

Committee: Special Political and Decolonization Committee (GA4)

Topic: The Question of Puerto Rico

Student Officer: Panagiotis Sachinis

Position: Co-Chair

Personal Introduction

Dear Delegates,

My name is Panagiotis Sachinis and I am an IB2 student attending St. Catherine's British School in Athens. I am absolutely honored and excited to be the Co-Chair in the Special Political and Decolonization Committee for the upcoming CSMUN Conference.

Personally, I believe MUN is a great time to meet others with similar interests, like-minded people who share a common care for the world. However, MUN events also allow us to see the world from a different angle, and to reflect on the actions and decisions that shape our society. The question of Puerto Rico is an important issue which affects millions of people, both within Puerto Rico, but also within the United States and surrounding areas, hence making it a vital issue which will ensure the stability of the region.

Although this study guide will serve as a strong foundation for your research towards this topic, I heavily advise that you extend your knowledge of both the topic, related issues, and your delegation's policy on the matter. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at any time through my email, which will be attached below. Best of luck in your future endeavours, and I look forward to meeting and working with you all!



Sincerely,

Panagiotis Sachinis

Email: pansachinis@gmail.com

Introduction

Puerto Rico is a relatively small island located in the Caribbean to the East of the island of Española. Puerto Rico's political status has been an issue that has affected the state itself, the United States, and surrounding states for over a century. A quite peculiar situation, Puerto Rico falls under the category of an unincorporated territory of the United States. It is not a sovereign nation, albeit having its own government, yet it is not classified as a state of the United States.

This means that Puerto Rico lacks a lot of the basic freedoms of a sovereign nation, such as self-determination and a fully independent cultural identity which, while it is distinct in many ways, is heavily influenced by American culture. Due to its lack of statehood, Puerto Rico does not have



Figure 1: Location of Puerto Rico

voting rights in federal legislature of the United States or for the Head of State (President of the United States). Despite the plethora of disadvantages, Puerto Rico enjoys some benefits, such as US citizenship, military protection, the use of the US Dollar, and support of the US economy. Its status also means that not all citizens have to pay income tax, contrary to other US states.

In 1953, Puerto Rico was removed by the United Nations from the list of non-self-governing territories, effectively showing Puerto Rico's ability to self-determine, even

¹"Puerto Rico". En.Wikipedia.Org, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto_Rico.



though it remains under the control of the Territorial Clause of the U.S. Constitution. This has created an ambiguity to its status even within the Puerto Rican people. Several referenda have been held in order to gauge the public's opinion on Puerto Rico's political status, with the most significant having taken place in 1967, 1993, 2012 and 2017, with a further referendum set to take place in November of 2020, with the aim of finalizing Puerto Rico's public opinion on statehood.

A number of issues currently plague the status of Puerto Rico. Beyond its ambiguous state, corruption both within the government of Puerto Rico and between the PR and US governments impacts the situation, along with the severe socioeconomic impacts of recent natural disasters, which have highlighted the apparent corruption between the states, and the need for immediate action. As delegates, it is vital that this committee comes up with solutions that allow for both the United States and Puerto Rico to maintain relations and find adequate ways to continue functioning, either with Puerto Rico as a US State or as a sovereign entity.



Definition of Key Terms

Unincorporated Territory

"A United States Territory in which the United States Congress has determined that only selected parts of the United States Constitution apply."²

Sovereignty

"Supreme power especially over a body politic, freedom from external control, autonomy."³

Commonwealth

General: "An association of self-governing autonomous states more or less loosely associated in a common allegiance."

Specific: "A political unit having local autonomy but voluntarily united with the U.S. —used officially of Puerto Rico and of the Northern Mariana Islands."⁴

Referendum

"The principle or practice of submitting to popular vote a measure passed on or proposed by a legislative body or by popular initiative."⁵

²"Unincorporated Territory". *Ldapwiki.Com*, 2018,
<https://ldapwiki.com/wiki/Unincorporated%20territory>.

