MEMBER PROFILE

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Last updated: November 2015
Status: Unrepresented territory (Federal District under exclusive jurisdiction of Congress)

Population: 658,893

Area of the federal district: 177km²

Language: English

Religion: 50% identifies as Christian, 10.6% as Muslim and 4.5% as followers of Judaism. Remainder (26.8%) adheres to another religion or none at all.

Ethnic Groups: According to the United States Census Bureau in 2010, the population distribution was 50.7% African American, 38.5% Caucasian, 9.1% Hispanic (of any race), 4.4% other (including Native Americans, Alaskans, Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders), 3.5% Asian, and 1.6% mixed. Population demographics have not seen a change in the 2014-2015 period.

OVERVIEW

The District of Columbia borders Maryland to the north and Virginia to the south and west. Congress retains authority over the district and the District of Columbia’s lack of status as a State gives Congress free rein to undermine the District of Columbia’s government functions and assume oversight. Therefore, the District of Columbia with the support of Washingtonians seeks to achieve the full privileges of democracy and statehood in the United States. Congressional representation in the Senate and House of Representatives as a consequence of Statehood would give the District of Columbia independent control of governmental affairs as in the other fifty States.

UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

The popularly elected D.C. Statehood Congressional Delegation, in conjunction with the New Columbia Statehood Commission (an entity of the District of Columbia government) defines the District of Columbia as an unrepresented territory of the United States. D.C. residents contribute to their District by paying taxes, but lack full representation in Congress. The District seeks full citizenship rights, such as formal voting representation in Congress and equal political rights through the establishment of the 51st State, New Columbia.

UNPO REPRESENTATION: DC Statehood Congressional Delegation (in conjunction with the New Columbia Statehood Commission)

The District of Columbia is represented at UNPO by the D.C. Statehood Congressional Delegation, in conjunction with the New Columbia Statehood Commission. They were admitted to the organization on 7 November 2015.

The Statehood Congressional Delegation is popularly elected and operates independently within the government of the District of Columbia. Three members of the Delegation serve on the New Columbia Statehood Commission, which includes the Mayor, the head of the executive branch, and the Chairman of the Council, the head of the legislative branch of the District government. The Commission focuses on local governmental efforts.
CURRENT ISSUES

The District of Columbia represents over 658,000 disenfranchised citizens of the United States: although DC residents have been electing their Senators and Representatives every two years since 1990, these so called Shadow Senators are not allowed to vote on legislation or debate on the floor of the Senate. Their legislative roles are very limited and consist mainly of placement of written statements in the official record of proceedings or presenting testimony to selected committees, such as the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee in the Senate.

In some specific cases, Congress has used its power over D.C. to abolish important life-saving public health programs, and repeal and weaken firearm safety laws. The lack of votes on budget issues means that D.C. does not get adequate resources to spend on its needs.

A poll conducted between 12-15 November 2015 by The Washington Post found that 67 percent of D.C. residents favor the District becoming a state, including 71 percent of registered voters, an increase of 10 percentage points from 2010. Moreover, nearly 3 in 4 residents said they were upset that the District has no voting representation in Congress, and about half described themselves as "very upset" over the absence.

To raise awareness of its minimal political rights and desire for full voting representation, D.C. created the Taxation Without Representation flag and license plates. D.C.'s current plan envisions a divide between the federal center of Washington from the District's residential and non-governmental areas, the latter that would become the 51st State under the name of New Columbia. This two-jurisdiction solution requires the approval of Congress.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Washington D.C. is the capital of the United States, established on 16 July 1790, and known as the locus of political institutions, such as Congress, as well as for its historic role in slavery, the civil war and civil rights movements. An administrative district, the District of Columbia is a federally controlled entity and, therefore, does not belong to any US State. Congress retains full authority over the District. James Madison, the 4th President of the United States, believed that the capital must be protected given its political context and also due to the importance of slave trade at the time.

The government of the United States has exclusive jurisdiction by virtue of Article 1, Section 8 of the US Constitution: "[The Congress shall have Power] To exercise exclusive Legislation in all Cases whatsoever, over such District (not exceeding ten Miles square) as may, by Cession of particular States, and the acceptance of Congress, become the Seat of the Government of the United States."

By 1860, the District of Columbia had 11,131 freed men. Slavery was officially abolished in D.C. on 16 April 1862. A relatively large African American population continued to reside in D.C. The issue of
racial inequality continued to dominate the District's society, eventually influencing the political sphere.

In 1868, the government passed the 14th Amendment:

> All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

This granted newly freed slaves the right to vote in local elections. Soon after 1870, Congress appointed a governor, upper legislature, as well as a three-person commission to manage the District. Aside from political developments, the District's economy rapidly developed, mostly due to port cities: Georgetown, Maryland and Alexandria Virginia. In 1846, Alexandria fell under Virginia's jurisdiction due to its reliance on the slave trade.

