



[HASTINGS: Backdoor approach to statehood](#)

April 27, 2010

Washington Times

Rep. Doc Hastings

When the Democratic majority was working to push through a government takeover of health care, Speaker Nancy Pelosi declared, "We have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it."

Unfortunately, that same kind of backward logic is being used as Congress prepares to vote on the Puerto Rico Democracy Act (H.R. 2499), a bill to provide for a federally sanctioned vote in Puerto Rico on changing its political status. Although the House of Representatives is considering the bill this week, there are serious questions regarding the implications of the bill that have gone unanswered.

H.R. 2499 would create a two-step voting process. First, the people of Puerto Rico would vote for either maintaining the status quo or selecting a different political status. If the majority select "different political status," a second vote would be held that would give people three options: independence, free association with the U.S., and statehood. It is said that the results of this plebiscite would be nonbinding, but it could set the stage for a congressional vote on making Puerto Rico the 51st state as early as next year.

Supporters of the bill will argue that Puerto Rico deserves to have the freedom and ability to make its own decisions regarding its political future. I agree. However, it's important to note that the people of Puerto Rico do not need to wait for Congress to act. Puerto Rico can hold its own nonbinding plebiscite, as they have done three times in the past, without congressional approval. If a congressionally sanctioned vote is going to be held, it must come with an open, thorough understanding of what independence or statehood would mean to Puerto Rico and the existing 50 states. An approach of voting first and answering questions later is simply not acceptable.

The complicated, multistep vote process laid out in this bill is not the right approach and deviates significantly from the process used by Alaska and Hawaii. Hawaii and Alaska were the last two states to be admitted into the Union and, like Puerto Rico, are not contiguous to the other 48 states. A key difference, though, is that both states had a direct vote on whether or not to become a state. In Hawaii, 94 percent favored statehood, and in Alaska, 83 percent voted in favor.

But under this bill, Puerto Rico would have no such direct vote. As explained, if an outright majority agreed to change the status quo, then voters would decide on three options. Whichever of the three got the most votes would be declared the "winner" - even if that option received just 34 percent of the vote. This means it would be possible for the

statehood option to win without the majority of Puerto Rico voters even favoring statehood.

Another troubling facet of this bill is that it expressly permits nonresidents of Puerto Rico to participate in the votes. Anyone born in Puerto Rico and living in the 50 states would be eligible to vote. For example, a person who has been a 30-year resident and registered voter in Ohio, Maine or Tennessee could cast a vote simply because he or she was born in Puerto Rico. This is unprecedented, and it's wrong.

In Puerto Rico, both English and Spanish are official languages. When the House last debated a Puerto Rico bill, an amendment on the issue of English as the official language was allowed on the House floor for debate. It is unknown whether House Democratic leaders who have clamped down on fair debate in this Congress will permit such an amendment and vote during this week's debate. It's important to note that during our history, the matter of the English language was addressed during the admission of other states into the Union, including Arizona, Louisiana, Oklahoma and New Mexico.

There also is the question of congressional representation. With a population of approximately 4 million people, Puerto Rico would be entitled to two U.S. senators and possibly six members of the House of Representatives, according to Congressional Research Service (CRS) estimates. That means a handful of other states expecting to gain a seat after the 2010 census would lose representation if membership in the House is kept at 435 seats.

At a time of record budget deficits and skyrocketing national debt, making Puerto Rico the 51st state also would cost billions of dollars in federal spending - and yet there is no discussion of this fact. This needs to be dealt with openly, directly and in advance - not ignored.

It's fair to want to give Puerto Rico a voice after more than 100 years as a territory - but it's not responsible to pass a bill without knowing or considering its implications. A great many answers are needed, and changes to this bill are required before it should be passed. Congress shouldn't pass this bill to find out what a 51st state would mean to the Union.

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