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Puerto Rico and the United States of America: The impact of Hurricane Maria

How Hurricane Maria in September 2017 changed the relation between the United States and
the territory of Puerto Rico.

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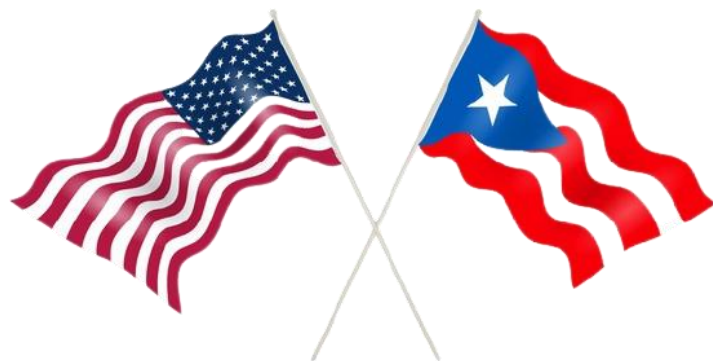
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Introduction

In September 2017, the Caribbean was hit by two devastating hurricanes: Hurricane Irma and two weeks later Hurricane Maria. The two hurricanes left a path of destruction in their wake.

Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017. Hurricane Maria will be the main subject of this thesis. Once Hurricane Maria had passed over the island, nearly 3000 people had died and the US territory was without electricity and reliable communication networks for months afterwards. The US federal government sent emergency supplies and people to help on the island. This aid really helped the people of Puerto Rico in the immediate aftermath. However, the United States government was criticised. The critiques claimed that the US should have responded better to the devastation of the hurricane. The United States was responsible for helping the island rebuild, as Puerto Rico is part of the US.

The group of islands that make up The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico are officially part of the US since 1898. Puerto Rico is not a US state and many forget that the people in the territory are official American citizens. The US is far more expansive than the fifty states most people think about when picturing the US. Besides the fifty states, the US also has fourteen territories, five of which are permanently inhabited. The five territories, which are Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands and the Virgin Islands have an interesting status within the US. The people who live in these territories are not always American citizens and they are often not allowed to vote in national elections.

This thesis will focus on the territory of Puerto Rico and Hurricane Maria. The territory has an interesting history with the US and after the devastation of the hurricane, the relation between the US mainland and Puerto Rico changed. This thesis will explain this changing relation by looking at issues such as citizenship, racism and colonialism.

Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony before it was annexed by the US in 1898 during the Spanish-American War. The people in the territory were not American citizens and the island did not have the status of Commonwealth yet. The American government established a military rule on the island with

a military governor at its head.¹ Two years later, the Foraker Act in 1900 ended the military rule and established a civilian government in Puerto Rico.² However, this Act did not result in the self-government of the island by the Puerto Ricans. Instead, the American president chose a governor, who would rule the territory.³ The Puerto Ricans were not citizens at the time the Foraker Act was introduced. Seventeen years later with the passing of the Jones Act in 1917, the Puerto Ricans officially became American citizens and were granted a Bill of Rights and a Senate.⁴ Despite these changes, the rule of the territory was still very much in the hands of the federal government. The governor was appointed by the president and had a veto over the Puerto Rican Senate and so did the US president. Congress was, under the territorial clause of the Jones Act, still allowed to make legislation for Puerto Rico.⁵

Not much has changed in the century after the Jones Act. Since 1947, the Puerto Ricans are able to elect their own governor every four years, but they still do not have representation in Congress that is allowed to vote. The territory only has a non-voting member in the House of Representatives for representation. The Resident Commissioner, as the non-voting member is called, is elected every four years.⁶

In American federalism, Puerto Rico is both interesting and problematic for the government because of the dissatisfaction of the Puerto Ricans with their situation and the current status the territory holds. The people of Puerto Rico have had several referenda throughout their history as a US territory in which they often had the choice to become a state, an independent country or remain a US territory. However, there has been no change in the status. The referenda were non-binding and bills introduced by the governor have not made it to Congress. The referenda did not change the status of

¹ José Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in The World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): 30-31.

² Monge, *Puerto Rico*, 28.

³ *Ibidem*, 43.

⁴ Sam Erman, *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the U.S. Constitution, and Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 142.

⁵ Monge, *Puerto Rico*, 75.

⁶ Pedro A. Mallavet, *America's Colony: The Political and Cultural Conflict between the United States and Puerto Rico* (New York: New York University, 2004): 2.

Puerto Ricans. The explanation is that not enough people voted in the referenda to make the referendum binding.

Puerto Rico's history and unique status within the US make the territory an interesting topic to research. In this thesis, the relation between the US and Puerto Rico will be explored on the basis of events during and after Hurricane Maria in September 2017. This traumatic event changed the relationship between the federal government and the territory of Puerto Rico. The two questions that will be discussed in this thesis are how did the media evaluate the US and Puerto Rican governments response to hurricane Maria and in what ways did this evaluation change the debate about the island's status? The thesis will contextualize Puerto Rican and modern US history as well as the role citizenship, racism and colonialism played in this history. The thesis will further explain why the relation between the two changed after the hurricane. Whether the relation changed for the better remains to be seen. The academic literature lacks sources on the relation between the US and Puerto Rico after hurricane Maria within the contexts of racism and colonialism. The hurricane is a recent event and the literature is mostly focused on the period before the hurricane and not on the situation afterwards.

The explanation will be based on a close reading of primary sources and will be complemented with secondary scholarship. This qualitative method will provide a good understanding of the relation between the US and its territory. The primary sources will partly consist of government documents, such as press releases, statements by the President and Puerto Rican Governor and Congressional Records. The other part of primary sources will be made up by newspaper articles and reports by different news channels. To give both sides of the story, in order to avoid a one-sided analysis, the articles and reports will come from different newspapers and channels. This also means that newspapers from Puerto Rico will be used, as well as newspapers from the mainland. In order to analyze the historic event of hurricane Maria and provide a historical foundation on which the question can be answered whether or not the relation between the US and Puerto Rico has changed, the thesis will look at media from both Puerto Rico and the US mainland. In order to discuss the debate on statehood, racism and colonialism, the analysis of the media provides a good understanding

of the current situation in Puerto Rico and the mainland. The debate on statehood is not only an occurrence in the territory, but also has consequences for the media.

This method of research is not without its limitations. One major roadblock will be the news articles from the local Puerto Rican newspapers. The majority of the people in the territory speak Spanish, which means that most of the news in the territory is also in Spanish to accommodate the people. However, not only the news is in Spanish, official government documents, press releases and statements by the governor are also in Spanish. While some articles and statements are also published in English, this is not the case for every article. The fact that many documents are in Spanish will make the sources difficult to read at times. While the thesis does include these documents and articles, the majority of sources will be in English, which can result in a one sided conclusion that is mostly focused on the mainland opinion rather than both the Puerto Rican and the US perspectives.

Another point to take into consideration is that the analyzed media is a small selection of everything that is published in different newspapers. In order to give as broad an analysis as possible, the thesis has focused on six different newspapers from both Puerto Rico and the US and has chosen different newspapers from different political views. However, this is still a small selection of media outlets and therein lies another limitation of the thesis. As much as this thesis will provide a general overview of the media's response and government actions, it will not be completely representative of the opinion of everyone living in either Puerto Rico or the mainland. The same limitation must also be considered when discussing government documents. The thesis will provide an overview of government documents, but there are many more than there are used in this thesis. In order to keep this thesis within certain limits, a selection of sources had to be made. While reading the thesis, one must take these limitations into considerations and should know that the thesis will not give the complete picture of the statehood debate or on the issue of racism in the territory.

Even with these limitations, or challenges, to the research on Puerto Rico and its relation with the United States, it is still an important topic to research. The topic of Puerto Rico has received plenty of attention from academic scholars. Research about topics like the statehood movement and citizenship has been done since Puerto Rico became a US territory. However, because of the timeframe of this thesis, the focus of the literature discussed will be from the 1980s onwards. Recent

academic literature discusses in particular the status of Puerto Rico as a colony and how racism plays a role in the status as a territory now. While Puerto Rico is not officially a colony, many scholars argue that the territory is a colony, also because of the racism from the US in relation to the people of Puerto Rico. In this thesis, colonialism, racism and the issue of identity will also be discussed, especially in the first chapter when the thesis will take a look at the media's reaction on the government's responses to hurricane Maria. The secondary sources that are discussed below will provide a foundation of existing knowledge on which this paper will build. The debate about statehood of Puerto Rico and the issues of colonialism and racism are not issues that are limited to the political debate. These debates also take place in academics, which will make these sources an interesting addition to the thesis.

Ever since Puerto Rico became a territory of the US, scholars have been talking about the different political options there are for the island. One of those options was to become an official US state. The debate around statehood for Puerto Rico had periods in which it was discussed often and periods where it was barely mentioned. Egardo Meléndez, published a book in 1988 on the renewed statehood movement. In *Puerto Rico's Statehood Movement*, Meléndez describes the history of the statehood movement in Puerto Rico and the situation of the movement at the time of the book's publication. He shows the reader that there is a widespread support on the island for official statehood. Meléndez argues that because of this support for statehood, the US Congress should take this movement seriously and take action.⁷

Meléndez is not the only scholar who advocates for a different political status for Puerto Rico. Former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico José Trías Monge was also pressing the US government to make a decision regarding the status of Puerto Rico. In his book *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in The World*, Monge shows the long and problematic history of Puerto Rico's status as a US territory. The book does not only explain the problems that Puerto Rico has faced, and is facing, Monge also offers suggestions on how to change the status. Whether this will be

⁷ Brian Mcfeeters, "Puerto Rico's Statehood Movement (review)," *SAIS Review* 10, no. 1 (1990): 201-03.

through statehood, independence or another solution, Monge does not say but offers advice for the different options.⁸

These books and articles were published in the 1990s. More recently, Amílcar Antonio Barreto published an article which specifically focussed on the statehood debate. In this article he points out that the statehood movement, while not as public as before, is still relevant on the island. Unlike Meléndez and Monge, Barreto connects the movement with the Puerto Rican identity. He argues that the uncertainty of the Puerto Rican statehood movement in Puerto Rico and the debate about the issue in Congress does not provide a clear national identity.⁹ Barreto also states that this debate is crucial in forming the relation between Puerto Rico and the mainland: it affects how the identity of the Puerto Ricans is formed.¹⁰ Barreto is a scholar who is mostly dealing with the issue of citizenship and identity. He has published more research on the issue of statehood and the identity of Puerto Rico. The statehood debate has also been discussed in the media in recent years and the thesis will also discuss the media's reports on this debate, as well as the political debate on this issue. The political debates will be examined later in the thesis.

Barreto is joined by other scholars who research the implications of statehood and the statehood debate for the US territory and the mainland. As many scholars have stated in research about identity, language and culture are important for the identity of a country. Similarly to Barreto, Kelly Torres connects the Puerto Rican statehood movement with identity. Torres argues that if Puerto Rico were to become an official American state, the identity of the territory would change. Torres shows that if Puerto Rico would become the 51st state, only English will be spoken in schools, which will change the identity off the island.¹¹ She also argues that someone who had moved of the island to the mainland will have a different view than someone who is still living on the island.¹² Torres further claims that the different referenda created controversy among the politicians and citizens of the island,

⁸ Luis Martinez-Fernandez, "Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World. (Book Review)," *The Journal of American History* 85 (1998): 728.

⁹ Amílcar Antonio Barreto, "American Identity, Congress, and the Puerto Rico Statehood Debate" *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 16 (2016): 100.

¹⁰ Barreto, "American Identity," 106.

¹¹ Kelly M. Torres, "Puerto Rico, the 51st state: the implications of statehood on culture and language," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 42 (2017): 167-68.

¹² Torres, "Puerto Rico, the 51st state," 165.

but also on the mainland of the United States.¹³ These referenda asked the question whether or not the Puerto Ricans wanted to remain a part of the US. The next question on the ballot was whether or not the Puerto Ricans wanted to become an official US state or remain a territory of the US. They also had the option to choose to become an independent country.

Every scholar and author has described Puerto Rico differently. Some describe Puerto Rico as if it was already an independent nation or as if it was a US state. Others describe the status as it is, a territory of the US. However, there are some scholars who take it a step farther. Monge, in the title of his book calls Puerto Rico a colony. He is not the only one. Pedro Malavet, a lawyer and professor from Puerto Rican descent, wrote his book as if Puerto Rico is a colony of the US and not a territory. The title of the book: *America's Colony: The Political and Cultural Conflict between the United States and Puerto Rico* already shows that he considers the territory a colony even though the US denies this. The main argument that Malavet is making in this book is that “the Puerto Rican cultural nation is under the sway of U.S. imperialism, which compromises both the island’s sovereignty and Puerto Ricans’ citizenship rights.”¹⁴

In the last few years, there has been a growing interest in the US and its territories. “The Greater United States,” as Daniel Immerwahr calls the US and its territories, has been researched more. The idea of an American Empire is also less controversial these days than a couple of years ago.¹⁵ In his book *How to Hide an Empire*, Immerwahr wants to show the reader how US history would be different if the “Greater United States” was included in telling the story of the US.¹⁶ Immerwahr focusses on the different United States territories, how the United States annexed Puerto Rico and how it later became a Commonwealth and how the Philippines became independent. Racism plays a role throughout his book and Immerwahr shows the importance of racism throughout history.

In his conclusion, Immerwahr states that Hurricane Maria showed that Puerto Rico was in trouble, mostly financially. When the hurricane hit, Immerwahr states that the island did not receive

¹³ Ibidem, 166.

¹⁴ Malavet, *America's Colony*, 2.

¹⁵ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A Greater History of the United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019): 14.

¹⁶ Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*, 18.

the same media coverage as for instance Florida did.¹⁷ Immerwahr is not alone in his assessment that the hurricane exposed the many problems Puerto Rico faced. Ed Morales' book *Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico* aims to explain how the hurricane exposed the true relation between Puerto Rico and the US. Morales also shows that the problems of Puerto Rico have a long history. He argues that the debt the island now faces can be blamed on colonial experimentation of both European countries and the US.¹⁸

As Immerwahr's book and Morales' indicate, the hurricane showed that the Puerto Ricans were never considered first-class citizens. Their fantasy of citizenship, despite not being able to vote in presidential elections, included that they were equally protected under the law. Morales shows in his book how the hurricane and its aftermath exposed this fantasy of US citizenship.¹⁹ It shows that the second class citizenship is not a new concept, but that it has been the case since the Puerto Ricans became official US citizens in 1917. He explains that the reason for this is the legal process that came before citizenship and is interconnected with racism and colonialism.²⁰

How the Puerto Ricans became citizens and the struggles they had to go through to in order to be granted citizenship is briefly explained in the books examined above. However, Sam Erman's book *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the U.S. Constitution, and Empire* goes into great detail on this process. In his book, Erman explains how the Puerto Ricans became official American citizens after the American annexation of the territory. He chose to focus on the debate about citizenship from a constitutional point of view. *Almost Citizens* tells the story of the Puerto Ricans, who were neither considered citizens nor alien. He argues that the struggle for citizenship around the turn of the 20th century meant that the US constitution moved away from being more racially inclusive, which was the case just after the Civil War.²¹ Not only does Erman focus on whether or not Puerto Ricans should

¹⁷ Ibidem, 386.

¹⁸ Ed Morales, *Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2019): 9.

¹⁹ Morales, *Fantasy Island*, 2-3.

²⁰ Ibidem, 4.

²¹ Andrew Lanham, "An Activist's Fight For Citizenship," *The New Republic*, February 20, 2019, accessed January 3, <https://newrepublic.com/article/153125/activists-fight-citizenship>.

be American citizens, but also on the debate about what it would mean to be an American citizen living on the island.²²

The above mentioned literature shows that there is plenty of interest in Puerto Rico. However, because Hurricane Maria is a relatively recent event, literature on it is limited. Authors like Immerwahr and Morales argue that the hurricane exposed the many existing problems in Puerto Rico and the problematic relationship between the US and Puerto Rico. The books do not explain how this exposition of problems has changed the relation between Puerto Rico and the US. Through the use of newspaper articles from the territory and the mainland, as well as government documents, this thesis will argue that the relation between the United States and its territory has changed after hurricane Maria. The arguments will show that racism and the issue of citizenship are important issues in the relation between the US and Puerto Rico because these issues influenced the emergency response the territory received in the months after Hurricane Maria. One goal of this thesis is to expand on the literature written on hurricane Maria and what consequences this disaster had, and still has, for the territory of Puerto Rico. Consequently, the thesis will therefore also expand on the literature written on the statehood debate and how issues like racism and colonialism play a role in this debate within the events on hurricane Maria.

