

Statement of Congressman Gerald E. Connolly (VA-11)
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Full Committee Business Meeting
Wednesday, April 14, 2021

Chairwoman Maloney, thank you for holding this important business meeting. At today's meeting, we seek to advance H.R. 51, the Washington, D.C. Admission Act, and with it the voting rights of more than 700,000 Americans. We will do so despite massive resistance from my colleagues on the other side of the aisle whose attacks on voting rights are echoes of an ugly chapter in our nation's history. I commend Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton for introducing this bill, which passed the House in the 116th Congress, and for her tireless efforts to fight for the rights of District residents.

Today, within the borders of this country, which prides itself on democratic self-governance, nearly three quarters of a million of our fellow American citizens are subject to the very transgression 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. The 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 right to vote to many Americans. Centuries of work continue as we fight for unfettered access to the franchise. Voter suppression is widespread 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 an unintended consequence of a dinner table compromise between Hamilton, Madison, 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 700,000 Americans of their constitutional rights.

The Washington, D.C. Admissions Act (H.R. 51) would help us live our democratic principles by admitting the Washington, Douglass Commonwealth as the nation's 51st state. The legislation would provide D.C. 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 federal district. 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.

In the past, Congress has considered three factors when determining a state's admission to the United States:

- Do the residents have a commitment to self government?;
- Do the residents support statehood?; and
- 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?

To each of these questions, the residents of the District of Columbia offer a strong and resounding yes.

The residents of the District of Columbia have been fighting for full representation in Congress and for self-governance for 200 years, demonstrating an unrelenting commitment to self-government.

In 2016, the people of the District demonstrated their support for statehood when they overwhelmingly approved a referendum requesting that the City Council petition Congress for statehood, with more than 86% of voters in favor.

The District's population is greater than that of two states: Vermont and Wyoming. Its \$15.5 billion annual budget is larger than 12 other states' budgets. The residents of the District pay more in taxes than the residents of 21 other states.

When our Founding Fathers adopted the Constitution in 1787, they knew that our nation needed a capital and envisioned a small administrative enclave. But they could not agree where to place it. In fact, it was at that famous dinner at Thomas Jefferson's home with Alexander Hamilton and James Madison at which the Founders hammered out a compromise: Hamilton got the new nation to pay lingering state debts and the national capital would be in the South – where Jefferson and Madison wanted it. The Founders never intended to deprive District residents of the right to vote.

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 fellow states. In fact, the Admissions Clause of the Constitution gives Congress full authority to admit new states. Further, all 37 new states were admitted by simple legislation rather than a constitutional amendment. It is not novel. And it is constitutional.

Some have argued that we should simply give the parts of the District that would comprise Washington, Douglas Commonwealth back to Maryland, the state that originally donated the land we today call the District of Columbia. But this option ignores the District's independent political history and identity. And Maryland has never sought nor does it now seek this resolution.

Let's call this Republican opposition what it is. You can be sure when they say their massive resistance is not about race and partisanship, that it is precisely about race and partisanship. And the results are tragic for the people of the District of Columbia and the nation.

I thank the Chairwoman for holding today's business meeting. Failure to grant the residents of the District a vote would be a terrible blow to our democracy. I thank Ms. Norton for leading the charge to grant equity and long-overdue representation to her residents. This bill serves as an important and historical step in ensuring democracy for all.