

After Hurricane Maria: The U.S. Role in Puerto Rico

Instructions: Read the following text about the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the broader context of U.S.-Puerto Rican relations. Underline at least three new facts you learn. Write a question mark near a sentence that raises a question for you. Be ready to share with a classmate.

How has Hurricane Maria affected Puerto Rico?

On September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico as a category four hurricane. This was several weeks after Hurricane Irma caused significant damage on the island. Hurricane Maria destroyed Puerto Rico's infrastructure—including its buildings, roads, bridges, and power grid—and wiped out most of its agricultural supply. As a result of the devastation, most of the island's population lost access to electricity, water, food, and other basic necessities. While estimates vary, many sources now report that several hundred people died from the hurricane and its aftermath.

Key Terms

Colony—A colony is a territory owned and exploited by a foreign power for that power's economic and political benefit.

U.S. territory—A U.S. territory is a piece of land that is under the control of the United States but has not been admitted as a state. The United States currently has sixteen territories, five of which are inhabited: American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Residents of U.S. territories share some of the rights of U.S. citizens in the fifty states. People living in U.S. territories (except some in American Samoa) are U.S. citizens, pay certain federal taxes, and can travel freely within the United States. Like states in the United States, the territories have their own governments and elect their governors. Unlike states, the territories do not have representatives who can vote on laws in the U.S. Congress.

U.S. federal government—The U.S. federal government is the national government of the United States. It is made up of three branches: the executive branch (president, vice president, president's cabinet, and many departments and agencies); the legislative branch (Congress); and the judicial branch (judges and courts). The federal government has authority over the governments of states, cities, and towns.

Popular referendum—A popular referendum is a measure, usually proposed by a state government, that appears on a ballot for voters to approve or reject. If voters approve the referendum, it becomes a law. If voters reject it, the measure does not become a law.

Second-class citizen—"Second-class citizen" is not an official term, but it is sometimes used to refer to a citizen of a state, country, or community whose rights are not equally protected in that society. Second-class citizens are usually members of a group that is discriminated against or otherwise treated unjustly.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—FEMA is an agency that is part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and is in charge of preparing for and responding to national emergencies and disasters.

Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA)—PREPA is an electric company in Puerto Rico responsible for generating and distributing electrical power on the island. Owned by the Puerto Rican government, PREPA is the only electric company in Puerto Rico. Hurricanes Irma and Maria destroyed PREPA's power grid, creating a blackout across the island. Two months after the storms, the grid was generating power at about 45 percent capacity. Before the storms, PREPA contributed to Puerto Rico's economic crisis as the first part of the government to run out of money.



1st Sgt. Waldemar Rivera (CC BY 2.0)

View from a U.S. National Guard vehicle providing drinkable water to the municipality of Comerío, Puerto Rico, October 16, 2017. Hurricane Maria disrupted all utilities, leaving the island without water or electrical power. Many residents still do not have sufficient access to water that is safe to drink.

In the days immediately after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, U.S. media coverage was similar to the coverage of Hurricane Harvey, which had caused massive destruction in Houston, Texas only weeks before. But the ongoing situation in Puerto Rico sets it apart from Houston.

Two months after Hurricane Maria made landfall, the devastation in Puerto Rico is still severe. Half of Puerto Rico remains without power, and hundreds of thousands of residents have no access to clean drinking water. Many are still without homes and have not been able to return to school or work. Local and federal officials say it will be months before power is fully restored to many parts of the island. It could take much longer in areas that have been difficult for recovery crews to access. The enormous financial cost of rebuilding will likely be a long-term strain on the Puerto Rican government, which

was already struggling with a major debt crisis.

Some of the issues at play in Puerto Rico's recovery process are particular to this place and its history. They connect to the political relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, a relationship that traces back to 1898, when the United States acquired Puerto Rico as a territory from Spain after the Spanish-American War.

How did Puerto Rico become a territory of the United States?

Puerto Rico was a colony of the Spanish Empire beginning in 1493. By the early 1800s, many of Spain's colonies were independent or had become possessions of other imperial powers. Cuba and Puerto Rico were the only Spanish territories left in the Western Hemisphere in 1825. During the 1880s and 1890s, some Puerto Rican political parties advocated for independence, but the government of Spain was focused on a war with Cuba, which was also fighting for independence.

The United States intervened in the war between Spain and Cuba in April 1898, determined to protect the millions of U.S. dollars invested in Cuba's sugar economy. In Decem-



ber 1898, Spain and the United States signed a peace treaty, which declared Cuba an independent nation and gave the United States control over Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines.

What does it mean that Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory?

