

# From a Weak Democracy in Islamabad, to Denial of Democracy in Washington, DC.

 [www.dcvote.org/blog/weak-democracy-islamabad-denial-democracy-washington-dc](http://www.dcvote.org/blog/weak-democracy-islamabad-denial-democracy-washington-dc)

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It has been only a week since I flew from Pakistan and landed at Dulles International Airport ready to begin my year-long Atlas Corps fellowship at Creative Science Labs in Washington, DC. It was my first time travelling outside of Pakistan and I can still remember how excited I was as I packed the last of my cheddars — traditional shawls — into my suitcase.

Shortly after arrival, my supervisor at Creative Science, Chris Fowler, invited me to watch my first ever baseball game at Nationals Park as a guest of DC Vote, an organization Chris has worked with in the past. During the game, Chris told me about the struggle for democracy in DC and about the work done by DC Vote in advocating for the rights of people living in DC.



Coming from Islamabad, I was shocked to learn that the people of the District of Columbia — the capital of the United States of America — do not have a voice in Congress, even though they pay federal taxes and fight for their country.

Back in Islamabad, the capital of my country, residents have representation both in Pakistan's upper (Senate) and lower house (National Assembly). They also elect a local government that deals with all the local issues of the people living in the capital, much like DC's Council.

Surely, I surmised, failure to be represented in the national legislature constitutes a civil rights violation in the US. To my mind, "No Taxation Without Representation" is a strong enough appeal for policy-makers to give Washingtonians a right to vote for fully-empowered representatives in Congress. It's alarming that this slogan, which originated during the 1750s and 1760s to summarize a primary grievance of the American colonists' undemocratic experience in the Thirteen Colonies (and one of the major causes of the American Revolution), still holds true today for the residents of the District of Columbia.

As a democracy activist and student, I have observed the political system of Pakistan and worked with the President of Pakistan as media assistant from 2008 to 2011. I know firsthand what a weak democracy looks like. Pakistanis have been ruled by four dictatorships and still rely on the army to play a major role in the setup and ongoing operation of our government. Despite this, Pakistanis have elected representatives from all the cities and constituencies of Pakistan, including the capital city. Unlike residents of DC, the people of Islamabad have the right to hold their representatives accountable and advocate for their basic needs to be met.

I have lived my life in a country that strongly values democracy in part because Pakistanis know how it feels to have democracy taken away. The continuing denial of democratic rights in DC is un-American. To

an outsider who works to advance democracy, this injustice in the seat of power of a leading democracy in the world is shocking. Representation in Congress for the people of DC is the only acceptable path to a better future not only for Americans in DC, but for those interested in stronger American democracy for all.

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*Atlas Corps is an international network of nonprofit leaders and organizations that promotes innovation, cooperation, and solutions to address the world's 21st century challenges.*

*Creative Science Labs is a Washington, DC based digital agency that creates high-impact websites and campaigns for non-profits and select private sector clients.*