


The Empty Gift: Citizenship, Imperialism, and Political Development in Puerto Rico

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Research Article

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Abstract

After nearly two decades under U.S. rule, the 1917 Jones Act granted American citizenship to Puerto Ricans. I argue that the United States strategically granted collective citizenship in order to strengthen its colonial rule. The convergence of two conditions prompted the grant of citizenship: Congress determined that the islands were strategically valuable to the United States; and Congress registered an independence movement on the island that could threaten colonial control. When Puerto Ricans demanded independence, Congress enveloped them in a bear hug that granted citizenship to weaken their movement. While citizenship was an attractive solution to many of the problems of colonial rule, there were strong objections within the United States to granting citizenship to a population considered to be nonwhite. As a result, Congress created a workaround by disentangling citizenship from statehood and from many of the rights and privileges that typically accompany it. Though citizenship is often associated with democracy and equality, American officials turned citizenship into a mechanism of control for the empire they were building. This work uncovers strategies of American territorial expansion and colonial governance and confronts deeply held notions about American citizenship and political community.

1. Introduction

In 1902, a pregnant and unmarried Isabel González—only 20 years old—traveled from Puerto Rico to the United States. By 1902, Puerto Rico had been under the jurisdiction of the United States for nearly four years. Many Puerto Ricans were reasonably under the assumption that they were U.S. citizens and that Puerto Rico would become a state. Until that point, there had been a consistent pattern where white settlers moved to new territories and the territories were made states and their residents U.S. citizens. According to this earlier model of territorial expansion, statehood and citizenship were inextricably linked and essentially guaranteed to newly acquired territories. But when González arrived at Ellis Island, she was denied entry to the United States and deemed a “public charge.”¹ What seems at first an unfortunate but all-too-common story of discrimination against a vulnerable person happened in fact to an activist who would spark a consequential political debate over the legal status of Puerto Rico and its residents. González sued for the right to enter, and the case eventually reached the Supreme Court. In January 1904, the Court ruled that González was not an alien and therefore had to be allowed into New York, but importantly, neither was she a citizen. Here, the Supreme Court was reflecting the reality that the older model of territorial expansion had begun to break down. The Court declined to specify the future of these new overseas territories or the citizenship of their residents. The Court left these questions to Congress. This article examines this point in the twentieth century when the United States was confronted with choices about citizenship and expansion.

After prolonged debate, the United States decided to extend U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917 under the Jones-Shafroth Act. But it was made abundantly clear that citizenship did not go hand in hand with statehood. With this decoupling, Congress redefined the legal category of citizenship, creating a new territorial form that was compatible with the racial hierarchy of the United States. During the twentieth century, Congress granted citizenship not only to Puerto Ricans but also, using this new model of empire building that separated citizenship from statehood, to three other U.S. territories: Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. All of this leads me to my research question: Why and under what conditions does the United States grant citizenship to its territorial residents?

I argue that when Congress believes a territory is strategically important but thinks its control over the territory is becoming weak, it extends citizenship as a way to strengthen

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¹Christina Duffy Burnett, “They Say I Am Not an American...: The Noncitizen National and the Law of American Empire,” *Immigration and Nationality Law Review* 29, no. 1 (2008): 511–70, 512–13; Sam Erman, *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the US Constitution, and Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 74–75.

American colonial rule. Both a congressional determination of strategic interest and the perception of an exit demand are the necessary and sufficient conditions for a grant of collective citizenship. The conditions must converge at a particular moment, as they did in Puerto Rico in 1917. When one or both conditions are absent, Congress does not extend a grant of collective citizenship. The two conditions that I describe—the determination of strategic interest and perception of exit demand—are neither inherent features of a territory nor universal truths. Rather, they are reflections of how lawmakers and colonial officials understood the U.S. territories at the time. I locate the understanding of strategic interest and exit demand in what political elites say explicitly in the historical record. When Congress determines that both conditions are present, it extends a grant of collective citizenship. Due to a commitment to preserving racial hierarchy, however, Congress does not extend a citizenship that includes all the rights and privileges and promise of statehood that the previous model of citizenship entailed. Congress consciously created a category to maintain territorial control and simultaneously prevent territorial residents from full inclusion in the American polity.

This article presents Puerto Rico as a case study. I show how a congressional determination of strategic value and an exit demand converged to produce the grant of collective citizenship in 1917. Puerto Rico was essential to U.S. foreign policy and economic goals, and World War II intensified Puerto Rico's strategic importance. At that moment, lawmakers registered exit demand (in the form of an independence movement) on the island and responded by granting citizenship in order to undermine the independence movement and strengthen colonial control.

Cuba and Hawai'i may also be considered relevant cases. Cuba was a protectorate of the United States from 1898 to 1902, and Hawai'i was a territory of the United States with statehood far from a foregone conclusion. Where Cuba differs from Puerto Rico and the other U.S. territories, however, is that Cuba was never a formal territory. When the United States contemplated annexing Cuba in the 1800s, it was largely intended to be incorporated as a state of the Union, considered in tandem with Florida and Texas. Cuba was central to debates about slavery in the United States—many Southerners (and some Northerners) fought for Cuba to be admitted as a slave state, adding to the slave states' power in Congress and helping to preserve slavery in the United States.² Ultimately, the United States did not annex Cuba but, instead, relinquished any claim to Cuba in the Teller Amendment of 1898. The Platt Amendment, passed three years later, reserved the ability of the United States to intervene in Cuban affairs if deemed necessary, much to Cubans' anger. Cuba, although a critical part of American empire, fell outside the new model of overseas territorial governance and citizenship. Cuba was governed by a different legal apparatus than the formal territories of the United States.

Hawai'i is a more complicated case because it exhibited characteristics of both the earlier model of settler colonialism and the new model of overseas colonialism that this article investigates. Unlike the other territories acquired in 1898, including Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, Hawai'i would become a state. In that regard, Hawai'i had an important characteristic of the settler colonial model of westward settlement and eventual statehood. Prior to statehood, it had long been governed by a white,

elite population and had policies in place to facilitate white settlement, features that are consistent with settler colonialism.³

Simultaneously, there were similarities between Hawai'i and other overseas U.S. territories at the time. Congress extended a grant of collective citizenship to Hawai'i—a citizenship that was at the time disconnected from statehood—nearly two decades before it would do the same in Puerto Rico. The grant of collective citizenship to Hawaiians (both native Hawaiians and settlers) was hotly debated. Native Hawaiians strongly opposed annexation and citizenship as it meant a loss of sovereignty.⁴ Many white supremacists also opposed annexation, citing the sizeable Asian population on the islands.⁵ Pro-annexationists in the United States won the day, emphasizing the threat of Japan in the region.⁶ Importantly, the annexation of Hawai'i in 1898 and the extension of collective citizenship in 1900 did not guarantee future statehood. Thus in 1900, Hawai'i rather closely resembled other U.S. territories such as Puerto Rico.

Hawai'i therefore marks a point of transition from settler colonialism to overseas empire, displaying traits indicative of both models of expansion. During this critical juncture in American empire in the early twentieth century, lawmakers sought to achieve their imperial ambitions and, in doing so, broke free of existing patterns of territorial expansion. Where Hawai'i reflects elements of both models of empire building, Puerto Rico represents the fulfillment of modern American overseas empire and a decisive shift away from the settler colonial model of expansion. With my focus on Puerto Rico, I investigate how Congress made decisions about citizenship and expansion and thus crafted its overseas empire.

2. Theoretical Framework

This article is positioned to contribute to bodies of literature both in American political development (APD) and the study of citizenship. Several authors in the APD tradition have examined American empire. Each author has focused on a different feature of the American imperial state. Ira Katznelson argues that territorial expansion facilitated the growth and centralization of the U.S. military.⁷ Paul Frymer and Colin Moore have drawn attention to the expansion and governance of U.S. territory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through primarily nonmilitary means and outside of traditional European-style colonial bureaucracies. Frymer examines how land policies facilitated westward expansion and settlement during the nineteenth century.⁸ Moore illustrates how public-private partnerships were key to territorial expansion in the Caribbean and the Pacific.⁹ Through this research, APD scholars have come to see American empire as a subject worthy of scholarly attention that sheds light on the American state and its governing structures. I see myself as

³Colin Moore, *American Imperialism and the State, 1893–1921* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 53.

