



Democrat accuses GOP of opposing DC statehood because of 'race and partisanship'

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A Democratic member of the House Oversight Committee on Thursday accused Republicans of opposing an effort to grant statehood to the District of Columbia because of "race and partisanship."

Thursday's hearing by the panel on legislation from the District's non-voting representative in Congress, Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D) marked the first House hearing on D.C. statehood since 1993.

The measure would allow most of what comprises the nation's capital to become a state known as Washington, Douglass Commonwealth. That means the District, like any other state, would have two senators and at least one representative in the House.

Norton's bill would still maintain parts of the District as the seat of the federal government but those would be limited to the areas where the Capitol, White House, Supreme Court and other federal buildings adjacent to the National Mall are located.

Republicans are widely opposed to the proposal because of concerns that D.C. statehood would result in two more Democratic senators — given the left-leaning nature of the diverse city — as well as questions over political corruption in D.C. politics.

Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-Va.), who represents part of the northern Virginia suburbs outside Washington, argued that Republicans' opposition to D.C. statehood is rooted in racism, pointing to GOP efforts to restrict voting rights across the country.

About 46 percent of the population in D.C. is African American, according to Census Bureau data.

"When they say it's not about race and partisanship, you can be sure it's about race and partisanship," Connolly said.

One of the witnesses, Roger Pilon, a constitutional scholar from the libertarian Cato Institute, pushed back against Connolly's assertion.

Pilon acknowledged that "there are partisan elements to this," but insisted that "this is not about race."

"I request that you withdraw that charge," Pilon said.

Connolly gave a one-word reply: "Never."

"It is about race and partisanship," Connolly added amid applause from the audience.

Norton's bill has 220 cosponsors, but they include three other non-voting delegates from the Virgin Islands, Northern Mariana Islands and Guam who could not cast votes for it on the floor.

Top Democratic leaders have also backed D.C. statehood, including Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.).

"There is no excuse for allowing 700,000 American citizens to go without representation in Congress simply because they live in Washington, DC. It's time to finally grant #DCStatehood," Pelosi tweeted on Thursday.

But even if Norton's bill were to pass the House, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) is opposed to the idea.

"They plan to make the District of Columbia a state — that would give them two new Democratic senators — and Puerto Rico a state, that would give them two more new Democratic senators," McConnell said in a Fox News interview in June while deriding Democrats' overall agenda as "socialist."

During Thursday's hearing, the top Republican on the Oversight Committee, Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio), sought to subpoena D.C. Councilman Jack Evans. Evans is under investigation for allegations of using his public office for personal benefit.

"We cannot ignore the elephant in the room," Jordan said. "The District government currently faces serious allegations of misconduct."

Other D.C. officials did testify at Thursday's hearing, including Mayor Muriel Bowser and D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson.

Bowser addressed the GOP arguments that granting D.C. statehood would result in more Democratic lawmakers in Congress.

"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.