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The Cost of Belonging: Why Puerto Rico's Political Status Is a Civil Rights Issue

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The Cost of Belonging: Why Puerto Rico's Political Status Is a Civil Rights Issue

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Riki Thompson, whose class inspired this piece and encouraged me to explore my identity and learn more about my country. Her guidance and support gave me the confidence to share my story. I also dedicate this work to my children may it help them better understand their culture, their roots, and the power of belonging.

Abstract

This article analyzes the political and personal dimensions of belonging through one Puerto Rican student as he constructs his identity in mainland United States. From lived experience, “The Cost of Belonging” describes colonial histories, immigration, language, and displacements that structure the sense of self and community. Using an interdisciplinary approach combining narrative reflection and social critique, this article puts into relief the emotional and systemic challenges of assimilation, biculturalism, and invisibility. The article contributes to Latinx studies, immigration, and student scholarship discourse by highlighting a bilingual, first-person voice that traditionally has been excluded from academic dialogue.

Keywords: belonging, identity, immigration, Puerto Rico, colonialism, displacement, Latinx studies, cultural identity, diaspora, intersectionality, social justice, student voice, bilingual experience, interdisciplinary research

The Cost of Belonging

Puerto Rico has been stuck in the middle for more than a hundred years, neither a state nor an independent country. As a U.S. territory, and as a commonwealth since 1952, Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, but they don't get full rights like voting for president or sending senators to Congress. This isn't just some quirky loophole; it's a civil rights problem that affects over three million people every single day.

I know this firsthand. I was born and grew up in Puerto Rico, and I lived there for 26 years. Today I live in Washington State, and now I can vote for president. My mom and family back home can't. That inconsistency is why I wanted to write about this. Puerto Ricans serve in the military, pay Social Security and Medicare, and contribute to the U.S. in so many ways but still get treated differently. That's not democracy. That's discrimination.

A Colonial Relationship that Never Ended

The U.S. took Puerto Rico in 1898 after the Spanish–American War. Since then, the island has been under U.S. control but never given statehood or independence. The Supreme Court's old Insular Cases (1901) basically said territories don't get full Constitution. Over 100 years later, those rulings are still in play, keeping Puerto Ricans in political limbo (Sparrow, 2006).

A Civil Rights Problem in Plain Sight

Puerto Ricans pay into federal programs like Social Security and Medicare, and thousands have served in the armed forces. But we can't vote for president and have no senators, limited instead to having a resident

commissioner in Congress. That's literally "taxation without representation," the very thing the U.S. once fought a revolution over.

It's not just about voting. Puerto Ricans are excluded from Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a program available in the states. In 2022, the Supreme Court (*US v Vaello-Madero*) said that exclusion was allowed. Medicaid in Puerto Rico also gets capped at lower levels than in the states, which keeps healthcare underfunded. These unequal laws make Puerto Ricans second-class citizens. Legal scholar Lopez-Morales (2014) calls this disenfranchisement and has pushed for presidential voting rights. And he's not alone; other scholars and even Congress itself (through CRS reports) admit the current setup doesn't match American values.

Hurricane Maria: Proof of Inequality

When Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in 2017, it became painfully clear how being a territory means getting second-class help. Figure 1 shows satellite imagery of the island before and after the storm, highlighting the extent of devastation and the need for faster, more equitable federal response. This visual supports the argument that Puerto Rico's lack of full political representation contributes to delayed disaster response and systemic neglect.

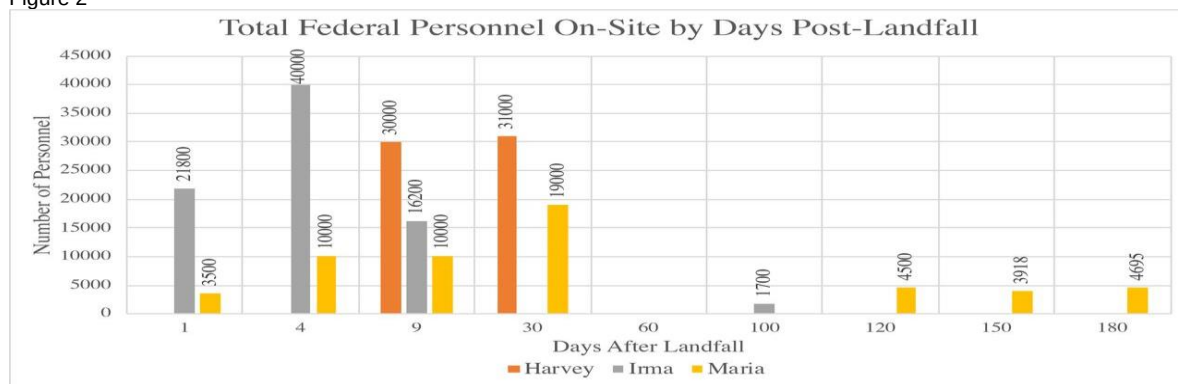
Figure 1



Satellite imagery of Puerto Rico before (left) and after (right). Hurricane Maria shows extensive island-wide damage. (NASA Earth Observatory, 2017)

Compared to similar disasters in Texas and Florida, the U.S. response to Puerto Rico was slower and less effective. A 2019 study found that disaster aid to Puerto Rico was delayed by days and lacked urgency, in part because of the Jones Act. As shown in Figure 2, the study compared federal responses and showed the disparities in funding, coordination, and attention (Willison et al., 2019). The numbers speak clearly: Puerto Rico was treated differently and worse. Having no voting power in Congress meant Puerto Ricans had little leverage to demand faster action. The disaster showed just how much second-class citizenship costs.