⁴Tom Coffman, *Nation Within: The History of the American Occupation of Hawai'i* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 123.

⁵*Ibid.*, 126.

⁶Coffman, *Nation Within*, 202; Thomas J. Osborne, "Trade or War? America's Annexation of Hawaii Reconsidered," *Pacific Historical Review* 50, no. 3 (August 1981), 285–307, 305.

⁷Ira Katznelson, "Flexible Capacity: The Military and Early American Statebuilding," in *Shaped by War and Trade*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Martin Shefter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002): 82–112.

⁸Paul Frymer, "'A Rush and a Push and the Land Is Ours': Territorial Expansion, Land Policy, and U.S. State Formation," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 1 (2014): 119–44.

⁹Moore, *American Imperialism and the State*.

²Ada Ferrer, *Cuba: An American History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), prologue.

joining these authors in investigating how territorial expansion and empire shape the American state. I build on their work and fill a gap in the literature with my focus on citizenship law, which is a less recognized feature of American empire and has not historically been understood as a form of imperialism in APD.

This article also draws on and speaks to our understanding of citizenship. Desmond King, Ian Haney López, Mae Ngai, and Rogers Smith, among many others, show that inclusion for some has come at the great cost of exclusion for many others because the very notion of American membership is so closely connected to whiteness.¹⁰ King examines how early twentieth-century immigration laws based on racist ideas of belonging continue to shape contemporary debates. López interrogates courts' definitions of whiteness in the twentieth century, revealing the contested and contradictory character of racial "logic." Focusing on the same time period, Ngai outlines how immigration laws have transformed migrants into aliens in the United States. Finally, Smith argues that American politics and civic identity are marked by exclusion and the fight for inclusion. These authors have contributed much to our understanding of citizenship in the United States, one that we now know is continuously contested and remade. I complement the work of these authors with a focus on the U.S. territories, which are an integral part of the history of race and citizenship in the United States that has largely been overlooked in American politics and political science.

A growing body of scholarship outside of American politics investigates citizenship in the context of American empire. Christina Duffy Burnett laments the exclusion of Puerto Ricans from citizenship and, in its stead, the creation of a new status called *noncitizen nationality*, that is neither citizenship nor alienage but something in-between.¹¹ Sam Erman's account of citizenship in Puerto Rico illuminates its varied and contested meanings for Puerto Ricans and U.S. lawmakers alike. Despite the best efforts of many Puerto Ricans, including Frederico Degetau, Santiago Iglesias, and Domingo Collazo, the citizenship granted to Puerto Ricans in 1917 fell far short of what many Puerto Ricans had hoped it would be.¹² Ross Dardani, too, shows that citizenship for Samoans took on many meanings. For some American officials, it was the strategic deployment of propaganda during the Cold War. For some Samoans, it was the key to rights and belonging, and for other Samoans it meant the decline of Samoan culture.¹³ All of these authors show how—more often than not—citizenship is a contested category both in lived experience and law on the books. I build on these authors' insights by showing how the creation of a territorial form of citizenship fundamentally transformed its meaning.

¹⁰Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Ian Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹¹Christina Duffy Burnett, "Empire and the Transformation of Citizenship," in *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State*, ed. Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 332–41.

¹²Erman, *Almost Citizens*.

¹³Ross Dardani, "Citizenship in Empire: The Legal History of U.S. Citizenship in American Samoa, 1899–1960," *American Journal of Legal History* 30, no. 3 (September 2020): 311–56, 346.

3. Existing Explanations

A number of authors outside of political science have studied citizenship in the U.S. territories and developed explanations about the motivations behind it. My work complements their findings while also clarifying and refining how these explanations matter. One of the primary explanations is popular resistance: that Puerto Ricans' demanded citizenship, and those demands shaped the actions of the American government. Robert McGreevey and Sam Erman provide detailed and important accounts of citizenship movements in Puerto Rico. McGreevey highlights the role of labor strikes by sugar producers that placed economic pressure on Congress to grant citizenship.¹⁴ Erman traces the pro-U.S.-citizenship activism of several Puerto Rican elites and their influence over the debates. In my work, I find that popular resistance matters, but in a different way than McGreevey and Erman demonstrate. I argue that it is not demands for citizenship, but rather, demands for independence that lead to grants of citizenship.

A second set of explanations highlights the economic interests that shaped choices about territorial governance. According to these accounts, lawmakers believed that the political incorporation of overseas territories would secure long-term access to the islands and, by extension, to overseas markets. Julian Go and Daniel Immerwahr argue that differing economic interests explain the political incorporation of Puerto Rico and its absence in the Philippines case. According to Go, the United States had different economic interests in the two territories. Puerto Rico was deemed a more stable site for free trade than the Philippines. The result was different institutional formations between the islands: Puerto Rico was subject to greater government oversight to safeguard U.S. economic interests, leading to U.S. citizenship among other things, whereas in the Philippines, oversight was much more decentralized.¹⁵ Immerwahr similarly argues that Philippine independence can be attributed to its perceived declining economic value to the United States, as well as fear that continuing to occupy the Philippines would lead to a costly war with Japan.¹⁶ These explanations illuminate the important role of economic interests in American empire, yet cannot fully explain the extension of collective grants of citizenship in the twentieth century. Empirically, citizenship appears neither necessary nor sufficient to guarantee formal economic relationships. For example, it is not clear that citizenship was a necessary condition of maintaining an economic relationship with Puerto Rico. When applied to citizenship, these economic explanations portray collective naturalization as an inevitable consequence of existing institutions and relationships rather than puzzling and inconsistent policies in their own right.

Still other authors identify diplomatic and military interests that motivate political incorporation. One explanation is that Puerto Ricans were collectively naturalized so that they could be conscripted to fight in the U.S. army.¹⁷ José Cabranes discredits the conscription argument, explaining that citizenship was not a

¹⁴Robert McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens: The United States, Puerto Rico, and the Politics of Colonial Migration* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 95.

¹⁵Julian Go, *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning: Elite Political Cultures in the Philippines and Puerto Rico during U.S. Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

¹⁶Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

¹⁷Manuel Maldonado-Denis, *Puerto Rico: A Socio-Historic Interpretation* (New York: Random House, 1972), 108.

prerequisite for Puerto Ricans' conscription to the U.S. army.¹⁸ While conscription itself was not a reason for the grant of collective citizenship, military and geopolitical considerations had an important role. Bartholomew Sparrow and Jennifer Lamm persuasively argue that World War I served as the primary impetus for the citizenship legislation.¹⁹ For Sparrow and Lamm, the citizenship aspect of the bill was not the most important. Instead, the authors argue that the Jones-Shafroth Act was part of a broader effort to reform the American colonial state and pursue commercial interests in the Caribbean.²⁰ This argument is persuasive, and geostrategic interests surely matter for the governance of territorial populations. However, interests alone cannot account for the granting of collective citizenship. American Samoa was also a territory of the United States in 1950, but unlike Guam, it was not granted collective citizenship.

These three sets of existing explanations provide helpful clues about the factors that influence decisions about territorial governance. My goal in this article is to build on existing accounts in theorizing the relationship between elites' perceptions of the independence movement in Puerto Rico and American strategic interests. I aim to understand the interplay between elected representatives and those within and outside of government in order to understand the debates within their context. I find that it was not one factor, either the independence movement or strategic interests, but rather their convergence that prompted Congress to grant citizenship.

