



William Lacy (Bill) Clay, Sr.

1931–

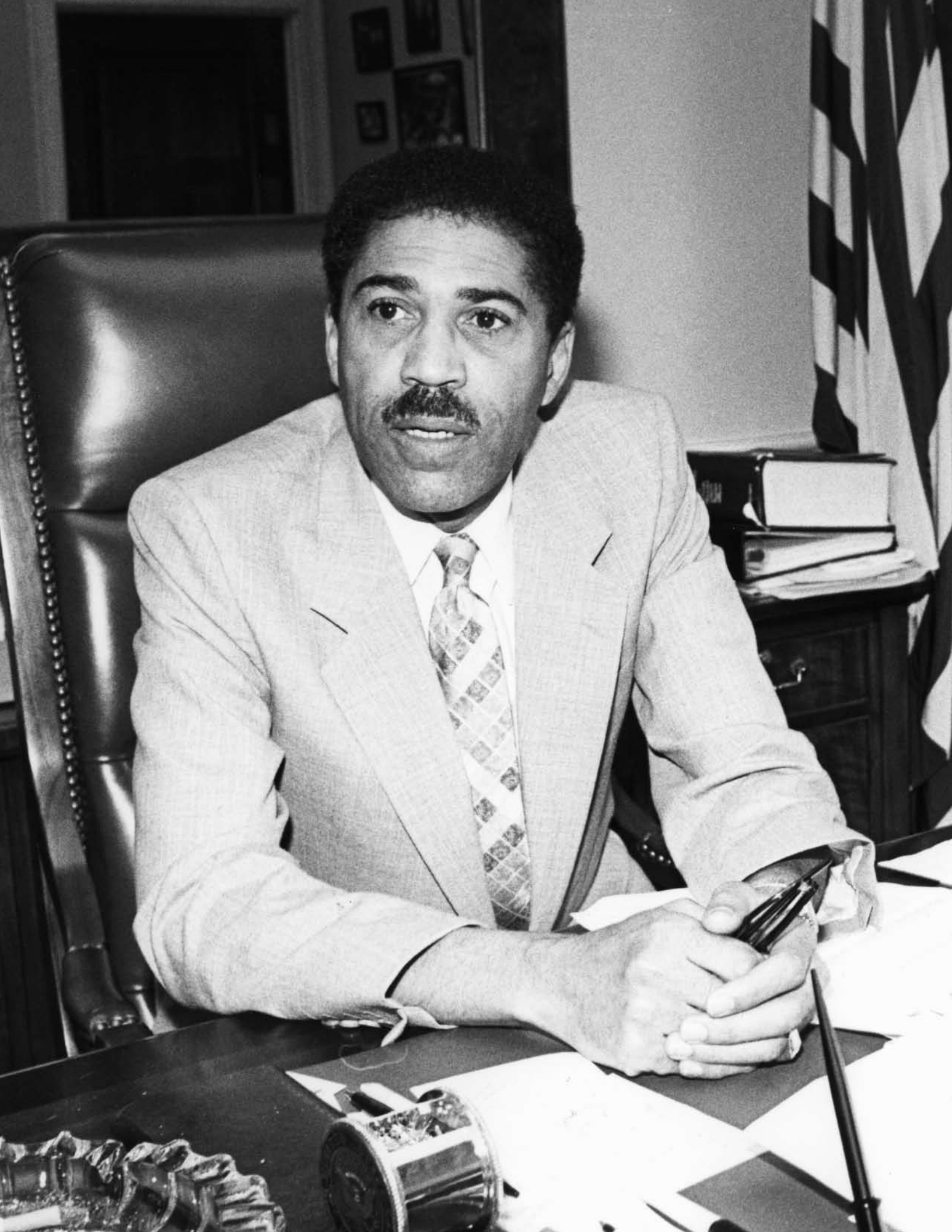
UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1969–2001
DEMOCRAT FROM MISSOURI

The first African-American Representative from Missouri, Bill Clay, Sr., served in the House for more than three decades—longer than any other former black Member of the House. During his extensive tenure, he used his experience as a civil rights activist and labor union representative in St. Louis to promote legislation to help minorities and U.S. workers. Clay zealously represented his impoverished inner-city constituents, who he believed needed a strong voice in Congress. Never one to avoid confrontation, the fiery dean of the Missouri delegation observed, “I didn’t get so tied to the job that it stopped me from speaking out. People used to say to me, ‘How can you do that? You won’t get re-elected.’ I would say, ‘I didn’t come here to stay forever.’”¹

