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As US debates DC statehood, advocates see possibilities ahead

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Washington, DC mayor and advocates say statehood a matter of equality, security; Republicans say it will give Dems more power.

United States lawmakers will debate granting the District of Columbia statehood on Monday, the latest step along a 30-year road undertaken by Washington, DC residents and activists.

The home of the US capital, by law, does not enjoy elected voting representation in Congress, although its residents pay federal taxes, a fact decried by residents and leaders alike. The movement gained national attention and an unprecedented level of support ahead of the November 2020 election, with advocates campaigning on a platform of “equality” for DC voters.

President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, along with numerous celebrities and legislators, have voiced support for the measure.

The House Oversight Committee debated HR51, a bill passed by the House of Representatives in 2020, that provides a path forward by reducing the federal district to an area encompassing the White House, Congress and other sites along the National Mall.

“It’s no longer just a political or even an equality issue, it’s really one of survival,” Strauss, who has no voting power in the Senate, said.

Strauss pointed to the “lack of equality on coronavirus” aid, the National Guard “attacking” Black Lives Matter protesters during the summer despite DC leaders’ wishes and the lack of ability for Mayor Muriel Bowser to call the National Guard during the January 6 Capitol insurrection.

Making the District of Columbia a state “will be a necessary partner to securing the federal interests, not a detractor”, Bowser told the committee.

Washington, DC, has a population of roughly 700,000 – more than the US state of Wyoming and on par with Vermont and Alaska. The majority of its residents are people of colour, and have no say in Congress, as the District’s only elected federal representative, Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, is seated in the US House but does not have floor voting privileges.

“I was born in Washington, DC, and generations of my family – through no choice of our own – have been denied the fundamental right promised to all Americans: the right to full representation in the Congress”, Bowser, who is Black, said in prepared remarks.

“The simple fact is, denying American citizens a vote in the body that taxes them goes against the founding principles of this great nation.”

Path forward

DC statehood faces political and legal hurdles. Republicans claim the push is a plot to increase Democratic votes by two in the 100-seat Senate.

Washington, DC, historically votes overwhelmingly Democratic. In fact, since DC joined the Electoral College in 1964, a Republican presidential nominee has only cracked 20 percent of the vote once and has received less than 10 percent of the vote in every election since 1992.

Republican Representative Jody Hice said as much after HR51 passed the House last June: “What this is really all about is an attempt to get two more Democratic senators.”

During the hearing, Republicans aired other issues, including DC’s lack of industry and other economic sectors that other states have, arguing that it is merely a city.

Wisconsin Representative Glenn Grothman said during the hearing that “normally when a congressman or, even more, a senator, weighs the bills that are up there, they have to address how they will affect manufacturing, agriculture, mining, which is where the wealth of a country comes from.”

While the Democratically controlled House is expected to pass HR51 again, it seems unlikely to do so in the Senate, where Democrats hold a razor-thin majority in the evenly split chamber, with Vice President Kamala Harris able to break ties in favour of the Democrats.

The bill would require 60 votes in the Senate to bypass the filibuster, which allows senators to block a bill from a vote.

“We know we’re probably a few votes shy in the Senate right now. But there’s a lot that we can do to help get it there. But none of it makes sense to do until we know that we can get this through the House which we expect to happen”, Strauss said.

Some legal scholars argue the US Constitution, the country’s founding document, does not allow for statehood. The framers of the Constitution believed the seat of government needs to be neutral, and not a state, they have claimed.

HR51 would separate the smaller federal district from the rest of the 177-sq km (68-sq mile) city, which would be admitted as the Washington-Douglass Commonwealth, named in honour of the first President, George Washington, and abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

Strauss said this allows the bill to meet constitutional requirements.

But Roger Pilon, a Constitutional scholar from the right-leaning Cato Institute’s Robert A Levy Center for Constitutional Studies, told Al Jazeera via email the proposal does “not satisfy the Constitution”.

Pilon said Congress has “no power to undo what it did in creating the District pursuant to” the Constitution’s Enclave Clause of Article I, Section 8, Clause 17, which gives Congress the power to administer the district. He also said “Maryland would need to consent to this proposal”, as the current boundaries of DC were lands ceded by Maryland in 1790 to create the District. Pilon added the 23rd Amendment of the Constitution, which lets DC citizens vote for presidential electors, would also need to be repealed.

The only way to provide a way for DC to become a state, Pilon said, would be to “amend the Constitution to provide for that. But that is not likely.”

Still, Strauss is hopeful. “We know that it’s just one more step in a long battle, but it’s a battle for the quality that we intend to win.