4. Strategic Interests in Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico was considered strategically important to the United States long before its acquisition in 1898. Puerto Rico was an essential component of the Monroe Doctrine, which in 1823 declared U.S. domination in the Western Hemisphere. The United States wished to compete economically with European powers, and it seemed that Latin America was the most viable avenue for economic development. Puerto Rico was central to gaining access to Latin American markets.²¹ For Republicans, a coaling station and naval base in Puerto Rico were critical to protecting commercial interests in the region—both the production of sugar and other agricultural products as well as defending the Panama Canal. Sovereignty over Puerto Rico allowed the United States to establish a military stronghold and gain control over industries in the region.²²

Moreover, Puerto Ricans' colonial status was not only an issue of Puerto Rican–U.S. relations, but also had the potential to damage U.S. diplomatic relations with Latin American countries. Despite American lawmakers' early support for and guarantees of U.S. citizenship, the actual legislation became increasingly delayed.²³ The delay raised concern among Latin American

countries about the treatment of Puerto Ricans. This reputational damage, in turn, undermined U.S. efforts to forge diplomatic relationships with other countries. Many Latin American countries—which American elites believed viewed Puerto Rico as one of their own—objected to what they saw as the subordination of Puerto Ricans.²⁴ The United States did not have a favorable reputation in the Caribbean. At the same time the United States was establishing governance of Puerto Rico, Haiti and the Dominican Republic were under U.S. military rule.²⁵ During the Taft presidency, Secretary of War Henry Stimson worried that Latin Americans interpreted the exclusion of Puerto Ricans from U.S. citizenship as a sign that the United States considered Latin Americans inferior. Stimson supported granting citizenship because he hoped it would encourage Latin American cooperation with the United States.²⁶ Benevolent treatment of Puerto Rico, which included granting citizenship, was a means to establishing dominance in the Caribbean and fostering positive diplomatic relationships with Latin American nations.

The U.S. executive branch proved especially sensitive to how withholding U.S. citizenship from Puerto Ricans damaged its global reputation. Three presidential administrations between 1898 and 1917 recommended that Puerto Ricans be granted U.S. citizenship. The importance of Puerto Rico for U.S. economic and foreign policy transcended political party and presidential administration. In 1905, Pres. Theodore Roosevelt “earnestly” recommended that U.S. citizenship be extended to Puerto Ricans.²⁷ The same year, Roosevelt sent a letter to Joseph Foraker, Republican senator from Ohio, calling attention to the “injustice and embarrassment involved in longer continuing the present status” of American governance in Puerto Rico and encouraging that a bill creating a civil government and conferring citizenship be passed “as speedily as possible.”²⁸ Roosevelt repeated his call for citizenship in his annual messages to Congress the following two years, fearing competition with European powers in the region and wanting to eliminate their influence in the region.²⁹

Members of Congress shared Roosevelt's concern that poor treatment of Puerto Rico could reflect badly on the United States. In 1910, Representative Harvey Helm, a Democrat from Kentucky, worried that American colonial governance in Puerto Rico hurt America's global reputation as a liberal government. Helm declared: “ill does it become the traditions and prestige of the Government of the United States ... to curtail in the least [their] powers and rights.... I feel that the reputation of our Government as the dispenser of liberty to mankind will be lowered instead of exalted by doing so.”³⁰ For Helm, the undemocratic treatment of Puerto Ricans was a political liability. Helm's eye toward the international arena highlights growing fears about America's reputation amid a still-developing overseas colonial regime. Another Democrat, James Slayden, echoed Helm's sentiments. Slayden lamented the “embarrassment” that the “failure in colonial government” caused the United States.³¹

¹⁸José A. Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire: Notes on the Legislative History of the United States Citizenship of Puerto Ricans,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 127, no. 2 (December 1978): 391–492, 404–407; Harry Franqui-Rivera, “National Mythologies: U.S. Citizenship for the People of Puerto Rico and Military Service,” *Memorias: Revista Digital de Historia y Arqueología desde el Caribe* 21 (2013): 5–21.

¹⁹Bartholomew Sparrow and Jennifer Lamm, “Puerto Rico and U.S. Citizenship in 1917: Imperatives of Security,” *Centro Journal*, 29, no. 1 (2017): 284–315, 302.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 306.

²¹Pedro A. Cabán, *Constructing a Colonial People: Puerto Rico and the United States, 1898–1932* (Philadelphia, PA: Routledge, 1999), 17.

²²Sparrow and Lamm, “Puerto Rico and U.S. Citizenship,” 289.

²³Edgardo Meléndez, “Comments on the Jones Act and the Grant of U.S. Citizenship to Puerto Ricans,” *Centro Journal*, 29, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 316–27, 320.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 319; McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens*, 100–101.

²⁵Erman, *Almost Citizens*, 132, 141.

²⁶McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens*, 101.

²⁷Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire,” 448.

²⁸“Inhabitants of Porto Rico to Be Citizens of the United States,” 59th Congress, 1st Sess., 1906, Senate Report No. 2746, 7.

²⁹Cabán, *Constructing a Colonial People*, 25; Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire,” 452.

³⁰Harvey Helm, *Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, 2nd Sess., 1910, 7627.

³¹James Slayden, *Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, 2nd Sess., 1912, 2696.

World War I magnified Puerto Rico's strategic importance to the United States. Of particular concern to the U.S. Navy was Germany, the foreign competitor that they believed posed the greatest threat to the American state. American officials had evidence that Germany was contemplating intervening in the Caribbean. Germany had already taken action in the "Far East" and the Navy Department feared Germany would soon target the Caribbean.³² American military officials suspected that Germany planned to pursue Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands under U.S. control, given their strategic location as naval stations.³³ Admiral Dewey and the Navy Department were under the impression in 1913 that Germany wanted the coaling station not to supply its cargo vessels but as a military base of operations, announcing "the desire of Germany to have a coaling station in the Caribbean is as natural as is the desire of the United States not to have Germany so established in the region."³⁴ The citizenship status and loyalty of Puerto Ricans became critically important with the increased potential of a foreign competitor. American lawmakers believed that citizenship would reinforce the loyalty of disaffected Puerto Ricans and foreclose immediate avenues for independence. The United States could not afford disloyal or disaffected colonial subjects when its control over the region and already established global trade routes were at stake.³⁵

An urgent letter from Governor Arthur Yager of Puerto Rico to Secretary of War Lindley Garrison in 1914 emphasized the "utmost importance" that a new Puerto Rico bill be passed in Congress.³⁶ As governor, Yager was a key figure in communication between Puerto Rico and Washington, DC. Yager was a senior official in the colonial government of Puerto Rico and had direct access to elites in Washington, including the president. In this letter, Yager also outlined several reasons in support of the bill, including U.S. diplomatic goals in Latin America and what he perceived as local dissatisfaction on the island. Reform of the colonial government and collective naturalization had been significantly delayed. Puerto Ricans had sought change for over a decade already, and further delay would cause further unrest. Yager stressed the importance of good relations with Puerto Rico in the broader context of U.S.–Latin American relations. He wrote:

In view of the increasing delicacy of our relations to the People of Latin origin ... and the growing acuteness of the problems growing out of those relations, it is of great and far-reaching importance that we succeed in our task in Porto Rico. To succeed means that ... we must also win their voluntary adhesion to that government.³⁷

As Yager explained, Puerto Ricans' dissatisfaction with U.S. governance endangered diplomatic goals in the region. To address these problems, Yager maintained that the U.S. government must safeguard Puerto Ricans' loyalty. Wilson was made aware of Yager's letter and wrote to Secretary Garrison the same week, agreeing with the need to "[liberalize] ... the governmental

arrangements in Porto Rico."³⁸ Here, Wilson affirmed Yager's views on the strategic advantages of reform.

In 1915, Wilson stated bluntly to Congress that governance of Puerto Rico was "very intimately associated with the question of national safety and preparation for defense" and that "we must be free from every unnecessary burden or embarrassment ... [with] no better way to be clear of embarrassment than to fulfill our promises."³⁹ Wilson considered Puerto Rico a liability in World War I, vulnerable to foreign powers and an "embarrassment" to U.S. reputation. The U.S. Navy shared Wilson's concerns about the importance of national security and U.S. reputation in the Caribbean. In reference to Puerto Rico, the Navy Department General Board emphasized in 1916 that the loss or transfer of a territory in the Caribbean would be "a violation of the Monroe Doctrine." The memorandum continues: "We have to firmly oppose any attempt to contravene the Monroe doctrine because otherwise American prestige would be seriously damaged."⁴⁰ The Navy Department's reference to American prestige highlights Puerto Rico's symbolic importance to the American imperial project. For the Caribbean to change hands, or even for American control over Puerto Rico to be jeopardized, would compromise U.S. reputation abroad and undermine the well-established Monroe Doctrine that had long formed the basis for U.S. international relations.

