

Exile, Migration, and the Struggle for Representation

1901–1965

William L. Dawson was born in Albany, Georgia, in 1886, and grew up in the Jim Crow South. By the time he was a teenager, the defeat of Reconstruction and the consolidation of power by Democrats committed to White supremacy had severely restricted life in Black communities throughout the region. In the early twentieth century, Dawson joined the legions of African Americans seeking a better life elsewhere. In 1905, he enrolled at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. He graduated from the historically Black institution and later moved to Chicago, where he worked as a Pullman porter and earned a law degree. He went on to serve as a U.S. Army officer in World War I.¹

Dawson's personal journey converged with the experiences of tens of thousands of African Americans who departed southern states in the Great Migration. During the early decades of the twentieth century, Black communities grew in northern and midwestern cities such as New York, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Detroit, Michigan; and Chicago, Illinois. There, Black people found some relief from Jim Crow—jobs, schools, and the freedom of movement that was so often restricted in the South. But they never completely escaped discrimination, nor fully exercised basic civil and political rights. Black Americans routinely found segregated housing, unequal pay, and significant barriers to participating in representative democracy no matter where they settled in the United States.

Representative William L. Dawson of Illinois chaired the Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments, later known as the Committee on Government Operations, for 10 nonconsecutive terms beginning in the 81st Congress (1949–1951). Dawson was the first Black Member to chair a House standing committee.

Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

The same discriminatory forces that caused Dawson and thousands of other Black Americans to leave the South also led to the complete disappearance of Black lawmakers on Capitol Hill. The once-promising era of Reconstruction gave way to a steady decline in the number of Black Americans elected to Congress in the late nineteenth century. Following the departure of George Henry White of North Carolina in 1901, no Black American was elected to Congress until 1928. This extended exile from the national legislature endured for nearly three decades, transcended regional boundaries, and mirrored a decline in Black state and local officeholders in the South. There, Jim Crow and state governments perpetuated White supremacy by law. In the North, district boundaries, subtle and explicit discrimination, and party politics conspired against Black candidates in rural and urban congressional districts alike. Thus, even though African Americans found access to the ballot when they left the South, they still found themselves excluded from Congress. Despite the obstacles arrayed

against them, Black Americans consistently sought ways to influence the political process from outside the halls of power and continued to try to win election to local, state, and federal offices.

In Chicago during the 1920s, William Dawson joined an emerging cohort of Black Republicans seeking to gain political access and patronage amid the Great Migration. The city's ward system created opportunities for local leaders who could marshal the votes of their communities. Dawson campaigned for candidates, was elected as an alderman in 1935, and twice pursued the Republican nomination for Illinois's First District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Dawson spent much of the Great Depression during the 1930s building a base of local support. His Republican political career plateaued, however, as scores of Black Chicagoans embraced the Democratic Party of Franklin D. Roosevelt, which offered them a modicum of relief from the ravages of the Depression. It was not long before Dawson joined them by switching his party allegiance. In 1942, Dawson was elected to the House as a Democrat and firmly secured control of patronage in Chicago's second ward. In a congressional career that spanned nearly three decades, Dawson became the most powerful Black Member of Congress to that point in U.S. history. He amassed seniority, worked closely with Democratic leadership, and was the first Black American to chair a House standing committee.

Whether he was in Georgia, Illinois, or on Capitol Hill, segregation and discrimination marred Dawson's personal and professional experiences. Through it all, he set a new standard for Black Americans in the legislative branch, became a trusted ally and party stalwart, and achieved real power through his control of the House Committee on Government Operations. This mixture of power and limitations, visibility and isolation, made Dawson's life and career a microcosm of the uniquely American dilemma that other Black lawmakers confronted during this era.

This essay explores the many contradictory experiences of Black Americans on and off Capitol Hill during the first six decades of the twentieth century, a period marked by migration and the struggle to overcome political exclusion. While 22 Black Members were elected to Congress in the final 30 years of the nineteenth century—all from southern states—Dawson was one of only eight African Americans elected to the House from 1901 to 1965 from industrial cities in the North and West.

Dawson was not the first Black politician sent to Congress during the period. Indeed, Black Americans



Oscar De Priest of Illinois stands outside the Capitol. After a 28-year absence of Black representation in Congress, De Priest represented a Chicago district from 1929 to 1935.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

hailed their return to Capitol Hill with the 1928 election of Oscar De Priest, a Chicago Republican. In the 1930s and 1940s, a small number of Black Representatives made modest gains in the legislative branch, though it was not until 1945 when two Black Members once again served simultaneously in Congress. Following World War II, incremental gains in Black representation in Congress coincided with the first significant civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. At the same time, segregationist southern Democrats steadily amassed influence in Congress through seniority and committee chairmanships. They grasped the reins of power in the House and Senate, and for decades used parliamentary maneuvers to delay bills, disrupt the legislative process, and stifle calls for reform.

Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of social movement activists, however, the era culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which expanded the role of the federal government in guaranteeing individual rights across the United States and altered the social and political landscape of the South. Black Members supported the goals of the postwar civil rights movement and labored from inside the halls of power to ensure that new legislation would deliver meaningful results. The cumulative struggles of six decades produced a dramatic ending to this era—one that fundamentally transformed democracy in the United States and the story of Black Americans in Congress.

EXILE

On December 6, 1901, the *New York Sun* printed a short history of the “rise and fall” of Black Americans on Capitol Hill. The paper included a brief description of each Black Member who had served between 1870 and 1901 under the headline “No Negro Now in Congress.” The 57th Congress (1901–1903) had opened the previous day, and the absence of Black Members seemed to signal the end of a chapter in congressional history. The *Sun* offered a retrospective on Black Representatives and Senators, noting that during the preceding three decades, only the 50th Congress (1887–1889) had not welcomed a Black Member. Because of the “persistent efforts to disenfranchise the black voters,” the *Sun* acknowledged, Black Americans had “entirely lost the political vantage ground” granted by the Fifteenth Amendment. The *Sun* predicted future Black candidates had little chance of winning election to Congress. The article proved prescient; 28 years passed before another Black Representative was sworn in on Capitol Hill.²



The first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University, pathbreaking scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the founders of the NAACP. He edited the organization’s monthly magazine, *The Crisis*, for more than two decades.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

In 1903, the leading Black intellectual of the era, the scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois, linked this lack of political representation to a larger phenomenon in American society. For Du Bois, “despite compromise, war, and struggle,” freedom had not been won for African Americans in the four decades following the Civil War. “Before the courts, both in law and custom, they stand on a different and peculiar basis. Taxation without representation is the rule of their political life.” A “color line” had been drawn in the United States, Du Bois declared, and it constituted the most significant challenge facing the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.³

Black Americans never accepted their exile from national politics. Instead, they engaged in a struggle for representation on several fronts. Black candidates ran for office. Black activists and organizations mobilized to pressure lawmakers in Congress to act on issues that mattered to them. And faced with a repressive system of segregation in the South, Black men and women sought new opportunities by migrating northward and westward in greater numbers than ever before, a movement that reestablished their communities in places where they could more freely exercise political power.

Exclusion

On the same day the *Sun* noted the absence of Black Members in the 57th Congress, the front-page headline described Republican efforts in the House to punish southern states for disenfranchising Black voters. In January 1901, Representative Edgar Dean Crumpacker of Indiana had raised the possibility of reducing southern influence in Congress based on Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment. Crumpacker proposed subtracting the number of disenfranchised voters from the population totals of individual states, which were used to determine the number of seats apportioned to each state in the House. The House voted down his measure. At the start of the 57th Congress, the Republican majority had increased significantly, and Crumpacker urged his colleagues to renew this effort. In early 1902, Charles William Frederick Dick of Ohio proposed an investigation to determine the relationship between the congressional representation of states that disenfranchised Black voters and the voting totals in those states' congressional elections. Ultimately, the proposed reduction efforts were rejected by the House. During debate, Representative Thomas Spight of Mississippi, a Confederate veteran turned newspaper publisher, boasted that the Mississippi state constitution was designed to disenfranchise: "I will not deny that the leading purpose was to eliminate the negro from the political equation." He added that the South would rather have no congressional representation than to "return again to the state of affairs existing in the reconstruction period" when African Americans exercised their right to vote.⁴

Amid Congress's failure to defend Black voting rights, the Supreme Court also made several rulings that enabled discrimination at the state and local level to flourish. In 1896, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision gave legal blessing to the system of segregation crystallizing in the South. The link between political exclusion and unequal justice was underscored two years later in *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898), when a Black man convicted of murder by an all-White jury appealed the decision, claiming that state laws disenfranchising Black voters had also stripped them from the jury pool, which ultimately denied Black defendants equal protection of the law. The court refused to acknowledge that Mississippi's state laws led solely to Black disenfranchisement and did not consider the juror selection process to be intentionally discriminatory. In *Giles v. Harris* (1903), Black voters in Alabama filed a class action suit claiming to have been discriminated against in attempting to register to vote. The

Supreme Court ruled that regulating elections was beyond its jurisdiction, leaving the process in the hands of state legislators who, as its immediate beneficiaries, resoundingly approved of Black disenfranchisement.⁵

The Supreme Court's rulings left southern states with immense power just as a broad movement of social, economic, and political reform emerged to challenge corruption and inequality in American life. The progressive movement was composed of a diverse array of social reformers pushing for the modernization and democratization of American society. Their efforts included regulating the quality and production of food, establishing laws for child labor and guidelines for industrial safety, and implementing conservation, temperance, and even experimental social welfare programs. From the 1890s through World War I, progressives ushered in political reforms, including direct primary elections, the popular election of U.S. Senators, and women's suffrage.⁶

Black civil and political rights were not part of this agenda, however. Progressive reformers focused on the need for expertise in all fields, which provided a convenient justification for limiting the franchise to those citizens that most progressives considered qualified to vote. In practice, this movement often complemented Jim Crow, and the restrictive measures implemented in southern states at the turn of the twentieth century continued to deprive Black citizens of their civil and political rights for decades.⁷ State and local laws, court decisions, and the ongoing, ever-present threat of violence established formidable impediments to Black political participation.

Despite these barriers, Black candidates continued to seek elected office, particularly during the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1902, Black Republican Alexander D. Dantzler was his party's nominee for a House seat representing the Seventh District of South Carolina against Democrat Asbury Francis Lever. Although Dantzler won just 167 votes to Lever's 4,220, Dantzler turned to the contested election process in the House, hoping that the Republican majority would admit him or declare the seat vacant. If the Black residents of the district were able to register to vote, Dantzler asserted, he would have won. Dantzler also claimed that South Carolina's election laws, which required literacy tests and property qualifications for prospective voters, were unconstitutional. When the House Committee on Elections dismissed the contest, it rejected Dantzler's argument and accepted the initial vote tally. The National Negro Suffrage League submitted a memorial to

Representative Joseph Weeks Babcock of Wisconsin, the head of the National Republican Congressional Committee, declaring that the Republican-led committee's report "establishes a precedent which, until reversed, will render of no effect any future contest from any of the disfranchised States of the South." During the next decade, Dantzler and several other Black candidates from South Carolina used the same strategy to contest the victories of their Democratic opponents. In each instance, the Committee on Elections cited the Dantzler case from 1902 as precedent and dismissed their claims, urging the contestants to take their case to the Supreme Court to rule on the constitutionality of South Carolina's election laws.⁸

While state laws enabled discrimination and disenfranchisement, southern Democrats worked to expand segregation into areas of federal jurisdiction. In 1913, Democrats gained control of Congress and the White House for the first time since the mid-1890s. The administration of President Woodrow Wilson proceeded to segregate executive departments. Congress, which had the responsibility of administering the nation's capital, also did much to promote the practice of segregation in Washington. From 1913 to 1921 and again after 1933, southerners largely controlled the committees and subcommittees that appropriated funds and oversaw the city government. In places where Congress could have overturned Jim Crow practices—in public parks, theaters, restaurants, and innumerable other locations, including the principal train depot and transportation hub of the city, Union Station—it did nothing.⁹

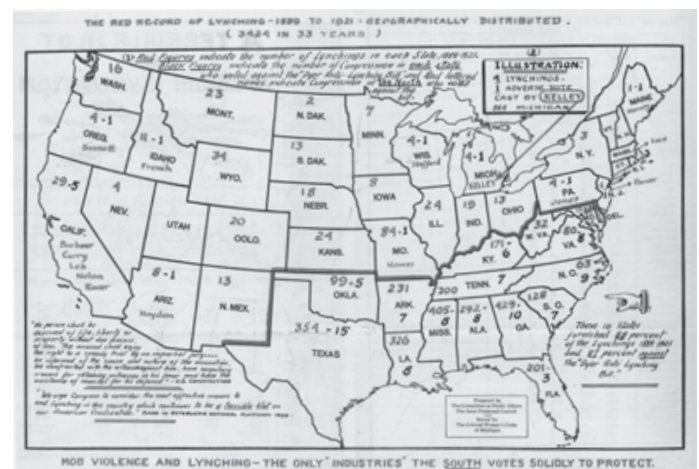
“Any Place that is North and East— And Not Dixie”

When the Republican Party acquiesced to the disenfranchisement of its southern supporters, the chances of electing Black candidates from the region swiftly vanished. The denial of Black political rights in the South, coupled with the intensifying social and economic repression, led many to leave the region. In his 1949 poem, “One-Way Ticket,” Langston Hughes described the feeling of despair that had driven many to leave the South. Hughes, whose grandfather, Charles Henry Langston, was the brother of former Virginia Representative John M. Langston, identified Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and fear as the root causes of this demographic shift. Black Americans left the South, he wrote, and headed in the direction of “Any place that is North and East—And not Dixie.”¹⁰

In 1910, nearly 90 percent of all African Americans lived in the South. Largely employed in agriculture, most faced economic uncertainty—especially as the boll weevil decimated cotton crops around the turn of the century. Crop prices fluctuated significantly during the first decades of the twentieth century, and indebtedness increased as many of the Black farmers who had been able to purchase property faced the prospect of losing their land and having to make other arrangements, such as tenant farming or sharecropping.¹¹

In the next decade, Black migration intensified, as Black Americans sought jobs and new freedoms beyond the Jim Crow South. In the late 1910s, World War I accelerated this process. Black migrants found work in war production and other industries as wartime mobilization tightened the labor supply. Those labor shortages provided Black workers with jobs in the steel, shipbuilding, and automotive industries as well as in ammunition plants and meat-packing factories. Black communities grew rapidly in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, and St. Louis, Missouri.¹²

Whether their motivation was economic or political, individual or communal, immense numbers of African Americans streamed northward. By one estimate, nearly 450,000 southern-born Black Americans left the South between 1910 and 1920; in the 1920s, more than 800,000



During the 67th Congress (1921–1923), the House Judiciary Committee considered antilynching legislation from one of its members, Missouri Representative Leonidas Carstarphen Dyer. The committee's records include this map of lynchings in each state from 1889 to 1921. A thick red line separates northern and southern states. According to the map issued by the Colored Women's Clubs of Michigan, southern states accounted for 88 percent of lynchings during this period and 87 percent of southern Representatives voted against Dyer's antilynching bill. Along the bottom of the page in capital letters the map proclaimed: “Mob violence and lynching—the only ‘industries’ the South votes solidly to protect.”

Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

made the same trek. Between 1910 and 1930, Detroit's African-American community grew 2,000 percent—from a population of 5,700 to about 120,000.¹³

Migration shaped the lives of the eight Black Members elected to Congress from 1928 to 1965. Five of the lawmakers had been born in the South. Some had participated in the Great Migration to northern and western urban areas with their parents—or later, as young adults—attracted by better economic, social, and cultural opportunities. Born in Florence, Alabama, in 1871, Oscar De Priest was seven when his family joined the exodus of some 60,000 Black families from the Lower Mississippi Valley to Kansas. He eventually moved to Chicago as a young man. His successor in the House, Arthur W. Mitchell, was born in Lafayette, Alabama, and taught school in the South before attending college in New York and Massachusetts, eventually settling in Chicago to practice law in the 1920s. William Dawson, who succeeded Mitchell, was born in Albany, Georgia, and moved to Chicago prior to World War I. Robert N.C. Nix Sr. of Pennsylvania was the son of Nelson Nix, who was born enslaved and became an educator and college president in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Robert Nix moved to New York City to live with extended family and eventually attended college and began his career as a lawyer in Philadelphia. Augustus F. “Gus” Hawkins was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1907; his family moved to Los Angeles, California, when he was a teenager.¹⁴



This 1936 photo of the NAACP's headquarters at 69 Fifth Avenue in New York City shows one way the organization raised awareness of the persistent violence against African Americans. Each time a lynching occurred in the United States, a flag with the words “A Man Was Lynched Yesterday” was flown outside the office.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Even those Black Members born and raised in the North and elected at mid-century were only one generation removed from the South. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was born in New Haven, Connecticut, where his father was a minister, and moved to Manhattan when he was less than a year old. His father, however, had been born in Franklin County, Virginia, in 1865. In Detroit, Charles C. Diggs Jr. was elected in 1954 and John Conyers Jr. a decade later, but both had roots in the South. Diggs's family was originally from Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Conyers's father, John Conyers Sr., an organizer and union official in the United Auto Workers, had moved from Monroe, Georgia, to Detroit in 1926.¹⁵

Ultimately, the election of Black Representatives during the mid-twentieth century would have been all but impossible without the Great Migration. No longer subject to ubiquitous voter suppression, skyrocketing Black populations in northern cities created new constituencies and new opportunities for political activism and the pursuit of leadership.

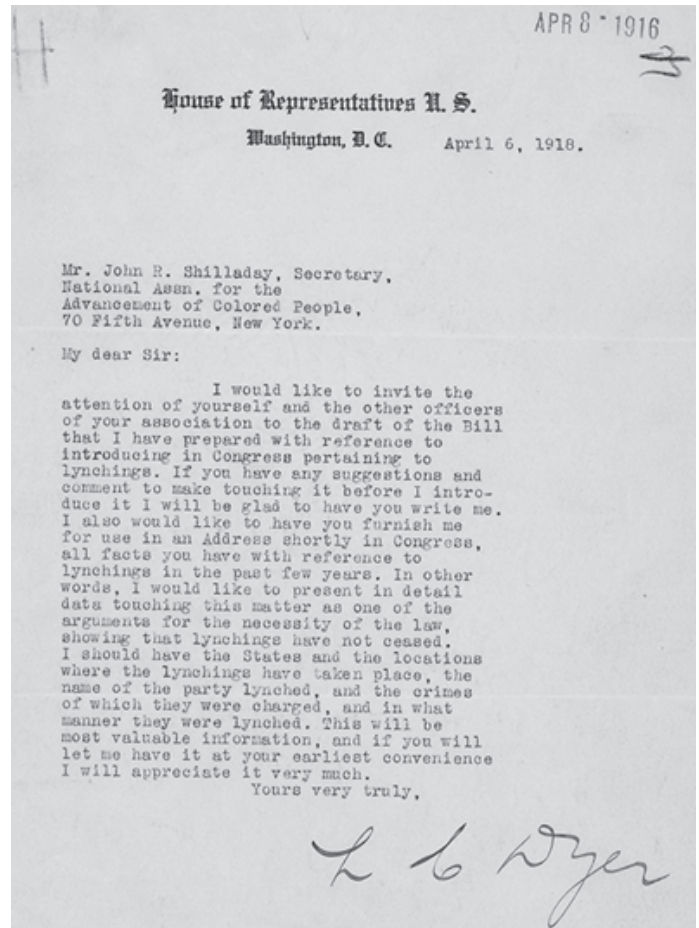
“This Shame and Disgrace among the Nations of the World”

Lynching was perhaps the issue around which Black Americans most urgently sought legislative change. In the absence of congressional representation, the NAACP embraced the mantle of advocating for the interests of Black Americans. Founded in 1909, the NAACP began a national campaign against lynching. In 1917, the organization led a silent march down Fifth Avenue in New York City to draw attention to the ongoing crisis for African Americans across the United States. The NAACP also attempted to lobby Congress for legislation, and one of its central goals was the passage of a federal antilynching law. The organization produced a report, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1919*, to spur congressional action, and sent James Weldon Johnson to Washington to serve as its congressional lobbyist. A poet, composer, writer, and activist, Johnson pushed lawmakers debating reapportionment to reduce southern representation in Congress as punishment for the region's disenfranchisement of Black people. He also decisively shaped the NAACP's antilynching campaign. Of his experience, Johnson recalled, “I tramped the corridors of the Capitol and the two office buildings so constantly that toward the end, I could, I think, have been able to find my way about blindfolded.”¹⁶

Johnson and Atlanta civil rights activist and NAACP assistant executive secretary Walter White searched for allies on Capitol Hill. One potential ally was Republican Leonidas Carstarphen Dyer of Missouri. Since his election to the House in 1910, Dyer had made an effort to serve as an advocate for the Black community, particularly as the number of Black voters increased in his district. Dyer represented a thin sliver of the southern and eastern sections of St. Louis. Part of the heavily industrialized district hugged the Mississippi River and included growing African-American neighborhoods. In July 1917, in East St. Louis, Illinois, violence between White and Black residents led to 47 deaths, including 38 African-American men, women, and children. In a 1917 hearing to consider the creation of a joint committee to investigate the causes of the riot, Dyer decried the slaughter as one of “the most dastardly and most criminal outrages ever perpetrated in this country.”¹⁷

The events were part of a wave of mob violence during the war in which White vigilantes targeted Black neighborhoods, demonstrating that violence against African Americans was just as possible in major cities as it was in the rural corners of the Deep South. Dyer introduced his antilynching measure on April 8, 1918. The bill was designed “to protect citizens of the United States against lynching in default of protection by the States.” He sought to charge lynch mobs with capital murder, to try lynching cases in federal court, and to fine counties where lynchings occurred. The Dyer bill also mandated jail time and imposed a fine of up to \$5,000 on state and local law enforcement officials who refused to make a reasonable effort to prevent a lynching or who surrendered a prisoner in their custody to a lynch mob. Finally, the bill sought to establish guidelines for fair courtroom proceedings by excluding lynch mob participants and supporters from juries.¹⁸

During debate, Dyer emphasized that lynching—and the refusal by states to prosecute the perpetrators—violated victims’ Fourteenth Amendment rights to equal protection of the law. He cited child labor laws as well as Congress’s December 1917 passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, which forbade the production, transportation, or sale of alcohol within the United States, as precedents for federal intervention. “If Congress has felt its duty to do these things, why should it not also assume jurisdiction and enact laws to protect the lives of citizens of the United States against lynch law and mob violence?” Dyer asked. In the Democratic-controlled 65th Congress (1917–1919), however, the measure remained stuck in the House Judiciary Committee.¹⁹



In April 1918, Representative Leonidas Dyer wrote to the NAACP to assist in gathering information on underreported lynchings in the United States.

Congressman L.C. Dyer to John R. Shilladay, 6 April 1918, NAACP Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, courtesy of the NAACP

In January 1920, with Republicans now in the majority, the Judiciary Committee held a hearing on antilynching bills introduced by Dyer and several other Members. James Weldon Johnson appeared before the committee—providing statistics on lynchings and presenting newspaper coverage of these incidents. In December 1921, Dyer introduced another antilynching bill, and under the NAACP’s intense lobbying, it came before the full House in January 1922. Southern Democrats decried the measure, mustering arguments about the rights of states under the Constitution. Hatton William Sumners of Texas, a Dallas attorney who later served 16 years as chair of the House Judiciary Committee, led the opposition. Sumners positioned the South as the true victim and likened the bill to an act of legislative “mob” violence; he suggested Congress let southern states resolve the lynching issue on their own.²⁰

On January 26, 1922, several hundred African-American spectators packed the House Gallery, intensely monitoring the debate. On several occasions they cheered loudly in violation of gallery rules. Some traded barbs with southern Members on the House Floor, whose speeches repeatedly referred to NAACP activists as “race agitators.” The Dyer bill passed the House that afternoon. The NAACP proceeded to engage in a formidable public campaign, but with southern Democrats in the Senate obstructing debate on the bill and threatening to filibuster, Senate Republicans declined to take up the fight.²¹

Dyer reintroduced antilynching legislation at the opening of the 68th Congress (1923–1925) and two more times before the end of the decade. Despite the setbacks in Congress, Johnson called upon “those who hold dear the institutions of our country and who feel this shame and disgrace among the nations of the world” to remain committed to federal action. He continued the NAACP campaign throughout most of the 1920s, testifying at a 1926 Senate Judiciary subcommittee hearing to provide

updated figures on lynchings in the South. Despite his efforts, the NAACP could not prod Congress to act definitively to protect the safety of African Americans.²²

Pivotal Decade

The 1920s began with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which guaranteed women’s suffrage. Passed by Congress in 1919, the amendment made no reference to voting rights for Black Americans. In fact, southern Democrats often used congressional debates on women’s voting rights to warn of what they considered the dangerous potential for Black enfranchisement if such an amendment were to be added to the Constitution. The first woman elected to Congress, Representative Jeannette Rankin of Montana, used discriminatory ideas about race to appeal for support from southern Members for the cause of women’s suffrage. She acknowledged and sympathized with the prejudices of her southern colleagues, making the case that White women were more prepared for democratic participation than African Americans. “The women of the



Founded in 1909, the NAACP became a primary advocacy group for early civil rights causes. The 1929 annual meeting in Cleveland, Ohio, celebrated the twentieth anniversary (left), and Walter White (first row, ninth from left).

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

South have stood by you through every trial,” she implored southern Representatives. “Are you going to deny them the equipment with which to help you effectively simply because the enfranchisement of a child-race 50 years ago brought you a problem you were powerless to handle?” Even in a moment of change when women across the country were guaranteed the right to vote in national elections, the possibilities for fundamental reforms designed to benefit African Americans were few and far between.²³

While none of the 11 women elected to the House of Representatives during the 1920s were African American, Black women aspired to win a seat in Congress. In 1924, Lucille Randolph joined her husband A. Philip Randolph, the nation’s leading Black trade unionist, as Socialist candidates in two adjacent Manhattan congressional districts. Lucille Randolph focused her campaign on the need for federal action against lynching, pledging to support the Dyer bill if elected. But the Randolphs’ third-party bids each received just three percent of the vote. In 1933, Black women activists in New York organized the Harlem

Congressional League with the goal of eventually electing a Black woman to Congress.²⁴

With little chance of passing legislation to protect the civil and political rights of African Americans, several Members of Congress tried to use other means to address these issues in the 1920s. In 1920, Representative George Holden Tinkham of Massachusetts briefly revived the congressional apportionment reduction efforts of 20 years earlier, calling for investigations into voter disenfranchisement in the South. The House Committee on the Census held hearings on congressional reapportionment, and witnesses included the NAACP’s Johnson and White and other legal advocates. They called on the committee to penalize southern states that continued to disenfranchise Black residents by reducing their seats in the House. Tinkham repeatedly invoked Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment as a mandate for Congress to take punitive action.²⁵

The demographic transformations of northern and midwestern cities raised the possibility that Black Americans could have political influence, and perhaps once again



anniversary of the organization and was attended by NAACP staff, including W.E.B. Du Bois (first row, fifth from left), James Weldon Johnson (first row, sixth from

This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the negroes' temporary farewell to the American Congress; but let me say, Phoenix-like he will rise up some day and come again. These parting words are in behalf of an outraged, heart-broken, bruised, and bleeding, but God-fearing people, faithful, industrious, loyal people—rising people, full of potential force.

