Is D.C. Finally on the Brink of Statehood?

A new generation of savvy activists. A new political calculus among leading Democrats. Maybe, just maybe, it could actually happen.

BY NORA CAPLAN-BRICKER
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Is D.C. on the Brink of Statehood?
A new generation of savvy activists. A new political calculus among leading Democrats. Maybe it could actually happen. 12

The Queen’s Gamble
Shemekia Copeland reigns as the greatest blues singer of her generation. Now she wants to fuse politics with the blues. 20

Opening Lines
Who is a liberal? The meaning of the “dreaded l-word” has never been more uncertain. 2

Tom Sietsema
A review of Pennyroyal Station in Mount Rainier, Md. 27

Inside
Just Asking 6 Date Lab 8 Second Glance 30 Crossword 31
Gene Weingarten 32
Sen. Bernie Sanders is often called a liberal. The Washington Post recently described the two-time runner-up for the Democratic presidential nomination as a “liberal leader.” The New York Times referred to him as a “firebrand liberal.” It’s another way of saying he’s left-wing.

But the senator from Vermont famously identifies as a democratic socialist and has repeatedly said he’s “not a liberal.” Democrats typically shun the l-word to avoid being seen as too radical, yet true left-wingers reject it for the opposite reason: They think liberals aren’t radical enough. As former Sanders press secretary Briahna Joy Gray told me, some on the left, especially among the young online set, “have come to associate ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’ with a kind of establishment brand of politics.”

Some libertarians, meanwhile, are trying to grab the word for themselves. Former Michigan congressman Justin Amash, a Republican-turned-independent-turned-Libertarian, tweeted in mid-January, “I hereby reclaim the word ‘liberal’ for classical liberalism. This serves as an official notice.” Bari Weiss, a centrist former Times opinion editor, recently tweeted support for Amash’s idea of forming a new political party. But she can’t really be described as a libertarian herself — and recently wrote an essay for Tablet magazine aligning with liberalism in yet another way: not “in the narrow, partisan sense” but in the sense of broader virtues like pluralism, individualism and “liberty of thought, faith, and speech.”

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Sen. Bernie Sanders is often called a liberal. The Washington Post recently described the two-time runner-up for the Democratic presidential nomination as a “liberal leader.” The New York Times referred to him as a “firebrand liberal.” It’s another way of saying he’s left-wing. But the senator from Vermont famously identifies as a democratic socialist and has repeatedly said he’s “not a liberal.” Democrats typically shun the l-word to avoid being seen as too radical, yet true left-wingers reject it for the opposite reason: They think liberals aren’t radical enough. As former Sanders press secretary Briahna Joy Gray told me, some on the left, especially among the young online set, “have come to associate ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’ with a kind of establishment brand of politics.”

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Longtime Slate writer Will Saletan, another centrist, has embraced the label in a similar fashion, telling Who is a liberal? The meaning of the ‘dreaded l-word’ has never been more uncertain. Opening Lines
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Republican-turned-independent-turned-Libertarian, recently tweeted: “I hereby reclaim the word ‘liberal’ for themselves. Former congressman Justin Amash, a conservative commentator Matt Lewis, “Nowadays, to me, [liberal] doesn’t mean ‘as opposed to conservative.’ Nowadays it means ‘as opposed to illiberalism,’ which exists in various forms on the left and right. I notice that Bill Kristol, for example, has been using the word ‘liberal’ a lot lately.”

Kristol — who, in his incarnations as chief of staff to Dan Quayle and longtime editor of the Weekly Standard, would never have been considered a friend to liberalism — told me there could be “not exactly a political alliance or party, but a kind of intellectual alliance” between center-left and center-right “in defense of liberalism broadly speaking. ... Liberal democracy seems to be what is at stake around the world — the defense of liberal democracy against a kind of populist authoritarianism on the right and various illiberal trends on the left.” (“If someone like Bill Kristol is thinking about identifying as a liberal,” Gray told me, “that should give liberals who see themselves as progressive some pause.”)

For most of the 20th century, things were a bit more straightforward. Democratic leaders were content to call themselves liberal — by which they meant they were committed to both personal freedoms and a role for government in regulating and softening (but not undermining) capitalism. Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John Kennedy all used the word to describe their visions of a strong federal government.

Then, in the 1980s, an ascendant conservative movement began a blistering rhetorical assault on what Ronald Reagan called the “dreaded l-word.” In a 1988 speech attacking Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis, Reagan used the word “liberal” or “liberalism” nearly two dozen times. Dukakis initially ran from the term before ultimately embracing it — and going down in a crushing defeat. By 1992, Bill Clinton was running for the White House on ostentatiously moderate “third way” politics.

“The negative connotations in the ‘80s and ‘90s were a kind of softness on the most divisive social issues: crime, parental authority, drug abuse,” says David Kusnet, who was Clinton’s chief speechwriter after writing for Dukakis during the ‘88 campaign. He adds that the word was “drained of the positive connotations of economic liberalism — being for working people, resisting excesses of corporate power, protecting people in times of need.”

Sanders invoked that kind of governing philosophy during his campaigns when he compared himself to Roosevelt. But some liberal critics question the comparison, noting that even FDR bargained with corporations and made concessions to Wall Street. “The Roosevelt thing is a bit of spin,” says New York Magazine’s liberal stalwart Jonathan Chait, “or at least a tendentious effort by the left to turn Roosevelt into usable history.” Chait notes that “Roosevelt was a liberal who toggled between the left and the center, and the left was pulling out its hair over Roosevelt more than half the time.”

The confusion over who on the left should qualify — or even wants to qualify — as a liberal has created an opening for libertarians. Before the 20th century, “liberal” generally meant what we now call libertarianism: government taking a hands-off attitude in both the social and economic realms. Stephen Kent, a spokesman for the D.C.-based public relations firm Young Voices, told me libertarians like him have “an opportunity to drop ‘classical’ from the way we describe our liberalism and just step in as the champions of liberal thought and the open society.”

Or maybe a broader-tenor approach could carry the day. Emily Chamlee-Wright, president and CEO of George Mason University’s classical-liberal Institute for Humane Studies, says she’s “interested in engaging in a broader family conversation amongst liberals,” be they left of center, classical or conservative. “Families can disagree about a lot of things, but they still recognize the family resemblance and come back for holiday dinners,” she explains.

Even among movement conservatives — many of whom have long delighted in “owning the libs,” as they put it — there have been occasional (sort of) nice things said about liberalism lately. Ben Shapiro claimed on his show that he scrapped his company’s plans to make a “LIBERAL TEARS” mug and instead made one that said “LEFTIST TEARS.” He said that while liberals are people he “disagrees with on taxes and government interventionism,” leftists want to target his advertisers, deplatform him and ensure he can’t make a living. Fellow talk-show host Dennis Prager has made the case that leftists, not conservatives, are liberals’ true enemy.

Then again, Shapiro and Prager both used their enormous platforms to support Donald Trump. Liberalism may be a capacious idea, but one thing’s sure: Trumpists don’t claim it or get to define it.

None of this jockeying over “liberal” is likely to go mainstream anytime soon, particularly since most politicians remain averse to the label. Gray, the former Sanders press secretary, wishes all progressives would wise up and call themselves leftists, but she understands these semantic discussions are taking place among a tiny subset of highly engaged citizens. She’s ultimately focused on the substance of politics, not evolving labels.

Still, it’s telling that, for all the criticism of liberalism, influential voices are still fighting over its meaning — and reimagining it to serve their ends. That impulse — not to own the libs but to hone the libs — seems destined to endure.

Graham Vyse is a Post Magazine contributing writer and an associate editor for the Signal.
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“Disinformation can be a very lucrative business, especially if you’re good at it.”

Joan Donovan

INTERVIEW BY JOE HEIM / PHOTOGRAPH BY CIDGY BOSSUET

Joan Donovan, 41, is a scholar of media manipulation, social movements and extremism, and is research director of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. She lives in Boston.

Disinformation has become a more widely used term over the past couple of years. How do you define it?

When I teach my class, I just lay it out as false information that is shared intentionally to reach a political goal. And that word “intentionally” is part of the definition where a lot of people get hung up because, well, how do you know what their intention is? Which is why my team uses a framework where we try to get down to the level of attribution, which is often very hard to find out, of who started a campaign and why. And there’s a variety of different actors and reasons why people would participate in a disinformation campaign. But once you start to focus on patterns of behavior, you realize that there are certain people who either do it because it lends them clout and influence within a very small universe of like-minded individuals — so for them it’s ideological reasons — and then there are others that are incentivized by money. Disinformation can be a very lucrative business, especially if you’re good at it.

What role did disinformation play in the attack on the Capitol?

We can’t under underestimate the role that disinformation played in giving people a reason to be in D.C. on January 6. Which is to say that many believed and were ready to act on the belief the election had been stolen from Donald Trump. Everybody could see that this voter fraud cloud was engulfing many, many people day by day, and little could be done to stop it, which is why we end up with thousands of people in D.C. to rally for Trump. Unfortunately, people are going to want to blame anyone else for what happened rather than looking at what occurred, which is that Donald Trump was able to enroll many people in this huge spider web of lies, and many of the people who showed up to the Capitol believe in Trump.

