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September 1, 2020

From Fringe to Winnable: The Campaign for DC Statehood

Barbara Helmick

When President Obama eulogized the legendary civil rights organizer and congressman John Lewis, he urged us to carry forth Lewis's work to expand voting rights and end voter suppression. One of the examples he listed was representation for the people of Washington, DC.

It may sound obvious that voting rights for DC would be included on a list of priorities for strengthening our democracy. But, only a few years ago, it was not. Progressive organizations and some members of Congress were sympathetic, but most saw DC Statehood as an outlier issue. They assumed passing

statehood would require bipartisan support and didn't see a strategy or strong enough movement to achieve that. In fact, Obama himself didn't mention DC statehood until the last year of his presidency, and only then when asked by a local high school student.

In all fairness to Obama, the political momentum for DC statehood is relatively recent. When Obama was elected in 2008, a coalition of organizers and elected officials, led by DC Vote, were pushing a bill to give DC residents representation in Congress but not full self-rule. Backed by Republican Tom Davis of Virginia, the bill came close to passing but for the last-minute machinations of the National Rifle Association. The coalition backing the bill fractured in the wake of the failed effort, and it took years to recover.

The tenacious, all-volunteer local statehood movement kept the statehood issue alive and, in 2012, convinced Eleanor Holmes Norton (DC's non-voting delegate to Congress) to re-introduce a statehood bill, something she hadn't done in several years. Over the next few years, local organizations worked with her to secure cosponsors for the bill.

It wasn't until early 2016 that DC Vote, where I now serve as the Program Director, moved towards making full statehood our priority. Critically, over the next few years, we reframed statehood as a national issue of voter suppression. Changing the narrative about statehood — from an unfair constitutional quirk to a blanket suppression of federal voting rights — raised the stature of our issue as a national concern, earning us a seat at the national voting rights organizations tables and resulting in dramatically more sponsorships for the statehood legislation. The broad, national coalition we subsequently formed allowed us to build momentum and put winning in our sights for the first time in 200 years.

Organizing the Grassroots for Statehood

In the spring of 2016, DC Vote brought on Bo Shuff, a former campaign manager for DC Mayor Muriel Bowser with over 20 years of experience in national advocacy work. Combined with my 43 years of grassroots campaign work (also on both a national and local level), Bo and I brought a whole new perspective and range of experiences to DC Vote's operation.

When Mayor Muriel Bowser introduced a bold and clear statehood plan on Emancipation Day that year, we were primed to jump in. The Mayor's plan called for a statehood referendum on the November ballot. This provided a clear focus, unifying key players around a common goal and giving us a rallying point to bring other local progressive organizations into the fight.

DC Vote's canvass operation reached thousands of residents, solidifying and activating local support for the ballot initiative. Neighborhood groups such as Neighbors United for Statehood, Stand Up! For Democracy in DC (Free DC), and the DC League of Women Voters rallied their networks in favor of the referendum, and UNITE HERE Local 25 assigned an organizer to work full time on the campaign.

The grassroots organizing paid off. A whopping 86 percent of voters — in the largest turnout in the District's history — supported statehood.

Building National Support

With the referendum on statehood accomplished, DC Vote turned our attention to building the power necessary to advance the campaign on a national level. Our first step was to tackle the winnability question. Bo wrote a strategy paper on behalf of DC Vote, which we circulated to local statehood organizations, the Mayor's Office, and Congresswoman Norton's office. We called for more funding

for a campaign to pass statehood, set an ambitious timeline for congressional action, and planted the idea that a statehood bill could pass in the Senate with a simple majority vote (either through the reconciliation process or by suspending the filibuster for statehood legislation).

We continued our local grassroots organizing, tabling at street fairs, canvassing for support at DC's State Fair (yes, we have one), attending local organizations' meetings, and speaking at schools. But we knew securing the backing of the national progressive community was critical to winning congressional support. Bo and I used our organizing skills to reach out to just about everyone we had ever worked with, raising awareness about our campaign, asking for advice, and calling on them to join us in the fight.

We stuck our toes in almost any door we could. We attended conferences and piped up on conference calls. We were often met with polite silence, but we kept at it. We reached out to the groups most impacted by congressional Republicans' practice of putting riders on the federal budget to block DC legislation, including Death with Dignity and pro-choice organizations. And we accepted almost any invitation to speak. When the National Cannabis Festival and Policy Summit invited us to speak on DC's inability to legalize (and commercialize) marijuana, we came wearing our "WEED Like Statehood" T-shirts.

