

Will the United States Finally Decolonize Puerto Rico?

By [Prof. Pedro Cabán](#)

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On April 14, 2021, the House Committee on Natural Resources held hearings on two competing bills to end Puerto Rico’s colonial status. The different bills reflect the changing political dynamics in the archipelago, as well as the Puerto Rican diaspora’s growing political clout. HR 1522, the Puerto Rican State Admission Act, binds Congress to admit Puerto Rico into the Union if a majority vote in favor of doing so in a special referendum. HR 2070, the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act, authorizes the insular legislature to convene a semi-permanent status convention where elected delegates decide on alternative self-determination options that are “outside the territorial clause of the constitution.” The bill creates a bilateral negotiating commission of US government officials and the convention delegates. In a referendum, voters will select a territorial option, which may include statehood, independence and sovereign free association. The bill requires that Congress “approve a joint resolution to ratify the preferred self-determination option” approved in a referendum. Commonwealth [Estado Libre Asociado-ELA] is not included as an option in this status bill.

These bills were introduced as Puerto Rico copes with a vexing political and economic landscape in the aftermath of natural disasters, economic collapse, persistent public protests, a crisis of governability and a pandemic. Puerto Rico is at a crossroads. The political class is beleaguered, and lacks the skills and legitimacy to manage the colony. A financial control board imposed by the federal government and unaccountable to the people rides roughshod over the economy. The Statehood Admission Act is not a solution to the crisis since it wants to perpetuate the rule of those who are responsible for the crisis in the first place. In contrast, the Self Determination Act creates the possibility for a new political leadership to oversee Puerto Rico’s decolonization.

HR 2070 has generated a lot of political attention, grass roots activity and media coverage. This is the first time since 2009 that a self-determination bill has been introduced in both houses of congress. HR 1522, on the other hand, has received little attention. It is merely the latest in a stream of statehood bills. This statehood bill, as the others before it, will languish in committee. The Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP) and its stateside supporters have introduced six “Puerto Rico Statehood Admissions Acts since the 114th Congress in

2015-2016. None of them has made it out of the Senate committee of jurisdiction. The PNP is urgently pushing for statehood, but it can't convince Congress that Puerto Ricans are clamoring for it. Even before HR 1522 was introduced, prominent senators on both sides of the aisle announced that Puerto Rico's admission into the Union was doubtful at best. In January 2021 Senator Cory Booker said there were not enough votes in the Senate to support statehood. Republican Senator Rick Scott agreed the Senate would not admit [Puerto Rico into the Union](#). Senator Charles Schumer said that he "is not going to support the [statehood bill](#)," noting that the referendums "did not reflect the strong consensus required to advance" [a statehood bill](#). Although the statehood bill is dead on arrival, Governor Pedro Pierluisi is determined to pursue this [lost cause](#).

In 2020 the PNP held a status referendum in an effort to drum up support for the [statehood party](#) candidates. Voters were asked "Should Puerto Rico be admitted immediately into the Union as a State?" Fifty two percent of the voters answered yes. PNP [declared](#) this a significant victory and called on Congress to accept the referendum results. A Columbia University law professor called the results historic, and claimed that with this vote the "people stake their claim to [statehood](#)." But since only 53% of the electorate voted, and of those 38,000 cast blank ballots, some argue that only 26% supported [statehood](#)." The PNP has regularly been criticized for designing referendum ballots that are intentionally confusing in order to steer voters to the [statehood option](#). Governor García Padilla, of the pro-Commonwealth Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), told a Senate Committee in 2013 that the purported growth in statehood support was due to changes in the electoral law ordered by the PNP-controlled electoral commission. "There has not been a surge in statehood support, just a change in how votes are counted or should I say [excluded](#)." Senator Richard Wicker said that support for statehood had "not changed significantly over the last 20 years," and there is no "impetus for Congress to entertain yet another" bill to admit Puerto Rico [into the Union](#).

Since 2004 electoral participation has declined rapidly from 82% in [2004 to 53% in 2020](#). Governors are being elected with ever smaller pluralities. Pedro Pierluisi, the unpopular and polarizing statehood gubernatorial candidate, claimed victory in the 2020 elections with only 33% of the votes cast. A well-known sociologist calculated that electoral support for the PNP has been declining steadily. In the 2012 elections the PNP got 834,191 votes, but in 2020 the number [dropped to 623, 053](#). The PNP is barely hanging on to power. After the ouster of Governor Rosselló in 2019 and the ill-fated administration of his successor, Wanda Vásquez, the PNP's credibility is in shreds. One prominent journalist and commentary is convinced that the state in Puerto Rico [has failed](#).

The PPD, the architect of now discredited ELA, is struggling for political survival as well. In the 2012 status referendum 54% of the voters said no to the statement "Puerto Rico should continue to have its present [form of territorial status](#)." When Puerto Ricans voted against ELA, they voted to end colonialism. After the vote the PPD seems to have lost its way. For decades the PPD pushed to "enhance" the Commonwealth by getting Congress to grant it autonomy over key policy areas. But Congress rejected the proposals as "constitutionally [impermissible](#)." After the 2012 referendum Senator Ron Wyden, Chairman of the Natural Resources Committee, said that "the new commonwealth option continues to be advocated as a viable option by some. [It is not](#)." He noted that "the current relationship undermines our country's moral standing in the world." Nonetheless, PPD president and senator José Luis Dalmau warned Congress that excluding ELA as a territorial option in the Self Determination Act of 2021 would be "[invalid](#)." It seems that neither the PNP nor the PPD

are willing to accept that Congress has decided to permanently reject their territorial ambitions.

