

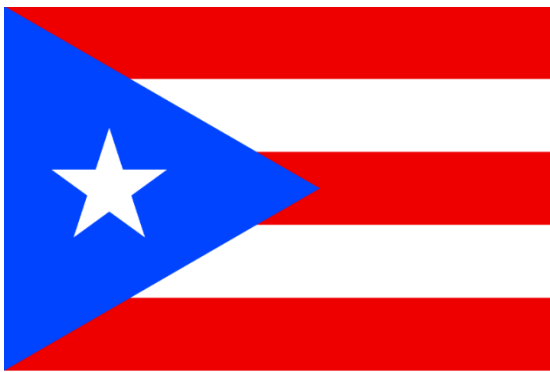
Puerto Rico: How overseas territory can maintain its identity.

It's the Super Bowl halftime show, and Bad Bunny is performing. Criticism soon begins to emerge from conservative parts of the United States: why is Spanish being sung at the premier American sporting event? According to critics, that doesn't fit with "American identity."

But that's precisely where the irony lies. Bad Bunny is American. He is from Puerto Rico, a territory that is officially part of the United States. People born in Puerto Rico hold U.S. passports, are U.S. citizens, and are subject to U.S. law. Yet the population there speaks mainly Spanish rather than English, and to many outsiders, the culture feels more Latin American than typically American.

This makes Puerto Rico a unique place within the United States. It's located in the Caribbean, has its own strong identity, and differs greatly from many other U.S. territories, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands. The combination of Spanish colonial history, Latin American culture, and American political influence makes Puerto Rico perhaps one of the most extraordinary territories in the world.

But how did this situation actually come about? Why is Spanish the primary language spoken in Puerto Rico? What is the island's history? And why does Puerto Rico feel so different from other U.S. overseas territories? You'll find answers to these questions in this article.



Flag Puerto Rico. Source: wikipedia.org



History of Puerto Rico

The history of Puerto Rico prior to the arrival of Europeans cannot be determined with complete certainty. However, historians do know that the Taíno were the dominant ethnic group on the island. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 60,000 Taíno Indians lived in Puerto Rico before the Europeans arrived. They subsisted on agriculture, fishing, and trade with other Caribbean islands.

After Columbus's arrival in 1493 during his second voyage to the Americas, Puerto Rico became part of the Spanish Empire. It would remain so for nearly four centuries. Under Spanish rule, the island developed into an important strategic location in the Caribbean.

The Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León became the first governor of Puerto Rico. From the island, the Spanish used Puerto Rico as a base for further colonization and military control in the Americas. Due to its favourable location, the island quickly became an important trade and naval hub within the Spanish Empire.



Location Puerto Rico. Source: wikipedia.org

During the colonial period, Puerto Rico was attacked several times by European powers, often as part of larger wars between European states. Due to its strategic location in the Caribbean, the island was of enormous importance to the Spanish Empire.

For example, England attempted to invade the island in 1595 during the Anglo-Spanish War. The Dutch also attacked Puerto Rico as part of the Eighty Years' War, in which the Dutch Republic fought against Spain.

Nevertheless, Puerto Rico remained under Spanish control each time. This was mainly because the Spanish built massive defensive structures around key ports and cities. The capital, San Juan, in particular, was



heavily fortified. The most famous of these forts is Castillo San Felipe del Morro, better known as El Morro. This gigantic fort guarded the entrance to the port of San Juan and made it extremely difficult for enemy ships to penetrate the city.

Thanks to these strong defences, Puerto Rico remained an important and well-protected part of the Spanish colonial empire in the Americas for centuries.



The big El Morre fortress at the coastline. Source:

wikipedia.org

During the Spanish colonial period, many of Puerto Rico's indigenous inhabitants suffered the same fate as many other indigenous peoples in the Americas. The Taíno were subjected to forced labour and slavery and also died in large numbers from European diseases to which they had no immunity. As a result, the island's indigenous population largely collapsed in a relatively short period of time.