The arguments will be divided into two chapters. The first chapter will analyse the media's response to Hurricane Maria. This chapter will further be divided in two main sections. The first section will research the newspapers from Puerto Rico and the second will analyse the newspapers from the mainland. The second chapter will relate this analysis to the overall debate about Puerto Rico's status. The focus of the chapter is on the political debate mostly and the primary sources used in this chapter are mainly governmental documents. This chapter will briefly explain the way the territory is governed and how both the federal government and Puerto Rican government reacted to the hurricane and the consequences for the statehood debate. The chapter will look more in to the statehood debate, because the issue of statehood, or at least a change in the status of Puerto Rico received more attention from politicians.

²² Erman, *Almost Citizens* 3-5.

Chapter 1: Media responses

This chapter will focus on the media response to Hurricane Maria and its aftermath: the government's response—American as well as Puerto Rican. It is important to understand how the media reacted to the government's responses to the devastating events of September 2017. This chapter will be divided into two main sections. The first section will discuss Puerto Rican newspapers and the second section will analyse the mainland media. As is well-known, the media in the US is often divided among political lines: there are left-wing news channels and ones that take a more politically right-wing or conservative approach. This division will mostly be the case for the newspapers from the mainland; the division in Puerto Rican newspapers is not as clear as in the mainland newspapers. This chapter will show those differences. Difference between the media in Puerto Rico and the mainland, particular in relation to the actions of the governments in the aftermath of the natural disaster.

On September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico. Both the local and federal government had to react immediately. The hurricane's center hit Puerto Rico directly, which was the worst case scenario for the territory. At the time Hurricane Maria made landfall, the hurricane was a Category 4. A hurricane of this caliber had not hit Puerto Rico since 1932. Not only did the hurricane destroy 80 percent of the buildings, the power also went out. This could be disastrous, because many people needed the electricity to access clean drinking water. The powerful wind gusts destroyed the buildings and powerlines across the territory. Furthermore, the heavy rains also brought the danger of floods.²³

The chapter will argue that the newspapers from Puerto Rico were more critical of the governments' responses to hurricane Maria than the American newspaper. Furthermore, chapter will argue that the media's focus later on shift to the debate about statehood. Before the argument is substantiated, the chapter will first briefly discuss the Puerto Rican and federal government's response to the hurricane. For the rest of the chapter, it is important to have an understanding of how the

²³ Robinson Meyer, "What's Happening With the Relief Effort in Puerto Rico? A timeline of the unprecedented catastrophe of Hurricane Maria," *The Atlantic*, October 4, 2017, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/10/what-happened-in-puerto-rico-a-timeline-of-hurricane-maria/541956/>.

governments responded to the hurricane hitting Puerto Rico and how they sent emergency responses to the areas that were hit.

Governments' responses

The Puerto Rican government had already set up a number of emergency response teams, and the executive branch was busy planning for Hurricane Maria. The government knew the hurricane was on its way, just a few days before it arrived. A day before the hurricane made it to Puerto Rico, the government issued a statement in which Governor Rosselló once again explained the precautionary measures the government had taken. Rosselló reiterated that those who did not have a safe place to stay during the hurricane could go to one of the 500 shelters the government had organized for this reason. People in flood areas were expected to leave and they should prepare to stay for several days. This official statement by the office of the governor also explained that the magnitude of Maria would be unprecedented compared to hurricanes in the last few decades: everyone should be prepared.²⁴

Shortly after the hurricane had passed, the Governor announced a new organization to help the territory rebuild. The Joint Operations Center of the Government of Puerto Rico is an organisation that primarily focussed on gathering information related to hurricane Maria. The federal government worked together with the Puerto Rican government and the governments of the municipalities to gather information about the areas that were hit during the hurricane. This information was then used to send emergency responders to help the people and to decide what the needs of the people were. The organisation concluded that restoring means of communication was a high priority.²⁵ The hurricane also crippled the water supply and electricity lines. However, because the communication lines were down as well, it was very difficult to get an idea of the destruction after the hurricane. Before the Joint

²⁴ “Gobernador Rosselló Nevares: “Es tiempo de actuar y desalojar áreas y residencias vulnerables””, La Fortaleza, issued September 19, 2017, accessed March 28, 2020, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernador-rossell-nevares-es-tiempo-de-actuar-y-desalojar-reas-y-residencias-vulnerables>

²⁵ “Gobernador Rosselló Nevares anuncia el establecimiento del Centro Conjunto de Operaciones,” La Fortaleza, issued September 22, 2017, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernador-rossell-nevares-anuncia-el-establecimiento-del-centro-conjunto-de-operaciones-0>

Operations Center was introduced, the local government sent out people with satellite phones to get an idea of the destruction.²⁶

Not only did the Governor and his office put massive amounts of effort in responding to the disaster that was Hurricane Maria, the first lady of Puerto Rico, Beatriz Rosselló, started an initiative to gather emergency supplies that the people needed to survive. According to the office of the First Lady, a week after the hurricane, over a million pounds of supplies were donated and distributed over different municipalities. These donations came from the mainland and after the office thanked the donators, they also stated that more emergency supplies were needed. These supplies included food and cleaning products.²⁷

On September 26, the Secretary of Public Affairs and Public Policy, Ramón Rosario Cortés, updated the people of Puerto Rico. In general, he was optimistic about the progress that was being made. He explained that getting gas to the region was important to start rebuilding and to get the airport in working order as well. Secretary Cortés' statement made it clear that every organization and agency in Puerto Rico was working hard to rebuild necessary buildings, like the power plant and hospitals. Cortés also restated that the curfew that the government had set would still be in effect.²⁸

As one can see, the Puerto Rican government had a few priorities when it came to responding to the hurricane. To organize the emergency responders, it was very important to have some form of communication methods rebuilt. Because this was a priority, the Puerto Rican government was quickly able to determine what was necessary to rebuild first and what needed to be done to keep the people safe and with a roof over their heads.

Luckily, Puerto Rico was not on its own to respond to the hurricane. The federal government also had the responsibility to keep its citizens safe in these times of need. After Hurricane Irma, the

²⁶ Amanda Holpuch, "Puerto Rico battered by Hurricane Maria: 'Devastation – it's everywhere'," *The Guardian*, September 21, 2017, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/21/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-storm-floods>.

²⁷ "Sobre un millón de libras en donaciones es entregada al pueblo gracias a iniciativa de la primera dama," *La Fortaleza*, issued October 27, 2017, accessed March 28, 2020, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/sobre-un-mill-n-de-libras-en-donaciones-es-entregada-al-pueblo-gracias-iniciativa-de-la>.

²⁸ "Puerto Rico Secretary of Public Affairs gives update on current situation," *La Fortaleza*, issued September 26, 2017, accessed March 28, 2020, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/puerto-rico-secretary-public-affairs-gives-update-current-situation>.

federal government was aware of the devastation the other hurricane could do to the territory.

President Trump quickly declared that Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, were in a state of disaster. For the Commonwealth, this meant that federal assistance would be sent to Puerto Rico which would assist the local relief efforts. This declaration also provided Puerto Rico with necessary federal funding. This funding would be divided amongst individuals, which then could be used for temporary housing, repairs and to help businesses.²⁹

Governor Rosselló received a phone call from President Trump a couple of days after this declaration. According to the official statement released by the White House, the President thanked the governor for his leadership in these difficult times and promised continued help from his administration.³⁰

The White House was quick to declare Puerto Rico in a state of disaster, which started federal support for the island. Congress was not as quick and did not discuss Puerto Rico until five days after the hurricane. On September 25 and a couple of days after that, Congress had not made any decisions regarding Puerto Rico and relief efforts. There were speakers who asked Congress and the president for more aid for Puerto Rico.³¹ They asked to prioritize rebuilding the territory rather than focusing on the debt owed to the federal government. These speakers mentioned that the necessary supplies to keep hospitals open were already running low and that a humanitarian crisis was close.³²

One of the first decisions Congress made after Hurricane Maria to help the affected areas was to pass the *Disaster Tax Relief and Airport and Airway Extension Act of 2017*. The president signed this into law on September 29.³³ This law was applicable to all areas hit by Hurricane Harvey, Irma and Maria. It provided tax reliefs and extensions of certain public health programs for the victims of these

²⁹ “President Donald J. Trump Approves Puerto Rico Disaster Declaration,” Statements & Releases, The White House, issued September 21, 2017, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-approves-puerto-rico-disaster-declaration-2/>.

³⁰ “Readout of President Donald J. Trump’s Phone Calls with the Governors of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands Regarding Hurricane Maria,” Statements & Releases, The White House, issued September 22, 2017, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/readout-president-donald-j-trumps-phone-calls-governors-puerto-rico-u-s-virgin-islands-regarding-hurricane-maria/>

³¹ 115 Cong. Rec. H7438-H7538 (Daily ed. September 27, 2017).

³² 115 Cong. Rec. H7491-H7492 (Daily ed. September 26, 2017).

³³ “President Donald J. Trump signs H.R. 3823 into Law,” Statements & Releases, The White House, issued: September 29, 2017, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-signs-h-r-3823-law/>.

hurricanes. For Puerto Rico specifically this meant the Secretary of Treasury sent money to the territory to provide its residents the tax relief and benefits promised in this law.³⁴ Many bills were passed by Congress in September and October 2017, aimed at the recovery from Hurricane Maria but also offering relief to victims of the previous two hurricanes, Harvey and Irma.

Two weeks after the hurricane had left a path of destruction in its wake in Puerto Rico, President Trump and the First Lady visited the island. There were US representatives and senators who were not pleased with how the president acted on this visit. On October 3, 2017, Trump held a speech in which he said that Puerto Rico had already spent most of the budget which the federal government had provided the island. Trump also stated that compared to Hurricane Katrina, the people of the territory should be relieved that not as many had died.³⁵ This speech did not receive a positive response in Congress. Both in the House and in the Senate, different representatives argued for more federal funding to help Puerto Rico and for the president to be aware of the human lives lost during this disaster.³⁶

Puerto Rican media

Puerto Rico has several noteworthy newspapers. Most newspapers in the territory are written in Spanish but there are also a few papers that are published in English. To give a good overview of the media's response in Puerto Rico, both newspapers written in English and in Spanish will be discussed. The first newspaper that will be examined is *El Nuevo Día*. According to the website, *El Nuevo Día* is the most visited news-site in the territory.³⁷ There is another important point to make about *El Nuevo Día* before going to the analysis of the newspaper's reports about Hurricane Maria. Since most of the articles are online, the newspaper also publishes English versions of the Spanish

³⁴ Disaster Tax Relief And Airport And Airway Extension Act Of 2017. Pub. L. No. 115-82, 131 Stat. 1168 (2017).

³⁵ "Remarks by President Trump in Briefing on Hurricane Maria Relief Efforts," Statements & Releases, The White House, issued October 3, 2017, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-briefing-hurricane-maria-relief-efforts/>.

³⁶ 115 Cong. Rec. H7760 (Daily ed. October 4, 2017).

115 Cong. Rec. H7756 (Daily ed. October 4, 2017).

³⁷ "Sobre nosotros," *El Nuevo Día*, accessed June 10, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/sobre-nosotros/>.

articles. However, because most of the original articles and the website are in Spanish, for this thesis, *El Nuevo Día* is placed within the category of Spanish newspapers.

The other newspaper that will be discussed within the Spanish newspapers is *Claridad*. Whereas *El Nuevo Día* has taken a much more objective point of view in terms of reporting, *Claridad* makes it clear that they do not agree with the current political status of Puerto Rico. Since the establishment of the newspaper, *Claridad* has made it clear that they are pro-independence for Puerto Rico. The paper is dedicated to exposing the corruption within government and fights for political transparency; it has done so since the beginning of the paper. *Claridad* is a printed newspaper, but its website is also an important source of information. The website became especially important after Hurricane Maria, when the *Claridad* office was unable to print any physical newspapers.³⁸

The selection of newspapers published in Puerto Rico written in English is smaller than the selection of Spanish newspapers. However, to give a good analysis of the media response to Hurricane Maria, it is important to also discuss newspapers written in English. There are currently three newspapers distributed in Puerto Rico that are reporting in English. In this chapter, the focus is on only one of those three. *News is My Business* primarily focusses on economic developments on the island, but does also report other news.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, the newspaper *El Nuevo Día* focussed on the consequences of the hurricane and on how to rebuild the island. One of the consequences of the destruction after the hurricane was the mental health of the Puerto Ricans. In several articles, published within the first year after Maria the newspaper discusses the mental health effects of the hurricane. In 2017, Hurricane Irma was quickly followed by Hurricane Maria, which resulted in over 80 percent of the powerlines on Puerto Rico being destroyed. With most of the powerlines down, many Puerto Ricans did not have access to the internet and they were unable to keep up with the news. This resulted in all of the *Prima Hora* subscribers unable to read the newspaper and unable to access the internet. *Prima Hora* is another big newspaper in Puerto Rico. The newspaper is part of the leading communications

³⁸ Gwen Aviles. "The 'rebels' behind Puerto Rico's longest running newspaper," *Medill Reports Chicago*, February 27, 2018, accessed June 10, 2020, <https://news.medill.northwestern.edu/chicago/the-rebels-behind-puerto-ricos-longest-running-newspaper/>

company in Puerto Rico and primarily reports on local news from the territory. According to Jennifer Torres, who is the director of nursing at one of the biggest hospitals in Puerto Rico, not having electricity and living in the dark and without access to the world can result in mental health issues like anxiety and fear. “In the absence of light, we began to feel insecure.”³⁹

In a different article, Torres points out that it is important to recognize the signs of trauma. The journalist adds that it is important to seek treatment for this trauma. After the hurricane, the lives of the people in the territory were disrupted; when people are not treated for things like anxiety and fear, the events of September 2017 will continue to disrupt people’s life for years afterwards. The Puerto Rican people still live with that fear: “when the sky turns grey, memories invade your mind. They stun you.” Torres says that she and the hospitals can help people and that they definitely should seek help.⁴⁰

In general, the journalists of *El Nuevo Día* are positive in their reports on the efforts to rebuild Puerto Rico. However, the newspaper is primarily focussed on the local relief efforts rather than the federal aid. The different authors of the articles in this newspaper specifically mention when relief efforts are organised by the private sector or by the government, which shows their criticism on the government’s responses. One example is the food distribution in the capital of Puerto Rico, San Juan. The paper describes how the municipality is aided by the private sector for emergency relief efforts. The journalist focusses on the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz. Cruz praised the private sector. This sector provided almost all the food and water distributed to those who needed it. According to the paper, the care packages were mostly provided by the private sector, and not by the government.⁴¹

Although the focus is mainly on local efforts, both by the Puerto Rican government and the private sector relief efforts, a few articles in this newspaper focus on the aid provided by the federal

³⁹ BrandStudio, “Cómo el vivir a oscuras afecta nuestra salud mental,” *El Nuevo Día*, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/brandstudio/hospital-panamericano/notas/como-el-vivir-a-oscuras-afecta-nuestra-salud-mental/>.

⁴⁰ BrandStudio, “Los traumas que dejó María,” *El Nuevo Día*, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/brandstudio/hospital-panamericano/notas/los-traumas-que-dejo-maria/>.