Mr. Chairman, in the trial of Lord Bacon, when the court disturbed the counsel for the defendant, Sir Walter Raleigh raised himself up to his full height and, addressing the court, said:

Sir, I am pleading for the life of a human being.

The only apology that I have to make for the earnestness with which I have spoken is that I am pleading for the life, the liberty, the future happiness, and manhood suffrage for one-eighth of the entire population of the United States. [Loud applause.]

On January 29, 1901, George Henry White of North Carolina gave his valedictory address as the sole Black Member of the 56th Congress (1899–1901), promising the return of African Americans to Congress. His speech, which filled more than four pages in the *Congressional Record*, insisted upon civil and political rights for African Americans.

Congressional Record, House, 56th Cong., 2nd sess. (29 January 1901)

elect their own to speak for them in Congress. The *New York Amsterdam News* made a public appeal for more Black congressional candidates. The increase in New York's Black population had made victory possible, argued the paper, but Black voters deserved to have a Black candidate to “support like the Italians support and elect Congressman Fiorello La Guardia,” who represented East Harlem in Congress.²⁶

In the 1920s, Black candidates sought elected office in Chicago, where the city's history of Black municipal officeholding laid the groundwork for congressional candidates. The Republican Party led the way in Chicago, with a formidable machine under Mayor William Hale Thompson and elected officials like alderman Oscar De Priest. But northern Democrats also recognized the potential in the city's Black electorate. In 1924, the Democratic Party nominated Black attorney Earl B. Dickerson to challenge the longtime incumbent, Republican Martin Barnaby Madden, for a Chicago seat in the House.²⁷

It was in Chicago that a Black candidate finally broke through the color line established by Jim Crow disenfranchisement. In 1928, when Representative Madden died during his twelfth term, Republicans chose the Alabama-born De Priest as their candidate for Illinois's First District. De Priest had risen in the ranks of urban machine politicians and gathered support by helping to deliver jobs and services to the Black migrants transforming the city's South Side. De Priest's election to the 71st Congress (1929–1931) served as a marker for a new era in American politics, as a Black candidate had succeeded beyond the geographical boundaries of the South.

THE “FULFILLMENT OF WHITE'S PROPHECY”

In his last speech on the House Floor, in 1901, George Henry White of North Carolina—the final Black lawmaker elected in the nineteenth century—had predicted the return of Black Members to Congress. Oscar De Priest arrived on Capitol Hill 28 years later. Six months before his election, the *Chicago Defender* hailed the candidate as the “fulfillment of White's prophecy.” African Americans across the country celebrated De Priest's victory, and he recognized his responsibility to act as a voice for Black Americans beyond his district, especially those still residing in the South. “It's a long, hard fight down there,” he acknowledged, “and I appreciate the fact the eyes of America are centered upon me. Prejudice has got to be broken down in this country and I've got to help do it.”²⁸

Taking office in 1929, De Priest's first term coincided with the stock market collapse and the onset of the Great Depression, which had devastating effects on his Chicago constituents. During his three terms in office, De Priest represented a district facing economic upheaval and undergoing a political transformation. He navigated a world in which his voters actively questioned his party's handling of the economy, and his Black constituents, in particular, began to leave the Republican Party in response to the New Deal policies of Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Black Representation Returns

Southern lawmakers reacted to De Priest's election with disdain. In December 1928, before De Priest was even sworn in as a Member of the House, third-term Representative Miles Clayton Allgood of Georgia resigned his seat on the House Committee on Enrolled Bills when he learned that De Priest had been assigned to that panel. “It is largely an honorary committee,” Allgood explained, “and, so far as I am concerned, all honor departed from it when De Priest was made a member.”²⁹

Reached for comment by a reporter, De Priest responded, “Who cares?” But his remarks belied the fact that during his six years on Capitol Hill, De Priest worked to combat both openly racist actions by House colleagues and more subtle slights that chipped away at his equal standing on Capitol Hill. De Priest responded with indignation to both types of attacks and used the levers of power at his disposal—however limited they were—to seek retribution. He also invoked the privileges of membership in the House to

make clear to his colleagues that he was willing to challenge discrimination within the Capitol and beyond.³⁰

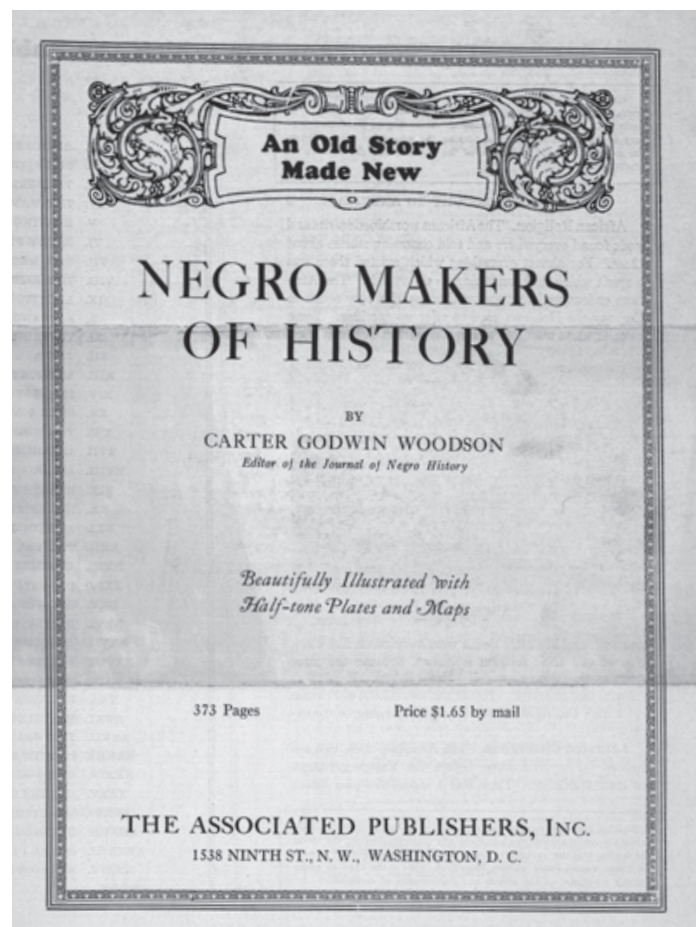
On February 20, 1930, De Priest was part of a celebration of “Negro History Week” held under the auspices of Black historian Carter G. Woodson’s Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Former Members John R. Lynch and Thomas E. Miller attended the event; Henry Plummer Cheatham had to decline the invitation after sustaining injuries in a car crash. Before the meeting, De Priest brought Lynch and Miller, as well as several other guests including Woodson, to the Speaker’s private dining room in the Capitol. At the gathering a short while later, the former lawmakers told the assembled crowd of their time in office. De Priest used the occasion to call for the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, pointing out that Congress had no problem appropriating money for the enforcement of the Eighteenth Amendment prohibiting the sale of alcohol.³¹

In the House, De Priest built on the legacy of his predecessors, including Lynch, Miller, and Cheatham. He introduced an antilynching bill and proposed a measure that would enable defendants to appeal for a change of trial venue if they were concerned about discrimination from a state or local court based on “race, color, or creed.” Aiming to leverage the power of the federal government in overcoming discrimination, he recognized the need to address federal programs first. De Priest was critical of the New Deal and amended a funding bill to prevent discriminatory hiring practices at the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), one of the Roosevelt administration’s high-profile public work initiatives.³²

De Priest tried to eliminate discrimination in public accommodations and waged a battle to desegregate the House restaurant in the U.S. Capitol. In 1934, a member of De Priest’s staff was denied access to the White-only dining room. De Priest had eaten in the restaurant with his staff before without incident and objected to the enforcement of the policy in his absence. He introduced a resolution for the House to investigate the practice of exclusion, asking his colleagues, “If we allow segregation and the denial of constitutional rights under the Dome of the Capitol, where in God’s name will we get them?” Ultimately, the House approved the resolution, but the committee report tacitly supported the restaurant’s policy. Whether on or off Capitol Hill, De Priest found that challenging segregation from the House was often an uphill battle.³³

Black Americans and the Democratic Party

In 1930, former Representative John Lynch described the plight of Black voters in decidedly unfavorable terms. They were, he observed, forced to choose “the least of two evils.” Republicans had become largely indifferent to the needs of African Americans, once a core party constituency. The only other option for Black voters, Lynch said, was a Democratic Party as openly opposed to their interests as it had been since before the Civil War. “So if some of us want to punish the Republican party we can’t do it without endorsing, approving, ratifying and condoning the denial of every one of our human rights and every wrong which we as a race have been forced suffer,” he concluded. But by the 1930s, the Great Migration and the Great Depression would transform the northern wing of the Democratic Party and give rise to new forms of Black political participation that Lynch did not foresee at the start of that tumultuous



Historian and educator Carter G. Woodson’s scholarly work explored the history of African Americans in the United States.

Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Printed Ephemera Collection



On February 23, 1948, southern state governors met with Democratic National Committee chair, Senator James Howard McGrath of Rhode Island (seated), to voice opposition to the civil rights policies of the Harry S. Truman administration. Standing from left to right: Benjamin Travis Laney Jr. of Arkansas, Robert Gregg Cherry of North Carolina, William Preston Lane Jr. of Maryland, James Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, and Beauford Halbert Jester of Texas.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

decade. These changes also opened new opportunities for ambitious Black politicians such as Arthur Mitchell and William Dawson, who identified a pathway to power through a rapidly changing Democratic Party.³⁴

Oscar De Priest learned this firsthand, and Illinois's First District provided a window into the process of Black political realignment in northern cities. Upon arriving in Chicago, most Black Americans had followed long-standing tradition and embraced the Republican Party. The local GOP welcomed their votes and encouraged their support by elevating men such as De Priest to positions of prominence. But in 1934, De Priest faced Mitchell, a Chicago Democrat who had left the Republican Party two years earlier. Mitchell responded to the overtures of a Democratic Party that was actively courting Black voters, seeking to unite them with White immigrant voters in a new coalition that was committed to supporting an active government solution to the country's economic despair. This development coincided with the election of President Roosevelt, who at the time of Mitchell's political conversion was about to initiate a massive spending effort to combat the problems of the Great Depression. Mitchell touted his support for the New Deal on the campaign trail and claimed that Black Americans would be better served by voting Democratic. De Priest rejected these arguments and claimed that Roosevelt's New Deal legislation had increased Black unemployment.

He also criticized New Deal agricultural policy, which he claimed was hurting Black farmworkers in the South. Mitchell won the November contest by a slim margin, becoming the first Black Democrat elected to Congress in American history. His victory signaled the beginning of a long-term shift in Black political allegiance to the Democratic Party.³⁵

The expansion of the federal government under Roosevelt produced a vast array of programs that cemented new bonds between Washington and the people of Mitchell's district. The New Deal prioritized economic relief for those in need, an important policy goal to the countless families Mitchell represented who had left the South in recent years and who often faced discrimination in the labor market as they sought to establish themselves in the Windy City. The New Deal also established an extensive jobs program delivered through a slew of new federal agencies, including the CCC, the Public Works Administration (PWA), and the Works Progress Administration. While discrimination remained—as De Priest emphasized with his CCC amendment—Black workers generally benefited from these programs. The PWA notably tried to employ Black workers in proportion to their share of the local population, thereby ensuring fair access to work, and helped construct public buildings worth millions of dollars in Black neighborhoods.³⁶

Black voters nationwide began leaving the Republican Party because of the growing perception that local Democratic organizations better represented their interests. Local patronage positions and nationally administered emergency relief programs in Depression-era Chicago and other cities, for instance, proved crucial in attracting African-American support. There were limits to the New Deal's aid to Black Americans, however. The protections of the Social Security program did not apply to workers in agriculture, for instance, thus excluding from a key economic security program the large subsection of Black workers who still toiled on farms. Moreover, federal funds and jobs were channeled largely through state and local governments, which enabled varying amounts of discrimination. While New Deal programs typically failed to equally distribute economic relief to Black Americans, particularly in southern states, the tangible assistance was significant. Black voters began consistently voting Democratic by the late 1940s, and the party attracted more support from African Americans in the ensuing decades.³⁷

While John Lynch may have misjudged the capacity of Democrats in the North to appeal to Black voters, his

assessment was more accurate when it came to the southern Democrats who held significant levers of power in the legislative process—enough to hinder any New Deal legislation they opposed. Having already narrowed the benefits of Social Security legislation, southern Democrats worked in the House Rules Committee to ensure that the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 excluded agricultural, domestic, and service workers—exempting many Black workers in the South from the benefits of the law, such as the minimum wage.³⁸

Northern New Dealers in Congress were largely supportive of Black civil and political rights. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, several attempts were made to pass antilynching legislation. But the southern wing of the Democratic Party obstructed these efforts, just as they consistently used procedural maneuvers to ensure that the core economic New Deal legislation did not disrupt the racial hierarchy in the South. By withholding their votes, they could sink administration proposals with ease.³⁹

The War for Democracy on Capitol Hill

Black Americans continued to remake the demographic and political landscapes of the United States after the country entered World War II in December 1941. The recovery initiated by the New Deal stabilized American society but had been unable to end the Great Depression; only wartime mobilization did that. The massive federal effort to retool the American economy and wage a two-theater war required all hands to work, and it drew another wave of migrants out of the South in search of new opportunities in war production industries. During the war and the rest of the 1940s, nearly 1.5 million African Americans followed well-worn paths out of the South and to the destination cities of two decades earlier, such as New York and Chicago, and to new industrial centers along the West Coast, including California's Los Angeles and Oakland and Seattle, Washington. All told, during the roughly two decades of migration accelerated by the two world wars, more than 3.5 million African Americans emigrated from the South to start new lives in the urban North and the West.⁴⁰

As Black Americans reconstituted their communities in new places, they exercised their civic voice in new ways. Many embraced wartime rhetoric that depicted the United States as being in a fight to preserve democracy against an avowedly racist foe in Nazi Germany. The *Pittsburgh Courier* coined the wartime slogan of Black America when it declared a “Double V” campaign—victory over fascism abroad and victory over racism at home.⁴¹

The federal government's dominance in the wartime economy opened new opportunities for Black Americans to challenge entrenched systems of labor market discrimination. The military effort necessitated the hiring of hundreds of thousands of workers in factories across the nation, but most employers still relegated Black workers to the lowest-paid positions, if they hired them at all. In 1941, A. Philip Randolph, the longtime labor activist and head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, called for African Americans to march on Washington to demand an end to the discriminatory hiring practices in those federally funded defense production industries.⁴²

To forestall a mass protest in the capital during wartime, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941, which declared “full participation in the national defense program by all citizens of the United States, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin,” based on “the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the Nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders.” The order required that the federal government, unions, and defense industries “provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers.” It also created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to investigate complaints about discrimination in hiring.⁴³



This 1942 photograph of a military policeman astride his motorcycle on a Columbus, Georgia, military base underscores the reality that Jim Crow practices prevalent in civilian life were also a part of military service. Nearly one million African Americans served in World War II, most in the segregated U.S. Army.

Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

While Black labor leaders forced the President's hand on job discrimination, Representative Arthur Mitchell highlighted the ways discriminatory practices by the United States and its allies undermined the war effort. For example, in 1942, Representative Mitchell repeatedly linked wartime setbacks suffered by the British to their persistent bigotry. Mitchell noted that the colonial power failed in Singapore "due in part to its own discriminations." He found potential similarities in his own country, where Black Americans suffered under Jim Crow and experienced unequal treatment in so many aspects of life. "America might suffer a like fate," Mitchell warned, "if we insist upon destroying the morale of one-tenth of its fighting strength." The American call to arms, Mitchell noted bitterly, "is for white people only, except where Negroes are needed to do the most menial service. Is this democracy?" To Mitchell, if the United States was going to assume a new role of global leadership, the nation must reflect on its shortcomings.

"While we are adjusting affairs the world over," he said, "we must not fail to adjust affairs in our own country and in our own hearts."⁴⁴

Black lawmakers also couched their critique of disenfranchisement in this international perspective. In 1943, the House debated a bill to outlaw the poll tax. Although just a first-term legislator at the time, Representative William Dawson, who had succeeded Mitchell in the House, told his new colleagues that he knew "more about what is the real ground of this subject matter than any man in this assembly." From his early life in Georgia, he had seen the restrictive effect of the poll tax, which he said violated "the true spirit of the Constitution of the United States." Five months later, Dawson testified on the bill before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Again, he spoke of the constitutional right to vote withheld from African Americans, but this time he connected this situation to the significance of the concept of "democracy" around the globe. If the poll tax survived, Dawson warned, "our vaunted government of the people, by the people and for the people is a joke to the rest of the world," as it will remain unable to guarantee all the people "their sacred right of franchise." The 1944 Supreme Court decision in *Smith v. Allwright* outlawed the White primary, ending a key practice that had perpetuated the dominance of segregationists in the Democratic Party. Southern states remained highly capable of ensuring Black disenfranchisement, however, even as Black soldiers gave their lives for democracy.⁴⁵

THE UPHILL BATTLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS ON CAPITOL HILL

The postwar period began with a renewed emphasis in Washington, DC, on the need for civil rights legislation. Reflecting the increasing influence of Black voters within the Democratic Party, President Harry S. Truman organized the President's Committee on Civil Rights in 1947. The committee drafted a report outlining an agenda for civil rights reform which included federal antilynching legislation, voting rights protections, a permanent FEPC, the elimination of the poll tax, and the creation of an effective civil rights division in the U.S. Department of Justice. President Truman called for congressional action on these recommendations and later used a July 1948 executive order to desegregate the military.⁴⁶

Civil rights were central to President Truman's re-election campaign in 1948. William Dawson praised the President's record, declaring that his administration had made a



A March 1949 Herb Lubow cartoon depicts President Harry S. Truman and "John Q. Public" inspecting worm-ridden apples symbolizing Truman's Fair Deal policies such as civil rights and rent controls. The worm labeled "Coalition" represents the alliance between Republicans and southern Democrats that successfully blocked many of Truman's initiatives.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

“strike at the heart of some of the glaring inequalities in the treatment of our citizens.” Representative Adam Clayton Powell Jr., however, was more reluctant to celebrate Truman’s actions.⁴⁷

Powell had joined Dawson in the House in 1945. Elected from a Harlem district, he was the first Black Member to represent New York in Congress. When he arrived in the 79th Congress (1945–1947), it was the first time that two Black Members had served simultaneously since the 51st Congress (1889–1891). Throughout 1948, Powell urged Truman and the Democratic Party to earn the votes they sought from Black Americans. “Negroes will not be satisfied with words. Negroes have been studied, commissioned and conferenced almost to death. The time has long passed for action,” Powell said. He also confronted northern Democrats for their complicity in maintaining segregation. On the House Floor, Powell criticized those who blamed the “Solid South” for Jim Crow as a way to evade their own “individual cowardice, bigotry, and hypocrisy.” Powell denounced what he called a “bipartisan Jim Crow policy” in Congress and ultimately withheld a public statement in support of the Truman campaign until October 1948.⁴⁸

Democratic divisions were exacerbated by a faction of southern Democrats who were upset with the Truman administration’s civil rights efforts and defected to form the States’ Rights Democratic Party. These dissidents, known as Dixiecrats, sought to preserve and maintain segregation. They nominated South Carolina governor and future U.S. Senator James Strom Thurmond as their presidential candidate in 1948. When Thurmond called for President Truman to engage in a public debate in front of southern audiences, Dawson stepped forward to criticize the very notion. “We’re interested in a man’s position and not his oratory, and Truman’s position on civil rights is well known,” he said. “How can the subject of human rights,” he asked, “be debatable anyhow?”⁴⁹

After Truman prevailed in the 1948 election, Democrats and the press cited Black voters as a key constituency in this triumph. Dawson had addressed the Democratic convention in Philadelphia to support Truman’s nomination and worked diligently to generate Black support for the President’s re-election campaign. While most of the southern Democrats who bolted to the Dixiecrats returned to the party following the election, the third-party effort showed just how far congressional foes of civil rights would go to impede change and limit the role of the federal government in guaranteeing equality.⁵⁰



This hand fan commemorates the 85th Congress (1957–1959), the first Congress since Reconstruction with four Black lawmakers serving simultaneously.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Eager to alter this dynamic and to stake their claim to a place in the emerging postwar political order, more Black candidates sought congressional seats in the urban North. In 1948, 10 Black candidates ran for House seats under the banner of former Vice President Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party, including Joseph H. Rainey, who was unsuccessful in his pursuit of a seat representing a Philadelphia congressional district. Rainey, a Philadelphia judge, was the president of the city’s NAACP branch and the namesake grandson of the first African American elected to the House, Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina. The GOP put forward Black candidates in northern cities as well. In 1950, for example, several Black Republicans were nominated to run for seats in New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Cleveland, Ohio.⁵¹

Only two new Black Members, however, joined Dawson and Powell on Capitol Hill during the 1950s: Democrats Charles Diggs of Michigan and Robert Nix of Pennsylvania. Though limited in number, the presence of Black legislators,



Minister and activist Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York relished his position as a national spokesperson for the advancement of African-American rights. In this 1950 photo, Powell reviews a fair employment practices bill with his colleagues on the House Education and Labor Committee. Left to right: Hugo Sheridan Sims Jr. of South Carolina, Samuel Kerns McConnell Jr. of Pennsylvania, Thomas Jefferson Steed of Oklahoma, John Lesinski of Michigan, Powell, and Thruston Ballard Morton of Kentucky.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

coupled with the growing strength of a grassroots movement for civil rights, ultimately led to legislative victories that guaranteed Black civil and political rights to an extent unknown since Reconstruction.

Institutional Opportunities

The 81st Congress (1949–1951) began with a landmark appointment when the Democratic Caucus named William Dawson to lead the Expenditures in the Executive Departments Committee (renamed the Committee on Government Operations in 1952), making him the first Black Member to chair a standing committee in Congress. Dawson wielded significant power by conducting oversight of federal agency spending, holding investigations of executive department agencies and programs to audit federal appropriations. Except for the Republican-controlled 83rd Congress (1953–1955), Dawson held the post for the rest of his career—serving 10 nonconsecutive terms and becoming the Black Member with the longest tenure as chair of a committee.⁵²

Dawson's committee chairmanship elevated his profile on the Hill, but he remained one of only four Black Members of Congress in the 1950s. During their service, Dawson, Powell, Diggs, and Nix outlined a legislative agenda that went beyond civil rights and voting rights laws directed at the South. Black legislators knew that racism and

discrimination were not merely regional dilemmas. After all, the cities they represented were rife with discriminatory practices, whether codified in law or simply in the everyday actions of citizens. With that reality in mind, the lawmakers introduced legislation to create federal housing initiatives, shape urban renewal efforts, and promote fair employment practices. While most of these bills were never signed into law, they contained ideas and spoke to priorities that became central to the Democratic agenda later in the 1960s.

Employment discrimination remained a persistent concern of Black legislators. The threat of mass protest had led to the creation of the FEPC during the war, but southern Democrats and Republicans blocked efforts to make it a permanent tool in the fight against workplace bias. In 1948, Powell tried to add an FEPC amendment to legislation creating the European Recovery Plan, also known as the Marshall Plan, but the House voted it down.⁵³

In the 81st Congress, however, Powell introduced a bill to prohibit discrimination in hiring and to establish a permanent FEPC to enforce the ban. Powell was named the chair of the Committee on Education and Labor's special subcommittee to consider his proposal. When he took the gavel, Powell became the first Black Member to lead a subcommittee hearing on proposed legislation, which he did in May 1949. He resisted many amendments and other maneuvers by opponents who aimed to weaken the bill in the House. Before the full chamber approved the bill, however, the opposition was able to eliminate most of its strong enforcement provisions, and the Senate declined to act on it.⁵⁴

Black Members also backed initiatives to shape housing policy in American cities, from public housing to urban revitalization efforts. Powell unsuccessfully attempted to add antidiscrimination riders to housing bills several times. In 1958, he introduced legislation to increase the federal reimbursement for businesses uprooted and displaced by urban renewal projects. Nix drafted measures to set standards for urban renewal proposals and appropriate federal funds for new projects. Nix and Diggs introduced bills that were precursors to the Area Redevelopment Act of 1961, which was designed to focus federal resources on the specific needs of a particular city or region.⁵⁵

As the Senate persistently obstructed civil rights legislation, advocates sought other ways to initiate reform. Powell developed a creative legislative solution for bills up for consideration, which involved attaching a rider prohibiting federal funds for institutions that promoted

or endorsed segregation. In 1946, he first deployed this approach, which came to be known as the “Powell amendment,” on a funding bill for school lunches that became law. At the time, Powell’s move deferred to the imperatives of a segregated school system by requiring matching appropriations for Black and White students. He also introduced a similar amendment to a 1950 education bill, aiming to ensure that it prohibited discrimination in the distribution of school funds based on race or color.⁵⁶

Beginning in 1955, Powell vowed to attach his rider to every education bill, starting with appropriations for school construction. But he reframed the amendment, consulting with the NAACP to devise wording that would undermine school segregation more directly. Instead of banning discrimination in funding, the new Powell amendment prohibited federal funding for schools that continued to segregate their facilities. Many Members agreed with his principled stand, though they thought that the amendment would make the passage of the bill extremely unlikely, thereby undermining the appropriation of necessary federal investment in schools. Powell responded to his critics on the House Floor in June 1956. He urged his northern Democratic colleagues not to let the southern wing of the party block the education bill. He refuted claims that the federal government did not have the authority to enforce such a measure, quoting the Government Accounting Office which had affirmed Congress’s power to regulate the distribution of funding in this way. For Powell, if Congress did not act to end school segregation, America’s foreign policy would also suffer. “It would hold the United States and democracy up to ridicule before the whole world as a nation of pretense and preachments but not practices.”⁵⁷

Representative Dawson opposed Powell’s effort, predicting the amendment would erode support for the school construction bill. Ultimately, the measure was defeated in the House, an outcome which Dawson claimed “vindicated my judgement.” He criticized Powell for missing the long-term implications of his actions and sought a less confrontational approach to ensure that neither Black nor White students “will suffer cruel educational deficiencies.”⁵⁸

Like Powell, Charles Diggs used his seat in Congress to highlight the needs of Black Americans well beyond his Detroit district. In August 1955, the murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy from Chicago who was visiting family in Mississippi, once again brought national attention to the barbaric practice of lynching which remained a part of the Jim Crow system of segregation and repression.

Determined to expose the brutality of the act, Till’s mother allowed the national press to photograph his mutilated body, and thousands of mourners streamed past the open casket.⁵⁹

Representative Diggs accompanied Till’s mother to the September 1955 trial in Sumner, Mississippi, which resulted in the acquittal of the two accused murderers. Diggs described the trial as “so filled with perjury, illegal and unethical practices of withholding evidence that undoubtedly a democratic nation could not imagine happening in its halls of justice.” Though he did not directly intervene in the case, Diggs noted that the Black community in Sumner welcomed his presence, as he was “a representative in the Federal Government—one of their own—and he was on the scene with them.” In addition to standing up for the Till family, Diggs pushed the Department of Justice to investigate the ongoing disenfranchisement of Black voters in Mississippi and proposed the House unseat the state’s delegation as long as these practices continued.⁶⁰

Diggs’s involvement contrasted sharply with that of William Dawson, who represented the Chicago district where Till’s mother lived. Dawson did not publicly comment on Till’s lynching, although he did provide financial assistance to Till’s mother. This was not enough for the NAACP. In a 1956 open letter to Dawson, the organization criticized the Chicago Representative for not



The trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam for the murder of Emmett Till was held in September 1955 in Sumner, Mississippi. Till’s mother Mamie Bradley (third left) received support from Representative Charles C. Diggs Jr. of Michigan (second right), and activist Dr. T.R.M. Howard (third right) of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, founder of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership.

