



## **The Future of America: Does it Include a Spanish Speaking 51<sup>st</sup> State?**

In November 2012, citizens of Puerto Rico will vote in a plebiscite to determine if residents support a change in the territory's political status. First, voters will decide if they want to retain their current status as a commonwealth, or if they would like to change the territory's political status. If a majority of residents opt for a change in status, they will then cast their votes for independence, a sovereign free association, or becoming the 51<sup>st</sup> state of the United States of America.

In March 1917, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones Act, which made Puerto a U.S. territory and granted residents statutory citizenship. In 1952, Congress passed the Puerto Rican Federal Relations Act, allowing the people of Puerto Rico to hold a Constitutional Assembly, where a document was created to establish the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. This was approved by an overwhelming majority of residents and later, by Congress.

Puerto Rico's Commonwealth status allows the best of both worlds—it lets citizens enjoy the benefits of United States citizenship while maintaining their unique culture, language and sense of identity. Should statehood be chosen, it begs the question: would the Puerto Rican people expect the rest of the United States to accommodate Spanish, or would they want to create an exception to the rule that English is the lingua franca of our nation? Is America ready for a Spanish speaking 51<sup>st</sup> state? Consider the following:

- Over 95 percent of Puerto Rico's population speaks Spanish, and fewer than 20 percent of Puerto Ricans are proficient in English. California, the U.S. state with the lowest English proficiency rate, still significantly surpasses Puerto Rico's rate—about 80 percent of Californians are proficient in English.
- Puerto Rico's legislative and judicial proceedings are conducted entirely in Spanish, with English translations available only upon request. If statehood is chosen, would Spanish be used for the official record in federal and state courts in Puerto Rico? What language should be spoken by employees of the federal and state governments in Puerto Rico?
- Puerto Rico is currently exempt from the English language testing provisions of federal education law, and their system of education is taught primarily in Spanish. If statehood is selected, do Puerto Ricans expect to be the first state where the educational system treats English as a foreign language? If so, how is the goal of English fluency attainable by students?

- Congress has previously set language expectations for other territories with a significant non-English speaking population that went on to become states, and Puerto Rico should be no different.
  - Oklahoma and New Mexico were both required to have state constitutions that stated public schooling would be conducted in English—and Arizona had to guarantee that its executive and legislative officials could read, write, speak and understand English.

Amidst the 300-plus languages spoken in the United States, English is the one common thread allowing us all to communicate. No other state in the Union treats English as a second language. In fact, currently, thirty-one states have adopted English as the official language of government on the state level. As with the rest of our country, should Puerto Rico become a state, residents will have the freedom to speak whatever language they choose in their daily lives. But English is the language of success in this country, and in order to integrate with the rest of the nation, English should be the primary language.

Aside from language concerns, any discussion of adding Puerto Rico as a state should include the economic consequences of such an action. Is it beneficial for the United States to admit a state that would become the poorest in the Union? Consider the following:

- In 2010, the average median household income in the United States was \$50,046. In Puerto Rico, the median household income was \$18,862, half of the lowest median household income of a state in the U.S., Mississippi, which averaged \$36,851.
- U.S. Census Bureau data shows 41 percent of people in Puerto Rico live in poverty. Should Puerto Rico gain statehood, residents would become eligible for U.S. government benefit programs. Federal programs such as food stamps, Medicaid and other benefits would cost the United States government several billion dollars a year.
- As a state, Puerto Rico would rank 28<sup>th</sup> in terms of population. This means it would be represented by two senators and at least six Congressional representatives. Puerto Rico would also receive at least seven Electoral College votes in Presidential elections.

Should Puerto Ricans choose statehood for their future, residents should be aware of the expectations they will face in assimilating with the culture in the United States. Likewise, United States residents should be aware of the consequences of admitting the territory. Ultimately, any decision by Puerto Ricans to elect statehood must be clearly chosen by a super majority. We cannot, and should not, admit a state where less than an overwhelming majority of residents desire to become fully American.