Just as in many other Spanish colonies, resistance movements against colonial rule later emerged in Puerto Rico as well. These uprisings were often less widespread and less violent than in some other parts of Latin America, but the call for greater autonomy continued to grow.

In 1897, after several uprisings and political pressure, Puerto Rico was finally granted self-government by the Spanish Empire. However, this autonomy was short-lived. Just one year later, Spain lost the Spanish-American War to the United States. In the subsequent Treaty of Paris, Puerto Rico was officially ceded to the United States.

Although the United States now controlled the island, in 1900 the Foraker Act granted Puerto Rico limited forms of self-government and its



own legislature. Puerto Rico was thus allowed to govern itself to some extent, but remained under Washington's supervision.

In 1914, Puerto Rican politicians even advocated for full independence from the United States, but that proposal was rejected. Interestingly, this sentiment later shifted somewhat. In recent decades, several referendums have been held in which a large proportion of voting Puerto Ricans actually expressed a desire to become the 51st official state of the United States.

At the same time, this issue remains a sensitive one within the United States itself. Many American politicians do not want to make Puerto Rico a full state, but rather to maintain it as a territory with a special autonomous status within the United States. As a result, Puerto Rico still finds itself in a unique political limbo today: it is American, but not a full-fledged U.S. state.

Proud of your roots

Even though Puerto Rico is officially part of the United States, the island feels culturally completely different from the U.S. mainland. Many residents identify first and foremost as Puerto Rican and only secondarily as American. This is reflected in almost everything on the island: the culture, music, cuisine, politics, and especially the language.

Puerto Rican identity is incredibly strong. You see the Puerto Rican flag flying everywhere on the island, and many residents are proud of their own history and heritage. In addition, for over a century, Puerto Rico has had its own legislature, its own political structure, and even its own national anthem: "La Borinqueña."

But the biggest difference from the rest of the United States is undoubtedly the language. Spanish is by far the dominant language in Puerto Rico, and many residents view English more as a second language. This is mainly due to the island's history.

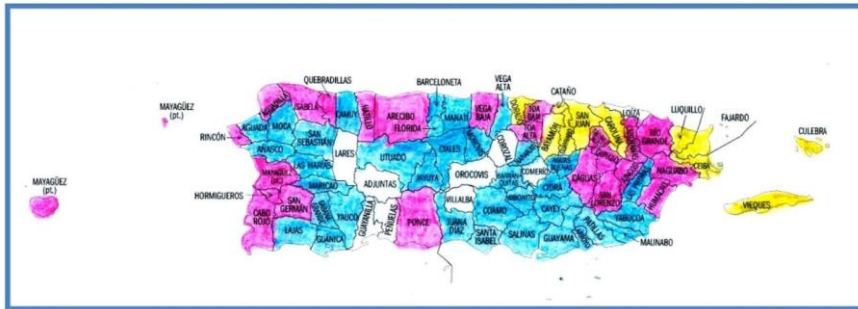
Over the centuries, Spanish became the language of daily life, education, politics, religion, and culture. By the time the United States took control, the Spanish identity was already deeply rooted in society.

The Americans did try to spread the use of English more widely on the island during the 20th century. For example, English was made mandatory in schools, and Washington attempted to "Americanize" the



island's culture more strongly. Yet this never fully succeeded. The population continued to speak mainly Spanish at home, on the streets, and in the media.

This has created a unique situation: Puerto Ricans are legally U.S. citizens, but culturally, many residents feel a much stronger connection to their Spanish and Caribbean roots than to their English-speaking American identity.



Map 1: Municipalities with highest number of speakers who speak English "very well"



The fluently English speakers

per municipalities in Puerto Rico. Source: Puertoricoreport.com

An important fact to understand is that Puerto Rico is what is known as an unincorporated territory of the United States. This means that the United States officially exercises control over the territory, but that Puerto Rico is not a full-fledged U.S. state. The same applies to territories such as the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa.