With the District continuously growing, its residents sought equal political representation. However, Congress repeatedly denied the District's request for self-rule, as well as congressional representation, one reason being a decrease in Southern Congressmen, i.e. white men and a significant rise in the African American population within the District from 14,316 in 1860 to 43,404 in 1870. Southern Congressmen failed to provide equal rights or any form of influence for their African American constituents in the District.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many African American civil rights activists migrated to D.C. to work with organizations, such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Upon arrival, they learned of the disenfranchisement that came with living in the District, leading many to become involved in the campaign calling for local representation. By the late 1960s, with Democrats enjoying majority in the national government, the civil rights movement and the interests of the District gained more attention and support.

With the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr on 4 April 1968, nationwide riots broke out. The uprisings served as a wake-up call to Congress, as law enforcement efforts were insufficient at maintaining peace, and its safety depended on establishing order in the capital.

In the following years, Congress approved legislation giving D.C. limited self-determination. This included an elected school board, a non-voting delegate to the House of Representatives, and with the passing of the Home Rule Act, a mayor and 13-member Council to be elected by District voters. The first election for the new local government took place in 1974. The overall reception of these new avenues for civic participation was positive, but it was clear that residents of the District were still short of full citizenship. District representatives at the House of Representatives had no voting rights and the District had no representation in the Senate; in other words, the District still lacked national representation. Moreover, legislation and budgets adopted by the D.C. Council were still subject to Congressional review and Congress had the ability to block or create policy for the District without the approval of its residents.

Over the years, Congress has used its power of legislative and budgetary review to block numerous initiatives proposed by the D.C. local government, including local initiatives, such as city benefits for unmarried domestic partners of D.C. employees and an exchange program for intravenous drug users to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, which was of great significance to the District as 3% of its residents are infected, the highest rate of any city in the nation, with deadly consequences for the local population.
There have been several attempts to redress D.C.’s lack of political rights, most notably a proposed constitutional amendment for voting representation. The amendment, proposed by the then-D.C. Delegate Walter Fauntroy in 1978, would have given the District two voting senators and one voting member of the House. However, only 16 states ratified the amendment, short of the required 38, and the amendment was officially dropped when the seven-year ratification window closed in 1985. Although the constitutional amendment failed, D.C. residents began considering a different solution for their disenfranchisement: statehood. The idea of District statehood first appeared in print in Sam Smith’s Statehood Papers in 1970. Statehood would allow the populated portions of the District to become a separate State with full representation and voting rights, while the uninhabited central Washington, which mainly contains federal buildings, museums and monuments, would remain a constitutionally mandated “district”.

The statehood movement gained momentum in the 1970s — the D.C. Statehood Party was founded in 1971 with the primary goal of achieving statehood for the District. Statehood supporters held a referendum in 1980 to determine if voters supported statehood; 60 percent voted yes. In 1982, a convention of elected citizens drafted a constitution for the potential new State, which would be called “New Columbia”. While D.C. citizens supported statehood, it was harder to gain the support of Congress. A statehood bill finally reached the floor of the House of Representatives in 1993, but failed 153 to 277. The proposed Voting Rights Amendment of 1978 sought to rectify D.C.’s lack of federal representation, but ultimately failed to gather enough support. Similar efforts regarding D.C. Statehood were made in 1992 by way of independent Senate and House Bills, but suffered the same lack of legislative support.
CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

The city of Washington D.C. is a cultural and urban hub that hosts buildings such as the White House, the United States Capitol (Congress), the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, as well as many museums: the National Museum of Natural History, the National Air and Space Museum, the National Museum of African Art, the National Museum of American History and the National Museum of the American Indian. Another central part of Washington's culture is the arts. The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts opened in 1971 and is the busiest art performing institution in the country. It is home to the National Symphony Orchestra, the Washington National Opera and the Washington Ballet.

Sports are also popular in the District with the presence of basketball, hockey, baseball and football teams. The Verizon Center in Chinatown is an arena that accommodates large-scale sporting events in Washington D.C.

Last, but not least, another historic characteristic of DC are its centuries old private universities, such as Georgetown University and the George Washington University.

Apart from Washington D.C.'s cultural and urban elements, the DC area also offers green spaces and natural wonders worth sightseeing. The District's bodies of water include the Potomac River, Anacostia River, Rock Creek and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. The D.C. has 7,464 acres (30.21 km²) of parkland, which is about 19 percent of the city's total area.

For example, Rock Creek Park, covering 11.41 km², is larger than New York City's Central Park. D.C. aims to preserve its nature, fisheries and wildlife as maintained by DC's Parks and Recreation department and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).