

Washington DC: Lacking a Political Voice in the Center of the
Political World

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On July 16, 1970, Congress declared the city of Washington, D.C. the permanent capital of the United States of America. Since then, Washington has become the political center of the country, mostly because D.C. is the space where representatives of people all across the country meet to pass the laws that will govern the country, the president resides and oversees the administration of those laws, and the highest court interprets the laws and ensures they stay in compliance with the U.S. Constitution. While vast political change occurs all throughout the district, the reality is that the citizens that reside here are not treated as citizens at all. Residents of Washington have no voting representative in the House of Representatives and therefore no one to advocate for their beliefs on the federal level. However, they are still required to abide by all the laws that they had virtually no say in and pay taxes, like normal citizens. In fact, license plates throughout the district state, "Taxation Without Representation," to represent this irony. While people come from across the country to DC to make their political voices heard, the irony is that residents living here have no say in how they are governed. The discrepancy between Washington acting as a place of protest and simultaneously acting as a center for political disenfranchisement will only be remedied by expanding voting rights there and ultimately by establishing D.C. as the 51st state in the United States of America.

Throughout the history of the United States, citizens, and non-citizens even, have come from across the country and the world to Washington, D.C. to spark protests and make their political voices heard. This makes logical sense; if you want something in the law to change, go to the place where they make the laws. Overtime, political protests in DC have actually been extremely successful in spreading awareness about certain issues, and ultimately at sparking change from Congress. One of the most famous examples is Martin Luther King's March on Washington, a gathering that took place along the National Mall and ended with his famous "I

Have a Dream” Speech, meant to bring recognition about the vast discrimination of people of color taking place in the United States. One year later, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, making it illegal to discriminate based on race, color, sex, religion, or nation of origin. However, this is not the only time D.C. has acted as a place of protest and a ground for voicing one’s opinion. On April 4, 1968, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. By 8pm that night, riots broke out along 14th street, lasting for 4 days, and leaving much of the city in ruins (Rindler). Not only did this create a realization in Washington that racial discrimination was still very much alive in the U.S., but it sparked copycat rallies around the U.S. that affected at least 110 cities across the nation, bringing national attention to the issues Martin Luther King was fighting and ultimately died for (Rindler).

Washington also acted as a site of awareness during the HIV/AIDS epidemic that rocked the nation during the 1980s. D.C. was a place very progressive in terms of LGBTQ rights, causing it to act a sort of a magnet for that community as the “Mecca for people up and down the East Coast” (Nnamdi). For this reason, the community was particularly affected when the epidemic broke out, mainly because the LGBT community received such a lack of information and services to deal with this disease. However, due to this vast effects DC experienced, this community also became advocates for HIV/AIDS across the country, bringing an awareness of the issue to the eyes of the public. Even today, Washington is the place to be to make your political voice heard. On March 24, 2018, a little over a month after a gunman killed 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, students from the school organized a demonstration in the nation’s capital to protest for action against gun violence. Hundreds of thousands of people participated, with “copy-cat” protests popping up all across the country that day (Jamison). This has since sparked the “March for Our Lives” movement

throughout the country, with student advocates fighting to ensure that what happened in Parkland will not happen again.

These three examples are not unique; Washington, D.C. is the place to come if you want to exercise your right of free speech, petition the government to do as you see fit, and get the attention of those representing you in Congress. Yet, the people who live in Washington year-round have been and remain highly disenfranchised when it comes to voting. In fact, until 1973, the residents of Washington did not even have the right to elect a local government. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was signed in to law, making it illegal to discriminate on the basis of race in voting (Fenston). While this did not directly affect Washingtonians because they still had no members of Congress or local government, and therefore could not vote, it represented a turning point for them to achieve self-government. This piece of legislation started the rally amongst DC citizens to achieve home rule. Home rule for the district had been passed in the Senate 5 times and had the support of the president, but it never even made it out of committee in the House due to the fact that the chair of the committee, Representative McMillan from South Carolina, would not bring it to a vote. Pastor Walter Fauntroy, a friend of Martin Luther King and advocate for DC voting rights, organized a busload of DC residents to go to McMillan's district in South Carolina and petition against him in the 1972 election. Because the Voting Rights Act allowed for millions of southern black voters to vote, Fauntroy and the DC residents were successfully able to campaign against McMillan, who lost his seat in 1972, and by 1973, President Richard Nixon signed the District of Columbia Self-Government and Reorganization Act, thus allowing DC citizens to vote for the first time (Fenston).