Twitter removed Trump from its platform. Was that the right decision?

It is the right decision because Twitter was Trump’s main tool in directing these groups, especially directing them to the Capitol, and then [he] seemed to be inflaming and inciting tensions by saying that even though the election must have still been stolen, that people should go in peace, as if they were under his control at that point. The thing about movements is, you can try to guide them during periods of relative calm, but when they reach a fever pitch like they did in storming the Capitol, it becomes less clear what kind of directions and what kind of signals they’re going to hear from charismatic leaders. And it was difficult to predict what Trump might say next.

Looking forward, what sort of disinformation should we be most worried about?

I think in the immediacy we have to reckon with the fact that democracy, as we currently know it, is imperiled, in the sense that we need a wide swath of the public to have faith that votes are being counted and tabulated fairly. That is the only way that people will continue to participate in the system of democracy. Even if people are disinterested in voting, they still have to maintain a belief that it is fair and that people have access to voting as a means for changing our president or any of our representatives.

For the ordinary person who isn’t studying the nuances of the ways in which different disinformation is being spread, what’s the best way to keep yourself from being duped?

I think when it comes to [social media], you have to have a gut check around information that shocks you or information that makes you feel like you need to share it immediately. The way in which these systems are built and the way in which we participate in social media has a lot to do with feeding off emotion. And outrage is a significant emotion that social media companies will tap time and time again. And so I think people, when they approach information online, especially those most vulnerable to misinformation, you want to trust, but verify and verify and verify.

This interview has been edited and condensed. For a longer version, visit wapo.st/magazine.
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Is there a Date Lab “type”? Erik Gross, a 25-year-old program coordinator at a think tank, assumed there was. Going into his date, he wondered — a little too late — what it meant for compatibility.

“I was joking with my friends: ‘I don’t know if I can date someone from Date Lab because they’re probably all going to be super extra and over-the-top,’ ” he recalled. Imagine his surprise when the person on the other end of his Zoom date was a bona fide introvert, 23-year-old technical government contractor Amanda Davis. While Davis is on the quiet side and cherishes her alone time, she is looking to meet people, which is what led her to Date Lab. “I have to put myself out there,” she explained. “It’s just sort of a necessary evil that I’ve learned to be more comfortable with.”

Sensing this, Erik took the lead in their Q&A. “I felt like I asked a lot of the questions,” he said. “I’m comfortable in that role. I know how to step up if I need to be the one to push the conversation forward.” Incidentally (or maybe not at all), Erik is a veteran of newspaper-coordinated blind dates: He did his college paper’s version of the column twice. Talk about types!

“I really appreciate someone who can take control, but not necessarily in an overbearing way — someone who has the next question ready,” Amanda said. “Someone who knows how to handle pauses, since that’s a skill that sometimes I lack.” This is how two people with very different communication styles managed to complement each other.

Erik ate Thai food “nervously and intermittently” throughout the date. Amanda ordered sushi. Both had nice things to say about each other’s appearance: Amanda recalled that her first thought upon setting eyes on Erik was, “Oh, thank God he’s cute,” while Erik said Amanda was “cute” and has a nice smile, though is not exactly his type. “I like girls with maybe a little bit more edge to them, who are maybe a little bit more outgoing,” he explained.

So opposites didn’t exactly attract, but they didn’t repel either. All told, they spent nearly two hours talking. And while they had many differences beyond personality type (she’s a musician, he’s not; she majored in math and computer science, he has a “useless” liberal arts degree), they did find common ground in having gone through breakups during lockdown. “The pandemic makes getting over a breakup harder,” Erik said of his experience. “It’s not like you can just go on with your life. It’s not like you can find distraction easily or go out and party or go out on a bunch of dates or whatever.” Indeed, the adage “the best way to get over a breakup is a hookup” ceases to function when you’re socially distancing. Date Lab, then, is a potentially useful backup plan. If nothing else, it can help people take their minds off things.

“The thing that really got the conversation going was when I
found out she was in the marching band in college,” said Erik. “I was like, ‘That’s awesome.’ I would have gone crazy over that in college. ... It was just a really unexpected hobby.”

“He was really entertained by that, whereas I’m used to people not being so interested,” explained Amanda. “It’s misunderstood, and there’s not as much credit that comes with it as there maybe should be.”

While Amanda said the conversation’s flow was natural and its tone was lighthearted, she did concede that it felt a bit like an interview. “I think a lot of that was due to the virtual setup,” she said. “He commented that because he was sitting where he sits for work, it felt kind of like a business interview.” A cameo made by one of Amanda’s three cats sparked a new line of discussion as Erik’s a “big cat guy.”

As they neared the two-hour mark, silences became longer and more numerous. “By the end of the date, we were just sitting there in silence while she was petting her cat and I was just watching,” Erik said. (In case it needs to be said, that’s not a euphemism.) Soon both agreed that they were experiencing Zoom fatigue.

On reflection, Amanda said she didn’t detect a romantic spark, but wondered how much that had to do with the virtual medium. “I would be interested, if we found a safe time, to try to meet up in person and get a better understanding of what our dynamic would be that way because I think that would be a little more normal and relaxed,” she said. For Erik’s part, he seemed interested in future contact with Amanda but only on a friendship basis. After all, they now have more than one thing in common. “It’s quite the bond to have with someone to go on Date Lab,” he said.

RATE THE DATE
Amanda: 4.5 [out of 5].
Erik: 4.5.

UPDATE
They’ve stayed in platonic contact, with no future dates planned.

Rich Juzwiak is a senior writer at Jezebel and writes Slate’s advice column “How to Do It.”

Join us for a virtual Date Lab event from 5 to 6 p.m. Feb. 12. Register at datelablive.com.
Valentine’s Day is exactly a week away, which means there’s still time to set the scene for a little romance at home. How about adding the warm and shimmering glow of a new chandelier? Or perhaps the two of you might want to curl up with a glass of champagne on a new sofa? Whatever you have in mind, the local décor experts below can help!

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The winter season is about richness and glow, and the Reverie chandelier from Fredrick Ramond features a combination of finishes and shapes to create an opulent transitional silhouette. Its hammered, polished steel drum encircles rings of frosted crystal accents that radiate stunning, soft light. With the addition of a champagne-toned metal band and chain, this unique piece is as much a show-stopper as it is a unique reflection of your taste. On display now in our Arlington showroom.

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A new generation of savvy activists. A new political calculus among leading Democrats. Maybe, just maybe, it could actually happen.
Is D.C. Finally on the Brink of Statehood?

STORY BY NORA CAPLAN-BRICKER / ILLUSTRATION BY SIMO LIU
Demi Stratmon, left, and Jamal Holtz, two of the lead organizers of 51 for 51, an advocacy group fighting for D.C. statehood. “I want statehood to happen in the first 100 days” of President Biden’s administration, Stratmon said. “I don’t want it to be pushed to the back burner anymore.”

Days after runoff elections in Georgia delivered Democrats an unexpected Senate majority, the team behind 51 for 51, an advocacy group fighting for D.C. statehood, gathered on Zoom to discuss its next steps. “There is nothing in the way of us finally granting statehood to over 700,000 residents of Washington, D.C.,” said Stasha Rhodes, the campaign director, her frameless glasses glinting in the glare of her computer screen. “We now see the light at the end of a very dark, undemocratic tunnel.”

Rhodes asked the campaign’s lead organizers, three native Washingtonians in their early to mid-20s, how they hoped to focus their efforts in the first days of the Biden administration. Ty Hobson-Powell, seated on his couch in a sweatshirt with the word “American” scrawled across the front, suggested putting pressure on senators who had already pledged support for D.C. statehood. Jamal Holtz raised the importance of talking to voters in states whose senators had expressed ambivalence. Demi Stratmon proposed an expanded media campaign. “I want statehood to happen in the first 100 days,” she said. “I don’t want it to be pushed to the back burner anymore.”

Hobson-Powell, Holtz and Stratmon are the newest faces of a D.C. statehood movement that has never been more visible — or closer to achieving its goal. For the first time in American history, D.C. statehood is now both a political priority in the halls of Congress and a popular demand far beyond the District’s borders. And that’s in part due to the work of activist groups such as 51 for 51, whose members spent the better part of a year before the pandemic traveling to places like South Carolina, New Hampshire and Iowa, speaking with voters who had no idea that roughly 700,000 Americans — more than the populations of Wyoming or Vermont — pay federal taxes without possessing a vote in Congress.

Though the pandemic at first stalled 51 for 51’s strategy, the summer’s uprisings for racial justice opened unexpected avenues for a campaign to empower a majority-minority city. In June, when President Donald Trump sent the National Guard into the city to suppress the protests despite opposition from Mayor Muriel Bowser, he drew attention to the unequal status that left D.C. unable to refuse what many residents considered a hostile invasion. “This blatant degradation of our home right before my own eyes offered another reminder — a particularly powerful one — of why we need statehood for the District,” the mayor wrote in The Washington Post that month. At the protests, calls for statehood joined other chants for racial justice. On June 26, a statehood bill passed the House of Representatives for the first time in history, with the support of all but one of the chamber’s Democrats.

