

# Puerto Rico History 101

## Why is Understanding Puerto Rico's History Important?

**B**efore Hurricane Maria struck the island 5 years ago, people in the United States mostly thought of Puerto Rico as a sunny vacation spot with beautiful beaches (if they thought of it at all). Puerto Rico has a rich and fraught history. Without understanding some historical context of the island archipelago's relationship with the U.S., it is impossible to fully grasp the current situation.

We hope you enjoy learning about Puerto Rico, its history, and its people!

### Earliest Inhabitants

- The earliest inhabitants of modern-day Puerto Rico were ancestors of an [indigenous Caribbean people called Arawaks](#), who came from modern-day Venezuela. They settled in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic and are known as "[Taínos](#)" (which means "noble" in the Arawak language). They named the island "[Boriken](#)" and the people became known as Boricuas (boh-REE-kuh-wahs).

### Spanish Colonization

- [Columbus arrived at Boriken in 1493](#), and "claimed" the island for Spain, beginning four hundred years of colonization which included slavery, disease, and death for many of the original Taíno population. To this day, Puerto Ricans' first language is Spanish and Catholicism remains the dominant religion attesting to the enduring influence of Spanish colonialism.
- [Spain's efforts to exploit Puerto Rico's natural resources](#) and turn the island into a production center for crops like sugar and coffee resulted in the enslavement and depletion of its Taíno population, the adoption of a slave trade using people brought in from West Africa (present-day Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Dahomey), and the arrival of new infectious diseases such as smallpox.
- [In 1897, Puerto Rico finally became an autonomous](#) part of Spain through the approval of the [Carta Autonómica](#), a charter that provided for broad autonomy for the island, while still keeping the "[capitán general](#)," as the last figure of authority representing the crown.

### U.S. Bombing and Takeover

- U.S. policymakers began expressing an interest in Puerto Rico at the end of the 18th century. In 1783, future U.S. President John Adams asserted that both Cuba and Puerto Rico were an 'integral part' of the U.S. trade in the Caribbean. His son, John Quincy Adams, later the 6th President of the U.S., stated in 1823 that the two islands were "[natural appendages to the North American continent](#)."

- During the Spanish-American war in 1898, at almost the same moment in history that Puerto Rico achieved its broadest autonomy after 400 years of European colonization, the U.S. bombed and [invaded](#) San Juan. In a bid to get Puerto Ricans to fight on the side of the U.S., a manifesto was issued promising to protect Puerto Ricans. Spain lost the war, and [Puerto Rico was "ceded" as a territory to the U.S. as part of the Treaty of Paris](#). A U.S. military-led government ruled the island for two years.
- In 1900, Congress passed the [Foraker Act](#) to establish the legal framework for a civilian government in "Porto Rico" [sic] under U.S. governance and taxation.
- **After less than two years of hard-won autonomous governance and 400 years of colonization under Spain, the U.S. ignored the new, democratically-elected local legislature of Puerto Rico in favor of creating its own colonial system.**

**“ In the Insular Cases, “The Supreme Court argued that Puerto Rico and other territories “ceded” by the Spanish were full of “alien races” who couldn’t understand “Anglo-Saxon principles,” and therefore the full measure of the constitution did not apply to them. ”**

## Discrimination Against Puerto Rico Enshrined in U.S. Law

### Insular Cases

- During the U.S. continental expansion period, 31 territories applied for and were admitted as states. However, in 1900, the Foraker Act, bolstered by a series of [racist U.S. Supreme Court cases](#), later dubbed the “[Insular Cases](#),” - decided by largely the same court that decided *separate but equal* in *Plessy v Ferguson* - determined that, unlike prior territories, Puerto Rico (along with other newly conquered territories) were “[unincorporated](#)” U.S. territories.
- According to the court, this meant that inhabitants of these territories were not on a path to becoming U.S. states, stating that Puerto Rico was “[foreign in a domestic sense](#)” and that the island “belonged to but was not a part of” the United States leaving Puerto Ricans in limbo with ambiguous legal status and without U.S. passports for decades. *Plessy* was eventually overturned, but the Insular Cases, which are built on the same racist worldview, still stand today.
- It is this history of legal discrimination, that continues to justify inequitable and “[cruel](#)” treatment of U.S. citizens in federal and other benefits based solely upon where they live. In 2022, the 120 years of legal jurisprudence granting [Congress the ability to decide](#) whether to treat citizens living in Puerto Rico equitably was evident again as the Supreme Court ruled *U.S. v. Vaello Madero* that Congress has the ability to discriminate against U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico in spite of numerous lower court [decisions](#) finding this behavior unconstitutional. Several [advocacy organizations](#) have repeatedly [expressed their frustration](#) with the federal government’s persistence in opposing equal treatment for people who live in Puerto Rico.
- Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the lone dissenter on the Supreme Court in the *Vaello Madero* decision wrote, that “*Congress’ decision to deny to the U. S. citizens of Puerto Rico a social safety net that it provides to almost all other U. S. citizens is especially cruel given those citizens’ dire need for aid.*”

