

Governmental Affairs Committee Hearing on
“Voting Representation in Congress for Citizens of the District of Columbia”
May 23, 2002

Statement of U.S. Senator Russell D. Feingold

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to join you today and for allowing me to make a statement in support of our effort to secure full voting representation in Congress for the residents of the District of Columbia. I want to commend you, Mr. Chairman, as the others have, for your leadership and work on this issue.

I want my colleagues in the House to know that when my constituents in Wisconsin hear that over half a million people in the District of Columbia are denied the right to voting representation in Congress, they are shocked. I also want to thank Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson for her efforts on the Campaign Finance Reform bill. Without her efforts, that legislation very well may not have had success in the House. That bill, of course, had to do with the integrity of the vote, and this issue has to do with the right to vote.

I am also very pleased to be here today with Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton. She has been a long-time, tireless champion of this important issue in Congress. It is an honor to work with both Delegate Norton and you, Mr. Chairman, to secure full voting representation for D.C. residents.

Mr. Chairman, our nation, the greatest democracy on earth, was born out of a struggle against taxation without representation. Before the Revolutionary War, the British government levied taxes on American colonists. But while these colonists were required to pay taxes to the British government, they had no say, no voice, no power over how they would be governed. Just a few years before the first battle of the Revolutionary War, the British continued the imposition of federal taxes with the Stamp Act and the Sugar Act.

In 1773, the Boston Tea Party took place. American colonists, led by Samuel Adams, raided three British ships in Boston harbor and threw the tea overboard to protest the British tea tax. Soon thereafter, the colonists began to mobilize and to fight for independence. And “no taxation without representation” became a rallying cry. A few years later, of course, after a long and hard-fought struggle, a free and independent America was born.

Yet, more than two hundred years later, Mr. Chairman, Americans in the District of Columbia – home to over half a million residents – remain disenfranchised. They are in a situation not too different from that of the American patriots who fought so hard and sacrificed their lives to someday live free.

Mr. Chairman, when the District of Columbia was created as our nation’s capital 200 years ago, its residents lost their right to full congressional representation. These Americans serve in our nation’s armed forces, pay federal taxes, and keep our federal government and capital city running day and night. They live in the shadows of the monuments of our forefathers and this country’s most highly-praised defenders of democracy. They fight and die for this country in armed conflict. And yet they have no voice in the Senate and only a limited voice in the House. They don’t even have the right to vote on basic administrative matters that other states and cities decide for themselves.

Virtually every other nation grants the residents of its capital city equal representation in its legislature. It is simply an embarrassment that in these modern times, we, as the world’s most powerful democracy, deny voting representation to over half a million Americans.

Since the ratification of the Constitution in 1788, the United States has forged its own suffrage history, guaranteeing the right to vote to all Americans regardless of race, gender, wealth, marital status, or land ownership. Through our interpretation of the one-person, one-vote doctrine, we have made great strides in overcoming inequality and underrepresentation. There remains, however, this unresolved obstacle to suffrage for all Americans: the disenfranchisement of D.C. residents. Mr. Chairman, it is past time for Congress to un-do this injustice.

And so, I was pleased to join you, Mr. Chairman, earlier this year as a cosponsor of an amendment to the election reform bill on the issue of voting representation for D.C. residents. I am told that this was probably the first time since 1978 – when the Senate considered a constitutional amendment – that the issue of voting representation for D.C. residents was even debated on the floor of the Senate. After debate, you withdrew the amendment, but it was important to begin debating this issue in the Senate again. It is long overdue. So I again commend you, Mr. Chairman, for continuing the debate by holding a hearing on this issue today.

Particularly at this time when D.C. residents are members of our nation’s military, the National Guard, the Capitol police, or serving so many other important roles to fight terrorism and to protect our nation from future terrorist attacks, it is, in fact, shameful that we deny them the right to full representation in Congress.

It is past time for Congress to act. I urge our colleagues to join Senator Lieberman and me as cosponsors of the “No Taxation Without Representation Act.” This is an important bill to send the message that taxation without representation is unfair and un-American. I urge my colleagues to join us in ensuring full voting representation for Americans who call the District of Columbia their home.

Thank you for the opportunity again, Mr. Chairman.