William Lacy (Bill) Clay was born in St. Louis on April 30, 1931, to Irving Clay, a welder, and Luella (Hyatt) Clay. His political epiphany occurred in 1949, after police arrested him, hauled him to a district police station, and tried to coerce him to confess involvement in a brutal crime with which he had no connection. His aunt, a housekeeper for a member of the St. Louis board of police commissioners, telephoned her employer, and detectives were swiftly dispatched to end the interrogation. That episode, Clay recalled decades later, “convinced me that survival and political influence are inseparable in American society.”² In 1953, he graduated from St. Louis University with a B.S. in history and political science. Drafted into the U.S. Army, Clay served from 1953 to 1955. While on duty in Alabama, he responded to the racial discrimination he and other African Americans faced by organizing demonstrations; once, Clay led a boycott of the base barbershop to protest its policy of serving black soldiers only one day a week. His experiences in the armed forces contributed to his future career as a social activist and politician.³ Clay returned to St. Louis and

briefly worked as a real estate broker and a manager with a life insurance company. He won his first elective office in 1959 as an alderman from a predominantly African-American St. Louis ward and served in this position through 1964. As a local politician, Clay continued to promote civil rights by participating in a series of protests. In 1963 he was arrested and jailed for nearly four months for his role in a demonstration against the hiring practices of a St. Louis bank. “I think things were accomplished that far outweighed the 112 days I spent in jail,” Clay remarked, alluding to a subsequent change in bank policy that increased the number of African Americans in professional positions.⁴ Clay continued to gain experience in local politics as a St. Louis committeeman from 1964 to 1967.⁵ His early political career coincided with his activity as a union official. Clay worked as a business representative for the city employees’ union from 1961 to 1964 and as an education coordinator with a local steamfitter’s union in 1966 and 1967.⁶ Clay married Carol Ann Johnson, and the couple had three children: William Lacy, Jr.; Vicki; and Michele.⁷

A 1964 Supreme Court decision mandating the equal population of congressional districts paved the way for Clay’s entry to the House. Three years later, the Missouri legislature passed a bill that reapportioned the state’s districts in compliance with the high court’s ruling. One of the new constituencies incorporated the north side of St. Louis and some of its outlying suburbs.⁸ When the 22-year incumbent Frank Karsten of Missouri chose not to seek re-election in the newly redrawn majority-black district, Clay entered the 1968 Democratic primary for the open congressional seat.⁹ He defeated five candidates for the nomination, earning 41 percent of the vote. His closest opponent, Milton Carpenter, a white state auditor and state treasurer and formerly a city comptroller, collected 30



percent.¹⁰ Clay faced Curtis Crawford, formerly a St. Louis assistant circuit attorney, in the general election. Against the backdrop of a turbulent period of racial unrest highlighted by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the 1968 campaign received national attention because the Missouri House election uncharacteristically featured two black candidates.¹¹ Clay emphasized his support for employment opportunities for African Americans and the promotion of civil rights. He also pledged to represent the needs of his predominantly urban district, saying, “The conditions of poverty found in the First District and other areas of the country must be immediately addressed by our federal government to bring faith and hope to our people, before we can talk of quelling unrest and civil disorder.”¹² Clay ultimately defeated his opponent in the heavily Democratic district with 64 percent of the vote, becoming the first African American to represent Missouri in Congress.¹³

As a new Member of the 91st Congress (1969–1971), Clay joined two other African-American freshmen: Representatives Shirley Chisholm of New York and Louis Stokes of Ohio.¹⁴ The three vowed to focus on issues affecting their urban constituents, who they believed had been neglected by the government. Shortly into his first term, Representative Clay, who embraced his radical reputation, predicted, “This country is on the verge of a revolution and it is not going to be a revolution of blacks, but of dissatisfied American people, black and white.”¹⁵ Assigned in 1969 to the Committee on Education and Labor, Clay served on this panel throughout his career. He eventually chaired the Subcommittee on Labor–Management Relations and was in line to lead the full committee before the Republicans took control of the House in 1995. He also served on the Committee on House Administration from the 99th to the 103rd Congress (1985–1995), chairing the Subcommittee on Libraries and Memorials. Clay reaped the benefits of the House seniority system, rising through the ranks of the Post Office and Civil Service Committee (chairing two subcommittees) to head the full panel during the 102nd and 103rd Congresses (1991–1995) after nine

terms of service. “From the day you are sworn into Congress, you dream of the day that you will rise to chair a full committee—and today that time has come,” Clay declared in 1990.¹⁶ His tenure as chairman ended in 1995 when the committee was abolished after the Republicans took control of the House. Clay also was a member of the Joint Committee on the Library during the 101st Congress (1989–1991).

