

Committee: Special Political & Decolonization Committee (GA4)

Issue: The question of Puerto Rico

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Position: Co-Chairs

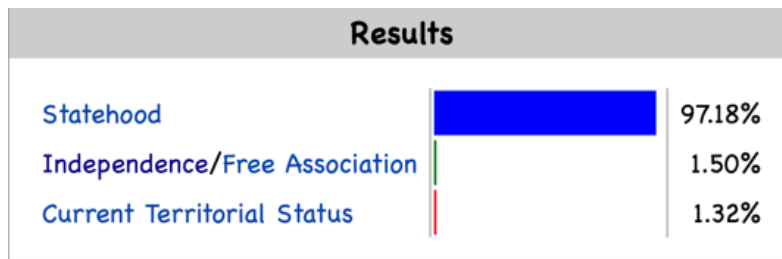
PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

My name is Stefanos Frilingos and I am the co-chair at the Special Political & Decolonization Committee at the 1st DST MUN. I am a rising senior IB2 at Psychico College and have been participating in MUN conferences for the past two years. This will be my first chairing experience, and I am really excited to meet you all in November and have an interesting and fruitful conference. Our committee focuses on international relations: border negotiations, territories and the future of colonized states. Both topics are very engaging and have been all over the news lately, hence sources and information are abundant, so I expect a variety of views, opinions and arguments in a multifaceted debate.

My name is Dimitra Mavroforou and I am also the co-chair of this committee. I am now starting the second year of junior high school and up until now I've participated in seven(7) MUN's: five as delegate and two as a chair. I am very honored to serve as a co-chair in the first DST MUN conference and cannot imagine it without fruitful and heated debates, especially in our committee since the topics are very interesting and have been the center of attention.

TOPIC INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is an unincorporated island territory of the United States of America. Located in the Caribbean Sea, it is under U.S. government jurisdiction; however, it is not an independent U.S. state. Prior to the American era which started in 1898, Puerto Rico was part of the Spanish colonies since 1493. Before the Columbian era, indigenous people cultures and tribes including the Aztec, Maya and Inca left their traces on the island. At the moment, the state of Puerto Rico's independence is being questioned. Should Puerto Rico be considered a colony and maintain its current territorial status? Should it gain independence, or should it become the 51st U.S. state? These matters have been concerning Puerto Ricans in the last decade especially, with five referendums being held since 1952 on the statehood question. But what are the implications? What are the advantages and disadvantages of Puerto Rico's independence, or the pros and cons of its statehood?



2017 Referendum results from the 23% who voted

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Colony

“A country or area under the full or partial political control of another country and occupied by settlers from that country.”¹

Referendum

“A general vote by the electorate on a single political question which has been referred to them for a direct decision.”²

State

A political association that enjoys sovereign jurisdiction within a defined territory. A dependent state (e.g. U.S. state) is “a territory considered as an organized political community under one government.”³

Commonwealth

“A nation, state, or other political unit: such as

a: one founded on law and united by compact or tacit agreement of the people for the common good

b: one in which supreme authority is vested in the people

c: REPUBLIC”⁴

¹ “Colony | Definition of Colony in English by Oxford Dictionaries.” *Oxford Dictionaries | English*, Oxford Dictionaries, en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/colony.

² “Referendum | Definition of Referendum in English by Oxford Dictionaries.” *Oxford Dictionaries | English*, Oxford Dictionaries, en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/referendum.

³ “State | Definition of State in English by Oxford Dictionaries.” *Oxford Dictionaries | English*, Oxford Dictionaries, en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/state.

Independence

“Freedom from being governed or ruled by another country” or “the ability to live your life without being helped or influenced by other people”⁵

Self-Determination

“Self-determination is the right of a country to be independent, instead of being controlled by a foreign country, and to choose its own form of government.”⁶

Sovereignty

Having the monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a territory.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

General Historical Context

The island of Puerto Rico (a US commonwealth) came under US control after the Spanish-American War in 1898. However, federal law was not officially approved until 1952 when a referendum on a new constitution was held which was approved by a significant margin. Ever since, there have been many talks and advocates about the future of Puerto Rico. Should it maintain its current territorial status, becoming a US state or becoming an independent, autonomous state? In June 2017, a referendum was held with the three options above available to vote. Puerto Ricans overwhelmingly voted for statehood in this non-binding weekend referendum. However, this outcome is not a holistic representation of the general opinion. Only 23% of the eligible citizens casted their vote. In addition, there's plenty of red tape on the way of becoming a state.

