



## Democratic Party of Puerto Rico

August 31, 2020

The Honorable Nydia M. Velázquez  
United States House of Representatives  
2302 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
United States House of Representatives  
229 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Velázquez and Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez:

In this historic month of August, 2020, which marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment that gave women the right to vote in the mainland United States, we find ourselves, once again, at the doors of Congress urging you not to forget about the 3.2 million U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico who are denied the ability to fully exercise their fundamental constitutional rights.

We commend the fact that you have taken steps to pursue a resolution to Puerto Rico's centuries-old colonial problem by introducing legislation that addresses this issue. We agree with you that Puerto Rico's current unequal and undemocratic status is simply unsustainable.

We wanted, however, to share with you our concerns regarding the proposed language included in the "Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2020":

- Self-determination is a democratic process by which the people determine their own future political status. The proposed legislation allows a group of delegates to decide and impose an option. In a democracy, we should trust the people to make their own decisions rather than rely on a selected few to decide for the people.
- The proposed bill ignores the most recent electoral events of self-determination, held in Puerto Rico in 2012 and 2017, whose legal and constitutional legitimacy have never been challenged in court.
- The bill states that "if the referendum is approved by the People of Puerto Rico, Congress **may** approve a joint resolution to ratify the self-determination option". In the end, the proposed bill creates a convoluted process which would ultimately delay a status resolution, as Congress would not have any commitment to act on the results, thus perpetuating current unincorporated territorial status.

- The proposed legislation fails to establish clear timelines for approval of a status option by the Delegates to the Convention, a subsequent referendum for the people to vote on that option, or even for Congress to act upon those results.
- Many on the island fear that this vehicle would allow those who, knowing that their preferred option would not have majority support in a referendum or those who want to offer an option that is not constitutionally possible, to use the Status Convention as an instrument to further delay Puerto Ricans' right to self-determine their future political status.
- This bill has no chance of being approved in the current congressional session. Furthermore, Adam Sarvana, spokesperson for the House Committee on Natural Resources, explained to a local newspaper on the island that the upcoming hearing will be used simply as: "...an opportunity to receive expert recommendations on how Puerto Rico's decolonization process should move forward and how Congress can address this issue effectively to advance the process..."<sup>1</sup>
- Last week, former Congressman Luis Gutiérrez appeared in a local television show and spoke of a recent conversation had with Rep. Velázquez that raised some eyebrows regarding the alleged real purpose behind filing this bill: "... I spoke to Nydia today... I think they (Rep. Velázquez and Ocasio-Cortez) also did it right now to counter and tell people to vote no on November 3, 2020 (upcoming statehood Yes or No referendum)"<sup>2</sup>.

If you truly want to "afford Puerto Ricans the freedom to design our own future", then you must do so by proposing a framework that allows Puerto Ricans to be active participants in the democratic process by way of a direct vote, instead of a perplexing configuration dictated to them by policymakers in Washington, D.C.

The truth remains, that as long as Puerto Rico continues to be an unincorporated territory of the United States, American citizens living in Puerto Rico will continue to be treated differently when invoking their rights as equal citizens under the law. Puerto Ricans are deprived from voting for the President, have no representation in the Senate and only one non-voting member in the U.S. House of Representatives. The unequal treatment Puerto Rico receives has never been more poignant than under the current Trump Administration.

The lack of equal representation for Puerto Rico was best articulated by President Obama during his eulogy for the late Congressman John Lewis. In his eulogy, President Obama underscored: "Once we pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, we should keep marching, to make it even better... by guaranteeing that every American citizen has equal representation in our government, including the American citizens who live in Washington, D.C. and in Puerto Rico. They're Americans!"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Delgado, Raúl Grijalva Mantiene En Agenda Una Audiencia en el Congreso sobre el Status de Puerto Rico, El Nuevo Día, August 26, 2020 (<https://www.elnuevodia.com/corresponsalias/washington-dc/notas/raul-grijalva-mantiene-en-agenda-una-audiencia-en-el-congreso-sobre-el-status-de-puerto-rico/>) Accessed August 29, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See, Jugando Pelota Dura, Univision Puerto Rico, August 28, 2020 (<https://twitter.com/JugandoPelotaPR/status/1299006255739146242>). Accessed August 29, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> See, B. Obama, Statement on the Passing of John Lewis, July 18, 2020 <https://obama.medium.com/my-statement-on-the-passing-of-rep-john-lewis-fa86761cd96>

Only through true political empowerment can we rid ourselves of our untenable second-class citizenship. The one and only mechanism that would allow Puerto Rico to achieve equal treatment under U.S. laws and to enjoy full voting rights is statehood.

Let us be clear, statehood is not a culmination of colonization, but rather a LIBERATION from its century-old chains. Statehood is recognized as a means for a territory to reach full measure of self-government and equality, as provided by the U.S. Constitution and by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV) of 1960.

We urge you to encourage voter participation in the upcoming referendum called by the elected officials on the island who ran on a platform that guaranteed the people their right to vote to determine their future political status. The upcoming referendum will provide a voice to our people and constitutes a valid form of self-determination.

We hope that you consider our comments and concerns regarding your status bill. For all the reasons stated above and many more, the leadership of the Democratic Party of Puerto Rico cannot support the “Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2020”, as currently drafted.

Sincerely,



Charles A. Rodríguez  
Chair  
Democratic Party of Puerto Rico



Johanne Vélez-García  
Vice Chair  
Democratic Party of Puerto Rico



María “Mayita” Meléndez-Altieri  
National Committeewoman Puerto Rico  
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