Since 1898, Puerto Rico has been a territory of the United States. It is currently the U.S. territory with the largest population, with over 3 million residents. The political relationship between the people of Puerto Rico and the United States has never been completely clear, since Puerto Rico is not an independent country but is also not fully part of the United States.

Right after Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory, Puerto Ricans were not U.S. citizens, although they were granted certain rights under the U.S. Constitution. The Jones-Shafroth Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1917, granted Puerto Ricans citizenship. The act also made changes to Puerto Rico's government. It set up three branches of government, and granted the U.S. president and Congress authority over these branches. In 1952, Puerto Rico created a constitution to guide the island's domestic affairs. The U.S. government remained in charge of Puerto Rico's foreign policy and trade.



Official White House Photo by Samantha Appleton.

Puerto Rican and U.S. flags hang behind U.S. President Barack Obama as he delivers remarks at an event at Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport in San Juan, Puerto Rico, June 14, 2011.

Do Puerto Ricans have equal rights as U.S. citizens?

While residents of Puerto Rico have some of the same rights as other U.S. citizens, they do not have the same political representation. Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico cannot vote in elections for the U.S. president and vice president, unless they establish residency in one of the fifty states. (They may vote in presidential primary elections.) Puerto Ricans directly elect a commissioner to the U.S. House of Representatives. This commissioner

The Jones Act (1920)

Although Puerto Rico does not have voting power in the U.S. Congress, laws passed by Congress affect Puerto Rico and its residents. One law that has appeared in the news recently is the Merchant Marine Act of 1920 (commonly known as the Jones Act, different from the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917). The Jones Act of 1920 requires that goods shipped from one U.S. port to another be transported on ships that are U.S.-made and U.S.-operated. The main goal of this law was to protect the U.S. shipping industry from foreign competition, but its impact extends beyond that. As a result of the act, shipping goods between Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland is expensive, and the cost of goods on the island can be very high. This made disaster relief efforts more difficult after Hurricane Maria and has also played a role in Puerto Rico's long-term economic troubles, including significant poverty on the island. (President Donald J. Trump granted a ten-day waiver to temporarily stop the enforcement of the Jones Act after the hurricane, but he declined to renew the waiver.)

can serve on and vote in committees but cannot vote when laws are proposed to the full House. Puerto Rico has no U.S. senators.

For decades, there has been a movement in Puerto Rico advocating for the island to become a U.S. state. Statehood advocates argue that Puerto Rico should be treated equally by the U.S. government—given the same degree of political representation and economic aid as the fifty states. In a popular referendum held in June 2017, 97 percent of Puerto Ricans who voted were in favor of becoming a U.S. state. Ultimately, it is up to the U.S. Congress to decide whether to admit Puerto Rico as a state, and Congress has not yet taken action on this issue.

“If we were a state, I believe the U.S. would be more worried because we’d have representatives in Congress and could vote. If we were a sovereign republic [an independent nation] we’d own our own ports and airspace. So it’s a political disaster as well as a natural disaster.”

—Iris Dipini, an engineer from Puerto Rico who has lived in the mainland United States for nineteen years, quoted in the *Economist*, October 5, 2017

As U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans are free to move anywhere within the United States. Throughout Puerto Rico’s history as a U.S. territory, Puerto Ricans have migrated to the United States, often seeking better economic opportunities. More recent economic troubles on the island have led increasing numbers of people to move from Puerto Rico to the United States during the past decade. Since 2010, tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans have moved to the United States per year, and in the past two years that number has been close to one hundred thousand. Roughly 5.4 million Puerto Ricans currently live in the United States.

What are different views on the U.S. role in Puerto Rico’s hurricane relief effort?

Many people in the United States are unaware that the 3.4 million residents of Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens. As a result, these U.S. voters may be less likely to support the U.S. government devoting significant financial resources to Puerto Rico’s recovery. Others, recognizing that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, argue that Puerto Rico should get the same federal support as the rest of the United States, including during natural disasters. (Puerto Rico currently receives less funding than U.S. states from a number of federal programs that provide financial aid.)



Master Sgt. Joshua L. DeMotts.

Workers repair power lines in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico, October 19, 2017. These workers are part of the 249th Engineering Battalion, which the Federal Emergency Management Agency assigned to help with the U.S. government’s power repair efforts in Puerto Rico.

“Make no mistake—this is a humanitarian disaster involving 3.4 million U.S. citizens.”

