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Puerto Rico's Status as Part of the United States to Be Decided in November Referendum

Voters to choose between statehood, independence, or independence with free association in historic decision on island's political future

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Vibrant house facades line a street in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, with a Puerto Rican flag draped from one of the balconies. By. GETTY IMAGES

For the first time, Puerto Rico's current status as a U.S. territory will not be an option in a direct vote scheduled for the general election in November. The news was announced by Governor Pedro Pierluisi, a member of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party.

This upcoming referendum will compel voters to choose between statehood, independence, or independence with free association, rather than maintaining the existing territorial status. This

significant change is intended to force a decision on altering Puerto Rico's current relationship with the United States. Independence with free association would involve negotiating terms regarding foreign affairs, U.S. citizenship, and the use of the U.S. dollar.

“In this way, we assert our rights as American citizens to demand our self-determination through direct voting without intermediaries and to require the federal government to address the grievance represented by our colonial status,” Pierluisi said.

He also highlighted that statehood would ensure residents in Puerto Rico receive equal funds and benefits in Medicaid, Medicare, SNAP, and supplemental social security. Similar to the U.S. Virgin Islands, voters in Puerto Rico cannot participate in the general presidential U.S. election but can vote in presidential primaries.

The governor plans to activate a 2020 law that permits the current governor to call for a status referendum. This executive order follows the 2022 approval of a bill by the U.S. House, aimed at facilitating Puerto Rico's transition away from its territorial status. The Puerto Rico Status Act, led by Representative Raúl Grijalva of Arizona, deliberately excludes the option of maintaining the island's territorial status.

Support for the current territorial status has waned since 2016 when the federal government established the unelected Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) to manage the island's finances. This board, created through the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), was a response to a severe financial crisis. Puerto Rico faced a crippling debt burden of approximately \$72 billion, prolonged economic recession, high unemployment, a declining population due to migration to the mainland United States, and significant fiscal mismanagement.

The FOMB was granted extensive powers to manage Puerto Rico's finances, including budget controls, debt restructuring, and the implementation of fiscal plans aimed at restoring economic stability. The board's creation aimed to address the financial crisis and help Puerto Rico regain access to capital markets while protecting the interests of creditors and residents.

The previous referendum in November 2020 saw 53% of voters favor statehood, while 47% were against it, with only about half of the registered voters participating. The forthcoming referendum marks the seventh occasion for the island to decide on its political affiliation with the United States.

“Puerto Rico has the right, and I would say the moral obligation, to continue exerting pressure, reiterating its right to self-determination, and demanding that Congress respond satisfactorily to the will of our people,” Pierluisi stated after signing the executive order. “Therefore, we must vote as many times as necessary to end the colonial status.”