While this act was extremely beneficial in aiding Washington to elect its own local leaders, the fact remains that on a national scale, Washington residents still have no political

voice. Washington was established as the capital in 1800, but prior to that, citizens residing in the area would vote in either Virginia or Maryland's elections, depending on what part of the city they lived in (Kingsley and Raskin). However, once established as the District, both states independently left it up to Congress to decide upon the rights and liberties of the citizens of DC and by 1801, citizens of DC lost their voting rights (Kingsley and Raskin). Finally, after 160 years, the Twenty-Third Amendment to the Constitution allowed for residents of Washington to vote in presidential elections, however, DC remains the only country in the world that disenfranchises citizens living in the capital city to vote in national legislative elections (Kingsley and Raskin). This negatively impacts those living in DC because "since delegates are not permitted to vote on legislation that comes before the House, Washington, D.C., and the territories are silent when it comes to deciding federal appropriations on education, social welfare, infrastructure, and other critical concerns" (Weeks). Besides not physically getting to vote in elections and participate in democracy, the actual wellbeing of the residents both in DC and in U.S. territories is being compromised by a lack of an advocate voting on their behalf in Congress. Washington College of Law Professor and Maryland State House Majority Whip Jamin Raskin argues that, "this Pennsylvania Avenue freeze-out translates to a haughty Congressional indifference to the political interests and priorities of the District population" (Raskin 47).

The solution, it would seem, would be to grant voting rights to residents of the District, which could be done in many ways. On a simpler scale, Congress could pass a bill that would treat the District of Columbia as a congressional district for the purpose of the House of Representatives. A bill like this was proposed by DC representative Eleanor Holmes Norton in

2007 entitled the “District of Columbia Fair and Equal House Voting Rights Act of 2007. Due to the fact that Congress found that,

- “(1) Over half a million people living in the District of Columbia, the capital of our democratic Nation, lack direct voting representation in the United States Senate and House of Representatives.
- (2) District of Columbia residents have fought and died to defend our democracy in every war since the War of Independence.
- (3) District of Columbia residents pay billions of dollars in Federal taxes each year.
- (4) Our Nation is founded on the principles of “one person, one vote” and “government by the consent of the governed” (United States. Congress. House).

H.R. 328 would have increased the number of voting seats in the House of Representatives from 435 to 437, thus giving Washington a vote, as well as creating another district in the state of Utah (United States. Congress. House). Unfortunately, this bill failed to pass, but represents a way to get DC residents the voting rights they deserve. On a much larger scale, and popular among DC residents, is the idea of DC Statehood. In other words, through a bill passed through Congress, the District of Columbia would become a state, and with that, receive all the same rights states have, including voting representatives in the legislative branch. On January 3, 2019, Representative Norton sponsored H.R. 51, The Washington, D.C. Admissions Act. The bill, which has 203 co-sponsors in the House, and 28 co-sponsors in the Senate, would admit the District of Columbia as a state in the Union. Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren is a large advocate for D.C. Statehood; “This is not right. The right to vote is at the heart of our democracy” (qtd in Nwanevu).

Beyond not being represented in Congress, Washington is under constant threat that Congress will turn over their laws at any time, which they have the legal authority to do. Laws important to the residents of DC, such as providing abortion services or legalizing recreational marijuana have been effectively blocked by the Republicans in Congress (Nwanevu). Giving DC statehood does not just give them representation, it gives them the ability to legitimately govern

themselves and pass laws that matter to them, a pillar of American democracy. However, Republicans are largely against this idea. Why? Probably because of the political makeup of the District. In the 2016 election, 90% of voters in DC voted for Hillary Clinton; there is no doubt that it is a very liberal city. Giving DC Statehood would likely add three new Democrats in to Congress, a threat to the Republicans. Former Republican John Kasich was blunt about it when asked why he was opposed to DC voting representation; “What it really gets down to, if you want to be honest, is because they know that’s just more votes in the Democratic Party” (qtd. In Nwanevu).

When it comes down to it, the lack of voting rights for those living in Washington is undemocratic. Raskin states, “the missing right to vote in the Constitution produces multiple problems for our democratic ambitions, practices, and values” (Raskin 57). Congress should pass a bill to give Washington DC statehood and allow the citizens there to fully participate in the U.S. democracy and advocate for themselves on a national scale. While DC acts as a place of protest and a center of democracy on a National level with so many people choosing that as the place to voice their political opinions, it should act that way on a local level, with citizens being able to actively voice their opinions and have a say in the laws that govern them.

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