

Sovereign Free Association and Independence

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There is little difference between Independence and Sovereign Commonwealth (also known as Associated Republic or Free Association) on the ballot. Both definitions call for P. R. to become a “sovereign nation” and therefore be able to have agreements with other nations. Independence would not necessarily include an agreement with the U.S. Under Sovereign Commonwealth, P. R. as a sovereign nation would have an association agreement with the U.S., but the relationship between them would change dramatically.

At present, the U.S. has Free Association agreements with 3 past Pacific territories: Palau, the Marshall Islands and Micronesia. Although each of these territories negotiated its own agreement, the 3 are very similar. An agreement with P. R. would probably have the same provisions:

- Citizens of nations with free association agreements are not American citizens. The U.S. has the authority to limit the duration and conditions under which these people can travel to the U.S. and a passport from P.R. would be required to travel to the U.S.
- The U.S. has full military control over the entire territory of these associated nations, including control over military bases.
- The citizens of these nations with free association agreements were originally eligible for Medicare and Medicaid under the agreements of free association, but in 1996 the Congress of the United States, without consulting the citizens in free association, ended all these benefits.
- The 3 sovereign agreements initially included a lump sum of money to cover the transition from American territory to sovereign nation with an agreement of Free Association. The amounts paid, although initially considered large enough, were quickly spent and have left these nations in a very depressed economic situation with no possibility of improvement. They are now desperately asking for more funds but with a federal budget deficit the chances that Congress will agree are not good.
- Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid were eliminated. Pell Grants and the benefits of funding for public schools and universities would be eliminated; in that case, the \$ 4 billion in federal funds that come each year would end.

Steps to Achieve Statehood



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The United States consists of 50 states with very different cultures and individual histories. With the exception of the original 13 colonies, the rest of the states have made it into the Union through a request for admission to the Federal Government. The U.S. Constitution (Art. IV, Section 3) sets out broad parameters for the admission process, allowing Congress to accept new states without imposing a specific process.

Although there is no formal structure for creating a new state, history shows a consistent process. Once most people in the territory express their preference for statehood, a petition is sent to Congress for approval. Sometimes the request takes several years to be approved. Approval of a federal law authorizing statehood only requires a simple majority (50% plus 1) vote in favor in Congress, without requiring ratification by other states. Admission laws may include measures such as transitional provisions requiring the territory to adopt a constitution creating a republican form of government (which P.R. already has). Usually the path to statehood is preceded by federal funding assistance for the territory aimed at developing education, infrastructure, health and social services, which P.R. also already has.

In 1789 the Northwest Ordinance was passed. It proposed a guide for how new territories created with the expansion of the nation westward could enter the Union. Tennessee was the first territory to test the new Ordinance. After great difficulty getting Congress to approve their admission, Tennessee decided to take their own initiative and elected senators and congressmen to send to Washington, D.C., to demand their seats. The strategy worked, and in 1796 Tennessee was admitted as a state. This is known as the “Tennessee Plan”.