³Definition Of SOVEREIGNTY". *Merriam-Webster.Com*,
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sovereignty>.

⁴Definition Of COMMONWEALTH". *Merriam-Webster.Com*,
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/commonwealth>.



Insular Cases

"Cases heard by the [US] Supreme Court from 1901 up to the 1920's for the purpose of defining how the US would handle its relationship with [its] new territories and their governments."⁶

Voting Rights

"Rights of participation in especially public elections."⁷

Natural Disaster

"A sudden and terrible event in nature (such as a hurricane, tornado, or flood) that usually results in serious damage and many deaths."⁸

Corruption

"Dishonest or illegal behavior especially by powerful people (such as government officials or police officers)."⁹

⁵"Definition Of REFERENDUM". *Merriam-Webster.Com*,
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/referendum>.

⁶"What Were The Insular Cases In The Supreme Court?". *Study.Com*,
<https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-were-the-insular-cases-in-the-supreme-court.html>.

⁷Legal Definition Of VOTING RIGHTS". *Merriam-Webster.Com*,
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/legal/voting%20rights>.

⁸"Definition Of NATURAL DISASTER". *Merriam-Webster.Com*,
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/natural%20disaster>.

⁹"Definition Of CORRUPTION". *Merriam-Webster.Com*,
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/corruption>.



Background Information

Puerto Rico's political status remains an ambiguous and difficult one, and is one which needs to be solved in order to maintain socioeconomic stability in the Caribbean region. However, the situation is plagued with various issues that stop it from being able to be fully solved. Regarding Puerto Rico, several key issues surround it, such as corruption within the government, lack of self economic sustainability, political instability, and vulnerability to natural disasters due to its location, a key fact which was highlighted especially when the island was hit by Hurricane Maria. The lack of support from the United States in these cases amplifies the consequences, while destabilizing the Puerto Rican-American relationship.

Puerto Rico's Status In Depth

Unincorporated Territory

Puerto Rico's ambiguous political status lies on the fact that it is an unincorporated territory. As previously mentioned, this entails that it does not have statehood with the United States, however is entitled to certain benefits from the United States. However, it also lacks many benefits it would gain from either full statehood or full sovereignty. After the end of the Spanish-American War, the 1898 Treaty of Paris assigned certain territories to the United States as the victors of the war, which included Guam, the Phillipines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. While most of the other territories were either granted independence or gained it, Puerto Rico remained a US territory until 1950, when legislation P.L. 81-600 allowed it to hold a constitutional convention and create a government by 1952. Although many believed that this was a move towards Puerto Rican independence, the island has remained under US sovereignty despite numerous efforts to either recognize its independence or achieve full statehood. Popular opinion however has shifted significantly



in the past 50 years since the first referendum was held, with the overwhelming majority now choosing statehood over free association, independence, or unincorporated territory.

Implications of the Current Situation

The current political situation has severe implications and consequences for Puerto Rico and its citizens, although it brings about certain benefits. Primarily, the island nation receives significant support from the United States economically, as it has access to the US economy and stock market, through the use of the US Dollar, and by having similar taxes to other US states. Puerto Rican citizens also receive US citizenship and are allowed to travel freely to the United States. The island also receives military protection, with four US military installations present on the island and a strong presence of the US Coast Guard in various locations. Its status also implies that not all citizens have to pay income tax, which is a benefit exclusive to the Puerto Rican people.

