

Testimony of U.S. Representative Jamie Raskin (D-MD) for March 2, 2020 Hearing on House Joint Resolution 8 before the Rules and Executive Nominations Committee

I write to offer my enthusiastic support for House Joint Resolution 8 and the cause of statehood for the District of Columbia. It is unsustainable to disenfranchise more than 700,000 fellow citizens simply because they live within miles of the U.S. Capitol. Our neighbors in Washington, D.C. pay taxes, serve in the military and participate in all the duties of citizenship, but are denied full representation in the House and Senate. They are rightfully demanding their equal place in our democracy, and it is incumbent on all of us who already have a full political voice to speak up on their behalf.

There is no way to square the current disenfranchisement with the letter and spirit of our Constitution. As House Joint Resolution 8 correctly recognizes, the Framers initially provided for the people who lived on the land designated for the federal capital to vote for congressional representatives. It was only after 1801 and the law placing the District of Columbia under full Congressional control, that these residents arbitrarily lost their right to vote for members of Congress or for President and Vice President.

A fraction of these residents regained their voting rights in 1846, when a portion of the federal district was returned to Virginia and its population became re-enfranchised as part of that state. But for those living on the other bank of the Potomac, the injustice continued and grew with time and the swelling numbers of affected American citizens.

Today, an estimated 705,000 people are denied equal participation in our political institutions. That is more people than live in two states – Vermont and Wyoming – and comparable to the population of several others. Washingtonians pay more taxes than the residents of 22 states. D.C. residents have served in every war our nation has fought, and contribute to our country in every way.

The only slight concession to this outrageous injustice is the 23rd Amendment – which in 1961 gave D.C. residents the right to vote in presidential elections, and the corresponding votes in the Electoral College. But D.C. residents remain without a vote in either the House or Senate which, to make matters worse, can and do interfere in local District affairs through Congressional fiat under the power of the District Clause and often to impose partisan political agendas.

We can and must right this wrong by following the path of the U.S. Constitution. Since the original 13 states formed the Union, Congress has exercised its exclusive powers under Article IV to admit 37 states to the Union, all by statute and none by constitutional amendment.

The House Oversight Committee, on which I serve, recently approved the Washington D.C. Admission Act (H.R. 5803), a bill to admit the newest state of the union under the name Washington, Douglass Commonwealth. The constitutionally mandated federal capital district would shrink to include just the core federal buildings such as Congress, the White House and

the Mall, while the remaining land of the current District of Columbia would become the new state with political self-government and its rightful representation in Congress.

Congress is free to do this. The Maryland General Assembly gave the land to the federal government in fee simple, permanently and without restriction. Congress can appropriately cede the residential portions of the District for creation of a new state, as its residents so clearly want and deserve.

The new state would be admitted by statute, just as every other state has been after the original 13. It would however require a constitutional amendment to repeal the 23rd Amendment, and the House legislation includes expedited procedures to achieve this. Since no one would want to leave three electoral votes in the hands of a handful of residents of the White House and reduced federal district, this should be easily and quickly achieved.

With this remedy available to our democracy, there is no valid reason not to employ it. The United States is the only democracy on earth to deny full representation and voting rights to the residents of its capital city. We have been rightly called out by the international community for this indefensible arrangement.

It is time for all U.S. citizens to stand up for the rights of our brothers and sisters in the nation's capital, and I applaud the Maryland delegates who are attempting to do so today and urge all of you to support this resolution and the cause of statehood and democracy for all Americans.