



Discontent in DC

By Mark David Richards

On April 15, 2002, Washington DC Mayor Anthony Williams spoke at an event led by civic leaders to protest DC's unequal political status. "It is not acceptable," he said, "in this city where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached for democracy and self-determination, that we don't have the vote.... I tell you, as the mayor of this city, it is unacceptable that we do not have a vote in national policy."

The architects of the federal system granted Congress the right of exclusive legislation over its seat of government in the Constitution, so the federal government would not be subject to a state legislature. But since the District of Columbia was established, Congress has not granted DC residents the rights that citizens who live in states take for granted. DC is the only national capital of the democratic republics of the world whose residents are excluded from voting in its national legislature.

[The federal republics of Australia, Mexico and Brazil once denied national voting rights to residents of their capital districts, but rectified this by passing legislation and amending their constitutions.]

In 1997 and 1999, a series of national studies called the DC Equality Poll examined the relationship between the federal and local DC government. The series, along with data from several other polls, throws a bit of light on the nature of the problem of DC political inequality and public receptivity to possible solutions.

Mark David Richards is senior associate of Bisconti Research, Inc. The DC Equality Poll studies were done as part of his doctoral dissertation.

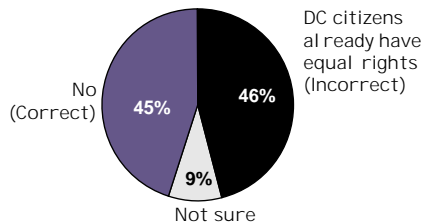
A Low-Profile Issue

Although DC's status issue is routinely discussed in the District itself, in 1999 the DC Equality Poll found that many registered voters who are college graduates were not aware that DC citizens do not have the same Constitutional rights as other US citizens.

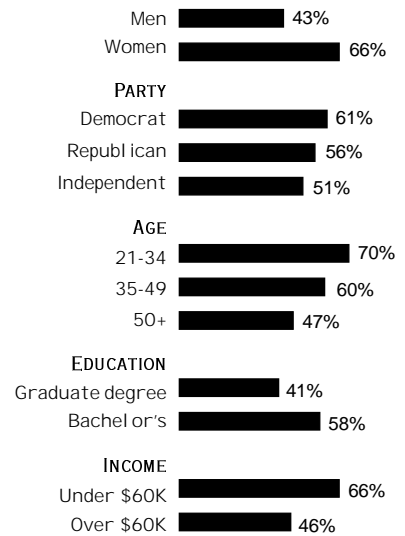
Question:

As far as you know, do citizens who live in Washington DC have the same constitutional rights as other US citizens, including equal voting rights in Congress?

COLLEGE GRADUATE REGISTERED VOTERS



PERCENT RESPONDING ALREADY HAVE OR NOT SURE



Progress is Limited

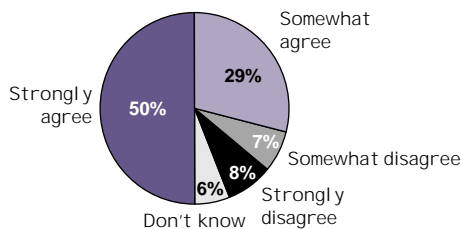
With the passage of the Twenty-Third Amendment to the Constitution in 1961, DC residents won the right to vote for president and vice president, but they have not yet won the right to voting representation in Congress.

Note: Asked of national college graduates registered to vote.
Source: Survey by Mark David Richards with TDM Research and Communications, November 12-21, 1999.

Question:

I am going to read you some statements about Washington DC, where the federal government has authority to decide how that city is governed. For each statement, I would like you to tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree... US residents who are residents of Washington DC should have voting representatives in the US Congress, like other US citizens.

NATIONAL ADULTS

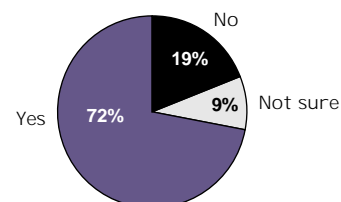


Source: Survey by Mark David Richards with Bruskin/Goldring Research, September 12-14, 1997.

Question:

Now, a question about the political status of the more than half million citizens who live in Washington DC. Under the US Constitution, Congress has exclusive legislative authority over the District government. Since 1964, DC citizens have had the right to vote in presidential elections. Since 1974, they have elected a limited home rule government funded 80% by local taxes. Unlike citizens in the fifty states, they do not have voting representation in Congress, neither in the House nor the Senate. In your opinion, should DC citizens have equal voting rights in the House and the Senate, or not?

NATIONAL ADULTS



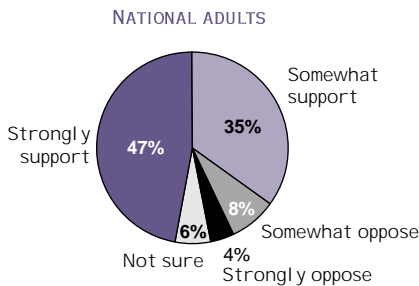
Source: Survey by Mark David Richards with Bruskin/Goldring Research, October 22-25, 1999.