“We’ve never seen the groundswell of public support for statehood that we’re seeing now,” says historian Chris Myers Asch, co-author of “Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital,” a celebrated book about D.C.’s long struggle for self-determination. “There were never thousands of people in the streets,
Stratmon said. "I don't want it to be pushed to the back burner anymore."

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Demi Stratmon, left, and Jamal Holtz, two of the lead organizers of 51 for 51, an advocacy group fighting for D.C. statehood, gathered on Zoom campaign. "I want statehood to happen in the first 100 days," she said.

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But if Democrats aren't moved to enfranchise the District in the name of fairness, they may be impelled to do so out of self-interest. The rural skew renders the Senate between 6 and 7 percentage points more conservative than the general electorate, according to the polling website FiveThirtyEight. By 2040, political scientists project, the 70 Senators who hail from small states will collectively represent only 30 percent of Americans. The longer the Democratic majority waits to create a more representative Congress, the harder it will be to overcome the Republican minority's ingrained advantage.

Statehood, in other words, poses a solution to many of the problems...
facing the new administration — but D.C.’s path forward is still far from certain. The Senate’s new swing vote, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, opposes scrapping the filibuster and has said he needs “to see the pros and cons” before deciding whether D.C. should be a state. Other conservative Democrats may also lack the stomach for an effort that Republicans portray as a power grab. Perhaps the greatest obstacle is the difficulty, demonstrated countless times over the centuries since the District was founded, of convincing people across the country that the rights of a city on the East Coast should rank among their most pressing concerns. It’s easy to imagine how the sense of possibility that currently surrounds statehood could dissipate as it has so many times before — unless, that is, activists can sustain the public excitement that eluded their predecessors, elevating the District’s disenfranchisement, at long last, to the status of urgent national cause.

Today's statehood activists are far from the first to connect the city's lack of representation to the wider oppression of Black Americans. Long a capital of African American culture, the District drew free Blacks before the Civil War and became a magnet for Southerners during the Great Migration; by the 1950s, Black residents made up the city's majority. In the early '70s, the newly founded D.C. Statehood Party, led by civil rights activists such as Julius Hobson, compared Washingtonians to "a colonized people," and the U.S. Congress to "the colonial authorities." (To this day, Congress reviews all laws passed by D.C.'s city council, as well as the municipal budget — a power federal lawmakers have used to preempt progressive policies, such as stringent gun control measures.)

Republicans have long opposed D.C. statehood, but the tepid enthusiasm of Democrats has been just as significant an impediment. In 1990, Jesse Jackson ran for the role of the District's nonvoting "shadow senator," which he vowed to use as a platform to win the city increased representation. Like Hobson before him, he spoke about statehood in the language of civil rights, arguing that it "may be the only way to integrate the U.S. Senate." Jackson and Eleanor Holmes Norton, D.C.'s nonvoting delegate to the House of Representatives, spent years building support for a statehood bill that came up for a vote in 1993, when Democrats controlled the presidency and both chambers of Congress. When the bill was defeated, with 105 Democrats and all but one Republican voting no, Jackson placed the failure at his own party's feet: "If the White House had pushed this, we would have won."

The movement that rebuilt itself from this nadir embraced an incrementalist strategy. Though some groups continued to demand statehood, most were like D.C. Vote, an umbrella effort established in 1998, which supported any steps toward self-determination. In the House, Norton continued to advocate for statehood while also advancing piecemeal proposals, such as a bipartisan bill that would have paired a House vote for the District with an additional seat for deep-red Utah. (Conservatives torpedoed the idea all the same.) It's only in the past decade "that the community of groups across the spectrum are full-on for statehood," says Josh Burch, founder of the volunteer group Neighbors United for DC Statehood.

In the interim, however, the movement made gains. "Part of what's happened today is a moment arriving, and part of it is that we helped make a moment," argues Bo Shuff, executive director of D.C. Vote. "Luck favors the prepared mind." With the help of Shuff's organization, Norton attached 227 co-sponsors to her statehood bill before the vote this past summer. Meanwhile, Bowser has prepared a constitution for the proposed commonwealth. Other shifts in the city also helped lay the groundwork. Opponents once argued that the District didn't deserve statehood because of a mismanaged budget — a justification that always veiled racist resistance to granting a mostly Black city self-government — but the D.C. of today is fiscally unimpeachable. And some advocates believe it's not a coincidence that the nation has grown more comfortable with the idea of statehood as the city has grown increasingly White.

But it’s the Democratic Party that has undergone what may prove the most consequential evolution. “Democrats are shifting toward uniform support for statehood because they realize it’s one of the only ways they can gain power that’s equivalent to their numbers in the greater population,” historian George Derek Musgrove, co-author of “Chocolate City,” told me. The last time statehood was widely discussed, in the early 1990s, Democrats had held the Senate for more than 30 of the prior 40 years. Now, after two Republican presidents who were elected without winning the popular vote, and six years of Mitch McConnell's ruthless tenure atop the Senate, Democrats can no longer avoid the reality that their political fortunes are shrinking even as their coalition grows. Unlike in the '90s, “I don’t think there’s any question that people within the Democratic leadership understand the stakes, and the benefits that statehood would bring to the party,” Musgrove says.

Because D.C. has no lawmakers who can vote in Congress, activists like those at 51 for 51 must persuade other Americans to petition their representatives on the District’s behalf. 51 for 51 was created for this purpose: Whereas the statehood movement of previous generations largely lacked allies outside D.C., the new group was founded in 2019 with the backing of national organizations — such as Indivisible and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence — whose stalled policy agendas could advance with the help of senators from a new state. (51 for 51, which consists of a nine-person team, also receives support from the Hub Project, a nonprofit that assists progressive campaigns.)

“Much of the action in the past has been centered in Washington, but that is not how you get statehood,” Norton told me in January. “51 for 51, by carrying the message around the country, has really amped up the support for statehood in a way that you simply can’t do from the District of Columbia, even from the House of Representatives or the Senate. That’s how all bills get passed, and no less so for D.C. statehood. You simply have to get the country involved.”

On a Tuesday in late September, Stratmon hosted a Zoom call with about 100 high school and college-age activists from across the country, all of whom had agreed to lobby their senators for statehood in two days, in a virtual trip to Capitol Hill. “I’m not a constituent of any of these senators, and that’s the fight we’re fighting as D.C. residents,” Stratmon told them. “They are your elected officials. They are there to serve you, and you have the right to speak with them and tell them why you believe in this cause.” Many of the young advocates were members of campus groups devoted to progressive issues — such as gun violence prevention, reproductive justice and climate action — that have been stymied by a conservative Senate.

In a breakout room, a group of California residents prepared to meet with their senators, Democrats Dianne Feinstein and Kamala Harris. Feinstein had recently stated her opposition to abolishing the filibuster. “The fact that she feels the need to come out and take a stand shows that we’re making noise,” Nicole Mendoza, a member of 51 for 51’s communications team who grew up in Los Angeles, told the group. “Our goal is to hold her accountable and let her know that, as her constituents, we are going to keep pushing back on her unfavorable stance on the filibuster.” One of the youth advocates asked if he could propose his own statehood bill to Feinstein’s office. Mendoza looked momentarily taken aback. “No,” she said. “I love the ambition, but we’re trying to keep focused on our asks.”

In recruiting young advocates to their cause, the members of 51 for 51 hope to harness the energy and idealism that have propelled youth
District's disenfranchisement, at long last, to the status of urgent public excitement that eluded their predecessors, elevating the country that the rights of a city on the East Coast should rank centuries since the District was founded, of convincing people across that Republicans portray as a power grab. Perhaps the greatest "the pros and cons" before deciding whether D.C. should be a state. Virginia, opposes scrapping the filibuster and has said he needs "to see spending years building support for a statehood in the language of civil rights, arguing that it "may be the enthusiasm of Democrats has been just as significant an impediment. all laws passed by D.C.'s city council, as well as the municipal budget — made up the city's majority. In the early '70s, the newly founded D.C. movement that rebuilt itself from this nadir embraced an "statehood. You simply have to get the country involved."

The movement that started as a call for statehood, most were like D.C. Vote, an umbrella effort established in 1993, when Democrats controlled the presidency and both chambers of Congress. But the movement made gains. "Part of what's helped lay the groundwork. Opponents once argued that the District was a great city with no elected representatives. But D.C. Vote and other groups have shown that the District's young people are powerful advocates for statehood."

