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Right to Democracy Briefing Will Ask What “Consent of the Governed” Means for U.S. Territories

The June 4 congressional briefing will examine Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands as the U.S. prepares to mark 250 years since the Declaration of Independence.

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As the United States prepares to mark the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Right to Democracy is convening a congressional briefing on June 4 to examine what “consent of the governed” means for residents of Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands.

The briefing, titled What Does ‘Consent of the Governed’ Mean in U.S. Territories?, is being organized in coordination with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and members of Congress from several U.S. territories. It will bring together a bipartisan group of lawmakers and will include special guest Daniel Immerwahr, the New York Times bestselling author of *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*.

Organizers say the briefing will provide members of Congress and their staff with historical background on the relationship between U.S. territories and the United States, using the Declaration of Independence as a central point of reference.

“Two hundred and fifty years ago, the United States declared a foundational democratic concept: that legitimate governments derive their just powers from the ‘consent of the governed.’ Yet for 125 years, the federal government has ruled U.S. territories without full constitutional or civil rights and without a clear pathway to self-determination,” said Adi Martínez-Román, Co-Director of Right to Democracy, which works to advance democracy, equity, and self-determination in U.S. territories. “This congressional briefing is an important step for the federal government to recognize that this undemocratic framework is unsustainable and a violation of basic rights under U.S. and international law.”

Right to Democracy argues that the consequences of the current territorial framework are not abstract. The organization says discriminatory federal programs increase the cost of living in island communities and help fuel an exodus that has expanded the territorial diaspora to more than 6 million people.

The briefing will also feature Right to Democracy’s Environment and Democracy Fellows, described as community leaders representing each territory. They are expected to discuss how federal decisions made without full democratic participation affect daily life in the territories, including in public health, disaster relief, voting rights and environmental policy.

Organizers say people in the territories live on the front lines of climate change, democratic erosion and national security challenges, and that their experiences offer lessons for the rest of the country. The event is designed to be bipartisan and bicameral, reflecting what Right to Democracy describes as a congressional coalition willing to examine the colonial legal framework under which the federal government governs the territories.

“For 125 years, the Insular Cases have normalized the federal government denying people in U.S. territories democracy and self-determination based on the Supreme Court’s troubling view that they were ‘alien races’ or ‘savage tribes,’” said Neil Weare, Co-Director of Right to Democracy. “The 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence is a proper occasion for the federal government and the general public to recognize that U.S. colonial rule is real, wrong, and needs to end now.”

The briefing is open to congressional staff, members of the press and the public. Right to Democracy says registration is available through its event link.

The organization is also encouraging support for its Declaration to End Colonial Rule in U.S. Territories, created with the Cross-Territorial Coalition.

“This declaration was created with the Cross-Territorial Coalition to call for democracy, equity, and self-determination as values the United States declared to the world 250 years ago, and that should be materialized for the communities of the territories. We ask all who believe in the central importance of those values to sign and stand with us,” explained Martínez-Román.