Clay was one of the 13 founding members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). Officially formed in 1971, the CBC sought to provide a formal network for African-American Members to focus on legislative issues directly affecting black citizens. Clay successfully lobbied to make the CBC nonpartisan—hoping to coax Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, the lone black Republican of the 92nd Congress (1971–1973), to join the nascent organization; however, Senator Brooke did not become a member.¹⁷ Soon after its creation, the CBC made headlines because of its public dispute with President Richard M. Nixon. Unhappy with the Nixon administration’s policies toward African Americans, the CBC boycotted the January 1971 State of the Union address. Clay drafted the letter outlining the reasons for the CBC’s boycott: “We now refuse to be part of your audience,” the letter stated in response to the President’s persistent refusals to meet with the black Members of Congress.¹⁸ When Nixon ultimately met with the CBC in March 1971, each member addressed a major point of concern for the black community. Clay spoke about the need for student grants to help impoverished African-American students who could not repay educational loans.¹⁹

The CBC was also involved with civil rights abroad, most notably advocating U.S. sanctions against the apartheid government of South Africa. Some black Representatives, including Clay, demonstrated at the South African Embassy. “South Africa is the most oppressive government in the world,” Clay stated before being arrested for civil disobedience.²⁰ Reflecting on the significance of the CBC, Clay called it “the single most effective political entity we have had in articulating, representing, protecting

and advancing the interests of black people in this nation over the past twenty years.”²¹

During his congressional career, Clay oversaw the passage of notable legislation. For nearly two decades, he worked to revise the Hatch Act of 1939, which restricted the political activities of federal workers. Clay’s measure, which became law in 1993, amended the Hatch Act, permitting government employees to publicly endorse candidates and to organize political fundraisers, among other rights that were previously prohibited.²² “It’s exhilarating to see your efforts finally rewarded,” Clay remarked after President William J. (Bill) Clinton signed the measure at a White House ceremony.²³ Clay also spent several years promoting the Family and Medical Leave Act, which passed earlier the same year, mandating that companies with more than 50 workers offer up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for employees to care for a newborn or attend to a family medical emergency.²⁴ Clay called the Family and Medical Leave Act “landmark legislation, in the same category as legislation against child labor, on minimum wage, and occupational safety, and health.”²⁵ Although Clinton signed Clay’s amendment to the Hatch Act and the Family and Medical Leave Act, which previously had been vetoed by President George H. W. Bush, Clay and Clinton did not always agree. Clay criticized the controversial North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), calling it “badly designed” and “fatally flawed.” Concerned that NAFTA would undermine workers’ well-being, Clay attempted to convince his colleagues of the pitfalls of the bill. “Approval of this measure will increase the downward pressures on the wages of workers in the United States; nullify any movement toward greater labor-management cooperation; discourage efforts to improve the education and skills of low-wage workers; and exacerbate the inequitable distribution of income.”²⁶ However, with the backing of President Clinton, NAFTA passed the House on November 17, 1993, by a vote of 234 to 200.

From his seat on the Education and Labor Committee, Representative Clay guided many initiatives through the

House. In 1996, he served as the floor manager for a bill to raise the federal minimum wage. Shortly after the measure passed the House, Clay commented, “The American people came to know how unfair it was to relegate people at the bottom of the economic scale to a wage that is unlivable.”²⁷ Clay also sponsored revisions to a pension law that was incorporated in the Tax Reform Act of 1986. With his background in labor relations, he supported the mandatory notification of plant closings and the protection of unions’ negotiating rights. Clay successfully sponsored legislation in the House to ban the permanent replacement of striking workers, but he was frustrated with the Clinton administration for what he perceived as a lackluster attempt to break a filibuster that caused his bill to languish in the Senate.²⁸ An advocate of improving the education of inner-city students, Clay worked to reduce class sizes, to increase the number of college grants for disadvantaged students, and to boost federal funding for historically black colleges. “If America is to be prosperous and stay competitive, we must continue to improve educational opportunities for students of all ages,” Clay commented in response to a growing backlash in the Republican-controlled House against President Clinton’s agenda targeting public schools.²⁹

Extremely popular among his St. Louis constituents, Clay made clear his intention to defend the rights of people he believed lacked an adequate voice in the government, even in the face of a shifting political environment.³⁰ “I don’t represent all people,” Clay declared. “I represent those who are in need of representation. I have no intention of representing those powerful interests who walk over the powerless people.”³¹ Clay’s passionate approach to politics, which was manifested in a “show-horse,” or publicity-driven legislative style, resonated with many of his voters. Much like Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of New York, Clay viewed his position in Congress as an opportunity to publicize issues that concerned African Americans in his district and throughout the nation. “Rule number one is, take what you can, give up what you must,” Clay mused when discussing political tactics. “Rule number two is, take it whenever, however, and from whomever. Rule number

three is, if you are not ready to abide by the first two rules, you are not qualified for a career in politics.”³²