## Puerto Ricans and Discrimination in Federal Anti-Poverty Programs

- U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico receive unequal treatment when it comes to funding for federal healthcare programs, such as Medicaid. The island receives a block grant that is capped and unlike the federal Medicaid funding to the states, the amount is unrelated to need or population. For example, in Mississippi, the poorest state, [the federal government pays 75.65% of the costs](#); yet in Puerto Rico, [it pays for 55%](#). Puerto Rico received a temporary increase under the Affordable Care Act (ACA or Obamacare) but that money fell short by 2017 (year 7), and Congress has been making short-term extensions ever since. Puerto Rico faces its next “[Medicaid Funding Cliff](#)” in December of 2022.
- **If Congress does not provide additional healthcare funding for the island’s poorest residents, close to 1 million patients could lose their insurance or suffer significant reductions in benefits on the heels of an ongoing global health pandemic.**
- Among other things, the funding structure means that Puerto Rico [can’t afford to cover seven of Medicaid’s 17 “mandatory” services](#), including nursing home care and nurse practitioner services or receive the [Medicare subsidy](#) for prescription drugs (LIS). They are also not eligible for long-term care provided to low-income seniors on the mainland. To make the limited federal grant dollars cover as many people as possible, only the poorest of Puerto Rico residents qualify for Medicaid.
- Residents of Puerto Rico are also not treated equitably in federal anti-poverty programs like [SNAP](#) (food stamps), [SSI](#) for the blind, disabled, and elderly, the [Child Tax Credit](#) (until 2021, only available to Puerto Rican families with at least three children), among others.

### Jones Act

- The [Merchant Marine Act of 1920](#) - also known as the “Jones Act” - regulates maritime commerce in U.S. waters and between U.S. ports and deals with [cabotage](#) (transport of goods or passengers between two places in the same country).
- This 97 year old [protectionist law](#) intended to protect American shipbuilding raises the costs of imported U.S. goods for the people in Puerto Rico by over a billion dollars a year. It requires that all goods transported by water between U.S. ports be carried on ships that have been constructed in the United States, fly the U.S. flag, are owned by U.S. citizens, and are crewed by U.S. citizens and U.S. permanent residents.

- This raises the cost of living in Puerto Rico, makes Puerto Rico an unattractive place to produce goods bound for the U.S. mainland, and has the effect of putting Puerto Rico at a competitive disadvantage to other Caribbean islands. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, which are exempt from the law, [U.S.-made goods are about half as expensive](#).
- Under the Jones Act, foreign-originating goods must be dropped off in Jacksonville and then shipped to Puerto Rico via an exorbitantly expensive Jones-compliant vessel. The cost of shipping a standard-size container from New York to Puerto Rico has been much higher than shipping it to Jamaica.
- Food in Puerto Rico [costs twice as much](#) as it does in Florida. The Jones Act does not apply exclusively to Puerto Rico, and also makes goods shipped to states like Alaska and Hawaii more expensive. Efforts to exempt Puerto Rico from the law, even in times of crisis, have been short lived.
- **Puerto Rican Independence Party/Partido Independista Puertorriqueño (PIP) - founded in October 1946** - believes that Puerto Rico should become an independent republic and grew from an average of 3% to 11.5% in the 2020 election for Governor. .
- **Popular Democratic Party/ Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) - founded in July 1938** - believes in continuing to develop the current status of Puerto Rico as a Commonwealth. The PDP went from 38% to 31.5% of the 2020 gubernatorial vote.
- Following the popular [movement](#) in 2019 to rid Puerto Rico of Governor Ricardo "Ricky" Rosselló, two new political parties gained strength and won seats in Puerto Rico's legislature:
  - **The Citizen's Victory Movement (Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana)** party stands for progressivism, anti-corruption efforts, promoting social, economic, and fiscal reconstruction, and decolonizing Puerto Rico. In the 2020 general election, the MVC won 13.95% of the vote, 2 out of 27 Senate seats, and 2 out of 51 House of Representatives seats.
  - **Movement for Dignity (Proyecto Dignidad)** is a conservative party promoting the inclusion of religious-based beliefs in policy. In the 2020 election, *Proyecto Dignidad* received 8% of the vote for governor and two legislators were elected in each chamber. These legislators have built coalitions to push for a bill to limit access to abortion and to [thwart a bill](#) that would have outlawed anti-LGBTQ "conversion therapy" (classified as torture by the American Psychological Association).

