

Puerto Rico and the Green New Deal:
Reactions to Climate Change and Resiliency Efforts

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ABSTRACT

The island of Puerto Rico stands to suffer some of the worst effects of climate change. Its centuries-long history of neglect as a U.S. colony, combined with its precarious location in Hurricane Alley, make it particularly susceptible. This paper examines how the Green New Deal, as well as U.S. and global conversations on climate change, apply to Puerto Rico. It argues that as climate justice dialogue flourishes, we must include Puerto Rico, while giving special attention to its history, existing conditions, and local community efforts. Larger systemic changes must also be made.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On April 11, 2019, Puerto Rico's former governor signed into law Senate Bill 1121, or the Puerto Rico Energy Public Policy Act. This act sets the island on a path to 100 percent renewable energy by 2050 and proposes using state-of-the-art technology to build more resilient infrastructure. Media outlets lauded the act as Puerto Rico's own Green New Deal; however, language absent in the law and its history as a U.S. colony complicates this claim. A combination of natural and unnatural disasters have plagued the island since it was acquired by the United States in 1898. The island's economic system began to crumble under legislation that introduced (then later repealed) tax breaks designed to boost its economy, then continued to worsen after the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

With the Green New Deal proposing to effect change, the question must be asked: how do the Green New Deal principles, and the greater U.S. and global conversations around climate change, apply to Puerto Rico? If its status as an unincorporated territory excludes its vote on whether this resolution will pass, how can a congressional resolution effectively represent Puerto Rican residents? This paper examines Puerto Rico's historic and current conditions, including the

implications of the Puerto Rico Energy Public Policy Act and impressive local community efforts, then concludes with three recommendations for ensuring that Puerto Rico and its citizens are not only represented in conversations on climate justice, but that those conversations also include the need for larger systemic change.

THE PROBLEM

Puerto Rico exists as an obvious example of climate vulnerability and the unevenly distributed impacts of global warming. Despite emitting low levels of greenhouse gases and reaping only slight benefits from U.S. coal- and oil-fueled prosperity, the island stands to suffer some of the worst effects of climate change. It is located near the equator in a region known as Hurricane Alley, where sea level rise and natural disasters pose regular, significant threats. Its history of colonization has enabled corruption, economic decline, and an inability to be self-sufficient and self-sustainable over the last 500 years, which exacerbates these conditions. With a semi-autonomous government and residents who are not allowed to vote in presidential elections and lack voting representation in Congress, Puerto Rico remains an unincorporated possession of the United States and the world's oldest colony.

This problem statement is most heavily supported by the lasting effects of Hurricane Maria, which barreled through the island with sustained winds of up to 150 miles per hour in September 2017. The storm caused catastrophic damage to the island's physical infrastructure estimated at around \$104 billion (Florido, 2018). Immediately following the storm, 95 percent of the island was without power, less than half the population had tap water, and 95 percent had no cell phone service (Robles and Bidgood, 2017). Three months later, almost half the population was still without power and 14 percent still had no tap water (Bacon, 2017). Puerto Rico's island municipalities, Vieques and Culebra – colloquially known as “colonies of the colony” –