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In 2019, Holtz, Stratmon and Hobson-Powell, along with nine other young advocates from D.C., spent the ensuing months following the Democratic presidential primary candidates on the campaign trail, pinning them at state fairs and pressing them to go on the record about whether they supported not only the idea of statehood, but a plan to enact it with 51 votes in the Senate. Some, such as Sen. Cory Booker, declined to endorse their proposal to bypass the filibuster, no matter how often they said they would do it. "We were like, 'No, sir, we're going to put the camera on you again,'" Stratmon recalls. (Booker's office did not return requests for comment, but he has described himself as a strong proponent of D.C. statehood while saying that ending the filibuster is "not off the table."). But 18 of the candidates eventually pledged their support, including Harris and Biden — who shook Hobson-Powell's hand at a crowded event in South Carolina while the other advocates thrust iPhones in his smiling face, memorializing the moment for Instagram.

The months of bird-dogging candidates constituted an education in how the rest of the country views the city of Washington. The advocates encountered many people who said they didn't know that D.C. had no voice in Congress. Over and over, the group explained that D.C. was full of doctors, teachers, janitors, shop clerks and hundreds of thousands of other people who didn't work in the White House or on Capitol Hill. After Holtz spent the entirety of a Bill de Blasio event making this case to a woman from South Carolina, she friended him on Facebook and started sharing his posts about 51 for 51. Sitting in the back of the car between events, the advocates would open Twitter, search "D.C. statehood" and "literally just sit together and respond to tweets and engage in a dialogue," Holtz says. When Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) justified his opposition to statehood in June by saying that D.C. wasn't home to "working-class people," 51 for 51 filmed interviews with a firefighter, a small-business owner and other city residents, and released them with the hashtag "#WeAreDC." As Black Washingtonians traversing mostly White Midwestern towns, the advocates also got used to chasing their quarry through rooms where "we were the only pocket of diversity in the space," as Stratmon put it, "and we had to get comfortable and do our job anyway." The first time Stratmon texted her friends back home that she was in Iowa, "they were like, 'Are you being kidnapped?'", she says. Stratmon took a certain pride in representing the District to people far beyond its borders. "D.C. is a bubble, and it seems sometimes like the rest of the country wants us to feel that way," she says. Taking her city's problems to the rest of the nation felt to her "like pushing boundaries."

Stasha Rhodes, 51 for 51's campaign director, helped found the group in 2019.

movements such as the March for Our Lives, started by survivors of the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Fla., and the climate-focused Zero Hour. Stratmon, Holtz and Hobson-Powell are members of more or less the same generation as those other activists. Long before they joined 51 for 51, they met as participants in the Marion Barry Youth Leadership Institute, a program for D.C. high school students with an interest in public service. They noticed one another immediately. Stratmon, from Takoma, was an award-winning dancer and the student president of Banneker High School, a prestigious magnet school in Northwest D.C. (Years later, she's a professional cheerleader for the Washington Football Team on top of her day job as a government consultant.) Holtz, who grew up in Ward 8, wore a suit to the program and talked about his ambition to be mayor someday with a seriousness that made Stratmon and Hobson-Powell believe him. Hobson-Powell, a few years older than the other two, had grown up near the northern tip of the city and made the local news at age 14 when he became the youngest person ever to attend Howard University; he came to the program to talk about his work with the city government as a college graduate still in his teens. (Today, he's a prominent local activist who helped organize the past summer's demonstrations for racial justice.) Over the coming years, "we kept ending up in the same rooms, and it seemed like we should know each other," Stratmon says. "We all wanted better for our city."

In 2019, Holtz, then a junior at the University of Rochester, received a call from one of his mentors in Washington. Greg Jackson, who was Holtz's boss when he interned in the mayor's office in high school, had heard that 51 for 51 was looking for young Washingtonians who could put a face on its case for equal rights. Jackson suggested Holtz, who suggested Stratmon, then a junior at Dartmouth College, and Hobson-Powell, who was working for the D.C. government. Jackson knew that Holtz felt strongly about the way D.C.'s dependent status shapes life in the city: Some of Holtz's family members have been pushed out of Washington by rapid gentrification and rising housing prices, and childhood friends have lost their lives to gun violence — both problems that the District could address more forcefully if it weren't constrained by Congress. Jackson had also admired Holtz's ambition to serve his hometown ever since Holtz was a teenager who stayed late on Fridays at his desk at the mayor's office. In addition to every other disadvantage that comes with D.C.'s status as a federal district, the city's lack of statehood deprives its young leaders of a pathway into public life beyond municipal government. Holtz's friends like to point out that, if D.C. were a state, he could someday ascend from mayor to governor. "Jamal might be statehood," Jackson says. "He might be the living embodiment of it, if we can get this done."

Holtz, Stratmon and Hobson-Powell, along with nine other young advocates from D.C., spent the ensuing months following the Democratic presidential primary candidates on the campaign trail, pinning them at state fairs and pressing them to go on the record about whether they supported not only the idea of statehood, but a plan to enact it with 51 votes in the Senate. Some, such as Sen. Cory Booker, declined to endorse their proposal to bypass the filibuster, no matter how often they said they would do it. "We were like, 'No, sir, we're going to put the camera on you again,'" Stratmon recalls. (Booker's office did not return requests for comment, but he has described himself as a strong proponent of D.C. statehood while saying that ending the filibuster is "not off the table.") But 18 of the candidates eventually pledged their support, including Harris and Biden — who shook Hobson-Powell's hand at a crowded event in South Carolina while the other advocates thrust iPhones in his smiling face, memorializing the moment for Instagram.

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At the same time, the group was contributing to a changing conversation within D.C.: a growing progressive consensus that abolishing the filibuster is a necessary step toward enacting the popular will. “We wanted to embrace the reality that Republicans, if we were successful in 2020 and took back the Senate, would use the filibuster to stop statehood,” campaign director Stasha Rhodes, who helped found the group, told me. “So we decided to create a campaign that leaned into that strategy and didn’t try to hide it.”

“51 for 51 deserves a ton of credit for making that a part of the conversation and the strategy around statehood,” Burch, of Neighbors United, told me. “I’ve evolved on the issue because of them.” Though 51 for 51 is calling for a “carve-out,” which would eliminate the 60-vote threshold solely for the issue of statehood, not wholesale abolition of the filibuster, that message still places them “way out in the fast lane” of the movement, according to Shuff of D.C. Vote. 51 for 51 framed its demand to avoid alienating partners who have yet to take a position on the filibuster, but its campaign has persuaded some of its allies to call for reform. The Brady organization, for example, started its own “51 is Fair!” campaign to pass gun control legislation with a simple majority vote. “I would definitely say that, for us, the egregious injustice of District residents being disproportionately impacted by gun violence while not being able to access democracy was our first foot in the door on this issue,” Christian Heyne, Brady’s vice president of policy, told me.

At 51 for 51’s Zoom lobby day in September, Sen. Feinstein’s staffer didn’t budge from her boss’s defense of the filibuster. Still, discussing the meeting in a virtual “war room,” the advocates concluded that the conversation had gone better than expected. “She was talking about how Feinstein supports D.C. statehood and is committed to revisiting the issue after November,” one recounted. “So that’s good.”

“That’s huge,” agreed Jennifer Mandelblatt, who works on campaigns at the Hub Project.

As the 51 for 51 team waited for reports from other meetings, they reminisced about the days when they could have visited the Hill in person. Eventually, good news began to trickle in. Waving a phone full of triumphant text messages a little before 10 a.m., Mandelblatt announced that Sen. Ed Markey, a Democrat from Massachusetts, had pledged his support for eliminating the filibuster for statehood. Mandelblatt did a celebratory dance from the comfort of her beige couch, and Mendoza cheered. Stratton reentered the meeting beaming from another encouraging call. “You all make me fearless,” she wrote in the chat.

Two months later, Rhodes sounded more subdued. “We were pretty confident that we were going to have a different result in the Senate,” she told me a week after Biden secured victory. “We’ve been taking a step back to mourn the results we didn’t get ... I’ve mostly cried and slept.” If the Democrats lost the Senate runoffs in Georgia, she wasn’t yet sure how the campaign would proceed. “We purposely put all our eggs in the winning scenario basket,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean we take a break or relax our advocacy.”

Even now that two surprise wins in Georgia have delivered a Democratic Senate, statehood faces a narrower path than the group once anticipated. “I’m not sure, on this issue and many others, frankly, that Democrats are willing to fight as hard as Republicans,” Musgrove says. “I am more hopeful than I’ve ever been about the chances of statehood, but we’re coming up from a hopefulness level of single-digit percentages.” Other longtime observers expressed a similar skepticism. “The intensity of the fight for statehood has risen and fallen like a thermometer,” says Tom Sherwood, a political analyst for WAMU who has reported on the city since 1974. “Sometimes it gets white hot, and then it kind of falls back.” The statehood movement, he points out, has always been underfunded (though 51 for 51 has “been able to spend seven figures,” according to a spokesperson). “As a citizen of the city, I am for statehood, but as a reporter in the city, I have seen an episodic battle with no clear ending,” Sherwood says.

There’s no doubt that, even if Democrats decide to fight for statehood, they will be met by Republicans who see no political upside in extending full voting rights to the capital’s residents. “A coalition of left-wing special interests are explicitly campaigning for, quote, 51 for 51,” McConnell warned in July from the Senate floor, accusing the group of seeking “ill-gotten power” and conspiring “to pack the Senate.”

