The Right to Vote for All: Residents of the District of Columbia

An Inquiry Pack to Accompany LegalTimelines.org

Inquiry Question: Has the fight for suffrage in the District of Columbia been successful?

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Developed by
Introduction: Suffrage in the District of Columbia

“No taxation without representation!” These days, this is a phrase most often seen in U.S. history textbooks. It became famous during the American Revolution, when colonists protesting paying taxes did not have the ability to vote for delegates who could represent their interests in the British Parliament. It is also a phrase echoed on license plates in Washington, D.C. today. They currently read: “End Taxation Without Representation.” Why? District of Columbia residents have limited government representation compared to residents of the 50 states.

In 1789, Article I, Section 8, Clause 17 of the U.S. Constitution established federal rule of the District of Columbia. It said, “Congress shall have the Power To...exercise exclusive Legislation in all Cases whatsoever, over such District...become the Seat of the Government of the United States.” The founders wrote this into the Constitution out of a fear that District of Columbia residents might otherwise have too much influence over the federal government.

Residents of Washington, D.C. had no representation in the federal government from 1789 to 1961. They did not have representation in Congress, nor were their voices heard in presidential elections because the District had no Electoral College votes. Then, in 1961, the country ratified the 23rd Amendment, which gave Electoral College votes to the District of Columbia. In 1970, the District was allowed one non-voting delegate to represent residents in Congress. The delegate can serve on committees, speak on the House floor, introduce bills, and offer amendments, but cannot vote while on a committee or in passing legislation. Many District residents question whether a non-voting delegate is representative at all.

The structure of Washington, D.C.’s local government changed many times from the early 1800s, when the District’s boundaries were first drawn, through the 1970s. At times during this period, residents were able to elect a mayor. At other times during this period the president of the United States appointed the mayor. It was not until 1973, when Congress passed an act known as the Home Rule Act, that the District set up a local government structure and residents were given the right to vote for local representation including their mayor and council members. Still, the Home Rule Act placed a serious restriction on the Washington, D.C. government—a restriction not seen with any other local government. The Home Rule Act required that Congress approve all laws the District of Columbia government passed and gave Congress the final say over the District’s budget.

Today, many Washington, D.C. residents continue to advocate for full representation, including voting membership in Congress and full control over District laws and budget. Some residents also advocate for statehood, which would provide the District with full representation and local control. One of their arguments is about Washington, D.C.’s population, which is estimated to be more than 700,000 as of 2019. This is larger than the populations of two U.S. states: Wyoming and Vermont.

The lack of full representation in the District of Columbia has a disproportionate impact on people of color. Black people comprise 47% of the District’s population, Hispanic people 11%, and Asian people 4%. Continuing the status quo disenfranchises people of color at a higher rate than it does White residents.
A Presidential Vote for the District

Source A: Joint Resolution Proposing the 23rd Amendment (1960)

Source A Transcription:

JOINT RESOLUTION

Proposing an amendment to the Constitution of the United States granting representation in the electoral college to the District of Columbia.

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled (two-thirds of each House concurring therein), That the following article is hereby proposed as an amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which shall be valid to all intents and purposes as part of the Constitution only if ratified by the legislatures of three-fourths of the several States within seven years from the date of its submission by the Congress:

“Article —

“SECTION 1. The District constituting the seat of Government of the United States shall appoint in such manner as Congress may direct:

...
“A number of electors of President and Vice President equal to the whole number of Senators and Representatives in Congress to which the District would be entitled if it were a State, but in no event more than the least populous State; they shall be in addition to those appointed by the States, but they shall be considered, for the purposes of the election of President and Vice President, to be electors appointed by a State; and they shall meet in the District and perform such duties as provided by the twelfth article of amendment.

“SEC. 2. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation”.

**Source A Information:** This image of the joint resolution proposing the 23rd Amendment is housed in the National Archives. Tennessee senator Estes Keyfauver first introduced the Amendment in 1959. After both houses of Congress adopted a revised resolution, it was passed along to state legislatures to be ratified. With support from politicians in both the Democratic and Republican parties, the ratification was complete by the end of March 1961. Nine states took no action to ratify the amendment and one state, Arkansas, rejected the amendment.
Source B: “It Hardly Seems Possible” Editorial Cartoon by Herb Block (1961)

Source B Information: Herb Block was a popular editorial cartoonist. After his childhood in Chicago, Block worked for newspapers in Illinois, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C. His longest stay was at The Washington Post, where he worked for 55 years. Block drew several cartoons supporting full voting representation for Washington, D.C. residents. The Washington Post published this cartoon on March 19, 1961. (A 1961 Herblock Cartoon, © The Herb Block Foundation)

Questions to Consider for Sources A and B:

1. Observe: What do you notice first about each source? What images and words do you see in the editorial cartoon?

2. Reflect: How are these two sources related? What do the images in the editorial cartoon represent? Do you think editorial cartoons, like the one above, can influence political beliefs? Why or why not? Do you think they would be more influential than sources like speeches, photographs, TV advertising campaigns, etc.?

