



Statehood Movement Grows in District of Columbia

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The United States flag has had 50 stars to represent the 50 states since Hawaii joined the Union in 1959. However, if a movement growing in Washington, D.C., picks up steam, the flag could one day have a 51st star.

D.C. statehood is a political movement advocating for the creation of a state out of what is currently the District of Columbia. The origins of the movement date to the 1700s.

Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution grants Congress power over a district "not exceeding ten Miles square" from which to govern the country. However, this setup has created a unique stretch of land now home to more than 672,000 people who pay federal taxes but have only "shadow" members in Congress — two in the Senate, one in the House — who have no voting rights.

According to many residents, that's the definition of "taxation without representation" — which, by the way, was one of the primary reasons behind the American Revolution in 1776.

D.C. residents were granted the right to vote for president in 1961, but the D.C. government cannot spend money it raises from local taxes and fees without approval from Congress.

Weary of 'half measures'

D.C. shadow Senator Paul Strauss, ranking member of the New Columbia Statehood Commission, says it's time for that to change.

"D.C. residents are tired of half measures," he said. "They're tired of having their rights ignored. We want to become a state."

Headed by the district's mayor, Muriel Bowser, the commission held a constitutional convention in June to present a draft constitution for the proposed state, currently dubbed New Columbia.

The issue of D.C. statehood is a personal one for Josh Burch. The native Washingtonian is a co-founder of Neighbors United for D.C. Statehood, a nonpartisan, citizen-led, pro-statehood organization.

"When I turned 18, I knew what it was like not to have a vote that mattered," Burch said. "And I can't in good conscience sit on the sidelines and have my children turn 18 and not do anything to ensure that they're treated fairly and equally as American citizens."

Burch got involved in the D.C. statehood movement in 2011 after some political horse-trading. President Barack Obama reportedly approved ending the district's right to fund abortions for low-income women in order to pass a budget deal with then-Speaker of the House John Boehner. Many in the district were furious that the president made the deal without input from D.C. residents. Forty-one people, including then-Mayor Vincent Gray and six members of the D.C. Council, were arrested during protests following the decision.

Matter of civil rights

That's part of the reason Burch considers D.C. statehood a civil rights issue as much as it is a political one.

"We have to stand up for ourselves and say, 'No, this is a moral issue, this is an American issue, and a free people deserve to have an equal voice and an equal vote in our democracy,' " Burch said.

Burch also said that even though it is clear the Founding Fathers did not intend for the District of Columbia to be a state, they no longer have what he called the "moral high ground" on the issue.

"What has happened is there are now 672,000 people that are disenfranchised, contrary to anything that our founders would have wanted," Burch said. "So we can't give up, we can't give in and say that it's OK to say that the decision of people 250 years ago is OK for us now."

However, the movement has a solid number of opponents.

One of the major arguments against D.C. statehood comes at the constitutional level. Roger Pilon, founding director of the Center for Constitutional Studies at the Cato Institute, has spoken extensively on why turning the District of Columbia into New Columbia is unconstitutional.

"The problem is, the Constitution still remains the Constitution, and so much of what is done today, especially through the federal government, is, under a properly read Constitution, unconstitutional," he said. The document, he said, lists "no power that the federal government has to create a new state" out of the district.

'Weighty' votes

Pilon warned that the new state could have too much influence on federal government operations, as it would take over responsibility for public services like ambulances and road maintenance. He also suggested that turning the district into the 51st state could leave a select few with far more political power than the rest of the country.

"The problem with creating this new state is that you would leave in place this small enclave and you would have a few people there — the first family, for example — and you would have other people, too, who still under this amendment would have the right to vote for electors for the presidency," he said. "But since there are so few of them, their votes would be vastly more weighty than the votes of the people in the rest of the country."

However, advocates point out that D.C. has more residents than either Vermont or Wyoming, and those states have the same representation in Congress as populous states like New York and California.

There is a partisan element to this debate as well. In citywide elections, D.C. residents have only elected Democrats to open offices, so statehood would almost guarantee the addition of two Democratic senators and one Democratic House member to Congress. That means the issue will never come up for a vote as long as Republicans control the Senate or the House.

Previous efforts to establish D.C. statehood have all failed. One attempt made it to the House floor in 1993, but it failed to pass, 277-153.