

Puerto Rico History 101

Why is Understanding Puerto Rico's History Important?

The majority of people in the United States have only started thinking and learning about Puerto Rico as anything other than a vacation spot with beautiful beaches since Hurricane Maria struck the island two year ago. Puerto Rico has a rich and fraught history. Without understanding some historical context of the relationship with the U.S., it is hard 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.
- [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 1898, Puerto Rico finally became an autonomous](#) part of Spain with its first Puerto Rican Constitution.

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 first 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. In 1900, after less than two years of hard-won autonomous governance under Spain, the U.S. ignored the new, democratically-elected local parliament of Puerto Rico in favor of creating its own colonial system.](#)

- Congress passed the [Foraker Act of 1900](#) to establish the legal framework for a civil government in "*Porto Rico*" [sic] under U.S. governance and taxation.

“ 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.” ”

Discrimination Against Puerto Rico Enshrined in US Law

During the U.S. continental expansion period, 31 territories applied for and were admitted as states. However, in 1901, [in a series of legal opinions](#) ("[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. Puerto Rico was established as an unincorporated territory with no path toward statehood, leaving Puerto Ricans in limbo with no clear legal status (or passports) for decades. It is this body of legal jurisprudence currently [being relied on](#) to continue discrimination against Puerto Rico in federal benefits.

Puerto Ricans and Discrimination in Federal Poverty Programs

- Puerto Rico receives disparate 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 states, the amount is unrelated to need. For example, in Mississippi, the poorest state, [the federal government pays 75.65% of the costs](#); in Puerto Rico, [it pays for 55%](#). Puerto Rico received a temporary increase under the Affordable Care Act (ACA or Obamacare) but that money ran out and Congress has been making short-term extensions ever since. Puerto Rico faces its next “[Medicaid Funding Cliff](#)” on October 1, 2021 **Unless Congress provides additional healthcare funding for the island’s poorest residents, close to 1 million patients could lose their insurance or suffer significant reductions in benefits in the middle of a global health pandemic.**
- Low-income seniors living in Puerto Rico are not eligible to participate [in the Medicare subsidy for prescription drugs \(Low Income Subsidy or LIS\) or eligible for long-term care provided to low-income seniors on the mainland.](#)

Political Parties in Puerto Rico

- Political parties in Puerto Rico are organized differently than the two major national parties in US politics. 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 around shared views on what the island’s political relationship should be with the United States.**
 - **The New Progressive Party (NPP)** believes that Puerto Rico should become the 51st state of the union
 - **The Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP)** believes that Puerto Rico should become an independent republic.
 - **The Popular Democratic Party (PPD)** believes in continuing to develop the current status of Puerto Rico as a Commonwealth.
- It is important to highlight that **party affiliation in Puerto Rico is not related to political ideology.** In other words, **you will find people from all over the political spectrum in each party on social and economic issues.**
- Some recent examples:
 - In 2016, the candidates for Governor and Resident Commissioner of the New Progressive Party (NPP) were a Democrat (Ricardo Rosselló) 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. 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).
- From 2008-2012, the same thing happened when Luis Fortuño (Republican) was the Governor and Pierluisi (Democrat) represented Puerto Rico in Congress. They were both members of the PPD.
- Local parties whose membership is not centered on the political status between the island and the United States, as well as independent candidacies, have started to gain some traction in Puerto Rico since 2008.
- In 2016, the first-ever independent Senator in the history of Puerto Rico was elected when Dr. José Vargas Vidot [received the most votes](#) for one of the At-Large seats in the Puerto Rico Senate. That same year, two independent candidates for Governor – Alexandra Lúgaro (11.13%) and Manuel Cidre (5.73%) – [received a sizable share of the votes.](#)

U.S. Citizenship

- In 1917, Congress passed the [Jones-Shafroth Act](#), which granted U.S. citizenship to all Puerto Ricans thereby [allowing the U.S. to draft and deploy them as troops during World War I.](#) 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. News Source: (USA Today) --

TAKEAWAY

Puerto Ricans were granted limited U.S. citizenship in 1917 so they could be drafted to fight in World War I. Believing they were better suited than white people who didn’t have immunity to tropical disease, the federal government sent Puerto Ricans or so-called “immunes” to fight in tropical climates such as the Panama Canal.

Puerto Rican Participation in the U.S. Military

- 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, and 596 Bronze Stars](#).
- 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](#). That is without counting the several thousand serving in the national guard units of the 50 federated states of the Union.
- [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](#).

Puerto Ricans and Limited Sovereignty

- For the **first 50 years under U.S. rule**, (1898 to 1946), **Puerto Rico was ruled by Governors that were appointed by the U.S. President, who was not Puerto Rican, and the 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, known as the “Gag Law” was signed into law U.S.-appointed governor of Puerto Rico Jesús T. Piñero. It **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;** 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 (US), or both. After many years of nationalist revolts, many of [them armed and coordinated](#), the law 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 the Nationalists **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 only two: a continuation of the colonial status existing at that time and the proposed new commonwealth status.**
- Under the next period under the sovereignty of the United States, 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.
- In 1976, Congress changed the tax code (Section 936), to attract mainland investors and corporations 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. **By 2006, [this tax credit was phased out by Congress](#), which led to the loss of more than 100,000 manufacturing jobs. Excessive borrowing by the Commonwealth to make up for the losses and continue paying for public services, caused, in part, the current economic recession, and the snowballing financial/debt crisis.**

Puerto Rican Migration

- The first great migratory wave of Puerto Ricans to the mainland began in the mid-’40s and lasted for [more than a de- cade, 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 traveled there](#).
- The latest 2020 U.S. Census showed Puerto Rico’s population fell [11.8 percent to 3.3 million](#) over the past decade.

Puerto Rico's Debt - The Passage of PROMESA

- In 1996, Congress began a ten-year phase-out of [Section 936](#) of the Internal Revenue Code, which awarded generous tax credits and federal tax exemptions to U.S. manufacturing companies that operated in Puerto Rico and the territories. An economic recession started in Puerto Rico in 2006, the year that the phase-out was complete resulting in the loss of more than 100,000 jobs. The economic loss reduced the Commonwealth's revenues to the point where [the government borrowed excessively to make up the difference](#) and 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](#).
- **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. states have](#). As Puerto Rico was approaching a financial cliff with the inability to service or restructure its debt, in 2016, Congress passed a bill known as [PROMESA](#), or the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act. This law created a Fiscal Oversight 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 exacerbates the already thorny issues 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.** It can require the Puerto Rican government to [implement austerity measures](#) such as [severely cutting pensions](#), [closing public schools](#), insisting on 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. This has not come into effect yet.

Democracy in action - the 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, more than half a million people took to the streets of Puerto Rico to demand the governor's resignation.

The protests by the Puerto Rican community were viewed worldwide as an example of democracy in action and were 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 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.