

**UNITED STATES-PUERTO RICO POLITICAL STATUS
ACT**

FIELD HEARING
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ONE HUNDRED FIFTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION
ON

H.R. 856—United States-Puerto Rico's Political Status Act

MAYAGUEZ, PUERTO RICO, APRIL 21, 1997

Serial No. 105-27

Printed for the use of the Committee on Resources



U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

43-229 *

WASHINGTON : 1997

Mr. YOUNG. Ms. Robles.

**STATEMENT OF MS. BELEN B. ROBLES, NATIONAL PRESIDENT,
LEAGUE OF UNITED LATIN AMERICAN CITIZENS, EL PASO,
TEXAS**

Ms. ROBLES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of this Committee.

My name is Belen Robles, and I am the President of the League of United Latin American Citizens, the oldest and largest community-based organization in the United States to include Puerto Rico. LULAC was founded in 1929 in the State of Texas and has more than 115,000 members in organizing councils throughout the United States and Puerto Rico.

From its inception, LULAC has been one of the principal civil rights organizations fighting to ensure Hispanics participate fully in the American society.

Puerto Ricans have been American citizens since 1917 by decision of the U.S. Congress. Our Nation presents itself to the world as a democratic example, and so it should act accordingly. Our first request before you is that you grant Puerto Ricans their civil right to choose freely their political status through a vote.

LULAC looks at this issue as one of civil rights and citizenship. The political alternatives discussed will have a tremendous impact on the Hispanic community both here and on the mainland. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that Congress seriously consider our position as the largest and oldest Hispanic organization in the United States.

Should the proponents of independence win the majority of votes, they request that Puerto Ricans no longer be U.S. citizens but that they will have free access to the United States because of the 100 years that Puerto Ricans have had access to our country. They also contend that European countries have agreed to allow free access for certain countries as an example of their position.

While taking into consideration this modality, Congress should pay attention to the following: Congress did not grant free access rights to the Philippines when they received their independence. Congress should consider, nonetheless, the Philippines' right to free access if the Puerto Rican independence petition is approved.

It is important to remember that 25 years before the Mayflower set sail from England, Don Juan de Onate, with 40 other men, arrived in what is today New Mexico via what today is the city of El Paso, Texas, the city where I reside.

Don Bernardo de Galvez, Spanish Governor of the Louisiana Territory, cleaned the south part of the United States of English fortresses with Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban and Dominican soldiers.

Therefore, if Congress decides to accept this petition of free access for citizens of a future Puerto Rican Republic, it has to consider what to do with Mexicans who want to gain free access to the United States, their former homeland.

LULAC is not against this petition from the Puerto Rican Independence Party, but we request equality for all Hispanics in Latin America, especially Mexicans.

The proponents of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico request to continue being American citizens without, however, being part of the United States. They demand an association through a pact between both countries, while retaining their citizenship.

Thus, Congress should consider in this case the type of citizenship that should exist in the United States. The American citizenship requested in this case is an incomplete one, like the one currently owned by Puerto Ricans residing in the island.

How can the United States explain that we are the champions of democracy when 3.8 million citizens cannot vote for their President? How can the United States explain that its Congress decrees and laws apply to citizens who have no representation? How can the United States explain to the world that part of their soldiers who are enlisted in its military do not have the civil rights to elect the President that could send them to war?

LULAC does not oppose maintaining a second-class citizenship, if that is the wish of this Congress. However, we strongly feel that you need to fully inform Puerto Ricans of the limitation of this form of citizenship so they know what they will be voting for.

The statehood supporters propose that Puerto Rico be a State of the Union with Puerto Ricans having the same rights and responsibilities as citizens residing within the 50 States.

This is a demand for equality. Should this request be granted, it would be a big boost for Hispanic representation in the U.S. Congress, with the addition of six Congressmen and/or women and two Senators residing from the island.

This civil right to equality, should it be granted, must be granted completely.

Some Congressmen have stated their intention of requiring a majority vote in favor of statehood in order for it to be granted. Other Congressmen demand that English be the official language of the island. These two requirements, or any other ones, are not suitable.

The rights of American citizens must be the same and equal in all the States of the Union and in Puerto Rico. To demand a vast majority of the votes is to infringe the concept which is the cornerstone of democracy, and that is the vote must be equal for all.

A vast majority of the votes means that a vote for statehood has less weight than a vote for independence or Commonwealth status. This is not democratic.

In regard to the issue of English as the official language, we need to say that the right to choose the language is naturally reserved to the American citizens; and LULAC is on record of supporting English-plus—English plus Spanish plus any other language that the person is capable of learning.

In summary, Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of this Committee, the League of United Latin American Citizens strongly urges the U.S. Congress to pass the United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act that would allow the people of Puerto Rico the opportunity to express their preferred relationship with the United States. We request that you honor the civil rights of the residents of Puerto Rico and allow them to choose freely their political status through a vote.

It is important that the Congress make clear to the people of Puerto Rico the true nature of statehood, independence and Com-

monwealth alternatives that are before them. We are opposed to requiring a vast majority of the vote cast to be for statehood in order to grant that option. We are also opposed to requiring English to be the official language of Puerto Rico.

I thank you.

Mr. YOUNG. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Robles follows:]

Testimony of Belen Robles

President of the League of United Latin American Citizens

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Congress of the United States, my name is Belen Robles, President of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the oldest and largest community-based Hispanic organization in the United States.

LULAC was founded in 1929 in the state of Texas and has more than 115,000 members in all states and in Puerto Rico organized in councils.

