

Congressman Dan Burton
Committee on Resources
Legislative hearing on H.R. 2499 (Pierluisi), “Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2009”
Testimony for the Record
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Puerto Rico has been a U.S. territory for 111 years, and is the longest existing U.S. territory. Puerto Ricans have fought in our wars as proud U.S. citizens. In fact, Puerto Ricans have sent more of their sons and daughters to serve in the United States military than all but one other state. Puerto Rico is a very special and significant part of the makeup of this great nation and, as I have been saying for years, I believe that they deserve the opportunity to express their status preference in relation to the United States.

Through this past 111 years, we have been debating what to do about Puerto Rico; whether it should continue to be a U.S. territory, or whether we should allow the people of Puerto Rico to work with Congress to determine whether they would like to have a more permanent status. We have never given the people of Puerto Rico an opportunity to declare their preference in this democratic way. That is why I am a strong supporter of the H.R. 2499, the Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2009 that my friend, Resident Commissioner Pedro Pierluisi has introduced.

The Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2009 is a fair and democratic piece of legislation. In simple terms, the bill provides the four million people of Puerto Rico with a chance to determine their own fate, through a two-part popular vote or “plebiscite.” During the first part, the Puerto Rican people will vote to either preserve the status quo and remain as a U.S. territory, or to pursue a path toward permanent non-territorial status. Should they decide to go forth with the latter option, the second plebiscite would present them with the choice of independence, sovereignty in association, or to become the 51st state of the U.S.

If the Puerto Rican people wish to maintain current territorial status they may, but we will continue to poll the people of Puerto Rico in years to come, to make sure that is still what they want. This bill doesn’t force them into anything they do not want, or something they may regret in 10 or 15 years time. That is why I support this bill.

Congress shouldn’t dictate to the Puerto Rican people what is best for them; the people themselves must be allowed to decide their fate. Congress doesn’t face the same realities day in and day out that the people of Puerto Rico face; realities like serving in the United States military without being able to elect its Commander-in-Chief. So many men and women from Puerto Rico have given their lives for American freedom, but don’t have the opportunity to vote for their President. And although Congress makes laws that govern Puerto Rico, they have no voting representation.

Our role in Puerto Rico is to be sure the Puerto Rican people are able to determine exactly what it is they want to do with their great island. It is our responsibility to ensure the self-determination process is free and fair. We need to provide the Puerto Rican

people the same chance for the full democracy we advocate to the rest of the world, but first we need to allow them to tell us how they want to go about it.