⁴¹ Elnuevodia.com, “Municipio de San Juan culmina entrega de alimentos a afectados por María,” *El Nuevo Día*, 29 December, 2017, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/notas/municipio-de-san-juan-culmina-entrega-de-alimentos-a-afectados-por-maria/>.

government. The newspaper mentions the work that the Puerto Ricans were doing in articles that reported on the efforts of the federal government or federal organizations, for example when over 30.000 houses received temporary roofs. The article states that The United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) installed the temporary roofs, but quotes Puerto Rican engineers who mentioned that over 75.000 houses were still in need of roofs and that they are working on providing those roofs together with the American government.⁴²

Three years later, in October 2020, a report was published on how FEMA had failed Puerto Rico. FEMA is the Federal Emergency Management Agency and is the organization that aids the US in times of disasters. In this report it was made public that FEMA had lost over one third of the supplies that were sent to Puerto Rico. Half of the basic necessities like food and water supplies had not made it to the island. The article in *El Nuevo Día* blames the federal government and FEMA for the failure of the relief efforts in the US territory. The journalist states that the failure was caused by mismanagement. The report further stated that “FEMA cannot ensure it provided commodities to Puerto Rico disaster survivors as needed to sustain life and alleviate suffering as part of its response and recovery mission.” One of the reasons that the report gives for the missing shipments is that FEMA did not use GPS.⁴³

Years after Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico is still rebuilding and finding new ways to recover. This process became more difficult because of other disasters that followed Hurricane Maria. In January 2020, the island suffered from major earthquakes. These earthquakes were quickly followed by the COVID-19 pandemic which halted the progress of rebuilding. Puerto Rico once again asked for federal support. After the impact of Maria and the natural disasters in the following year, the US

⁴² Agencia EFE, “30,000 techos temporeros fueron instalados en Puerto Rico,” *El Nuevo Día*, 30 December, 2017, accessed June 10, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/30000techostemporerosfueroninstaladosenpuertorico-2386323/>.

⁴³ Laura M. Quintero, “El Inspector General de Estados Unidos confirma mal manejo de FEMA tras el huracán María,” *El Nuevo Día*, October 1, 2020, accessed October 26, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/gobierno/notas/el-inspector-general-de-estados-unidos-confirma-mal-manejo-de-fema-tras-el-huracan-maria/>.

federal government assigned almost \$90 billion to the recovery of Puerto Rico. In order to receive federal funding, the Puerto Rican municipalities had to follow federal direction on how to rebuild.⁴⁴

El Nuevo Día focusses in the months after Hurricane Maria primarily on the first response to the hurricane. As we will see, it was only two years after the hurricane that the newspaper, as well as the Puerto Ricans more generally started to focus on the status of the territory.⁴⁵

Whereas *El Nuevo Día* has taken a more neutral approach, the second newspaper discussed in this part was much more critical of both the federal and the Puerto Rican government. Similarly to *El Nuevo Día*, *Claridad* mostly reported on the relief efforts by the local government and the effects of the hurricane on the island. *Claridad* is critical of the Puerto Rican government's reaction to the hurricane, but also the lack of preparedness for natural disasters. The journalists go so far as accusing the Puerto Rican government of being responsible for the many deaths that the territory had suffered in 2017.

The newspaper published an article a year after the hurricane that points out the, in its eyes, failures of the local government. According to this article, the local government's health care system should have been better prepared for events like the hurricane. The authors of the article further blame the local government for all the human rights violations and the many deaths in the hospitals after the hurricane. In the article, the authors make it clear that there was no coordinated plan in the case of a public health emergency. "The absence of a coordinated public health response plan was also one of the main findings of the commission that investigated human rights violations after Hurricanes Irma and María, and also documented cases in other hospitals in the country." Two specialists who work for the health department blame the government for not having enough medical supplies and for the fact that many hospitals were not up to standard. "Obviously there was inadequate monitoring of the institutions so that they had the necessary emergency teams, for example."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ "Efficiency will open the door to reconstruction," *El Nuevo Día*, March 16, 2020, accessed June 25, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/opinion/editoriales/efficiencywillopenthedoortoreconstruction-editorial-2575998/>.

⁴⁵ David Cordero Mercado, "A cry for statehood," *El Nuevo Día*, September 2, 2019, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/news/story/a-cry-for-statehood/>.

⁴⁶ Jeniffer Wiscovitch and Omayra Sosa Pascual, "El gobierno de Puerto Rico no previno la mayoría de las muertes por el huracán María (final)," *Claridad*, September 25, 2018, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/el-gobierno-de-puerto-rico-no-previno-la-mayoria-de-las-muertes-por-el-huracan-maria-final/>.

The number of deaths because of Hurricane Maria is a recurring theme in the articles published on *Claridad*'s website. The newspaper's journalists are very critical of the way that the Puerto Rican government acted. When the Secretary of Health in 2019 made a statement that people should have learned from the hurricane season of 2017 and should be able to prepare better, the newspaper is strong with its critique. "The secretary's statement hides that hundreds, if not thousands, of those who died during Hurricane María had a fatal outcome due to the lack or inability to access basic health maintenance services."⁴⁷ What can be seen from this quote is that *Claridad* says the Secretary's assertion is wrong. The richer people of Puerto Rico were able to prepare for hurricanes and had access to better healthcare than other people, even in times of a public health emergency. According to the newspaper *Claridad*, the blame for the many people who died in the months immediately after Hurricane Maria can almost be put solely on the Puerto Rican government.⁴⁸ The high death toll is because of buildings collapsing, which can also be blamed on the corruption in the territory. Many buildings were not built safely enough.⁴⁹

Claridad published critical articles on the government's response and the state of the health department in Puerto Rico. The newspaper neglects to discuss the federal government's response. There is one area where this newspaper praised the relief efforts: this area involves the communities in Puerto Rico, similarly to *El Nuevo Día*. The paper recognizes the hard work of the many community programs that organized aid for those affected by the hurricane. These communities were not only working on rebuilding the island but also form human relationships and teach values like mutual help. *Claridad* journalist Gabriela Diaz argues that Nelson Santos, the vice president of the El

Omayra Sosa Pascual and Jeniffer Wiscovitch, "Vidas de damnificados por María aún penden de un hilo (1)," *Claridad*, June 19, 2018, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/vidas-de-damnificados-por-maria-aun-penden-de-un-hilo-1/>.

⁴⁷ Félix Aponte Ortiz, "¿A una fosa común los Muertos del Huracán María?," *Claridad*, September 25, 2019, accessed, October 25, 2020, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/a-una-fosa-comun-los-muertos-del-huracan-maria/>.

⁴⁸ Ortiz, "¿A una fosa común los Muertos del Huracán María?," *Claridad*, September 25, 2019.

⁴⁹ Alida Millan Ferrer, "Desastres naturales y corrupción," *Claridad*, January 22, 2020, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/desastre-naturales-y-corrupcion/>.

Coquí Community Board in 2017 “is betting that this knowledge acquired through community work will become a weapon to face, even, the colonial state of the island.”⁵⁰

Community health centers played an important role in providing the first aid immediately after the hurricane, when the federal government’s aid had not yet arrived. Isolina Miranda is an executive director for one of the twenty community health centers in Puerto Rico. When she visited the wrecked facility only days after the hurricane, she found people anxiously waiting and wondering if the center was able to help them. She told the people to “see what we can do with what we have here.” In the wake of the hurricane, these community centers became the first organisations to help those who needed health care after the hurricane. This was at a time that “many hospitals closed, while federal and state government agencies - charged with responding after a natural disaster - failed, according to interviews with several people.”⁵¹

The federal government and FEMA failed Puerto Rico, according to *Claridad*. A study that compared FEMA’s response to Hurricane Harvey, Irma and Maria comes to the conclusion that Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands received a very different treatment than Texas and Florida.⁵²

As seen before, *Claridad* focussed mostly on the local relief efforts rather than federal aid and less on the economic and political problems the island has. However, as Ed Morales has made clear in his book *Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico* the newspaper also makes the argument that the problems that Puerto Rico faced, and still faces after Hurricane Maria, existed long before the hurricane made landfall on the American territory. The editorial article, published two years after the hurricane, states that Maria has exposed the long existing problems of poverty and corruption within the Puerto Rican government and the federal government. “The decline

⁵⁰ Gabriela Ortiz Díaz, “Post María: “A problemas sociales, soluciones comunitaria,” *Claridad*, October 2017 24, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/post-maria-a-problemas-sociales-soluciones-comunitaria/>.

Felix Cordova Iturregui, “El huracán María, la crisis y el escándalo,” *Claridad*, January 17, 2018, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/el-huracan-maria-la-crisis-y-el-escandalo/>.

⁵¹ MC Nelly Torres, “Los Centros de Salud Comunitarios salvaron vidas después del huracán (1),” *Claridad*, June 19, 2019, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/los-centros-de-salud-comunitarios-salvaron-vidas-despues-del-huracan-1/>.

⁵² Luis Alejandro Molina, “Sin explicación el discrimen de FEMA con Puerto Rico,” *Claridad*, March 18, 2019, accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/sin-explicacion-el-discrimen-de-fema-con-puerto-rico/>.

was demonstrated immediately after the emergency, in the ineptitude and corruption of the response of the governments of Puerto Rico and the United States.”⁵³

The Puerto Rican newspapers reporting in English are not much different than the papers discussed above. *News Is My Business* is, as stated before focused on the economy of the island. It did report on the hurricane and the relief efforts. The main concern of the newspaper are the economic consequences of a natural disaster. After Hurricane Maria, this was not any different. The main focus the year after Hurricane Maria was on rebuilding homes and rebuilding the tourist sector and how the territory’s economy had changed.

In an article on Governor Rosselló, the journalist acknowledges that Puerto Rico cannot rebuild on its own. The newspaper supports the choice of the Governor to ask for help at institutions like MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The Governor said that “the disaster, although it brought some challenges, also gave us some opportunities.” As the paper describes, it is one of the reason why he went to MIT for help, because with the help of the university, Puerto Rico would be able to make its energy system more efficient.⁵⁴ The other newspapers in Spanish discussed before did not mention the governor visiting MIT and personally asking for help.

Whereas Morales’ book was not published until 2019 and *Claridad* did not publish the editorial article on how Maria exposed the pre-existing problems in Puerto Rico which were not seen by the politicians until hurricane Maria, *News is My Business* found a study that was done by a local economic firm which showed that young African American women were hit the hardest by the hurricane. The study was done in 2017, just months after Hurricane Maria. The article on the study also explains the Puerto Rican economic decline of the last decades and how Hurricane Maria showed how bad the economy had become over the years. This article also places the blame for this decline on the federal government. According to the study that this newspaper covers, Puerto Rico’s poverty is

⁵³ “Editorial: A dos años de María: muchas preguntas y una gran desconfianza,” *Claridad*, September 25, 2019, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/editoriala-dos-anos-de-maria-muchas-preguntas-y-una-gran-desconfianza/>.

⁵⁴ “Rosselló asks for help to rebuild Puerto Rico after Hurricane María,” *News Is My Business*, December 13, 2017, accessed September 12, 2020, <https://newsismybusiness.com/rossello-rebuild-hurricane/>

partly to blame on its status as US territory rather than a state. Because of its status, Puerto Rico does not get the same benefits that states receive.⁵⁵

While most articles of this online newspaper discuss the economic ramifications of the 2017 hurricane season, *News Is My Business* also focusses on the importance of local community centers. This trend can also be seen in the other newspapers discussed before. In one particular article, the paper focusses on the importance of community health centers in the weeks following Maria. According to the paper, these centers were the first responders in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. Where the federal government should have been the one to step in, these federal organisations were often absent when it counted the most. In the daily reports by FEMA, the community health centres which were doing so much work were not mentioned. “As far as FEMA’s documented memos, the community health centers and their role in providing primary health care to vulnerable communities did not exist.”⁵⁶ As the paper shows, this resulted in limited supplies to help the people: the healthcare workers saved many lives while working in improvised tents. According to the workers of those community centers, the death count would have been much higher after the hurricane if it was not for those centres providing health care wherever they could. Many of these centres used private funding to pay for the supplies. However, as the CEO of RCHN Community Health Foundation Feygele Jacobs, quoted in the paper, summarised nicely: ““But what does it say when you are relying on private philanthropy [instead of the government]. Right?””⁵⁷

Other private organisations that helped after the hurricane are also discussed by the newspaper: organisations that focus on providing housing for those who lost their home and organisations that are rebuilding those homes.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ “Study: Hurricane María unmasks PR’s poverty, whose face is female,” *News Is My Business*, December 19, 2017, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://newsismybusiness.com/hurricane-unmasks-poverty/>.

⁵⁶ “Community Health Centers were lifesavers after hurricane, but gov’t didn’t count on them,” *News Is My Business*, June 14, 2019, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://newsismybusiness.com/community-health-centers-were-lifesavers-after-hurricane-but-govt-didnt-count-on-them/>.

⁵⁷ “Community Health Centers were lifesavers after hurricane, but gov’t didn’t count on them,” *News Is My Business*, June 14, 2019.

“Op-Ed: FEMA provides Hurricane María progress report,” *News Is My Business*, October 20, 2017, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://newsismybusiness.com/provides-hurricane-progress/>.

⁵⁸ “SBP Puerto Rico has helped 110 families rebuild after Hurricane María,” *News Is My Business*, October 7, 2020, accessed December 16, 2020, <https://newsismybusiness.com/sbp-puerto-rico-has-helped-110-families-rebuild-after-hurricane-maria/>.

Mainland media

Newspapers in the US are often written with a specific audience in mind. Some newspapers are written more for the centrist audience, whereas others are writing more along political party lines. *The New York Times* aims to provide objective information as well as commentary. There are newspapers that are trying not to be biased, but often have an opinion on the current president or endorse certain political candidates. In the following part of this chapter, the thesis will discuss several newspapers, divided over political lines. The newspapers analysed in this section of the thesis are daily national newspapers, meaning that they are distributed throughout the US. Before going into more depth about the newspapers that will be used here, it is important to mention that the newspapers from the US are more easily accessible than the Puerto Rican newspapers. The newspapers are not only available online, but also easier to access and analyse, given the language.

The first newspaper that will be discussed is *The New York Times*. In 2016, *The New York Times* endorsed Hillary Clinton for president; it has endorsed Democratic presidential candidates since the elections in 1960 when they backed JFK for president.⁵⁹ After *The New York Times*, the next newspaper discussed will be its opposite in terms of political views. *The New York Post* is a tabloid newspaper and does not have the same respectable reputation that other newspaper have. However, it is the fourth ranked newspaper in the United States. Because it is almost politically the opposite of *The New York Times* it is an interesting addition to the thesis. Finally, the last newspaper that will be analysed is *USA Today*. This centrist newspaper is neither favouring Republicans nor Democrats, but was critical of the Trump administration and its response to the hurricane.

Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico on September 19 and 20, 2017, but, as mentioned earlier, the hurricane also hit other areas. Whereas the Puerto Rican newspapers are primarily focussed on the island itself, *The New York Times* is also focussed on the Virgin Islands, the US mainland and the Caribbean island of Dominica. Hurricane Maria hit the Caribbean nation of

“Habitat for Humanity P.R. to provide houses to Hurricane María victims,” *News Is My Business*, August 9, 2018, accessed December 16, 2020, <https://newsismybusiness.com/humanity-provide-hurricane/>.

⁵⁹ Taylor Adams, Meghan Louttit and Rumsey Taylor, “New York Times Endorsements Through the Ages,” *The New York Times*, accessed November 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/09/23/opinion/presidential-endorsement-timeline.html>.

Dominica first before moving towards the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Similar to Puerto Rico, communication networks across these islands shut down and the islands were unable to communicate with the outside world.⁶⁰

A week after the hurricane hit, the *New York Times* published a long article on the Trump administration and its efforts so far to help Puerto Rico. The newspaper is very critical of the administration's performance on the island. According to this article, the Trump administration wanted to avoid another situation similar to the situation after hurricane Katrina hit in 2005.⁶¹ In this article, the journalists keep pointing out that the Puerto Ricans were still in desperate need of supplies ranging from food to materials needed to repair buildings. People local to Puerto Rico, those who were working tirelessly in the first days after the hurricane hit, were immediately asking the president and the military to send more aid. According to a Puerto Rican police officer, the people in the territory were in desperate need of the previously mentioned supplies. Several Democratic representatives in Congress called for more aid to be sent to the territory. The Democratic Senator for Florida, Bill Nelson, tweeted that he saw the situation in Puerto Rico as a crisis and that the island was in desperate need of medicine, food and water. Other Democratic representatives quickly followed Nelson's example by asking the Trump administration to send more troops to Puerto Rico to help.