It is important to note that the current political status of Puerto Rico brings about significant implications and consequences for both the nation as a whole and its citizens. Puerto Rico lacks many of the basic freedoms of an independent nation, such as the ability to self-determine and the lack of a fully independent cultural identity. Puerto Rico does not have sufficient representation and voting rights in the US Congress, and the nation is not able to vote for federal legislature or for the Head of State. Despite the benefit of the US economy and the lack of import and export duties by being a US territory, its lack of statehood also means that a significant tax is imposed on most imports, raising the price of resources and materials being brought into the country.¹⁰ The ambiguity of the situation has also led multiple government officials towards corruption, an issue which plagues Puerto Rico to this day, with recent events such as the resignation of Governor Ricardo A. Roselló highlighting this. A further implication of the situation is the lack of support from

¹⁰"Import Tariffs & Fees Overview | International Trade Administration". *Trade.Gov*, 2020, <https://www.trade.gov/import-tariffs-fees-overview>. Accessed 15 July 2020.



the United States in case of emergency, in terms of resources, man power, and finances, issues which have been amplified especially under the Trump Administration.

Insular Cases

The Insular Cases were a series of US Supreme Court rulings which took place primarily between 1901 and 1905. The Insular Cases primarily dealt with the political status of the US territories acquired after the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898. More specifically, the cases had to deal with the question of whether the citizens of the acquired territories, which included Guam, the Phillipines, and Puerto Rico, were citizens of the United States. Furthermore, the rulings decided the question of how American constitutional rights which applied to US States applied to the newly acquired territories.

The Supreme Court rulings concluded with the fact that the constitutional protection of rights would not always or automatically apply and extend to all US territories and areas and American control¹¹. In the case of Puerto Rico, this ruled that even though citizens of Puerto Rico were citizens of the United States, some basic constitutional rights did not apply to them (such as the ability to maintain US citizenship in the case that Puerto Rico achieved independence). Many of the rulings made by the Insular Cases still stand today, and have had a significant effect on the current situation. One of the most significant was the *Downes vs Bidwell Case* in 1901. It created a distinction between the definitions for incorporated and unincorporated territory, along with examining the imposition of taxes and tarrifs on territories. Another important case was the *De Lima vs Bidwell Case* in 1901. This case was a Supreme Court ruling which concluded that duties could not be collected from the citizens of Puerto Rico.

¹¹Bartholomew, H et al. *The Louisiana Purchase And American Expansion: 1803–1898*. Rowman And Littlefield Publishers, 2005.



Questions on the Status of Puerto Rico

The Effect of the Referenda

Various referenda have taken place in order to outline the public opinion on the political status of Puerto Rico. There have been five that have been the most significant, however none have provided a significant change to the political system of Puerto Rico. Political opinion has progressed significantly since the first referendum in 1967, with the latest in 2017 showing over 97% of the populous wishing for US statehood, despite the very low turnout rate¹². The 1967 referendum in contrast, showed a majority of the population wishing to remain under US sovereignty, while almost none of the referenda have sought for full independence. The issue with these referenda stands on the fact that almost no political change has taken place despite growing public unrest. This is sought to be changed with the provisional November 2020 referendum, which seeks to be the final and determining referendum for Puerto Rico's future.

The Role of the US Congress

The US Congress has significant control over the political events and changes in Puerto Rico. The most significant is the Territories Clause of the United States Constitution, which effectively allows Congress to either grant Puerto Rico full statehood or full independence. The issue with the control the US Congress has over Puerto Rico is that the nation lacks representation within it. Even if a referendum concludes that Puerto Rico should seek full statehood, the Congress could deny that request. However, this is an issue which was partially fixed by the Puerto Rico Statehood Admissions Act. Puerto Rico's lack of control over their own political system is a significant issue which prevails.

¹²"Official Results Of 2017 Plebiscite - Puerto Rico Report". *Puerto Rico Report*, 2017, <https://www.puertoricoreport.com/official-results-2017-plebiscite/>.



