

ADVANCING EQUITY IN U.S. TERRITORIES

HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE CHAIR RAÚL M. GRIJALVA

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The U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources has jurisdiction over matters related to U.S. Territories. This includes the territories of American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands of the United States.

About 3.5 million Americans live in these jurisdictions, and 95 percent of them identify as a member of one or more racial or ethnic minorities. Those born in the territories are U.S. citizens or U.S. nationals, but the federal government has historically treated them as second-class citizens.

Residents of U.S. Territories are unable to participate in federal elections and do not have a federal representative with voting power in Congress. In addition to a lack of political power, residents lack equal access to important federal programs intended to aid vulnerable Americans. In Puerto Rico, these issues are part of a larger conversation about the island's political relationship with the United States. Chair Raúl M. Grijalva and Democrats on the Natural Resources Committee will prioritize addressing these issues in the 117th Congress.

EXTENDING FULL VOTING RIGHTS

U.S. citizens in the territories are unable to vote in presidential elections and lack voting representation in Congress. Despite being qualified for military service and being treated, in other respects, as full Americans, close to 3.5 million otherwise eligible men and women were barred from participating in the 2020 general election, despite its enormous impact on their livelihoods and futures. Without the capacity to fully participate in our democratic processes, territorial residents will continue to see their needs ignored or minimized. House Democrats support establishing a congressional task force responsible for recommending changes to extend full and equal voting rights to residents of U.S. Territories in federal elections.

EXPANDING ACCESS TO FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Residents of the U.S. Territories face unequal access to essential federal programs. Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands of the United States, Guam and American Samoa are excluded from receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, which are granted to elderly, blind, and disabled individuals with financial need. Nutrition assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is also limited for families in Puerto Rico, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands. Similar funding caps exist for the federal Medicaid program in eligible territories, straining health systems putting thousands of low-income Americans at risk. In the 117th Congress, the Committee will work with other committees with relevant jurisdiction to advance bills expanding access to federal programs and guarantee equity in federal assistance.

RESOLVING PUERTO RICO'S POLITICAL STATUS

Puerto Rico's political status has been a focus of intense debate since the United States acquired the territory in 1898. Since then, Puerto Rico has held several plebiscites to consider three significantly different options: statehood, independence, or free association. In the 117th Congress, the Committee will examine legislation to resolve Puerto Rico's political status and will hold hearings on competing bills to fulfill this objective.