We knew that to make progress within the national progressive movement, we also needed to demonstrate our legislative chops by winning more support for statehood in Congress, where support was still thin. Most members of the House Progressive Caucus had not cosponsored the statehood legislation, nor had members of the Hispanic, Asian Pacific Islander, and LGBT Caucuses. DC Vote stepped up to take over the Community Capitol Hill Days (that is, lobby days but with a focus on education), which local statehood groups had been organizing for several years. With paid staff and organizational resources, we created a visibly powerful operation by dramatically increasing the number of

appointments with Congressional offices and staying in communication with staffers after our visits. In early 2017, over 200 DC residents turned out for the Community Capitol Hill Day. Many had never taken such an action, but all were outraged that they had no voice in the new political climate.

It was a good start, but we knew that we needed to do much more to build national power if we were going to win. We needed to speak the language that progressive groups spoke and cut to the chase with Democrats in Congress. One day, it came to me: this was voter suppression. DC's status wasn't simply some quirk in the constitution; it was about preventing the District's residents, a majority of whom are people of color and a majority of whom vote Democratic, from having representation in our federal government. Calling for an end to the blanket suppression of federal voting rights to all the voters in DC became the new frame for statehood.

Organizing Works

With our new frame in hand, we organized a Hill Staffer Day in which we educated congressional staffers (many of whom live in the District) about statehood. Many had “aha” moments when we framed the issue of statehood as an issue of voter suppression; this made sense in a way the historical narrative and general unfairness had not. We saw a significant increase in the number of cosponsors for the statehood bill.

We began to push in earnest for more allies across the progressive movement. In 2019, we chartered an Amtrak car to Netroots Nation, inviting DC residents to get on the train for statehood. We secured a spot for Congresswoman Norton as one of the keynote speakers — her first speech to a national audience.

Most progressive groups had long been in favor of DC Statehood. Once we had

developed a plausible path to winning, and had shown powerful progress, it was a natural move for them to include statehood among their organizations' priorities. As we secured more endorsements from progressive organizations, we began to ask them to take action. We asked organizations that scored votes to include statehood. We signed on to other organizations' voting rights letters and asked them to sign on to ours. We urged national networks to get their state affiliates to push for new cosponsors for the statehood legislation.

With a vote on the statehood bill (HR51) approaching, we recruited a broad base of national organizations to a Statehood Table. Diverse organizations, including People for the American Way, The Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights, Planned Parenthood, the League of Conservation Voters, Clean Water Action, AFL-CIO, HRC, and the League of Women Voters, sent staff to strategize about how we could finally pass statehood legislation in a chamber of Congress. Our allies wrote blog posts, promoted HR 51 on social media, and recruited their members to attend the House Oversight and Reform Committee hearing in September 2019. The Hub Project, a group working to end the filibuster, created its own campaign called "51 FOR 51."

One thousand people showed up the day of the hearing on HR51, including greeters at the Metro stop and cheerleaders outside the Cannon doors. There were so many supporters that, at the last minute, we set up a jumbotron and chairs for overflow space in the aptly named Liberty Park. At the end of the day, there was an outdoor go-go concert for statehood. The whole day made visible the depth, diversity, professionalism, and passion of the national movement. For the first time, statehood trended on Twitter.

We captured the attention of the Democratic leadership. When the full House voted on HR51, all but one of the Democratic House members voted yes. After over 200 years of effort, this was a truly historic victory.

With this historic victory, Democratic Senators have begun signing on to

cosponsor statehood legislation. This positions us to take advantage of a new Senate this fall and push for a vote in favor of statehood next year – at last giving the people of DC full federal representation and real self-government.

Going Forward

The need for DC statehood is clearer than ever, as are the risks to our democracy of continuing to deny voting rights to nearly one million Americans, many of them people of color. When the president mobilized troops against peaceful protesters on the streets of DC, the Mayor used her new national platform to lift up the racist roots of disenfranchisement, which stemmed from Congressional fear of giving power to a majority Black city. The discrimination faced by the people of DC since 1801 has now become part of the national conversation about how to root out structural racism in our country.

As our campaign goes forward, we're working to expand our narrative to include the treasured principles of American democracy: representation and the right to self-government. We believe that focusing on these principles will resonate with a wide audience of Americans — and we want them all on board. We need to head off any compromise deal that wins us only half a loaf by merging with Maryland. We're drawing inspiration from the fights for **affordable health care** and **marriage equality**, both of which ultimately secured victory through narratives that focused on powerful, unifying principles in addition to arguments for equal rights and access under the law.

We need our wide-ranging coalition to stay unified, in communication, and ready for whatever 2021 brings. We are prepared to seize the momentum we've built to pass statehood legislation in the first 100 days of a new administration. If the results of the fall elections aren't so favorable, we'll fight on. We're now part of a wide, national coalition, and, together, we will continue the push for

full democracy.



About **Barbara Helmick**

Barbara has been a grassroots organizer ever since she answered a help wanted ad titled “Activist” in 1973. She was a pioneer in the development of the door-to-door canvassing model for progressive organizations, such as Clean Water Action, USAction, Working America, and the ERA Fund. Her cavass program developed hundreds of...