Possible Solutions in Play

Over its history, DC has taken three main approaches to remedy its unequal status: by means of a Constitutional amendment, by retroceding to the state that originally ceded the land for DC, and by becoming the state of New Columbia.

Question:

There are several ways for DC to gain equal [congressional] voting rights. For each of the following, tell me if you would support or oppose DC citizens if they took that approach... Pass an amendment for equal constitutional rights for DC citizens.



Note: Asked of those who support voting rights for residents of Washington DC (72%).
Source: Survey by Mark David Richards with Bruskin/Goldring Research, October 22-25, 1999.

Several amendment proposals have been made in recent years, including one for equal voting rights in Congress and one that would treat DC citizens equal to citizens who live in states for all Constitutional intents and purposes.

Constitutional Amendment

The idea of passing an amendment to give DC citizens voting rights in Congress when its population was large enough was proposed by Alexander Hamilton during the New York ratifying convention.

Serious efforts to pass an amendment started in 1916 and culminated in 1960. During the civil rights upheavals, Congress agreed to a DC presidential voting rights amendment, with the number of electors determined by the least-populated state rather than by DC's population. The Twenty-Third Amendment was ratified by 39 states on March 29, 1961. However, voting rights in Congress were not included.

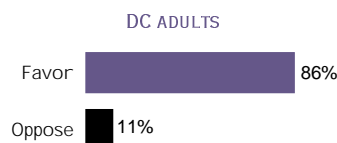
DC, like United States territories, was granted the right to a non-voting delegate in the House of Representatives in 1970.

Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Carter all supported voting rights for DC citizenry. Carter strongly supported a congressional voting rights amendment, and in 1978 Congress approved the Twenty-Seventh Amendment (with a bipartisan two-thirds majority) to grant DC two senators, voting rights in the House of Representatives and for presidential elections commensurate with population, and the right to participate in the ratification of Constitutional amendments. It had to be ratified by 38 states within seven years.

The state ratification effort was troubled and underfunded. State legislators were often unaware of the issue, the DC Statehood Party opposed it, and there was infighting among proponents. On August 22, 1985, when time ran out, DC was 22 states short of ratification.

Question:

Do you favor or oppose giving the District the same congressional representation as the fifty states, including two US Senators and a House member with full voting privileges?



Note: Asked of adults in the District of Columbia.
Source: Survey by *The Washington Post*, May 15-19, 2002.

Efforts to Retrocede

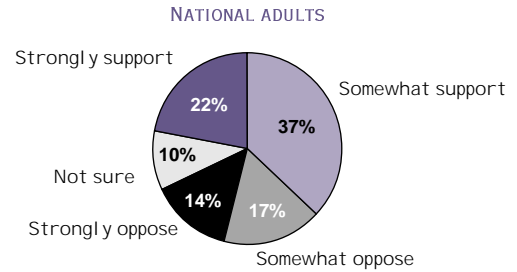
Virginia and Maryland ceded the original land area to establish DC, but the southwestern portion was retroceded to Virginia in 1846, after the Virginia legislature, Congress, and citizens in Alexandria City voted to support the reunion.

In the DC Home Rule Charter (1973), Congress identified the area it considered to be of federal interest and created a National Capital Service Area (NCSA) comprised mainly of the federal buildings and parkland. The NCSA is about 18% of DC land area, including the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. If Congress agreed to retrocede it area to Maryland, or to make it the fifty-first state, the NCSA would remain Washington DC.

Efforts to retrocede have been discussed periodically, with limited interest expressed in Maryland, in Congress, and in DC.

Question:

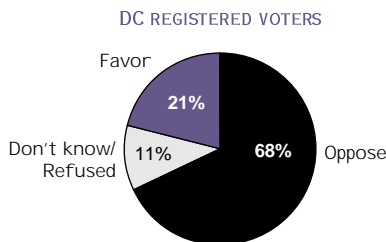
There are several ways for DC to gain equal [congressional] voting rights. For each of the following, tell me if you would support or oppose DC citizens if they took that approach... Merge DC with the state of Maryland for congressional voting purposes.