⁶⁰ Barbara Marcolini, "A Walk Through Dominica, Hours After Hurricane Maria," *The New York Times*, September 22, 2017, accessed November 16, 2020, <https://www-nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/video/world/americas/100000005450694/dominica-hurricane-maria.html?searchResultPosition=9>.

Kirk Semple and Azam Ahmed, "Hurricane Maria Does 'Mind-Boggling' Damage to Dominica, Leader Says," *The New York Times*, September 19, 2017, accessed November 16, 2020, <https://www-nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2017/09/19/world/americas/hurricane-maria-caribbean.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

Jeremy W. Peters, "In the Virgin Islands, Hurricane Maria Drowned What Irma Didn't Destroy," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2017, accessed November 16, 2020, <https://www-nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2017/09/27/us/hurricane-maria-virgin-islands.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁶¹ During the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Bush administration received a lot of critique on the way FEMA and the government has helped the affected areas. There were limited supplies and the distribution of those supplies was slow. Not only came the response late, it took a week for the government to organise their relief efforts, leaving tens of thousands of people without their basic needs. President Bush was criticised for his response to the hurricane.

Elisabeth Bumiller, "Bush criticized over storm response," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2005, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://www-nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2005/09/02/world/americas/bush-criticized-over-storm-response.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

Talmon Joseph Smith, "Remembering Katrina and Its Unlearned Lessons, 15 Years On," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2020, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://www-nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2020/08/21/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-hurricane-katrina-anniversary.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

After the Jones Act was temporarily waived, the relief efforts were able to help more people according to the White House. Had the Jones Act not been waived, getting basic supplies to the island would have been too expensive because of the regulations in the Jones Act. The Press Secretary promised to not let the people of Puerto Rico down and the President praised FEMA and other first responders. However, this article's main focus is on the people who are experiencing the aftermath of the hurricane first hand.⁶²

President Trump and his administration kept insisting that FEMA and other government organisations were doing a great job in helping Puerto Rico after September 20, 2017. A week after Hurricane Maria had swept over the island, the President said that they had “made tremendous strides” and “people can’t believe how successful it’s been.” The acting Secretary of Homeland Security at the time, Elaine Duke, said that it was “a good news story” because the government and FEMA were able to reach many people who needed help. This statement received an immediate response by the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz.⁶³ After the Secretary of Homeland Security called Puerto Rico a good news story, Cruz responded with the notion that the story of Puerto Rico is “a story of a devastation that continues to worsen.”⁶⁴ Her critique resulted in Trump lashing out against the San Juan mayor, stating that the Democrats had told her to be negative of the federal

⁶² Helene Cooper, Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Jack Healy, “Trump Administration Is Pressed to Step Up Hurricane Recovery in Puerto Rico,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2017, accessed November 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/28/us/politics/trump-administration-puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-response.html?searchResultPosition=30>.

Niraj Chokshi, “Trump Waives Jones Act for Puerto Rico, Easing Hurricane Aid Shipments,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2017, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www-nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2017/09/28/us/jones-act-waived.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

Niraj Chokshi, “Would Repealing the Jones Act Help Puerto Rico?” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2017, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://www-nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2017/10/24/us/jones-act-puerto-rico.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

⁶³ Carmen Yulín Cruz has been the mayor of San Juan since 2013 and is a member of the Popular Democratic Party in Puerto Rico. The Popular Democratic Party members are usually in favor of remaining a US territory and oppose statehood.

Nicole Acevedo, “San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz to run for Puerto Rico governor in 2020,” *NBC News*, March 22, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/san-juan-mayor-carmen-yul-n-cruz-run-puerto-rico-n986331>.

⁶⁴ Richard Fausset, Michael D. Shear, Ron Nixon and Frances Robles, “San Juan Mayor Rebukes Trump Administration for Rosy Comments on Relief Effort,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2017, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://www-nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2017/09/29/us/san-juan-mayor-trump.html>.

response.⁶⁵ In the two years following the hurricane, Trump continuously lashed out at Mayor Cruz, questioning her leadership.⁶⁶ Many of the articles are about the Puerto Rican criticism of President Trump as well as his actions when he visited the island two weeks after the hurricane.⁶⁷

The New York Times continuously uses Puerto Rican politicians against President Trump and his administration. When the President or someone of his staff praised the work the federal government organisations were doing, Puerto Ricans who were quick to point out the places where these organisations had failed were quoted in the *New York Times*. The author who refers to these voices does not agree with Trump either. “But the hurricanes are yet another reminder of this president’s rare capacity for self-congratulation — a trait that seems particularly ill-suited to the aftermath of deadly disasters, when the plight of people who lost homes or even family members would seem to take precedence over testimonials to FEMA.”⁶⁸ However, the newspaper also acknowledged the fact that Trump sometimes did mention the difficulties of the federal aid in Puerto Rico. What is interesting to mention is that during a press conference on September 26, 2017 President Trump praised his efforts in other areas affected by Hurricane Maria and seemed to almost forget Puerto Rico. Journalists accused the President of being preoccupied by sports instead of working on helping Puerto Rico and these other affected areas. Trump was tweeting more about a football game than on the hurricane.⁶⁹

The New York Times was not the only media that expressed criticism of Trump’s handling of the Puerto Rican crisis. Popular late night shows such as *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah, *Saturday*

⁶⁵ Peter Baker, “Trump Lashes Out at Puerto Rico Mayor Who Criticized Storm Response,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2017, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2017/09/30/us/politics/trump-puerto-rico-mayor.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁶⁶ Annie Karni and Patricia Mazzei, “Trump Lashes Out Again at Puerto Rico, Bewildering the Island,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2019, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2019/04/02/us/trump-puerto-rico.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

⁶⁷ Mark Landler, “Trump Lobs Praise, and Paper Towels, to Puerto Rico Storm Victims,” *The New York Times*, October 3, 2017, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2017/10/03/us/puerto-rico-trump-hurricane.html?searchResultPosition=7>. The Editorial Board, “Mr. Trump’s Paper Towels Aren’t Helping Puerto Rico,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2017, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2017/11/25/opinion/sunday/mr-trumps-paper-towels-arent-helping-puerto-rico.html?searchResultPosition=6>.

⁶⁸ Mark Landler, “Trump Rates His Hurricane Relief: ‘Great.’ ‘Amazing.’ ‘Tremendous.’,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 2017, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2017/09/26/us/politics/trump-puerto-rico-hurricane.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁶⁹ Landler, “Trump Rates His Hurricane Relief: ‘Great.’ ‘Amazing.’ ‘Tremendous.’,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 2017.

Night Live and *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert were also very critical in their description of Trump's handling of the situation.⁷⁰

Less critical of Trump was *The New York Post*. *The New York Post* is a very different newspaper than others discussed before in this thesis. Important to note is that this paper is one of President Trump's favorite news sources.⁷¹ This newspaper also endorsed Trump for president for the primary elections in New York in 2016 for the presidential elections. *The New York Post* expected that he would become "more presidential: better informed on policy, more self-disciplined and less thin-skinned" once Donald Trump became the presidential nominee.⁷² After the primary elections were finished and Trump was the official nominee, *The Post* remained silent during the election campaign: they did not publically endorse Trump during this time because unlike their expectations, Trump had not become "more presidential."⁷³ When it was time to consider whom to endorse for president for the 2020 elections, *The Post* decided to endorse President Trump for re-election.⁷⁴

When it comes to reporting on the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, *The New York Post* did not report as much on the issue as other newspapers do. The articles that are published tell a similar story as other papers. When the *Post* reports on the actions by the Trump administration it remains sceptical of the accusations that he did not do enough for the island in the initial months after the hurricane. Days after Hurricane Maria made landfall in the US territory, *The New York Post* published an article indicating what the federal government had to do differently than during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The newspaper also compares responses to Hurricanes Harvey and Irma in Texas and Florida to the

⁷⁰ "Trump Calls His Puerto Rico Hurricane Response an "Unsung Success" | The Daily Show" The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, September 12, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQDbEDCFG1w>.
"The Chaos President Cold Open – SNL" Saturday Night Live, September 30, 2017,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7e4vFMJmBIc>

"Trump Blames Puerto Rico For Running Up His Budget," The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, October 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2t4gy3oAx7I>.

⁷¹ Colleen Shalby, "What in the world is going on in the West Wing? Seven revelations from one of the reporters who knows Trump best," *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 2017, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-insight-haberman-20170728-story.html>.

⁷² Post Editorial Board, "The Post endorses Trump for NY primary," *The New York Post*, April 14, 2016, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2016/04/14/the-post-endorses-donald-trump/>.

⁷³ Callum Borchers, "Shock and nah: New York Post withholds endorsement from Donald Trump," *The Washington Post*, November 8, 2016, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/08/shock-and-nah-new-york-post-withholds-endorsement-from-donald-trump/>.

⁷⁴ Post Editorial Board, "The New York Post endorses President Donald J. Trump for re-election," *The New York Post*, October 26, 2020, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/10/26/the-new-york-post-endorses-president-donald-j-trump-for-re-election/>.

situation and response in Puerto Rico. The newspaper praised these two states for how they handled the hurricanes. In terms of Puerto Rico specifically, the journalist praised the federal government for reacting quicker than in 2005. However, the author of this article, Nicole Gelinas, also pushes the government to supply funds to Puerto Rico so that people can rebuild the island and improve infrastructures so that they can withstand another storm.⁷⁵

The newspaper offered space to not only critics from the territory, but also important political figures on the mainland. Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York blamed racism within the federal government for the failed efforts and the resulting death toll, for instance.⁷⁶

Six months after the hurricane hit Puerto Rico, new documents showed that, according to the newspaper, FEMA had ignored several requests from the Puerto Rican government and Walmart. This request involving among other things fuel for generators was met by silence by the federal organisation. Walmart needed to keep the generators running in order to keep refrigerators on, but they still had to throw away an unclear amount of perishable food. The newspaper did not consider this as a complete failure of FEMA, but used it as a way to explain the “difficulties the agency has faced in responding to Hurricane Maria, along with providing Puerto Ricans with thousands of tarps for the homeless and millions of meals for the hungry.”⁷⁷

Almost a year after Maria, Trump said that he thought that they “did a fantastic job in Puerto Rico. We’re still helping Puerto Rico.” This article which covered this press conference also stated that Trump had made some false claims during this press moment. Other than accusing the President of making some false claims, the article remained fairly neutral.⁷⁸ A few months later, Trump had

⁷⁵ Nicole Gelinas, “The help Puerto Rico needs now — and what it doesn’t,” *The New York Post*, September 24, 2017, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2017/09/24/the-help-puerto-rico-needs-now-and-what-it-doesnt/>.

⁷⁶ Cedar Attanasio and Linda Massarella, “Cuomo blames racism for weak federal response to Hurricane Maria victims,” *The New York Post*, June 10, 2018, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2018/06/10/cuomo-blames-racism-for-weak-federal-response-to-hurricane-maria-victims/>.

⁷⁷ Associated Press, “FEMA ignored Puerto Rico in aftermath of Hurricane Maria,” *The New York Post*, March 21, 2018, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2018/03/21/fema-ignored-puerto-rico-in-aftermath-of-hurricane-maria/>.

⁷⁸ Ruth Brown, “Trump: We did ‘fantastic’ job with hurricane relief in Puerto Rico,” *The New York Post*, August 29, 2018, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2018/08/29/trump-we-did-fantastic-job-with-hurricane-relief-in-puerto-rico/>.

Marisa Schultz, “Coast Guard Commandant says Trump provided a ‘massive’ response effort to aid Maria’s victims,” *The New York Post*, September 17, 2018, accessed November 17, 2020,

reportedly plans to stop financial aid to the territory, because he believed that the money was not used for rebuilding the island.⁷⁹ President Trump claimed that the Puerto Ricans should have done more to prepare for the hurricane and was critical of the local government's response. *The New York Post* is not completely in agreement with the President, but does acknowledge the federal government's failure. The paper is critical of the death toll reported after the hurricane and praises the government when it "finally" acknowledged the death toll of over 1400 people.⁸⁰ The same goes for the later adjustment of the death toll to almost three thousand.⁸¹

USA Today is the last paper discussed in this section. This newspaper is the number one newspaper in the United States in terms of circulation. It is a daily newspaper that is mostly focussed on a centrist audience of the political spectrum.⁸²

As has been mentioned multiple times throughout the thesis, Hurricane Maria also helped expose pre-existing problems, not only social problems but also the huge financial debt the island was in. *USA Today* also focussed on these economic problems that were exposed after the hurricane. Early October 2017, Trump and other members of his administration stated that Puerto Rico's massive debt should be wiped out in order for the territory to rebuild. However, the newspaper pointed out that, realistically, this might cause many problems, both for Puerto Rico as well as its financiers. Municipal Market Analytics partner Matt Fabian says that "the storm is going to accelerate the economic decline of the commonwealth."⁸³

<https://nypost.com/2018/09/17/coast-guard-commandant-says-trump-provided-a-massive-response-effort-to-aid-marias-victims/>.

⁷⁹ Associated Press, "Trump plans to stop disaster relief funds to Puerto Rico," *The New York Post*, November 12, 2018, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2018/11/12/trump-plans-to-stop-disaster-relief-funds-to-puerto-rico/>.

⁸⁰ Mark Moore, "Puerto Rico finally admits Hurricane Maria killed more than 1,400 people," *The New York Post*, August 9, 2018, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2018/08/09/puerto-rico-finally-admits-that-hurricane-maria-killed-more-than-1400-people/>.

⁸¹ Rob Frederick, "Nearly 3,000 deaths in Puerto Rico linked to Hurricane Maria," *The New York Post*, August 28, 2018, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2018/08/28/nearly-3000-deaths-in-puerto-rico-linked-to-hurricane-maria/>.

⁸² "Media Bias Ratings," AllSides, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-ratings>.

⁸³ Nathan Bomey, "There may be only one way to fix shattered Puerto Rico," *USA Today*, October 5, 2017, accessed November 10, 2020, https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/ha/default.aspx#!?&_suid=16050435251090812492517848894.

USA Today was also critical of the Trump administration's response in the initial week after Maria hit Puerto Rico, but also acknowledged the difficulties that the government faced. As the newspaper informs its readers, Democratic representative Nydia Velazquez called the situation in Puerto Rico and the response by the government "Trump's Katrina."⁸⁴ But whereas many people and other media continued to critique FEMA's response to the hurricane, according to *USA Today*, Puerto Rico had been happy with the organisation's response. It quotes Mayor Cruz, who said that initially she was satisfied with Trump and his response. However, the mayor also became critical when the President tweeted that Puerto Rico, because of its existing debt, was in more trouble than Florida and Texas "that are doing great."⁸⁵ As the paper notes, the President kept praising his relief efforts in Puerto Rico, despite the challenges that FEMA was facing.⁸⁶

President Trump continued to partly blame the government of Puerto Rico for the state that the island was in after the hurricane. He stated that the Puerto Rican infrastructure was a disaster before the hurricane. He further stated that the federal government would decide how much money they would give to the territory. The President also warned the residents of Puerto Rico that FEMA would not be able to help the island forever and that FEMA would leave soon. As the paper reports, this resulted in a sharp response from San Juan Mayor Cruz and Senate Minority Leader Schumer. The author of this article points out that without federal funds, Puerto Rico would be unable to rebuild.⁸⁷ Other statements from President Trump, for example about the death toll, also received shocked messages from Puerto Ricans and politicians, as well as journalists from *USA Today*. His statements in which he said that the relief efforts were going well and that they were a success are also often met

⁸⁴ Gregory Korte, David Jackson and Ledyard King, "Trump on defensive over Hurricane Maria response," *USA Today*, September 27, 2017, accessed November 10, 2020, https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/ha/default.aspx#!?&_suid=16050435251090812492517848894.

⁸⁵ Korte, Jackson and King, "Trump on defensive over Hurricane Maria response," *USA Today*, September 27, 2017.

⁸⁶ David Jackson and Donovan Slack, "Trump calls disaster response critics 'ingrates'," *USA Today*, October 2, 2017, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/ga/default.aspx>.

