

Chair Castro and other members of the Senate executive committee:

My name is Colleen K. Connell. I am the Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois. On behalf of the ACLU of Illinois, I offer testimony in support of House Joint Resolution 16. House Joint Resolution 16 addresses a serious flaw in our democracy — the lack of meaningful representation for the more than 700,000 residents of the District of Columbia.

People who live in Washington, D.C. are just like those from across the State of Illinois. They are veterans, nurses, grocery store clerks, teachers, family members, neighbors, and volunteers. Many of these individuals served their community with the same sense of pride and heroism that we have seen people serve residents across Illinois during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each of these people deserve the same for voting rights as every other American.

The ongoing denial of full voting rights for the residents of DC, most of whom are Black and Brown, is an egregious example of voter suppression which is sweeping our country today.

This is not a coincidence. The hard truth is that the denial of statehood for DC residents for more than 200 years is rooted in racism. In 1867 right after the Civil War, President Andrew Johnson vetoed a bill that would have granted citizens of DC the right to vote, including Black residents. Congress overrode the veto, briefly granting notable and historic political influence to Black Washingtonians. But just as Black voters started to exercise their political power in DC, Congress quickly replaced DC's local government with federally appointed commissioners, blocking the heavily Black region from having full voting rights or control over its own government.

Denying D.C. statehood means denying D.C. residents autonomy. D.C. doesn't have control over its own laws or even full control over its own criminal justice system. Unlike every other state, D.C. cannot pass its own laws without "congressional review," something Congress has repeatedly used to block the will of the people in D.C. Congress is also able to enact and impose laws for D.C. residents, without any input from D.C. residents themselves -- something Congress does frequently through forced "riders" on D.C.'s budget every year. Some of the many examples of how Congress has stepped in to block the will of the people in D.C. include:

- In 1998, Congress blocked D.C. from using its own funds to pay for an HIV/Needle Exchange Programs, stalling the program by nearly a decade and costing D.C. residents' lives and money.
- In 1989, Congress introduced the Dornan Amendment, which to this day still blocks D.C. from using its own local tax dollars to provide abortion coverage for individuals enrolled in Medicaid--something that all other states are free to do.
- In 1992, the D.C. Council legalized same-sex domestic partnerships in the Health Benefits Expansion Act, but Congress refused to allow D.C to fund the measure until 2002, delaying benefits of the act for a decade.

- In 1981, the D.C. Council repealed the District's death penalty. In 1992, Congress ordered a referendum in D.C. in an attempt to reinstate the death penalty in the District.
- In 1981, Congress overturned legislation to decriminalize same sex activity in D.C., stalling D.C.'s effort to remove a discriminatory law against L.G.T.B.Q people by more than a decade.

How would the members of this Committee feel if every piece of legislation you passed during this session were sent to Congress for review?

As of December 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates D.C.'s population has grown to 712,000. That's more than the populations of both Vermont and Wyoming, and it's comparable to the populations of Alaska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Delaware. Among D.C.'s voting population today are more than 11,000 active-duty service members and more than 30,000 veterans, all of whom are being denied their full voting rights simply because they live in D.C. These service members risk their lives to protect the rights of Americans, yet they are denied their own full rights at home.

It is long past time for D.C. to be granted statehood. Making D.C. a state is not a partisan issue, it is a campaign for equal civil rights. It is a democratic effort to re-enfranchise more than 712,000 Americans who have been wrongly denied their full voting rights for more than 200 years. Every member of our state legislature, every member of the U.S. Congress, and every person who believes in our Democracy and equal rights should support D.C. statehood.

The ACLU of Illinois encourages you to pass this resolution and add your voice to those demanding statehood for our fellow Americans in Washington, DC. It is time for this historic wrong to be corrected.