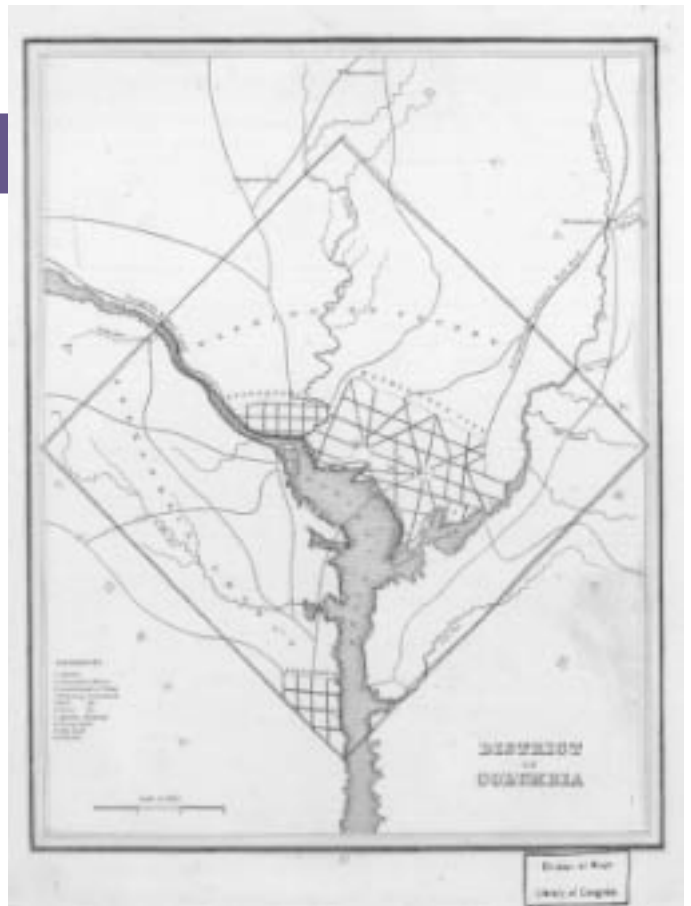
Note: Asked of those who support voting rights for residents of Washington DC (72%).
Source: Survey by Mark David Richards with Bruskin/Goldring Research, October 22-25, 1999.

Question:

Some have proposed that the District become part of Maryland for the purpose of congressional elections. Do you favor or oppose the District joining Maryland to give the District a vote in Congress?



Note: Asked of Washington DC registered voters.
Source: Survey by Center for Survey Research, George Washington University School of Media and Public Affairs, April 1-12, 2000.



Statehood

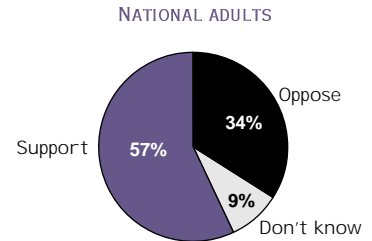
The idea that residents of the District of Columbia would eventually want statehood was recognized as early as 1805, but it wasn't until March 1969 that the DC Statehood Committee was formed. By 1977, a survey of 1,126 residents of the DC metro region, directed by Associate Professor Robert Hitlin of American University, found 51% of District residents in support of statehood, 28% opposed and 21% not sure.

President Bill Clinton was the first chief executive to endorse DC statehood. In November 1993, the Democratically-controlled House of Representatives debated HR 51, the New Columbia Admission Act. The debate lasted two days and ended 63 votes short—153 for and 277 against, with four not voting. Only one Republican—from Maryland—supported DC statehood.

Support for statehood in DC is strong and growing. In May 2002, *The Washington Post* found 66% of DC residents supported statehood—up a dramatic 20 points since increased federal intervention in local affairs in 1997.

Question:

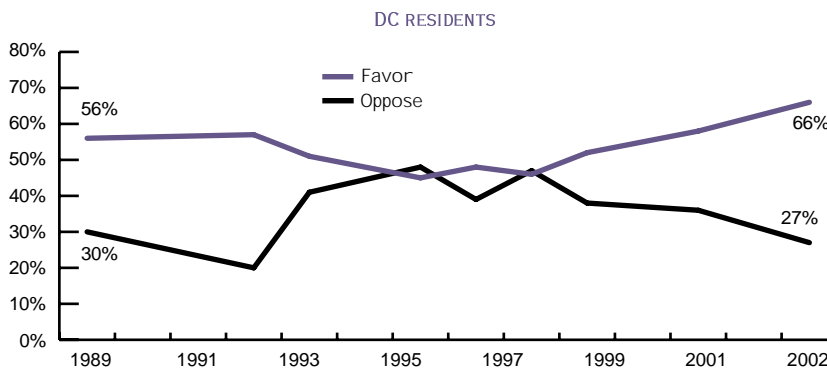
There are several ways for DC to gain equal [congressional] voting rights. For each of the following, tell me if you would support or oppose DC citizens if they took that approach... Statehood for DC.



Note: Asked of those who support voting rights for residents of Washington DC (72%).
Source: Survey by Mark David Richards with Bruskin/Goldring Research, October 22-25, 1999.

Question:

Do you favor or oppose the District of Columbia becoming a separate state?



Note: Asked of residents of Washington DC.
Source: Surveys by *The Washington Post*, latest that of May 2002.

	Favor	Oppose
1989	56%	30%
1992	57	20
1993	51	41
1995	48	45
1996	48	39
1997	46	47
1998	52	38
2000	58	36
2002	66	27

Efforts Continue

DC political equality is a local, intergenerational issue that is constrained by congressional power granted by the Constitution. The opinions of US citizens who have voting representation in Congress are important, but the DC Equality Poll revealed that many Americans are not even aware of the issue.

Although it is unclear how DC residents will obtain their long-term goal, they continue talking about and advocating for the same rights as other Americans. Findings from the DC Equality Poll have helped in the development of an ongoing campaign to remedy two centuries of disenfranchisement. ●