Memphis Press-Scimitar Newspaper Morgue, Special Collections Department, The University of Memphis Libraries

speaking out on Till's murder and denounced the lawmaker for "silence, compromise, and meaningless moderation" on civil rights matters.⁶¹

Black Members were joined by some of their White colleagues in introducing another round of antilynching bills in the two decades following World War II. Whereas the Dyer bill in the 1920s and several proposals in the late 1930s were subject to extended debates on the floor and several hearings, the antilynching efforts of the late 1950s and early 1960s did not receive similar scrutiny. The result was the same, however; southern Democrats maneuvered against these bills in the House and found ways to block any antilynching legislation in the Senate.

Congress, Committees, and Civil Rights Legislation

Congress lagged behind the presidency, the judiciary and, often, public sentiment during much of the postwar civil rights movement. Southern Democrats still wielded power on Capitol Hill, exerting largely unchecked influence as committee chairs in an era that saw the apex of committee power in Congress. This power was in no small part the product of decades of Black disenfranchisement in the South. The Democratic Party dominated elections in the South, and Democratic House candidates achieved consistent electoral victories without opposition. Starting in 1931, apart from the 80th (1947–1949) and 83rd Congresses, Democrats held the majority in the House. Southern Democrats from safe seats accrued seniority and

rose within the ranks of the party, inheriting the gavels of numerous House committees. They were well-positioned by the 1950s to obstruct and defeat civil rights bills through parliamentary maneuvers, filibusters, and the committee approval process.⁶²

Notwithstanding Dawson's position as chair of Government Operations, the small number of Black Members found it difficult to exert power in committees in the 1950s. In the 84th Congress (1955–1957), for instance, when Democrats regained the majority after a brief period of Republican control, southern Members opposed to Black civil rights chaired 12 of the 19 House committees, including some of the most influential panels: Education and Labor; Interstate and Foreign Commerce; Rules; and Ways and Means. The powerful coalition of southern Democrats and northern Republicans that had formed to oppose the economic and social programs of the New Deal continued to impede the work of civil rights reform well into the 1960s.

For most of this period, the House Judiciary Committee, under the leadership of Chair Emanuel Celler of New York, offered civil rights reformers one of the few friendly committee forums. A Judiciary subcommittee held hearings in July 1955 on more than 45 civil rights bills introduced in the 84th Congress. On the House Floor, a bipartisan group of Members emerged as civil rights advocates. Democrats such as Celler, Clifford Philip Case of New Jersey, and Helen Gahagan Douglas of California, were joined by Republicans such as Jacob Koppel Javits of New York, Hugh Doggett Scott Jr. of Pennsylvania, and Frances Payne Bolton of Ohio. In the mid-1950s, Case, Javits, and Scott were elected to the Senate and influenced that chamber's civil rights agenda.⁶³

But no matter how much support rank-and-file Members provided, any measure that passed out of Judiciary was sent to the House Rules Committee, which directed legislation onto the floor and structured bills for debate. Chaired by arch-segregationist Howard Worth Smith of Virginia, this influential panel repeatedly sabotaged civil rights proposals; Smith either weakened bills or refused to consider them altogether. He often shuttered committee operations, retreating to his farm in Virginia's horse country to stymie deliberations. When he explained one of his absences by noting that he needed to inspect a burned-down barn, Leo Elwood Allen of Illinois, the ranking Republican on the Rules Committee, remarked, "I knew the Judge was opposed to the civil rights bill. But I didn't think he would commit arson to beat it."⁶⁴



As chair of the House Judiciary Committee, Emanuel Celler of New York was a prime mover behind the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

The Senate's antimajoritarian structure magnified the power of pro-segregation conservatives. In contrast to the rules of the House, which strictly limited Members' ability to speak on the floor, the Senate's practice of allowing Members to hold the floor without interruption played into the hands of obstructionists. The filibuster—a Senate tactic that allowed a Senator or a group of Senators to prevent a vote on a bill—became the civil rights opponents' chief weapon. In this era, too, the Senate modified its rules, raising the bar needed to achieve cloture—the practice of ending debate to hold a vote on legislation. From 1949 to 1959, cloture required the approval of two-thirds of the Senate's membership rather than two-thirds of the Senators who were present.⁶⁵

As in the House, influential southern Senators held key positions and were among the most determined parliamentarians. Richard Brevard Russell Jr. of Georgia framed his opposition to civil rights initiatives around concerns about federal interference in state affairs. Russell used Senate procedure in an attempt to become a more palatable public figure than many of the Senate's virulent segregationists, such as Mississippi's James Kimble Vardaman or Theodore Gilmore Bilbo. Russell attracted northern and western Republicans to his cause based on their opposition to the expansion of federal powers that would be necessary to enforce civil rights in the South. Mississippi's James Oliver Eastland, another procedural tactician who presided over the Judiciary Committee beginning in March 1956, bragged that he had special pockets tailored into his suits where he stuffed bothersome civil rights bills. Between 1953 and 1965, the Senate Judiciary Committee killed almost every one of the more than 122 civil rights measures introduced in that chamber during those 12 years.⁶⁶

These procedural impediments in Congress made the courts an even more important venue for the civil rights struggle. In 1954, the Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, a case that tested the segregation of school facilities in Topeka, Kansas, set a new precedent regarding segregated schools in the South. "In the field of public education, separate but equal has no place," the Justices declared, and a second *Brown* decision in 1955 directed school systems across the nation to move toward desegregation "with all deliberate speed."⁶⁷

Despite significant moments of federal intervention, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1957 decision to send troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to assure access for Black students, implementation of the Supreme



In 1959, an African-American child watches an angry mob march towards Little Rock High School to protest desegregation.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Court's ruling was slow. "*Brown v. The Board of Education* notwithstanding," Georgia Representative and civil rights icon John Lewis recalled of his youth in Troy, Alabama, "nothing in my life had changed." In fact, school segregation continued throughout the South. The enthusiastic and vocal racism of earlier opponents of desegregation was increasingly abandoned in favor of a seemingly color-blind approach that used new, ostensibly class-based divisions, such as neighborhood boundaries and tax policy, to perpetuate inequalities.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, *Brown* was a significant victory over an entrenched Jim Crow system based on the *Plessy* precedent. On Capitol Hill, southern defiance was blatant. Senators Russell, Thurmond, and Harry Flood Byrd Sr. of Virginia drafted a public statement. Titled the "Declaration of Constitutional Principles" and known as the Southern Manifesto, it attacked the *Brown* decision, accusing the Supreme Court of abusing judicial power and trespassing upon what they said were states' rights. Signed on March 12, 1956, by 82 Representatives and 19 Senators—roughly one-fifth of Congress—and read on the House Floor the next day, the manifesto urged southerners to exhaust all "lawful means" in the effort to resist the "chaos and confusion" that would result from school desegregation.⁶⁹

RIGHTS AND REPRESENTATION

Support for the passage of major civil rights legislation grew in Congress during the mid-1950s as the nonviolent civil rights movement transformed public opinion. In Montgomery, Alabama, local activists led by 27-year-old



Rosa Parks, with journalist Nicholas Chriss, rides on a desegregated bus on December 21, 1956. As an NAACP activist in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a White rider on a public bus in 1955. Her act of civil disobedience galvanized the U.S. civil rights movement. Congress later honored Parks with a Congressional Gold Medal and by making her the first woman to lie in honor in the Capitol Rotunda after her death in 2005.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. launched a boycott of the city's segregated bus system. The protest began after the arrest of NAACP activist Rosa Parks, who defied local ordinances in December 1955 by refusing to yield her seat on the bus to a White man. The year-long—and, ultimately, successful—boycott brought national attention to the struggle and launched King to the forefront of a grassroots, nonviolent humanitarian protest movement.⁷⁰

Much like the NAACP in the 1920s, the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s pressured Congress to pass legislation to address racial inequality in the United States. This time, however, the protest movement benefited from voices in the halls of Congress. Black Members, though few, were poised to contribute to this effort on Capitol Hill.

Civil Rights Act of 1957

Despite the many obstacles to passing civil rights legislation, a reform bill began to move through Congress in 1956. Its progress was partly the result of pressure by advocacy groups such as the NAACP, proposals by President Eisenhower's Attorney General Herbert Brownell Jr., and the growing presidential ambitions of Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson.⁷¹

In a November 1956 letter to President Eisenhower, Charles Diggs called for immediate action on civil rights legislation in the 85th Congress (1957–1959). Diggs also

addressed a letter to Democratic Speaker Sam Rayburn of Texas and House Majority Leader John W. McCormack of Massachusetts, denouncing “conservative elements of our Party,” including “your Colleague, Senator Eastland,” who had been able to “stifle liberal legislation, especially Civil Rights.” He asked Democratic leaders if they were prepared to join the fight to end the filibuster in the Senate, “the chief weapon of the Dixiecrats to kill civil rights?” He also urged the passage of “right to vote, anti-poll tax, anti-lynching measures” at the beginning of the new Congress.⁷²

On May 17, 1957—on the three-year anniversary of the *Brown* decision—more than 20,000 people attended a rally at the Lincoln Memorial urging the federal government to protect Black civil and political rights. Representatives Powell and Diggs joined Martin Luther King Jr. in addressing the crowd.⁷³

A month later, Powell and Diggs argued for a strong bill on the House Floor. Powell aimed his remarks at amendments that preserved trials by local juries. Since southern states prevented Black citizens from serving on juries, White defendants accused of crimes against African Americans were often easily acquitted. The Harlem lawmaker stressed that these local infringements had international implications. “America stands on trial today before the world and communism must succeed if democracy fails,” he said. By the mid-1950s, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union had pushed the U.S. government to reckon with continued racial inequity at home, which threatened to undermine the federal government's claims to global leadership. The U.S. Department of State tried to assuage the concerns of potential allies, particularly among the increasing number of independent African nations—emphasizing the freedoms inherent in American society as well as the dangers of Soviet totalitarianism. “Speak no more concerning the bombed and burned and gutted churches behind the Iron Curtain when here in America behind our ‘color curtain’ we have bombed and burned churches and the confessed perpetrators of these crimes go free because of trial by jury,” declared Powell.⁷⁴

Diggs informed his colleagues that on a recent congressional delegation to the African continent, “we were constantly questioned about the treatment of minority groups and peoples here in the United States.” The stories of disenfranchisement and segregation, Diggs said, were detrimental to “the prestige of the United States in the Free World.” Diggs also responded to congressional opponents of the bill, who incredulously called for evidence of

disenfranchisement. He listed many of the tactics used by local officials to deny African Americans the ability to register to vote, actions which he characterized as “intimidation, coercion, and subterfuge.” He singled out specific counties in several southern states in which no Black residents were registered to vote. “The reason that we are here today seeking relief on the Federal level is because the offending States are not protecting the right to vote,” Diggs told his colleagues.⁷⁵

A majority of the House agreed, passing the bill by a vote of 286 to 126 on June 18, 1957. But the bill that passed the House in June did not survive Senate consideration intact. In the Senate, Democrat Paul Howard Douglas of Illinois and Republican Minority Leader William Fife Knowland of California circumvented Eastland’s Judiciary Committee and got the bill onto the floor for debate. Senator Johnson played a crucial role, too, discouraging an organized southern filibuster while forging a compromise that appeased southern Members by preserving local juries in any civil rights case. Sent back to the House shorn of important voting protections, it was approved on August 27. A day later, Senator Thurmond held the floor for more than 24 hours in a personal filibuster against the bill. Nevertheless, on August 29, the Senate approved the Civil Rights Act of 1957 by a vote of 60 to 15.⁷⁶

The resulting law, signed by President Eisenhower in early September 1957, was the first major civil rights measure passed since 1875. The act established a two-year U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (CCR) to investigate and report on civil rights infringements and created a civil rights division in the Department of Justice. But the law was unable to enforce voting requirements and punish the disenfranchisement of Black voters. Three years later, the Civil Rights Act of 1960—again significantly weakened by southern opponents—expanded the powers of the CCR and stipulated that voting and registration records in federal elections must be preserved.⁷⁷

A Movement for Change on Capitol Hill

By 1958, four Black Representatives were taking on new positions within House leadership and experimenting with ways to exercise more power within the institution. But Black Members of Congress were too scarce to form a voting bloc powerful enough to change how the institution worked. It would be five more years before Gus Hawkins of California joined the House and a year later John Conyers of Michigan was elected. Every one of the Black Members

in the House in 1965 would go on to hold office for at least 20 years, so they all eventually earned a committee chairmanship. Conyers became the longest-serving Black Member in congressional history—and the third-longest tenured of all House Members—with nearly 53 years in office before he resigned in 2017. But in the early 1960s, there simply were not enough African-American lawmakers to drive a policy agenda.

