

**Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Wyden
on Puerto Rico's political status, August 1, 2013.**

I welcome our witnesses. This morning the committee will hear testimony on the results of last November's vote on Puerto Rico's political status, and on the President's response.

Puerto Rico has been an "unincorporated" territory of the United States since the conclusion of the Spanish-American War, 115 years ago.

After 115 years, it's clearly time for Puerto Rico to determine what political path it will take.

The question of whether Puerto Rico should become a state or a sovereign nation -- and whether there are other options -- defines much of the political debate today on the islands.

Puerto Rico faces huge economic and social challenges. Per capita income is stuck at about half that of the poorest U.S. state and the violent crime rate is well above the national average, and rising.

The lack of resolution of Puerto Rico's status not only distracts from addressing these and other issues, it contributes to them.

As the most recent report from the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status found, "identifying the most effective means of assisting the Puerto Rican economy depends on resolving the ultimate question of status."

Ninety-five years after receiving U.S. citizenship, Puerto Ricans have achieved leadership in the U.S. military, in business, in the Congress, on the Supreme Court and in many other prestigious positions.

But for Puerto Rico to meet its economic and social challenges and to achieve its full potential, this debate over status needs to be settled.

Puerto Rico must either exercise full self-government as a sovereign nation, or achieve equality among the States of the Union.

The current relationship undermines the United States' moral standing in the world. For a nation founded on the principles of democracy and the consent of the governed, how much longer can America allow a condition to persist in which nearly four million U.S. citizens do not have a vote in the government that makes the national laws which affect their daily lives? That is the question.

Today, the committee will hear testimony about the most recent effort to resolve the status question, last November's vote.

I expect to hear two vastly different views about what the results of the vote mean.

However there is no disputing that a majority of the voters in Puerto Rico -- 54 percent -- have clearly expressed their opposition to continuing the current territorial status.

Given that fact, I agree with the President's proposal to resolve this dispute through a federally sponsored referendum.

I also agree that the ballot question should be reviewed by the Department of Justice to ensure that the options are not inconsistent with the Constitution, laws, and policies of our country.

Justice Department review is essential to ensuring that the proposed "new commonwealth" status, or a proposal with similar features, will not be on the ballot.

The "New Commonwealth" option continues to be advocated as a viable option by some. It is not.

Persistence in supporting this option after it has been rejected as inconsistent with the U.S. Constitution by the U.S. Justice Department, by the bipartisan leadership of this Committee, by the House, and by the Clinton, Bush, and Obama Administrations undermines resolution of Puerto Rico's status question.

The rejection of the current territory status last November leaves Puerto Rico with only two options: statehood under U.S. sovereignty, or some form of separate national sovereignty.

The federally sponsored vote should be simple and straightforward and reflect these two choices.

Today, we will hear from the presidents of Puerto Rico's three principle political parties - Governor Padilla of the 'Commonwealth' Party, Resident Commissioner Pierluisi of the Statehood Party, and former Senator Berrios of the Independence Party.

The full written statements of all witnesses will be entered into the record and I ask each of you to summarize your oral remarks to not more than five minutes.