people, can voluntarily submit to a status that makes us second-class citizens in the country that we have defended for generations.

I realize that, after nearly 115 years, the prospect of change can be unsettling. But I also know that there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come. We deserve better than what we have, and the time has come for us to seek a new status that will empower us to realize our full potential.

Among the alternatives to the current status, I believe statehood is the right choice. Independence and free association are worthy options, but both would place at risk our U.S. citizenship and federal support under programs like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security for future generations of Puerto Ricans. Because I believe the overwhelming majority of you are opposed to breaking or substantially weakening the strong political, social and economic bonds that have formed between Puerto Rico and the United States, I think the only viable alternative to the status quo is statehood. At this critical moment in history, we should aspire to perfect our union, not to sever it.

The current status is about second-class citizenship, which we should rise up to reject. Independence and free association are about separation, which would diminish the opportunities

available to our children and grandchildren. Statehood is about equal treatment. It would deliver to Puerto Rico what all free people deserve: full voting rights, full self-government, and full equality under the law.

This November, I hope that the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico will send a clear message to Congress that they are ready to make a change.

Thank you, Mr./Madame Speaker.