

 DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

VOTERS SUPPORT SELF- DETERMINATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Voters support both independence and statehood for U.S. territories at similar rates.
- ▶ Voters agree the U.S. should commit to aid territories through a transition period in the event of a status change.
- ▶ Most voters are unaware that Congress can buy and sell territories.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of Puerto Rico's future has historically been used by both Democrats and Republicans to draw support from an ever growing diaspora without ever really taking decisive action once elected. Presidents [Ronald Reagan](#) and [George H.W. Bush](#) both publicly supported statehood for the island and more recently, President Barack Obama suggested that [extending voting rights](#) to the "U.S. citizens living in Puerto Rico and Washington D.C." was long overdue.

American politicians from both parties consistently emphasize that the majority of residents of the nation's remaining colonies are U.S. citizens who cannot vote, without ever prodding the American public to think about how this arrangement ever came to be in the first place, and why does it still exist?

Unlike most other issues, moving towards decolonization of the American empire and self-determination for the remaining colonies is particularly challenging because Congress continually sends mixed signals in terms of what

is acceptable each session, and residents of the colonies rely on politicians who they do not vote for to lobby for their interests. On November 3rd of this year Puerto Ricans will once again vote in a nonbinding referendum on whether or not they would like to be admitted into the union as a state. And if history is any indication, Congress will ignore the results of the referendum. Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell has even stated in the runup to the referendum that as long as he is in power, Puerto Rico will never become a state. This adds to the narrative of mixed signals, given that the 2016 Republican platform explicitly supported statehood.

In a break from politicians who are pushing statehood and the ones who support self-determination without a plan, Congresswomen Nydia Velazquez and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have [introduced](#) the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act. The bill creates semi-permanent committees so that Puerto Rican delegates can negotiate with a Congressional delegation on status options like statehood or independence, with the goal of putting one of the options up for a vote in Puerto Rico. While novel, it's also unclear whether a bill like this could pass the House and Senate, having no clear precedent.

When it comes to studying opinions concerning decolonization, researchers often exercise agenda control by polling U.S. voters about what they perceive to be desirable for either political party, rather than using their position of influence to encourage understanding, education and opening the negotiation space for a just decolonization process. A great example of this is Gallup polling on the subject.

Since 1963, Gallup [has tracked](#) support for Puerto Rico statehood, and support has fluctuated with

a high of 66% in favor (2019) and a low of 59% in favor (1979). Between 1962 and 1991 they also tracked support for granting Puerto Rico independence, which is supported at almost the same rates. Yet, when Gallup stopped tracking independence, support for independence did not disappear.

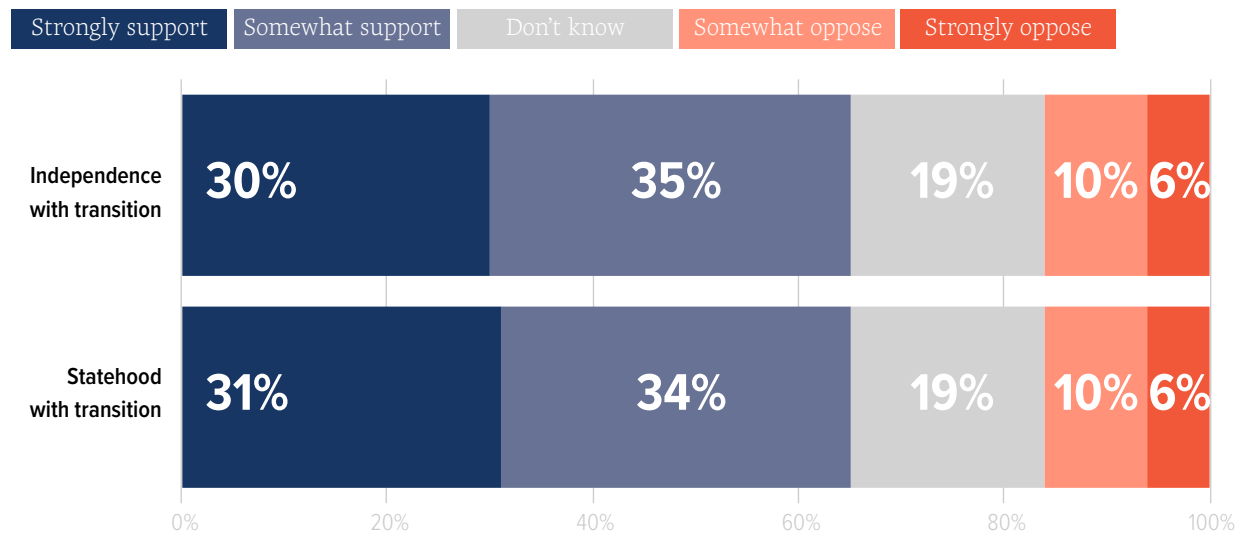
and really, it shouldn't be up to the American public to determine. American politicians face very little risk in either case, so the question remains, what would compel them to take action?

