



Puerto Rico — Va-PoReg Country Report

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04/11/1899 Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of USA]: On 07/25/1898, during the Spanish-American War, the U.S. invaded Puerto Rico. Following the U.S. victory, Spain ceded Puerto Rico, along with the Philippines and Guam, to the U.S. under the Treaty of Paris, effective from 04/11/1899.¹ In the initial decades of the 20th century, Puerto Rico was under the governance of the U.S. military, and key positions, including the governor, were appointed by the President of the United States. The Foraker Act of 1900 introduced a level of civilian popular government in Puerto Rico, establishing a popularly elected House of Representatives. However, the upper house and the governor continued to be appointed by the United States. In 1914, the Puerto Rican House of Delegates unanimously supported independence from the United States. However, the U.S. Congress rejected this move, deeming it „unconstitutional“ and in violation of the 1900 Foraker Act.² In 1917, the Jones–Shafroth Act, commonly referred to as the Jones Act, was enacted by the U.S. Congress. This legislation conferred U.S. citizenship upon Puerto Ricans born on or after 04/25/1898. The Jones Act also established a popularly elected Senate to form a bicameral legislative assembly and outlined a bill of rights. Additionally, it permitted the popular election of the Resident Commissioner for a four-year term.³ On 05/21/1948, a bill was proposed in the Puerto Rican Senate aiming to restrict the rights of the independence and Nationalist movements on the island. This legislation criminalized activities such as printing, publishing, selling, or exhibiting materials intended to undermine or destroy the insular government. It also prohibited the organization of any society, group, or assembly with similar destructive intent. The law was repealed in 1957. Following the November 1948 election, Luis Muñoz Marín became Puerto Rico’s first governor to be popularly elected, succeeding the U.S.-appointed Piñero on 01/02/1949.⁴ In 1950, the U.S. Congress granted Puerto Ricans the right to organize a constitutional convention, subject to a referendum. The referendum, held in 1951, supported the creation of their own government under a constitution. The commonwealth status, defined as a ‘permanent association with a federal union,’ was chosen in the referendum. A second referendum ratified the constitution in 1952, establishing Puerto Rico as an Estado Libre Asociado (Associated Free State) or Commonwealth. In 1967, the Legislative Assembly conducted the first plebiscite, offering three political status options. The Commonwealth option, endorsed by the PPD, won with 60.4% of the votes. Efforts to address the status issue in the 1970s and 1993 upheld the Commonwealth status. In the 1998 plebiscite, none of the options gained majority support, with the „none of the above“ option prevailing, maintaining the commonwealth status quo by default.⁵ In comparison to other U.S. territories like Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or American Samoa, Puerto Rico has greater autonomy over its internal affairs. While Puerto Rico holds a level of authority over its internal matters similar to that of an American state, it lacks the sovereignty enjoyed by a state in the Union. Being a possession of the United States, Puerto Rico does not benefit from the same constitutional protections granted to states.⁶ Residents of Puerto Rico who are U.S. citizens are not eligible to cast votes in U.S. presidential elections. However, both major political parties, Republicans and Democrats, conduct primary elections in Puerto Rico to select delegates responsible for voting on the parties’ presidential candidates.⁷ Despite this degree of internal self-governance, Puerto Rico’s autonomy remains legally reversible: the U.S. Congress retains the authority to override local legislation and intervene directly in internal affairs. This was demonstrated most clearly by the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) of 2016, under which Congress imposed an external

fiscal oversight board with authority over Puerto Rico's budget, bypassing the local government. This distinguishes Puerto Rico from semi-sovereign cases where autonomy rights are constitutionally or contractually protected against unilateral metropolitan intervention, and supports its classification as a colonial regime rather than a semi-sovereign electoral democracy. As per FH's classification for 1972-2015, the territory is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework. After 2015, FH no longer lists Puerto Rico. Neither LIED nor V-Dem provide any data for Puerto Rico.

Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of USA, Electoral Democracy] as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto_Rico#History

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto_Rico#American_territory_\(1898%E2%80%93present\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto_Rico#American_territory_(1898%E2%80%93present))

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto_Rico#U.S._citizenship_and_Puerto_Rican_citizenship

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto_Rico#U.S._unincorporated_organized_territory_with_commonwealth_constitution

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Puerto_Rico#Political_status

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Puerto_Rico#Implications_of_the_current_political_status

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto_Rico#Government