

Howard Students Join D.C. Residents' Push for Rights

Contributed by Jason Scruggs -- Black College Wire
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Poll: Most Americans don't know District has no vote in Congress

In 2007, just after then-Illinois Sen. Barack Obama announced his candidacy for president, he publicly announced in Washington that upon entering office, he would be an advocate for D.C. Congressional voting rights. Two years later, and with Obama now as the 44th president, some remain skeptical about his ability to bring about real change for the District. Currently, D.C. is granted a delegate to represent its citizens in Congress. House Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton can vote in committee and draft legislation but does not have full voting rights. With over a half-million people residing in the District, congressional representation can positively impact the lives of residents of the city.

"Although I really don't think it will happen anytime soon," said Nakoshie Mills, a sophomore political science major, "but it's OK to dream sometimes."

As a D.C. native, Mills knows first hand just what lack of representation means.

"I was in D.C.'s public school system my whole life. I grew up not too far from Howard," Mills said. "Buildings were run down; the schools were run down, and it seemed like the government didn't pay too much attention until whites moved into the area. Then things started to change."

According to a poll on behalf of D.C. Vote, an advocacy organization founded in 1998, "more than 80 percent of Americans are unaware that D.C. residents are denied a vote in Congress."

Securing voting rights for D.C. could be the beginning of solving some of D.C.'s major problems. Although Mills is an Obama supporter, she is one of many who has opted to keep a realistic perspective about his abilities as president.

"I don't think Obama is going to make a massive change, at least not the way he promoted it in his campaign," Mills said.

With the ongoing loss of jobs and two wars overseas, voting rights for Washingtonians may not exactly be top priority. However, one way to facilitate this effort is to raise awareness.

The District has one of the highest crime rates in the country, not to mention an intransigently high HIV/AIDS rate that disproportionately affects black women. Other areas of concern are the District's public schools and facilities.

"Have you seen D.C.'s public library? It's horrible," Mills said. "They have stuff in there from the '70s. There are homeless people in there, dust everywhere; it's just a mess!"

Recently a hearing was held in Congress regarding D.C. voting rights, and advocates remain optimistic about its success.

"I am confident the bill will be met with great support in the House of Representatives," D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty said.

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Jason Scruggs writes for The Hilltop, the Howard University student newspaper, which originally published this article.