I asked Rhodes whether she feared that the promise of additional Democratic Senate seats could not only propel support for statehood but also fuel the opposition. “When we’re asked if this is about getting two more seats in the Senate, then we are unapologetically saying yes,” she said. “This is about getting two seats in the Senate, because over 700,000 folks in Washington deserve two seats in the Senate.” Polling suggests that Americans increasingly agree: One 2020 survey, from Data for Progress and YouGovBlue, found an eight-point shift in favor of statehood since early 2019, with a plurality of voters (43 percent) and a strong majority of Democrats (69 percent) in the pro column. Young voters and Black voters displayed the most movement, swaying toward statehood by 18 and 29 points, respectively. In a Hill-HarrisX poll conducted in June, a slim majority of an ideologically diverse pool of respondents, 52 percent, said they thought D.C. should be a state.

Rhodes argues that the more people learn about statehood, the more they see it as a matter of justice rather than a question of political expediency. “It’s a trick to focus on the partisan aspects of it and not focus on the justice side of it,” she says. “I’m from the South, I’m Black and I’m a lesbian. People before me have had to fight for every single right I enjoy, and all those things were partisan. We’re not going to apologize for that, or run away from it.”

In early January, at 51 for 51’s first meeting after the Georgia runoffs, the mood was resolute rather than exultant. In addition to discussing Democrats’ success in the Senate, the group needed to talk about the recent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. The disaster seemed to be feeding the enthusiasm surrounding statehood: Bowser...
once again called for statehood the day after the riot, pointing out that the D.C. police officers who put “their lives on the line to protect our democracy” lacked representation in the halls they were called to defend. Observers also noted that the National Guard could have responded more quickly if D.C. had a governor with the power to call them in. The advocates welcomed the attention but felt ambivalent about the form it was taking. On the day of the attack, “I saw a tweet saying something like, ‘Today was the strongest argument yet for D.C. statehood,’” Holtz said. “For me, that was annoying.” The strongest argument for statehood, in his view, was not a security breach — however alarming — but the disenfranchisement that District residents endure every day.

Still, the new year had restored the group’s optimism and set their legislative effort in motion. Norton had already reintroduced her statehood bill in the House, with a record number of original co-sponsors, leaving advocates to focus on the Senate. “The best way to push reluctant senators is to have them hear from their constituents that D.C. statehood is good for West Virginia, for Arizona ... for Georgia,” Rhodes said, listing some of the states whose Democratic lawmakers have so far failed to endorse either statehood or filibuster abolition. “There is no way to accomplish the progressive agenda we need after such a devastating administration without democratizing the Senate.” To reach the grass roots, 51 for 51 plans to rely on the Just Democracy coalition, a group of Black- and Brown-led social justice organizations pushing for structural change to American institutions. “We’re prioritizing building on the support of the voters who have actually saved democracy,” Rhodes said.

Most of all, Rhodes told me, “we’re excited to have the opportunity to be heard. As an organizer, you like to think that if enough people show up, and you send enough emails and make enough phone calls, change will happen. But if the rules are rigged against you, none of that matters. With this new Senate and this new White House, I think we actually have a chance to be listened to.” On the other hand, “it would be a devastating sign that Democrats are not interested in democracy if we didn’t achieve statehood now.”

Advocates have two years to prevent that from happening. “Harris and Biden looked me in the eyes and told me I mattered,” Hobson-Powell says, recalling his experiences on the campaign trail last year. “That lets me know that what I have to do is continue to put pressure on them.”

Nora Caplan-Bricker is a writer in Boston.
You could say that the songs on Shemekia Copeland’s new album, “Uncivil War,” include rocking shuffles, a showstopping slow blues and a New Orleans-style second-line groove, or that among the guest stars are the dobro maestro Jerry Douglas, the bluegrass mandolinist and fiddler Sam Bush, the alt-country rocker Jason Isbell, the twang icon Duane Eddy, the Stax Records soul mainstay Steve Cropper, and the blues guitar phenom Christone “Kingfish” Ingram. But when Copeland and her manager, John Hahn, conceived the album, they talked about an anti-gun-violence song, a song about the civil rights movement, an anti-racist song, a love-whomever-you-want song, a legacy-of-slavery song, a strong-woman song (or three), a song about economic inequality and the environment, a song about religious intolerance, a song about the vexed divides that split the nation into red and blue factions. They believe the cultural moment is ripe for explicitly political blues songs, reviving a form so old that it seems new again.

Widely hailed as the greatest blues singer of her generation and the reigning Queen of the Blues, Charon Shemekia Copeland, 41, has grown impatient with business as usual in the blues: the eclipse of singers by endlessly wailing guitars; the willingness of the aging boomers who dominate the core listenership to hear “Sweet Home Chicago” or “The Thrill Is Gone” yet again; set lists featuring the usual good-times anthems and romantic laments and not enough resonance with vital issues of the day. Her search for new audiences, collaborators and songs to sing is also a search for a fresh sense of relevance for the music she loves, and it has taken her from Chicago, the home of the blues, to Nashville, the capital of country music, with its matchless concentration of song-making talent. There, she has sought not only musical but also ideological fellowship among artists who

QUEEN'S THE GAMBLE
Shemekia Copeland reigns as the greatest blues singer of her generation. Now she wants to fuse politics with the blues.

STORY BY CARLO ROTELLA / PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN MADDOX
You could say that the songs on Shemekia Copeland’s new album, “Uncivil War,” include rocking shuffles, a showstopping slow blues and a New Orleans-style second-line groove, or that among the guest stars are the dobro maestro Jerry Douglas, the bluegrass mandolinist and fiddler Sam Bush, the alt-country rocker Jason Isbell, the twang icon Duane Eddy, the Stax Records soul mainstay Steve Cropper, and the blues guitar phenom Christone “Kingfish” Ingram. But when Copeland and her manager, John Hahn, conceived the album, they talked about an anti-gun-violence song, a song about the civil rights movement, an anti-racist song, a love-whomever-you-want song, a legacy-of-slavery song, a strong-woman song (or three), a song about economic inequality and the environment, a song about religious intolerance, a song about the vexed divides that split the nation into red and blue factions. They believe the cultural moment is ripe for explicitly political blues songs, reviving a form so old that it seems new again.

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converge on the Americana scene, a progressive-tending confluence of country, folk, bluegrass and singer-songwriter rock created by roots-minded musicians in search of alternatives to the city’s mainstream country music industry, which traditionally caters to more conservative rural listeners. Being Queen of the Blues is no small distinction, but Copeland doesn’t believe it will be enough to sustain her in the long run. So she’s willing to risk a move away from her blues base to try to find a new home for her social concerns and her prodigious voice.

The first thing most listeners notice about Copeland’s voice is its sheer force. Frequently compared to great blues shouters of the 1920s like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, she’s in the habit of showing off the outsize instrument housed in her compact frame by stepping away from the mic and overmatching the amps of her band with her unaided voice. Such displays of raw power caught the blues world’s attention when she made her spectacular debut as a teenager, but it’s her mature control of that power that separates her from other belters. She used to come out blasting on every song, but now she gets more out of the quieter end of her dynamic range. Singers trying too hard to sound authentically bluesy often get sloppy with pitch and diction, smearing notes when they bend them and running lyrics through a blender of mannered imprecision — growling, slurring, droppin’ g’s — that reduces words to mush. Copeland, by contrast, sings like she’s explaining something. She bends notes with a microtonal precision that calls to mind the string-squeezing guitar genius Albert King, and her diction is as fussy as an opera singer’s. The words matter to her more than any other element of a song, and she wants to make sure you hear them all.

The guitar heroes who have dominated the blues since the rise of rock tend to treat songs as excuses to play solos, reducing them to a series of generic grooves: the jaunty shuffle, the stately slow blues. “Blues music has become very jam-band-ish, more about the jam than the song,” Copeland told me. “For me the words always come first when I’m picking a song to sing — ‘cause I’m not a songwriter, I’m a song picker.” She has a routine for getting into a song someone else has written. “The lyrics have to say something I want to say, so I start there,” she told me. “Then I add a layer each time I listen: drums, bass, guitar.” Treating each song as a distinct piece of writing with mood, plot and point of view, she works hard to inhabit the character telling the story, so that listening to one of her sets feels a little like reading a collection of short stories or poems: the one about a freedom marcher in the rain (“Walk Until I Ride”), the one about a school shooter (“Apple Pie and a .45”), the one about a slave ship that sank off the

Frequently compared to great blues shouters like Bessie Smith, Shemekia Copeland often shows off her power by stepping away from the mic and overmatching the amps of her band with her unaided voice.
Shemekia’s one of the great singers of our music,” the veteran bluesman Taj Mahal told me. “I watched her grow, saw the torch passed to her from her father, and she has continued all along to honor that gift.” Johnny Clyde Copeland, Shemekia’s father, was a Texas bluesman, but his musical tutelage was eclectic. “My father wrote songs like a country artist, sang like a soul singer and played guitar like a bluesman,” she told me. “We listened to all kinds of music, and I sang Johnny Cash with him, and Hank Williams. One of the first songs I ever recorded was ‘I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.’”

