

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
1213 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
(202) 225-2615 FAX: (202) 225-2154

SAN JUAN OFFICE:
157 AVENIDA DE LA CONSTITUCIÓN
ANTIGUO EDIFICIO DE MEDICINA TROPICAL
ALA DE ENFERMERIA 2DO PISO
SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO 00901
(787) 723-6333 FAX: (787) 729-7738

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-5401

January 6, 2015

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Thomas Jefferson wrote that “the ground of liberty is to be gained by inches” and that “we must . . . press forward for what is yet to get.” Between 2009 and 2014, much ground has been gained by those of us who have dedicated our lives to achieving equality for Puerto Rico through statehood, the only democratic and dignified status option that has broad public support on the island. Although some people have yet to fully appreciate it, the statehood movement—which is a civil rights movement—has advanced further and faster towards our ultimate goal within the last six years than during any other period since Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory in 1898.

Despite these remarkable achievements, I am the first to recognize that more work remains to be done before the star representing Puerto Rico is added to the American flag. Motivated by a profound sense of purpose, statehood advocates intend to “press forward for what is yet to get.” We will utilize every strategy and employ every technique that will advance our cause, because the cause transcends everything else. We will not rest or relent. I cannot, and will never, counsel my constituents to be patient. These men and women have already waited too long for equality and justice. I understand their sense of urgency because I fully share it. My job as a leader is to try to channel all of this passion in a positive direction, so that it helps the statehood movement, rather than harms it. We have succeeded in the past six years precisely because we have been smart, tactical and focused. As a result, we have advanced steadily while anti-statehood forces remain in perpetual retreat.

Consider the following accomplishments:

- At my urging, your administration and Congress have fulfilled the federal government’s most fundamental responsibility as it relates to this issue, which is to be honest about the status options available to Puerto Rico if it does not wish to remain a U.S. territory. Without exception, your administration and Congress have affirmed that the only other options for Puerto Rico are to become a state or a sovereign nation, either fully independent from the U.S. or with a compact of free association with the U.S. that either nation can

terminate. Your administration and Congress have consistently rejected the status proposal, called “Enhanced Commonwealth,” that has been put forward by leaders of the Popular Democratic Party of Puerto Rico. Politicians who champion this proposal seek to confuse the status debate, to arrest the momentum of the statehood movement, and to perpetuate the status quo. Accordingly, the fact that the federal government in recent years has unequivocally rejected this proposal is of enormous importance.

- In May 2009, I introduced H.R. 2499, the *Puerto Rico Democracy Act*. The bill provided for a federally-sponsored, two-step plebiscite process in Puerto Rico where voters would choose among the current territory status, statehood, independence and nationhood in free association with the U.S. In April 2010, H.R. 2499 was approved by the House of Representatives in a strong bipartisan vote, despite vehement opposition from statehood opponents, becoming the most successful standalone Puerto Rico status bill in history.
- In March 2011, the President’s Task Force on Puerto Rico’s Status issued a report confirming that Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory; that the only other options available to Puerto Rico are to become a state or a sovereign nation; that “Enhanced Commonwealth” is not a viable proposal; and that Puerto Rico’s severe economic problems—which are damaging quality of life on the island and causing residents to relocate to the states in astonishing numbers—are inextricably connected to its unresolved political status.
- In June 2011, you made the first official visit by a sitting president to Puerto Rico since President Kennedy in 1961. In a speech delivered upon your arrival, you said the following with respect to the territory’s political future: “When the people of Puerto Rico make a clear decision, my administration will stand by you.”
- On November 6, 2012, the government of Puerto Rico held a plebiscite under local law, modeled on H.R. 2499. As I noted in a letter sent to you the following week, the results were historic. A majority of my constituents expressed their opposition to territory status, which means that the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico are being governed without their consent. Statehood received more votes than territory status, which is unprecedented. And statehood obtained far more votes than either of the two nationhood options, which demonstrates that Puerto Rico has no desire to break or weaken the bonds forged with the United States over nearly 12 decades. As I advised you: “The people of Puerto Rico have spoken and, as their official representative in Washington, I intend to do everything within my power to ensure that the federal government responds in an appropriate and timely fashion.”
- In August 2013, the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources held a hearing on the 2012 plebiscite. Chairman Ron Wyden said that “there is no disputing that a majority of

