

# The Washington Post

## Q and A: D.C. statehood explained

Jenna Portnoy

September 19, 2019

U.S. lawmakers on Thursday held the first hearing on D.C. statehood since 1991. Here is what you need to know:

**Q:** *What was the aim of the hearing?*

**A:** The hearing was an opportunity for members of the House Oversight and Reform Committee to hear testimony and question witnesses about the D.C. statehood bill written by Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D), the District's nonvoting representative in Congress.

With their party in control of the House, Democrats are confident their bill can pass that chamber this session. But Republicans oppose creating a state that would be a Democratic stronghold, and Norton and others acknowledge the legislation has no chance in the GOP-controlled Senate.

"The way in which bills move is one house at a time," Norton said. "I think getting this bill through the House is more than halfway there. So we've got that in the bank."

Her bill has more than 200 co-sponsors, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

The 1991 bill failed badly on the House floor.

**Q:** *What is the argument for statehood?*

**A:** In addition to abiding by a foundational notion — no taxation without representation — statehood would allow true self-government in the nation's capital, supporters say.

Residents elect a chief executive (the mayor) and a legislature (the D.C. Council), but Congress can override laws passed by the District's elected officials.

**Q:** *Can D.C. afford statehood?*

**A:** In 1995, the federal government appointed a control board to manage the city's then-dismal finances, stripping the District government of much of its limited autonomy.

But today's reality is "a far cry from the image many still harbor about the District," D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson (D) said Thursday.

The Revitalization Act, a bill negotiated and passed by a Republican-led Congress as part of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, helped rescue the city from the brink of bankruptcy by shifting certain costs to the federal government.

With 700,000 residents and a thriving tax base, the District can more than support itself financially, he said.

Jeffrey S. DeWitt, the District's chief financial officer, said that some functions currently managed by the federal government would fall to the new state.

*Q: What do opponents say?*

**A:** Roger Pilon, a constitutional scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute, has cited several objections to statehood. The framers did not want a tiny federal enclave surrounded by a single state, as Norton's bill prescribes, he said.

"That is particularly what James Madison feared," he said. "He spoke of dependency and interdependency. The federal government would be depending on a state for all manner of goods and services."

Pilon argued that Congress doesn't have the power to make the District a state simply by passing legislation.

If Norton's bill were to pass, he said, the 23rd Amendment, which gives District residents the right to vote for president, would have to be repealed. Otherwise, the few residents left in the federal enclave — such as the first family and a smattering of others — would control all three of the District's electoral votes, which statehood proponents say should go to the new state.

Pilon also said Maryland would have to agree to make the District a state, because Maryland originally ceded land for the nation's capital — not for "a new state on its border."