From its inception, LULAC has been one of the principle civil rights organizations fighting to ensure Hispanics participate fully in American society. Some of LULAC's most important accomplishments include winning the right for Hispanics to serve on juries, integration of Hispanic students in the public schools in California, and the creation of the "Little Schools of the 400" the precursor to today's Headstart Program.

Puerto Rico is the second jurisdiction, after Texas, with the largest number of members in LULAC. We are here today to continue our fight for civil rights for Hispanics: in this case, the civil rights of the residents of Puerto Rico.

For six consecutive years, LULAC's National delegates, at its annual convention, have unanimously expressed their endorsement of Puerto Rico's status petition to the Congress and the United States to allow the residents of Puerto Rico to exercise their free choice regarding the political status of their island. This is a civil right of American citizens residing in Puerto Rico which has been historically denied to them.

Puerto Ricans have been American citizens since 1917 by decision of the United States Congress. Our Nation presents itself to the world as a democratic example and so, it should act accordingly. Our first request before you, ladies and gentlemen of the Congress, is that you grant Puerto Ricans their civil right to choose freely their political status through a vote.

LULAC looks at this issue as one of civil rights and citizenship. The political alternatives discussed will have a tremendous impact on the Hispanic community both here and on the mainland. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that Congress seriously consider our position as the largest and oldest Hispanic organization in the United States.

The proponents of independence for Puerto Rico request that, should they win the majority of votes, Puerto Ricans would no longer be citizens but that they be allowed free access to the United States as an acknowledgment to the one hundred (100) years they have been allowed to. They also contend that European countries have agreed free access for them as an example of their position.

While taking into consideration this modality, Congress should pay attention to the following:

- (1) Congress did not grant free access rights to the Philippines when they received their independence. Congress should consider, nonetheless, the Philippines right to free access if the Puerto Ricans independence petition is approved.
- (2) It is important to remember that twenty five (25) years before the Mayflower set sail from England, Don Juan de Oñate with 40 other men, arrived at what is today New Mexico via what is today the city of El Paso, Texas. Before Oñate, the Spaniards

discovered two thirds (2/3) of the modern United States, decades before the pilgrims arrived at Plymouth. Hispanics explored the Pacific Coast from California to Alaska and the Atlantic Coast, from the Gulf of Mexico to Labrador. Juan Ponce de León discovered the state of Florida; Hernando de Soto explored Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi and Oklahoma, and discovered the Mississippi River; Coronado explored Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and was the first European to view the Grand Canyon. In the War of Independence, Don Bernardo de Galvez, Spanish Governor of the Louisiana territory, cleaned the south part of the United States of the English fortresses with Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican soldiers.

During the Civil War, the Spaniard David Farragut became the first four star officer in the history of the U.S. Navy. Therefore, if Congress decides to accept this petition of free access for the citizens of a future Puerto Rican Republic, it has to consider what to do with the Mexicans who want to gain free access to the United States, to their homeland. The land that was discovered and explored by them and that they are now denied the opportunity to access freely.

- (3) Congress also has to consider what to do with the Cubans and the Central and South American citizens who want to gain free access into our nation.

LULAC is not against this petition from the Puerto Rican Independence Party, but we request equality for all Hispanics in Latin America, especially the Mexicans.

The proponents of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico request to continue being American citizens, without, however, being part of the United States. They demand an association through a pact between both countries (United States and Puerto Rico), while retaining the citizenship.

Thus, Congress should consider in this case the types of citizenship that should exist in the United States.

The American citizenship requested in this case is an incomplete one, like the one currently owned by Puerto Ricans residing in the island.

How can the United States explain that we are the champions of democracy when 3.8 million citizens cannot vote for their President?

How can the United States explain that its Congress decrees laws applied to citizens who have no representation.

How can the United States explain to the world that part of their soldiers who are enlisted in its military do not have the civil right to elect the President that could send them to war.

LULAC does not oppose maintaining a second class citizenship if that is the wish of this Congress, however, we strongly feel that you need to fully inform Puerto Ricans of the limitations of this form of citizenship so they know what they will be voting for.

The statehood supporters propose that Puerto Rico be a state of the union with Puerto Ricans having the same rights and responsibilities as citizens residing in the fifty states.

This is a demand for equality. Should this request be granted it would be a big boost for Hispanic representation in the United States Congress with the addition of six Congressman and two senators residing from the island.

This civil right to equality, should it be granted, must be granted completely.

Some Congressman have stated their intention of requiring the majority of votes in order to grant statehood. Other Congressman demand that English be the official language of the island. These two requirements or any other ones are not suitable.

The rights of American citizens must be the same and equal in all the states of the Union and in Puerto Rico.

To demand a vast majority of the votes is to infringe the concept which is the cornerstone of Democracy; that is, "the vote must be equal for all".

A vast majority of the votes means that a vote for statehood has less weight than a vote for independence or commonwealth status. This is not democratic.

In regard to the issue of English as the official language, we need to say that the right to choose the language is a natural right reserved to the American citizens and to the states, not to the Congress or the Federal Government. The American citizens have not delegated the aforementioned right to Congress and, thus, it is up to Puerto Ricans to address this issue. The best example of my position is the resolution taken by twenty three states, through referendum and not through laws published by the Congress, to adopt English as their official language.

The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) respectfully submit before this Honorable Congressional Commission this statement and request that this time the civil rights of American citizens residing in Puerto Rico, to self determine their political status, be respected and that the Congress and the President of the United States respect and implement their choice and determination of political status.