Issues Surrounding Puerto Rico

Corruption and Recent Uprisings

Unfortunately, corruption is one of the key issues that plagues the Puerto Rican government. The most recent example of this took place in July of 2019, with the ousting of Governor Ricardo A. Roselló, along with the arrest of six other government officials. His resignation was a result of popular uprisings, with hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans



Figure 2: Protests in Puerto Rico¹³

storming the streets of San Juan and demanding his resignation¹⁴. The Telegram scandal, often referred to as Telegramgate, was a series of screenshots leaked from a group chat on the messaging app Telegram, which included the governor. The screenshots included vulgar and homophobic language by the governor, harassing several other members of government. Furthermore, Roselló allegedly conducted informal business with other participants in chat, giving them unfair advantages and priorities in business dealings for his personal benefit. The uprising caused by this scandal and the governor's ousting is seen by many as a revolutionary moment for Puerto Rico, to lead the people into a better future.

Natural Disasters and Hurricane Maria

¹³Ramirez, William. "After The Power Of Protest Ousts A Governor, Puerto Rico Has A New Leader. ForNow.". American Civil Liberties Union, 2019, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/free-speech/rights-protesters/after-power-protest-ousts-governor-puerto-rico-has-new-leader-now>.

¹⁴Robles, Frances, and Alejandra Rosa. "'The People Can'T Take It Anymore': Puerto Rico Erupts In A DayOf Protests". *Nytimes.Com*, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/22/us/puerto-rico-protests-politics.html>.



On September 20th, 2017, the Category 5 Hurricane Maria struck the island, causing devastating damage and killing over 3000 people in the process and plunging the entire population into a severe humanitarian crisis¹⁶. Following shortly after the storm, the entire island lost power for multiple days, with access to clean water and food becoming scarce. Roughly 80% of the island nation's agriculture was destroyed, reaching an estimated economic deficit of \$780 million USD.



Figure 3: Aftermath of Hurricane Maria [3]

Infrastructure was vastly destroyed, and the island was plunged into a general economic crisis, putting it at the brink of bankruptcy. Months after the storm, the Puerto Rican government submitted a report to the US Congress detailing that the estimated cost to repair the damage caused by Hurricane Maria is roughly \$139 billion USD¹⁷. The damaged infrastructure meant that it took roughly 11 months for the power grid to be fully restored. Due to the vast implications on the people, many decided to emigrate out of Puerto Rico, with an expected 8% decrease in the population by 2024.

The most significant political issue regarding the situation of Hurricane Maria is the lack of support and reaction from the United States. Although the Hurricane took place in September of 2017, President Donald Trump delayed the signing of the relief legislation for Puerto Rico and other states until June of 2019. Furthermore, the signed legislation only allotted \$19 billion USD to Puerto Rico for relief, which is negligible compared to the estimated cost of the damage.

¹⁵ Vick, Karl. "How The U.S. Ignored Puerto Rico After Hurricane Maria". Time, 2017, <https://time.com/4960647/us-turned-its-back-on-puerto-rico/>.

¹⁶"The Facts: Hurricane Maria's Effect On Puerto Rico". Mercy Corps, 2020, <https://www.mercycorps.org/blog/quick-facts-hurricane-maria-puerto-rico>.

¹⁷Florida, Adrian. "NPR Choice Page". Npr.Org, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/09/637230089/puerto-rico-estimates-it-will-cost-139-billion-to-fully-recover-from-hurricane-m?t=1594811036496>.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United States of America

The United States acts as the bigger of the two parties, with Puerto Rico seeking US statehood in order to solve its ambiguous political status. As the dominant political power, it has sovereignty over Puerto Rico, and through the US Congress has the ability to control many of the domestic and international political decisions and changes that take place in Puerto Rico. In terms of political parties, both Republicans and Democrats fully support a change in Puerto Rico's political status, with the Republican party strongly supporting Puerto Rican statehood, while the Democratic party lies more in favour of self-determination and independence.

Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico is the smaller political power in this situation, and is the state which is seeking statehood from the US, or independence. It is largely under the control of the United States, in ways such as politically, economically, and militarily. The Puerto Rican people have largely sought for statehood in the most recent years, however that opinion used to lie towards keeping it as a colony during the time of the first referendum in 1967.