In the 87th Congress (1961–1963), Powell ascended to chair the House Committee on Education and Labor, a post he held for three terms. Only the second Black American to chair a standing committee in Congress, Powell set a new standard for Black Americans exercising power on Capitol Hill. His panel reviewed and approved legislation that formed core components of President Johnson’s Great Society agenda in the mid-1960s, including the Higher Education Act of 1965.⁷⁸

Powell used his position as chair of the committee’s Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the War on Poverty to continue his work highlighting the issues facing urban communities in the North. A subcommittee hearing on de facto segregation tried to shift the focus of Congress to northern cities. “A far more difficult social problem to solve,” Powell said, “is the form of racial segregation whose roots are not nourished in the law, but instead germinate in the soil of social mores and custom.”⁷⁹

The War on Poverty Subcommittee conducted a hearing on urban poverty in the middle of West 114th Street in Harlem. Powell led the open-air meeting on a sweltering summer day in New York City, calling witnesses to discuss



In 1948, the States’ Rights Democratic Party, also known as the Dixiecrats, nominated segregationist governors Strom Thurmond of South Carolina (right) for President and Fielding Lewis Wright of Mississippi (left) for Vice President.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

the need for quality housing and an end to persistent employment discrimination. “All of you out there are the best experts on black problems because you are black,” Powell told the crowd of more than 200 spectators. On August 7, 1965, the subcommittee held hearings on the need for community action programs in Los Angeles. Only days later, violence and civil unrest swept through the city’s Watts neighborhood.⁸⁰

While Powell’s chairmanship demonstrated the expanded possibilities for Black Members to exert power in Congress, the collective agenda of Black Representatives in the early 1960s prioritized federal civil rights and voting rights legislation to undercut the pillars of the Jim Crow South. To achieve these goals, they needed broad support in the House and Senate as well as reforms to congressional procedures that could allow legislation to circumvent long-standing obstacles laid by southern Democrats.

At the start of the John F. Kennedy administration in 1961, Speaker Sam Rayburn sought to revise House Rules, directly challenging the entrenched power of Rules Committee Chair Howard Smith. Rayburn proposed adding three more Members to the panel, a move he believed would break Smith’s stranglehold over civil rights legislation. Rayburn recruited a group of roughly two dozen northern Republicans who supported the expansion and declared their intention to “repudiate” a GOP alliance with southern Democrats, which they called an “attempt to narrow the base of our party, to dull its conscience, to transform it into a negative weapon of obstruction.”



Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. stands on the second story of the A.G. Gaston Motel in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 16, 1963. In April, King was arrested for violating a court injunction against protests during the campaign to desegregate the city. After an agreement with city officials to desegregate public spaces, the Ku Klux Klan engaged in a series of violent acts of retaliation culminating with the bombing of Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, which killed four young girls.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Republican votes proved decisive as the changes were approved by a margin of 217 to 212. The rules change was a key first step in creating the possibility for new legislation, but more importantly, the support of northern Republicans presaged the development of a coalition that would undercut the power of southern segregationists and pass sweeping civil rights laws.⁸¹

In 1962, Congress approved a constitutional amendment to prohibit the poll tax. Ratified by the states in 1964, the Twenty-fourth Amendment was a significant addition to the Constitution and proved effective in eliminating one of the main components of Jim Crow disenfranchisement.⁸²

The postwar civil rights movement had slowly built support for legislative reform and directed pressure at lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Protests at lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960 gained national and international attention. They were followed in 1961 by a campaign to desegregate interstate buses by the Freedom Riders, who were beaten and arrested at several stops as they tried to complete a trip from Washington, DC, to New Orleans, Louisiana. In April 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. led a large protest in Birmingham, Alabama, at which Birmingham police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor unleashed police dogs and high-powered hoses on the peaceful protesters. Television cameras captured Connor’s brutality, and network newscasts broadcast it to shocked national and global audiences.⁸³

On August 28, 1963, Randolph, activist Bayard Rustin, King, and other civil rights leaders organized what was to that point the largest ever demonstration in the capital: the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The event brought together more than 250,000 people on the National Mall to demand civil rights laws and economic justice. Around 150 Members of Congress attended, although the march organizers would not allow elected officials to address the crowd. Randolph, who had called off the planned march on Washington in 1941, hoped the crowd would spur legislators to act. “Legislation is enacted under pressure,” he insisted. “You can’t move senators and congressmen just because every one thinks a measure is right. There has got to be pressure.”⁸⁴

Nix spoke on the House Floor a week before the planned march. While many Members of Congress were anxious about the upcoming event, if not hostile toward it, he defended the protest. For Nix, the march was one front in the struggle to “realize the full promise of democracy which has been withheld cruelly and deliberately” since

emancipation. In the previous century, Nix said, Black Americans had been “teased with mere tastes of freedom.” They were now using the “traditional American medium of protest” to take their case directly to Congress and the American people.⁸⁵

Over the previous six decades, a grassroots movement for change had ebbed and flowed in the United States. But this time the scale and scope of the protest movement and the impact it had on the burgeoning cohort of allies within the halls of Congress led to a far different outcome.

Civil Rights Act of 1964

As activists maintained pressure on President John F. Kennedy to act, the administration began coordinating with congressional allies to pass a significant reform bill. Black legislators, of course, had their own ambitions for the bill. First-term Representative Gus Hawkins observed in May 1963 that the federal government had a special responsibility to ensure that federal dollars did not underwrite segregation in schools, vocational education facilities, libraries, and other municipal entities, saying “those who dip their hands in the public treasury should not object if a little democracy sticks to their fingers.” Otherwise “do we not harm our own fiscal integrity, and allow room in our conduct for other abuses of public funds?” After Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963, his successor, President Johnson, invoked the slain President’s memory to prod reluctant legislators to produce a civil rights measure.⁸⁶

In the House, a bipartisan bill supported by Judiciary Chair Emanuel Celler and William Moore McCulloch of Ohio, the committee’s top Republican, worked its way to passage. McCulloch and Celler forged a coalition of moderate Republicans and northern Democrats while deflecting amendments designed to undermine the bill.

Black legislators used their committee positions to dramatize the need for a major set of reforms and to debate just how best to accomplish those goals. Powell’s House Committee on Education and Labor, for instance, held hearings on components of the civil rights bill in 1963. Hawkins was part of the subcommittee hearings on the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, which became Title VII of the proposed legislation. The Californian used his position on the panel to raise important questions about the need for some type of federal oversight to prevent discriminatory hiring. He also presided over a hearing in Los Angeles on discrimination in education programs funded by the federal government.⁸⁷



President John F. Kennedy and members of his administration meet with event organizers at the White House after the August 28, 1963, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Standing from left to right: W. Willard Wirtz, U.S. Secretary of Labor; Floyd McKissick, CORE; Mathew Ahmann, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice; Whitney M. Young Jr., National Urban League; Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., SCLC; John Lewis, SNCC; Rabbi Joachim Prinz, American Jewish Congress; A. Philip Randolph, chair of the March on Washington and vice president of the AFL-CIO, with Reverend Eugene Carson Blake, Protestant minister and activist partially visible behind him; President Kennedy; Walter P. Reuther, UAW, with Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson partially visible behind him; and Roy Wilkins, NAACP.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

On February 10, 1964, Hawkins spoke on the floor urging his colleagues to support the bill. He also denounced its opponents, who he said were relying on the outmoded ideas at the heart of the 1896 *Plessy* decision to resist progress in 1964. The dramatic changes of the postwar decades, Hawkins said, had set the stage for revolutionary departures from the old ways, at home and abroad. “Today the free peoples of the world are on the march—everywhere,” Hawkins declared. “In Europe, Asia, and Africa as in our country, and in Mississippi as well as California, people yearn for freedom, security, self-government, and human dignity.”⁸⁸

William Dawson emphasized the domestic implications of this legislation. “These problems are not confined to any one section of the country. They are national,” he reminded his colleagues. Dawson dismissed those who urged time-consuming lawsuits to remedy the situation—only federal action could initiate real change. He acknowledged that the bill was not “a panacea” but stressed that it would produce “a major step toward the achievement of full equality for all Americans.”⁸⁹

Later that day, the House voted 290 to 130 to approve the Civil Rights Act of 1964. So many members of the Democratic majority opposed the legislation that House leaders needed the votes of 138 Republicans—nearly

80 percent of the GOP conference—to pass the bill. The measure was among the most far-reaching pieces of legislation in U.S. history. It contained sections prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations and in state and municipal facilities, including schools. It applied the Powell amendment to any program receiving federal aid and barred discrimination in hiring and employment based on race, color, sex, religion, or national origin. It also created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to investigate workplace discrimination.⁹⁰

President Johnson worked with Senate Democratic leadership to build support for the measure and fend off the efforts of a determined southern minority to kill it. By allowing influential Minority Leader Everett McKinley Dirksen of Illinois to weaken the enforcement powers of the EEOC, bill proponents were able to attract support from a large group of midwestern Republicans who followed Dirksen's lead. On June 10, 1964, for the first time in its history, the Senate invoked cloture on a civil rights bill, and did so by a vote of 71 to 29, cutting off debate and ending a 60-day filibuster—the longest in the chamber's history. On June 19, 1964, 46 Democrats and 27 Republicans joined forces to approve the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 73 to 27. President Johnson signed the bill into law on July 2, 1964.⁹¹

Voting Rights Act of 1965

A day later, on July 3, Representative Gus Hawkins visited Mississippi along with his California colleagues Phillip Burton and William Donlon “Don” Edwards, as well as William Fitts Ryan of New York. In 1964, a popular movement for voting rights coalesced across the South, directly targeting the Black disenfranchisement efforts at the heart of the Jim Crow system. The Representatives stayed with local families, observed the voter registration process, and commended voting rights campaigners. Mississippi Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr. advised the group not to test any of the provisions of the new Civil Rights Act. Johnson also warned that they may be subjected to violence because Hawkins was Black. In fact, the home Edwards was staying in was bombed the day after he left. After his trip, Hawkins declared that the noble work of the volunteers would “have a lasting effect on Mississippi even if it does no more than arouse national concern over the state.” Over the next calendar year, Americans across the country would be confronted with the struggle for Black voting rights in the South.⁹²

In Mississippi, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality had

organized Freedom Summer, a joint effort to staff a voter registration drive and establish “freedom schools” in Black communities. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 included a provision regarding voting rights but limited enforcement powers, and continued resistance by southern state and local governments led many to call for more effective voting rights legislation almost immediately.⁹³

In the early 1960s, the movement for voting rights coincided with several Supreme Court rulings, such as *Brown*, that overturned existing precedent and fundamentally changed the voting landscape, particularly in the South. In a string of decisions known as the “reapportionment cases,” the court required representation in federal and state legislatures to be based substantially on population. *Baker v. Carr* (1962) upheld lawsuits that challenged districts apportioned to enforce voting discrimination against minorities. In *Gray v. Sanders* (1963), the court asserted the concept of “one man, one vote” by invalidating Georgia's county unit voting system, which used county boundaries to disproportionately empower lightly populated rural areas at the expense of the more heavily populated urban regions. Two decisions in 1964, *Wesberry v. Sanders* and *Reynolds v. Sims*, proved seminal. In *Wesberry*, the Court declared that the equal distribution of population must be a factor in drafting district lines for seats in the U.S. House. In *Reynolds*, the Supreme Court solidified the “one man, one vote” concept in an 8 to 1 decision that expressly linked the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause to the guarantee that each citizen had equal weight in the election of state legislators.⁹⁴

The voting rights movement and the Supreme Court decisions on apportionment affected the elections process, from the drawing of districts to the casting of ballots. But Black Americans in the South remained restricted, and Democrats in the region filled state and local offices with little to no Black participation and only minimal Republican opposition. In Mississippi, for example, the Democratic slate was always full of segregationists. In August 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) challenged the seating of the so-called “Regular Democrats” at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Fannie Lou Hamer, a sharecropper and activist from Ruleville, Mississippi, emerged as the group's leader. The MFDP pointed to the inequities in voter registration, district composition, and electoral procedures in state elections as evidence that the Regular Democrats were not the true, democratically elected

representatives of their constituents. After tense negotiations at the convention, the credentials committee refused to seat the MFDP delegates, instead offering the dissident faction two seats—which the MFDP refused.⁹⁵

Five months earlier, Hamer and four other Black candidates had decided to run for House seats in the November 1964 elections, challenging Mississippi's five incumbent Representatives. Hamer went up against Jamie Lloyd Whitten, the 12-term incumbent from the Second District. After each challenger lost by significant margins in the June Democratic primary, election officials in Mississippi kept the MFDP candidates off the ballot for the general election. Four of the Democratic incumbents won unopposed in November. One Republican, Prentiss Lafayette Walker of the Fourth District, defeated Democrat William Arthur Winstead, who was attempting to win his twelfth term in the House. The MFDP challengers decided to contest these election victories with the hopes that the House would seat them instead of the segregationists.⁹⁶

On January 4, 1965, as the 89th Congress (1965–1967) convened, 600 MFDP supporters arrived from Mississippi to demonstrate peacefully at the Capitol. MFDP candidates Hamer, Annie Devine, and Victoria Grey tried to access the House Floor but were turned away by security. Protesters stoically lined the tunnel between the House office buildings and the Capitol, forcing Members to walk by their silent protest as they made their way from their offices to the floor. William Fitts Ryan backed efforts to block the seating of the Mississippi delegation. Edith Starrett Green of Oregon forced a roll call vote on a proposal to bar the Mississippi Representatives-elect until an inquiry was completed, but they were seated despite the protests. Hamer and other candidates formally contested the election, and their cases were sent to the Committee on House Administration for review.⁹⁷

Black Members of Congress embraced this spirit of democratic participation as protests intensified in early 1965. Representatives Conyers, Diggs, and Hawkins visited the city of Selma, Alabama, on February 5, 1965, as part of a 15-Member congressional delegation that investigated voting discrimination.⁹⁸

Four days later, several Black Members of Congress spoke on the House Floor and patiently explained the situation to their colleagues. Prior to the trip, Members had stated their desire to “listen and learn” about the situation in Alabama. Diggs printed in the *Congressional Record* a voter registration application from Alabama, laying before the House the

difficulties faced by prospective voters in the state. Hawkins described the delegation's activities in Selma, particularly their use of a federal building to accept testimony from residents regarding their difficulties trying to register to vote. Hawkins reminded his colleagues that “the constitutionality of this right to vote cannot be disputed. Legally, it does not have to be earned.” But Hawkins noted that the law did not apply in much of the South “from a practical standpoint,” and he and others recognized that Selma represented one front in an ongoing battle to win this right.⁹⁹

