

## Is Statehood Next for Puerto Rico? It's Complicated.

### Can a century-old colonial crisis be solved before a once-in-a-generation opportunity passes the island by?

The status question is the beating heart of politics in Puerto Rico today. [...] There are those who believe in the current territorial status, who argue Puerto Ricans are their own people — not Americans — and what should remain is a partnership that allows for self-governance with long-lasting support from the United States. Others believe the benefits Puerto Rico currently receives can be further expanded without necessarily becoming a state by making it an “enhanced commonwealth.” And then there are those who believe Puerto Rico is its own nation and should be free from the shackles of empire, something the island has not experienced since 1493 when it was first claimed as a colony by the Spanish crown. Independence, they argue, would allow Puerto Rico to finally live up to its modern potential, without oversight<sup>1</sup> from a foreign power. It could cut its own trade agreements, build its own economy, and preserve the island’s national identity. [...]

Stateside Democrats, who are unsurprisingly friendly to the idea of Puerto Rico as a 51<sup>st</sup> state, now hold majorities in the House and Senate. And President Biden, who personally supports statehood, campaigned on working with representatives of each status option to “engage in a fair and binding process.” [...] Despite the fact that statehood has been part of the Democratic National Committee’s platform for nearly a decade, the bill faces opposition from a key Democrat. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has said in recent months that he won’t support a statehood bill because the latest referendum showed “there is no consensus, there is division” on the status question. He added he is concerned about local legislation that could accelerate the process of Puerto Rico becoming a tax haven for the rich.

The other elephant in the room is how hostile the GOP has been to the idea of Puerto Rican statehood. Republicans claim it would automatically mean adding two Democratic Senate seats and conservatives would “never” get back control of the chamber. The consequence would be “full-bore socialism.” Despite this fear-mongering<sup>2</sup>, the GOP has supported making the island a state in its platform for the last two elections. [...] Two potential GOP allies, Sens. Marco Rubio and Rick Scott of Florida, have said they would favor making Puerto Rico a state but have not yet signed on to the latest push. [...]

The island’s two main parties, the pro-statehood PNP and the pro-commonwealth PPD, have attempted to ram through<sup>3</sup> a fix to the colonial status through six nonbinding status plebiscites in the last 50 years. Three of the votes have happened since 2012. But the 2012 and 2017 votes, where statehood seemed to win, were deemed faulty due to issues with voter turnout, boycotts, and incomplete ballots. [...]

But why would Puerto Ricans, as colonized people, want equal footing with a country that presumably does not want them back? Colón, the political scientist, said that while many pro-statehood boricuas<sup>4</sup> see themselves as Americans, there’s an entire section of voters who weigh how tightly the island and the U.S. are intertwined<sup>5</sup>. “There’s a great deal of pragmatism in terms of, ‘You probably don’t want to accept me as a state, but you have been considering what to do with this territory too long, and now your time is up,’” he said.

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1. administration, supervision
2. creating fear

3. push, force
4. natives of Puerto Rico, or people of Puerto Rican descent
5. twisted together, interconnected