The War Department soon became directly involved in the Puerto Rico legislation in Congress. A 1916 letter indicated that the War Department was prepared to "take the matter up personally with Senator Shafroth and other Senators."

The bill is chiefly important because it makes Porto Ricans American citizens.... The particular present importance of this matter is the agitation of a man, José de Diego, who has visited practically all of the Latin-American countries agitating for a pro- Spanish policy.... Diego is now in Spain speaking to large audiences and urging the revival of Spanish influence in the Antilles. If the pending Bill can pass, the gift of American citizenship will destroy the independent party in Porto Rico and put an end to the Diego agitation. Should the Bill again fail of passage, however, further internal disturbance may well result from this fresh disappointment.⁴¹

The insistence by the War Department and the Navy Department that Congress pass new legislation for Puerto Rico highlights the geopolitical stakes in 1916. The War Department became directly involved in the legislation process, going so far as to contact members of Congress directly to urge immediate action. Prominent leader of the protest movement on the island José de Diego again raised concerns for U.S. politicians. According to the War Department, de Diego posed a meaningful threat to American empire. Not only was he fomenting anti-American sentiment on the island, but he was traveling to Latin America and Spain trying to restore Spanish imperialism in the region at the expense of American imperialism. In the eyes of American lawmakers, de Diego was undermining the Monroe Doctrine and inviting foreign incursion, thus challenging

³²Sparrow and Lamm, "Puerto Ricans and U.S. Citizenship," 291.

³³Cabán, *Constructing a Colonial People*, 233, n. 2.

³⁴George Dewey to Secretary of the Navy, June 14, 1913, General Board File 429, General Board Minutes, June 13, 1913, vol. 5, 113, quoted in Sparrow and Lamm, "Puerto Ricans and U.S. Citizenship," 191.

³⁵Sparrow and Lamm, "Puerto Ricans and U.S. Citizenship," 199.

³⁶Arthur Yager to Lindley M. Garrison, February 13, 1914, Woodrow Wilson Papers: Series 4: Executive Office File, 1912–1921, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/woodrow-wilson-papers/>.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Woodrow Wilson to Lindley M. Garrison, February 18, 1914, *Woodrow Wilson Papers*.

³⁹Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Record*, 64th Congress, 1st Sess., 1915, 98.

⁴⁰Memorandum to Accompany the General Board's Letter No. 404, March 4, 1916, Records of the General Board of the Navy, box 404, Operational Archives, United States Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC, quoted in Sparrow and Lamm, "Puerto Ricans and U.S. Citizenship," 291.

⁴¹War Department to Woodrow Wilson, July 21, 1916, *Woodrow Wilson Papers*.

the American imperial project. De Diego's activity would have been particularly unwelcome, as geopolitical competition in the region was a considerable source of anxiety during World War I.

The legislative branch similarly experienced the agitation about Puerto Rico felt in the executive branch during World War I. Representative William Green made the following statement before Congress:

I am surprised that any thinking man in Porto Rico would suppose that in this day and age that island could remain independent.... We can not for a moment think of permitting any of the great powers to obtain possession or control over this island. While we hold it is an outpost for defense of the Panama Canal; held by any other nation it becomes a point of attack in war and danger in peace. For their own good and our own good we must retain some kind of control over Porto Rico.⁴²

Concern over foreign competitors in the Caribbean recurred throughout debates about Puerto Rico during World War I. American lawmakers earnestly believed that Puerto Rico's independence would be liability to American interests. It was thus tantamount for the United States to grant citizenship as a means of securing the region, signaling to foreign nations and Puerto Ricans alike that U.S. control was permanent.⁴³

As the grant of citizenship became increasingly likely, lawmakers began to contemplate the diplomatic rewards of the policy. Not only would citizenship meet the immediate security needs of World War I, but it was also used to further diplomatic relations with Latin America. Lawmakers hoped that once Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens, they could act as ambassadors to Latin American countries on behalf of the United States. A year before the passage of the Jones-Shafroth Act, Harvey Helm, a Democratic representative from Kentucky, posited how granting citizenship could be used to the United States' advantage:

inasmuch as this bill now makes the Porto Ricans citizens of the United States, we ought to take advantage of every possibility to select from the Porto Ricans the representatives for the Consular Service especially, and send as many of them as possible into the countries of South America as representatives of this government. They have a kindred language, they are a kindred race, and they know the manners and customs of the people of South America. They would make the most serviceable representatives in a business way that this government could have.⁴⁴

A year later, Helm again proposed that Puerto Ricans could further U.S. diplomatic efforts in Latin America. Helm inquired, "after the passage of this law would it be possible and legal for consuls now needed in Latin American territory be selected from the citizenship of the island of Porto Rico and become citizens of the United States?" To which, William Jones, a Democrat from Virginia and a sponsor of the bill, replied, "I think so, unquestionably."⁴⁵

These passages are indicative of the racism that undergirded lawmakers' thinking about Puerto Ricans. Puerto Rican elites were thought of as a homogeneous group with Latin Americans, able to be used instrumentally in the service of American interests. The multiple references to naturalized Puerto Ricans as agents of the United States in Latin America highlight the significance of the citizenship bill to U.S. diplomatic

goals. Control over Puerto Rico, after all, was part of the broader goal of making economic inroads in Latin America to compete with European powers. Just as U.S. lawmakers feared that a poor relationship with Puerto Rico could hurt diplomatic relations with Latin American countries, lawmakers also assumed that granting citizenship to Puerto Ricans presented an opportunity to improve its relationship to Latin America.

The passages reveal that colonial officials, lawmakers, and presidential administrations all shared a preoccupation with the strategic importance of Puerto Rico and the vulnerabilities of American empire at this time. It is clear throughout the first two decades of overseas American empire that political elites registered the role of Puerto Rico to military and economic interests. Prior to World War I, American elites recognized Puerto Rico's strategic value. Despite this awareness, it was not until World War I further heightened existing concerns and Congress took note of an exit demand on the island that Congress would pass citizenship legislation. The success of the American imperial project rested on the ability to secure Puerto Rico and, by extension, the Caribbean. U.S. political elites anticipated that granting citizenship would ameliorate disaffection among Puerto Ricans and signal to the international community its effective, humane, and permanent governance of its colonial subjects.⁴⁶ In turn, citizenship was thought to be a means of securing the loyalty of Puerto Ricans at time when disloyalty could imperil the entirety of the U.S. imperial project. Granting citizenship, then, was in part a response to elites' concerns about the strategic importance of Puerto Rico. As the next section will show, the other major factor in the grant of citizenship was an exit demand from Puerto Ricans. Strategic interests and an exit demand converged to produce citizenship legislation.

5. Citizenship versus Independence

Before addressing the exit demand in Puerto Rico, I would like to provide a brief note on the difference between a citizenship demand and an exit demand. One of the existing explanations for citizenship is popular demand, that a grassroots movement demands citizenship and then citizenship is granted. My work suggests the opposite. One of my interventions in this article is distinguishing between different types of popular demand movements, which in my framework are exit demand movements and citizenship movements. In broad strokes, Congress is very willing to ignore demands for citizenship. It is when populations weaken American imperialism with an exit demand movement that Congress extends a bear hug.

At their core, the fundamental difference between the two types of demand movements is that the United States perceives exit demand movements as cutting or weakening ties with the colonial state, while citizenship demands strengthen ties to the colonial state. A clear example of an exit demand is an independence movement. But, an independence movement is not the only type of exit demand. In contrast, the demand for citizenship is a request for greater rights and greater representation, and is often accompanied by greater financial support. The consequence of a citizenship movement is becoming closer to the colonial state.

Many accounts characterize both demands for citizenship and demands for independence as "resistance," and it is true that both are reflections of dissatisfaction and are demands that challenge

⁴²William Green, *Congressional Record*, 64th Congress, 1st Sess., 1916, 7487.

⁴³Cabranes, "Citizenship and the American Empire," 472.