Hawkins printed some of the testimony received by the committee in the pages of the *Congressional Record*, including a brief excerpt from the statement of Launsey West, a U.S. Navy veteran who worked as a house painter. West described specific incidents of police violence against those attempting to register, including several Black women. He also spoke of the devastating personal toll of his participation in the voter registration drive, such as the jobs he had been denied since trying to register. Representative Jeffrey Cohelan of California asked West if he had sought to register earlier. West recalled that other Selma residents warned him that he “might be whipped” if he tried. Cohelan asked, “Well, then, why did you get courage in 1963?” “Because I felt more stronger with others with me,” West declared.¹⁰⁰

Conyers said he returned from Selma convinced that there was “no alternative but to have the Federal Government take a much more positive and specific role in guaranteeing



Following mass arrests of voting rights protesters—including Martin Luther King Jr.—members of a House delegation planning to travel to Selma, Alabama, hold a press conference in Washington, DC, on February 4, 1965. From left to right: Representatives Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Augustus F. “Gus” Hawkins, William Fitts Ryan of New York, Charles Diggs, John Conyers Jr., and Joseph Yale Resnick of New York. Powell ultimately did not travel with the delegation.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

the right to register and vote in all elections.” Without federal intervention, the vast power of state and local governments went unchecked in places like Dallas County, which encompassed Selma. “But surely this Government cannot relax,” Conyers insisted, “if even one single American is arbitrarily denied that most basic right of all in a democracy—the right to vote.”¹⁰¹

On March 7, 1965, Alabama state troopers savagely beat protestors marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. “It was the most disciplined march that I’ve ever been a part of, walking in twos, not interfering with traffic, not talking loud, not any singing,” recalled future Representative John Lewis, who led the marchers. Many of the protestors were kneeling in prayer when the troopers clubbed and gassed them on what would later be known as “Bloody Sunday.” Lewis was one of many to be hospitalized; as television cameras captured the onslaught, and networks beamed images into the homes of millions of Americans.¹⁰²

After President Johnson addressed a Joint Session of Congress on March 15 about the events in Selma, legislative action was swift. The bill that quickly moved through

both chambers prohibited discrimination at the polls and directly involved the federal government in election oversight. The measure suspended the use of literacy tests for a five-year period and stationed federal poll watchers and voting registrars in counties with persistent patterns of voting discrimination. It also included a “preclearance” provision, which required the Department of Justice to approve any change to election law in counties with a history of discrimination and disenfranchisement. Finally, the bill made obstructing an individual’s right to vote a federal crime.¹⁰³

Unlike the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act cleared the Senate first, on May 26, 1965, by a vote of 77 to 19. As the House debated the bill, Conyers also stressed the Cold War foreign policy implications of denying one group of citizens the right to vote: “We are weak before our enemies if our goals abroad are so shamelessly ignored and subverted here at home.” The House passed the bill by a vote of 333 to 85 on July 9, 1965. An amended conference report passed both chambers by wide margins, and President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law on August 6, 1965.¹⁰⁴

When taken together, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—arguably *the* most significant pieces of legislation in the twentieth century—profoundly reshaped American politics and society. The antidiscrimination provisions in the Civil Rights Act took aim at the Jim Crow system that had dominated southern life for decades, desegregating public spaces and affording Black Americans access to new opportunities. The federal government took an active role in prohibiting employment discrimination and extending workplace protections to women. The Voting Rights Act enabled voter registration in the South and provided oversight for counties across the nation where discriminatory practices restricted access to the polls.

These changes spurred significant resistance throughout the country. Southern schools, for instance, did not immediately desegregate. But these legislative achievements were influential in making American government and society more democratic. Black voters elected a new generation of political leaders to state and local offices. In the 1970s, groundbreaking electoral victories sent Black Representatives to the House from southern congressional districts for the first time since the nineteenth century. The lasting effects of these landmark laws extended far beyond the South, however. In the ensuing decades, the number of Black Members of Congress grew exponentially. In the 65 years prior to the Voting Rights Act, eight African



When John Conyers was elected in 1964, he joined incumbent Charles Diggs and represented Detroit, Michigan, in the 89th Congress (1965–1967). This was the first time in the twentieth century that any state sent two African-American Members to Congress simultaneously.

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Americans were elected to the House. In the six decades that followed, 145 Black Members served in Congress, including nine Black Senators. These changes were the product of a historical moment in which lawmakers were once again willing to use the power of the federal government to guarantee individual rights, thereby vindicating a century-long effort by Black Americans to resurrect the spirit of Reconstruction on Capitol Hill.

“No Contest Without a Contestant”

A month after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the Committee on House Administration’s Subcommittee on Elections held hearings on the Mississippi election cases, welcoming testimony from the state’s sitting Representatives. William Meyers Colmer of Mississippi argued that there had been “no legal, bona fide contestant” in each of these cases because the MFDP candidates were not on the ballot in November. Colmer pointed to past precedent to declare there can be “no contest without a contestant.” In Mississippi, this was a high bar to meet; the candidates attempted to run in the Democratic primary, but the vast majority of Black voters sympathetic to their cause had been unable to register to vote.¹⁰⁵

The subcommittee also heard from the contestants, including Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, and Augusta Wheadon. They spoke of the violence and intimidation that kept many Black voters from the polls in their home state. Wheadon listed the incidents of violence against Black political activists in the months prior to the election. She explained that this overwhelming tide of violence kept her from filing the paperwork to have her name placed on the ballot. “I did not wish to risk my life to get certified to run against Mr. Thomas Abernathy, of the First Congressional District, but I did file notice of contest.”¹⁰⁶

On September 15, the committee issued a report regarding the Mississippi Freedom Democrats’ attempts to contest the elections of the state’s congressional delegation. The committee sided with the incumbent Mississippi lawmakers and ruled that since the contestants had not been on the ballot, they could not formally challenge the election results. But the committee also pointed to the recently enacted Voting Rights Act, which it claimed would provide “thorough and complete remedies” to the problems Black voters faced in Mississippi.¹⁰⁷

The matter was not over, however. On September 17, the House engaged in an extended debate on the floor, with Gus Hawkins, a member of the Committee on House



Less than one week after “Bloody Sunday,” protestors gather outside the White House—raising awareness about the violence in Selma and carrying signs that read “We demand the right to vote, everywhere” and “Stop brutality in Selma.”

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Administration, calling for further investigation into the issue given the evidence of disenfranchisement in Mississippi. John Conyers echoed Hawkins’s call. Even the normally cautious William Dawson asked the House to unseat the Mississippi Representatives. Dawson rooted his support in House precedent, citing more than 40 contested election cases from 1867 to 1901 in which the House unseated a Representative because Black citizens were barred from voting.¹⁰⁸

Hamer, Devine, and Gray were granted House Floor privileges during the debate, a welcoming gesture that suggested a formidable segment of the House membership acknowledged the deep-rooted problems facing African Americans in the South. Nevertheless, the committee’s report stood as the final word. The House voted to dismiss all five contests.¹⁰⁹

The events on the House Floor that September day presented a stark reminder of the past, even as they offered a glimpse of the future. The committee’s majority relied on procedure and precedent to maintain barriers that had long denied the rights of Black Americans. At the same time, the democratic movement, rooted in the South and led by Black women, that brought the protest to the House Chamber was gaining allies from across the country.

One month after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, and more than a year after the Civil Rights Act was signed into law, Black Americans were at a critical juncture. With the federal government willing to intervene to protect their civil and political rights for the first time since Reconstruction, a key advance had been achieved in the

long struggle for representation. The next step was to seize the opportunity and achieve what Robert Nix had called “the full promise of democracy” by electing Black Members of Congress in greater numbers than ever before.¹¹⁰

Notes

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Oscar De Priest

1871–1951

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

1929–1935

Republican from Illinois



Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

In 1928, Oscar De Priest of Illinois was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, becoming the first African American to serve in Congress in the twentieth century. He was the first Black Member elected from outside the South, and he arrived on Capitol Hill 28 years after the departure of George Henry White of North Carolina in 1901. His victory in a Chicago district marked a new era of Black political organization in urban areas in the North. Though De Priest was the only Black Member of Congress during his three terms in office, he embraced his role as the Representative for all African Americans and recognized that “the eyes of America are centered upon me. Prejudice has got to be broken down in this country and I’ve got to help do it.”¹

Oscar Stanton De Priest was born in Florence, Alabama, on March 9, 1871. His parents, Neander and Martha De Priest, had been enslaved before the Civil War. His father later worked as a teamster and a farmer, while his mother found part-time employment as a domestic worker. In 1878, the De Priest family, along with thousands of other Black residents of the Mississippi Valley, moved to Kansas seeking a better life. The migrants from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama sought to escape poor economic and social conditions after Democrats and former Confederates

secured control of southern state governments at the end of Reconstruction. De Priest attended public schools in Salina and enrolled in a business course at the Salina normal school, where he studied bookkeeping.²

De Priest settled in Chicago in 1889, well before the wave of African-American migration to northern cities in the 1910s and 1920s. In Chicago, De Priest worked as an apprentice plasterer, house painter, and decorator, and he eventually established his own business and a real estate management firm. In 1898, he married Jessie Williams, a music teacher whose family was from Pennsylvania, and they had two sons: Laurence and Oscar Stanton Jr. Laurence died as a teenager in a drowning accident.³

Chicago’s budding Republican machine facilitated De Priest’s foray into politics. Divided into wards and precincts, Chicago evolved into a city governed by a system of political appointments and patronage. De Priest recognized the potential for a career as a local leader in a city with few Black politicians whose African-American population was experiencing dramatic growth. At first comfortable with a behind-the-scenes role, De Priest eventually assumed a more prominent political position as a loyal Republican interested in helping his party gain influence in Chicago. By 1904,

De Priest's organizing successfully mobilized Black voters for Republicans in the second and third wards. This put him in line for his first elected position: a seat on Chicago's Cook County board of commissioners. He retained this position for two terms, from 1904 through 1908. Caught between rival factions, De Priest failed to secure a third term as commissioner. During a seven-year break from politics, he turned his attention to real estate and became an affluent businessman.⁴

To revive his political career, De Priest curried favor with powerful Republican officials such as Chicago mayor William Hale "Big Bill" Thompson and longtime U.S. Representative Martin Barnaby Madden. Republicans drafted De Priest as their candidate for alderman in 1914, as party leaders sought to appeal to the growing Black population in the city. With the backing of the Republican organization, De Priest won with ease to become Chicago's first Black alderman. De Priest received significant support from Black women voters in the campaign—who had gained the right to vote through a 1913 Illinois state law—and he praised the work of Black women activists led by Ida B. Wells who mobilized voters on his behalf.⁵

As an alderman, De Priest sat on the influential city council from 1915 to 1917. He abruptly resigned at the request of Republican leaders after he was indicted for accepting money from a gambling establishment. "I shall devote myself unreservedly to proving my innocence and restoring my good name in this community," proclaimed De Priest, announcing his decision not to seek another term in office. He was later acquitted of the charges, but his political future remained uncertain. After failing to gain the Republican nomination in 1918, De Priest unsuccessfully attempted to regain his council seat by running as an Independent. In 1924, he was elected third ward committeeman.⁶

The turning point in De Priest's career occurred when Martin Madden, the influential Chicago Representative and chair of the House Appropriations Committee, died suddenly in 1928. Madden had already secured the Republican nomination to run for a 13th term in the House. The Republican machine, led by Mayor Thompson, selected De Priest to replace Madden as the nominee in the lakeshore congressional district encompassing the Loop, the center of Chicago's business district, as well as the city's most populous Black neighborhoods in the Bronzeville section of the South Side. In the November election, De

Priest squared off against Democrat Harry Baker and three Independents, including William Harrison, an African-American assistant attorney general. De Priest narrowly defeated his opponents with only a plurality, securing 48 percent of the vote; Harrison siphoned off some of the Black votes in the district. In his two re-elections, De Priest won by more sizable margins, earning 58 and 55 percent of the vote, respectively.⁷

In the House, De Priest did not inherit his predecessor's seat on the Appropriations Committee. During his three terms he served on the Indian Affairs, Invalid Pensions, and Enrolled Bills Committees. De Priest also was a member of the Post Office and Post Roads Committee during the 73rd Congress (1933–1935)—a significant post for a Black Member seeking to represent the interests of African Americans throughout the nation. The year De Priest first won election to the House, the U.S. Post Office Department employed 45 percent of the federal government's Black workers.⁸

As De Priest prepared to take his seat in the 71st Congress (1929–1931) on April 15, 1929, a potential obstacle loomed. After his election in November, the local press speculated that the House might attempt to exclude De Priest. One month before the election De Priest was indicted, charged with conspiracy to commit election fraud in the April primary elections in Chicago. Although he had been cleared of the charges a few days before the start of the new Congress, Ruth Hanna McCormick, another newly elected Republican from Illinois, enlisted the assistance of Speaker Nicholas Longworth of Ohio to thwart potential challenges by southern Democrats to De Priest's seat. Allegedly at the request of his wife, Alice, a personal friend of Representative-elect McCormick's, the Speaker dispensed with the traditional procedure for swearing in Members by state delegation and administered the oath of office en masse—simultaneously to all the Members of the House—to prevent Members who otherwise would have been sworn in before De Priest from disputing the legality of his joining the 71st Congress. De Priest's first day in Congress attracted great interest from the press and many African Americans watched the proceedings from the segregated Visitors' Gallery.⁹

As the first African American elected to Congress for nearly three decades, De Priest forged a new path as a Black Representative from a northern city. He benefited from the demographic shift wrought by the Great Migration that transformed his Chicago district.

