

# Roll Call

## Lieberman plans ‘head and heart’ appeal at DC statehood Senate hearing

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Statehood for the District of Columbia is getting a hearing in the Senate for just the second time in recent memory — and Joe Lieberman is right in the middle of it.

The last time Lieberman took a seat in front of this committee, he was the chairman. Now the former Connecticut senator is back to work on some unfinished business.

“I’m really trying to get into people’s head and heart,” the political independent said in a phone interview ahead of Tuesday’s meeting of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

People in Washington deserve full representation, and while the issue has become polarized, it doesn’t have to be that way, he plans to tell his former colleagues.

It’s a tough sell in the bitterly divided Senate, but Lieberman is counting on his pedigree to help him sound convincing. For years he survived and even thrived in the uncomfortable in-between spaces of Washington, making his name as an unrelenting moderate. He earned some enemies, but also grudging admiration.

“I’m coming in as somebody who worked very hard across party lines — and sometimes to my detriment in my own party,” said Lieberman, who listed himself as an independent Democrat by the time he left the Senate in 2013.

“Joe Lieberman may be the least partisan [senator] I’ve ever worked with,” said Sen. Thomas R. Carper, D-Del. “For him, it’s a matter of doing what’s right.”

Carper took up the mantle when Lieberman retired, trying to make Washington the 51st state. So far, that has proved a thankless and largely uneventful quest in the Senate, despite rapid progress on the other side of the Capitol.

The House passed a bill in April to make the District a state called “Washington, Douglass Commonwealth,” in honor of abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

But advocates barely paused to celebrate. Even with a record 45 co-sponsors, the bill is a long shot in the Senate, since it would struggle to overcome the 60-vote filibuster threshold.

### **Mending the tear**

The witness list on Tuesday says a lot about how Senate Democrats are approaching the issue. Lieberman will set the tone for the hearing, delivering introductory remarks along with D.C. Democratic Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton.

His presence is not just a blast from the past. Lieberman is supposed to be an ambassador of sorts, reaching out to Republicans and moderate Democrats.

“There’s got to be a lot of pressure on the Republican senators not to even think about D.C. statehood because of the short-term calculation that D.C. statehood would benefit Democrats,” the former senator said.

His job is to speak from a place of empathy while also making a moral appeal.

“I’d hoped that at a time when unfortunately there’s too much racial division in our society again that adopting statehood for the District would be one way to close the gap, mend the tears,” he said.

Advocates have framed statehood as a civil rights issue, highlighting the role of racism and voter suppression in keeping the District and its roughly 700,000 residents without meaningful representation in Congress. Seeing it that way shouldn’t be partisan, said Lieberman, who attended the March on Washington and other civil rights events in the 1960s.

But Lieberman’s own legislative efforts serve as something of a cautionary tale. He helped lead a promising push in 2009 to give Washington a voting member of the House, working with Utah GOP Sen. Orrin G. Hatch on a package that would have also added another member for Utah. That deal ultimately fell apart, and he ended his final term with a symbolic gesture, introducing a full-blown D.C. statehood bill in the Senate for the first time in decades.

The other speakers Tuesday will bring a mix of optimism and pragmatism, but two prominent voices didn’t make the cut.

“I have worked on this issue tirelessly for the last 15 years and to disregard my testimony is outrageous,” Michael D. Brown said in a press release.

As one of the District’s two elected shadow senators, Brown spends his days advocating full representation in Congress — and he was there to testify back in 2014, the last time a Senate committee held a hearing on D.C. statehood.

Paul Strauss, D.C.'s other shadow senator who also won't be testifying Tuesday, remembers that hearing, including the spotty attendance from lawmakers, who popped in and out of the room or didn't show up at all. He expects turnout to be better this time.

"If they're paying attention, they're going to be given a lot to think about," Strauss said of the committee members.

With the House already in line and a Democratic president in the White House, this Senate hearing "is where the ballgame is," despite the long odds, he said.

### **Constitutional questions**

D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser will also appear on Tuesday, reprising her performance at a House hearing in the spring. The push for statehood is a matter of racial justice, she is expected to say — not a power grab dreamed up by Democrats hoping to control two new seats in the Senate.

Other witnesses are National Urban League President Marc H. Morial, law professors Richard Primus of the University of Michigan and Derek T. Muller of the University of Iowa, and the Cato Institute's Roger Pilon.

Pilon, like many conservatives and even moderate West Virginia Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin III, has long argued that Washington statehood cannot be done by statute but only by constitutional amendment.

Many Democrats dismiss the constitutional argument and point to the Constitution's admission clause, granting Congress the power to admit new states to the union.

"If it was constitutional the first 37 times, maybe it's still constitutional now," Carper said.

All eyes will be on Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, the only Democrat on the committee who has not signed on to the bill. (Other holdouts in the Democratic Caucus are her fellow Arizonan Mark Kelly, Manchin and Maine independent Angus King.)

Sinema's office did not respond when asked whether she would show up for the hearing or what she hopes to hear from the witnesses as she looks to make a decision.

That's where someone like Lieberman could come in handy, said Carper, who is "thrilled" that his former colleague is coming and believes he can make a difference with lawmakers still on the fence.

"Unless we try, we'll never know," Carper said.