

Add Another Star? This Territory Just Voted for Statehood

In a referendum on statehood held over the weekend, 97 percent of Puerto Ricans who cast ballots said they would prefer to become the 51st state, the largest margin of success ever for the island territory's statehood effort.

Gov. Ricardo Rosselló Nevares, newly elected in November, said he intends to press the matter with both Congress and the White House, going so far as to suggest he may appoint two senators and five representatives to go to Washington, D.C. But, turnout for the "consultation" vote was only 500,000—about 25 percent of the island's registered voters, and only about 33 percent compared to the turnout for the November election.

Puerto Ricans are considered U.S. citizens, but they are not allowed to vote for president. The island territory of roughly 3.5 million people is represented by a lone delegate in the House of Representatives who has limited voting rights in the chamber. Largely a Democratic territory, it's unlikely the Republican-led Congress will recognize the vote as an official vote for statehood.

"Today Puerto Ricans are sending a strong and clear message to the world, claiming equal rights as American citizens," Nevares said at a victory rally. "It is now up to us to bring those results to Washington with the force of a democratic exercise, supervised by a National and International Observer Mission, which has validated the process as properly organized, just and democratic. This Mission will be reporting to Congress and the Federal Government on this historic election."

Puerto Rico also voted in favor of statehood in 2012, but by a much wider margin, but Congress refused to recognize the vote. Since then, the island's government has grown more and more fiscally insolvent as more and more residents flee for the mainland U.S. amid 12-percent unemployment, skyrocketing tax rates, and increasing cost of living.

Nevares defended the low turnout, saying many other current U.S. states had much lower turnouts for their statehood referenda.

"In Wisconsin's ratification as a state in 1848, 23,183 voters from a population of more than 130,000 people participated, representing 17 percent of its population," he said. "In addition, in 1911 Arizona did the same with 15,489 voters of 217,000 population, 7 percent of its population. In 1940, Hawaii requested initiating a process toward statehood with a 35 percent turnout. Meanwhile, in 1946, Alaska began its admission process with the vote of 16,375 voters with a population of 75,000, which represented 21 percent of its population. Today the results equal or exceed these percentages."

The governor said it was up to his generation of Puerto Ricans to push for an end to their island's "colonial relationship" with the U.S. and to "demand and demand" statehood. He said it would be "a great contradiction" to demand other parts of the world embrace democratic government principles without recognizing "the legitimate right to political self-determination" in Puerto Rico. {eoa}