Her mention of those Mount Rushmore figures of country music shouldn’t come as a surprise. Though cultural convention pigeonholes the blues as an essential Black genre and country as the sound of Whiteness, the facts on the ground are messier than that.

Black Southerners, who invented the blues, no longer predominate among fans and practitioners. Copeland, who is Black, has performed with most of the great living Black blues figures and with others who are now gone, but many of her trusted musical collaborators are White. That group includes all but one member of her road band as well as John Hahn, who is not only her manager but also her principal lyricist; Will Kimbrough, the versatile Nashville ace who produced, played guitar and co-wrote seven songs on “Uncivil War”; and most of the Nashville pros Kimbrough and Hahn recruited to help write and play songs for her. In that sense, her musical community resembles her multiracial family — she and her husband, Brian Schultz, a heavy-metal-loving, White railroad construction supervisor from the Nebraska panhandle, have a 4-year-old son, Johnny — and the place where she has lived for the past 15 years: Beverly, one of the few racially integrated neighborhoods on Chicago’s South Side.

Country, for its part, shares a root system with African American musical traditions. There has long been crossover traffic between country and blues, and country has always had significant numbers of Black listeners, musicians and influences. Copeland’s bluesman father, like many Southerners of his generation, grew up listening to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio, and she hears blues and country as mutually resonant elements of a single intertwined musical tradition with a strong Southern flavor. “If Patsy Cline isn’t a great blues singer,” she told me, “then I don’t know what a blues singer is.” As Copeland sings in “Drivin’ Out of Nashville,” a chicken-fried noir tale written by Hahn and Oliver Wood (another multiple-threat musical Swiss Army knife, a type in which Nashville specializes), “Country music ain’t nothin’ but the blues with a twang.”

So the blues-country team-up Copeland has been pursuing in Nashville in recent years — “Uncivil War” is her second album produced by Kimbrough — is more a revival of an old partnership than a new thing under the sun. The same goes for the merger of blues and explicitly political content. Copeland and Hahn often decry the dearth of social commentary in contemporary blues, but there’s precedent in the tradition for songs that directly address current political topics.

“There’s a way in which the conventional idea that there aren’t a lot of political songs in blues is right, and a way in which it’s wrong,” says the distinguished music historian Elijah Wald, who points out that even blues lyrics about heartbreak or hard labor have long been heard as responses to oppression. He argues that the habit of treating blues as roots music tends to sideline its political potential. “Robert Johnson singing about a railroad strike is not heard as protest music,” he told me. “It’s like the false distinction that treats ‘conscious’ rap as political and gangsta rap as not political.” He likens Copeland’s feminist-angled
Copeland’s turn toward Americana raises echoes of the Popular Front, the leftist cultural movement of the 1930s that featured singers such as Leadbelly, who sang “The Bourgeois Blues.”

Social commentary to that of the Chicks, the country supergroup shunned by country radio in 2003 (when they were known as the Dixie Chicks) for criticizing President George W. Bush. But the conventional classifying of popular genres allows country to be associated with current events and politics — often conservative and jingoistic — while blues is associated with abstract existential truths about the human soul.

Copeland’s turn toward Americana, an end run around these perceptions, raises echoes of the Popular Front, the leftist cultural movement of the 1930s. “The Popular Front embraced major blues figures who sang explicitly political songs for a largely White left progressive audience,” Wald says. “Singers like Leadbelly, who sang ‘Bourgeois Blues,’ and Big Bill Broonzy, who sang ‘I Wonder When I’ll Get to Be Called a Man,’ and Josh White was the big one, with songs like ‘Uncle Sam Says,’ ‘Trouble’ or ‘Bad Housing Blues.’” White, Wald notes, “was asked to come to the White House to sit down with FDR and talk about what Black people want.”

Donald Trump would never have invited Copeland for such a chat, though she did join other blues stars to sing “Sweet Home Chicago” at the Obama White House in 2012. The eponymous first single on “Uncivil War” laments our bitter divides, and Copeland tries not to alienate anyone when she’s talking between songs onstage or DJ-ing her weekday show on SiriusXM’s blues channel (a backup gig that has proven a godsend for her since the pandemic interrupted income from live shows), but it’s not hard to tell that she’s on Team Blue. In making the move from Chicago to Nashville, two blue cities surrounded by red hinterland, she has found a kindred spirit in Kimbrough. He has exercised chameleon-like adaptability in making music with artists from Emmylou Harris to Jimmy Buffett, but his own work — like the antiwar, anti-greed-themed album “Americanitis” — displays a strain of southpaw critique. Kimbrough, known as a guitar wizard, shares not just Copeland’s progressive politics but also her disdain for guitar-hero overkill, so as producer he scrupulously restrains his own playing in the service of framing to best advantage the words she sings. “You have to beg him to take a solo,” she mock-complained to me. “Take a damn solo, Will.”

Wearing headphones, Copeland sat on a high stool at a microphone in a small room in the Butcher Shoppe, a recording studio in Nashville co-owned by the Americana patron saint John Prine, on a Monday morning in early December 2019. In town to record vocal tracks for the dozen songs on “Uncivil War,” she was dressed all in black, from leather boots to wool watch cap. In the next room, Kimbrough led a veteran crew of local session musicians into the...
shuffled groove of a song called “Money Makes You Ugly.” They locked in on the rocking sweet spot between push and drag: plenty of drive to propel the song onward, just enough hold-back to give it a satisfyingly nasty quality of thickness and churn. “The ice is meltin’ and my lawn’s on fire,” Copeland sang. “The world’s got a fever gettin’ higher and higher.”

As she sang, she tapped into the original rush of anger inspired in her almost a year earlier by an interview with Donald Trump Jr. she saw somewhere — she can’t remember where. She’d gotten on the phone to Hahn, who had seen the same interview and was similarly incensed. “He’s totally out of touch with life in this country, like his father,” Copeland had said to Hahn. “He thinks the reason people are poor is because they don’t work hard enough.” (I have not been able to find any record of Trump Jr. making a public remark in early 2019 to the effect that poor people should work harder. Copeland and Hahn backtracked on their digital trail at my request to see if they could find it, and they couldn’t. Whatever he actually did say seems to have bounced around in the segmented echo chambers of our political culture until Copeland and Hahn heard it as such.)

Copeland talks with Hahn at least once a day, and many of the songs he writes for her come out of the back-and-forth of these conversations. After they got off the phone, Hahn, who had already been contemplating a song about privilege without conscience, wrote a fiery condemnation of the rich and powerful for screwing up the world. Hahn, a lyricist but not a musician, sent it to Kimbrough to put the words to music. Hahn envisioned a foot-stomping burner, but when they got together in the kitchen of Kimbrough’s house in Nashville to work on it, Kimbrough explained that they had to pace the song to fit the words. “When I’m hearing it, my little brain goes to a minor key,” he said. He was all in black: jeans, T-shirt, Clark Kent glasses, bed head. “Almost like a ...” He trailed off as he picked up an acoustic guitar and chunked out a groove in B minor, humming a descending strain over it. “’Course, there’s a lot of words,” he added. Touching upon climate change, fracking, lead-poisoned drinking water in Flint, Mich., and more, the song had turned out to be as much about the environment as about inequality. “Whoever told you that you own this place?” the singer asks the apocalyptically spoiled plutocrat to whom it’s addressed. “Think of ‘Gimme Shelter,’” Kimbrough told Hahn and Copeland as they sat with him at his kitchen table. “That’s the maximum speed. It isn’t fast, but it rocks.”

Now, in the studio eight months after that kitchen session, Copeland felt for her original outrage — “It’s the attitude of not knowing or caring what people have to do to get by that gets me,” she had told me — and poured the feeling into the groove crafted by Kimbrough’s crew. After they had recorded a couple of takes, everyone crowded into the control room of the Butcher Shoppe to listen to playback. I noted that Copeland had been revising Hahn’s lyrics on the fly, substituting “dirty water” for “water from Flint.” She said, “Yeah, keep it simple — make your point and get out.” The blunt, earnest songs she conceives with Hahn tend to be least preachy when most concise. “We try to address the issues without lecturing people,” Hahn said.

Blues songs may sound straightforwardly simple, but it’s not easy to write one. “There’s not many people around today that really do it well,” the prolific bluesman Keb’ Mo’ told me. “There’s a way that it’s got to be done to be effective. Every verse is like a chorus.” He was referring to the haiku-like spareness of a classic blues lyric like Elmore James’s “The sky is crying, look at the tears roll down the street.”
From left: Copeland rehearsing with Mick Jagger in Washington in 2013. Copeland with blues legend B.B. King; manager John Hahn, left; and guitarist, songwriter and producer Steve Cropper.

