

**Statement of Rep. Tom Davis**  
**D.C. Vote: Champions of Democracy Reception**  
**and Award Ceremony**  
**October 23, 2007**

Thank you for having me here this evening and thanks also to Eleanor Holmes Norton for her kind remarks. Since 2003 I have been actively engaged in a new effort to bring voting representation to the District of Columbia. It feels like it's been longer than that. And while we're still struggling in the Senate to make our case, we can be proud that we have already changed the debate permanently and for the better.

Unlike previous efforts - and with the excellent support of D.C. Vote - I took a real look at what happened to the District at the point of its establishment in 1790. We know now this City was founded on compromise, regional opportunism, and political expediency. What is ironic is that we, again, have reached a point where the streams of compromise, regional opportunism and political expediency present us with a chance to correct the unhappy legacy left us by the first Congresses.

But the cause of electoral justice here is haunted by myths surrounding the founding of Washington, D.C. So important that we take every chance to lay out the facts of how this city became what it is.

The idea for a federal district arose out of an incident that took place in 1783 while the Continental Congress was in session in Philadelphia. When a crowd of Revolutionary War soldiers, who had not been paid, gathered in protest outside the building, the Congress requested help from the Pennsylvania militia.

The governor refused, and the Congress was forced to adjourn and reconvene in New Jersey. After that incident, the Framers concluded there was a need for a Federal District, solely under federal control, for the protection of the Congress and for the territorial integrity of the capital.

So the Framers of the Constitution gave Congress broad authority to create such a Federal District and broad authority to govern such a place. That is the limit of what the Framers say about a Federal District in the Constitution - that there should be one and that it should be under Congressional authority.

After ratification of the Constitution, one of the first issues to face the new Congress was where to place this Federal District. Some wanted it in New York. Some wanted it in Philadelphia. And others wanted it on the Potomac. These sectional factions fought a fierce political battle to decide the matter because they believed they were founding a great city, a new Rome. They expected this new city to have all the benefits of the great capitals of Europe. They never once talked about denying that city's inhabitants the right to vote.

Finally, Jefferson brokered a deal that allowed the city to be placed on the banks of the Potomac in exchange for Congress paying the states' Revolutionary War debt. New York got the debt paid and Philadelphia got the capital for ten years. Then as now, those political decisions were shaped by the issues of the day.

In 1790, Congress passed the Residence Act in which the right to vote was given to those residing in the new District. While the capital was being established, those living here were permitted to continue to vote where they had before, in their states.

The seat of government officially moved to Washington in 1800. In his final address to the Sixth Congress, less than a week after it took up residence in the new Federal District, President John Adams reminded Members, "it is with you, gentlemen, to consider whether local powers over the District of Columbia vested by the Constitution in Congress . . . shall be immediately exercised." Notice Adams did not say, the Constitution requires that you strip the inhabitants of the District of all representation. That Founding Father recognized that Congress had a choice.

Once again, the issues of the day shaped the actions of Congress. The political parties could not come to an agreement. Imagine that. The Federalists wanted to insure strong central control over the city. Anti-federalist Republicans wanted limited authority and distrusted all things urban.

With Jefferson and his Republicans preparing to take control of the presidency and Congress, a pervasive atmosphere of crisis compelled the Federalists into action. If a bill was not passed before the Jeffersonians took over, it never would pass. Eventually, the Congress passed a stripped down version of a bill authored by a Virginia Congressman, "Light Horse Harry" Lee. It simply stated that the laws of Virginia and Maryland then in effect would continue in effect in the District.

We may never know why this version was passed. No records survived. But there is absolutely no evidence the Founding Fathers – who years earlier had put their lives on the line to forge a representative government - then decided the only way to secure that government was to deny representation to some of their fellow citizens.

One historian aptly described the process as a "rushed and improvised accommodation to political reality, necessitated by the desperate logic of lame duck political maneuvering." But the inelegant compromise left a decidedly undemocratic accident in its wake. District residents had no vote in Congress.

This was not, and is not, merely a quirk of history that affects very few people. This problem affects the very reputation of our entire nation. Foreign visitors I meet here and overseas comment with puzzlement on the lack of voting representation in the nation's capital. I heard it from the mayor of Hong Kong when we were discussing his relationship with China. Our advice to others on urban enfranchisement loses credibility when we refuse to solve this problem at home.

I have yet to hear anyone articulate any good that falls to the United States from denying these Americans voting rights. This country has sacrificed time and time again, on every continent on this planet, for the premise that tyranny in any form is unacceptable.

Over the course of that history, our little capital along the banks of the Potomac has grown from a population of 8,000 to over 560,000. We have become the great city our Founding fathers hoped we would become.

The Constitution provides us the tools we need to fix this problem legislatively. Courts have stated over and over again that Congress has the authority to use those tools. The remaining questions are the uncomfortable ones.

Do we have the will to do the right thing? Do we see the lack of direct representation within our own borders as unacceptable? Do we value each other's rights as highly as we value our own?

I know that Americans answer each of these questions with a resounding yes . . . and now it is time for America's leaders to do the same. We are, after all, mere servants – often quite humble ones at that – to the noble ideas of liberty and popular sovereignty enshrined in our fundamental political compact. We should never shrink from the hard tasks. From the Founders to today, each generation is called upon to use the talents and tools at hand to make those ideas manifest in our time and place. This is our time.

Thank you all for your support throughout this struggle. I don't have to tell you how precious the voices of your friends are when so many are willing to criticize so viciously. It has been – and will continue to be – an honor to serve shoulder to shoulder with every one of you in this ongoing battle.

*[check against delivery]*