

D.C. STATEHOOD: RETROCESSION IS NOT THE ANSWER

For decades, residents of Washington, D.C., have demanded nothing short of statehood because they seek equal treatment under the law. D.C. residents pay taxes and serve our nation in the military, but have no voting representation in our government. Nearly 700,000 mostly Black and Brown people don't have the same rights as residents of each of the 50 states – simply because of where they live. The only way to address and correct this injustice is to grant the District statehood.

As we move closer to statehood for Washington, D.C., than ever before, Republican representatives like Dusty Johnson (R-SD) are proposing plans for retrocession – in which Washington, D.C., gets subsumed into the state of Maryland instead of remaining a separate and independent jurisdiction. As Rep. Johnson sees it, retrocession is an “[appropriate and bipartisan](#)” alternative to the solution to the subjugation of those living in Washington, D.C. He could not be more wrong.

Proponents of retrocession submit this idea as an easy alternative that would technically give D.C. residents full voting rights while maintaining the current structure of the House and Senate. Some opponents of statehood make the claim that retrocession is the only constitutional solution to the issue of lack of representation. But residents of Washington, D.C., know that statehood is constitutional, and that retrocession – with its history tied to slavery and its deep unpopularity in both the District and in Maryland – is not the answer to their 200-plus year struggle for full representation.

Statehood is constitutional – end of story.

Put simply, the Admissions Clause – Article IV, Section 3 of the Constitution – affords Congress the power to admit new states. Since 1791, every state has been admitted the same way: by a simple act of Congress, and signed into law by the president. D.C.'s admission process would look no different than all the other states besides the original 13 colonies, as affirmed by [dozens of nationally acclaimed constitutional scholars](#).

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Retrocession is often proposed as the solution to the false claim that making Washington, D.C., a state is unconstitutional and would require a constitutional amendment. But retrocession is an explicit acknowledgement that Congress has the exclusive power to change the District's jurisdictional status. The District Clause – Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution – gives Congress power to exclusively govern the “Seat of the Government” – without a constitutional amendment, including reducing its size. As such, anyone who is offering retrocession as a “solution” to D.C.'s lack of representation must concede that making D.C. a state through congressional action is constitutional. In fact, Rep. Johnson's bill says it clearly: It is “a bill to reduce the size of the seat of the Government of the United States,” making it evident that the argument against statehood is not one of constitutionality, but rather one of partisanship and racism.

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Retrocession's history is steeped in racism and has deep ties to slavery.

Retrocession is not a moderate, innocuous suggestion as statehood opponents claim it to be. Its use throughout our country's history is deeply intertwined with the legacy of slavery, used as a tool to dilute Black political power and further entrench white supremacy.

Derek Musgrove and Chris Myers Asch's *Chocolate City* details the retrocession process that took place in 1846, when white slaveholders in Alexandria – then a part of the District of Columbia – pushed to join Virginia in an effort to preserve their high economic status, a status that was buoyed by their profitable trade of enslaved people. They sought to leave the District – where abolition was becoming an increasingly likely possibility – and join Virginia – where slavery was thriving – so that their exploitation of the labor of enslaved people could continue unabated. They were successful.

The retrocession of Alexandria didn't just serve to maintain white slaveholders' profit and positions of power; it also sabotaged local Black communities. Within a year of the city's retrocession back to Virginia, the Black schools in Alexandria [closed](#). Free Black people stopped moving to the city, and longtime Black residents began to move away.

Retrocession is unpopular across the board.

Support for statehood has risen consistently over the last 30 years: a 2016 District referendum showed support for statehood at [86 percent](#) among District residents; nationwide support remains high at [54 percent](#) based on a February 2021 poll. Meanwhile, retrocession has remained an unpopular and unwanted alternative. In response to a retrocession bill introduced by congressional Republicans in February 2021, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) [said](#): "Retrocession would be inconsistent with that referendum vote and the District's pursuit of self-determination." As Musgrove and Asch [wrote](#), retrocession has no support in present-day Washington, D.C., because: "Adopting the strategy of 19th-century slave traders is a tough sell in a plurality-Black city."

District residents overwhelmingly support statehood over retrocession; the same is true for Maryland residents. A [2019 poll](#) found that Maryland residents supported statehood even before it gained national approval, and residents of DC suburbs in Maryland supported it overwhelmingly. When asked about retrocession, residents were even more decisive: they opposed it 57-36 percent. Maryland lawmakers, who would have to consent to retrocession according to Maryland state law, [are similarly opposed to it](#). Their antipathy to retrocession is longstanding: A survey of Maryland state legislators from the [1990s](#) found that over 90 percent of the state's governing body rejected the notion of retrocession, even if Congress mandated it as a condition of DC statehood.