⁴⁴Harvey Helm, *Congressional Record*, 64th Congress, 1st Sess., 1916, 8462.

⁴⁵William A. Jones, *Congressional Record*, 64th Congress, 2nd Sess., 1917, 4168.

⁴⁶Cabranes, "Citizenship and the American Empire," 472.

colonial control. One of the reasons the two are conflated and misunderstood is that both are often present simultaneously, for example, in Puerto Rico. But politically, the two different types of movements register very differently to members of Congress. I argue that an exit demand movement is what is doing much of the work to prompt Congress to grant citizenship to territorial populations.

6. Exit Demand

Before 1916, American lawmakers largely interpreted activism in Puerto Rico as the desire for citizenship, with the exception of a moment in 1909 when the Unionist Party of Puerto Rico was gaining popularity. The Unionist Party was the party on the island associated with greater autonomy or independence as the goal, although it was not always explicit.⁴⁷ Its leader was Luis Muñoz Rivera, a prominent politician in Puerto Rico, noted for pushing for greater autonomy under Spanish and later U.S. colonial rule. Robert Patterson Kennedy took notice of Luis Muñoz Rivera and the Unionists' activities, which he interpreted as a danger to the American state. Robert Patterson Kennedy was a Republican representative from Ohio and a member of the Insular Commission, having been appointed by President McKinley. Kennedy wrote to McKinley's successor President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909 that "the most dangerous ailment in Porto Rico, not only today, but since American occupation, is one Luis Munoz Rivera." Kennedy continues: "there must be neither peace nor contentment until they get rid of him."⁴⁸ Affixed to Kennedy's letter was a newspaper clipping about Rivera's opposition to the United States and his preference for Spanish governance.⁴⁹ In Kennedy's eyes, Muñoz Rivera was a capable, anti-American leader on the island and therefore a grave danger to the United States. Already, Muñoz Rivera had embarrassed the United States by publicly announcing the superiority of Spanish rule over that of the United States.

A letter to the Secretary of the Interior, the auditor of Puerto Rico, George Cabot Ward, addressed concerns in Washington, DC, about anti-American resentment in Puerto Rico. Ward provided the following explanation:

I find the reports as to the recent growth of anti-American sentiment largely, if not entirely, exaggerated. As to the question of separation from the United States ... leaders of the Unionist party themselves are not sincere in the talk of complete independence. What propaganda they made ... has been intended solely for the consumption of the poor farmer class who live in the mountainous and central parts of the island.... Naturally, independence is a very taking doctrine to preach to such people, for they are not capable of considering the effect such a policy would have on their own economic condition.⁵⁰

Ward was a high-ranking colonial official in Puerto Rico, and his telling of recent events to the Secretary of the Interior would likely have assuaged some of the concern in Washington. Stateside, Robert Patterson Kennedy was concerned about what

he heard and saw in the newspaper, but George Cabot Ward's interpretation of events from the island suggests little danger to U.S. colonial governance. Ward believed that the "poor farmer class" who seemed most moved by Muñoz Rivera and the Unionist Party was of little concern. The degrading and implicitly racist description of the Puerto Rican farming class juxtaposed with Kennedy's description of Muñoz Rivera as "dangerous" and "able" illustrates how the United States made sense of the racially heterogeneous population of Puerto Rico. Poor farmers were ignored and disparaged, while Puerto Rican elites received acknowledgement and were deemed as aids or enemies of the colonial state.

As a result of this episode in 1909, American colonial officials and lawmakers were poised to recognize moments when American empire was challenged. On the eve of World War I with U.S. strategic interests heightened, members of Congress began to interpret agitation in Puerto Rico once again, and this time believed it posed a greater threat than in 1909. American political elites perceived that the local unrest threatened colonial governance on the island, and they strongly advocated the grant of citizenship as a means of subduing the agitation. While an independence movement would not have posed any real threat to U.S. capacities, lawmakers were concerned that a challenge to American empire would harm its international reputation and invite geopolitical competition in the region, which would be particularly damaging during World War I. Lawmakers calculated that granting citizenship would strengthen colonial rule by bringing Puerto Ricans closer under the jurisdiction of the United States, an attractive goal given the long-term interests in the region.

Early on in American colonial rule, lawmakers were under the impression that Puerto Ricans desired statehood and U.S. citizenship. The Puerto Rican Union Party formed in 1904 with the purpose of reforming colonial governance. Importantly, lawmakers were under the impression that the Union Party's goal was to reform rather than weaken colonial rule.⁵¹ The Union Party was dedicated to reforming U.S. governance, either through greater autonomy for Puerto Rico in the form of a "protectorate of the United States," as an "autonomical country with American citizenship," or with the grant of statehood.⁵² Each of these options would entail permanent ties to the United States. Puerto Rican leaders provided additional testimony to Congress indicating that the Puerto Rican population desired U.S. citizenship and viewed the denial of citizenship as an injustice. Tulio Larrinaga, Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico at the time, described to Congress Puerto Ricans' frustration with the "denial of United States citizenship" because "although it did not seriously affect the civil and political rights of the inhabitants, gave rise to the impression that the United States intended to keep the native population in a condition of inferiority."⁵³

Manuel Rodríguez-Serra of the Puerto Rico Bar Association also lent credence to the belief that Puerto Ricans desired U.S. citizenship. In 1910 he lamented the political status of Puerto Ricans: "We do not know what we are, and we regret that Congress has not seen fit to say what we are to be, what is to become of us. Of course that creates in every Porto Rican a feeling

⁴⁷Truman R. Clark, "President Taft and the Puerto Rican Appropriation Crisis of 1909," *The Americas* 26, no. 2 (October 1969): 152–70, 155.

⁴⁸Robert P. Kennedy to William McKinley, March 25, 1909, file 9-8-36; Office of Territories Classified Files, 1907–1951, Department of the Interior Office of the Secretary, Record Group 126, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰George Cabot Ward to Richard Achilles Ballinger, June 8, 1909, file 9-8-36, Office of Territories Classified Files, 1907–1951, Department of the Interior Office of the Secretary, Record Group 126, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵¹Cabreres, "Citizenship and the American Empire," 449.

⁵²Bureau of Supplies, Printing, and Transportation, *Register of Porto Rico for 1910: Prepared and Compiled under the Direction of Hon. M. Drew Carrel, Acting Secretary of Porto Rico* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Bureau of Supplies, Printing, and Transportation, October 1910), 229–30.

⁵³Tulio Larrinaga, *Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, 2nd Sess., 1910, 7605.

of regret, a great feeling of regret.” He went on to explain that “if in this measure Porto Ricans are declared to be citizens of the United States and are to be incorporated into the United States, the feeling would be very different, would be a feeling of satisfaction.”⁵⁴ During this time, many Puerto Rican elites communicated their desire for U.S. citizenship to members of Congress. These were demands for citizenship and—to lawmakers—would not have endangered U.S. colonial control.

American lawmakers were aware of Puerto Ricans’ desire for citizenship at that time but proved unwilling to act on it. This inaction suggests the Congress was not moved by demands for citizenship but rather by demands for independence. It was not until World War I heightened strategic interests in the Caribbean and Congress registered an independence movement on the island that Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship.

Around 1915, the tenor of elite debates about Puerto Rico began to change. Colonial officials in Puerto Rico began to express anxiety about the island’s politics, citing the independence movement and the danger it posed to U.S. interests. U.S. District Court Judge of Puerto Rico Peter Hamilton, who was living on the island at the time and communicating regularly with President Wilson, worried how unrest on the island could damage U.S. reputation: “This sort of agitation is a distinct drawback. It will stop just as soon as America passes a conclusive Organic Act settling the future of Porto Rico. It is important ... for American prestige.”⁵⁵ Although unrest endangered “American prestige,” Hamilton believed that granting citizenship would resolve the issue. A few weeks later, Hamilton reiterated the importance of the Organic Act in securing Puerto Ricans’ loyalty to the United States in the event of war. He explained that “agitators can do much harm.... The solution is an early Organic Act which will make the Puerto Ricans American citizens.”⁵⁶ With war upon the United States, Hamilton recognized the danger of a colonial population with less than absolute loyalty, particularly in a region so strategically important to the warring countries. Importantly, Hamilton registered the political agitation as harmful. Granting citizenship was identified as the solution, drawing the colonial population closer under the jurisdiction of the United States and reducing opportunities for independence.

