

Hearing on “H.R. 51: Making D.C. the 51st State”
House Committee on Oversight and Reform
10:00 AM, Monday, March 22, 2021
Statement for the Record
Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-VA)

Chairwoman Maloney, thank you for holding today’s hearing on the Washington, D.C. Admission Act (H.R. 51). As a longtime supporter of D.C. statehood, I commend Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton for introducing this bill and for her tireless efforts to fight for the rights of all District residents.

Today, within the borders of this country, which prides itself on democratic self-governance, more than 700,000 of our fellow American citizens are subject to the very endeavors against which our founding fathers rebelled – taxation without representation. These American citizens have no Senators to deliberate and vote on their behalf. They have one Delegate in the House, and, despite her constant and fierce advocacy, she is prohibited from voting and representing her constituents on the House floor. Citizens of Washington D.C. — citizens of the United States — have lived without representation in Congress for far too long.

Our founding fathers denied the franchise to many Americans. Centuries of work continue as we fight for unfettered access to the polls, mail in balloting, and removal of limits on qualifying voter identification. Voter suppression is ubiquitous in this nation and it has a unique history in our nation’s capital. Denying D.C. residents the right to vote may have started out as a dinner table compromise between Hamilton and Jefferson, but it has grown into the intentional suppression of largely black and brown voters. Republicans are deliberately adopting an inaccurate constitutional analysis that they think justifies continuation of an archaic, racist policy that strips nearly three quarters of a million Americans of their constitutional rights.

The Washington, D.C. Admissions Act (H.R. 51) would catalyze democratic principles by admitting the Washington, Douglass Commonwealth as the nation’s 51st state. The legislation would provide DC residents with representation in the Senate and voting rights in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Under this bill, the two square miles that include the Capitol Building, White House, National Mall, principal federal monuments, and federal buildings adjacent to the National Mall would remain the District of Columbia. The other 66-square-mile area currently within the District’s boundary line would be vested with long-overdue statehood and the right to vote in each chamber of Congress.

Since its inception, Washington, D.C. has lacked the authority to govern its own people and implement local laws that reflect its culture, history, and unique population. Upon enactment of this bill, present-day District executive, legislative, and judicial officials would be deemed officials of the state. The Mayor, members of the Council, and the Chair of the Council would be deemed the Governor, members of the Legislative Assembly, and Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, respectively. Congress would no longer have veto authority over D.C. laws and policies.

In the past, Congress has considered three factors when determining admission to the United States. Below I lay out those factors and provide evidence that in every case, the future Washington, Douglas Commonwealth has exceeded all requirements:

Q: Do the residents have a commitment to self-government?

A: Yes. On October 28, 2016, the D.C. Council adopted a state constitution and boundaries. On November 8, 2016, D.C. residents approved an advisory referendum requesting that the Council petition Congress for statehood. Under the terms of the referendum, residents agreed to statehood, a constitution, boundaries, and a representative democracy.

Q: Do the residents support statehood?

A: The residents of the District demonstrated their support for statehood when they overwhelmingly approved the November 2016 referendum with more than 83 percent in favor.

Q: Does the proposed state have sufficient resources and population to support itself and its share of the costs to be part of the federal government?

A: The District currently has more than 712,000 residents. Two states have smaller populations: Vermont and Wyoming. The District pays more in federal taxes than 21 states and pays more in federal taxes per capita than any state, and has a higher per capita personal income and GDP than any state.

The District's fiscal year 2020 budget was \$15.5 billion, which is a larger budget than 12 states. Less than one percent of the budget consists of congressional appropriations not available to other jurisdictions. If it were a state, the District could certainly support itself financially and administratively.

You may hear many arguments against D.C. statehood today. Some will tell you that residents can 'vote with their feet' and just move to a new state. But I ask you if our founding father's solution was to move back to England? Why should D.C. residents have to uproot their lives and move their families just to enjoy their rights as citizens of this nation? Other arguments are thinly masked partisan panic and racism.

Some will tell you making D.C. a state is unconstitutional. That assertion is plainly wrong. This bill solves any issues of constitutionality by maintaining the District of Columbia as the seat of power while creating the Douglas Commonwealth as a state on equal footing with its 50 fellows. Congress has created states in the past using this exact method. It is not novel. And it is constitutional.

The people of Washington D.C. have the ability, desire, and funding to be a state. They check every box and pass every test. It is time to vest D.C. residents with a voice in the House and the Senate. Withholding representation from Americans should trouble anyone from any party. We can and should enact this remedy and move a step closer to our goal of a representative democracy.

I thank the Chairwoman for holding today's hearing, and I thank Ms. Norton for leading the charge to grant equity and long-overdue representation to her constituents. This hearing serves as an important next step to ensuring democracy for all. The citizens in the District deserve their rights – this is a question of justice and equality, and the answer is clear.