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With Dem victories, hope anew for voting rights in District

By **Michael Neibauer**
 Examiner Staff Writer 11/6/08

D.C. leaders supported Barack Obama's candidacy. Now they expect President-elect Obama to return the favor with a vote for the nation's capital in the U.S. House of Representatives.

"Taking nothing for granted," Mayor Adrian Fenty said Wednesday. "But obviously having more U.S. senators and a Democratic president, I think the chances of us having full voting rights increases dramatically."

Fenty backed Obama's candidacy very early, in the summer of 2007, with one caveat: That Obama support D.C. voting rights. A few months later the Senate blocked legislation that would have given the District one voting seat in the House, in exchange for Utah getting one additional seat. Obama had co-sponsored the bill.

The voting rights legislation fell three votes shy of the 60 needed for Senate floor consideration. Democrats on Tuesday gained a minimum four Senate seats. Of the bill's seven Republican backers, two were up for re-election Tuesday and both appear to have won.

It was a great day for the cause, supporters say. D.C.'s nonvoting Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, who cruised to re-election, is now predicting 63 Senate votes for D.C. voting rights.

"Now that we have 63 percent, I want the earliest vote in the Senate and of course the House as well," Norton said. "The D.C. voting rights bill will be my first bill. Once the 111th Congress comes around, it'll be 210 years that D.C. residents have waited for a vote that the framers always intended it to have. I want no further delay."

Getting Norton a vote in Congress "may in fact be easy as counting votes in the Senate," said Lisa Crooms, Howard University law professor. But ending disenfranchisement means moving D.C. toward two Senate seats and ultimately statehood, Crooms said, a concept that makes many elected officials outside the city cringe.

The Norton bill that the Senate rejected included a provision that the District "shall not be considered a state for purposes of representation in the United States Senate."

"I guess it makes her job easier," Crooms said of Norton's one-vote effort. "But just as easily as they give it they can take away. If you corrected that, you wouldn't have to keep going back with your hat in your hand."

Obama's victory, said D.C. Council Chairman Vincent Gray, "moves the District's hopes of voting representation in Congress a big step forward."

"I believe Mr. Obama will follow through on his promise that, if elected, he would sign the bill into law upon congressional passage," Gray said in a statement.

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