

**Rep. Steny H. Hoyer**  
**Majority Leader**  
**Hearing Before the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties**  
**“District of Columbia House Voting Rights Act of 2009”**  
**January 27, 2009**

Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for inviting me to testify on an issue that tests, every year, our commitment to the democratic principles we voice here so often and with such certainty.

As you know, these last few weeks have been a time for listening to and reading inaugural addresses—not just the most recent one, but, if we want some context, the 55 that came before it. Together they would add up to 500 pages, pages that historian Ted Widmer called “the Book of the Republic.” Last week, I had a look at the biggest and most maligned chunk in the entire Book: the address given by our ninth President, William Henry Harrison—which, I’m sure you know, was delivered in a snowstorm, lasted almost two hours, and caused the President’s death from pneumonia.

If I had been advising the President back then, I would have told him that he could throw out the entire thing, except for this one passage: “It is in this District only where American citizens are to be found who...are deprived of many important political privileges, without any inspiring hope as to the future....Are their rights alone not to be guaranteed by the application of those great principles upon which all our constitutions are founded? We are told...that at the commencement of the War of the Revolution the most stupid men in England spoke of ‘their American subjects.’ Are there, indeed, citizens of any of our States who have dreamed of *their subjects* in the District of Columbia?...The people of the District of Columbia are not the subjects of the people of the States, but free American citizens.”

*Free American citizens.* It’s been obvious since President Harrison spoke those words in 1841. In fact, it’s been obvious as long as America has had a Constitution. In the Federalist Papers, James Madison wrote that Congress could not legitimately set aside a federal District unless its people have “their voice in the election of the government which is to exercise authority over them.”

But where is that equal voice today? The people of the District were represented in Congress, under the Constitution, until the capital moved here and their vote was taken from them. Today, out of all of the world’s democracies, there is only one national capital without full voting rights: this city full of monuments to democracy. The people of the District have watched as America extended the right to vote over and over again, wondering when their time would come.

Now, in this time of change for America, we can succeed where so many before us failed. We can give the people of this city the equal vote they deserve, the equal say in the decisions that shape their lives every day. We can do it by giving them, at last, a vote in this House.

There are plausible legal arguments both for and against this bill. Of course, I am convinced that it falls well within Congress's constitutional authority to "exercise exclusive Legislation in all Cases whatsoever, over [the] District." But whichever side we come down on, I think we can agree that legal arguments are best sorted out in the courts. At this point in the debate, we should make our case on principle, not on technicalities. If you oppose this bill, you need to tell us: Just what does our country gain by treating the people of Washington, D.C. differently from America's other 300 million?

In the same way, if we support this bill, we need to answer the question: Just what would one vote be worth? A vote won't teach one child to read or subtract in the District's schools. A vote won't prevent a handgun murder, or build a new park, or attract a new business. A vote won't even tilt the balance in this House.

But as our Nation's story tells us again and again, a vote means dignity. A vote means that men, women, and children from this city can walk down the National Mall and know that they own it—as much as any tourist off the bus from Indiana, New York, or Georgia owns it. And for the people of this city, a tremendous amount of good can come from that small beginning.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I urge my colleagues to pass this bill.