



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Committee on the Judiciary
Markup of H.R. 157, the District of Columbia House Voting Rights Act of 2009
February 24, 2009

Thank you, Chairman Conyers.

It is fitting—and a source of pride—that my first words to this Committee are offered in strong support of H.R. 157.

I believe that taking this step to end the disenfranchisement of the District's nearly 600,000 residents is the just and proper course of action. There is no principled basis to deny to the District that which is the birthright of states with smaller or comparable populations—namely, a single voting member in the House of Representatives.

Laws with national applicability, as well as laws designed specifically to govern life in the District, are introduced and approved in Congress every day. D.C. residents should have a real voice—that is, a vote—in those debates. Representative democracy, the bedrock principle of America's approach to government, requires no less.

Mr. Chairman: In a world where too many governments remain indifferent or hostile to the rights and liberties of those they purport to lead, to be born or to become a citizen of the United States is a blessing. The proof of this statement's essential truth is revealed to us in many forms. It is reflected, for example, in the eyes of the young Marine who readies himself for battle by gently rubbing the small American flag stitched to his uniform for good luck. And it is evident from the lump that forms in the throat of the elderly immigrant to this country as she takes the oath of citizenship and reflects back on the long and difficult journey that has culminated in this joyful moment.

I do not pretend to know for certain what combination of factors inspires American soldiers to risk their lives for this country, or what blend of motives drives immigrants to leave behind everything—and everyone—they know in order to reach these shores. But I do think it is

because they, like us, revere this country for its commitment to freedom and democracy. H.R. 157 will mark another important step in the effort to ensure that all U.S. citizens, wherever they reside, can participate fully in our vibrant democracy.

I want to join my colleagues in commending Congresswoman Holmes Norton for her tireless devotion to this fundamental issue. Even though I am new to this body, I am not new to the principle for which she fights. Residents of Puerto Rico have been U.S. citizens—and U.S. soldiers—since 1917. The percentage of the Island’s sons and daughters currently serving in the U.S. military is greater than the percentage in 49 of the 50 states. The Island’s four million residents cannot vote for their president and commander-in-chief; are not represented in the Senate; and send a single non-voting member to the House. I will not belabor this point because I believe that the situations confronting the District and Puerto Rico, while similar in some ways, are also different in key respects. I also firmly believe that H.R. 157 deserves to be considered on its own merits.

Mr. Chairman: If there is a place where democracy should be working at its best, it is in the capital city of our great nation. There can be no democracy where the people have no meaningful say in the process of making the laws that govern their lives. I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 157, and to make democracy shine in the District of Columbia.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.