Puerto Rico has struggled through five turbulent and traumatic years. By 2015, after being mired in an economic recession for a decade, Puerto Rico had amassed an [insurmountable debt](#). President Obama responded to the fiscal crisis by rescinding Puerto Rico's fiscal autonomy. He imposed a Financial Oversight Management Board (FOMB) that usurped the legislature's control of the budget. The FOMB imposed a [neoliberal regime](#) with catastrophic consequences for the population. In 2017 Hurricanes Irma and María laid waste to Puerto Rico and a swarm of earthquakes in 2019 further devastated the archipelago, forcing a record number of Puerto Ricans to migrate to the [United States](#). Government ineptitude in responding to the emergency magnified the catastrophic effects of the natural disasters which [left over 4000 dead](#). The pandemic hit Puerto Rico as it was digging itself out of the earthquake's rubble. By mid-April 2021 over 2,200 had died from the [coronavirus](#).

In summer 2019 hundreds of thousands of indignant Puerto Ricans finally had had enough. After two weeks of protests, they forced the resignation of Governor Rosselló, a reviled figure widely blamed for Puerto Rico's [interminable crises](#). The extraordinary protests set the stage for an unexpected political party realignment [the following year](#). In the 2020 elections the still aggrieved population voted in record numbers for political parties that support independence and self-determination. The venerable Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), and upstart Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (MVC), obtained 28 percent of the [gubernatorial vote](#), and their candidates were elected to the legislature. Their victory was a stunning rejection of the political class. Both the MVC and PIP testified in support of HR 2070, and are actively advancing a progressive agenda in the legislature.

Puerto Ricans are tired of politics as usual. Protests are now a way of life, and Puerto Ricans openly challenge the authority of an ailing colonial state whose legitimacy is in [shreds](#). The young reject the PNP and PPD which are both obsessed with territorial [status](#). They are resisting sweeping [austerity measures](#) and resolutely face the ensuing police brutality. Women feminists were a vital force in the [summer 2019](#) uprising and established the [Colectiva Feminista en Construcción](#). In the early days of May 2021 the *Colectiva* held fervent and boisterous demonstrations to protest the government's failure to contain the [plague of femicides](#). Hundreds of others are protesting the government's continued failure respond to the transportation and health crisis that victimize the [residents of Vieques](#). Labor unions are challenging Governor Pierluisi's decision to sell the public electric utility to the [LUMA corporation](#). Puerto Ricans in all walks of life have turned to a new politics of solidarity, resilience and [resistance](#). They have broken with a culture of dependency on the government, or "[assistenialism](#)."

Puerto Ricans have built a multitude of mutual aid associations that provide vital services the government has essentially [forsaken](#). An array of other issue-specific organizations are challenging destructive [environmental policies](#), are fighting [gentrification](#) driven by Americans attracted by generous [tax incentives](#). Other organizations are fighting privatization of the publicly owned [assets and resources](#), and others are working toward energy and food self-[sufficiency](#). Indeed, one of the most remarkable developments of the last few years has been the politicization of the population and the emergence of a political consciousness that demands government accountability. One well known activist described the emergence of "an unforeseen duality between the self-management movement and the protests that were organized [to defend the people](#)" (*author's translation*). The colonial state is floundering in this hyper-politicized environment.

Many, if not most, of the 5.8 million Puerto Ricans who reside in the United States consider themselves members of the Puerto Rican nation. The Puerto Rican diaspora is actively promoting the Self Determination Act, while combating the PNP's [statehood campaign](#). HR 2070 has captured the attention of virtually all Puerto Rican diaspora organizations. Ninety organizations wrote to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority [Leader Chuck Schumer](#) urging them "to support and prioritize the passage of the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act." Boricuas Unidos en la Diaspora Puerto Rico (BUDPR), Diaspora en Resistencia, Power4PuertoRico, Our Revolution Puerto Rico and Frente Independentista Boricua have scores of thousands of followers on their social media platforms. These organizations joined forces with Vamos a Puerto Rico, a prominent Puerto Rico-based social justice grass roots organization, to lobby for HR 2070. Diaspora organizations placed ads in the [New York Times](#), convened webinars on decolonization and self-determination, organized zoom panels with representatives from the PIP and MVC, have [held rallies](#), lobbied congress, and set up a Twitter account to contact key [legislators](#). On April 20, diaspora organizations held a [public hearing](#) on HR 2070 and sent the proceedings to the Committee on [Natural Resources](#).

Progressive organizations including LatinoJustice, Center for Popular Democracy, Democratic Socialists of America, and Open Society Policy Center support HR 2070. The Center for American Progress applauded the bill, noting that the "landmark legislation would facilitate, not impose, a status resolution mechanism to resolve 123 years of colonialism on the [island](#)." Pierluisi and the PNP were caught off guard by the scope of activism [for HR 2070](#).

The political realignment that is taking place in Puerto Rico creates a propitious moment for the self-determination act to become law. The federal government knows that the once reliable political class can no longer manage the colony. If HR 2070 becomes law, years may pass before Congress and the convention delegates agree on self-determination options. In the interim the anti-colonial forces can consolidate and expand their political base. With the Commonwealth excluded as a territorial option, and the PNP unable to generate support in Congress, independence or a sovereign free-associated state emerge as real possibilities for the world's oldest colony.

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Pedro Cabán is Professor of Latin American, Caribbean and U.S. Latino Studies at the University at Albany. He is the author of "Constructing a Colonial People: Puerto Rico and the United States: 1898-1932."

Featured image: Scene from a protest in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Photo: Billboard

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