Figure 2



FEMA obligations per person by time since disaster declaration. (Willison et al., 2019)

Statehood vs. Independence

Puerto Rico has voted several times on what its future should be. These are called plebiscites, basically island-wide votes that are advisory, meaning Congress still has to decide. In the most recent ones, there have been narrow statehood majorities. In 1967, 1993, and 1998, there were split results and no majority. In 2012, 61% favored statehood. In 2017, 97% voted for statehood, but the turnout was only 23%. Most

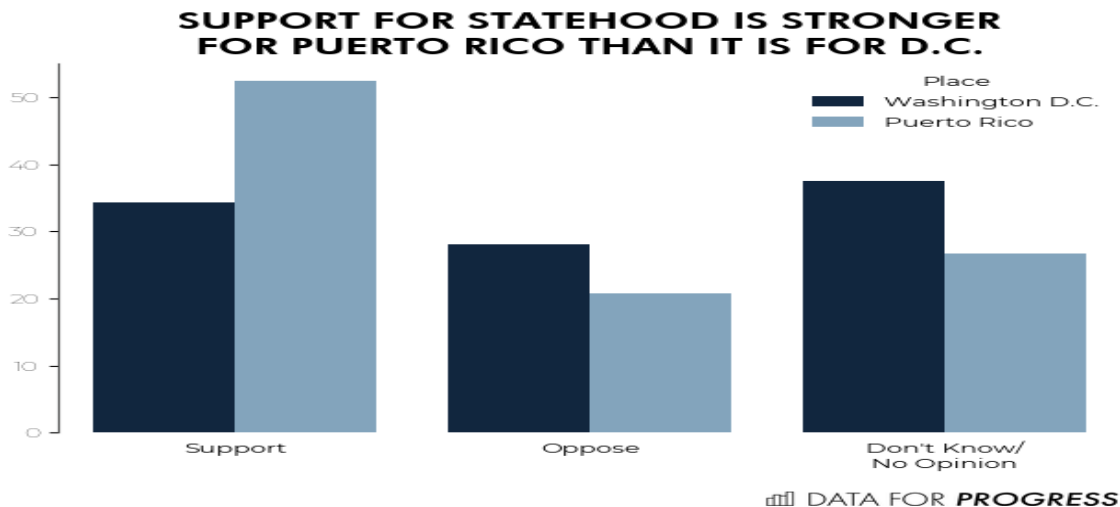
recently, 52.5% voted yes for statehood in 2020. Still, Congress hasn't acted. Bills like the Puerto Rico Status Act (2022, 2023) have been introduced but keep stalling.

This ongoing debate is a reflection of the island's multi-faceted history and identity. People are divided. Some want statehood for equality and full rights, while others worry about losing culture and language. Independence would mean full control of taxes, trade, and foreign policy, but it could also bring a rough economic transition. Free association is a middle option, where Puerto Rico would be independent but still tied to the U.S. through an agreement.

What Puerto Ricans Really Want

Polls show Puerto Ricans don't agree on one single path, but almost nobody wants things to stay the same. As shown in Figure 3, there is growing public support for statehood, both for Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C. Data for Progress found statehood support rising, though a chunk of people remain undecided or lean toward independence.

Figure 3



The Public Supports Statehood for D.C. and Puerto Rico (Windham, 2019).

This shows that while not everyone agrees on one solution, very few support keeping things the way they are. The 2020 plebiscite, with a vote of 52.5% “yes,” proves that most Puerto Ricans want change. The real question is which path forward, not whether to move at all.

Identity and Belonging

Growing up in Puerto Rico, I felt proud to be both Puerto Rican and American. But after moving to the mainland, I realized not everyone sees me that way. I’ve been asked countless times: “Wait, you’re a U.S. citizen? Do you need a visa?”

This back-and-forth is tiring. We are citizens, but the system makes us invisible. It sends the message that Puerto Ricans don’t fully count, even though we do everything asked of citizens.

In conclusion, Puerto Rico’s political status isn’t just a debate for politicians, it’s a civil rights issue. It shapes how fast aid comes after a hurricane, whether people get to vote for leaders, and how equality is defined in America.

It is a civil rights issue that demands attention, respect, and action. Congress needs to stop dragging its feet and give Puerto Ricans a real, binding choice: statehood, independence, or free association. The time to end this colonial limbo is now.

Glossary of Key Terms

Advisory Election (*elección consultiva*): A vote that shows what people want but does not directly change the law.

Commonwealth (*Estado Libre Asociado*): Puerto Rico's current status since 1952, allowing some local self-government but still under U.S. control.

Free Association (*libre asociación*): A form of independence where Puerto Rico would become its own country but keep an agreement with the U.S. for aid, defense, or travel rights.

Insular Cases (*Casos Insulares*): Old Supreme Court rulings that said territories like Puerto Rico belong to the U.S. but are not fully part of it, so not all rights apply.

Jones Act (*Ley de Cabotaje*): A U.S. shipping law that makes goods more expensive in Puerto Rico and slowed aid after Hurricane María.

Plebiscite (*plebiscito*): A public vote in Puerto Rico on its political status, but the results are not automatically binding unless Congress acts.

Resident Commissioner (*Comisionado Residente*): Puerto Rico's representative in the U.S. Congress, who can debate and work on committees but cannot vote on final laws.

Territory (*territorio*): Land owned by the U.S. but not a state; people there are U.S. citizens but don't have the same voting rights.

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