

The GW Hatchet

Election Inspires D.C. Voting Push

By Gabrielle Bluestone, The GW Hatchet, November 20, 2008

For D.C. voting rights advocates, conditions are perfect.

The necessary pieces - Democratic control of Congress and a president-elect who supports the cause - have fallen into place for the first time since 1993. Now proponents of D.C. representation and statehood are divided over what to push for when Congress reconvenes in January.

"Now's the time to push for full voting rights for the District of Columbia, because the people of the District of Columbia deserve a representative and two senators, not just a representative," said D.C. Shadow **Sen. Michael D. Brown**, who holds no official position in Congress, but is elected to advocate for D.C. rights. "And the best way to achieve that is through statehood, because it would also give us autonomy over our budget and autonomy over our legal system, none of which we have at this point, and none of which the one vote bill would give us."

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C., is pushing the District of Columbia Voting Rights Act, which would give the predominantly Democratic city a vote in the House of Representatives. To garner bipartisan support, the bill would also give an additional vote to conservative Utah.

With the support of D.C. Vote, a nonprofit organization which advocates for D.C. voting representation, Norton, who is not afforded a vote on final House legislation, is pushing for the first step in representation for D.C.

She said the new administration of President-elect Barack Obama will give D.C. a new shot at achieving their goals.

"After 209 years, District residents will have not only a president who has already changed America and the president that our residents most wanted. They will have a Democratic president, who as senator, co-sponsored the District of Columbia Voting Rights Act and has told me he will sign our bill," Norton said in a news release. She could not be reached directly for comment.

The 2008 D.C. voting bill passed easily in the House, but fell three votes short of the 60 needed to end a filibuster in the Senate last fall.

But some D.C. leaders said the bill would not be enough to bring about full autonomy for the District.

Nothing in the legislation precludes future bills that seek senatorial representation or statehood, but statehood supporter D.C. Shadow Sen. Paul Strauss, who was elected to his third term this November, is not happy with the timing of the bill.

"We're not liable to get many bites at the apple in the 111th Congress, so we have to make this count," Strauss said. "Rushing ahead without deliberation would be as bad of an idea as delaying it."

But Norton and D.C. Vote both said full autonomy is not achievable without first obtaining a vote in the House. The delegate said in the news release that the passage of the District of Columbia Voting Rights Act would be a “stepping stone.”

Ilijah Zherka, executive director of D.C. Vote, agreed that the congressional bill is the foundation for any future milestones in the District’s representation.

“At this point, we do not think that it would make sense to switch bills or strategies because there isn’t support for achieving statehood in this Congress,” Zherka said. “So, what we would rather do is actually win.”

For **Brown**, playing it safe isn’t necessarily the best solution.

“My concern is that people will feel that the issue is over once we get a representative,” he said. “I mean, what will our slogan then be on our license plates, taxation with partial representation? And how do I go up to Capitol Hill, when we’ve lost seven brave men and women in Afghanistan and Iraq, and demand a third of the representation that they’re entitled to.”

Norton said in the news release that she intends to tackle full voting rights and full self-government for the District if the current bill is passed.