Hahn tends to be more didactic, placing priority on engaging the issue he and Copeland want to address. As a result, his lyrics can sound like talking points, which has been a trait of blues protest songs going back to their Popular Front heyday. Compared to a dark-night-of-the-soul epic like Robert Johnson’s “Hellhound on My Trail” (“I got to keep makin’ / Blues fallin’ down like hail”), for instance, Leadbelly’s “The Bourgeois Blues” (“Home of the brave, land of the free / I don’t wanna be mistreated by no bourgeoisie”) can seem stiff. Similarly, a couplet from “Money Makes You Ugly” like “Your conscience was laid off with the boomers who made up the core of her blues audience. Nashville might yet provide the solution to that problem, but this performance was pure Chicago. “What goes on in the dark,” she sang, “will soon come to light,” and her elongated reading of “soon” was a mini-suite of sustain and twisting leaps resonating with grievance, hope and an aching for redress. If she could figure out how to consistently infuse her purpose-built political songs with the undeniable feeling that pulsed in her rendition of this heartbreaking standard, she might yet make herself the Queen of Blue America.

So far, the album has done well. It has earned strong notices in publications from Rolling Stone to the Wall Street Journal, and on NPR, and it has showed up on best-of-lists for 2020 — including at No. 1 on the list compiled by the veteran rock critic Jim DeRogatis, co-host of NPR’s “Sound Opinions” show, ahead of Americana critical darlings like Jason Isbell and Lucinda Williams, the hip-hop stars Run the Jewels and the pop star Dua Lipa. “Uncivil War” also opened at or near the top of blues charts and received respectful reviews in the blues specialty press, and Copeland still enjoys her perennial front-runner position in blues awards competitions — all of which suggests that her explorations of America have not alienated the sensibilities of her blues base.

At the end of a long recording day, Copeland decided to do one more song, a cover of “In the Dark,” a lovelorn midtempo shuffle recorded by Junior Parker in 1961 and definitively transformed into a magisterial slow blues by Lonnie Brooks in the 1970s. The band settled into a restrained groove, and Copeland launched into the first verse: “I heard you was out / High as you could be / Kissin’ other women / And you know it wasn’t me.” The signature mood of slow blues in a minor key descended, and everything else seemed to fall away — the ripped-from-the-headlines political convictions of the newly written songs on the album, the desire to reach beyond the blues scene for a broader audience and new musical challenges and topicality — as she poured herself into the old familiar vocal swoops and bends, the crushing tension and soaring release at the heart of the blues. “That ain’t right, babe,” she sang. “No, no, no, that ain’t right.”

The Black Lives Matter protests of the spring and summer, part of a cultural climate of growing attention to racial injustice that just might inspire demand for some fresh (or freshly revived) protest music, were still in the future, too. The album, originally titled “Living With Ghosts” and scheduled for summer release, would be delayed until October and retitled “Uncivil War,” and it was anybody’s guess how it would fare if she couldn’t tour in support of it.

When she was recording in December 2019, Copeland’s new album seemed on track for a summer 2020 release, timed to arrive well in advance of Election Day and its long news shadow. But the coronavirus, just then crossing from animals to humans in Wuhan, would wreak all manner of plans as it spread around the planet. It would wipe out live musical events, on which the blues business heavily depends, and take the life of the beloved John Prine, whose studio Copeland was using and who had duetted with her on his song “Great Rain” on her previous album, the award-winning “America’s Child.” “She doesn’t sound like anybody else,” Prine had told me when I caught up with him backstage at Nashville’s Ryman Auditorium, the Mother Church of Country Music. “It’s a blues voice, but it’s so clear and proper and righteous. I’m so glad she’s come down here.”

The Queen of the Blues did her best singing of the day on this old song with no obvious political content or subtext. She had decades of singing in prime voice ahead of her, and she was decades younger than the boomers who made up the core of her blues audience. Nashville might yet provide the solution to that problem, but this performance was pure Chicago. “What goes on in the dark,” she sang, “will soon come to light,” and her elongated reading of “soon” was a mini-suite of sustain and twisting leaps resonating with grievance, hope and an aching for redress. If she could figure out how to consistently infuse her purpose-built political songs with the undeniable feeling that pulsed in her rendition of this heartbreaking standard, she might yet make herself the Queen of Blue America.

Carlo Rotella is a professor of English, American studies and journalism at Boston College. His most recent book is “The World Is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood.”
When you’re in need of a hug — and a spark

Order takeout as much as this stomach-for-hire does, and you’re going to encounter a lot of fried chicken, cookies and, more than anything, utensils you didn’t ask for. If I had a dollar for every unbidden fork, spoon and knife that’s come my way since March, I could buy a first-class vacation for whenever the world opens up again. (Paris sounds nice, even if only the village in Virginia’s hunt country.)

Right now, I’m seeing buckets — oceans, really — of squash soup. It’s winter, I get it, but a lot of bowls are indistinguishable from one another, or rely on the same accents of sage or brown sugar. I like both flavors, just not … everywhere, every time.

Expecting the same old (but ever-hopeful!), I spooned into a carton of winter pumpkin soup from the new-in-November Pennyroyal Station in Mount Rainier and ended up scrape-scrape-scraping the bottom of the package. Ginger and turmeric encouraged some of the dipping, lemongrass and a topper of Calabrian chiles even more of it. The lemongrass lends an electric charge; the chile imparts a fruity heat that teases til the last drop. A swirl of the spoon heightens the drama in your mouth. If there’s one recipe I want from a chef right now, it’s this distinctive vegan soup from Jesse Miller, the former chef of the neighborly Bar Pilar on 14th Street NW in Washington.

Pennyroyal Station, the creation of Miller, 37, and his business partners, Erin Edwards, the former director of operations at Bar Pilar, and Garrick Lumsden, a veteran of Passion Food Hospitality, took time to get up and running in Prince George’s County — three

PENNYROYAL STATION 3310 Rhode Island Ave., Mount Rainier, Md. 240-770-8579. pennyroyalstation.com. Open for takeout and delivery 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 5 to 8:30 p.m. weekends. Prices: Appetizers $5 to $11, sandwiches and main courses $13 to $24, family meals $38 to $40. Delivery via Grubhub, Uber Eats and Toast. Accessibility: Ramp leads to bar entrance and an ADA-compliant restroom.

PHOTO: SCOTT SUCHMAN

The pumpkin soup at Pennyroyal Station sets itself apart from the norm with the addition of ginger, turmeric, lemongrass and Calabrian chile.
years, in fact. Blame it on a complete gut job, permits and the stops and starts resulting from a pandemic. The restaurant’s name acknowledges the historic building’s past as a bank, the city’s past as a streetcar stop and the flowering herb native to Washington state, home to Mount Rainier.

Do yourself a favor and fetch your food in person. Even if you can’t dine inside at the moment, you should at least see the 1936 facade and take a peek at the bar. The exterior showcases the talent of Yulia Avgustinovich, a Russian-born, Denver-based painter selected by the Mount Rainier Arts Commission to do the mural, abloom with flowers and incorporating local architecture. The bar is visible from the front door, where takeout is retrieved, and it’s a beaut, its counter fronted with handsome sea foam-colored stools and tiny black-and-white tiles. What’s not wainscoting in the high-ceilinged, light-drenched room are windows. (Lucky locals: The restaurant provides delivery — free — within a three-mile radius.) When the weather cooperates, a front patio welcomes interested parties, who get to enjoy some of the thought the owners have poured into the presentation, including vintage barware and china that underscores Miller’s nostalgic, Southern-inflected cooking.

Plenty of places are trying to make us feel good these days by offering the culinary equivalent of hugs. Pennyroyal Station whips up tried-and-true American comforts, albeit with a surprise that makes them feel somehow new. Consider Miller’s mac and cheese, presented as an appetizer bulked up with nuggets of smoked brisket, delicious burnt ends included, and bone marrow. Unlike cheese or wine, biscuits don’t improve with age. Miller understands this, baking batches throughout dinner service. Eight bucks gets you a couple of biscuits sturdy enough to support juicy, slow-roasted pork but tender where you want them to be. Lunch started recently and brunch is on the drawing board, and let’s hope that the pork biscuits are there to greet us. An investor begged Miller to include the chef’s chicken liver mousse, the lone carry-over dish from Bar Pilar. The richness of the starter, offered with grilled bread, is foiled by the sash of sriracha.

Chef Jesse Miller of Pennyroyal Station previously worked at Bar Pilar in Washington.

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For every special event in your life!
“Sammies” enjoy a category of their own, and they star the sandwich that has graced many a menu throughout the past year. Buttermilk fried chicken, Miller’s contribution to the flock, is lots to like — moist chicken, snappy sliced pickle, “ramp ranch” dressing — inside a soft, toasted bun. The chef calls the creamy sauce the “bell” in the concert of flavors, and it’s apt, thanks to ramp vinegar in the mix. The very good cheeseburgers — lit with chile mayonnaise, smoky with bacon and cooked the color you want — come in three sizes: six ounces, 12 ounces and 18 ounces, allowing you to decide tonight how long you need to Peloton tomorrow.

