

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. I thank my good friend from Washington for the time.

I rise in strong support of H.R. 2499, the Puerto Rico Democracy Act. This bill will provide a congressionally sanctioned process by which U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico can determine their preferences regarding the territory's political status.

This is not a bill to admit Puerto Rico as the 51st State. This bill, instead, would enable Puerto Ricans to determine their status preference by presenting all of the options possible under the law. They would be presented through a series of votes.

In the first plebiscite, voters will decide if they want a continuation of the current status or to change status. If voters decide to change status, a second plebiscite will be held on the three viable options for change: independence, statehood, or free association with the U.S.

The Puerto Rico Democracy Act does not include the misguided "enhanced Commonwealth option." An enhanced Commonwealth, as envisioned by the bill's critics, perpetuates the false hope that Puerto Ricans can have the best of both worlds: they can have U.S. citizenship and national sovereignty; they can receive generous Federal funding and have the power to veto those laws with which it disagrees. If included as a viable option, an enhanced Commonwealth proposal would permanently empower Puerto Rico to nullify Federal laws and court jurisdiction. An enhanced Commonwealth option would also set the stage for Puerto Rico to enter into international organizations and trade agreements, all while being under the military and financial protection of the United States.

It is no surprise that this proposal has been soundly rejected as a viable option by the U.S. Department of Justice, the State Department, the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration. It is time that the people of Puerto Rico are given real options for the future political status of their homeland and not false promises.

Therefore, Mr. Chairman, I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting this bill before us today.

Mr. HASTINGS of Washington. Mr. Chairman, I am very pleased to yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from Texas (Mr. SMITH).

Mr. SMITH of Texas. First of all, I thank the ranking member of the committee and the gentleman from Washington State for yielding.

Mr. Chairman, there are at least three reasons to oppose this bill, any one of which should be persuasive.

First, it rigs a proposed new referendum to force Puerto Ricans to choose what they have voted against four times in the past, statehood. It does not provide Puerto Ricans with a fair, straightforward way to choose among statehood, independence, and remaining a Commonwealth. The bill also allows U.S. citizens who are na-

tives of Puerto Rico to vote in the referendum even if they now live in the United States.

Second, the poverty rate in Puerto Rico is almost 45 percent, twice that of our poorest State, Mississippi. The Congressional Budget Office estimated in 1990 that if Puerto Rico were to become a State, Federal entitlement and welfare costs for Puerto Rico would jump by 143 percent. That was 20 years ago. If Puerto Rico does become a State, the additional cost to American taxpayers of government benefits are likely to be in the tens of billions of dollars, but no cost analyses have been released. One can only guess why.

Third, let's acknowledge that to some this bill is a Democratic power play. The Pew Hispanic Center reported in 2008 that 61 percent of Puerto Rican registered voters were Democrats, 11 percent were Republicans, and 24 percent were independents.

Mr. Chairman, I urge my colleagues to oppose this bill for any or all of these reasons.

Mr. HASTINGS of Washington. Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to yield 3 minutes to the Republican Conference chairman, Mr. PENCE.

(Mr. PENCE asked and was given permission to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. PENCE. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

I rise in support of the Puerto Rico Democracy Act, which simply grants the people of Puerto Rico a say in their future.

First, a little history lesson. The American flag has flown over Puerto Rico for more than a century. It has been a U.S. territory since 1898. The people of Puerto Rico have been citizens of the United States since 1917. Citizens born in Puerto Rico are natural-born U.S. citizens bound by Federal law. They pay Federal payroll taxes, and they are even eligible to be elected President.

American citizens from Puerto Rico have been drafted into military service during World War II and every war ever since—five Medal of Honor winners from Puerto Rico—65,034 Puerto Ricans served in World War II alone.

□ 1445

It has been an enormous contribution to the life of this Nation by these American citizens.

As a conservative who believes in the power of self-determination and of individual liberty, I believe the 4 million American citizens in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico should be able to voice their opinions about Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States, although the ultimate determination of that fate rests with this Congress, and I am pleased to stand in a long line of Republicans who have taken that view. Every Republican President for the last 50 years has been committed to self-determination and democracy for the American citizens in Puerto Rico.

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan said, "Puerto Ricans have borne the responsibilities of U.S. citizenship with honor and courage for more than 64 years. They have fought beside us for decades and have worked beside us for generations." He also added Puerto Rico's "strong tradition of democracy provides leadership and stability" in the Caribbean. I agree.

If the American citizens of Puerto Rico choose independence, I will support that vote. If the American citizens of Puerto Rico choose statehood, I will support that vote. I am equally confident that this Congress will be able to resolve any difficult issues about taxation, obligations of individuals and, most importantly, about the need for English to be the official language prior to any offering of citizenship to that territory.

The American citizens of Puerto Rico have fought, have bled, and have died in our military, on virtually every continent, in order to spread democracy and the right of self-determination. It seems to me it would be the height of hypocrisy for this Congress to deny the very same rights for which Americans have fought all over this world to the American citizens of Puerto Rico.

I know this is a difficult and a contentious debate, and I hold in the highest regard my colleagues who take a different view; but for me, for President Ronald Reagan, and for all freedom-loving Americans, I believe with all of my heart the time has come to adopt the Puerto Rico Democracy Act and to begin the process of allowing the American citizens of Puerto Rico to determine what will be their destiny, and we will determine it as well.

Mr. HASTINGS of Washington. Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. DUNCAN).

Ms. VELAZQUEZ. Mr. Chairman, I yield 2 additional minutes to the gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. DUNCAN).

The CHAIR. The gentleman from Tennessee is recognized for 4 minutes.

Mr. DUNCAN. Mr. Chairman, I rise in opposition to this bill.

First of all, I would like to thank the gentleman from Washington State and the gentlewoman from New York for yielding me this time.

I have been to Puerto Rico three times. The people there have treated me in a very kind way, as kind as any place I have ever been, and I think Puerto Rico is a wonderful place.

I served with Governor Fortuño, who is the main proponent of this bill, and Governor Anibal Acevedo Vila before him. I have great respect for and, I hope, friendship with both of those men, but I oppose this bill.

The Washington Times said in an editorial yesterday that this is a bad bill, written "to stack the deck in favor of statehood for Puerto Rico" and that it "actually tramples self-determination in favor of an underhanded political power grab."

Those aren't my words. Those are the words of the Washington Times.