



# Why Washington residents want D.C. to be the 51st U.S. state

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September 21, 2019

Washington, D.C., is the capital of the United States. It could also be the capital of irony.

Nearly one million people live here, going about their daily lives amid grand monuments honouring American democracy.

But they don't have a say in U.S. Congress. The District of Columbia is not a state, and so does not have a vote in the laws of the land.

"It really is wrong. We have no voice," said D.C. resident Darrah Baldwin. "We deserve the same rights that all other citizens have in this country."

Baldwin was one of hundreds of Washingtonians who descended on Capitol Hill earlier this week for a congressional hearing on the possibility of D.C. becoming the 51st state. It was the first such hearing in more than 25 years.

The initiative is unlikely to go anywhere, lacking the support of the Republican majority on Capitol Hill.

This week's hearing often deteriorated into partisan bickering, with Republicans on the committee attempting to delay the hearing, before accusing D.C.'s government of being too corrupt to run its own affairs (based on an investigation into one local council member).

Even so, campaigners say the hearing represents new momentum for a cause that should have been addressed decades ago.

"We're in the shadow of government, yet we're disenfranchised," said D.C. resident Elizabeth Mitchell. "That needs to change."

## **Constitutional conundrum**

D.C.'s lack of statehood is rooted in the U.S. Constitution.

The country's founders envisioned a "federal district" that would serve as the seat of government and be overseen by Congress so that no one state would have undue influence over the national legislature simply because it was located there.

The selection of the area dubbed Washington, D.C., was a product of a compromise between lawmakers Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

Hamilton wanted the U.S. as a whole to collectively share states' debts. Jefferson and Madison wanted the capital to be moved from New York City closer to the southern states. And so Hamilton got his national debt, and land from Virginia and Maryland was ceded to create the District of Columbia.

At the time, the federal district only had an estimated 3,000 residents. Today, more than 700,000 people call it home.

"The founders didn't anticipate that one day people might actually want to live here," said Denver Brunsman, a history professor at The George Washington University.

"There's no evidence that they really thought this through, and so this is a problem that today leaves hundreds of thousands without representation."

## **Taxation without representation**

The arrangement means Washingtonians have no say over their own laws. Congress, which has ultimate jurisdiction over the District, must approve them, and can block them even if they've been passed by the District's city council. Congress also has authority over the city's budget.

While D.C. does have representatives on Capitol Hill, they aren't allowed to cast any votes, which means the District's residents don't have any decision-making power on important issues such as taxes, gun laws or declarations of war.

Imagine Canadian Parliament being in charge of Ottawa's municipal affairs, and yet the city's federal representatives were unable to vote in the House of Commons.

All the while, people who live in D.C. pay some of the highest taxes in the U.S. It's another example of irony, as one of the American Revolution's best-known slogans was "No taxation without representation."

For D.C. residents, the exact opposite is a modern-day reality.

"It's probably inconceivable to most residents of democratic countries that residents of their own capital don't have the same rights as other citizens," said Rep. Eleanor Holmes-Norton, D.C.'s non-voting delegate in the House of Representatives.

"We are one of the oldest jurisdictions in the United States. This is an anomaly."

### **A seat at the table**

The situation is hindering improvement in the lives of D.C. residents, according to 22-year-old activist Andre Glosson, a third-generation Washingtonian.

He points to multiple examples of congressional interference in laws passed by Washington's city council, including attempts to weaken gun control laws.

Congress has also stifled D.C.'s attempts to fully legalize marijuana and enact doctor-assisted dying programs, despite both measures being supported by the District's council.

The tension between D.C. and Congress is particularly high when there's a Republican majority on Capitol Hill, given Washington itself is ranked as one of the most liberal cities in the United States. It voted 91 per cent in favour of Hillary Clinton in 2016.

"When we talk about D.C. statehood, we're talking about having a seat at the table," Glosson said, "and making sure that what we want for Washingtonians is not dictated by men and women who don't even live in our city, and don't deal with issues that we deal with on an everyday basis."

It's also a matter of civil rights. Washington is a historically black-majority city, and so the lack of statehood has disproportionately affected African-American citizens over the decades.

Johnnie Scott-Rice, one of the first black students to attend an integrated high school in Washington more than 50 years ago, has spent her adult life fighting for statehood.

"It hurts. This is my town," she said. "I want my children to have the same rights as everybody else. It's as simple as that."

### **Politics vs. statehood**

Only it's not simple at all when it comes to turning the dream of statehood into reality.

Partisanship is the major hurdle. Republicans largely don't support statehood, because it would mean another liberal-leaning state that could tip the balance of power in the Democrats' favour.

Even if a statehood bill passed the Democrat-controlled House — which it would, as it has strong support from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi — it would fail in the Senate, where Republicans hold the majority.

Brunsmann draws a parallel to the period before the American Civil War when, for every slave state added to the union, a free state would have to be added as well.

"We're almost back in that same situation," Brunsmann said. "It seems like we'd almost have to find a Republican territory to become a state if this was ever going to work."

There are more practical concerns, said Roger Pilon, a scholar at the Cato Institute.

He argued the federal government would become overly dependent on a newly created state for everything from electrical power to snow removal, and that it could endanger the government's ability to function.

Pilon also predicts a logistical nightmare with a new state effectively in charge of a jurisdiction filled with foreign embassies, diplomatic entourages, everyday Washingtonians, not to mention the president himself.

"The Framers [of the constitution] knew what they were doing when they provided for the seat of government that we have," Pilon said. "It has served us well for over two centuries."

For the hundreds of Washingtonians who came to this week's hearing — cramming into two overflow rooms on Capitol Hill and a park to watch the hearing on a big outdoor screen — the status quo isn't good enough.

They know it might be a futile fight, but they're not discouraged, choosing to see D.C.'s transformation from "federal district" to full-blown state as only a matter of time.

"We're operating from a moral high ground," said youth campaigner Ty Hobson-Powell. "What we're doing is not a partisan issue; it's about what's right."

"We just need representation."