Hamilton was specifically responding to what he interpreted as an exit demand on the island. In 1916, he sent a letter to President Wilson underscoring the importance of immediate citizenship for Puerto Ricans, this time with explicit reference to the independence movement. He wrote that citizenship would “tend to stop De Diego’s movement for independence” and, in another letter, warned “the strength of the Unionist appeal for real independence possible.”⁵⁷ José de Diego was a leader of the Puerto Rican independence movement at the time, and his popularity concerned American lawmakers. Hamilton perceived unrest on the island as credible and harmful, as evidenced by his letters to Wilson. Arthur Yager, Governor of Puerto Rico, too, saw de Diego as a threat to American colonialism. Yager wrote to Wilson in 1916 that

Mr. De Diego has returned to Puerto Rico with the avowed intention of reviving the movement for independence and of attempting to prevent

the passage of the new bill by Congress. If he succeeds ... he can make trouble for the American Government in Puerto Rico.... [I]n view of the whole situation in Puerto Rico nothing can be of greater urgency than this Puerto Rican bill.⁵⁸

At this time, Yager was communicating directly with William A. Jones, who was the sponsor of the citizenship bill that would eventually be enacted. Jones was a Democrat from Virginia and served as chair of the House Committee on Insular Affairs. In a letter to Jones, Yager expressed concern about anti-American politics in Puerto Rico and its implications for American geopolitical interests:

It is easy to foresee that these political leaders who favor independence on the island, could and probably would make dangerous use of this feeling of resentment to arouse anti-American sentiment.... Might not the American administration here find itself in a most embarrassing and humiliating position and be unable to carry out the government at all? And this situation, if it should arise, would be exploited to the full extent by those who are unfriendly to the American people, not only in Porto Rico, but throughout all Latin-America.⁵⁹

Yager communicated directly with the chair of the House Committee on Insular Affairs about the dangers of the Puerto Rican independence movement. Yager reckoned that anti-American resentment had the potential to “embarrass” and “humiliate” the United States and invite intervention from foreign competitors. Anti-Americanness also threatened the U.S. relationship with Latin American countries, which was strategically important to the United States and was in a delicate state at the time. Correspondence from colonial officials to government offices in Washington, DC, reveals the urgency of the political situation in Puerto Rico. According to senior colonial officials Governor Arthur Yager and U.S. District Court Judge Peter Hamilton, the Puerto Rican independence movement posed a real threat. These appointed officials were trusted advisors to Washington, DC, elites, and their assessment of the situation would have been considered carefully.

Although the Puerto Rican independence movement was perceived as a serious issue, U.S. lawmakers reasoned that it could be addressed by granting citizenship. Felix Frankfurter appeared before the Senate as legal counsel for the Bureau of Insular Affairs and stated that “citizenship was a means of removing the great source of political unrest in the island.”⁶⁰ In the same vein, Chair of the House Committee on Insular Affairs William A. Jones wrote in a letter to Governor of Puerto Rico Arthur Yager, “the people of Puerto Rico should be made citizens of the United States collectively.... I believe it will result in putting an end to all agitation in favor of independence.”⁶¹ Governor Yager agreed with Jones, maintaining “that the extension of the United States citizenship to Puerto Rico was essential for detaining the movement toward independence.”⁶² For these American political elites, granting citizenship was understood as a tool to

⁵⁸ Arthur Yager to Woodrow Wilson, November 11, 1916, *Woodrow Wilson Papers*.

⁵⁹ Arthur Yager to William A. Jones, March 15, 1916, folder 40, *Yager Papers*, Filson Historical Society.

⁶⁰ Frankfurter quoted in Sparrow and Lamm, “Puerto Ricans and U.S. Citizenship,” 295.

⁶¹ William A. Jones to Arthur Yager, March 24, 1914, folder 40, *Yager Papers*, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY, quoted in Sparrow and Lamm, “Puerto Ricans and U.S. Citizenship,” 299.

⁶² María del Pilar Arguelles, *Morality and Power: The U.S. Colonial Experience in Puerto Rico from 1898 to 1948* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 41.

⁵⁴ “Proposing to Amend the Present Organic Law of Porto Rico”: Hearings before the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, 61st Congress, 2nd Sess., February 23, 1910, 222–23.

⁵⁵ Peter J. Hamilton to Woodrow Wilson, June 2, 1915, *Woodrow Wilson Papers*.

⁵⁶ Peter J. Hamilton to Woodrow Wilson, June 15, 1915, *Woodrow Wilson Papers*.

⁵⁷ Peter J. Hamilton to Woodrow Wilson, May 1, 1916, *Woodrow Wilson Papers*.

undermine the independence movement. The sentiment in Congress regarding citizenship as a deterrent to independence was no different from that of Frankfurter and Yager. James Vardaman, Democrat from Mississippi and prominent white supremacist, refused to support the grant of citizenship but understood its utility: “if we do not enact this legislation now, our failure to do so will, I fear, serve to encourage those people to hope for the unattainable.”⁶³ Vardaman hoped that granting citizenship would discourage aspirations for independence.

Resident Commissioner Luis Muñoz Rivera also recognized the potential impact of citizenship on the future status of the territory: “the majority of Porto Ricans think that conferring American citizenship in any form whatever would interfere with the future declaration of the status of inhabitants of the island.”⁶⁴ This passage suggests that he was wary that citizenship would preclude the possibility of Puerto Rican independence.⁶⁵ In 1916, Muñoz Rivera stood before Congress and declared that the Unionist Party, the majority party on the island of which he was a member, “uphold [s] independence as the ultimate status of the island.”⁶⁶

Indeed, American lawmakers and colonial officials were under the impression that the Puerto Rican independence movement posed a threat to American strategic interests and also felt that granting citizenship would subdue it. In addition to colonial officials sharing their observations of unrest on the island, Puerto Ricans declared before Congress their desire of independence. The explicit connection drawn between citizenship and dampening political dissent on the island appeared consistently in debates across different sectors of government during the years leading up to the 1917 legislation. Testimony from Puerto Rican political leaders and exchanges between American officials conveyed a growing anxiety about Puerto Rico’s independence movement.

8. Citizenship and the Problem of Racism

While Congress understood the strategic value of citizenship in its imperial project, white supremacy worked against the more inclusionary potential of these logics. Lawmakers were enthusiastic about appointing Puerto Rican elites to diplomatic positions to advance diplomatic relations with Latin America, yet opposed granting rights and privileges to the Puerto Rican “masses.”

Lawmakers feared the presence of nonwhite territorial populations in the contiguous United States. By virtue of acquiring new territories, lawmakers believed that the contiguous United States would be inundated by “savages” and “uncivilized races.” Of particular concern was the “degradation” of citizenship if it were extended to territorial populations and the belief that Puerto Ricans without formal education would not be able to participate in or enjoy the benefits of political membership.⁶⁷ In 1900, Senator Chauncey Depew of New York remarked,

Puerto Rico is more thickly populated than any country in Europe.... There are, in round numbers, a million people upon the island. Seventy

⁶³House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, 64th Congress, 2nd Sess., January 30, 1917, 2250–51, emphasis added.

⁶⁴Luis Muñoz Rivera, “A Civil Government for Port Rico: Hearings before the United States Senate Committee on Pacific Islands and Port Rico,” 63rd Congress, 2nd Sess., 8, quoted in Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire,” 465.

⁶⁵Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire,” 465–66.

⁶⁶Luis Muñoz Rivera, “A Civil Government for Porto Rico,” Hearings before the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, 64th Congress, 1st Sess., January 13 and 15, 1916, 10.