—Ricardo Rosselló, governor of Puerto Rico, September 25, 2017

Many people have criticized the U.S. government for not providing enough aid to Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria. Critics have argued that the federal government—led by President Trump, but also including Congress and various executive agencies—is not providing the funding or workers necessary to restore electricity and access to food, water, and housing. On October 30, 2017 a group of United Nations human rights experts described the current situation in Puerto Rico as “alarming” and called for the U.S. government to remove all existing barriers to an effective emergency response.

In mid-October, a group of U.S. senators asked the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to authorize full reconstruction aid to Puerto Rico, which the island’s government had requested over a week earlier. (Full reconstruction aid includes all of the disaster relief funds that FEMA usually provides in the wake of a natural disaster in the United States.) A week after the senators’ request, FEMA approved over \$500 billion in aid. Many criticized this response as long overdue.

Critics have pointed to the quicker and more substantial response by the U.S. government in Texas and Florida following Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. For example, over 5,000 engineers and utility workers from outside of Texas arrived to restore power within days of Hurricane Harvey. In contrast, a few hundred electrical workers from outside of Puerto Rico had arrived by the middle of October, a month after Hurricane Maria made landfall. Another difference was in food relief provided after the two storms. A limit on Puerto Rico’s food stamp program—set in a budget policy passed by the U.S. Congress decades ago—restricted the amount of food aid that was available to Puerto Rico immediately after the storm. Texas and Florida do not have

these limits and were able to quickly increase food stamp support after Hurricane Irma.

Many argue that the inequalities highlighted in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria reveal broader issues of inequality between Puerto Rico and U.S. states. Some say that Puerto Ricans are treated as second-class citizens by the U.S. government. Others claim that Puerto Rico’s political and economic status resembles that of a U.S. colony.

“Americans don’t really view Puerto Ricans as fellow Americans with equal rights.... Trump underscored this point when he brought up Texas and Florida. Those two states are getting the money, but what about Puerto Rico? Welcome to second class.”

—Julio Ricardo Varela, senior digital editor of LatinoUSA.org, in an article published in the *Washington Post*, September 26, 2017

On November 19, 2017, thousands of people rallied in Washington, D.C., calling for justice for Puerto Rico. The protesters demanded that FEMA act quickly to restore services, that the United States cancel Puerto Rico’s debt, and that Congress permanently waive shipping restrictions under the Jones Act.

As Puerto Ricans and others have demanded a more substantial response from the U.S. government, President Trump has made comments suggesting that the United States is only responsible to a certain extent and that local leaders in Puerto Rico should be doing more to lead the recovery effort.

“Such poor leadership ability by the Mayor of San Juan, and others in Puerto Rico, who are not able to get their workers to help. They want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort.”

—U.S. President Donald J. Trump, in a tweet posted on September 30, 2017

Some people have pointed out the racism behind President Trump’s messages.

“[W]e just read the tweets...and sort of were upset and confused by such unbelievably coded racist behavior. It’s behavior that we have heard and words that we have heard over and over and over that somehow we don’t do enough, we don’t help ourselves enough.... And as we see the images and we talk to our family, everybody, hands on, doing everything they can to help their neighbors, to help what’s happening in Puerto Rico....”

—Luis Miranda, Jr., father of musical artist Lin-Manuel Miranda and founder of a political consulting firm in New York City, in an interview with Democracy Now!, October 2, 2017

There are communities within Puerto Rico that have organized their own relief efforts. Some members of these communities do not think that the U.S. government will offer enough support, while others believe that people within Puerto Rico are most knowl-

edgeable about what their communities need in order to rebuild.

“We are very organized. We don’t need no one to come here and tell us what we need to do, because we know what we need to do. We know our community. We know our necessities. We know how to attend them. Obviously, we don’t have the resources.”

—José Bellaflor Díaz, resident of the Río Piedras neighborhood in the Puerto Rican capital, San Juan, in an interview with Democracy Now!, late September 2017

Access to resources is an issue even for the most organized areas in Puerto Rico. The difficult aftermath of Hurricane Maria has highlighted questions about who is responsible for ensuring that Puerto Rico has the resources it needs, presently and in the long-run. These issues, and the debates surrounding them, connect to broader questions about the status of Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory and the history that has led up to the situation in Puerto Rico today.



Sgt. Jose Ahiram Diaz-Ramos (CC BY 2.0).

Puerto Rico National Guard members, along with employees from the Aqueducts and Sewers Authority of Puerto Rico, distribute water for residents of Utuado, Puerto Rico, September 26, 2017. Utuado is located in a mountainous region in central Puerto Rico, parts of which were isolated from relief efforts for weeks after Hurricane Maria. Many members of these communities had to walk for hours to reach accessible roads where resources could be distributed.