### Political Parties in Puerto Rico

- Historically, party affiliation in Puerto Rico is not related to political ideology. It is not unusual to find people from all over the political spectrum on social and economic issues in the same party. While Democrats and Republicans are organized around shared policy views that can be placed in the Conservative-Liberal ideology spectrum, parties in Puerto Rico are organized mainly around shared views on what the island's political relationship (the so-called "status" issue) should be with the United States.
- *Some recent examples:*
  - In 2020, the candidates of the New Progressive Party (NPP) for Governor and Resident Commissioner (non-voting member of Congress) were a Democrat (Pedro Pierluisi) and a Republican (Jenniffer González), respectively.
  - From 2012-2016, the Governor and the Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico were Democrats, however, they were members of different parties in Puerto Rico. Gov. Alejandro García Padilla was a member of the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) while Resident Commissioner Pedro Pierluisi was a member of the New Progressive Party (NPP).

### Current Parties

- **New Progressive Party/Partido Nuevo Progresista (NPP)** - founded in 1967 - believes that Puerto Rico should become a U.S. state. The last two elected governors were members of the NPP (the most recent governor won election with 33% of the vote).

### U.S. Citizens

- In 1917, Congress passed the [Jones-Shafroth Act](#) which granted U.S. citizenship to all Puerto Ricans. The Jones Act separated the Executive, Judicial, and Legislative branches of Puerto Rican government, provided limited civil rights to the individual, and created a locally elected bicameral legislature. This happened just [a month](#) before the U.S. declared war on the German Empire on April 6, 1917. This sparked a debate - that is still ongoing - about the intentions of the U.S. Government offering citizenship to Puerto Ricans. Two months after granting citizenship to Puerto Ricans, President Wilson [signed a compulsory service act](#) that applied to Puerto Ricans allowing Puerto Ricans to be drafted into the U.S. military. It has also been argued that the federal government believed that white people weren't suited to fight in tropical climates because they didn't have "immunity" to tropical diseases. Instead, the U.S. conveniently [sent](#) so-called Puerto Rican "immunes" to defend the Panama Canal.

- Although Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens requiring them to fight for U.S. interests, citizenship did not give them the [right to vote](#) for president or to elect voting senators or representatives to Congress if they lived in Puerto Rico.

### Puerto Rican Participation in the U.S. Military

- In 2019, there were approximately [330,000 veterans and some 35,000 Puerto Ricans](#) in active duty service both in Puerto Rico and on the mainland. The Puerto Rico Army/Air National Guard and the Reserve components represent another 10,000 Puerto Ricans in uniform. Altogether, at least 375,000 Puerto Ricans are veterans or are still wearing the uniform – almost [80,000 veterans](#) live on the island where they are not eligible for all of the [same programs](#) as veterans received by those living on the mainland, like [TRICARE](#).
- [Nine Puerto Ricans have been awarded the Medal of Honor](#), seven have been awarded the Navy Cross, and [eighteen have been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross](#).
- During the Korean War, Puerto Ricans in the 65th Infantry Division, known as the Borinqueneers, obtained [at least 10 Distinguished Service Cross awards, 256 Silver Stars, 596 Bronze Stars, and a Congressional Gold Medal for the entire regiment](#).