Spain

Spain's role is largely to play before the end of the Spanish-American War. Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony before the 1898 war concluded, with the United States taking over the island. Spain plays a significant role in the way Puerto Rican culture has formed, as well as language, as Spanish is still the dominant language in the island.



Other US Territories: American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands (NMI), and the US Virgin Islands (USVI)

In the case that Puerto Rico was to achieve statehood, there is a possibility that many other US Territories would begin seeking statehood. While none of these territories are as powerful of a case as Puerto Rico, the public and political opinion of their respective governments could shift, creating pressure on the United States to also induct these territories as states.



Timeline of events

<u>1493</u>	The island of Puerto Rico is discovered by Christopher Columbus, which he names San Juan Bautista.
<u>1898</u>	The start and end of the Spanish-American War. The United States won, with the Treaty of Paris of 1898 being signed to assign territories and terms for peace.
<u>1901-1905</u>	A series of cases by the US Supreme Court called the Insular Cases regarding the status of US territories.
<u>1917</u>	Puerto Ricans become US Citizens.
<u>1950</u>	US Congress enacts legislation P.L. 81-600, allowing Puerto Rico to hold a constitutional convention.
<u>1952</u>	Puerto Rico ratifies a constitution and a new republican form of government is established on the island. It is enforced by US federal law P.L. 82-447.
<u>1967</u>	The first referendum regarding the status of the island was held.
<u>1993</u>	The second referendum was held, this time with a higher turnout and more votes for statehood.
<u>1998</u>	A third referendum was held, this time with five voting options.
<u>2012</u>	A fourth referendum was held, with the majority voting for statehood.
<u>June, 2017</u>	The most recent (and fifth) referendum to be held, with an overwhelming majority voting for statehood.
<u>September, 2017</u>	Category 5 Hurricane Maria devastates the island, killing more than 3000 people.
<u>2019</u>	Riots and uprising against corruption lead to Gov. Ricardo A. Rosselló announcing his resignation.



2020	Another (and hopefully last) referendum will be held in November of 2020, COVID-19 permitting. It is vital that a higher turnout rate is witnessed, as this could decide Puerto Rico's future.
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Relevant UN Resolutions, Events, Treaties and Legislation

Insular Cases

A series of Supreme Court rulings between 1901 and 1905, which specified various detail regarding the US territories acquired during the Spanish-American War and Puerto Rico.

P.L. 81-600 (US Congress)

Allowed Puerto Rico to hold a constitutional convention and effectively create its own government¹⁸. Was a binding legislation which allowed Puerto Rico to move a step forward towards self-determination by creating its own government.

P.L. 82-447 (US Congress)

Puerto Rican government given force under this legislation, with the backing of the US Congress, the US President, and the Puerto Rican people¹⁹. Puerto Rican government was recognized by the United States, and many other nations/organizations which followed, suggesting Puerto Rico's ability to become independent.

¹⁸“Constitutional Amendments, Treaties, and Major Acts of Congress Referenced in the Text.” *GovInfo*, www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CDOC-108hdoc225/pdf/GPO-CDOC-108hdoc225-4-9.pdf.

¹⁹United States, Congress, *Public Law 447*. Chapter 567, US Congress, 1952, available at: <https://www.puertoricoreport.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/PL-82-447.pdf>.



Resolution 748 (United Nations General Assembly)

The United Nations recognizes Puerto Rico's self government and right to self determination through this resolution, drafted on the 27th of November, 1953²⁰. While it does not actively seek a change, this resolution placed the framework and suggested that Puerto Rico has the ability to seek independence, should the nation choose to do so, as well as outlining the fact that Puerto Rico was no longer considered a non-self-governing territory.

Resolution 1541 (United Nations General Assembly)

Presents a list of factors for when a colony has the capabilities of self-governance and independence²¹. Puerto Rico has a majority if not all of these factors, suggesting that it has the capability to handle independence.

