



Washington DC fights in Senate hearing to become the 51st state of the union

Senators, representatives and DC mayor argue for proposed state of 'New Columbia' and no taxation without representation in Congress

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Supporters of granting the District of Columbia statehood asked members of a Senate panel on Monday to make the American capital the 51st state in the union.

DC residents lack congressional representation, an injustice statehood supporters compared with denying women and African Americans the right to vote as they urged members on the Senate committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs to consider a proposed measure to make DC into the "state of New Columbia". The few opponents who spoke during the hearing questioned the seriousness of the bill and the constitutionality of allowing DC to become a state.

Although the bill has almost no realistic chance of passing Congress, Senator Tom Carper, the committee's chair and the bill's sponsor, said he scheduled the hearing as a way to restart the conversation on DC statehood.

"When it comes to having a vote in Congress, these men and women really don't count, at least not in the same way. In truth they never have," said the Delaware Democrat during the hearing. "While they bear the full responsibilities of funding the federal government and dealing with the consequences of the laws it enacts, they do not enjoy the benefits and protection of having voting representation in Congress."

This is the first time Congress has dealt with the issue in more than two decades. The last time was in November 1993, when the Democrat-led House defeated a statehood bill in a 277-153 vote. But DC's slow-burning fight to become a state has continued, garnering some notable supporters over the years, including the current president.

Senator Tom Coburn, a Republican from Oklahoma and a ranking member of the committee, agreed DC residents "suffer an injustice" but didn't think this bill offered a realistic solution. He said the bill had no chance of passing Congress and would certainly be "dead on arrival" in the House.

Among the speakers at Monday's hearing who testified in favor of statehood were DC mayor Vincent Gray and district representative Eleanor Holmes Norton. Roger Pilon of Cato Institute, a libertarian thinktank, spoke against the bill.

Gray said DC residents find themselves in the same situation as their forebears who revolted under the motto "No taxation without representation".

"That [motto] is obviously what motivated the creation of America in the first place and hopefully it will motivate the freeing of the people of the District of Columbia from the bondage that we suffer at this stage," he said.

Norton, the district's non-voting congresswoman, said she is reminded of her residents' lesser status on a daily basis: "I feel it when the bell rings and I cannot vote for or on behalf of the 650,000 residents who live in the district."

A representative since 1991, Norton said she always speaks up during floor debates on issues of military involvement and war despite not being able to cast a vote. She said it's unfair that Congress sends citizens who are not fully represented in their government to war.

"I shall never forget the purple fingers of Iraq and Afghanistan that signalled that they now had representation in their national legislatures while our residents who fought and died in those wars and our veterans who came home, came home once again without the same rights they had gone abroad to obtain," she said.

As recently as this year, the United Nations has decried the limited representation for DC residents, calling it a "human rights violation".

Joshua Burch, a DC native and grassroots activist for statehood, said he's not discouraged by the bill's glum prospects. Rather, he sees the hearing as an important first step in developing a dialogue around DC statehood.

"As a lifelong citizen of the District of Columbia this is the only bill that will make me an equal American citizen," he said in a statement. "As a father this is the only bill that will give my children what they rightly deserve: equality."

The District of Columbia

More than two centuries ago, the US states of Maryland and Virginia ceded portions of their land to create the District of Columbia. The district, named after the country's first president George Washington and explorer Christopher Columbus, was formed into the seat of America's young democracy.

In 1800, Congress moved the nation's capital to Washington DC from Philadelphia. Soon after, Congress passed the Organic Act of 1801, which officially brought the district under control of the federal government. No longer part of a state, residents of the district lost their right to vote

for members of Congress and, at the time, for president. Nearly half a century later, the land ceded by Virginia to form DC was returned, decreasing the district's size by nearly a third.

Another century passed before the Constitution was amended to grant DC residents the right to vote in presidential elections. The 23rd amendment awarded the nation's capital three votes in the electoral college, whose members are responsible for selecting the US president. In 1964, DC residents voted for the first time since 1800 in a presidential election.

About a decade later, Congress granted the city home rule, allowing for the creation of a local government. DC now has a mayor and a 13-member council. To this day, DC residents lack representation in Congress, save for a non-voting delegate to the House of Representatives and a "shadow" delegation.

'New Columbia'

The proposed 'New Columbia' would form the nation's 51st state, created from land that is now the District of Columbia. However, certain areas would remain a part of the district, including principal federal monuments, the White House, the capitol, the supreme court, the federal executive, legislative and judicial office buildings located adjacent to the mall as well as certain military property.

As proposed, DC's mayor would become the governor, and the council would be transformed into a state legislature. The district's residents would be able to elect voting members of Congress.

Before statehood could happen, there are significant constitutional and legal concerns that would have to be considered, including what to do about the 23rd amendment. There is also a question about whether Maryland, the original owner of the land, would have to give its consent for DC to become a state.

Constitutionality aside, partisan politics practically guarantee the bill will not pass Congress. DC voters are overwhelming Democratic, and congressional Republicans are not likely to approve a bill that would hand over two Senate seats and a House seat to Democrats.

In the infinitesimal possibility this bill finds its way onto the president's desk, DC statehood would be in the hands of a statehood supporter.

"I'm in DC, so I'm for it," Obama [said](#), speaking at a public school in Washington in July.

He continued: "Folks in DC pay taxes like everybody else. They contribute to the overall well-being of the country like everybody else. They should be represented like everybody else. And it's not as if Washington DC is not big enough compared to other states. There has been a long movement to get DC statehood, and I've been for it for quite some time."