



Republican Arguments Against D.C. Statehood Aren't Getting Any Newer—or Any Less Racist

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At Thursday's House committee hearing on D.C. statehood, Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, told D.C. lawmakers they were too incompetent and corrupt to run a state government. The former Ohio State University wrestling coach, who recently orchestrated a cover-up to hide what he knew about a doctor who was sexually abusing athletes, kicked things off by reciting a list of former D.C. public officials who've been accused or convicted of corruption, including Marion Barry, D.C.'s infamous long-serving mayor who was busted for crack possession in 1990. This "cloud of scandal," in Jordan's account, was the defining feature in the political life of a place unsuited to rule itself.

"Any discussion about the future of D.C. would not be complete without a discussion about the district's current challenges," Jordan said, citing the ongoing ethics investigation into the activities of D.C. Councilmember Jack Evans. Jordan brought up the federal oversight board established in 1995 and disbanded in 2001, which temporarily took the district's finances out of the hands of local leaders. "I wish I could say the situation has improved" since then, Jordan said, "but this is not the case."

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, the district's longtime nonvoting delegate to Congress, pointed out that "nobody has seriously questioned Ohio's fitness to be a state" even though it's had plenty of its own corrupt and power-abusing leaders over the years. (She stopped short of dragging Jordan for protecting an alleged molester and lying about it.) Nor has any other city whose budget has been temporarily controlled by an oversight board during a period of near-insolvency been threatened with permanent disenfranchisement.

Efforts to keep home rule out of reach for D.C. have historically been motivated by racist beliefs—chiefly, the idea that a majority-black city, as D.C. was until recently, was unfit to govern itself—and used to enforce racist policies, such as segregation. And so, at Thursday's hearing, Jordan's invocation of Barry was a nod to conservatives who'd like to freeze D.C. in the Barry era in public memory: too corrupt and crack-ridden for the responsibilities of statehood. At times, Jordan and his party peers sounded like stern parents telling a misbehaving child why she wasn't mature enough to visit the mall on her own. The D.C. officials who testified spoke in

sweeping, patriotic language about rights, suffrage, and equal representation; the Republicans met them with condescension and a scolding.

Roger Pilon, a vice president at the libertarian Cato Institute who'd been brought in to testify against statehood, laid the groundwork for his testimony in a 2016 essay he wrote in opposition to statehood. In that piece, he argued that D.C. residents valued their voting rights less than their ability to influence policy “simply by virtue of their daily proximity to the organs and levers of national power.” (Tell that to the janitor who cleans the Senate restrooms.) He also sounded a note of contempt for the self-governing capacity of D.C. residents—or, at least, the D.C. residents of 34 years earlier. “The 58-page constitution that D.C. voters ratified in 1982, including provisions that require the new state to provide jobs or adequate incomes to all city residents and allow firefighters and police the right to strike, does not give confidence,” he wrote.

Republicans have called that old constitution, which was written when Barry made the district's first push for statehood, a liberal manifesto. The article Pilon links to mentions the striking and guaranteed-income provisions only in the context of their waning popularity when the constitution was reconsidered, just five years after it was ratified. When D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser and other local political leaders convened to draft a new one in 2016, they came up with a far more politically neutral document.

But Pilon and his ideological peers chose to make partisan arguments against a caricature of the district rather than face the inconvenient plight of 700,000 Americans who live under taxation without representation. Two hours in on Thursday, when Rep. Gerry Connolly, D-V.A., pointed out Republican efforts to disenfranchise people of color and then refused Pilon's request to back down from saying “it's about race and partisanship,” the crowd applauded at finally hearing the subtext made text.

Till then, through those two hours, several of the Republican committee members had spent their allotted time offering racially coded arguments against equal voting rights and representation for the district's 700,000 or so residents. According to them, D.C.'s politicians were too corrupt, its school system too weak, and its murder rates too high for its residents to warrant representation in the federal legislative bodies that govern their lives.

It's been 26 years since the last time statehood came before Congress, in 1993, when the bill proposing the full enfranchisement of D.C. residents failed in a vote, 277 to 153. Norton said at the time that the vote had “surpassed my greatest expectations,” even though 40 percent of her fellow Democrats had voted against the bill. The bill that came before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform on Thursday, H.R. 51, is poised to fare much better than Norton's previous legislation. It currently has 220 cosponsors— more than enough to pass the House. It almost certainly won't make it to the Senate floor as long as Sen. Mitch McConnell, who's called the prospect of D.C. statehood “full-bore socialism,” is in charge. But it's an important victory— part symbolic, part substantive— for advocates who've been pushing for decades to expand the Overton window on D.C. statehood.

And yet, for all that's changed in D.C. and the country since that first statehood vote, the arguments opponents made at Thursday's hearing were faithful reprises of the 1993 talking points. Back then, Rep. Tom DeLay accused D.C. of having “a hug-a-thug attitude on violent crime” and being “a liberal bastion of corruption and crime.” On Thursday, Glenn Grothman, R-

W.I., said the same thing. He talked about D.C.'s high homicide rates and low student test scores relative to the 50 states—a deceptive and inaccurate comparison, since no existing state is entirely a city.

Grothman also told the D.C. lawmakers in attendance that their recent legalization of sports betting, which could bring loads of money into the city's coffers, was not “a sign you have your act together.” D.C. should be “the easiest city in the country to manage, because you have so many government jobs here,” he said. “It's not like you're a city like I was born in, where you can have manufacturing jobs disappear and real challenges happen.” Grothman was born in Milwaukee, which has its own troubles with disenfranchisement.

For as long as congressional Republicans have been admonishing D.C. lawmakers for being unable to run their own supposedly easy-to-manage city, they've been blocking them from effectively doing so. Congress once banned D.C. from using any public funds—including its own municipal funds—for needle exchange programs, even in the midst of an HIV epidemic; a study found that in the two years after that ban was lifted, the new programs prevented 120 new HIV cases, saving the city \$44 million in lifetime health care costs. (Now that the opioid epidemic has led to rising HIV rates among white injection drug users, Republicans are coming around to syringe exchange programs.) Congress also fought D.C. when it tried to decriminalize marijuana and fund abortion care for low-income women—policies that would have disproportionately supported its black residents.

With this history in mind, and considering McConnell's explicit admission that Republicans should oppose D.C. statehood because of the politics of its residents, it would make sense for statehood supporters to go all in on a racial justice argument for statehood. A few of the Democrats at Thursday's hearing started heading that way. “Yes, it is true that we are more brown and more liberal than some of you, but denying statehood would be unfair no matter who was affected,” Bowser said in her opening statement. “It would be unfair if we were conservatives from a rural district built around agriculture, or an industrial city in the heartland.” She didn't have to say the other part—that rural white conservatives are *over*-enfranchised in the Senate and the Electoral College, and that there's no way the U.S. Congress would have made it to 2019 without giving a sizable majority-white city a single seat in the House.