H.R. 4901 - Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act of 2019

This bill effectively commits to making Puerto Rico a state of the United States, if the country chooses so through the November 2020 plebiscite²².

²⁰UN General Assembly, Cessation of the transmission of information under Article 73 e of the Charter in respect of Puerto Rico, 27 November 1953, A/RES/748, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3boof1de10.html>.

²¹UN General Assembly. *Principles Which Should Guide Members In Determining Whether Or Not An Obligation Exists To Transmit The Information Called For Under Article 73E Of The Charter*. United Nations, 1960, available at: [https://www.undocs.org/A/RES/1541\(XV\)](https://www.undocs.org/A/RES/1541(XV)).

²²United States, Congress, *Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act*. US Congress, 2019, available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/4901?s=1&r=9>



Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Various Referenda

As previously mentioned, a significant number of referenda have taken place in order to gauge the public opinion regarding Puerto Rico’s political status, however none of these have been decisive or conclusive. The key trend is the rising popularity of statehood among the people, along with a decrease in the votes to remain as a commonwealth, or to gain full independence. Voter turnout has generally been high, however an outlier was seen as a result of a boycott of the 2017 referendum, where a turnout of 22.9% was seen. Interestingly, a 97% majority for statehood was seen in this referendum. Below is a graph of the turnout and votes for statehood in the key referenda.

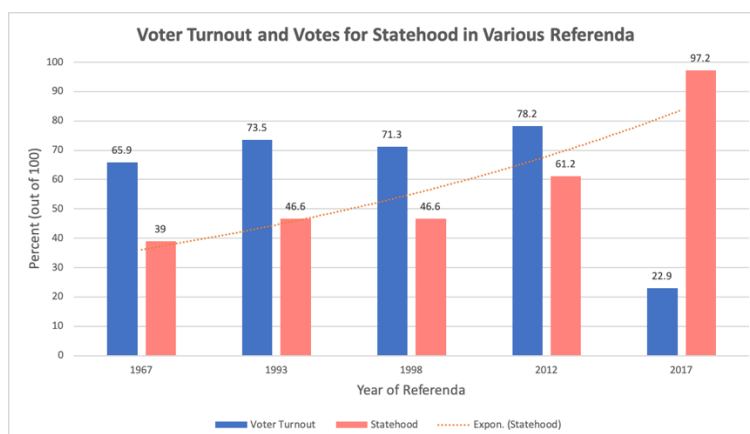


Figure 4: Voter Turnout and Votes for Statehood

There is a clear rise in the desire for statehood among the people of Puerto Rico, as seen through the almost exponentially rising curve. However, there is a general ambiguity in the results of the 2017 referendum due to the low turnout rate, hence why it is vital a higher turnout is seen in the 2020 referendum.