Characteristics and Rights of Puerto Ricans

⁴ “Commonwealth.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/commonwealth.

⁵ “Independence Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” *Gender Pay Gap Definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/independence.

⁶ “Self-Determination Definition and Meaning | Collins English Dictionary.” *Complacent Definition and Meaning | Collins English Dictionary*, www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/self-determination.

Puerto Rico, although not a sovereign state, has some important characteristics that give it its unique status and a certain autonomy. First of all, it has its own constitution, which is crucial when determining the laws of the island. Like all 50 states, Puerto Rico has its own governor who acts as the leader of the executive branch of government.

Puerto Ricans have some unique characteristics in terms of their rights and duties, compared to other Americans. One is the fact that Puerto Ricans only pay federal income tax on work done within the United States. Also, although they pay into Social Security and have access to Medicare and Medicaid, they do not have access to many other government funded programs. Puerto Rico do not have a vote in the US Congress. This is a major part of why it is considered by many political scholars as a colony (no representation). Another limitation for Puerto Ricans is that they can vote in presidential primary elections, but not in presidential elections. However, all Puerto Ricans are considered natural-born US citizens.

Economic Significance

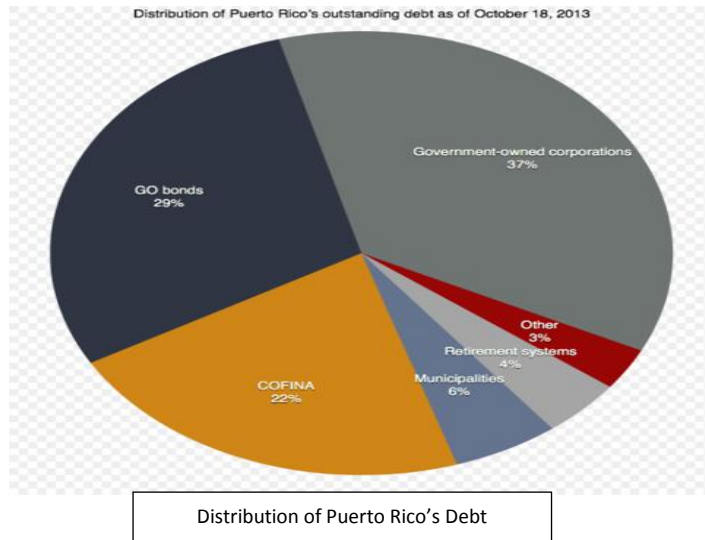
After the 97% statehood votes in the referendum, Puerto Rico Governor, Ricardo Rosselló stated about why such a large percentage of statehood voters: “they were claiming [their] equal rights as American citizens”.

Nevertheless, the issue goes much deeper than just the need for equal rights with the rest of the United States. The commonwealth is struggling in an economic crisis, filing for municipal bankruptcy in May 2017 and is at approximately \$70bn. in debt to various creditors. Poverty is rampant, unemployment is high -- 11.5% -- and statehood supporters, including Rosselló, believe the move has the potential to boost Puerto Rico's economy.

Even though Puerto Rico has made it quite clear that it stands in favor of statehood, the final call is to be made by the US Congress. Congress has to pass a statute to admit Puerto Rico as a state, noting that conversations around this matter have been going on for decades, without any definite outcome.

The referendum was “nonbinding”, therefore it does not hold the promise that statehood must happen. “It’s all about convincing Congress, so if the turnout is

better and the support is still high, Puerto Rican leaders and statehood supporters will have an even stronger case to lay before Congress.”⁷



Statehood Benefits

Puerto Rico has numerous advantages to gain from statehood. First of all, they could see a large improvement in their quality of life, not only economically speaking to the larger influx of tourists and better and less economic regulations, but also in terms of rights; Puerto Ricans will enjoy the same rights and laws applied to the rest of the United States. A second very important advantage is improved health care for Puerto Ricans because the implementation of the Affordable Care Act in the state, also known as Obamacare. As discussed in the previous section of the guide, Puerto Ricans have had major problems with accessing healthcare, especially after Hurricane Maria. Thirdly, it will provide more job opportunities for Puerto Ricans who will easily move around the country, and the island will attract more social entrepreneurship which it is greatly lacking of. In an attempt to decrease US unemployment figures, the government will be incentivized to promote industry jobs in Puerto Rico. A statehood would allow Puerto Ricans to have a say in laws that affect them, according to the 1st Amendment of the United States constitution. The most important right in mind is giving Puerto Ricans the right to vote in their presidential and congressional elections. In terms of a benefits for the government of the United States, it will see increased tax revenues because Puerto Rico would be

⁷ Willingham, AJ. "Puerto Rico's Statehood Debate: 5 Big Questions." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 13 June 2017, edition.cnn.com/2017/06/12/politics/puerto-rico-question-answers-statehood-trnd/index.html.

subject to all federal taxes that the rest of the states are, such as the federal income tax.

Statehood Downsides

There are, however, some potential downsides to Puerto Rico becoming a state of the USA. First of all, there is the problem of the U.S. inheriting Puerto Rico's debt, which is an issue that many Americans on the mainland are opposed to. Secondly, the United States will see an increase in poverty levels, crime, and the unemployment rate as a whole. A large portion of the Puerto Rican population are very poor compared to the rest of the American populous. However, this could act as an incentive for the American government to increase its spending in Puerto Rico on infrastructure, schools, and other means, in order to bring economic development to the island. However, this causes the obvious problem of an increased government spending program on Puerto Rico, which increases the national deficit, with which the United States already has a serious issue. Another important point is that Puerto Ricans might be unable to pay federal income tax. Puerto Ricans are already required to pay some US federal taxes, but residents do not have to pay the federal personal income tax. The idea of a loss of Puerto Rican identity has concerned some locals on the island which believe that through the years, Puerto Rico has in fact cultivated a distinct identity of the mainland USA that should be preserved. Finally, on the practical challenges, the U.S. will have to amend the flag to reflect all 51 states, which may sound like a small issue, but can cost the government and businesses millions of dollars.

Public Opinion Worth Noting

With recent natural disasters such as Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico has really, deeply felt the absence of the U.S. help, as it being just a US territory, minimum care was provided to support the people and fix the damages caused by the disasters. The scale of Maria's destruction has been devastating, causing as much as \$94 billion in damage — a crippling toll for an island that was already billions of dollars in debt. The natural disaster primarily affected Puerto Rico's poorest residents, who have fewer resources available to help them recover and rebuild. Many of whom live in hard to reach places such as mountain slopes, which makes the restoration of water and electricity even harder. Now, more than ever Puerto Ricans have felt like they needed the U.S. by their side, as can be seen from this comment of a Puerto Rican referendum voter: "If there's an earthquake in Puerto Rico, who is going to send the help? The Americans! This is their land!" said Gladys Martínez Cruz, 73, a retired tax clerk in San Juan's Barrio Obrero neighborhood. "We need someone who is going to support us, send us money. There's a lot of hunger in Puerto Rico, even with the help we get."

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

USA

The United States is a federal republic made up of 50 states, a federal district, five territories and several uninhabited island possessions. Making up the primary administrative districts are states and other territories. These are then subdivided into counties and independent cities. The District of Columbia is a federal district that contains the capital of the United States, Washington DC. The states and the District of Columbia choose the President of the United States. Each state has presidential electors equal to the number of their Representatives and Senators in Congress; the District of Columbia has three (because of the 23rd Amendment). Territories and colonies of the United States such as Puerto Rico do not have presidential electors, and so people in those territories do not have the right to vote in the presidential elections.

Puerto Rico

The political scene of Puerto Rico takes place in the framework of a republican democratic type of government which is under the jurisdiction and sovereignty of the United States as it officially is an organized unincorporated territory.

Statehood Movement in Puerto Rico

The statehood movement in Puerto Rico seeks for Puerto Rico to be integrated in the United States as the 51st state. Since 1958, five referendums have been held on the statehood issue. The most recent one happened in 2017. The population of Puerto Rico as of 2015 was over 3 million people, which is larger than 21 US states.

