

ROLL CALL

D.C. Democratic Primary a Political Whisper

A reminder that voters' political voices have historically been faint

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Both the Democrats and the Republicans already have selected their nominees for the presidential race.

The big primaries are over.

And it's not like voters in the District of Columbia ever had a strong political voice in national elections.

But David and Shauna Holmes, both retired federal employees who've lived in D.C. for about 20 years, turned out anyway for early voting.

"This is it," Shauna said as she sat inside the Sherwood Recreation Center, just a little more than a mile east of Union Station. "This is all we have."

David wasn't much more enthusiastic.

"We are always an afterthought," he said. "But at least we will be the only primary that is on the news."

For many D.C. residents, Tuesday's Democratic primary is a reminder that their political voices are faint.

The district's lone representative in Congress can only vote while serving on House committees. The U.S. Constitution states that Congress has the right "to exercise legislation in all cases whatsoever" over the district.

Residents and local elected officials frequently complain about Congress meddling in their city's affairs. That resentment is even reflected on district license plates, which proclaim "Taxation Without Representation."

"We are the whipping boy for Congress," Shauna said. "We are not even allowed to use our own tax dollars without Congress interfering."

D.C. trends blue. And that also led to friction with Congress, especially with Republicans.

Seeking to reduce gun violence, the district implemented some of the nation's toughest gun regulations. In response, some Republicans tried to roll them back with pro-gun rights amendments .

They also tried to push back when D.C. voters approved the use of medical marijuana .

Most Republican lawmakers have opposed efforts to grant D.C. statehood. Among the reasons: that would almost certainly create two safe Senate seats for Democrats.

Even so, the 2016 presidential campaign has offered some hope to pro-statehood residents.

Donald Trump has talked about supporting D.C. statehood.

"I would like to do whatever is good for the District of Columbia because I love the people," Trump told NBC when asked about the issue.

Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders both agree that D.C. should be a state.

But Roger Pilon, the vice president for legal affairs at the Cato Institute, argues that the statehood issue flies in the face of constitutional law.

Pilon said that constitutional issues make creating the state of New Columbia by statute a "pure fantasy."

The 23rd Amendment gives D.C. votes in the Electoral College, and that could conflict with congressional power to create a new state.

Pilon said that amending the Constitution to make D.C. a state would be a way to get around these legal issues but politically, but that would be an uphill climb.

Phil Mendelson, chairman of the council of the District of Columbia, said that D.C. statehood has been in the Democratic platform before but it is different this time because of "renewed efforts."

Mike Hill works for the D.C. government. He grew up in the district and he supports statehood. But he also suggests that there are more important issues.

"We will always have problems, but things are a lot better here than they are in other places around here, like Maryland," he said, not long after he voted late last week.

Joel Adams, 39, is a bartender and lifelong D.C. resident. He says he wants statehood because members of Congress — "people who are not from here" — have done a poor job of managing the district.

But Adams thinks that support for statehood is gaining traction.

He's encouraged by coverage of the issue, such as John Oliver's segment last August on D.C. statehood.

Washington, Adams said, has become home to a growing number of young people from other parts of the country. And that, he said, has raised the awareness of the disenfranchised Washingtonians.

Within the next 20 years, said he thinks there is a 75 percent chance that D.C. will become a state.

“Awareness is cause for optimism,” said Adams.