⁶⁷Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire,” 432.

thousand are negroes, 250,000 of mixed negro and white blood.... One hundred thousand of these people can read or write; about 50,000 can do both. Nine hundred thousand are in absolute ignorance.⁶⁸

Depew continued: “I do not believe that we will incorporate the alien races, the civilized, semicivilized, barbarous, and savage people of these islands into our body politic as States of our Union.”⁶⁹ Racist language is indicative of strong opposition to collective naturalization in 1900. Discourse of this kind is well documented during the early twentieth century as the United States was expanding overseas. Julian Go identifies two modes of discourse during this period: the first, which relied on the “biological side of racial inferiority,” and the second, according to which “those deemed lesser could be uplifted.”⁷⁰ Both types appear here; Depew articulated a biologically based racism, while the following passages suggest that the Puerto Rican population was inferior but could be civilized.

Although racism undoubtedly pervaded discourse about American imperialism, the ways in which Puerto Ricans were racialized did not preclude their eventual collective naturalization. Senator Alexander Clay of Georgia made an explicit racial argument about Puerto Rico as “part of the Western Hemisphere, populated by the Caucasian race ... fully in sympathy with our form of government.”⁷¹ U.S. Secretary of War Jacob Dickinson commented in 1910 that

out of [the] number of illiterate voters there are a great many really substantial people who are small property owners and have been by succession for generations, and, although they are not educated, they are law-abiding people.... Their children are being educated and they have the interests of the island at stake, and while, like other people they are subject to political influences, yet they are a good class of citizens, industrious and law abiding.⁷²

Both Dickinson and Clay invoked racist and paternalistic language that reflects how lawmakers perceived Puerto Ricans within U.S. racial hierarchy. Although Dickinson described Puerto Ricans as “illiterate” and uneducated, they are also associated with attributes that are deemed positive. Underlying the racialization of Puerto Ricans was their differentiation from Filipinos. The political status of the Philippines and its residents was also being decided at this time, and Puerto Ricans were contrasted with Filipinos in very explicit racial terms. In lawmakers’ minds, although Puerto Ricans were not considered fully “civilized” by American standards, they were closer in proximity to whiteness than Filipinos and therefore more assimilable.⁷³ These debates highlight the complicated and contradictory ways that Puerto Ricans were racialized in the American imaginary. Puerto Ricans were viewed as simultaneously “semicivilized, barbarous, and savage” as well as “industrious and law abiding,” “Caucasian,” and able to represent the United States abroad as emissaries. Lawmakers distinguished educated, elite Puerto Ricans from the “illiterate masses.” As Ian Haney López elucidates, racial logics are contradictory and always changing, deployed to serve political needs rather than reflect

⁶⁸Chauncey Depew, *Congressional Record*, 56th Congress, 1st Sess., 1900, 3619.

⁶⁹Ibid., 3622, cited in Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire,” 432.

⁷⁰Go, *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning*, 27–28.

⁷¹Alexander Clay, *Congressional Record*, 56th Congress, 1st Sess., 1900, 3682.

⁷²“Proposing to Amend the Present Organic Law of Porto Rico”: Hearings before the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, 61st Congress, 2nd Sess., January 31, 1910, 12.

⁷³Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire,” 443.

any reality.⁷⁴ Puerto Ricans were no exception. These debates show that Puerto Ricans were unquestionably subject to racism, and that the particular way they were racialized enabled them eventually to be granted U.S. citizenship but excluded from many of the rights of political membership.

9. Strategic Citizenship and the “Empty Gift”

Given the state’s strong commitment to white supremacy, U.S. lawmakers were tasked with designing a form of citizenship that was compatible with racial hierarchy and imperialism. Lawmakers viewed citizenship not as an equalizing or democratic effort but as a political tool to build its empire. As a result, the citizenship extended to Puerto Ricans was decoupled from many of the rights and privileges associated with it and no longer carried with it the promise of statehood. A letter from Regis Post, Secretary and later Governor of Puerto Rico, epitomizes this view of citizenship as a political tool:

I honestly do believe, however, that something might properly be done in regard to giving the people of Porto Rico citizenship. I believe that in a way it would be a perfectly empty gift ... and I do believe that it would remove one great cause of discontent in the island ... without sacrificing any of our real principles or any of our control.⁷⁵

Post regarded citizenship as a “perfectly empty gift.” For the governor of Puerto Rico, hollowed out citizenship was a *virtue*. Post explicitly connected the grant of citizenship with removing “discontent” on the island, showing how colonial officials understood citizenship in strategic rather than altruistic terms. A letter from Governor Yager to President Wilson also supported the view that granting citizenship was not designed to enact substantive change. While the citizenship bill would expand local autonomy and grant Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, it would do so, importantly, “without endangering the efficiency or the stability of the administration.”⁷⁶ Yager had no intention of altering the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico or empowering anti-colonial factions with the grant of citizenship. Rather, citizenship was designed with the opposite outcome in mind: to weaken the independence movement.

Within the legislative branch, members of Congress also envisioned a form of citizenship with the primary purpose of meeting strategic aims. Edgar Crumpacker, Republican Representative from Indiana, shared Post’s sentiment that granting citizenship meant little to the United States in terms of rights and inclusion. Crumpacker thought that “citizenship should be conferred in an inexpensive way.”⁷⁷ Put in other words, Crumpacker supported a grant of citizenship that imposed minimal costs to the United States. Representative Vardaman, a Democrat, plainly stated: “if the Porto Ricans are going to be held against their will, as we are holding them now, then we ought to legislate for their interests. *We should make the coercion as palatable as possible.*”⁷⁸ Vardaman envisaged citizenship as a coercive tool to liberalize American empire.

⁷⁴Haney López, *White by Law*, 7.

⁷⁵“Inhabitants of Porto Rico to Be Citizens of the United States,” 2.

⁷⁶Arthur Yager to Lindley M. Garrison, February 13, 1914, *Woodrow Wilson Papers*.

⁷⁷Hearings before Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, 61st Congress, 2nd Sess., January 31, 1910, on the bill proposing to amend the present organic law of Porto Rico, 3.

⁷⁸House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, 64th Congress, 2nd Sess., January 30, 1917, 2250–51, emphasis added.

The executive branch joined lawmakers and colonial officials in viewing citizenship as a pragmatic means to strengthen colonial control. Taft’s Secretary of War, Jacob Dickinson, proposed a citizenship policy providing for individual naturalization rather than collective naturalization and limiting office holding positions to U.S. citizens only. Individual naturalization procedures would require that residents of Puerto Rico undergo a lengthy process to apply for citizenship in U.S. courts and “[take] an oath of allegiance to the United States.”⁷⁹ The bureaucratic burden of navigating the American judicial system in Puerto Rico would be prohibitive for Puerto Ricans without sufficient time, resources, and education. The policy would also exclude the vast majority of Puerto Ricans from voting, with the majority of the island population being illiterate.⁸⁰ Moreover, the proposal’s prerequisite of U.S. citizenship to hold official positions would severely limit political representation in Puerto Rico. In effect, only those who voluntarily acquired U.S. citizenship could hold public office. Secretary Dickinson’s policy thus had widespread implications, ultimately leading to stronger American colonial rule: the obstruction of Puerto Ricans’ avenues of resistance to imperialism and the limiting of citizenship to a small number of elite Puerto Ricans loyal to the U.S. government. Although individual naturalization was not the citizenship policy adopted in 1917, it is telling that the Taft administration’s citizenship proposal had such inequalitarian consequences.

In its final form, the Jones-Shafroth Act conferred a new, territorial form of citizenship to Puerto Ricans. While the act contained some democratic provisions, including an elected legislature and Bill of Rights, other provisions ultimately reinforced American colonial power. The president would retain appointment powers for many official positions on the island, and legislative sessions and elections were to take place more infrequently.⁸¹ The territorial citizenship also lacked many of the rights and privileges typically associated with it. While both U.S. citizens in the contiguous United States and those in the territories carry a U.S. passport, there are important differences in the type of citizenship they have. U.S. citizens living in the continental United States have the ability to vote in federal elections, for example, voting for president, but residents of the U.S. territories do not. And U.S. citizens in the contiguous United States (with the exception of Washington, DC) have voting representation in Congress, including two senators and a member of the House of Representatives, but U.S. citizens in the U.S. territories have one *nonvoting* delegate in Congress. Finally, the Sixth and Seventh Amendments in the U.S. Constitution, which provide the right to a trial by jury, do not apply to Puerto Rico.