### Puerto Ricans and Limited Sovereignty

- For the first 50 years under U.S. rule, (1898 to 1946), Puerto Rico was ruled by non-Puerto Rican Governors appointed by the U.S. President. During that time, laws passed by the Puerto Rican legislature could be vetoed by the U.S. President.
- In 1946, President Truman appointed the [first Puerto Rican Governor](#), Jesús T. Piñero. In 1948, Congress passed the [Elective Governor Act](#), and the first democratically elected Governor, [Luis Muñoz Marín](#), assumed office in 1948.
- In 1948, Law 53, prohibited owning or displaying a Puerto Rican flag anywhere, even in one's own home. It also became a crime to speak against the U.S. government or to speak in favor of Puerto Rican independence. Anyone accused and found guilty of disobeying the law could be sentenced to ten years imprisonment, a fine of \$10,000 (U.S.), or both. After many years of nationalist revolts, many of them [armed and coordinated](#), the "[Gag Law](#)," signed into law by U.S. appointed governor of Puerto Rico [Jesús T. Piñero](#), was finally repealed in 1957.

- In 1952, [Puerto Rico officially became a U.S. Commonwealth](#), after the people of the island drafted and ratified its own Constitution, a status which granted Puerto Ricans a degree of control over local affairs, but not full self-determination. Nearly 82% of Puerto Rican voters approved the [Constitution of the Estado Libre Asociado](#). But Puerto Rican Nationalists, in favor of Independence from the U.S., considered the outcome of the vote a political farce since the referendum offered no option to vote in favor of independence or statehood, restricting the choices to ratifying or rejecting the new commonwealth status.
- During the next period under U.S. sovereignty, Puerto Rico's economy shifted, from agriculture to manufacturing. Investment by industries during the '60s and '70s transformed the economy of Puerto Rico in dramatic and positive ways. From being called the "[Poorhouse of the Caribbean](#)" in the 1940s when per capita income was only \$121, by the 1960s, income per capita had risen to more than \$3,000 per person per year. This idea of generalized "betterment" in Puerto Rico's quality of life as a result of wide scale manufacturing which simultaneously reduced Puerto Rico's food independence, is showcased in the government-produced film called "[Progress Island: USA](#)."
- In 1976, Congress changed the U.S. tax code ([Section 936](#)), to attract U.S. investors and corporations to operate in Puerto Rico by allowing them to avoid paying federal taxes. This made investors very wealthy, but it also helped create higher paying jobs and an economic base for Puerto Rico during the time the law was in place. It is undeniable these measures produced wealth and [economic growth](#) within Puerto Rico.
- In 1996, Congress began a ten-year phase-out of [Section 936](#), which awarded generous tax credits and federal tax exemptions to U.S. manufacturing companies that operated in Puerto Rico and the territories.
- 2006 saw the completion of the phase-out, the loss of more than 100,000 jobs, and the beginning of a long-lasting recession. The economic loss reduced the Commonwealth's revenues requiring [the government to borrow excessively](#) to pay for basic services. A [vicious cycle](#) of borrowing to pay off old debt resulted in a total \$70 billion public debt and close to \$50 billion in unfunded [pension liabilities](#).



## Puerto Rico's Debt - The Passage of **PROMESA** and the Imposition of an Undemocratic Fiscal Board

- When the 936 [phase-out was complete](#), the groundwork was laid for the financial crisis that would later take hold, as the Puerto Rican economy suffered and the government began a cycle of unsustainable borrowing to pay for government services. This led to the debt crisis and subsequent default.
- Predatory Wall Street lending aggravated the island's debt issues. According to a [Front-line PBS report](#), Wall Street firms engaged in irresponsible lending practices and pushed the government to borrow unsustainably, which further increased the island's debt liabilities.
- Puerto Rico does not have the [same access](#) to bankruptcy laws that U.S. cities and states have. In 2016, Puerto Rico was approaching a financial crisis with the inability to service or restructure its debt. Rather than allowing Puerto Rico to restructure its debt under the bankruptcy process, Congress passed a bill known as **PROMESA**, or the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act. This law created a Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB), appointed by the United States President, with legal authority to exercise control over Puerto Rico's fiscal affairs and restructure the island's \$70 billion debt.
- The undemocratic nature of the FOMB coupled with the powers granted to it by Congress over a wide range of Puerto Rico's economic and other affairs underscores the unfairness of Puerto Rico's colonial status under U.S. sovereignty.
- PROMESA is deeply [controversial](#) because while it allows Puerto Rico access to a [court-supervised](#) bankruptcy-like debt restructuring process, the law also curtails Puerto Rico's self-governance and internal democratic processes because Congress gave the FOMB final authority over budgets and fiscal decisions.
- The FOMB has practically absolute powers over Puerto Rico's budget - including the spending of all disaster funds and budgets related to the provision of basic services. It has required the Puerto Rican government to [implement austerity measures](#) such as [severely cutting pensions](#), [closing public schools](#), attempting to implement a [work requirement](#) for food stamp recipients, eliminating and [undermining labor rights](#) and pay raises, even [against the wishes of the elected officials](#) of the island's Government.
- PROMESA also awarded the FOMB and the Governor the power to [reduce the federal minimum wage](#) in Puerto Rico to \$4.25 for workers who are younger than 26 years old.