⁸⁷ John Bacon, "80% of island still without power; Trump says FEMA can't stay 'forever'," *USA Today*, October 13, 2017, accessed November 18, 2020, https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/ha/default.aspx#!?&_suid=1605704455809031749488735241704.

with criticism. Until the high death toll was finally acknowledged, Rick Jervis reported that the people of Puerto Rico were pained by the actions of the President.⁸⁸

The newspapers from the mainland of the US make the comparison to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 several times. When visiting Puerto Rico, President Trump also made the comparison, stating that the devastation left by Hurricane Maria was not a catastrophe like the one in 2005. This statement left many people in Puerto Rico shocked.⁸⁹ The comparison to Hurricane Katrina not go over well with the Puerto Ricans. When President Trump remarked that the territory received more money than the government had intended, he left many people shocked, including lawmakers in Puerto Rico and members of Congress.⁹⁰ This statement was also was discussed in popular shows in the US, like *The Late Late Show* with James Corden.⁹¹

Analysis

In this chapter, six different newspapers were analysed. Three newspapers came from the territory of Puerto Rico and the other three newspapers came from the mainland of the United States. The newspapers were chosen because of their wide variety of news reports as well as the audience the papers write for.

When it came to reporting on the immediate response by the federal government and the Puerto Rican government, there is a difference between newspapers from the island and those that are primarily distributed on the mainland. The newspapers from the island, *El Nuevo Día*, *Claridad* and *News is my Business*, were mostly focused on the response by the Puerto Rican government and the

⁸⁸ Rick Jervis, "For Puerto Ricans, 'it's like punching us in the face'," *USA Today*, September 17, 2018, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/ga/default.aspx>.
David Jackson, "Defensive Trump heads to Puerto Rico," *USA Today*, October 3, 2017, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/ga/default.aspx>.
"In Puerto Rico, the U.S. failed its citizens," *USA Today*, June 1, 2018, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/ga/default.aspx>.

⁸⁹ Oren Dorell, "Residents cheer Trump visit but not the politics," *USA Today*, October 4, 2017, accessed November 10, 2020, https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/ha/default.aspx#.!/?&_suid=16050435251090812492517848894.

⁹⁰ David Jackson, "Trump hails recovery after Hurricane Maria," *USA Today*, October 4, 2017, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/ga/default.aspx>.

⁹¹ "Trump to Puerto Rico: Hurricanes Are Expensive," *The Late Late Show with James Corden*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZbp6F3qcZL>.

local efforts rather than the federal aid. While *Claridad* was more critical of these local efforts than newspapers like *El Nuevo Día* and *News Is My Business*, their focus was mostly on the actions of the Puerto Rican government rather than the federal aid. When these three newspapers discussed federal aid, they mostly explained how the government was lacking in their efforts to help Puerto Rico. The newspapers have one thing in common. They all blame the federal and local government for the many deaths in the territory.

In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, the newspapers did not discuss the status of Puerto Rico, or the changing political situation. The focus was on rebuilding the island first; the discussion about the status of the territory came two years later, when the people of the territory demanded the resignation of the Governor. In addition to other issues, the people of Puerto Rico demanded his resignation because of his failure to respond properly to the hurricane in 2017.

The newspapers that are distributed on the mainland mostly reported on the actions of the federal government and the federal organisations tasked with responding to the natural disaster. *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *The New York Post* were critical of the Trump administration's response to the hurricane. They stated that the government should have done more and should have acted sooner. Similarly to the Puerto Rican newspapers, the American media focused the first two years after Maria had made landfall on the relief efforts and on rebuilding the island.

But in 2019 the discussion about the status of Puerto Rico that had started on the island also became part of US media. During the presidential elections of November 2020, the issue of the Puerto Rican status was widely discussed in the media. When the dust had settled after the hurricane, the people of Puerto Rico started to realise how the federal government had failed them: the issue of the status of Puerto Rico became more prominent.

Chapter 2: Politics

In the previous chapter, the media's response to hurricane Maria was examined. The focus of this chapter was primarily on how the media covered the relief efforts of the Puerto Rican and federal government. The first chapter also briefly touched upon the changes in the political field regarding the status of the island. The following chapter will continue examining the shift in attention of the media and politics of the relief efforts to the statehood debate and how the relation between Puerto Rico and the US has changed over the years since hurricane Maria. After the hurricane, the struggles Puerto Rico had with receiving sufficient funds for rebuilding the island show the disadvantages of the status of a territory within the US. Political struggles on the side of the federal government and political problems like corruption within the Puerto Rican government also resulted in struggles with recovering after the hurricane. Attention of the media and politicians shifted more to the statehood debate. In this debate, which already took place within the academic world since Puerto Rico became a territory, issues like colonialism and racism also play an important role. These issues could primarily be seen in the academic debate but are now also discussed within the statehood debate in the media and politics.

In September 2017, President Trump has only been in office for a few months and was unable to define his presidency on the issue of the Commonwealth. Before the hurricane season of 2017, Trump had not given his attention to the territory. Before going into more detail about Trump's decisions regarding Puerto Rico after hurricane Maria, it is also important to understand how the territory is governed and what monumental decisions Congress has taken regarding the territory. Therefore, the thesis will briefly discuss key decisions before hurricane Maria before shifting towards the political situation after hurricane Maria. To explain the political situation and the progress of the relief efforts and the statehood debate, the chapter will use the media's reporting on Congressional actions and statements made by politicians and Puerto Ricans themselves. However, because this chapter will focus on the political actions of the governments, the majority of the analysis will come from Congressional records and government documents from Puerto Rico.

The chapter will clearly show that because of hurricane Maria and Trump's actions afterwards, the statehood debate became an important point on the agenda of Puerto Rico and Congress. This shows a shift in the relation between the US and Puerto Rico as well. As the academic literature stated, the statehood debate disappeared towards the background in the years before the hurricane and few people were interested in this debate. Barreto stated in his 2016 book that even though the statehood debate was still relevant for the territory, it was not as visible as it used to be.⁹² The chapter will explain that the political debate also shifted from discussing relief efforts for the territory towards the option of statehood.

Politics before hurricane Maria

Since Puerto Rico became part of the US in 1898, there have been substantial changes as to how the territory was governed. Now, the Puerto Ricans have a governor. This governor is elected by the citizens of Puerto Rico. They were able to elect their own governor since the Elective Governor Act, which passed in 1948. Even though the territory could now elect its own governor, like a state, the president still has the power to appoint justices for the Supreme Court and the legislative power over Puerto Rico remains largely in the hands of Congress.⁹³ Similarly to most state governors, the Puerto Rican governor serves a four year term. From August 2019 to November 2020, Wanda Vázquez was the territory's governor.⁹⁴ She remained in office until the November 2020 elections when the people of Puerto Rico elected Pedro Pierluisi for governor. Governor Ricardo A. Rosselló was governor before Vázquez and responsible for the response to the disastrous hurricane; he was in office from January 2017 to August 2019 and stepped down because of widespread protests throughout the territory.⁹⁵

⁹² Barreto, "American Identity," 100.

⁹³ Monge, *Puerto Rico*, 106.

⁹⁴ Alejandra Rosa, Patricia Mazzei and Frances Robles, "Puerto Rico Supreme Court Outs New Governor, and Another Is Sworn In," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2019, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/us/puerto-rico-governor-wanda-vazquez.html>.

⁹⁵ Patricia Mazzei and Frances Robles, "Ricardo Rosselló, Puerto Rico's Governor, Resigns After Protests," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2019, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/24/us/rossello-puerto-rico-governor-resigns.html>.

Since the 1990s, the territory has been plagued by a growing number of issues. Many American companies in Puerto Rico started leaving the territory. They had settled in Puerto Rico because of tax loopholes. When Congress removed those loopholes, the companies started leaving the territories. This created problems which ultimately resulted in a collapsing economy. Many people were unable to find jobs and left for the mainland.⁹⁶ When Governor Rosselló took office, he promised to change the situation in Puerto Rico. On his first day as governor, Rosselló signed several executive orders, mostly focussing on improving the economic situation on the island. One order was that government agencies should reduce spending.⁹⁷

Puerto Rico is not only governed through executive orders of the governor. The governor is assisted by a Council of Secretaries including a Secretary of State. The Secretary of State is chosen by the governor, but the House of Representatives and the Senate of Puerto Rico have to approve. The governor, the Council of Secretaries and the Secretary of State fall under the Department of State of Puerto Rico. This Department is one of the most important bodies of government for the territory. As stated on the website of the Department, the institution is a bridge between Puerto Rico and the federal government. It encourages the economic, cultural and political relations between Puerto Rico and the US.⁹⁸ Similarly to the federal government, the legislative branch of the Puerto Rican government is divided into a House of Representatives and a Senate. Elections are held every four years to elect the senators, representatives and the governor.⁹⁹ Together with the executive branch, which is the governor, and the judicial branch, the Puerto Rican government tries to govern to the best of its abilities, but ultimately has less power than state departments of official states. The government structure is specified in the Puerto Rican constitution, which the territory has had since it became a Commonwealth in 1952.

⁹⁶ Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*, 386.

⁹⁷ Luis J. Valentin Ortiz, "Rosselló's First Executive Orders," *Caribbean Business*, January 2, 2017, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://caribbeanbusiness.com/rossellos-first-executive-orders/>.

⁹⁸ "Origins of the Department of State," Gobierno de Puerto Rico: Departamento de Estado, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.estado.pr.gov/en/origin-of-the-department-of-state/>.

⁹⁹ "Ramas Legislativas," Sobre Puerto Rico, Nuestro Gobierno, Portal Oficial del Gobierno de Puerto Rico, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.pr.gov/SobrePuertoRico/NuestroGobierno/Pages/Ramas-Legislativas.aspx>.

The status of Commonwealth means that the federal government has more influence on how the territory is governed than the government has in formal US states. The people of Puerto Rico are American citizens and the US laws apply to them. However, unlike other American citizens, they do not have a say in these laws because they do not have a voting member in Congress. As said before, this is the Resident Commissioner. The federal laws transcend the Puerto Rican Constitution: the Puerto Rican constitution can therefore be overruled by federal laws. Not only do the federal laws overrule Puerto Rican laws, the US president and Congress can also make decisions regarding the territory without approval from the Puerto Rican government.¹⁰⁰ The federal government is not involved in the daily operations of the Puerto Rican government, but Congress has made many influential decisions over the years.

One of those decisions was about the status of the territory: a Bill passed by the House of Representatives in 2010 but not passed by the Senate. *The Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2010* would not change the status of the territory, but it did give the Puerto Ricans the opportunity to vote for a different status in a referendum. These referenda should be held every eight years. The people can choose to become a US state or a sovereign nation with close political ties to the US. This Act, if it had passed, would give the Puerto Ricans more sovereignty about their status within the US.¹⁰¹

On November 6 2012, the Puerto Ricans held another referendum about the political future of the island. The first time Puerto Rico held a referendum on the issue of statehood was in 1967. Before this referendum, in September 2012, Resident Commissioner Pedro Pierluisi spoke for the House of Representatives about the importance of this referendum. In this speech he pointed out the historical relevance of this referendum. For the first time, the Puerto Ricans had the opportunity to choose yes or no on the ballot that asked whether or not they supported the current status of the territory. Pierluisi stated that this was also an issue of second-rate citizenship and hoped that the Puerto Ricans would send a clear message to Congress that they were ready for a change.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Monge, *Puerto Rico*, 162-63.

¹⁰¹ Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2010, H.R. 2499, 111th Cong. (2010).

111 Cong. Rec. H3029-H3059 (daily ed. April 29, 2010).

¹⁰² 112 Cong. Rec. H6156 (daily ed. September 20, 2012).

A week after the referendum, Pierluisi returned to the House to discuss the results. A slight majority stated that they did not want a change in the political status of Puerto Rico. The second question on the ballot was about an alternative to the current status. Many voted for statehood rather than independence or free association.¹⁰³ If the referendum showed that a majority wanted to change the status of the territory, the change would result in Puerto Rico becoming a state.

The statehood debate remained important in Puerto Rican politics. However, one issue became more important than the political status of the territory. The economic situation in the territory was at a low point in 2016 and Congress decided to take action. A new bill was introduced in May which created a financial oversight board. The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act or PROMESA was signed into law by the President at the end of June in 2016. The purpose of this oversight board is to help Puerto Rico become financially responsible and to help the territory to access the capital markets. With this oversight board, Puerto Rico lost some of the independence it gained when it became a Commonwealth.¹⁰⁴ In Puerto Rico, the opposition was strong. In 2016, new elections were held for the office of governor. Pedro Pierluisi, who supported PROMESA, lost the election against Ricardo Rosselló Nevares. Rosselló is a strong opponent of PROMESA. According to the *Washington Post*, this election showed the debate within Puerto Rico about how much the federal government should interfere in the territory's financial situation.¹⁰⁵ The people of Puerto Rico were clearly against more influence from the federal government.

Since 2016 and PROMESA, Puerto Rico saw more changes that had an impact on their government and the lives of the people. Rosselló became governor and president Obama left the oval office after two terms to make room for Donald J. Trump. In the first few months in office, President Trump did not discuss the issues in Puerto Rico personally. Only after Hurricane Irma did Trump give

¹⁰³ 112 Cong. Rec. H6346 (daily ed. November 14, 2012).

¹⁰⁴ Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act or PROMESA, H.R.5278, 114th Cong. (2016).

¹⁰⁵ Mike DeBonis, "House passes Puerto Rico fiscal rescue bill ahead of July cliff," *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2016, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/06/09/puerto-rico-fiscal-rescue-is-poised-to-pass-house-as-july-deadline-looms/>.

the US territory his attention. Congress had been discussing the issue of statehood for the territory with the Resident Commissioner and other parties that wanted to achieve statehood for Puerto Rico.

Until September 2017, the official statements by the president and his staff did not discuss Puerto Rico. After Hurricane Irma, early September, Trump and his administration offered federal aid to the areas hit by the hurricane, including the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. A day before Irma hit Puerto Rico, the Trump administration declared an emergency status for the territory. Trump ordered FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, to aid the local government during the aftermath of the Hurricane. This declaration was ordered a day before Irma made landfall on the island. In this declaration, Trump also stated that FEMA had full authority to act as they saw fit in response to the hurricane. The actions taken by FEMA to help Puerto Rico and its citizens were partly funded by the federal government.¹⁰⁶

Trump reiterated this statement in his phone call with Rosselló after Irma hit. He offered his support and said that FEMA would help coordinate emergency teams and other efforts to help Puerto Rico recover from the hurricane.¹⁰⁷ A new bill was also passed quickly by Congress to provide the emergency workers and other first responders with extra funding. This funding did bear the name of Hurricane Harvey which had hit the US a few weeks before Irma. In the official statement, released by the White House, the administration made it clear that the Hurricane Harvey Funding Bill, H.R. 601 was a great example of what Congress was able to do in times of need.¹⁰⁸

After the disaster of Hurricane Irma, Puerto Rico barely had time to catch its breath before Hurricane Maria was making its way towards the US territory. The response of both the Puerto Rican government and the federal government will be discussed in the next part based on media reports. That part will further discuss how these responses affected the debate about the status of the territory.

¹⁰⁶ “President Donald J. Trump Approves Puerto Rico Emergency Declaration,” Statements & Releases, The White House, issued September 5, 2017, accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-approves-puerto-rico-emergency-declaration/>.

¹⁰⁷ “Readout of President Donald J. Trump’s Call with Governor Ricardo Rosselló of Puerto Rico,” Statements & Releases, The White House, issued September 6, 2017, accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/readout-president-donald-j-trumps-call-governor-ricardo-rossello-puerto-rico/>.

¹⁰⁸ “Statement from the Press Secretary on President Donald J. Trump Signing H.R. 601,” Statements & Releases, The White House, issued September 8, 2017, accessed March 25, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-president-donald-j-trump-signing-h-r-601/>.

Politics after hurricane Maria

Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated Puerto Rico. To this day, Puerto Rico is still recovering from the two hurricanes. This progress has been difficult. Not only has the federal aid been temporary, but in the last two years, the territory has been suffering through more hurricanes, earthquakes and the Covid-19 pandemic. This means that the territory has still not fully recovered. This did also not help the relation between Puerto Rico and the US mainland. In the last two years, the debate has moved from recovering from the hurricane to the status of the territory. This change can also be seen in the media's reporting on Puerto Rico.

Trump visited Puerto Rico two weeks after the hurricane. However, this was met with severe criticism from the Puerto Ricans. A year after the events of September 2017, Governor Rosselló stated that the people of Puerto Rico did not agree with Trump and his actions following the hurricane. Rosselló said in his declaration that the territory deserved for the President to recognize the tragedy in Puerto Rico. People felt neglected and relegated to second class status after official states, something that can be seen throughout Puerto Rico's history. The governor specifically targeted the President for this recognition. He hoped "that the federal government will work alongside us on our path to recovery. It is time to reconstruct a new Puerto Rico; it's what our people deserve and what Americans want."¹⁰⁹

A year after the hurricane, an official report by the George Washington University put the death toll on the island as a result of Maria at almost 3000. The official death toll was also a point of critique in the media, because the newspapers believed that the death toll was much higher than the government said. President Trump saw this figure differently than the newspapers. He stated on twitter that he did not believe this number. When he visited the island, there were no more than eighteen deaths and the number could not be as high now, according to Trump.¹¹⁰ Up until that point,

¹⁰⁹ "Authorized statement of the governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló:" La Fortaleza, issued September 13, 2018, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/authorized-statement-governor-puerto-rico-ricardo-rossell-5>.

¹¹⁰ John Wagner, Joel Achenback, "Trump is rebuked after questioning number of deaths attributed to Hurricane Maria," *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2018, accessed April 1, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-questions-number-of-deaths-attributed-to-hurricane-maria-falsely-says-democrats-created-a-higher-count-to-make-him-look-bad/2018/09/13/9519308a-b73b-11e8-a7b5-adaaa5b2a57f_story.html.

Governor Rosselló avoided conflict with Trump: he needed the federal aid to rebuild the island. However, when Trump tweeted his doubt about the official number of deaths because of Hurricane Maria, the governor had to step in. According to Rosselló, the people deserved a true account of what happened and what impact the hurricane had, and still has, on the territory. According to him, the people cannot recover when everything about the hurricane is questioned by the commander-in-chief of the US.¹¹¹ This again shows the issue of racism, the president is doubting the reports from Puerto Rico without any basis as to why he doubts them.

Up until that point, the Puerto Rican governor was grateful for all that the federal government had done to help the territory. Rosselló praised the federal government in many speeches and official statements following the hurricane and made no critical remarks about their service. The newspapers discussed in the previous chapter were critical of the federal response, unlike the governor. In October 2017, Trump approved Puerto Rico's request for extra funding through the Community program Disaster Loan. The governor was appreciative of the extra funding and stated that he hoped to receive more federal funds.¹¹² This positive tone changed after the previously mentioned tweet of President Trump. A year and a half later, Puerto Rico received information that the federal administration believed that Puerto Rico would not need further funding to recover from Maria. Rosselló did not agree with this assessment and turned to the president publicly.

The Puerto Rican governor pointed out in a statement on January 17, 2019 that the territory had always followed the requirements that were expected of them to receive the federal funds. The unequal treatment of Puerto Rico is also a reoccurring theme in the newspapers. *The New York Times* in particular has compared the federal response in Puerto Rico with the response in the official states

¹¹¹ "Authorized statement of the governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló:," La Fortaleza, issued September 13, 2018, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/authorized-statement-governor-puerto-rico-ricardo-rossell-5>.

¹¹² "Gobernador Rosselló Nevares anuncia solicitud de \$4,900 millones al Congreso para garantizar liquidez del Gobierno de Puerto Rico," La Fortaleza, issued October 11, 2017, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernador-rossell-nevares-anuncia-solicitud-de-4900-millones-al-congreso-para-garantizar>.

of the US. According to the article, Trump declared a state of emergency in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico equally as quick, but visited Puerto Rico later than the other two states.¹¹³

The governor accused the administration of adding requirements that did not apply to any other jurisdictions in the US, which shows the unequal treatment of Puerto Rico. The racism debate can be seen here as well. The US government had given Puerto Rico additional requirements for receiving funds in order to rebuild the island. Other jurisdictions in the US have not had these requirements when they received funds from the federal government. This shows, according to Rosselló, the lack of knowledge about the unequal treatment of Puerto Rico in the reports written on how the federal funds were used. Colonialism and racism also play a role here. The critique the governor has on the federal government is a similar argument that can be made in the racism discussion on this topic.

Rosselló said that he is “making a public request to you, Mr. President, to meet together so that we can correct the incorrect information that your advisers are providing you and the puzzling notions you are receiving about Puerto Rico.”¹¹⁴ This was not the first time, however, that the Governor asked the president to recognize the magnitude of the hurricane and the problems that arose afterwards.¹¹⁵ Governor Rosselló also asked for an equal treatment from the federal government.¹¹⁶ In the years after Hurricane Maria, much has changed in Puerto Rico. The island is still recovering from the hurricane, but there were also political changes. These changes were not only on a local level, but also on a federal level. The attention of the federal government, similarly to that of the media, shifted more to the status of Puerto Rico and less on the response of the government after Hurricane Maria.

Criticism was not only given on the federal government. As the media shows, the Puerto Rican people also directed their anger at its own officials. In 2019, protests broke out across the territory.

¹¹³ Ron Nixon and Matt Stevens, “Harvey, Irma, Maria: Trump Administration’s Response Compared,” *The New York Times*, September 27, 2017, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/2017/09/27/us/politics/trump-puerto-rico-aid.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹¹⁴ “Declaraciones autorizadas del gobernador de Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló Nevares;,” *La Fortaleza*, issued January 17, 2019, accessed April 4, 2020, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/declaraciones-autorizadas-del-gobernador-de-puerto-rico-ricardo-rossell-nevares-14>.

¹¹⁵ “Authorized statement of the governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló;” *La Fortaleza*, issued September 13, 2018, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/authorized-statement-governor-puerto-rico-ricardo-rossell-5>.

¹¹⁶ “Gobernador de Puerto Rico advierte ciudadanos americanos residentes en la Isla necesitan trato igualitario en el Congreso;” *La Fortaleza*, issued November 13, 2017, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernador-de-puerto-rico-advierte-ciudadanos-americanos-residentes-en-la-isla-necesitan>.

These protests ended with the resignation of Governor Rosselló and Wanda Vázquez taking office. Governor Rosselló resigned from the office of Governor because of the release of several offensive text messages that he had sent. These messages mocked political colleagues, and contained profanity according to *The New York Times*. Rosselló and members of his cabinet mocked other politicians and Puerto Rican celebrities.¹¹⁷ The people in Puerto Rico were further demonstrating because of their frustration over corruption in the government, the economic decline of the territory and the slow response during Hurricane Maria. The people needed a governor who stood up for them when they felt like the federal government treated them as second-class citizens.¹¹⁸ As *Claridad* explained, the protests erupted when the text conversations of Rosselló with officials of his Cabinet and friends became public: it was the final straw for many people who were tired of the government's corruption.¹¹⁹ When Rosselló resigned, many hoped for a more transparent government and a better understanding of where the federal funds would go.

In the weeks immediately after the hurricane, *The New York Times* was focussed on the federal aid and other relief efforts in Puerto Rico, as can be seen in the previous chapter. However, once life slowly got back to normal, the newspaper also started publishing opinion pieces or articles in which the focus was on the status of Puerto Rico. Two years after the hurricane, the island was once again in chaos, but this time it was not due to a natural disaster, when governor Rosselló stepped down and former secretary of justice, Wanda Vázquez, took the oath as governor.¹²⁰ The newspaper went into detail about “la revolución de verano,” the summer revolution.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Patricia Mazzei, “Puerto Rico Leadership in Turmoil Amid Calls for Ricardo Rosselló to Resign,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2019, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/14/us/puerto-rico-rossello.html?module=inline>.

¹¹⁸ Frances Robles, “Protests Are Still Erupting in Puerto Rico. This Time, It’s Over Wanda Vázquez as Governor,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2019, accessed January 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/2019/07/29/us/puerto-rico-march-vazquez-rossello.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

¹¹⁹ Amalia Alsina, “Suplemento Especial: La lucha de la mujer: De Lares al Verano de 2019,” *Claridad*, September 18, 2019, accessed January 2021, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/suplemento-especial-la-lucha-de-la-mujer-de-lares-al-verano-de-2019/>.

¹²⁰ Simon Romero, Frances Robles, Patricia Mazzei and Jose A Del Real, “15 Days of Fury: How Puerto Rico’s Government Collapsed,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2019, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2019/07/27/us/puerto-rico-protests-timeline.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹²¹ Alejandra Rosa, Patricia Mazzei and Frances Robles, “Puerto Rico Supreme Court Ousts New Governor, and Another Is Sworn In,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 2019, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2019/08/07/us/puerto-rico-governor-wanda-vazquez.html>.

Unlike *The New York Times*, when the Puerto Rican government stepped down in the summer of 2019, *USA Today*'s reporting on this event was very limited. *USA Today* did make the connection between the protests and the hurricane of 2017. The paper stated that the governor received criticism "for mismanaging the crisis, particularly for understating storm deaths" but that he remained in office. According to the newspaper, the people were furious about the debt and the financial struggles as well as the failure to rebuild after Hurricane Maria.¹²²

The New York Times made the same connection between this political unrest and Hurricane Maria.¹²³ Even on the first day of the protests, in July 2019, the newspaper stated that everything is connected, the failed relief efforts, the corruption and failure of the Puerto Rican government. In this article, the authors stated that the Puerto Ricans "see this crisis as an opportunity to rethink the difficult status quo."¹²⁴ The people were tired of Congress pushing strict economic measures on the island to manage the financial crisis after Hurricane Maria. This supported the debate that had started on the status of the territory. According to the article, the people in the territory were not supporting either party ruling Puerto Rico, so they were not sure which direction the government would take in the discussion about the status of Puerto Rico. The Democratic Governor, Ricardo Rosselló, who stepped down, was in favor of statehood as is his party, the New Progressive Party. The other party, the Popular Democratic Party, favors an enhanced form of the current status as Commonwealth.¹²⁵

In the elections of November 3, 2020, when the US voted for the next president, the people of Puerto Rico had another ballot. They were asked about the status of the territory and could vote for a new governor. The Puerto Ricans voted for Pedro Pierluisi as their new governor. Pierluisi is a

¹²² Susan Miller, "The people of Puerto Rico are angry: Here is what's fueling a major protest planned for Monday," *USA Today*, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/07/21/puerto-rico-protest-monday-what-you-should-know/1790087001/>.

Adrianna Rodriguez, "Puerto Rico governor, protests, history of the black flag: Everything you need to know," *USA Today*, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/07/24/puerto-rico-gov-ricardo-rossello-7-biggest-questions-about-protests/1812715001/>.

¹²³ Patricia Mazzei and Alejandra Rosa, "Hurricane Maria, 2 Years Later: 'We Want Another Puerto Rico'," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2019, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2019/09/20/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹²⁴ Frances Robles and Alejandra Rosa, "'The People Can't Take It Anymore': Puerto Rico Erupts in a Day of Protests," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2019, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2019/07/22/us/puerto-rico-protests-politics.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹²⁵ Robles and Rosa, "'The People Can't Take It Anymore': Puerto Rico Erupts in a Day of Protests," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2019.

member of the New Progressive Party, which is in favor of statehood. At the same election, the voters were asked: "Should Puerto Rico be admitted immediately into the union as a state?" Over 52 percent of the people are in favor of statehood for Puerto Rico. However, before the territory can become a state, Congress has to approve any changes in the political status of Puerto Rico. The author of this article states that the new governor had a lot of work ahead with the federal government.¹²⁶ *The New York Times* journalist believes that the Puerto Rican status will change.¹²⁷

With this outcome, the Puerto Ricans expressed their desire to become a state and not an independent country. According to Ramón Grosfoguel, one must place the rejection of political independence of the Puerto Ricans in the context of "a modern capitalist world system that maintains a racial and ethnic hierarchy of Western versus non-Western people."¹²⁸ The people in Puerto Rico fear that they would only become pseudo-independent and would still be dependent on the US, as can be seen with other countries in the Caribbean.¹²⁹ The people fear that they would still be seen as a colony, a debate that can also be seen in the academic literature on colonialism and racism. Grosfoguel further says that racism also plays a role in decolonization and argues that Puerto Ricans moving to the mainland of the US often experience racism as well.¹³⁰ Monge in his book also states that if the status of Puerto Rico would change, it can be said that Puerto Rico is decolonized. Monge also questions whether Puerto Rico would become completely independent from the US when they become a sovereign country and discusses four ways in which Puerto Rico can be decolonized.¹³¹ Not only does Monge state that Puerto Rico needs to find a way to change their status, the US also needs to look at themselves and their interests in the territory.¹³²

¹²⁶ Dánica Coto, "Puerto Ricans voted on statehood and for a new governor on Tuesday. Like the US, they're anxiously awaiting final results," *USA Today*, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/11/04/puerto-rico-awaits-final-election-results-governor-statehood-vote/6159554002/>.

¹²⁷ Christina D. Ponsa-Kraus, "Make Puerto Rico a State Now," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/2020/11/04/opinion/puerto-rico-state.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹²⁸ Isar P. Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness. Global Studies of the United States* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 21.

¹²⁹ Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 8-9.

¹³⁰ Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects*, 2.

¹³¹ Monge, *Puerto Rico*, 178.

¹³² *Ibidem*, 181.

Unlike *The New York Times*, there was no discussion about what would change when a new governor would take Governor Rosselló's place in *USA Today*. There were no articles about the status of Puerto Rico until November 2020, when the elections were held. When it came to the status of Puerto Rico, *The New York Post* did not say much on this ongoing debate in the territory, especially after September 2017. *USA Today* also barely spent any time on this topic. Immediately after the hurricane, the focus was on the relief efforts by the federal government and the criticism of President Trump and his administration.

When discussing the option of Puerto Rico as a state, *The New York Post* stated that the Democrats wanted to add two extra states, Puerto Rico and Washington DC, to the US so that they can have a majority in the Senate after the 2020 elections. *The Post* called it an "awful idea."¹³³ Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, a Democrat, said that it is a possibility that the US is adding a 51st and 52nd state to the Union.¹³⁴

There is a lot of Republican opposition in making Puerto Rico an official US state. If the territory were to become a state, it would bring seven extra votes into the Electoral College, as well as two senators in the Senate. These votes are likely to go to the Democrats which will shift the balance in the Senate. For this reason many Republicans are against allowing Puerto Rico to become a state.¹³⁵

The issue of statehood remains very controversial in federal politics. The statehood debate of Puerto Rico has also become a debate about the functionality of the Electoral College and how democratic this structure is. As has been said before, Republicans fear that now the Democrats have a slight majority in Congress, they will make Puerto Rico a state. This would mean that Puerto Rico would receive two seats in the Senate. Republicans fear that these two Senate seats would become Democratic. Former Arizona Republican Senator Martha McSally told NBC News in August 2020

¹³³ Michael Barone, "Democrats latest awful idea: adding new states to lock in Senate control forever," *The New York Post*, September 18, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/09/18/democrats-want-to-add-new-states-to-lock-in-senate-control-forever/>.

¹³⁴ Mark Moore, "Schumer backs statehood for Puerto Rico, DC if Democrats win Senate majority," *The New York Post*, October 1, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/10/01/schumer-backs-statehood-for-puerto-rico-dc-if-dems-win-senate/>.

