

# Roll Call

## DC statehood gets first congressional vote in 27 years

Griffin Connolly

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For the first time in more than a quarter century, Congress has voted on a measure to make most of the area comprising the District of Columbia the 51st state.

The House Committee on Oversight and Reform approved the bill, aptly numbered HR 51, on a party-line 21-16 vote Tuesday after a contentious, hourslong markup.

The bill would give the more than 700,000 residents of the District full congressional representation, with one House member and two senators. Washington is an overwhelmingly Democratic city, and if granted statehood would likely provide the Democratic Party with a boost in both chambers.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland said in a statement Tuesday he would bring the bill to a floor vote “before the summer.” The legislation already has 223 co-sponsors — enough to pass the House — though likely fated for the dustbin of Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s Republican-controlled Senate.

“Congress has two choices: It can continue to exercise undemocratic authority over 700,000 American citizens who live in the nation’s capital ... or it can live up to the nation’s promise and ideals,” said Washington Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton.

Norton, a Democrat, introduced the bill on the first day of the 116th Congress. It was the subject of an initial — and equally contentious — hearing in September.

If enacted, the bill advanced out of the Oversight Committee Tuesday would reconstitute 66 of the 68 square miles of the current District of Columbia as the State of Washington, Douglass Commonwealth. The two square miles that include the Capitol, White House, National Mall, principal federal monuments and federal buildings adjacent to the National Mall would remain the District of Columbia, without electoral rights.

Democrats offered a slate of empirical data points supporting the proposed State of Washington, Douglass Commonwealth’s admission into the Union as the 51st state:

- The District pays more in federal taxes than 22 states, and more per capita than any state.
- More people live in Washington than in Vermont or Wyoming.

- It has a higher GDP per capita than any state in the country.

“The United States is the only democratic country that denies both voting rights in the national legislature and local self-government to the people of its capital,” Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney, a New York Democrat, said in her opening remarks Tuesday. “That is wrong. It violates everything we stand for as Americans.”

Republicans’ arguments against the bill rest largely on constitutional concerns and the District’s murky history of financial self-management and corruption.

Financial management of the city reached a nadir in 1995, forcing Congress to subsume control of the budget for a period of roughly six years to guide it back on track. And the Constitution does not distinguish between the seat of the federal government and the physical land where the government is seated.

“The only way to overcome this problem would be to amend the Constitution,” ranking member Jim Jordan of Ohio said.

Democrats on the Oversight panel dismissed that thread of argument as just another way for Republicans to kick the can down the road on helping to enfranchise the District’s residents.

“Does anyone in this room really think he’d vote for a constitutional amendment?” Rep. Gerry Connolly said of Jordan.

“If not now, when?” the Virginia Democrat said of granting D.C. statehood. “It’s time to right this wrong,” he said.

Democrats swatted down Republican amendments to the bill on Tuesday, including a provision from West Virginia Rep. Carol Miller to set abortion regulations for the proposed state and a measure from Georgia Rep. Jody Hice calling for a constitutional amendment to ratify the state’s entry into the Union.

Congress historically has used varied methods to admit new states into the Union.

Six states — Tennessee, Michigan, Iowa, Oregon, Kansas and Alaska — became states through the “Tennessee Plan,” wherein the territories drafted a constitution and elected senators and representatives without any authorization from Congress. Statehood was then affirmed by congressional vote, according to the Congressional Research Service.

Experts told lawmakers in September that the Supreme Court would likely ultimately decide whether it is constitutional to admit Washington into the Union with full statehood.

“On that constitutional question, I fully grant that there is a credible case on either side of the question,” said the Cato Institute’s Roger Pilon, a witness invited by committee Republicans. “Although, obviously I’m of the view that the better argument is that it will take a constitutional amendment to turn the District of Columbia into our 51st state.”

