

Puerto Rico's status explained

ECSU talk takes a look at island's history

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WILLIMANTIC — This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917, an act granting U.S. citizenship to residents of Puerto Rico.

But right now, the island territory isn't celebrating anything, a product of the recent devastation from hurricanes Irma and Maria in recent days.

Adding to the uncertainty is the island territory's fiscal situation that has it billions of dollars in debt.

With many Willimantic residents hailing from the territory, the state university located in the city recently hosted a discussion on Puerto Rico as part of its regular lecture series.

According to University of Connecticut Assistant Political Science Professor Charles Venator Santiago, many Americans are unaware Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory and residents of the island are U.S. citizens.

"The average American doesn't have a clue," he said during a "University Hour" talk at the Eastern Connecticut State University Student Center Theatre last Wednesday.

VenatorSantiago, who holds a joint appointment with the political science department and "El Instituto: Institute of Latino/a, Caribbean and Latin American Studies," presented information about the history of Puerto Rico and its relationship to the United States.

"University Hour" is a weekly, cultural series held for about an hour every Wednesday afternoon.

The talk was held the same day Puerto Rico was hit hard by Hurricane Maria, the second of two hurricanes to recently hit the island.

During his presenta-



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Charles Venator Santiago, an assistant political science professor at the University of Connecticut, speaks about the history of Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory, during 'University Hour' at the Eastern Connecticut State University Student Center Wednesday afternoon.

tion, "Hostage of Empire: Constitutional Dimensions of Puerto Rican Birthright Citizenship," Venator Santiago explained the U.S. occupied Puerto Rico on July 25, 1898 and imposed a two-year military dictatorship to rule the island.

The Treaty of Paris, which went into effect April 11, 1899, involved the cessation of Puerto Rico from Spain to the United States following the Spanish-American War.

Venator Santiago said that agreement entailed that Congress would be responsible to enact legislation addressing the civil and political rights of the inhabitants of Puerto Rico.

He said Puerto Rico is not the only U.S. territory, however.

"Five territories are considered to be key inhabited territories," said Venator

Santiago.

He was referring to Puerto Rico, American Samoa, U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam and Northern Mariana Islands.

"The United States had a history of acquiring territories, long before it acquired Puerto Rico," said Venator Santiago.

Puerto Rico was established as a common wealth in 1952.

Venator Santiago said there has been debate about the future of the island amidst its financial crisis. "How do you sustain the economy?" he said, noting that is a question being considered.

In June 2016, then-President Barack Obama signed PROMESA (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act) into law, through which an appointed board was given control over Puerto Rico's

budget and debt restructuring.

That board was formed in light of Puerto Rico's current fiscal crisis.

Venator Santiago noted that a small board comprised of unelected people "basically tell the (Puerto Rico) government how to spend their money, what to do."

"Congress right now has a great deal," he said.

Puerto Rican residents voted to ask the U.S. government to recognize Puerto Rico as the 51st state during a referendum June 11.

In addition to supporting the option of Puerto Rico becoming a state, voters also had the option of supporting independence for Puerto Rico or supporting Puerto Rico maintaining its territorial status.

Venator Santiago said the commonwealth is "in disarray" and the independence movement is only being supported by a small percentage of the electorate.

He said since 1898, Congress has debated upwards of 102 bills containing citizenship provisions for Puerto Rico, including the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917.

In 1940, Congress enacted the Nationality Act, under which Venator Santiago said Puerto Rico was treated like an incorporated territory for the sole purpose of establishing that birth on the island was tantamount to birth in the United States.

That legislation was amended in 1948 and 1952.

"What happens is that everyone born in Puerto Rico after the Nationality Act is a U.S. citizen," Venator Santiago said.

He explained if a person born in Puerto Rico moved to the United States, they would meet the "constitutional requirements" to run for president of the United States. He said a resident of Puerto Rico who stayed in Puerto Rico, however, could not run for president of the United States. "The moment that a Puerto Rican citizen steps on U.S. soil, he or she acquires all the rights of a U.S.-born citizen," Venator Santiago said.