¹³⁵ Ryan Struyk, "Here's what would happen to US politics if Puerto Rico became a state," *CNN Politics*, October 14, 2017, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/14/politics/puerto-rico-state-congress-white-house/index.html>.

about her fear of Puerto Rico becoming a state. “They're going to make D.C. and Puerto Rico a state and get four new Democrat Senators” and “We'd never get the Senate back again.”¹³⁶ This way, the Senate would, according to Republican Senators, remain Democratic. However, according to *Politico*, this is not certain. The political parties in Puerto Rico are neither Democratic nor Republican and the elected officials can be a member of either one of the parties.¹³⁷

The issue of the Electoral College and which color Puerto Rico would become if it is an official state is not the only issue in the statehood debate. Within the Democratic Party, the elected officials have different ideas about Puerto Rican statehood. Representative Soto has re-introduced a House proposal to allow for Puerto Rico to become the 51st state in March 2021.¹³⁸ This bill led to a divide within the Democratic Party about this issue. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer was in favor of Puerto Rican statehood, but said that the slight majority in the referendum is not enough support to advance with the progress of statehood for Puerto Rico. Schumer does not support the bill by Soto. Soto accuses him of “trying to appease politics at home.”¹³⁹ This caused, according to the media, a division within the Democratic Party.

According to *USA Today*, Republicans see the Democrats’ advocacy of statehood for Puerto Rico as a political move. The newspaper quotes Republican Representative James Comer. The Republican from Kentucky calls it “a key part of the radical leftist agenda to reshape America.”¹⁴⁰ The newspaper quotes another Republican. Representative Virginia Foxx from North Carolina suggested in March that in this debate, Congress is used as a pawn by Democrats to “gain power.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Steve Benen, “Arizona's McSally makes an unfortunate case for a GOP-led Senate,” MSNBC, August 12, 2020, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/arizona-s-mcsally-makes-unfortunate-case-gop-led-senate-n1236498>.

¹³⁷ Olivia Reingold, “Is Puerto Rico the Next Senate Battleground?,” *Politico*, September 9, 2020, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/09/09/puerto-rico-statehood-politics-democrats-republicans-senate-409191>.

¹³⁸ José A. Delgado Robles, “New Puerto Rico statehood bill introduced in the House,” *El Nuevo Día*, March 3, 2021, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/news/story/new-puerto-rico-statehood-bill-introduced-in-the-house/>.

¹³⁹ Gary Fineout, “Democrats fracture over Puerto Rico statehood,” *Politico*, March 5, 2021, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/states/florida/story/2021/03/05/democrats-fracture-over-puerto-rico-statehood-1367099>.

¹⁴⁰ Courtney Cox, “Could DC, Puerto Rico, become the next US states? Here’s what Congress is considering,” *USA Today*, April 14, 2021, accessed August 5, 2021, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/04/14/what-know-bills-congress-washington-dc-puerto-rico-statehood/7211653002/>.

¹⁴¹ Ibidem

As stated in the previous chapter, *The New York Post* often supports President Trump and is critical of those who oppose him. However, what can be seen on the topic of Hurricane Maria and specifically the federal response in Puerto Rico, the newspaper was somewhat more critical of the Trump administration than expected of a newspaper that supported Trump. Still, *The New York Times* and the Puerto Rican newspapers were more critical.

Trump did not support statehood, and according to him, the people of Puerto Rico did not want to become a state.¹⁴² After the Puerto Ricans voted in favor of statehood, Democratic congresswoman Stephanie Murphy from Florida stated that “now that the people of Puerto Rico have spoken, the federal government must listen. Whether it's the White House or Congress, Democratic or Republican, we must respect and respond to this result. To do otherwise would be immoral and undemocratic.”¹⁴³

According to the *El Nuevo Día* journalists, it is also important to educate the people of Puerto Rico on how their status can change for the better and inform them that Congress is bound by legislation to listen to the people. “Puerto Rico must decide for itself” and its self-determination also requires a binding status process for Congress, according to Maruxa Cárdenas, an author who wrote on the protests of 2019 when the Governor had to resign.¹⁴⁴

Governor Vázquez came into office and has since then signed several laws in order to prevent another disastrous response to a natural disaster like Hurricane Maria. First, she ordered a status update of the repairs throughout Puerto Rico and how much of the assigned federal funds went into these repairs. She feels “great satisfaction” over the work that has been done, but also acknowledges that there is still a lot to do and that “the Government is committed to meeting the needs of the

¹⁴² José A. Delgado, “Donald Trump rejects statehood for Puerto Rico,” *El Nuevo Día*, October 3, 2020, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/news/story/donald-trump-rejects-statehood-for-puerto-rico/>.

¹⁴³ “Congresista Murphy dice que el Congreso debe responder al voto del 52% en favor de la estadidad,” *El Nuevo Día*, November 18, 2020, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/corresponsalias/washington-dc/notas/congresista-murphy-dice-que-el-congreso-debe-responder-al-voto-del-52-en-favor-de-la-estadidad/>.

Benjamín Torres Gotay, “Gana la estadidad en el plebiscito,” *El Nuevo Día*, November 4, 2020, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/politica/notas/gana-la-estadidad-en-el-plebiscito/>.

¹⁴⁴ José A. Delgado, “Defienden el proceso descolonización que proponen Nydia Velázquez y Alexandria Ocasio,” *El Nuevo Día*, October 31, 2020, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/corresponsalias/washington-dc/notas/activistas-de-la-diaspora-participan-en-foro-sobre-el-proyecto-de-status-de-nydia-velazquez-y-alexandria-ocasio/>.

municipalities and providing guidance during the island's recovery and reconstruction process.”¹⁴⁵

With the same goal in mind, Governor Vázquez also signed Senate Bill 923. This Bill defines what public order agents are and what their tasks are during a state of emergency. This law also allows the Governor to request assistance from the federal government and establish a Corps of Peace Officers. This law can also result in “greater resources of personnel, vehicles, and equipment to safeguard public safety in emergency situations.”¹⁴⁶

Criticism of the Puerto Rican government in the aftermath of the natural disasters by the newspapers and the people brought changes. Government critics claimed that the government was corrupt and that the citizens of the territory were not sure where all the funds to restore the island would go. In order to create transparency, Governor Vázquez, signed a House Bill that was passed “for the purpose of establishing the responsibility of government agencies to notify and substantiate amendments to purchase orders and contracts that increase the value of the purchase already awarded.” This would create more transparency about where the federal funds were used and about the purpose for which they were intended.¹⁴⁷

The media did spend most of its attention to the status of Puerto Rico in the years following the hurricane. However, the recovery and rebuilding efforts remained important. The media reported that hospitals in Puerto Rico were not equipped for a health crisis like the one that followed Hurricane Maria. Especially *Claridad* was harsh in its description of the government’s response in helping hospitals. In order to prevent this from happening again, Governor Vázquez ordered hospitals to submit a contingency plan every year in May. This way, organizations that work closely with hospitals in times of disaster are able to coordinate their aid better. The contingency plan would

¹⁴⁵ “Gobernadora Wanda Vázquez Garced solicita estatus de los proyectos de reparación y construcción por daños provocados por el huracán María por parte de los municipios,” La Fortaleza, issued October 21, 2020, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernadora-wanda-v-zquez-garced-solicita-estatus-de-los-proyectos-de-reparaci-n-y>.

¹⁴⁶ “Gobernadora Wanda Vázquez Garced firma proyecto de ley para que Puerto Rico esté mejor preparado para una respuesta de emergencia,” La Fortaleza, issued October 30, 2020, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernadora-wanda-v-zquez-garced-firma-proyecto-de-ley-para-que-puerto-rico-est-mejor>.

¹⁴⁷ “Gobernadora Wanda Vázquez Garced firma ley para fomentar transparencia en procesos de compras del gobierno,” La Fortaleza, issued November 19, 2020, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernadora-wanda-v-zquez-garced-firma-ley-para-fomentar-transparencia-en-procesos-de>.

explain how the hospitals would prepare for another scenario like the one following hurricane Maria and how they would provide aid to everyone in need.¹⁴⁸

Similarly to the Puerto Rican government, Hurricane Maria kept the federal government busy for months afterwards. FEMA sent over 3000 federal employees to the island and hired 1500 local people from Puerto Rico to assist in the relief efforts. Months after the hurricane, in February 2018, FEMA reported that more than \$1.6 billion in food and more than \$361 million in water had been provided to survivors. Emergency operations were no longer necessary and most grocery stores were open and accessible. Despite this progress, FEMA also stated that they would continue to work on the island.¹⁴⁹ They were now more focussed on long-term recovery, rather than temporary measures to provide the people with food and shelter.¹⁵⁰

Like the newspapers, Congress did not focus much on the recovery of Puerto Rico after the initial months. Congress accepted resolutions that marked the six-month and the one-year anniversary of the hurricane. In the six-month resolution, the Senate still said that Puerto Rico remained in a state of emergency. The declaration stated that the Senate would support all those who lived in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands, or had left these territories for the mainland.¹⁵¹ This resolution, however, did not say what shape the support would assume, or mention specific plans to help rebuilding the affected territories. The resolution that the Senate accepted on the one year anniversary of Hurricane Maria was not much different than the one accepted six months before. It honored the victims and thanked the first responders. The resolution once again expressed the support and commitment of Congress for the recovery of Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands.¹⁵² The fact that Congress focused little on the relief efforts and the debate moved towards the status of Puerto Rico.

¹⁴⁸ “Gobernadora Wanda Vázquez Garced firma proyecto de ley para que hospitales sometan informes sobre sus planes de contingencia para la temporada de huracanes,” La Fortaleza, issued December 24, 2020, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernadora-wanda-v-zquez-garced-firma-proyecto-de-ley-para-que-hospitales-sometan-informes>.

¹⁴⁹ “FEMA Statement on Commodities in Puerto Rico,” FEMA, February 1, 2018, accessed April 5, 2020, <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2018/02/01/fema-statement-commodities-puerto-rico>.

¹⁵⁰ “Puerto Rico Hurricane Maria (DR-4339-PR),” FEMA, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4339>.

¹⁵¹ A resolution marking the 6-month anniversary of the devastation of Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands by Hurricane Maria, S.Res.445, 115th Cong. (2018).

¹⁵² A resolution marking 1 year since the landfall of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands, S.Res.651, 115th Cong. (2018).

As stated before and as the media had reported, President Trump did not believe the report of George Washington University about the death rates in Puerto Rico. In the same week as the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Maria, Trump and his administration called the recovery of Puerto Rico, and especially the role that the federal government played in it, a success.¹⁵³ Many people, both in Puerto Rico and in the federal government as well as the media, did not agree with the president's assessments. The president's remarks were made around the time the report came out which said that over 3000 people had died: the President calling the federal response a success did not go over well with many people. Of course, many Puerto Ricans did not agree with the president's assessment, but also in Congress many representatives and senators also protested the President's statement.¹⁵⁴

It was not until two years after Hurricane Maria that Congress was taking federal action. It did so not only to prevent other disasters like the one in 2017, but to also allow Puerto Rico to vote for a change in its political status. In the media, the criticisms of the Trump administration's response was hard and many in Congress wanted to prevent another disaster like Hurricane Maria. Several bills were introduced in Congress to improve the situation in Puerto Rico.

In March 2019 the National Commission on the Federal Response to Natural Disasters in Puerto Rico Act of 2019 was introduced in the Senate. This Bill would establish a committee that would research the federal preparedness in 2017 and the federal response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The goal of this Act was learn from the mistakes that were made in Puerto Rico in response to the hurricanes in 2017. The Commission would not only report on the response by federal organizations, it would also be looking into how prepared the territory was for disasters, how strong the economy was in such events and how reliant Puerto Rico was on imported goods and telecommunication and how this could change.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Noah Bierman and Paloma Esquivel, "Trump falsely says Puerto Rico's official hurricane death tally is inflated by Democrats," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 2018, accessed April 5, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-puerto-rico-20180913-story.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Lauren Gambino, "Donald Trump attacked for calling Hurricane Maria response an 'incredible success'," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2018, accessed April 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/sep/11/trump-hurricane-maria-puerto-rico-success>.

¹⁵⁵ National Commission on the Federal Response to Natural Disasters in Puerto Rico Act of 2019, H.R. 229, 116th Cong. (2019).

The proposal of the bill explained what the Commission's tasks would include, how the Commission would be formed and how the members would be appointed. The Commission would look into the federal response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria, as well as the preparedness of the federal government for the hurricane season in 2017. The Commission would further look into how the federal government acted after Hurricane Maria. This included researching how the government obtained the official death toll but also how the government helped rebuild the territory. In order to get a complete image of the federal response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria, the Commission would also look at the scope of the destruction left behind by the two hurricanes.¹⁵⁶ Unfortunately, as of March 2021, this Bill has not been enacted into law. It was sent to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

As we have seen, in the elections of November 3, 2020, the Puerto Ricans could not only vote for their next governor, but could also vote for a change in status of the territory.¹⁵⁷ For the first time, this referendum would ask a simple yes or no question, but the referendum was once again a non-binding referendum. The governor announced the referendum in May, 2020. Her political party, the New Progressive Party, favors statehood. The referendum was organized because the New Progressive Party was confident that statehood would receive the majority votes. According to *ABC News*, the party believed that because of the unequal treatment of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, many people would vote in favor of statehood.¹⁵⁸ Days before the elections, Governor Vázquez stated that as soon as the election result was that the majority of the Puerto Ricans voted in favor of statehood, the government would be able to start the notification and transition process.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ National Commission on the Federal Response to Natural Disasters in Puerto Rico Act of 2019, S.23, 116th Cong. (2019).

¹⁵⁷ "Gobernadora Vázquez Garced firma la Ley para la Definición Final del Estatus Político de Puerto Rico para celebrar Plebiscito el 3 de noviembre," *La Fortaleza*, issued May 16, 2020, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernadora-v-zquez-garced-firma-la-ley-para-la-definici-n-final-del-estatus-pol-tico-de>.

¹⁵⁸ Dánica Coto, "Puerto Rico to hold statehood referendum amid disillusion," *ABC News*, May 16 2020, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/puerto-rico-hold-statehood-referendum-amid-disillusion-70723188>.

¹⁵⁹ "Gobernadora Wanda Vázquez Garced está lista para iniciar proceso de transición al prevalecer la estadidad en el plebiscito," *La Fortaleza*, issued November 1, 2020, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernadora-wanda-v-zquez-garced-est-lista-para-iniciar-proceso-de-transici-n-al-prevalecer>.

The federal government was not only trying to learn from the mistakes that were made in the response to Hurricane Maria, but also to make it possible for Puerto Rico to change its political status. More politicians were speaking out on the status of the territory and the unfair treatment of the US towards the island. In March 2019, The Puerto Rico Admission Act was introduced by Democratic Representative Darren Soto. Representative Soto is Florida's first Congressman of Puerto Rican descent. The Admission Act explains the process that would take place if Puerto Rico wanted to become a US state. Ninety days after the enactment of this Bill, the president would have to issue a proclamation in which he states that Puerto Rico is "admitted into the Union on equal footing with other states."¹⁶⁰ Another Bill, introduced by Democratic Representative Jose E. Serrano, stated that the territory is required to hold a referendum to ask the citizens what they would prefer for their political status, whether or not they wanted to become a state. However, this Bill also will hold Congress accountable for declaring Puerto Rico a state if the result of the referendum is a majority vote for statehood.¹⁶¹

In 2019 and 2020, more and more politicians in Congress spoke in favor of a change in political status for Puerto Rico and tried to make people more aware that Puerto Ricans are American citizens. In January 2020, Puerto Rico was hit by an earthquake and Congressman Soto addressed the House asking the Trump administration to bring more money that was promised to the island. Only half of the allocated funds made it to the island.¹⁶² This statement was followed a month later by Democrat Charlie Crist, also from Florida, who said: "Now it is time for the Senate to act for our Puerto Rican brothers and sisters."¹⁶³ Acknowledging that Puerto Ricans were American citizens, a fact sometimes overlooked.

After the elections of November 2020, Congresswomen Stephanie Murphy, a Democrat from Florida, stated that "now that the people of Puerto Rico have spoken, the Federal Government must

¹⁶⁰ To state the need for action on statehood for Puerto Rico if the status wins a majority of the vote on the question in the territory's plebiscite on November 3, H. Res. 1113, 116th Cong. (2020).

Puerto Rico Admission Act, H.R. 1965, 116th Cong. (2019).

¹⁶¹ Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act, H.R. 4901, 116th Cong. (2019).

Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2020, H.R. 8113, 166th Cong. (2020).

¹⁶² 116 Cong. Rec. H316 (daily ed. January 16, 2020) (statement of Mr. Soto).