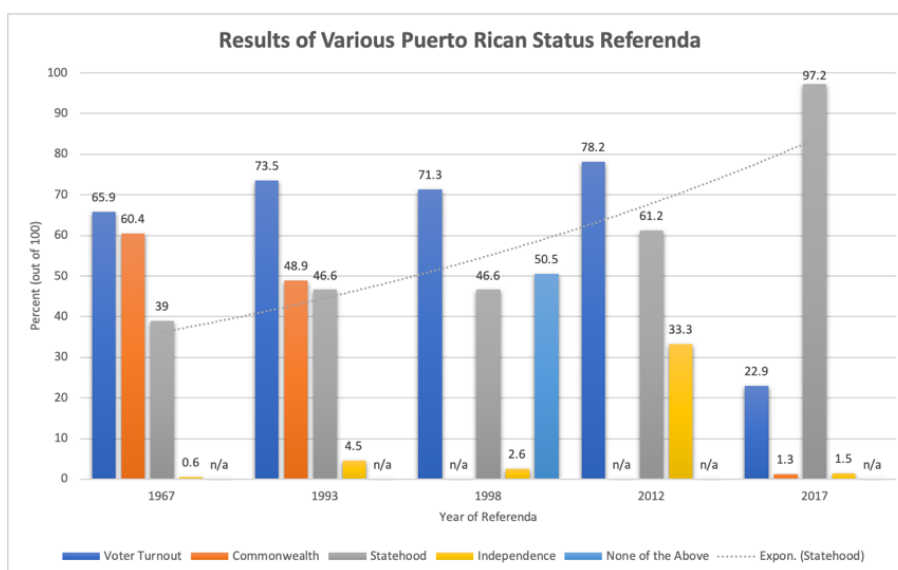


Figure 5: Results of Various Referenda

These figures show the shifting opinion of the people, and the growing demand to achieve statehood for Puerto Rico. None of these referenda however, led to any major political changes being made, making them nothing short of polls. The provisional 2020 referendum seeks to change that, as the decision of the people will directly influence the decision which will be made regarding the future political status of Puerto Rico.

UN Action

Attempts to Reintroduce a UN Vote

Since the early 1970s, many organizations and states have called upon the United Nations to vote and review the situation of Puerto Rico. Since 1972, the Special Political and Decolonization Committee has called for the decolonization of Puerto Rico and for a retrial of the situation, however the United States has heavily coveted these calls to action, referring to the lack of jurisdiction of the General Assembly and suggesting that this is an issue which must be solved solely between the United States and Puerto Rico.



Possible Solutions

Unfortunately, there is no one way to solve this situation which will leave or participating parties satisfied. Perhaps the best way to solving this is to ensure that the provisional November 2020 referendum is carried out as best as possible and ensuring that it has the effect it must have. The simplicity of this referendum could entail a simple yes or no question which asks citizens whether Puerto Rico should remain as a commonwealth, or if they should seek statehood. Due to the low turnout in the previous referendum, it is vital that a higher turnout is seen so as to ensure the entire country of Puerto Rico is properly represented. There are many approaches to increasing the turnout rate, such as motivating citizens to vote through potential rewards/compensation, national campaigns, etc. The issue of corruption within both governments must be dealt with, perhaps with assigning certain organizations to overview the voting procedures and ensure that they remain impartial. The United Nations could be utilized here as an organization, or perhaps third-party existing organizations. These organizations could overview the voting and counting procedures, the processing of the votes, and the actions which will take place directly following the referendum. However, it is vital that the nation's sovereignty is preserved.

It is important to also address the actions the countries should take following the results of the election. If it is chosen that Puerto Rico should seek statehood, certain laws must be passed by the US Congress to ensure that the island state is treated fairly in accordance to US laws for other states. In the case Puerto Rico seeks to remain as a territory, further actions should be sought such as increased voting rights and the removal of certain taxes and tariffs, along with the guarantee of US citizenship. Lastly, if Puerto Rico seeks full independence or free association with the United States, certain measures must be put in place in order to allow a smooth transition. A transitional period could take place, allowing sufficient time for infrastructure to be modified, along with legislations regarding borders, economies, and trade be put in place so Puerto Rico can function as an



autonomous state. It is also vital that both Puerto Rico and the United States remain in communication, with talks between government leaders intended to settle the aforementioned issues. These talks could also involve mediation by the United Nations.

Finally, there is the dire issue of compensation and aid to help with the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and other recent natural disasters. This could be done through various methods, perhaps such as pure financial aid, investment in infrastructure, allocation of resources to Puerto Rico, reduction in trade tariffs, etc. Regardless of the final outcome of the referendum and the direction Puerto Rico decides to follow, it is vital that some sort of aid and relief is provided to Puerto Rico by the United States and by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to ultimately ensure that Puerto Rico's future, whether as a territory, a state, or an independent sovereign nation, is not hindered by the effect of natural disasters and events that took place while it was under the sovereignty of the United States.

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