United Nations

The UN in a Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty has shown a critical view on the USA and its handling of Puerto Rico and its political and economic issues. Writing, "Political rights and poverty are inextricably linked in Puerto Rico. If it were a state, Puerto Rico would be the poorest state in the Union. But Puerto Rico is not a state, it is a mere 'territory.' Puerto Ricans have no representative with full voting rights in Congress and, unless living stateside, cannot vote for the President of the United States. In a country that likes to see itself as the oldest democracy in the world and a staunch defender of political rights on the international stage, more than 3 million people who live on the island have no power in their own capital." Puerto Rico's political status is to be blamed by the UN for its poor economy. Philip Alston continues writing in the UN report "It is not for me to suggest any resolution to the hotly contested issue of Puerto Rico's constitutional status. But what is clear is that many, probably most, Puerto Ricans believe deeply that they are presently colonized and that the US Congress is happy to leave them in the no-man's land of no meaningful Congressional representation and no ability to really move to govern

themselves. In light of recent Supreme Court jurisprudence and Congress’s adoption of PROMESA there would seem to be good reason for the UN Decolonization Committee to conclude that the island is no longer a self-governing territory.”⁸

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of event
1493	Puerto Rico is discovered and becomes part of the Spanish colonies
1898	Puerto Rico is officially under U.S. Control under the Treaty of Paris
1917	US citizenship is granted for all Puerto Ricans
1950	The commonwealth bill is signed by President Truman
1967	First status referendum Options: commonwealth, statehood or independence
1993	Second status referendum Options: commonwealth, statehood or independence
1993	Spanish and English become the official languages
1998	Third status referendums Options : statehood, independence, free association, territorial commonwealth or none of the above
2012	Fourth referendum The majority voted for statehood
2017	Final referendum Options: statehood, independence/free association and “Current territorial status”

RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Treaty of Paris (1898)

⁸ 7, 2018 Posted June. “UN Report on Extreme Poverty Blames Puerto Rico’s Political Status.” Puerto Rico Report, 6 June 2018, www.puertoricoreport.com/un-report-on-extreme-poverty-blames-puerto-ricos-political-status/.

Spain and the United States of America signed a peace treaty ending the Spanish-American War, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Philippines were passed on to the United States

UN Resolution 65/119

General Assembly Resolution on the Eradication of Colonialism, Puerto Rico is considered by many scholars still to be a colony and one of the few left in today's world

UN Resolution 71/104

General Assembly Resolution on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples by the specialized agencies and the international institutions associated with the United Nations

UN Report AC.109/2018/L.13

Report from the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples which is part of the 4th General Assembly Committee, report on the status of Puerto Rico

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Since 1967 there has been a total of 4 referendums concerning the issue. Through the years the options and the public opinion on the matter changed which sometimes led to confusing results such as the referendum that was held in 2012. 54% of the votes on the referendum, concerning the first question, had rejected the idea of continuing under the current territorial colonial status (also known as the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico). On the second question the house was given options out of 4 solutions, and 61% voted for statehood. However these results were ignored by Congress because there were almost 500,000 blank ballots, which meant that a big percentage of the population did not participate in the voting procedure.

The special committee on decolonization has approved multiple draft resolutions that called upon the United States government to speed up the process that will eventually allow the Puerto Rican people the right to fully exercise independence and self-determination. They also called on the United States to allow Puerto Rico's people to take decisions in sovereign matter. Which means that they can take part in urgent social and economic matters.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The official control that the United States of America's government has on the state of Puerto Rico could be an advantage to the beginning of decolonizing the state. This could be done through means of economic and social support. Furthermore the special committee on decolonization should continue working on the previous draft resolutions and further discuss them so as to achieve the goal.

A well written and thought out resolution should include several of the key points mentioned below. Firstly, there must be a strong discussion on the ideas of self-determination, sovereignty, referencing important documents on the creation of nation-states like the Montevideo Convention on statehood, established in 1933, and also including the definitions of the crucial key terms (self-determination, sovereignty). As we are speaking on the question of statehood, it is important to refer to a referendum on statehood. However, this leads to the second point, which is to have a good framework behind the referendum and the whole solution process. In order to be able to reach a solution that would could be followed and agreed upon by all parties, the UN must be monitoring any referendums, or meetings between the belligerent parties that would occur.

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