- Since PROMESA was signed into law, the FOMB has agreed to [debt restructuring](#) often over [the objections of the Puerto Rican government](#) that prioritized the payment of bondholders over the needs of the Puerto Rican people. These restructuring agreements have severely impacted the [quality of life and services](#) by imposing austerity measures on the island's fiscal plan.
- PROMESA also awarded the FOMB and the Governor the power to [reduce the federal minimum wage](#) in Puerto Rico to \$4.25 for workers who are younger than 26 years old.
- In addition to imposing austerity, contracted advisors of the FOMB, specifically McKinsey & Co, have been [revealed](#) to have clients that are in business agreements with the Puerto Rican government creating a serious conflict of interest.

## Puerto Rican Migration

- The latest 2020 U.S. Census showed Puerto Rico's population fell [11.8 percent to 3.3 million](#) over the past decade.
- The first great migratory wave of Puerto Ricans to the mainland began in the mid-'40s and lasted for more than a decade, during which [more than 600,000 Puerto Ricans moved to the mainland](#).
- Puerto Rico is currently in the midst of another migratory wave, with [500,000 leaving the island between 2006 and 2016](#), and [more than 135,000 leaving in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria](#).
- According to the Center for Population Studies, 210,000 Puerto Ricans lived in Orlando by 2014. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, an additional [100,000 Puerto Ricans moved there](#).

## Democracy in Action

- The people of Puerto Rico have a proud history of taking to the streets to make their voices heard about political and social issues. These protests have been viewed worldwide as an example of democracy in action and are praised for their [creativity](#) and infectious energy.
- Puerto Ricans [danced](#), [meme'd](#), [rapped](#), and found every way possible to get the message across. This historic moment of unity demonstrated in the summer of 2019 crossed political, demographic, and socioeconomic lines in a way not seen before in Puerto Rico since the successful movement to stop the U.S. Navy from continuing to use the Puerto Rican island of [Vieques](#) for military target practice, after leaving a legacy of 60 years of contamination, disease, and abuse.

### Summer of '19

- During the summer of 2019, [a series of events led to massive protests by the people of Puerto Rico](#) that resulted in the [resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló](#).
- The protests were ignited [after the arrest by the FBI of two cabinet members](#) under corruption charges and the publication of a group chat in which Governor Rosselló and other top government officials made [cruel, racist, homophobic, and misogynistic comments](#) about various people.
- The two weeks after the publication of the group chat saw the [build-up of protests](#) – both on the island and all across the world – calling for the resignation of Governor Rosselló. The movement was coined #RickyRenuncia and it [quickly became a trending topic on all social media platforms](#), while also capturing [the attention of the media](#).
- On July 22nd, close to a million Puerto Ricans, or 1 out of every 3 island residents, took to the streets of Puerto Rico to demand the governor's resignation.

### Summer of '22

- Puerto Rico has persevered through many challenges in the last few years, ranging from bankruptcy to natural and man-made disasters, including mismanagement of the island's still unrepaired electricity grid.
- The new private U.S.-Canadian consortium LUMA Energy [has been operating](#) the transmission and distribution lines for the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority since the summer of 2021, having undergone an 11 month transition prior to that.
- Constant blackouts and [unreliable service](#) have disrupted daily lives, economic activity, and the ability to [provide health care](#) has gotten worse, not better, according to [data released](#) by the independent Puerto Rico Energy Bureau (Negociado de Energía in Spanish).
- Public outrage coupled with [disrespectful remarks](#) to reporters in a botched press conference held only in English have come to a boiling point with [new protests](#) against the Governor and the company reminding Puerto Ricans of the last summer when boricuas' dissatisfaction led to a historic mass movement for change in the Summer of 2019.