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D.C.'s shadow delegation: It's not the money, it's the strategy



(Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

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By George Derek Musgrove, Published: April 11

Last week, D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray (D) released a budget for fiscal 2015 that [contains \\$100,000](#) for the District's shadow delegation to Congress, the city's official statehood lobby. Though a pittance when compared with the \$1.1 million that D.C. Council member Vincent Orange (D-At Large) proposed [allocating for the same purpose last year](#), the budget line still would be unprecedented. The city has never directly funded the shadow delegation since the first elections for the positions in 1990.

The appropriation would be a shot in the arm for a lobby that has seen more setbacks than successes over 24 years. But no amount of money would help statehood activists if they use it to execute the same failed strategy.

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Since its creation, the shadow delegation has focused its energy on lobbying members of Congress on Capitol Hill. Though its efforts get support from the small number of members who already favor statehood, the delegation has never been able to persuade those on the fence, let alone outright opponents, to support their cause.

This was not always the case for advocates of D.C. self-determination.

In July 1978, 12 years before the creation of the statehood delegation, Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.) strode to the well of the Senate to deliver a speech on the [D.C. Voting Rights Amendment](#), which would have granted the capital city voting representation in the

House and Senate “as though it were a state.” A segregationist Democrat turned conservative Republican who had opposed D.C. self-determination his entire career, Thurmond was widely expected to oppose the legislation. Yet, surprisingly, the senator urged his colleagues to support the measure, stating, “Human rights begins at home, here in the nation’s capital.”

How did this happen? Four words: The folks back home.

That year, D.C. Del. Walter Fauntroy (D) and the Self-Determination for D.C. Coalition had mobilized South Carolina African Americans to support the D.C. Voting Rights Amendment. Their efforts were tremendously effective, with a Thurmond campaign poll showing that 57 percent of black South Carolinians favored the amendment. Facing a tough reelection battle in which he needed to increase his share of the black vote, Thurmond reversed his usual opposition to D.C. self-determination.

Many of Thurmond’s Southern colleagues made similar decisions in response to Fauntroy and Self-Determination for D.C.’s activities in their states. So many, in fact, that Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), one of the few Southern senators from a state with a large black population to oppose the legislation, complained that his colleagues were engaged in a “mad scramble for political advantage with a minority group.”

When the D.C. Voting Rights Amendment passed the Senate that August, it was one of the most significant victories for advocates of D.C. self-determination, before or since. Though a newly powerful [conservative movement defeated the amendment](#) when it traveled to the states for ratification, the campaign to pass it holds an important lesson for those who hope to jump-start the struggle today: Members of Congress respond to the folks back home who can vote them into or out of office, not to D.C. residents who come begging at their Capitol Hill doors.

This lesson, by the way, was not lost on many D.C. residents when they voted for the first statehood delegation in 1990. Though three shadow offices were up for grabs, almost everyone focused on Jesse Jackson, a newly minted D.C. resident and candidate for shadow

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senator. Residents hoped Jackson would be able to move the stalled fight for statehood forward through his leadership of the Rainbow Coalition, the national network that had helped him to amass [almost 7 million votes](#) in the 1988 Democratic primary. Ron Richardson, chief executive of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Local 25, [underscored this point](#), arguing that Jackson was a “leader of national proportions . . . who can go to the Hill and can say to a congressman, I took your state.”

Unfortunately, Jackson did not use this leverage, focusing instead on lobbying senators in Washington. In the years since, the delegation has continued to pursue this strategy. In the process, it has become increasingly ineffective.

The 2015 budget could give the shadow delegation funding it needs to expand its lobbying operation. But the history of the struggle for D.C. self-determination teaches that, to have any success, it needs to adopt a strategy that can reach the folks back home.

The writer is an assistant professor of history at the University of Maryland Baltimore County.

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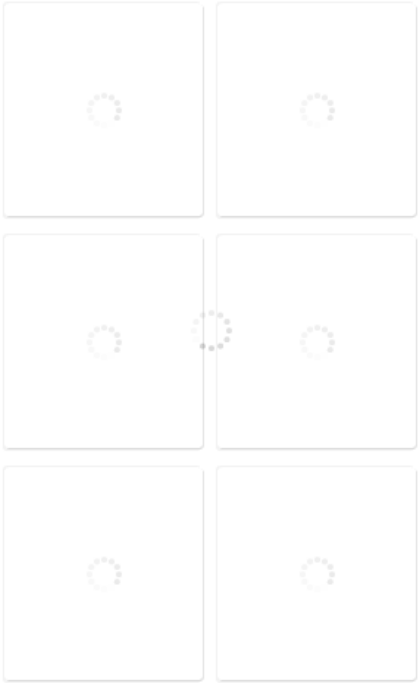
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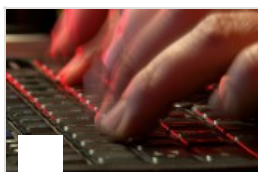
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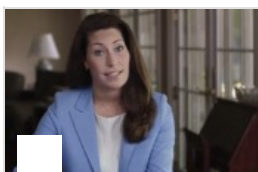
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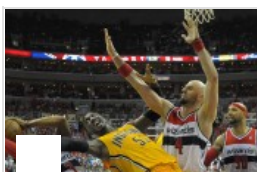
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