WHAT WE FOUND

In an August 2020 survey of likely voters, Data for Progress asked voters whether they would support independence or statehood for the remaining U.S. territories, including a transition period of Congressional support in either case. Unsurprisingly, likely voters support both options for decolonization at the same rate (65% support for both). There is no evidence that the American public supports one option more than the other,

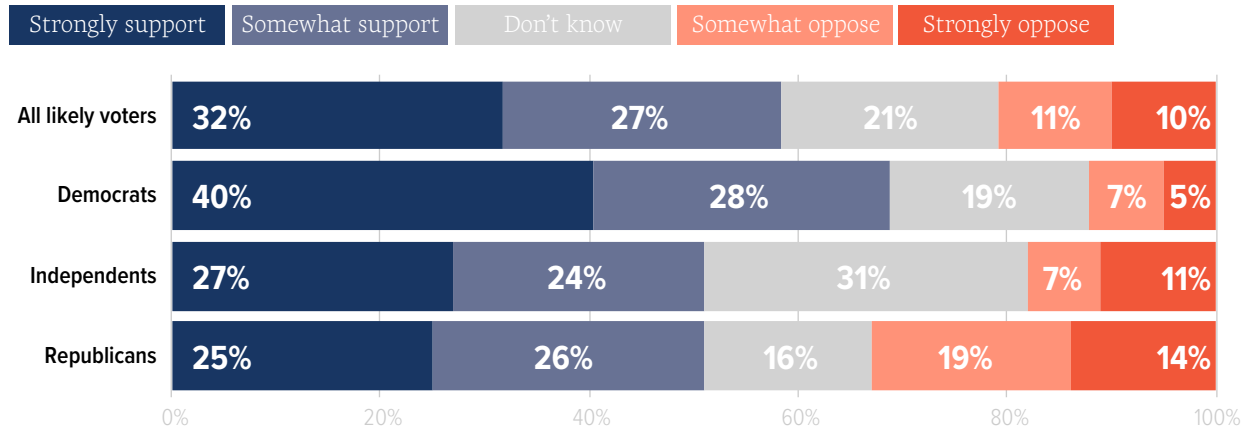
Investigating further, we asked about support for decolonization of Puerto Rico specifically, but used language which asked likely voters to respect the outcome of a referendum, rather than state what they wanted for the island. We found strong support and very little opposition overall (59% support, 21% oppose). Even among Republicans a majority were in support (51%) and only one-third were in opposition. It is notable that the proportion of likely voters who said they did not know is high, with 21% overall and 31% among independent voters. This suggests that the issue is either not that salient for likely voters, or they do not feel like they know enough to say one way or the other.

If the U.S. territories vote for [Rotate: Independence / Statehood], would you support or oppose measures by Congress to ensure they have a sufficient transition period of congressional support to ensure they have a chance to become economically self-sustaining and stable?



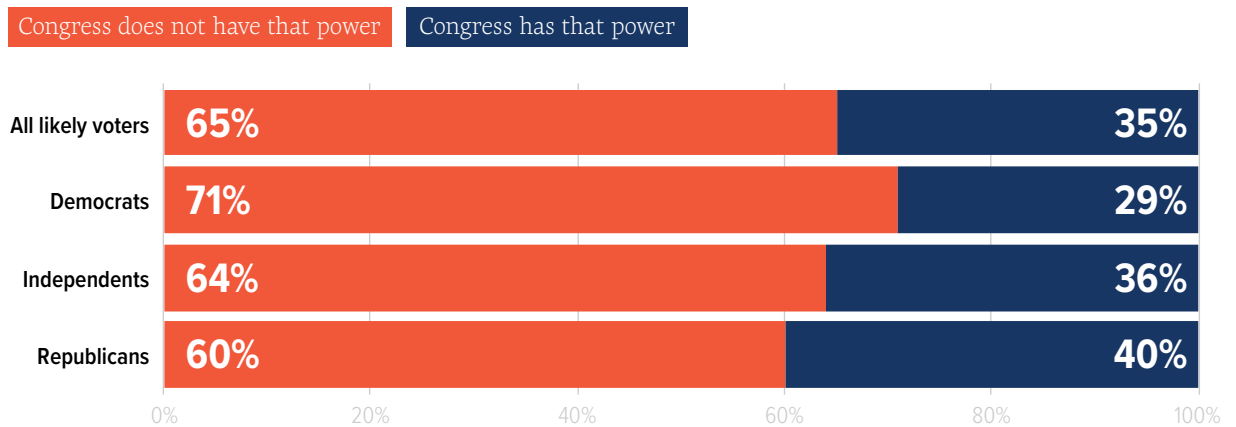
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Would you support or oppose a measure where Congress commits to make Puerto Rico either a state or an independent nation depending on whatever Puerto Ricans vote for in a referendum?



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Do you think the Congress has the ability to sell territories like Puerto Rico and Guam and acquire new territories like Greenland?



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In an effort to see how much voters do know about the relationship between the U.S. and its remaining colonies, we asked likely voters a factual question about Congressional authority to buy and sell territories. Overall, 65% of likely voters are unaware that Congress does in fact have the authority to buy and sell territories. Even more interesting was that Democrats, the group who is most outraged by Trump’s suggestion that we should sell Puerto Rico, are the least aware that

it is legally within the power of every Presidential administration to do this. It is clear that likely voters are not currently knowledgeable enough about the relationship between the U.S. and its colonies for their opinions to mean that much.

Although it should not be up to the U.S. voters to determine the future of U.S. colonies, since Congress has this power, by extension they too have this power. It should be the responsibility of researchers who support a just self-determination

process for ALL U.S. colonies to mind their oversized influence on the conversation, particularly in this case because those who are impacted cannot defend themselves at the ballot box. Instead, we should focus on educating the average American voter, setting the table for activists to raise awareness and effectively compel Congress to create a framework for decolonization without exercising agenda control that unknowingly, or knowingly in some cases, influences the outcome.

METHODOLOGY

From 8/7/2020 to 8/7/2020 Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1,074 likely voters nationally using web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is +/- 3 percent.

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