

Puerto Rico's Stagnant Status

This past summer, at both the Democratic National Convention and the Republican National Convention, delegates for Puerto Rico called the territory the “next state of the United States” and “the great 51st Republican state of the nation,” respectively. However, the actuality of Puerto Rico statehood is historically complicated and politically contested.

Puerto Rico's history as a colony stretches back to 16th century Spanish rule.¹ The United States acquired the island following the Spanish-American War in 1898; since then, Puerto Rico has been classified as an “unincorporated territory,” meaning it would not be granted independence or “a clear path to statehood”.² Although Puerto Ricans were afforded U.S. citizenship in 1917, they are not guaranteed the same constitutional rights as mainland citizens. For instance, the island is considered a self-governed territory, but all legislation passed by Puerto Rican officials is under review by the U.S. Congress. Puerto Rican citizens also cannot vote in general presidential elections.

The United States created a “dependent trade relationship,” requiring Puerto Rico to use the U.S. market for commerce.³ In addition to this dependent trade relationship, Puerto Rico has systemic economic hardships due to a massive debt, governmental mismanagement, lack of federal funding after natural disasters and COVID-19.⁴

Since its acquisition, the United States has taken advantage of Puerto Rico, utilizing the island for military testing, trade, and research. The United States Navy continuously bombed the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, with toxic chemicals like napalm and uranium, for training during the 1940s until 2003. Residents believe that due to the toxic chemicals, cancer rates in Vieques are significantly higher than other regions in Puerto Rico.⁵ Decades of accumulated military ordnance can still be found on and in the waters around the island. The U.S. Navy has estimated cleanup will take 10 years on land and 15-20 years underwater. The island was also used for research on oral birth control during the 1950s. Due to a lack of popularity for the pill on the U.S. mainland, and with growing eugenic sentiments towards lower-class people of color among

¹ “Puerto Rico,” *History*, last modified April 12, 2024, <https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/puerto-rico-history>.

² Amelia Cheatham and Diana Roy, “Puerto Rico: A U.S. Territory in Crisis,” *the Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified September 29, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/puerto-rico-us-territory-crisis>.

³ Bonnie Mass, “Puerto Rico: A Case Study of Population Control,” *Latin American Perspectives*, 4, no.4, (October 1977): 66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X7700400405>.

⁴ Rachel Harrison, “‘Often Forgotten’: How US Hurricane Relief and Health Care Policies Leave Puerto Rico Behind,” *NYU*, August 21, 2024.

⁵ Dena Takruri, “Puerto Rico's Vieques still reels from decades of US Navy bombing,” *Al Jazeera*, July 1, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/7/1/puerto-ricos-vieques-still-reels-from-decades-of-us-navy-bombing>.

researchers of the pill, the trials were taken to Puerto Rico.⁶ While women were told the drug they had been given would prevent pregnancy, they were unaware of their participation in a clinical trial and did not know of potential risks. Many women experienced side effects like severe nausea and blood clots.⁷ Three women died during the trials but there was no investigation into their deaths.⁸

Having withstood centuries of colonization and exploitation, Puerto Rican culture is distinct from U.S. culture; there is a strong sense of nationalism within the Puerto Rican diaspora. There have been numerous instances of violent resistance to U.S. colonial rule including the unsuccessful 1950 attack on the Blair House in Washington D.C., in which Puerto Rican Nationalists attempted to assassinate then President, Harry S. Truman.⁹ However, sentiments on the future status of the island are contentious. In Puerto Rico, referendums on the island's political status have taken place six times since 1967, but they have low voter-turn out leading to inaccuracies in data.¹⁰ The next referendum is proposed to take place on November 5, 2024, costing the island an estimated \$1.3 million. No matter the outcome, these referendum results are nonbinding, and Puerto Rico would still need approval from the U.S. government to amend its status. Slow-moving status efforts in the States and a diverse range of opinions on the island, make a revision to Puerto Rico's status in the near future unlikely.

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⁶ "The Puerto Rico Pill Trials," *PBS*,

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-puerto-rico-pill-trials/>.

⁷ Erin Blakemore, "The First Birth Control Pill Used Puerto Rican Women as Guinea Pigs," *History*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.history.com/news/birth-control-pill-history-puerto-rico-enovid>.

⁸ "The Puerto Rico Pill Trials," *PBS*,

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-puerto-rico-pill-trials/>.

⁹ Jorell Meléndez-Badillo, "Puerto Rico Is Voting for Its Future," *TIME*, last modified May 6, 2024, <https://time.com/6969980/puerto-rico-voting-future/>.

"2 shot in seeming effort to kill Truman," *United Press International*, November 1, 1950, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1950/11/01/2-shot-in-seeming-effort-to-kill-Truman/7671541036971/>.

¹⁰ Charles R. Venator-Santiago, Carlos Vargas-Ramos, and Jossianna Arroyo, "What Does Puerto Rican Vote Mean?" *U.S. News & World Report*, last modified June 12, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-06-12/puerto-rico-votes-on-statehood-polls-protests-and-what-it-means>.

