



Insight

Puerto Rico's Tennessee Plan

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Introduction

On July 10th, the Governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló announced three new appointments to the newly formed Democracy Commission. Those three appointees join four others who were appointed earlier this year. The commission is tasked with lobbying Congress to approve Puerto Rico's request for statehood. Puerto Rico's latest push for statehood resembles the strategy Tennessee used in 1795 to become a state, known as the Tennessee Plan. But what exactly is the Tennessee Plan and how could it help Puerto Rico achieve statehood?

What is the Tennessee Plan?

The Tennessee Plan refers to the strategy that Tennessee used in 1795 to gain membership into the Union. The territory of Tennessee, then known as the Southwest Territory, was under the jurisdiction of North Carolina from 1777-1788. In 1789, North Carolina ratified the United States Constitution and ceded its Tennessee territory to the federal government. The territory was governed under the Northwest Ordinance, which provided a method for admitting new states to the Union from the territory.

After a territorial census revealed that the Southwest Territory had a sufficient population for statehood, the territory held a referendum which revealed a three-to-one majority in favor of joining the Union. Unwilling to wait for the Union to initiate the statehood process, Governor Blount called for a constitutional convention where delegates from all counties in the territory drafted a state constitution and a democratic bill of rights. The territory then formed its own legislature electing John Sevier as governor, William Blount and William Cocke as senators, and Andrew Jackson as representative. Tennessee, having converted the territory into a new state, with an organized government and constitution, presented itself for admission to the Union. After much delay, Congress approved statehood in 1796, making Tennessee the 16th state of the Union.

Puerto Rico Adopts the Tennessee Plan

Last month, Puerto Rico held a vote on the island's territorial status in a non-binding referendum. Statehood received an overwhelming [97 percent](#) of the vote. However, the referendum had a turnout of only 23 percent of registered voters, the lowest of the island's five referendums. Regardless, Governor Rosselló has pushed forward with statehood, forming the pro-statehood Democracy Commission, comprised of two senators and five representatives, similar to the "legislature" Tennessee created in 1795. Former governors Luis Fortuño (R) and Carlos Romero Barceló (D) will serve as Puerto Rico's senators. The remaining five members, former Governor Pedro Rosselló Nevaes (D), former Puerto Rico Senate President Charles Rodríguez (D), National Committeewoman Zoraida Fonalledas (R), two-star General Félix Santoni (R), and MBL Hall of Famer Iván "Pudge" Rodríguez (I) will be representatives. The bipartisan commission is tasked with convincing Congress to make Puerto Rico a state. The commission has plans to present themselves in Washington to that end.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the fate of Puerto Rico statehood is up to Congress. Article IV, Section 3, Clause 1 of the United

States Constitution, which authorizes Congress to admit new states into the Union, specifies that new states cannot be admitted into the Union “without the Consent of the Legislatures of the States concerned as well as of the Congress.” Tennessee had the benefit of presenting itself for admission into the Union when Congress was uncertain of how to proceed. 34 states later, Congress is more equipped to handle this issue and unfortunately for Puerto Rico, given its economic condition, statehood will be a hard sell. The island has roughly [\\$70 billion in debt](#), and filed for bankruptcy under Title III of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act earlier this year. With the focus currently on health care and tax reform, the commission will have a difficult time convincing Congress Puerto Rico statehood should be a priority.