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## **D.C. vote threshold**

September 11, 2007

Michael Steele/ J.C. Watts - More than a century ago, the Party of Abraham Lincoln stood with those whose hands and feet were shackled by the injustice of slavery and denied the rights to be a full citizen of this great nation. Today, we have the opportunity to stand, once again, with those who seek to be freed of the shackles that denied them a basic right of citizenship — the right to full representation in our government. Washingtonians deserve voting representation in the United States Congress.

In his Second Inaugural address, President Abraham Lincoln said the injustice of slavery had led directly to the horror of war. That same principle applies today — where government allows injustice to remain, the people will suffer.

The D.C. House Voting Rights Act addresses this injustice by allowing for full representation of the citizens of the District of Columbia in a vote-neutral fashion and affects only the House of Representatives. We believe the Senate should act post-haste to end taxation without representation in our nation's capital.

Washington, D.C., is like so many other great cities in America: full of pride and promise; but also, constrained by the struggle to provide quality education for its children, to protect its citizens and to grow and prosper for future generations. The difference between the District of Columbia and every other city and state in America is that Congress is the final arbiter on how the bills are paid and what laws shall govern the people of Washington. The citizens have absolutely no say on the floor of the Congress — through the vote of their duly elected representative — about the matters that directly affect the people born and raised in our nation's capital. This is a blemish on our democracy and it must come to an end.

Now we need leaders in Congress to stand with the citizens of the District of Columbia and to no longer put political expediency or legislative neglect ahead of doing what is right. The Framers didn't intend to create a city where American citizens were completely unrepresented. But this is the situation we have.

Some have called the D.C. House Voting Rights Act a novel approach to exercising the District Clause of the Constitution to provide representation for D.C. residents. However, the important research of individuals like Viet Dinh and Judge Ken Starr shows Congress first used that power to allow D.C. residents to vote in Maryland and Virginia between 1790 and 1801. Congress rescinded that right by statute in 1801. Furthermore, the courts have upheld Congress' treatment of Washington, D.C., as a "state" under many provisions of the Constitution. Sen. Orrin Hatch, Utah Republican and himself a constitutional expert, recently reaffirmed the constitutionality of the D.C. House Voting Rights Act.

The Framers stated that Congress would exercise "exclusive legislation in all Cases whatsoever, over such District... as may . . . become the seat of Government of the United States." The Framers

did not tell Congress where to put the district. The Framers did not tell the Congress how to govern that district. The Framers simply empowered the Congress to do whatever it deemed appropriate, within the confines of the Constitution, to establish and manage the Federal District.

Some opponents claim a constitutional amendment is the only way to grant the citizens of the District voting rights. But the argument that a right granted by statute and rescinded by statute can now only be granted by a constitutional amendment fundamentally makes no sense.

The journey to this point in our nation's history has been both painful and rewarding. Tax-paying American citizens have voting representation regardless of race or gender — and location. Geography should no longer be a barrier for the citizens of Washington, D.C., to participate in our democracy, nor should it be a proxy for race.

Our elected officials have not always treated Washingtonians, residents of a majority African-American city, kindly or fairly. Connecticut Sen. Prescott Bush, grandfather of the current president, put it this way in 1961: "Congress has treated the District with slight consideration. We have treated it like a stepchild, in comparison with the way we have treated other states."

As Republicans, we are proud that Virginia Rep. Tom Davis conceptualized a bipartisan approach and that so many of our colleagues, like Mr. Hatch and former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and onetime New York Rep. Jack Kemp have joined Mr. Davis as supporters.

Right now, the Senate has within its power a chance to end taxation without representation in our nation's capital. There is some talk that opponents may launch a filibuster to derail this bill. That would be "treating the citizens of the District with slight consideration." We hope our friends in the Senate will also recall that no senator has filibustered a voting rights measure since the days of segregation. This status quo situation has existed long enough. The citizens in this city have suffered long enough. It is time to let D.C. residents vote in Congress. By passing S. 1257, the Senate can end a historic wrong and grant some measure of dignity to the Americans who work, live, raise families and pay taxes in Washington, D.C.

Michael Steele is the former Republican lieutenant governor of Maryland and J.C. Watts is a former Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Oklahoma.

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