This territorial form of citizenship was by design. Governor Arthur Yager spoke at a conference at Lake Mohonk in 1915 and said that citizenship would not “imply suffrage or the power to vote for any officer of government or anything else.” Yager explained that granting suffrage would result in “a body of electors ... about 70% of whom are not only illiterate but have no sort of political experience or training that would fit them for the exercise of this important privilege.... No healthy political life is possible under these conditions” and Congress must “establish some ... restrictions upon the suffrage.”⁸² Judge

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire,” 456.

⁸¹Erman, *Almost Citizens*, 142.

⁸²Arthur Yager, Lake Mohonk Conference speech, October 22, 1915, folder 45, Yager Papers, Filson Historical Society.

Hamilton, the other senior colonial official residing in Puerto Rico, wrote to President Wilson the same year that “[citizenship], of course, does not mean that all should vote. On the contrary, there should be at least at the same time a property or educational qualification, or both. No unbiased observer can think for the mass of the popular are as yet fitted for the ballot.”⁸³ Both Yager and Hamilton appealed to white supremacy, citing the unsuitability of Puerto Ricans for a democratic form of government. These passages are also indicative of the racialization of Puerto Ricans and the ways in which the “masses” were distinguished from the Puerto Rican elites who were to assume diplomatic positions.

In his capacity as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Taft asserted that the primary value of citizenship for Puerto Ricans was freedom of movement. In particular, Taft stressed that U.S. citizenship would enable Puerto Ricans “to move into the continental United States and become residents of any state there to enjoy every right of any other citizen of the United States, civil, social and political.”⁸⁴ While U.S. citizenship did confer the right to move to the continental United States, where citizenship would confer more rights and privileges, it is unlikely that American elites were concerned about a significant influx of Puerto Ricans to the United States. At that time, it would have required great effort and personal expense, which would have been prohibitive to many Puerto Ricans. Ultimately, there was consensus among American political elites that substantive guarantees of U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans were few if any. As political scientist Pedro Cabán notes, “citizenship ... did not provide Puerto Ricans with legal means to resist the colonial state’s role in promoting the relentless appropriation of their country’s land and natural resources by American capital. Nor did citizenship diminish in the slightest Congress’s absolute power over Puerto Rico.”⁸⁵

Over the course of these debates, citizenship was not only decoupled from certain rights, but it was also disassociated from statehood. At the beginning of American occupation, both American officials and Puerto Ricans expected that they would automatically become U.S. citizens and that Puerto Rico would become a state of the United States, as was consistent with the historical pattern of U.S. territorial expansion. Isabel González’s case illustrates that assumption, as she believed she would be admitted at Ellis Island as a U.S. citizen. Other scholarship on American empire describes this break between the settler colonial model of empire building and twentieth-century overseas expansion.⁸⁶ Since the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, states were put on a path of “white settlement and eventual statehood.”⁸⁷ Sam Erman calls this the “Reconstruction Constitution,” a Civil War-era regime that encompassed “near-universal citizenship, expanded rights, and eventual statehood.”⁸⁸ For Erman, the creation of a territorial form of citizenship for Puerto Ricans marked the end of the Reconstruction Constitution. This article, too, argues that lawmakers in the early twentieth century broke from the previous pattern of empire building through white settlement

and statehood and developed a new model that applied to the overseas U.S. territories. Where I build on these accounts is in showing how this new model refashioned the meaning of U.S. citizenship.

It took Congress years to define territorial citizenship and its relation to statehood. John Martin, Democratic representative from Ohio, questioned the meaning of collective citizenship in 1909: “This language, ‘collective citizenship,’ may be said to be a little ambiguous. I think full citizenship means statehood.”⁸⁹ Martin’s assumption that citizenship coincided with statehood reflected the older pattern of territorial expansion. Congress would eventually decide that citizenship and statehood no longer went together in the U.S. territories, enabling the United States more flexibility in the grant of citizenship.

To be sure, the contention that Puerto Ricans were granted a limited or “empty” citizenship is not new. It is well established that Puerto Ricans are excluded from many of the rights and protections that U.S. citizens in the contiguous states enjoy.⁹⁰ Where I differ from these authors is in showing how citizenship was made compatible with empire as the American state was confronted with challenges in the twentieth century. In making citizenship and empire compatible, Congress reconstituted the meaning of U.S. citizenship, one that was decoupled from statehood and from the rights typically associated with it.

In sum, Congress deployed citizenship to advance its imperial ambitions and, in doing so, diverged from the earlier statehood and citizenship model of expansion. With this decoupling, Congress redefined the legal category of citizenship, creating a new territorial form. This form of citizenship enabled the U.S. government to not only preserve but also strengthen colonial rule in the name of inclusion and equality. While “second-class citizenship” is commonly used to describe the subjugation of different groups, it takes on a distinctive meaning in the context of American imperialism. It is not only the incompleteness of U.S. citizenship for territorial residents, but also how citizenship itself was a strategic choice that has brought territories further under the control of the United States. This is not to say that territorial residents were not eager for citizenship, nor am I arguing that inclusion is an unworthy aspiration. But rather, American colonial officials understood citizenship as a mechanism of control for the empire they were building.

10. Conclusion

In sum, the grant of collective citizenship to Puerto Ricans and other territorial residents was a strategic response to concerns about colonial governance that strengthened American colonial control. In extending citizenship to overseas territory, Congress created a new form of citizenship that was made compatible with its commitment to white supremacy. This form of citizenship became a durable institution and a reshaped legal category. Puerto Rico created a precedent for future U.S. territories, including Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and it shaped outcomes in the

⁸³Peter J. Hamilton to Woodrow Wilson, October 23, 1915, *Woodrow Wilson Papers*.

⁸⁴William Howard Taft, *Balzac v. Porto Rico*, 258 U.S. 298, 308 (1922) quoted in Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire,” 487, n. 463.

⁸⁵Pedro Cabán, “Puerto Ricans as Contingent Citizens: Shifting Mandated Identities and Imperial Disjunctures,” *Centro Journal* 29, no. 1 (2017): 273.

⁸⁶Erman, *Almost Citizens*; Frymer, *Building an American Empire*; Moore, *American Imperialism and the State*.

⁸⁷Moore, *American Imperialism and the State*, 38, 85.

⁸⁸Erman, *Almost Citizens*, 2.

⁸⁹John Martin, *Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, 1st Sess., 1909, 2467.

⁹⁰Cabranes, “Citizenship and the American Empire,” 397; Ileana I. Diaz, “Malignant Citizenship: Race, Imperialism, and Puerto Rico-United States Entanglements,” *Citizenship Studies*, 25 no. 3 (2021): 333–52; Burnett, “They Say I Am Not an American”; Erman, *Almost Citizens*; Monica Matos-Desa, “Second Class Citizens: The Case Against Unequal Military Healthcare Benefits for Puerto Rican Veterans,” *Cardozo Journal of Law & Gender* 16, no. 2 (2010): 291–314.

Philippines and American Samoa. To this day, this territorial form of citizenship remains a cornerstone of U.S. imperialism.

This research has important implications for the way we study citizenship. Like other recent scholars of citizenship, I find that citizenship is never just one thing. Citizenship may appear dichotomous insofar as someone either is or is not a citizen, but that does not provide a complete picture. Furthermore, citizenship doesn't do the same thing in every given moment. Citizenship in the nineteenth century was associated with a different model of nationhood than the citizenship that was reshaped in the twentieth century. And precisely because citizenship has an indeterminate and malleable nature, it became an effective tool of empire building.

This research also has implications for the way we conceptualize American empire. The strategic grant of citizenship to Puerto

Ricans in 1917 shows how liberal democracy and expansion work together. We are accustomed to associating citizenship with inclusion and equality, and thus, as Congress attempted to accommodate its imperial ambitions to norms of liberal democracy, citizenship was very useful. Congress used this form of citizenship associated with self-government and equality to fix in place a colonial hierarchy and legitimate expansion. Finally, this was not part of any grand strategy. On the contrary, as in other sites of political development, the development of American empire was improvised and contingent, responsive to political demands of the moment and shaped by elites' motivations and grassroots politics.

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