As a result, there has always been a sort of intermediate status. Technically speaking, Puerto Rico belongs to the United States, but at the same time, it has never been fully incorporated into the United States in the same way that Texas or California, for example, have been. Even the referendums in which many Puerto Ricans expressed a desire to become an official U.S. state did not ultimately lead to actual admission as the 51st state.

One could therefore argue that, for the United States, Puerto Rico was primarily a strategic "prize" following its victory in the Spanish–American War. Yet, culturally, the United States has never had the same influence on Puerto Rico as Spain did before.



This is mainly because the island was part of the Spanish Empire for nearly four centuries. That Spanish influence can still be seen everywhere today:

- in the language
- in the architecture
- in religion
- in music
- in family values
- and in the island's overall identity

In 1902, both English and Spanish were officially recognized as the languages of Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, Spanish remained clearly the dominant native language of the population. English was often not taught until later in school as a second language.

The Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico, a teachers' organization founded in 1912, played an important role in this. Many teachers believed that Puerto Rican identity should be preserved and opposed the complete anglicization of education.



Rico. Source: Matadornetwork.com

The Spanish roots are hard to take away from Puerto

Unique situation

Among the unincorporated territories of North America, Puerto Rico does indeed hold a much more unique position than, for example, the U.S. Virgin Islands. While the U.S. Virgin Islands still function largely as a traditional overseas territory of the United States, Puerto Rico has



developed much greater autonomy and a much stronger sense of identity.

For example, the U.S. Virgin Islands do not have their own full constitution, and U.S. law applies there largely directly. English is also clearly the dominant language there, and the territory is often still viewed as a traditional U.S. colony or overseas territory.

In Puerto Rico, the situation is completely different. The island has:

- its own constitution
- its own political system
- its own legislature
- its own national identity

Moreover, that constitution was strongly influenced by Spanish legal traditions from the colonial period. As a result, Puerto Rico functions more as an autonomous extension of the United States than as a standard territory.

Still, that immediately raises a logical question: if Puerto Rico is so culturally authentic and independent, why doesn't the island overwhelmingly vote for full independence?

The answer lies primarily in the practical benefits of its ties to the United States. Several referendums have shown that a large proportion of voting Puerto Ricans actually want to be closer to the United States:

- About 58.6% favor full U.S. statehood
- About 29.6% want more autonomy, but while maintaining ties with the United States
- only about 11.8% support full independence

For many residents, the benefits of the U.S. connection carry significant weight. Puerto Ricans have:

- a U.S. passport
- access to U.S. social services



- military protection
- economic support
- the freedom to travel to the U.S. mainland
- access to the U.S. labor market

Economically, in particular, Puerto Rico has become heavily dependent on the United States. As a result, full independence brings uncertainty for many residents. While many Puerto Ricans may not feel like typical Americans culturally, they do recognize the benefits of the U.S. system.

Conclusion

Puerto Rico is an island with a long and complex history of colonization and foreign rule. It was first under the Spanish Empire for four centuries, and later came under U.S. control. Yet, despite all these influences, Puerto Rico has always managed to maintain a strikingly strong sense of its own identity.

Whether Puerto Rico will ever become fully independent remains difficult to predict. There is certainly a chance that the debate on this issue will intensify again in the future, especially since Puerto Rican identity remains so strongly present. But for now, a large portion of the population seems to prefer holding on to the benefits of the American connection.

That may well make Puerto Rico one of the most unique territories in the world: legally tied to the United States, culturally deeply rooted in its Spanish and Caribbean past, and politically situated somewhere between autonomy, statehood, and independence.

As a result, artists like Bad Bunny naturally have every right to call themselves American. Puerto Ricans are officially U.S. citizens. At the same time, the debate surrounding language and identity—as seen, for example, during the Super Bowl—shows just how complex the concept of “American identity” actually is.

Ironically, many Puerto Ricans are partly descended from the original inhabitants of the Caribbean, such as the Taíno, combined with Spanish influences. Historically speaking, this means they actually have deeper



roots in the Americas than many residents of the U.S. mainland, whose ancestors arrived from Europe centuries later.

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