¹⁶³ 116 Cong. Rec. H1001 (daily ed. February 10, 2020) (statement of Mr. Crist).

listen. Whether it is the White House or Congress, whether it is Democrats or Republicans, we must respect and respond to this result.”¹⁶⁴

Many members of Congress started discussing the status of Puerto Rico after attention from the media shifted to the status as well as the unequal treatment of the territory. The media also picked up on the fact that more politicians were interested in Puerto Rico. Unlike Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, these representatives did not have a close connection to Puerto Rico. Ocasio-Cortez has family members who are from the territory. The reason that many Florida politicians spoke out for Puerto Rico is that many Puerto Ricans who leave the territory move to Florida. After Hurricane Maria, many Puerto Ricans fled to the state of Florida. Before the hurricane, there was already a large number of Puerto Ricans living in Florida, but the number increased immensely after Maria.¹⁶⁵ When the Puerto Ricans moved, or fled, to Florida, there were several organizations that helped these people acclimate and settle into their new lives. CBS News also discussed the many Puerto Ricans living in Florida and their role in the upcoming elections. Wanda Ramos, a member of a group that helped the people of Puerto Rico settle in Florida, said that many of these people “were coming here with just a bag, a backpack and a few things. There were people that came here with medical conditions.”¹⁶⁶ These people now have settled into the community and these communities were organizing the people to vote in the presidential elections in November 2020. The fact that many Puerto Ricans now live in Florida means that many more can now vote in the presidential elections and many organizations are working hard to make people aware of this right. ¹⁶⁷

The state of Florida now is home to over one million Puerto Ricans. Whereas, before Hurricane Maria, the Puerto Ricans who left the island were more spread out over the nation. In the post-Hurricane Maria migration, Florida is the preferred and likely destination for Puerto Ricans. The

¹⁶⁴ 116 Cong. Rec. H5800 (daily ed. November 16, 2020) (statement of Mrs. Murphy).

¹⁶⁵ Suzanne Gamboa and Carmen Sesin, “Puerto Rican voters, battered by crisis, could be pivotal for Biden in Florida,” *NBC News*, September 15, 2020, accessed January 16, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/puerto-rican-voters-battered-crisis-could-be-pivotal-biden-florida-n1240145>.

¹⁶⁶ Larcai Mitchell, ““He wanted to sell Puerto Rico”: Puerto Ricans in Florida work to defeat Trump,” *CBS News*, October 6, 2020, accessed January 16, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/puerto-ricans-florida-trump/>.

¹⁶⁷ Mitchell, ““He wanted to sell Puerto Rico,” *CBS News*, October 6, 2020.

University of Central Florida has created a Puerto Rican research hub to study the migration from the island to Florida. The research hub will research the Puerto Rican community in order to better inform public policy makers to what this community needs.¹⁶⁸

El Nuevo Día reported on the status of Puerto Rico and the debate around the status of the territory, especially in the last year. Democratic Representatives Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Nydia Velázquez, both from Puerto Rico, were also opening up the discussion about the status of Puerto Rico. The newspaper reported on the new bill that the two Congresswomen have proposed in Congress to actively work on changing the status of Puerto Rico where “the most important thing is the integrity of the process.”¹⁶⁹ The newly elected Vice President Kamala Harris also wants to change the status of the island and to improve the situation in which many Puerto Ricans are now living.¹⁷⁰ This situation involves not only poverty, but also the unequal treatment of the people of Puerto Rico by the federal government that needs to be changed.

The Resident Commissioner for Puerto Rico, Jenniffer Aydin González Colón, made a similar statement in the House of Representatives, days after Representative Murphy spoke to the House. According to González Colón, the fact that the Puerto Ricans have voted in favor of statehood can no longer be ignored and “it is Congress' responsibility to act and do it.” She further stated that “It is time to get to work to give the people of Puerto Rico the equality that has been long promised but denied... This is the time. Let's do it. Respect the will of the people of Puerto Rico to become a State, and let's do it now.”¹⁷¹

There is, however, also a movement that is against the statehood movement, especially on the mainland. According to the media, the argument of this movement states that the territory should be able to decide for itself, without the US telling them what to do. The movement sees the “white

¹⁶⁸ “About,” University of Central Florida, Puerto Rico Research Hub, accessed January 17, 2021, <https://sciences.ucf.edu/puerto-rico-hub/>.

¹⁶⁹ José A. Delgado, “Alexandria Ocasio Cortez afirma que para avanzar un debate de status se requiere un acuerdo procesal en Puerto Rico,” *El Nuevo Día*, October, 2020, accessed 10 December 10, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/corresponsalias/washington-dc/notas/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-afirma-que-para-avanzar-un-debate-de-status-se-requiere-un-acuerdo-procesal-en-puerto-rico/>.

¹⁷⁰ Luis Alberto Ferré Rangel, “Kamala Harris on the status of Puerto Rico: “I believe we cannot wait”,” *El Nuevo Día*, October 29, 2020, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/news/story/kamala-harris-on-the-status-of-puerto-rico-i-believe-we-cannot-wait/>.

¹⁷¹ 116 Cong. Rec. H5936-H5937 (daily ed. November 19, 2020) (statement of Miss González Colón).

liberals' newfound desire to grant Puerto Rico statehood" as a new form of American colonialism.¹⁷² Those in Congress who want Puerto Rican statehood see it as beneficial for themselves, according to this movement. The politicians present the option of statehood as helping Puerto Rico after hurricane Maria, but they are using the territory as a "political paw."¹⁷³

El Nuevo Día has published several articles on the topic of statehood after the majority of the Puerto Ricans voted in favor of the status. Several opinion articles also argue that statehood is a new form of colonialism. The discussion about whether or not Puerto Rico is a colony, which can be seen in the academic debate, also makes it into the statehood debate and is picked up by the media.

In April 2021, two bills were introduced in the House of Representatives. The newspaper published the testimony of María de Lourdes Santiago, Vice-president and Senator for the Puerto Rican Independence Party, when she spoke to the House. In this statement, Santiago said "the possibility of statehood is a pipe dream concocted by a toxic combination of colonialism induced dependency and insecurity in Puerto Rico."¹⁷⁴ She stated that politicians who argue for Puerto Rican statehood believe that to not support statehood would mean that the Puerto Ricans are "non-deserving" of statehood.¹⁷⁵ The issue of racism is therefore an important point in the statehood debate.

Scholars like José Trías Monge and Pedro A. Malavet argue that Puerto Rico is still a colony. The idea of American imperialism and the idea of the "other" play a role in the treatment of Puerto Rico. US racism can be seen in the exploitation of Puerto Rico throughout its history with the US as well as the economic status and treatment of the Puerto Ricans as second class citizens.¹⁷⁶ In the statehood debate, the issues of unequal treatment and the economic situation of the territory play a role. Santiago argued that the colonialism of the US over Puerto Rico created a dependency and the

¹⁷² Julio Ricardo Varela, "White liberals must stop pushing Puerto Rican statehood for their own benefit. Let us decide," *NBC News*, November 11, 2020, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/white-liberals-must-stop-pushing-puerto-rican-statehood-their-own-ncna1247419>.

¹⁷³ Varela, "White liberals must stop pushing Puerto Rican statehood," *NBC News*, November 11, 2020, accessed March 7, 2021.

¹⁷⁴ María de Lourdes Santiago, "Congress has to put an end to colonialism in Puerto Rico," *El Nuevo Día*, April 20, 2021, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/opinion/punto-de-vista/puerto-rican-independence-party-testimony-before-the-committee-on-natural-resources-hearing-on-hr-1522-and-hr-2070/>.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁶ Malavet, *America's Colony*, 3-5.

territory can therefore never become fully independent and statehood would not improve the situation. Here, the academic debate on colonialism is interwoven with the statehood debate.

In an interview with *Truthout*, which is also published in *Claridad*, José López Rivera, professor of history and leader of the Puerto Rican diaspora in Chicago, makes the argument that the majority of people voted in favor of statehood because they want equality. According to Rivera, there was “an island-wide offensive in favor of statehood as a symbol of equality, civil rights, and the notion that if Puerto Rico were a state, then Puerto Ricans would achieve parity of funding for health, education, and welfare.”¹⁷⁷ Rivera also points out the US’ exploitation of the territory. The US used Puerto Rico for military experiments and women in the territory were used for the development of the birth control pill. According to Rivera, the sentiment in the territory for total independence from the US comes from this exploitation and the US treating Puerto Ricans as second-class citizens.¹⁷⁸ Ed Morales also makes a similar argument. He states that colonialism has been disastrous for Puerto Rico. The solution, according to Morales, is either statehood or independence for the territory.¹⁷⁹ Both in the media and in the academic debate on Puerto Rico and its status does racism play an important role.

When asked about President Biden’s stance on the issue of statehood, press secretary Jen Psaki said that the “President supports a referendum in Puerto Rico for the people of Puerto Rico deciding the path forward.”¹⁸⁰ The governor, Pedro Pierluisi asked for clarity and wants a yes or no answer

¹⁷⁷ Margaret Power, “Independence Is the Progressive Solution to US Colonialism in Puerto Rico,” *Truthout*, January 23, 2021, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://truthout.org/articles/independence-is-the-progressive-solution-to-us-colonialism-in-puerto-rico/>.

Redaccion de Claridad, “La independencia es la solución progresista al colonialismo de Estados Unidos en Puerto Rico,” *Claridad*, February 2, 2021, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.claridadpuertorico.com/la-independencia-es-la-solucion-progresista-al-colonialismo-de-estados-unidos-en-puerto-rico/>.

¹⁷⁸ Power, “Independence Is the Progressive Solution to US Colonialism in Puerto Rico,” *Truthout*, January 23, 2021.

¹⁷⁹ Johnathan Robles, “*Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico* by Ed Morales (review),” *Journal of Global South Studies* 37 (2020): 165.

¹⁸⁰ “Press briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki,” The White House: Press Briefings, March 3, 2021, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/03/03/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-march-3-2021/>.

from Congress about the statehood proposal.¹⁸¹ Pierluisi told *Time* that his “stance has always been that statehood for Puerto Rico is the best option.”¹⁸²

It is still uncertain if, and when, Puerto Rico becomes the 51st state of the US. The statehood debate is an interesting discussion which has increased in intensity after Hurricane Maria. George Laws Garcia, executive director of the Puerto Rico Statehood Council, said to *The Guardian*: “The prospects of statehood are incredibly challenging, but they’ve been challenging for every other territory that has ever been admitted as a state. In my lifetime, it’s certainly the best possible odds that we could have.”¹⁸³

As this chapter shows, not only hurricane Maria brought more attention to Puerto Rico. Discussions about racism, colonialism and the debate about the Electoral College are also relevant in the debate about statehood for Puerto Rico. Isar Godreau in his book *Scripts of Blackness. Global Studies of the United States* argues that studying race and the racism debate in the context of nation building can become “instrumental for the nationalist imagination constructed opposition to—or at least in conversation with—colonial power.”¹⁸⁴

This chapter showed that hurricane Maria brought more attention to the territory but issues like racism and the statehood debate make Puerto Rico a very relevant topic in both politics and the media. The attention of the newspapers shifted from the emergency response of the Puerto Rican and federal government to the statehood debate. Through the actions of president Trump after hurricane Maria, politicians also began debating about the status of the island after the Puerto Ricans stated that they felt they were treated unequally after the hurricane in comparison to other US states. Through the use of the media, political documents and academic literature, this chapter explained the shift in attention from the relief efforts of hurricane Maria to the debate on the status of Puerto Rico. The option of

¹⁸¹ José A. Delgado, “Status debate gains momentum,” *El Nuevo Día*, March 21, 2021, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/news/story/status-debate-gains-momentum/>.

¹⁸² Mariah Espada, “Influencers, Developers, Crypto Currency Tycoons: How Puerto Ricans Are Fighting Back Against the Outsiders Using the Island as a Tax Haven,” *TIME*, April 16, 2021, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://time.com/5955629/puerto-rico-tax-haven-opposition/>.

¹⁸³ David Smith, “New stars on the American flag? Fresh hope as Puerto Rico and DC push for statehood,” *The Guardian*, February 20, 2021, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/20/puerto-rico-washington-dc-statehood-politics>.

¹⁸⁴ Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness*, 23.

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statehood for Puerto Rico has never been as realistic as it is now since the elections of 2020. The debate that is now taking place in the territory and in Congress has influence on how the two governments work together and their relation.

Conclusion

The citizens of Puerto Rico will never forget the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria in September 2017. The hurricane ravaged the island, leaving the residents in dire need of supplies. The federal government assisted the territory's government in providing emergency supplies and funds to restore the territory.

Using government documents and newspaper articles, this thesis discussed the relation between the United States and its territory Puerto Rico. Since Hurricane Maria in September 2017, Puerto Rico received more attention from the federal government than it had in years.

The first chapter was focused on the media's responses to Hurricane Maria and the Puerto Rican and American government's aid. The chapter discussed both Puerto Rican newspapers and newspapers from the mainland of the United States. The newspapers from the territory were primarily focussed on the response from the local government and they were critical of this response. The newspapers from the island, *El Nuevo Día*, *Claridad* and *News is my Business* also discussed the efforts by the Puerto Ricans themselves and how they helped the people in this time of need. They discussed local community centres and health centres. According to these newspapers, the locals worked harder to provide aid and helped rebuild the island than the governmental organisations.

The newspapers from the mainland *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *The New York Post* discussed the response by the Trump administration more than the Puerto Rican newspapers. Similarly to the Puerto Rican newspapers, these papers were very critical of the federal response. They accused the federal government and particularly the president of acting too late and said that the island did not receive enough resources.

The primary focus of the newspapers in the initial year after the hurricane was on the relief efforts of the government but this focus shifted when the federal and particularly Puerto Rican government response to the natural disaster was increasingly criticized. Two years after the event, social unrest in Puerto Rico grew and in the summer of 2019 the demonstrations in the territory led to the resignation of the Governor. One of the reasons that the people were protesting was the way the local government responded to Hurricane Maria. After these protests, the government of the territory

as well as Congressmen and –women were speaking out for a change in the political status of Puerto Rico. In November 2020, the people of Puerto Rico voted in favor of statehood.

In the Puerto Rican government, Governor Vázquez listened to the protests and signed several laws to prevent another disastrous response from governmental organisations like the one that could be seen in 2017. In the federal government, several Bills were introduced in the House of Representatives that would allow Puerto Rico to become an official state in the Union. An increasing number of members of Congress spoke out against the current political status of Puerto Rico. When (or if) passed, these Bills, will hold the President to the promise to the American people in Puerto Rico that the island will become a state. In these Bills, the process which will make Puerto Rico a state is also described, ensuring that this process will go smoothly.

This thesis' media analysis shows that the question whether or not Hurricane Maria has changed the relation between the United States and its territory of Puerto Rico can be answered positively: yes, it has changed. The hurricane and the, failed, relief efforts revealed existing problems to the general public and Congress. These problems include poverty and unequal treatment of the people in the territory compared to people living in the states. They existed long before Hurricane Maria hit the island, but because its devastation brought Puerto Rico more in the news, more people became aware of the struggles the Puerto Ricans faced. The hurricane brought more attention to the political situation of the territory. More politicians brought up the issue of the political status of Puerto Rico and more also promised to change this status if the people of Puerto Rico want to become a state or an independent country. Other reasons explain the current interest in Puerto Rican statehood. But the aftermath of Hurricane Maria is probably the best explanation for this interest. The racism debate, the debate about the Electoral College and President Trump's actions all have kept the attention of the American people on the territory.

In November 2020, the Puerto Ricans voted to become a state of the United States of America. The people in Puerto Rico demanded to be treated equally as others, residents in official states. Congress has passed bills that would make it easier for the territory to become an official state. However, the statehood movement has been working long and hard for this recognition and in the century since Puerto Ricans became American citizens the political status has barely changed. With

Joe Biden in the Oval Office, the Puerto Ricans have hope that their situation will change. However, we will have to wait and see what will happen to the territory and whether change in the political status will actually come. One thing can be said for sure: more people than ever know now of the situation in Puerto Rico and after 2017 more politicians voice their support of the island becoming a state. The relation between the United States government and the local government of Puerto Rico since 2017 has definitely changed.

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