

April 28, 2010

FACT SHEET: H.R. 2499 vs. Alaska & Hawaii Precedent

What would statehood for Puerto Rico mean – the need for facts: The House of Representatives is expected to soon vote on H.R. 2499, the Puerto Rico Democracy Act. This bill would provide for a two-step vote process in Puerto Rico on their future political status, including the option of becoming the nation's 51st state. Puerto Rico is able to conduct its own local plebiscite or referendum, as they have done three times in the past, yet this bill specifically seeks to provide a Congressionally-sanctioned vote. If Congress is going to ask Puerto Rico if they want to become a state, as H.R. 2499 does, then Congress has an obligation to understand in advance what statehood would mean to both Puerto Rico and the existing 50 states. However, that information is not being discussed despite an imminent vote on H.R. 2499, nor is much information on the implications of statehood for Puerto Rico even publicly available. These Fact Sheets are an effort to provide some of this information for the consideration of Representatives and the public.

Does H.R. 2499 follow precedent on how Alaska and Hawaii were admitted as states?
No, it doesn't.

Alaska and the Hawaii were the last two states admitted to the Union, and are the only two non-contiguous states. Both states followed a similar process to achieving statehood.

First, in some manner, each conducted its own local plebiscite/referendum/vote of residents on statehood – and both passed with strong majorities. It was then, after the self-initiated request for statehood, that Congress responded. Congress then wrote and passed an Admissions Act that articulated and dictated the conditions and requirements for statehood. For both Alaska and Hawaii, the Admissions Acts included a straightforward ballot to be put to a vote of residents that included the question: "Shall Alaska/Hawaii immediately be admitted into the Union as a State?". 83% of Alaskans cast votes in favor, and 94% of Hawaiians voted in favor.

The process for both Alaska and Hawaii involved self-initiated local votes with strong majorities expressing the desire to become a state, and only then Congress passing an Admissions Act laying out what statehood would mean, which included a Congressionally-sanctioned and directed vote of residents on accepting or rejecting statehood. The responses were overwhelming majorities

In H.R. 2499, this process is backwards.

Despite the fact that Puerto Rico could conduct its own local plebiscite as did Alaska and

Hawaii, a Congressionally-sanctioned vote is sought first. This vote is not a straightforward question on statehood, but rather a complicated two-step process. Furthermore, Congress is asking Puerto Rico in this complicated way if it wishes to be a state without a clear understanding of the implications of statehood and conditions that would be required to join the Union. In addition, the two-step process creates a situation where a mere plurality could choose statehood as the “winner”, receiving as low as 34% of the vote.

BOTTOM-LINE: H.R. 2499 deviates strongly from the precedent and process used to admit Alaska and Hawaii as states. If a Congressionally-sanctioned plebiscite is sought first in a manner directly contrary to the Alaska and Hawaii precedent, as H.R. 2499 does, then Congress has an obligation to at the very least ensure there is an open, thorough understanding of what statehood would mean to Puerto Rico and the existing 50 states – but that is not at all happening in the House.

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