Winter squash lasagna sounds heavy. Miller lifts the stack of sliced squash and pungent Taleggio cheese with what he calls “excitement bites.” Sure enough, my pulse quickens when I discover minced lemongrass in a dish that already includes ginger and rosemary in its cream sauce, along with the fine crunch of hazelnuts. The only thing I’d change about the lasagna is the cooking time for the squash, which defied my fork in spots.

Miller does tacos, too, apportioned with families in mind. Each $38 order features two pounds of roasted, pulled pork. At home, buyers build their own tacos using the accompanying tender corn tortillas, Carolina rice, sparkling pico de gallo and a salsa verde that leaves a tickle of heat in your throat. Two of us stretched the spread across the next two days and we looked forward to the leftovers as much as their robust debut in our kitchen.

As this review was headed for publication, Miller told me he was pulling an entree of striped bass. People simply weren’t ordering it. I’m here to tell you fish in general is an ingredient that tends to make it from restaurant to home in good condition, and Pennyroyal Station sealed its deal with a bed of farro, sweet baby carrots and a green goddess dressing fit for the, well, gods. Gotta love fresh dill and goddess dressing fit for the, well, gods. Gotta love fresh dill and

PHOTOS: CHEF BY SCOTT SUCHMAN; ORIGINAL SECOND GLANCE PHOTO BY WASHINGTON POST READER MICHAEL S. WILSON

its flavor survives any trip.

There are just two desserts, both delights. If you like chocolate chip cookies on the order of Toll House, you’re going to scarf Miller’s crisp batch, based on his mom’s recipe. (The mystery flavor turns out to be warm-tasting mace.) Cake doughnuts come three to an order, glazed in chocolate and jazzed up with sprinkles. Online, the restaurant asks if you’re celebrating anything special. I wasn’t, but I pretended otherwise, just to see if Pennyroyal Station followed through on requests. Per my inquiry, “Happy anniversary!” was written across the box of doughnuts.

My impulse was to write a thank-you note, not just for a job well done but for adding something vital to Prince George’s County. Instead, I’m sending Pennyroyal Station this early Valentine.

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ACROSS
1 Railway makeup
6 Information confirmation
11 Edible shoot
16 ICU personnel
19 Cognizant (of)
20 King ___ (orangutan in “The Jungle Book”)
21 “Smoke Signals” actress Bedard
22 Cry of delight
23 Drawn-out legal conflict
25 Sense something sweet, say
26 Bill who played a role in the Epcot attraction “Ellen’s Energy Adventure”
27 Equine or leonine locks
28 Three-card scam
29 Frustratingly finicky
30 Trades without cash
34 Something you may follow during karaoke, and a description of the circled letters in 71 Across
37 Come out
38 Discharges, as lava
40 Follows
41 Ranking figure at a firm
44 Vulcan salute, e.g.
47 1977 book about the first year of law school
48 Neighborhoods
49 Repayment pledge
51 Club ___ (tourism company)
52 Certain emitted particle with a Greek letter in its name
55 Steaming, and a description of the circled letters in 44 Across
59 Heating appliance
60 Winter weather wear
62 Pryor knowledge?
63 Rib-eye alternatives
66 Tightfitting denim attire that Tobias wears at all times on “ Arrested Development”
67 Glades predators
68 What pirates inhale
69 “Parks and Recreation” actress Rashida
70 Parcel (out)
71 Bakery order with cream cheese frosting, often
Reveals gory details
77 Computer port initials
78 Second word of 49 Across
79 Addressee of the song lyric “Like a fool, I fell in love with you/You turned my whole world upside down”
81 “Sounds good to me”
83 Burgundy or maroon, e.g.
87 Object flung from the shore, and a description of the circled letters in 71 Across
91 ___ Tar Pits (California attraction)
93 Spots for heating pads when treating neck pain
94 Take 5 candy brand
95 Alcoholic imports from Brussels
98 Takes a look at geese?
99 ___ in a blue moon
100 Senator Ben
101 Kingly?
103 Los Angeles Lakers color commentator Lantz
104 Dangerous vapors
105 Abandoning a hopeless cause, and a description of the circled letters in 95 Across
111 “Catch-22” pilot, and a homophone of 61 Down and 65 Down
112 Megachurch congregants’ venue, at times
113 Put in an opening stake
114 Swiftly
115 Grand Funk Railroad bassist Schacher
116 Prone to irritation
117 Christian Bale’s role in “Exodus: Gods and Kings”
118 Device used in photo-rejuvenation procedures

DOWN
1 Anatomical pouch
2 ❯
3 ___ de toilette
4 Provide fodder for fact-checkers
5 Demand to someone holding your hand
6 Arrangements
7 Learning by repetition
8 Results of catching flies?
9 Base of some points
10 Transaction add-on
11 Hold back, as news
12 Do some frolicking
13 Taking a break
14 Like action thriller films
15 “I hadn’t considered that”
16 “Love to Love You Baby” singer
17 Kingly
18 “Heroes in a half ___” (descriptor for the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles)
24 Not as adorned
28 Classical nonet member
29 Support, as a chief
30 “Eso ___ (That Kiss)!” (song sung by Paul Anka)
31 Make House modifications, say, say?
32 NPR journalist Montagne
33 Pianist’s flourish
34 ___ decay (radioactive process)
35 Possesses
36 “Theatre Cat” played by Ian McKellen in “Cats”
38 Plastic wrap brand
39 Chipmunk, to an owl
40 Removes a layer from
43 Public tumults
45 ___ the room (senses the general mood)
46 Rapids whirlpool
50 Military activities, briefly
53 “Pagliacci” clown
54 Fend off
55 Cowgirls’ accessories
56 Chip-matching phrase
57 As in music class, e.g.
58 Altered crop letters
60 Orange street marker
61 Prospector’s discovery
63 Ride on the playground?
64 Exercise for strengthening biceps
65 Piece of regatta gear
66 “Inside” ones may be hard to get
67 ___ Heights
68 ___ missile (Gulf War weapon)
69 Body part that “hits the floor” in shock
70 Tuna salad vendors
72 Word game involving agents, a spymaster and an assassin
73 Variety
74 Took steps
75 Having slack
76 Unaccompanied sort
79 Untrustworthy source
80 Play Store downloads
82 What some settle for
84 Leaf made from a tree
85 Solo homor result
86 Problematic falsification of people’s identities
88 Cruciate ligament site
89 Speck of sand
90 Nation whose flag has a central green star
92 Missing history, say
95 ___ buddies (besties)
96 Between, en français
97 Piece by Elissa Washuta
98 Sudoku patterns
99 ___ responders, for short
101 Counterattacking item
104 Jack Sprat eschewed it
105 Scone spread
106 Game with a Braille version that was released in 2019
107 Personal care facility
108 Contains
109 Cold comfort for an athlete?
110 ___ se (by itself)
Take this job and shove it

By tradition, outgoing American presidents leave handwritten letters to their successors, in an envelope in the Resolute Desk. These have always been gracious, encouraging, and even conciliatory, especially when the new president defeated the old one. George H.W. Bush's letter to Bill Clinton, after a particularly contentious campaign, was moving: "Your success now is our country's success. I am rooting hard for you."

Donald Trump had indicated he would not leave a note for Joe Biden, but as I write this, just before the inauguration, the White House reveals that he did. They did not disclose what it said. I think I know. Others might speculate on this, but only I can truly channel Trump, since only I possess the requisite degree of infantilism:


"Congratulations. Melania said I had to right this letter myself in my own handwriting and I have to be nice even though this is the GREATEST FRUD in the History of Human Elections. You are BAD.

"Melania said I have to say you are 'good,' but I won't capitalize it, so you be the judge of what I think. Also I forgot some nicknames up above. You are also Joe JustBidenTimeTillTrumpReturns. And Joe Mama So Fat. You are a FAKE PRESIDENT, and everyone knows it. Suitcases full of ballots, polling places swarmed by ZOMBIES and ghosts, ballots mailed in from Kenya by Obama, people voting 12 times in different costumes with fake noses, believe me the most UNFAIR AND CORRUPT election EVER! I won by 220 million votes, MINIMUM.

"Okay, Melania says to calm down and she will hand-write the next paragraph. So here she goes:

"Bill, your success now is our country's success. I am rooting hard for you."

"Okay, I am back and have calmed down. I don't want to make this all negative so let me just say in the noble tradition of former Republican presidents who won but got the election stolen from them by Democraos I want to say sincerely that I wish you good luck, which you will really need because your brain rot is so BAD you can SMELL it coming from your ears and you will BE SO NAMYPAMBY you will put everyone on WELFAIR even Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos who owns the failing Washington Post and the failing Canada.

"Okay, that's about it. You may have noticed certain problems with your 'transition' including that some pens smell funny. Don't worry about it. I definitely did not do anything bad with them, and also your bed. I definitely did not hire any professionals to do anything on them.

"In closing let me note that my signature is bigger than your signature."

Email Gene Weingarten at gene.weingarten@washpost.com. Find chats and updates at wapo.st/magazine.
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