

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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Opening Statement Chairman Elijah E. Cummings

Hearing on “H.R. 51: Making D.C. the 51st State” September 19, 2019

Good morning. I am extremely proud that our Committee is holding the first hearing on D.C. statehood in the House of Representatives in more than 25 years. Neither chamber of Congress has ever passed a D.C. statehood bill. I hope ours will be the first. H.R. 51 now has 220 cosponsors, which is a record for any previous D.C. statehood bill. For the first time in a generation, there is real and sustained momentum behind this effort.

This legislation would fulfill the promise of democracy for more than 700,000 Americans who call Washington, D.C. their home.

D.C. residents are American citizens. They fight honorably to protect our nation overseas. They pay taxes. Not many people know this, but D.C. pays more in total federal taxes than 22 states. And it pays more per capita than any state in the nation. D.C. residents have all the responsibilities of citizenship, but they have no congressional voting rights and only limited self-government.

These fundamental disparities for hundreds of thousands of Americans are inconsistent with the core principles embodied in our Constitution. When our nation was founded, it was based on the belief that no people should be subjected to taxation without representation or be governed without their consent.

The Boston Tea Party was one of the most famous illustrations of this fight—refusing to accept laws and taxes in which we had no say. Everyone on this panel, in this room, and across this country should be able to agree with this core value. Even our colleagues today in the modern-day Tea Party movement continue to pay homage to this bedrock principle.

There is nothing more fundamental in a democracy than the right to vote. As the Supreme Court has said:

No right is more precious in a free country than that of having a voice in the election of those who make the laws under which, as good citizens, we must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined.

In President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s 1956 State of the Union address, he said this:

Once again I ask the Congress to join with me in demonstrating our belief in the right of suffrage. I renew my request that the principle of self-government be extended and the right of suffrage granted to the citizens of the District of Columbia.

Today, more than 60 years after President Eisenhower said those words, D.C. residents overwhelmingly support statehood. In 2016, an astonishing 86 percent voted in favor of becoming a state.

Congress now has an opportunity to live up to the Constitution's goals. Statehood will give D.C. residents full and equal democratic rights.

Unfortunately, there is not one Republican cosponsor of this bill. In June, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell called D.C. statehood "full-bore socialism." I don't know what this means. We have 50 states now, and nobody has ever claimed that adding one to our union and giving its representatives in Congress a vote was somehow evidence of socialism.

The truth is that most of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle oppose D.C. statehood because they believe it could dilute their power. In 2016, then-Ohio Governor John Kasich was very blunt about this. He said: "What it really gets down to if you want to be honest is because they know that's just more votes in the Democratic Party."

The right to democracy should not be contingent on party registration. Today, I urge all Members of this panel to rise above our partisan differences and think through this issue on the merits. I urge everyone to have a respectful and robust debate, with the fundamental goals of our Founding Fathers at the forefront of our debate.

As President Abraham Lincoln declared in the Gettysburg Address, a true democracy is "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

I thank all our witnesses for being here today. I also thank the people of the District of Columbia who have shown so much drive and determination, many of whom are watching today's historic hearing with great interest.

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