

D.C. Voting Rights Act: A Historic Consideration by J.C. Watts, Jr.

In 2006, I had the privilege of watching as President Bush signed the “Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Reauthorization and Amendments Act.” The passage of the bill through Congress took place only after many hours of debate and consideration. Today, there is another similar piece of legislation before Congress: the D.C. Voting Rights Act. This bill would grant residents of the District of Columbia a voting representative in the U.S. House of Representatives, and the time has come for it to be signed into law.

Both the 2006 Voting Rights Reauthorization and the D.C. Voting Rights Act have many political supporters and opponents, and there are more arguments for and against them than any single person can consider. But when I look at these bills, I see something more—what I see in them is a modern day consideration of the fundamental principle of American democracy—that every citizen has the inalienable right to vote for the men and women that exercise political power over them.

When John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin met with the other Founders in Philadelphia in 1776 and wrote the Declaration of Independence, they weren't just deciding to create a revolution because they were angry with King George or Great Britain. Their determination to fight for their independence was based on firmly held political convictions, supported by many years of political thought. Their ideas were rooted in the writings of Aristotle and Plato, Britain's Magna Charta, and their own brief, but unique political history. When they wrote the Declaration, they set out these guiding principles for the world to see and judge, stating that “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” In other words, political power is not something that is transferred from generation to generation through bloodline; it is not conferred by the power of the political gods on a select few; and it is not held through brute force. Political power can *only* be exercised when it is granted by the people who are governed. That is what defines a democracy.

When Americans elect their local and national representatives, they are not participating in a popularity contest. Voting is not just an abstract “civic duty.” Voting is a means of conferring our political power on the men and women we believe will govern us best. The right to vote is what makes our nation unique in history—what makes us a democracy.

The women's suffrage and Civil Rights movements were historic moments in our nation's history because through them, the right to vote was fully extended to U.S. citizens. The D.C. Voting Rights Act is a similar effort to extend full voting rights to every citizen.

You see, until now, residents of the District of Columbia have been left without a voice in Congress—they elect a representative like citizens of the 50 states, but their representative has no voting power. This means that although they pay taxes, like every other citizen, and are governed by laws passed in Congress, they have no real voice in the process.

This issue is not new—many have fought over the years to secure a voting representative for Washington, D.C. Needless to say, it's an issue that is politically charged. Would a D.C. representative add to one party's power at the expense of the other party? Are there constitutional considerations? These questions have been debated by many qualified scholars, both in support and in opposition to the bill.

As I look at the D.C. Voting Rights bill, I see something more important than party politics. I see a debate

that rests on the very basis of the American political system—on the right to vote for your voice in government. It is this basic characteristic of democracy that has transformed nations throughout history. In our own day, the right to possess and confer political power has been battled for and won in countries like Hungary, Russia, Ukraine, Iraq, and many others. I have watched my fellow man around the world struggle to secure the right to vote and rejoice in exercising this right. Each time I see photos of an Iraqi proudly displaying a purple finger, I am reminded of just how important this privilege is for every country that would call itself free.

When I see men and women of this country stand up and fight for their right to vote, I am encouraged. As a people, we do still understand the meaning of democracy, and as the citizens of Washington, D.C. are demonstrating, they are willing to do what it takes to maintain it.