



April 12th, 2021
San Juan, Puerto Rico

Hon. Raúl M. Grijalva
Chair
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives

RE: Written Testimony of Manuel Natal-Albelo on H.R. 1522 and H.R. 2070

Chairman Grijalva and Members of the Committee on National Resources:

My name is Manuel Natal-Albelo, a former member of Puerto Rico's House of Representatives and as of last Sunday, the General Coordinator of *Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana* (Citizens Victory Movement), a recently created, progressive, people-powered, and community-centered political party in Puerto Rico. I was invited by the Committee to testify before the Full Committee Legislative Hearing on H.R. 1522, "Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act" and H.R. 2070, "Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2021".

I must stress from the outset that Puerto Rico has been a colony of the United States since 1898 and legally defined as an unincorporated territory, a possession but not part of the United States, under the plenary powers of Congress. Although Congress has reorganized the territorial government over the years leading up to the creation of the present Commonwealth status in 1952, the colonial nature of the relationship has remained unchanged. Since 1898, Congress has **never** consulted the Puerto Rican people in a binding plebiscite or referendum on whether to retain the present status, become independent, or a state of the Union. Having retained its plenary powers, Congress should assume its responsibility for a territory it claims as a possession. Yet, it has avoided doing so for 123 years.

Today we have an opportunity to change that. This Committee, and eventually, Congress, is presented with a unique choice between two paths. The first path is one that we have traveled many times before: plebiscites or referenda promulgated unilaterally and without consensus by a political party on the island, devoid of informed public deliberation, and usually designed to be slanted towards the outcome favored by the ruling party, the final results of which have lacked democratic legitimacy, whether the "prevailing" option receives 97% of the votes or 0%. That path of exclusion and

subordination is currently represented by H.R. 1522, the “Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act”. The second path is one that, although it has been historically promoted by diverse and well-respected groups in Puerto Rico, has never been supported by Congress, or by any previous administration in Puerto Rico: a binding self-determination process, in which all non-colonial non-territorial options can compete on a level playing field, and in which the People of Puerto Rico get to cast an informed vote and Congress must act upon the will of the majority. That path of inclusion and empowerment is currently represented by H.R. 2070, the “Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2021”.

We chose the latter and urge Congress to the same. *We*, a political movement that promotes real change in all aspects of our lives as Puerto Ricans, including ending the colonial relationship with the United States. *We*, the only political movement in Puerto Rico that has elected officials from all three non-colonial non-territorial options. That is: statehood, independence, and some form of free association. How have we managed to achieve what the two-party system in Puerto Rico had not in more than 70 years? By focusing on finding common ground and not on how we can cancel each other’s efforts on the status question. In this particular case, we have focused on building a fair and inclusive process, rather than trying to predetermine the result. This is why we propose the Constitutional Status Convention (*Asamblea Constitucional de Status* in Spanish) as the best means for decolonizing Puerto Rico. Our proposal provides for the following course of action:

1. The Legislature of Puerto Rico will call a Status Convention (SC).
2. The People of Puerto Rico will elect delegates to the convention, representatives of all three non-colonial non-territorial options (statehood, independence, and some form of free association).
3. The delegates will draft definitions on self-determination options for Puerto Rico, which shall be outside the Territorial Clause of the United States Constitution, and will draft transition plans for each self-determination option.
4. These self-determination options and the transition plans will be negotiated with Congress, and the results of this process will be binding upon Congress.
5. The People of Puerto Rico will vote for all the self-determination options drafted by the Convention and adopted by Congress in a referendum. The winning option will be enacted. If in the first referendum no option obtains more than 50% of the vote, a second-round will be held between the two options that obtained the most votes in the first round.¹

¹ We note that H.R. 2070 promotes the use of ranked-choice voting for the final referendum, and we recognize that it is another legitimate electoral mechanism for reaching a majority mandate on a self-determination option.

As proponents of the Constitutional Status Convention as a means of exercising our right of self-determination, we reject the argument made by some that this mechanism places the solution of the status question in the hands of a minority or a few people or in “small rooms” and not in the hands of the people. With this process, the People of Puerto Rico elect the delegates to the Status Convention, and the people, through a referendum, also determine which self-determination option they prefer. Nobody decides for the people. The delegates to the Convention have the task of elaborating the options to be presented to the people in a referendum. This is the task performed in the past by the legislators who drafted the legislation for the five previous status plebiscites conducted in 1967, 1993, 1998, 2012, and 2017. In our case, we propose that this task be carried out by a special body, the Constitutional Status Convention, elected for that specific purpose, in negotiation with Congress, and the people will vote at the end of the drafting and negotiation process.

Thus, we oppose H.R. 1522, “Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act”. Puerto Rico’s colonial condition requires a fair and inclusive self-determination process in line with international law that considers all non-colonial, non-territorial options, and not merely an admission bill. On the other hand, we are optimistic about the proposals included in H.R. 2070, “Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2021”. It is high time for Congress to recognize the right of self-determination for the People of Puerto Rico and act expeditiously to put an end to the existing colonial relationship.

Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens as well as a nation, a people with their own identity and culture, under U.S. colonial rule since 1898. Sometimes these facts generate confusion regarding Puerto Rico's relation with the United States. Should Puerto Ricans aspire to become a state of the Union? Should they become independent? Should they become a sovereign freely associated state with the United States? A democratic response from the United States Congress should be: that is for them, not us, to decide. The first step in that process shall be done by ourselves, *las puertorriqueñas y los puertorriqueños*, in a true, binding exercise of self-determination.



MANUEL NATAL-ALBELO

General Coordinator

Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana