



DC Primary Up First Statehood Still the Issue

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By The NorthStar News Staff

Residents of Nation's Capital Seek Full Citizenship Rights

*Publisher's Note: The District of Columbia presidential primary is **nonbinding**, therefore not tying delegates to the outcome of the election. This arrangement came into being by a one vote margin of the District's local Democratic committee after significant pressure from the Democratic National Committee. The result is that the presidential primary in the nation's capital will now take a back seat to the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary.*

Contrary to the picture that is being presented in the media, the nation's first presidential primary will not be held in Iowa or New Hampshire. It is the District of Columbia's primary and it will be held on January 13. The low profile given the District's Democratic presidential nominating process is a further example of how the rights of its citizens, mostly Black and poor, have been discarded at a time when the present occupant of the White House is promoting democracy and self-determination for Iraq. Equally noteworthy is that the majority of Democratic candidates have chosen to bypass the primary, leaving only Rev. Al Sharpton, Rep. Dennis Kucinich, and former Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun spending any time addressing issue of concern to the residents of the nation's capital. This slight by Democrats is all the more offensive when one considers that the party's eventual nominee cannot win in November 2004 without a significant Black turnout.

While District residents are naturally concerned about the plethora of issues that occupy the attention of most Americans, the citizenship status of residents continues to be at the forefront of DC activists. What troubles many DC residents and civil rights advocates is that in the shadow of our nation's capitol, over half a million residents are denied full representation in Congress. While minimal steps were taken to give the District's delegate in the House of Representatives a greater voice in committee, the right to cast votes on bills on final passage remains elusive. Also, unlike other states that have a smaller population than Washington DC, the residents of the nation's capitol do not have representation in the United States Senate. Still, District residents pay federal taxes despite the lack of full representation.

The District of Columbia presidential primary offers residents of the capital to once again shine a light on this injustice. In this past Saturday's DC presidential debate all three participants – Sharpton, Kucinich, and Moseley-Braun – expressed unflinching support for statehood. Ironically, this issue and their response is muted by the indifference the media has shown for the District's primary. News outlets have leaped over the District as if the concerns of its residents, and their political status, are of no consequence. Despite the media's reluctance to provide coverage of the first presidential primary of the political season, voters who turnout in the District of Columbia will at least have the opportunity to register their preferences through the ballot box. And supporters of political self-determination of the nation's capital will have an opportunity to point out the contradictions inherent in the District's political status as compared to claims being made by our government that it will bring those same rights denied our citizens to a people in a faraway land.

Washington DC as a Homeland

Washington DC is much more than gargantuan federal office buildings and neo-classical architecture. It is home to some 600,000 permanent citizens in addition to the transient population employed by the federal government. As our nation grew in size so did our center of government. However, for Washington residents the full rights of United States citizens as expressed in the Constitution did not accompany this growth. Today we find a city whose citizens are still burdened with the historical conflict of taxation without representation.

In a feeble attempt to address this contradiction, Congress passed the Non-Voting Delegate Act in 1971 and civil rights activist Walter Fauntroy was elected the District of Columbia's first "Congressman." As a non-voting "Delegate", Fauntroy represented the District in the House of Representatives but had no voting rights. District citizens could pay taxes but they

would not be allowed a “vote” on the floor.

Washington, DC was granted limited home rule in 1973, thereby installing Congress as “caretaker and guardian” of the city. This arrangement has allowed for limited independence and virtually no self-determination for the city. Essentially, DC remained a “ward” of the federal government and her operations were still entirely dependent upon Congressional budget approval. Additionally, Congress maintained authority over District courts and veto power over any laws passed by the local government.

1975 saw the election of Walter Washington as the District’s first mayor. This was a symbolic gesture with no real consequences on the issue of citizenship rights for the District’s residents. The election of civil rights activist and District Councilman Marion Barry held greater promise for a grassroots movement to establish full home rule for the citizens of Washington, DC. However, full home rule and self determination remained a dream deferred for city residents.

Representative Fauntroy introduced the DC Voting Rights amendment to Congress in 1978. The amendment (See [DC Voting Rights Amendment](#)) would have given District residents full voting representation in both houses and was approved. It was eventually defeated in 1985 as only 16 of the necessary 38 states needed to ratify the amendment approved the measure.

A second effort put forth in 1980 when residents of Washington, DC approved an initiative to petition Congress for statehood. District of Columbia voters approved a preliminary draft of a “Constitution for the State of New Columbia” in 1982. The House Committee on the District of Columbia approved HR 51, the DC Statehood bill, in 1989.

HR 51 called for the division of the District into two distinct jurisdictions: a national “Service Area” of roughly nine square miles would incorporate the federal executive, legislative, and judicial buildings, and all federal monuments and institutions. This area would still be called Washington, DC. The state of *New Columbia* would have included the remaining commercial and residential areas, which cover an area of approximately 60 square miles. There is no constitutional restriction that would have prohibited the remaining land to be annexed as a state.

Opponents of the New Columbia legislation included President George H. Bush and the leadership of the Republican Party. Not insignificantly, President George W. Bush had license plates that expressed support for DC statehood – “Taxation with Representation” - removed from the presidential limousine when he took office in 2001. The plates had been authorized by President Bill Clinton as a show of support for statehood for the District. Opponents of DC statehood contend that Washington DC was meant to serve only as the seat of the United States government. This argument would be entirely valid if it were not for the fact that over the course of time close to three quarters of a million citizens have established permanent residency in the District. Washington, DC is obviously more than just a federal center. Hypocritically, at the same time Republicans opposed DC statehood some were arguing for statehood for Puerto Rico.

Taxation without Representation

Taxation was, and continues to be, at the heart of the DC statehood debate. Under HR 51 federal employees working in the area that would remain the nation’s capital would have been exempt from a non-resident tax. However, under that proposal many of the federal office buildings would have actually been located in New Columbia. That would have subjected federal employees working in those buildings to a commuter tax.

There were other less substantial arguments raised against the DC statehood bill, including the cost of adding a star to the American flag and opposition to making a city a state. While both points were trivial, the latter really pointed to the manner in which DC residents are disfranchised. The District’s population is presently greater than the state of Wyoming and is not far from that of Vermont, North Dakota, and Alaska. At the time that HR 51 was on the table Republicans also feared that the addition of senators from the District would have put the party at risk of long-term minority status in the upper house.

What would District residents have gained from statehood? HR 51 called for full citizenship rights for District residents and the allocation of two senators and one representative. Given that the District is overwhelmingly Black, its representation in Congress would likely be Black, hopefully progressive, and probably Democratic. If the District were made a state, its governor would most likely be Black too. Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) a supporter of HR 51, indicated that the District was hampered by the “four toos” – *too urban, too Black, too liberal and too Democratic*. The overnight empowerment of the District that would result from statehood would institutionalize Black political power in the state. However, it would be no different than the political environment in Vermont, Maine, Wyoming, or any other state with relatively few Black citizens. The only difference would be of “hue.”

Advantage Sharpton; DC Primary Provides a Psychological Boost

Up until now the Democratic presidential campaign has been about posture and position for the announced candidates, perhaps with the exception of Rev. Al Sharpton. Though he, along with Kucinich and Moseley-Braun, have been cast off as a novelty candidate, a strong showing in DC will at least give credence to claims made by the civil rights activist that the party has become tone deaf to the concerns of Blacks. Rev. Sharpton has spent the most time campaigning in the District of any of the candidates and his time spent should pay off for him at the ballot box. If victorious, he will, at a minimum, be able to lay to the side criticism that he cannot command the support of the party's core voters. Carol Moseley-Braun may also do well considering her co-sponsorship of statehood legislation with Sen. Edward Kennedy during her tenure in the Senate.

Rev. Sharpton could use a victory in the District of Columbia primary to give him a bounce into the other primaries where he will enjoy a strategic advantage; appealing to Black voters in states where they comprise a significant portion of the partisan electorate. For Sharpton a first place finish is not necessary to remain relevant. With relatively fewer resources, staff, and cash-on-hand, expectations are different for Sharpton's candidacy. To win in November 2004 Democrats are going to need every single Black vote they can muster and can ill afford to discount the support that Rev. Sharpton has in certain corners of the Black community. Though he may not walk into the Boston convention with a significant share of delegates, he can corner a moral position on the party's relationship with Black voters that will enable him to extract some concessions from its leadership. What he extracts, and on whose behalf, is a work in progress and should be put on the table by those voters who cast ballots for him.