Clay’s consistent support from black voters and organized labor enabled him to retain his seat—despite a series of alleged ethical violations ranging from tax evasion to the misuse of congressional funds. Throughout his career, the Missouri Representative argued that he was the victim of an unfounded government “witch hunt” because of his race and his outspoken stance on civil rights.³³ “Not many elected officials, black or white, have suffered harassment, humiliation, or intimidation to the degree and extent that I have,” Clay angrily remarked.³⁴ He further contended that African-American leaders faced more scrutiny than their white counterparts.³⁵ In the early 1990s, Clay withstood a significant political setback in the wake of a scandal involving the House “bank,” an informal, institutional facility some Members used to deposit their congressional pay. The revelation of the bank’s longstanding practice of allowing Representatives to write checks with insufficient funds caused a public outcry. Clay vehemently denied “abusing the system” when records revealed he was responsible for a number of overdrafts. “No rules were broken, and no public money was lost,” he said.³⁶ Clay’s constituents remained loyal; both in the 1992 primary and in the general election, where he earned 68 percent of the vote.³⁷ Moreover, despite several reapportionments that

resulted in a growing number of conservative white voters in the outlying suburbs of his district—a consequence of St. Louis’s declining population—Clay handily retained his congressional seat. His stiffest opposition for the overwhelmingly Democratic district often emerged in the primaries. Active in local politics throughout his congressional career, Clay faced a series of challenges from African-American and white candidates alike in tumultuous St. Louis politics, but despite this steady opposition, Clay typically won the primaries with ease.³⁸

In May 1999, Clay announced his decision to retire at the conclusion of the 106th Congress (1999–2001). “I will continue to speak loudly, boisterously, about the inequities in our society,” Clay promised of his remaining time in the office.³⁹ Clay’s colleagues offered many tributes honoring his “brilliant career,” ranging from his legislation on behalf of American workers to his commitment to increasing funding for education, especially for minorities. The longtime Representative also received praise for his 1992 book, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991*.⁴⁰ In 2000 Clay’s son, William Lacy Clay, Jr., was elected to represent his father’s former St. Louis district, making the Clays the second African-American father and son ever to serve in Congress (Harold E. Ford and Harold Ford, Jr., were the first). In 2004, Clay published a political memoir, *A Political Voice at the Grass Roots*.

FOR FURTHER READING

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NOTES

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- 2 Bill Clay, *A Political Voice at the Grass Roots* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2004): 13–14.
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- 4 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 250–251.
- 5 *Politics in America, 1982* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1981): 679.
- 6 “William L. Clay, Sr.,” Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1998.
- 7 “William L. Clay, Sr.,” Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1998; Clay, *A Political Voice at the Grass Roots*: 16, 175.
- 8 “Redistricting Bill Passed in Missouri,” 29 June 1967, *New York Times*: 23; Clay, *A Political Voice at the Grass Roots*: 155.
- 9 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 1st sess. (13 November 1985): E5135; John Herbers, “Congress to Get Three More Negroes,” 3 October 1968, *New York Times*: 43; LoDico, “William Lacy Clay,” *CBB*.
- 10 Clay, *A Political Voice at the Grassroots*: 156, 165. One of Clay’s five opponents withdrew from the contest shortly before the election, but his name remained on the ballot.
- 11 “Long Calls Missouri Defeat ‘Victory for Snooper,’” 8 August 1968, *New York Times*: 26; “Long Calls Defeat Wiretappers’ Victory,” 8 August 1968, *Chicago Tribune*: 2.
- 12 William L. Clay, Sr., *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1992): 115–116.
- 13 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.

- 14 The winner of a special election for the remainder of the 91st Congress and an election for a full term in the 92nd Congress, George W. Collins of Illinois was sworn in to office on November 3, 1970, as the fourth African-American freshman Member in the 91st Congress. Collins therefore began his congressional service after Clay, Chisholm, and Stokes began theirs.
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- 21 Singh, *The Congressional Black Caucus*: 210.
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- 33 "Rep. Clay Urges Speed on Inquiry," 9 May 1975, *Washington Post*: A4; Clay, *Just Permanent Interests* 322–331.
- 34 Clay, *Just Permanent Interests*: 322.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 335–337.
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- 38 See, for example, Representative Clay's detailed description of the 1974 Democratic primary, in which he faced African-American businessman Clifford Gates; Clay, *A Political Voice at the Grass Roots*: 208–221. See also *Almanac of American Politics, 1992* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1991): 706–707; *Politics in America, 2000* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1999): 775–776; Sheppard, "Race Is Key Issue in Primary for House Seat in St. Louis."
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