

Carson Declares: Statehood for 'Strategic' Puerto Rico

Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson endorsed U.S. statehood for Puerto Rico on Sunday, citing its "very strategic" location for military defense.

Speaking at a convention for Puerto Rican gubernatorial candidate Ricardo Rossello, a member of the island's pro-statehood party, Carson said he "would be incredibly honored and delighted for Puerto Rico to be the 51st state."

"One thing I've found when I have come to Puerto Rico is extremely friendly people," the 64-year-old retired neurosurgeon said, adding that "we have probably more patriotic Puerto Ricans than almost any other state."

Statehood is a central political issue in Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory whose two main parties are the pro-statehood PNP and pro-commonwealth PPD, each of which have Democrats and Republicans within their ranks.

The island's fate has also made it onto U.S. presidential candidates' agendas because Puerto Ricans can vote in presidential primaries—though not general elections—and because Florida, a key swing state, is home to nearly 1 million Puerto Ricans.

Carson has found little support among Republicans in Puerto Rico, who mostly favor candidates Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio, both of whom have endorsed statehood for the U.S. commonwealth.

Carson called Puerto Rico "very strategically located for the defense of America, right near Cuba."

"We have the Chinese already coming in and infiltrating the

Caribbean,” he said. “We also have to recognize that we have global jihadists who are trying to destroy us. We need unity.”

Carson, neck and neck with Donald Trump atop Republican polls, spoke for about five minutes without addressing recent headline-grabbing allegations that he misrepresented facts surrounding a scholarship offer to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and fabricated details of a violent exchange with a friend as a child.

Those supporting statehood reason that inclusion for Puerto Rico in the U.S. would provide equal treatment on issues like federal Medicaid and Medicare reimbursements, while those against are wary of risking the island’s independence and cultural identity.

With Puerto Rico facing a \$72 billion debt load and a roughly 45 percent poverty rate, Governor Alejandro Garcia Padilla of the pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party, faces historically low approval ratings and strong challenges in next year’s election from statehood candidates such as Rossello and Puerto Rico Resident Commissioner Pedro Pierluisi.

Carson’s trip to Puerto Rico was seen as an effort to push himself onto the agenda there.

A person close to Rossello’s campaign told Reuters on Saturday that Carson was not invited by the campaign, but sought to be allowed to speak in the days leading up to the rally.

Indeed, Rossello’s rally was an unexpected choice for Carson. Rossello is a Democrat, and his running mate, Puerto Rican House minority leader Jenniffer Gonzalez, is a Republican who supports Bush.

Rossello, 36, has lit a fire in some voters with a zealous, energetic and youthful persona. He is the son of former Puerto

Rico Governor Pedro Rossello, who governed in the 1990s during relatively prosperous times.

(Reporting by Howard Schneider; Editing by Alan Crosby)

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