the voters in Puerto Rico—54 percent—have clearly expressed their opposition to continuing the current territorial status.” Ranking Member Lisa Murkowski likewise said that “it is clear to me that the majority of Puerto Ricans do not favor the current territorial status.” Chairman Wyden also recognized that “for Puerto Rico to meet its economic and social challenges and to achieve its full potential, this debate over status needs to be settled” and that “the current relationship undermines the United States’ moral standing in the world. For a nation founded on the principles of democracy and the consent of the governed, how much longer can America allow a condition to persist in which nearly four million U.S. citizens do not have a vote in the government that makes the national laws which affect their daily lives?”

- Following the November 2012 plebiscite, I initiated contact with senior White House officials in an effort to persuade your administration to include language regarding Puerto Rico’s political status in your Fiscal Year 2014 budget request to Congress. As a result of our collaboration, in April 2013 your administration asked Congress to appropriate \$2.5 million for the first federally-sponsored plebiscite in Puerto Rico’s history, to be held on options that would “resolve Puerto Rico’s future political status.”
- On January 17, 2014, this appropriation was enacted into law, after intensive advocacy efforts by me and other Members of Congress who support statehood for Puerto Rico or oppose the current territory status. As I noted in a letter sent to you the following week: “I believe this provision of law, which is a direct response to the historic results of the November 6, 2012 plebiscite, is the most significant step that the federal government has ever taken to resolve Puerto Rico’s political status.”

It has been nearly a year since the provision appropriating \$2.5 million for the first federally-sponsored plebiscite in Puerto Rico’s history became law. Although the law does not specify how the ballot should be structured, instead leaving the precise details to the government of Puerto Rico, it does require the U.S. Department of Justice to ensure that any option on the ballot is compatible with the Constitution, laws and public policy of the United States.

This law has already served to expose and deepen divisions within the island’s Popular Democratic Party, which currently controls the governorship and both chambers of the Legislative Assembly. Party leaders have been unable to agree on a status proposal. If they manage to do so, that proposal will almost certainly be rejected by the federal government as inconsistent with U.S. law or policy.

While they continue to delay, I have proposed a simple course of action, and it is my hope that they will have the courage to accept it. I believe the funding should be used to hold a federally-sponsored yes-or-no vote in Puerto Rico on the territory’s admission as a state. There are five main reasons why I believe this is the best approach.

First, this approach is deeply rooted in precedent. Alaska and Hawaii both conducted federally-sponsored yes-or-no votes that led to statehood. Second, this approach is the most logical, because statehood obtained the most votes in the November 2012 plebiscite. Third, the format is inclusive. Those who support statehood can vote “yes” and those who oppose it for whatever reason can vote “no.” Fourth, the vote would yield a definitive result that nobody could reasonably question. The excuses, rationalizations and protests that we have witnessed from the leaders of the Popular Democratic Party since the November 2012 vote would be absent or, at least, likely to fall on deaf ears. Finally, this approach has broad bipartisan support in Congress. H.R. 2000, a bill I introduced last Congress that embodies this approach, obtained 131 cosponsors and led to the filing of an identical Senate companion bill.

Accordingly, I ask that you or the Attorney General formally respond to this letter, advising the people of Puerto Rico whether your administration concurs with my conclusion that a ballot that poses the following question satisfies all of the requirements of the federal law enacted in January 2014.

“Shall Puerto Rico be admitted into the Union as a State?

Yes__ No__.”

Thank you for your attention to this matter, which is of national significance. I look forward to continuing to work with you and your administration on the issue of Puerto Rico’s political status, as well as on other important issues, over the next two years.

Sincerely,



Pedro R. Pierluisi
Member of Congress

cc: The Hon. Eric Holder, Attorney General of the United States
The Hon. Loretta Lynch, Attorney General of the United States (Designate)
The Hon. Jerry Abramson, Director of Intergovernmental Affairs, Co-Chair, The President’s Task Force on Puerto Rico’s Status
The Hon. Stuart Delery, Acting Associate Attorney General, Co-Chair, The President’s Task Force on Puerto Rico’s Status