3. Question: What questions do you have about one or both sources?
District of Columbia Home Rule

Source C: The District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization Act (1973)\textsuperscript{3}

Source C Information: The District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization Act (also known as the DC Home Rule Act) was passed in December 1973. Above are two excerpts from the 63-page act. The top excerpt shares the purpose for the bill’s passage. The bottom excerpt illustrates an exception to full independent governance in the District: that Congress remains the ultimate decision-maker in the passage of local District laws and spending.
Source D: “Gee—It Seems Just Like A Dream!” Editorial Cartoon by Herb Block (1946)⁴

Source D Information: Herb Block was a popular editorial cartoonist. After his childhood in Chicago, Block worked for newspapers in Illinois, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C. His longest stay was at The Washington Post, where he worked for 55 years. Block drew several cartoons supporting full voting representation for Washington, D.C. residents. The Washington Post published this cartoon on January 25, 1946. The woman, wearing a tattered dress and in a dirty house, holds flowers with a tag that says, “Truman Recommendation for District Suffrage.” President Truman advocated for District home rule and voting rights for District residents in presidential elections. (A 1946 Herblock Cartoon, © The Herb Block Foundation)
Questions to Consider for Sources C and D:

1. **Observe:** What do you notice first about each source? What images and words do you see in the editorial cartoon?

2. **Reflect:** How are these two sources related? What do the images in the editorial cartoon represent? What is the message of the editorial cartoon? Do you think Herb Block, the cartoonist, would have supported the DC Home Rule Act, which passed almost 20 years after this cartoon was published? Why or why not?

3. **Question:** What questions do you have about one or both sources?
District of Columbia Statehood?


Source E Information: Since the mid-1980s, dozens of District of Columbia statehood bills have been introduced in Congress. Just two of these bills made it through committee and on to the House floor. The first time was in November 1993, when it was defeated by a vote of 277 to 153. The second time was in 2020, when the House voted 232 to 180 to approve the act and sent it to the Senate. The term ended without a
vote. Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton, Washington, D.C.’s non-voting representative re-introduced the act in January 2021, and Senator Tom Carper of Delaware introduced the companion bill into the Senate. Action on these bills is currently outstanding (as of July 2021).

Source F: “Still No Representation for You” Editorial Cartoon by Tom Toles (2010)

Source F Information: This Tom Toles editorial cartoon was published in The Washington Post in October 2010. The building depicted in the cartoon is the U.S. Capitol, where elected representatives in the Senate and House of Representatives work. The sentence in the bottom right mentions the “Tea Party,” which was a movement that branched out of the Republican Party. The Tea Party did not advocate for District representation in Congress, despite drawing its name from the Boston Tea Party, a 1773 event where colonists protested against their taxation by the British government without political representation. (TOLES © 2010 The Washington Post. Reprinted with permission of ANDREWS MCMEEL SYNDICATION. All rights reserved.)

Questions to Consider for Sources E and F:

1. Observe: What do you notice first about each source? What images and words do you see in the editorial cartoon?

2. Reflect: How are these two sources related? What do the images in the editorial cartoon represent? How did the history of suffrage in the District of Columbia lead to the push for statehood?

3. Question: What questions do you have about one or both sources?
Inquiry Question

Has the fight for suffrage in the District of Columbia been successful?

In your answer, explain how you would define success, then use the timeline and the available sources to support your claim about whether it has been successful.
Extension Inquiry Question

Should the District of Columbia be granted statehood?

Use the suggested resources and/or your own research in your response.

Suggested Resources:

• The District of Columbia’s local government officially advocates in favor of statehood. Explore the District’s webpage, including its arguments in favor of statehood, its supporters, news and press, and how advocates can take action.

• Congressional Digest offers a short article on the “Pros & Cons of D.C. Statehood.”

• Many Republican politicians have disagreed with statehood for the District of Columbia. What does the D.C. Republican Party say about statehood and full voting representation?

• In June 2020, PBS NewsHour reported on “How Washington, D.C. could become a state – and why it probably won’t.”
Notes


