



Meet The New Generation of D.C. Statehood Advocates

September 24, 2020

Mikaela Lefrak and Tyrone Turner

Residents of Washington, D.C., have been advocating for more representation for generations. But the push for full statehood is now getting more attention than ever before, in part due to the diligent work of a new generation of activists.

In the late 1990s, “D.C. statehood was not on anybody’s lips,” says Anise Jenkins, 79, one of the grandmothers of the statehood movement. “We were kind of ridiculed for it.”

Now Jenkins sees her city buzzing with an unprecedented level of energy around statehood. The House of Representatives passed H.R. 51 this summer — the first time a chamber of Congress has ever passed legislation making D.C. the 51st state. And the Democratic National Party made statehood part of its 2020 party platform. The District’s government even commissioned 51 statehood murals in honor of H.R. 51.

But statehood is still far from a sure thing. Even if Democrats take control of the Senate and White House in November, a new law making D.C. a state will face legal challenges. For one, conservative constitutional scholars like Roger Pilon, a director at the Cato Institute for Constitutional Studies, argue Congress doesn’t have the constitutional authority to grant D.C. statehood.

A majority of Americans reject the idea of D.C. statehood. A Gallup poll last year found that 64% of people said they opposed making the District the 51st state, and 8% had no opinion on the matter.

That’s where D.C.’s cadre of young advocates come in. Many of them have made it their mission to educate Americans outside the District about statehood. They travel to swing states to meet with presidential candidates and voters. They organize lobbying days for young advocates in different parts of the country to meet with their representatives and senators. And they speak at national events like the March on Washington about the importance of statehood.

Above all, they argue that D.C. statehood is inextricably intertwined with other values worth fighting for: Racial justice, gun control, health care access, prison reform and, of course, the right to vote.

Meet some of the young advocates and hear what motivates them.

Jamari O’Neal, 21

Jamari O’Neal first got riled up about statehood at summer camp— political science summer camp, that is. When he was about 14 years old, he got to talking with his fellow campers about net neutrality. Because he was from the District, he didn’t have a senator to call to show his support for the cause.

“They were just like, I don’t see why you care about this,” he says of their disinterest in his plight as a Washingtonian. “And this was from people who care enough about politics to go to a summer camp for it!”

After high school, O’Neal started volunteering with Sen. Elizabeth Warren’s presidential campaign. Talking to constituents in other states revealed to him his own power to change people’s minds. Later he became a founding member of Persist DC, an organization that advocates for progressive causes from Warren’s platform. One of its goals is to support candidates that are strong advocates for D.C. statehood.

“We can actually talk about [statehood] and change people’s minds,” O’Neal says. “This doesn’t have to be how it always is.”

Demi Stratmon, 22

On a recent evening, Demi Stratmon logged onto a Zoom meeting and greeted about 60 participants in their teens and twenties. Young activists from all over the country were preparing for an upcoming virtual lobbying day, when they’d meet with senators about D.C. statehood.

Stratmon works for 51 for 51, a statehood organization that also wants the Senate to change a rule that requires 60 votes to pass most laws. The Senate lowered that number to 51 in order to confirm Supreme Court justices, the argument goes, so why not change it again for statehood bills?

Stratmon graduated from Dartmouth this spring and moved back in with her parents in Takoma, D.C. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, she’s never gone into the office for work. She does all her advocacy from her computer. On the Zoom training, she tried to pump up her fellow advocates about online advocacy too. (Pumping people up comes naturally to her — she’s also a professional NFL cheerleader.)

“You have to be confident,” she tells the advocates-in-training. “They are your elected officials, and you have the right to speak with them.” Stratmon doesn’t need to remind them that, because she lives in the District, she has no senators to lobby herself.

Ty Hobson-Powell, 25

Two lines in the musical “Hamilton” describing the young Alexander Hamilton could just as easily have been written about Ty Hobson-Powell: “Everyday day you fight, like you’re running out of time. Keep on fighting in the meantime / Non-stop.”

Like Hamilton, Hobson-Powell is non-stop. He got his high school diploma at 13, his bachelor's degree at 15 and his master's in human services at 17. He works full-time as a statehood advocate for 51 for 51 and launched his own organization, Concerned Citizens of DC, in June. The group organizes protests and marches around specific policy demands largely tied to racial justice, including removing law enforcement from elementary school and cutting down on over-policing in Black neighborhoods.

“We are a city of Black and Brown people,” Hobson-Powell says. “To ignore the racism attached to our lack of statehood would be hard to do.” In August, he brought his message to a national audience when he spoke at the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington.

Hobson-Powell lives in Colonial Village, the neighborhood in Northwest D.C. where he grew up. He's watched as his neighborhood and the city as a whole have gentrified — a byproduct, he says, of years of institutional racism and voter disenfranchisement in the District.

“The Chocolate City isn't as chocolate as it once was,” he says. “But we are people with our own culture.”

Noah Wills, 24

Unlike the other young people in this story, Noah Wills didn't grow up in D.C. He first came to the District for college, from Pennsylvania.

“I took my representation for granted before I moved to D.C.,” he says.

Wills is making up for it now. In college he interned for D.C.'s shadow delegation to Congress. He now runs Students for DC Statehood, an organization focused on mobilizing high school and college students. One of his main goals is to get students bought in to the idea of statehood while they're living in the District for college, before they move away.

“They're really the only population who still has their voting rights who comes here for any extended period of time,” he says. He calls those students “the gateway to the rest of the country.”

These days when he goes home to Pennsylvania, he constantly talks to his family members about statehood. His advocacy can have a real impact there: After all, he points out, the congressman for his family's Pennsylvania district voted against the D.C. statehood bill, H.R. 51, this past June.

Jamal Holtz, 22

Jamal Holtz stands on the roof of his apartment building at sunset and looks towards Anacostia. The city's affordable housing program recently found him a place in a nice building near Nationals Park, but he still hopes to end up in back in Ward 8, where his mom raised him and his four siblings.

When Holtz was 16 he joined the Marion Barry Youth Leadership Institute, a civic engagement program that gives kids experience in community advocacy and government. The program

introduced him to many of the young statehood advocates in his network today. That was when he decided he wanted to be mayor of Washington, D.C.

“We’re treated as second-class citizens,” he said. “To be frank, statehood is a civil rights issue.”

Last spring and summer, Holtz and other young activists traveled to battleground states to meet with swing voters about D.C. statehood. A conversation with a woman from South Carolina stuck in his mind.

“She had no idea that D.C. wasn’t a state,” he said. “She was surprised to hear how many people live here. She became an advocate, and now she’s talking to her family about it, talking to her neighbors about it. She follows me on Facebook and always shares my stories when I’m talking about D.C. statehood. And that’s really what’s going to push the needle.”

For the first time in his life, he feels like statehood is possible — that is, if Democrats take the White House and Senate, and make it a priority.

“It’ll give me a new goal in life,” he says, “Not limit myself to mayor, but make it governor.”