

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Territorial Leaders Argue Denial Of Voting Rights Violates International Law

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Leaders from Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands are now arguing that U.S. citizens living U.S. territory being denied the right to vote for president of the United States is not just morally wrong, it is a violation of international law, according to a release issued by Equally American, [formerly We the People](#), a nonprofit that advocates for equal rights and representation in U.S. territories.

Nearly 4 million citizens living in U.S. territories – a population greater than 21 states and larger than the five smallest states combined – are denied the right to vote for President and voting representation in Congress simply because of where they happen to live. This includes more than 100,000 veterans and active duty service members living in U.S. territories. At the same time, decisions made by the federal government impacting

residents of U.S. territories can literally mean life or death, a fact thrown in stark relief by the six month anniversary of Hurricanes Maria and Irma hitting Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Represented by [Equally American](#), territorial leaders from these areas have filed an [amicus brief](#) in support of a case brought by former Puerto Rico Governor Pedro Rosselló before the Organization of American States Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

[Rosselló v. United States](#) argues that by denying U.S. citizens in the territories voting representation in the federal government, the United States is violating its international law obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, and other international agreements. The case was originally filed in 2006 but is only now reaching the merits. Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosselló and Congresswoman Jenniffer González have also filed a letter in support of the case.

“Six months after Hurricanes Maria and Irma, it is important to recognize that the denial of voting rights in the U.S. Virgin Islands and other territories has a real-world impact on the daily lives of those who call the territories home,” said Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, who represents the U.S. Virgin Islands in Congress but who cannot vote on final passage of congressional legislation. “This month also marks Virgin Islands History Month and the end of the Virgin Islands’ centennial commemoration as part of the United States – 100 years, yet we still aren’t treated as equally American.”

“Our country was founded on representative democracy, and it is un-American to deny voting rights to the millions of Americans living in the territories,” said Congresswoman Madeleine Z. Bordallo, who represents Guam as a non-voting Delegate to Congress. “The people of Guam have demonstrated time and again our patriotism to the United States. Especially given increasing tensions with North Korea and the harmful effects of recent federal laws to our island, it is more important now that we be afforded a say in the election of our President and full voting representation in Congress.”

“Denying the right to vote in U.S. territories is not only a violation of America’s core democratic and constitutional principles, it is also a violation of the United States’ commitments under international law,” said Neil Weare, president and founder of Equally American, who represents amici. “We are hopeful that international pressure will help the United States live up to the democratic ideals it champions throughout the world. Residents of the territories proudly serve to defend democracy abroad; it is time they are able to fully enjoy it at home.”

“I am, and the people of Puerto Rico are, very grateful to our brothers and sisters in the other territories for their support in our case pending before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The lack of voting rights at the national (federal) level for the U.S. citizens in the territories is un-American, undemocratic, against our basic human rights, and a violation of international law,” said Pedro Rosselló, former governor of Puerto Rico and lead Petitioner in *Rosselló v. United States*. “Now well into the 21st Century, it is high time that the U.S. remedy this situation if our country wishes to remain the beacon of democracy and the world’s standard-bearer of human rights.”

Today's amicus brief puts in context the historical relationship the United States has with Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands, highlighting the impact decisions made by the federal government have on the daily lives of U.S. citizens living in these areas. The brief also emphasizes the proud tradition of military service in each of these territories, where casualty rates in Iraq and Afghanistan range from 3-4 times the national average.

Rosselló v. United States follows [Statehood Solidarity Committee v. United States](#), a similar case filed by advocates for equal rights in the District of Columbia in which the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ruled in 2003 that the denial of voting representation in Congress for residents of D.C. violated the United States' international law commitments.

The United States is expected to file its response to the petitioners in *Rosselló v United States* in the next month or two.

Amici include:

- The Hon. Madeleine Z. Bordallo, Member of Congress representing Guam
- The Hon. Stacey Plaskett, Member of Congress representing the U.S. Virgin Islands
- The Hon. Gregorio Kilili Sablan, Member of Congress the Northern Mariana Islands
- The Hon. Carl T.C. Gutierrez, former Governor of Guam
- The Hon. Charles W. Turnbull, former Governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands
- The Hon. Donna M. Christian-Christensen, former Congresswoman representing the U.S. Virgin Islands

Our amicus brief and other case materials available [here](#).

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