



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Five-Minute Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery
Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), and Puerto
Rico's Political Status
January 22, 2013

Mr. Speaker:

Tomorrow, I will reintroduce two bills: the first to extend the SSI program to Puerto Rico, the second to provide fair treatment to Puerto Rico under TANF.

SSI provides assistance to blind, disabled and elderly individuals with low incomes. Congress has chosen not to extend the program to Puerto Rico, which instead receives a limited block grant. The average SSI payment to residents of the states is \$500 dollars a month, while the average payment to residents of Puerto Rico is just \$70 dollars.

The TANF program provides payments to needy families with children. The territories are not eligible for certain TANF grants. Moreover, federal law imposes a cap on the aggregate funding that a territory can receive under a combination of safety-net programs, including TANF. My legislation would eliminate this cap, which has not been increased since 1996, and make the territories eligible for TANF grants they do not currently receive. Equality under TANF would mean at least \$40 million dollars in additional funding for Puerto Rico each year.

Those who seek evidence of how Puerto Rico is harmed by its territory status need look no further than the treatment it receives under SSI and TANF. I will fight to secure parity under these two programs. But as long as Puerto Rico remains a territory, it will be an uphill battle.

Mr. Speaker: Puerto Rico recently held a referendum on its political status. Under the current status, the 3.7 million American citizens living in Puerto Rico cannot vote for the leaders who make their national laws and are treated unequally under those laws—as the examples of SSI and TANF illustrate.

The ballot had two questions. On the first question, voters were asked if they want Puerto Rico to remain a territory. Of 1.8 million voters, 54 percent said they do *not* want the current status to continue, while 46 percent said they do.

On the second question, voters were asked to express their preference among the alternatives to the current status. Of the 1.4 million people who chose an option, 61 percent voted for statehood; 33 percent for free association; and 5.5 percent for independence. The 834,000 votes for statehood on the second question exceeded the 828,000 votes for the current status on the first question. For the first time ever, more people in Puerto Rico want to be a state than to continue as a territory.

True to form, defenders of the status quo have tried to distort the results of the referendum, making claims that are intellectually dishonest and divorced from the facts. These critics ignore

the results of the first question and argue that, because close to 500,000 people left the second question blank, statehood did not prevail in the referendum.

Let me be clear so there is no confusion: a majority of voters in Puerto Rico soundly rejected the current status. Among the three alternatives, statehood won a decisive victory. And statehood obtained a greater number of votes than any other status option, including the current status.

Mr. Speaker: At yesterday's inauguration, President Obama invoked the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

President Obama then emphasized that, "while these truths may be self-evident, they have never been self-executing; that while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth."

To uphold this nation's core principles and values, the President and Congress must respond to the democratic expression of their fellow citizens in Puerto Rico, who have withdrawn their consent to a political status that makes them second-class citizens and have made clear that they aspire to have full democratic rights and full equality under the law. None of my stateside colleagues in Congress would accept territory status for their own constituents. So they must recognize—and they must *respect*—that the American citizens I represent no longer accept it either.

Thank you.