

“Taxation without representation.” This was the rallying cry at the Boston Tea Party, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the foundation of the United States of America. The right to self-government, to representation in a national legislature, is the cornerstone of the nation. Yet, today, there are hundreds of thousands of citizens without representation or self-government, and they are living in the nation’s capital. By granting Washington D.C. a representative in Congress and allowing the local government autonomy over its budget process, we can give the people of Washington D.C. the rights they deserve.

The population of D.C. may seem small, too small for to merit their own representative in Congress, but in fact, the district has a greater population than both Vermont and Wyoming.¹ The decisions that Congress makes impact the 600,000 citizens of D.C. no less than they impact the residents of any other state. Those decisions include sending D.C. residents to war, imposing regulations on their businesses, and raising their taxes.² In fact, D.C. residents are more impacted by the decisions of Congress than anyone else. The Constitution gives Congress the “exclusive” authority to approve the city’s budget, laws, and judge rulings, in effect giving it control over the daily, local regulations of Washington D.C.³ Recently, Congress has sought to nullify local officials’ efforts to protect Planned Parenthood and legalize marijuana in the district. In May 2016, 83% of D.C. residents voted for a measure that would give the city autonomous control of its budget, but Congress struck the law down before it could take effect.⁴ Despite their efforts to gain autonomy, the citizens of D.C. remain dependent on a parasitic relationship with Congress.

Having Congress manage Washington D.C.’s budget traps the city in a gridlocked, partisan process. The appropriations process forced a government shutdown in 2013, and nearly caused another one in 2015 over Planned Parenthood. When those shutdowns occur, Washington D.C., with its budget tied to Congress, loses its local funding. In the last shutdown, D.C. was forced to deplete its emergency reserve and temporarily shut down services like its libraries and trash collection.⁵ Even without a shutdown, the city’s budget, forced to move within the bureaucratic federal appropriations process, takes several months longer to complete than it would otherwise. As a low priority within the federal process, the budget often ends up

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Population Estimates*. U.S. Census, July 1, 2015.

² Andrew Giambrone, “Is D.C. Statehood a Matter of Civil Rights?” *The Atlantic*, September 22, 2014, November 20, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/09/what-would-a-51st-state-look-like/380586/>

³ “Why DC Voting Rights Matter.” *The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights*, November 20, 2015. <http://www.civilrights.org/voting-rights/dc-voting-rights/why-dc-voting-rights.html>

⁴ Russell Berman, “Congress Rejects D.C.’s Bid for Fiscal Independence,” *The Atlantic*, May 24, 2016, July 30, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/05/congress-rejects-dcs-bid-for-fiscal-independence/484013/>

⁵ Perry Stein, “Experts Say a Government Shutdown is Likely. D.C. Says It’s Ready,” *Washington Post*, September 16, 2015, August 2, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2015/09/16/experts-say-a-government-shutdown-is-likely-d-c-says-its-ready/>

containing incomplete or inaccurate information and rarely reflects the city's actual needs.⁶ If local officials were put in charge of the budget, they could more accurately tailor funding to match local priorities and create a far more reliable, efficient budget. Even further, under the current system, the city council has to wait thirty days before implementing any laws, as they wait for congress' approval. Eliminating that complex, unnecessary review process, which entails up to eight votes on a single piece of local legislation, would save the federal government 2,500 employee work-hours and 80,000 sheets of paper a year. Denying Washington D.C. autonomy benefits neither the city nor the federal government. Giving the city control over its own laws and budget would create a smoother, more efficient process for everyone.

The only reason Washington D.C. still lacks a congressional representative is partisan politics. Because the district is overwhelmingly Democrat, Republicans in Congress refuse to vote for a measure that would create another Democratic seat in Congress.⁷ No other valid reason to prevent Washington D.C. from having a congressional representative has been established. Countless other capital cities, including London, Paris, Rome, Brasilia, and Ottawa, write their own budgets and make their own laws with no interference from their national government.⁸ In Congress, a representative from DC could do more than just vote; he could lobby for his people. With that vote comes power and the ability to lobby other congressmen, something that D.C.'s current representative, who lacks a vote, can not do. In Congress, votes are capital.⁹ One senator promises to vote for another's immigration reform, and in exchange, that congressman promises to vote for the senator's bill to lower taxes. A congressman from D.C. could do the same. He would not just be casting his vote in a way that would help his people; he would also be pressuring and lobbying others to do the same.

For too long, the residents of Washington D.C. have been trapped in a partisan quagmire, subject to congressional gridlock with no right to true self-government. For too long, they have been relegated to second-class citizenship. The people of D.C. deserve local autonomy and their own representative in Congress.

⁶ CRS (August 30th, 2007)

⁷ Lauren Gambino, "Washington DC Fights in Senate Hearing to Become the 51st State of the Union," *The Guardian*. September 15th, 2014, November 20th, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/15/washington-dc-51st-state-senate-hearing-bill>

⁸ Alice Rivlin, et al. *Building the Best Capital City in the World*. (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, December 2008): 73-74.

⁹ Sarah A. Binder and Frances E. Lee, *Making Deals in Congress*, (American Political Science Association, February 20, 2016)

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