But De Priest also encountered a segregated city when he arrived in the nation's capital.

De Priest welcomed the responsibility of representing the entire Black population of the United States. Beginning in his first term, De Priest spoke out about the blatant disregard of constitutional protections for Black Americans in the South and called for a federal elections law to address the disenfranchisement of Black voters. He hoped that Congress would use the provisions in the Fourteenth Amendment to reduce the number of congressional seats held by southern states. "I'm the only member of my race in congress," De Priest said, "but I hope to convince my fellow legislators that the right is on my side."¹⁰

De Priest pointed to the government's long-term neglect of the Fourteenth Amendment, designed to guarantee the rights of citizens to due process and equal protection of the law, as well as the Fifteenth Amendment, which prohibited discrimination in voting based on "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Without a new federal commitment to these Reconstruction-era additions to the Constitution, De Priest vowed not to support any bills to fund the enforcement of the Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the sale of alcohol in the United States. He also voiced sympathy for African Americans continuing to live in the segregated South. "It's a long, hard fight down there," he lamented.¹¹

De Priest experienced blatant discrimination in Congress, as did his family while living in Washington, DC. Many southern Democrats resented his presence on Capitol Hill, and one Member, Miles Clayton Allgood of Alabama, resigned from the Committee on Enrolled Bills rather than serve on the same committee as the Chicago Congressman. Early in De Priest's first term, the First Lady, Lou Hoover, invited his wife Jessie De Priest to have tea at the White House with other congressional spouses. The First Lady's invitation provoked a wave of condemnation across the South. Several southern state legislatures, including Mississippi's, passed resolutions imploring the Herbert Hoover administration to give "careful and thoughtful consideration to the necessity of the preservation of the racial integrity of the white race." The First Lady divided the reception into four sessions in an attempt to avoid a boycott by the wives of southern Members. Mrs. De Priest attended the smallest of the four gatherings with a few women chosen by the administration. Representative De Priest called the southern legislators cowards. "I've been elected to congress

the same as any other member," he exclaimed. "I'm going to have the rights of every other congressman—no more and no less—if it's in the congressional barber shop or at a White House tea." Nevertheless, he sought to make the most of the incident by sponsoring a fundraiser in the nation's capital for the NAACP less than two weeks later. The Illinois Congressman invited every House Republican except two—George Moore Pritchard of North Carolina, who had refused to take the office next to De Priest in the House Office Building, and Albert Henry Vestal of Indiana, whose wife had called on the congressional wives' club to bar Jessie De Priest.¹²

De Priest introduced several proposals to use federal power to protect Black civil and political rights. In 1933, he drafted a joint resolution to amend the Constitution to authorize federal courts to change the location of a trial if a defendant's right to impartiality was compromised by "considerations of race, color, or creed." The bill stemmed from the infamous Scottsboro, Alabama, case in which nine African-American boys were sentenced to death by an all-White jury for the alleged rape of two White women, despite a lack of evidence. On the House Floor, De Priest outlined several high-profile cases in which Black defendants were unable to attain a fair trial. "I am making these remarks because I want you to know that the American Negro is not satisfied with the treatment he receives in America," De Priest declared, "and I know of no forum where I can better present the matter than the floor of Congress." De Priest also backed a measure to hold states and counties responsible for the prevention of lynching. The unsuccessful bill he introduced in 1934 would have fined and imprisoned local authorities if prisoners in their jurisdiction were lynched.¹³

In the House, De Priest sought other ways to advance the cause of civil rights and the living conditions of Black Americans across the country. In 1932, he introduced a bill to provide monthly pensions for those who had been formerly enslaved who had reached the age of 75, "to give recognition and do justice to those who are now living who were emancipated by the Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln in 1863." De Priest requested that an African-American preacher be allowed to offer the opening prayer in the House Chamber in 1934. He also nominated several African-American men from his district to the military academies, including future Tuskegee Airman and Lieutenant General in the U.S. Air Force, Benjamin O. Davis Jr.¹⁴

Although his individual legislative efforts were unsuccessful, De Priest was adept at the amendment process and in shaping pending legislation. In 1930, he successfully preserved funding in the U.S. Department of the Interior appropriation bill to start a new library at Howard University in Washington, DC, the historically Black university founded in 1867. Opponents tried to strip the money from the bill, citing the need to cut spending amid the Great Depression. De Priest spoke in favor of the appropriation, pointing out that Howard trained many Black teachers who “go back to the Southland and educate the black youth” and that the new library would open many more opportunities. The House approved the measure and it became law in February 1931.¹⁵

De Priest also added an antidiscrimination rider to a \$300 million unemployment relief and reforestation measure in March 1933. The final version of the bill, which launched the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), incorporated De Priest’s amendment outlawing “discrimination because of race, color, creed, or criminal records” in the selection of workers for the program. Nevertheless, discrimination in the CCC remained rampant. By 1934, only 6 percent of CCC enrollees were Black, although that figure increased to almost 10 percent by the end of the decade. While roughly a quarter million African Americans served in the CCC, only one in 10 had access to integrated facilities.¹⁶

De Priest also acted against discriminatory practices within the Capitol. In January 1934, the manager of the House restaurant ordered De Priest’s secretary, African-American Morris W. Lewis, and Lewis’s son to leave the dining room when they went to get a meal. The manager explained that the restaurant was for Whites only. The incident made headlines when De Priest introduced a resolution calling for an official investigation into whether Representative Lindsay Carter Warren, a Democrat from North Carolina and chair of the House Committee on Accounts, which operated the restaurant, had the authority to maintain a policy of segregation in the public facility. On the House Floor, De Priest refuted Warren’s claim that African Americans had always been banned from the restaurant, recalling that he and other Black patrons had frequented the Capitol establishment. Although there was a separate public facility for Black customers next to the kitchen in the basement of the House, De Priest implored his colleagues to support his resolution, remarking, “If we allow segregation and the denial of constitutional rights

under the Dome of the Capitol, where in God’s name will we get them?”¹⁷

De Priest’s resolution was referred to the Rules Committee, which controlled the flow of legislation in the House and was chaired by southern Democrat and future Speaker William B. Bankhead of Alabama. Many expected the bill to languish in the Rules Committee, but De Priest kept his measure alive by using a parliamentary procedure called a discharge petition, in which De Priest collected the signatures of 145 Members to force the bill out of committee and onto the House Floor for debate. The House ultimately voted in favor of De Priest’s call for an investigatory committee, but the panel created to study the restaurant’s policy of segregation split along party lines, with the Democratic majority refusing to take any action in regard to the restaurant.¹⁸

De Priest’s congressional career overlapped with some of the worst years of the Great Depression. He joined his Republican colleagues in criticizing President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s response to the crisis, predicting the federal spending on New Deal relief programs would cause uncontrolled inflation. He also warned that Communists were spreading subversive propaganda through schools to capitalize on the economic distress across the nation. In 1933, De Priest introduced a resolution that would have organized a special House committee to investigate teachers and students engaged in “practices inimical to our American government.”¹⁹

De Priest’s criticism of Roosevelt’s economic relief measures alienated many voters in his district. Ultimately, his loyalty to the Republican Party and the continued economic distress many of his constituents experienced cost him his seat in the House. In the November 1934 general election, De Priest faced a formidable challenge from Arthur W. Mitchell, a former Republican active in that party’s Chicago political machine. Mitchell had switched to the Democratic Party and had become an ardent supporter of Roosevelt and the New Deal. In a campaign that received national attention because both candidates were Black, Mitchell attacked De Priest’s refusal to vote for emergency federal aid to poor Americans and criticized his ineffective protest of segregation in the House Restaurant. De Priest earned just 47 percent of the vote in a losing cause, paving the way for Mitchell to become the first Black Democrat elected to Congress. The contest reflected a larger political trend occurring in Chicago and many other northern

cities: the New Deal drew African-American voters away from the Republican Party to the Democrats during the Great Depression.²⁰

In 1936, De Priest challenged Mitchell but failed to regain his congressional seat as President Roosevelt carried House Democrats in his landslide re-election. Mitchell won handily with 65 percent of the vote. In 1943, De Priest again was elected third ward alderman and served on the Chicago city council until 1947, when he was defeated for re-election. He remained active in his real estate business until he died in Chicago on May 12, 1951.²¹

Manuscript Collection

Chicago History Museum, Research Center (Chicago, IL). *Papers*: 1871–1951, 2.5 linear feet. The Oscar De Priest papers contain several dozen condolence letters received by Oscar De Priest and his wife in 1916 upon the death of their son Lawrence; a notebook listing names of those sending flowers to a De Priest family funeral (evidently Lawrence's); a copy of the application for National Register of Historic Places status for De Priest's home (1974); several typewritten sheets of De Priest family genealogical information; and various news clippings about De Priest. Also present are several bulletins/programs produced by the M.W. Prince Hall, Grand Lodge F.A. & F.M. (Masonic), of which De Priest's son, Oscar Stanton De Priest, was Grand Master in the 1950s and 1960s.

Notes

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- 5 Wanda A. Hendricks, "'Vote for the Advantage of Ourselves and Our Race': The Election of the First Black Alderman in Chicago," *Illinois Historical Journal* 87, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 184.
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- 10 "De Priest Calls on Race to Free 'Peons' of Dixie," 15 July 1929, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 1.
- 11 "DePriest is 'Back Home'; Gets Welcome," 8 June 1929, *Chicago Defender*: 1.
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Arthur W. Mitchell

1883–1968

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

1935–1943

Democrat from Illinois



Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

The first African American elected to Congress as a Democrat, Arthur W. Mitchell of Illinois served four terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. A former Republican, Mitchell embodied the shifting party allegiances among Black Americans, who had traditionally backed Republican candidates. He strongly supported President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal legislation that attracted many Black voters to the Democratic Party during the Great Depression. As the only African-American Member of Congress between 1935 and 1943, Mitchell introduced several measures designed to protect Black civil rights and encourage equal employment in government work and military service. “If our Government is to live as a democracy, it must not escape the responsibilities of a democracy. In a democracy the color of a man’s skin has nothing to do with his citizenship rights,” Mitchell declared to his colleagues on the House Floor.¹

Arthur Wergs Mitchell was born on a farm near Lafayette, Alabama, on December 22, 1883. His parents, Taylor Mitchell and Ammar Patterson, had been enslaved before the Civil War. His parents worked on a farm on land they rented, and his father supplemented the family

income as a logger. He attended public schools and entered Tuskegee Institute in 1901, working his way through college as an assistant for Booker T. Washington. After receiving his teaching credentials from Snow Hill Institute near Selma, Alabama, he taught in rural schools in Georgia and Alabama. He attempted to put Washington’s theories on farm management and land ownership into practice by founding the West Alabama Institute at Greensboro in 1903. He led the school, which relocated to Panola and then to Geiger, until it permanently closed in 1915. Mitchell then moved to West Butler, Alabama, to direct the Armstrong Agricultural School. Mitchell attended both Columbia and Harvard and was admitted to the bar in Washington, DC, in 1927. He practiced law in the nation’s capital, and when he moved to Chicago in 1929, he continued his career as an attorney while also becoming involved in the real estate business. Mitchell married Eula Mae King, and had a son, Arthur Wergs Mitchell Jr. When his wife died in 1910, Mitchell married Annie Harris, a former teacher and government employee who held jobs in Chicago and Washington, DC, during Mitchell’s congressional career. She died in 1947, and a year later, he married Clara Smith Mann.²

Mitchell entered politics as a Republican, but became a Democrat after he moved to Chicago, in part because he believed there was greater room for political advancement, as most elected Black Chicago officials at that time were Republican. Mitchell's party switch was fortuitous, as many Black Americans shifted their allegiance to the Democratic Party in the early days of the New Deal. During the 1932 presidential race, he was hired by the Democratic Party to trail Republican Oscar De Priest's campaign stops in western states on behalf of President Herbert Hoover. Party leaders tasked Mitchell with countering De Priest's appeals to Black voters and making the case for Roosevelt's candidacy. Soon after President Roosevelt's inauguration in March 1933, Mitchell began positioning himself for a run for Congress in Chicago's First District.³

In the 1934 Democratic primary for the majority-Black congressional district encompassing Chicago's South Side, Mitchell squared off against Harry Baker. Mitchell lost to Baker by fewer than 1,000 votes, but Baker died before the general election, and party leaders in the district selected Mitchell to take his place. The congressional campaign between Mitchell and Oscar De Priest garnered national attention because both the challenger and the incumbent were African American—De Priest had defeated White Democratic opponents in the three previous campaigns. Mitchell turned the contest against the Republican Congressman into a referendum on President Roosevelt's policies. Capitalizing on growing support for the New Deal, which he believed would help the district, Mitchell orchestrated an aggressive campaign that forced De Priest to defend the Republican Party, whose influence was waning locally partially because of Chicago's Democratic mayor, Edward J. Kelly, who actively courted African-American voters. "De Priest's party was out of power," Mitchell told voters, and he had no way to secure important aid for the district. Instead, "he was a part of the Republican reactionaries, opposing Roosevelt's recovery program."⁴

On November 7, 1934, Mitchell narrowly beat De Priest, becoming the first African-American Democrat elected to Congress. In his next three re-elections, Mitchell won by slim margins—defeating De Priest again in 1936, then Republican alderman and future Democratic Representative William L. Dawson two years later, and former Illinois state senator William E. King in 1940.⁵

Ahead of the new legislative session, Mitchell laid out some of his expectations in an interview with the *Boston*

Daily Globe. "I expect to meet some opposition, but life is a struggle in any activity one engages in," he said. "Overcoming barriers makes the victory all the sweeter. I may offend some people, but on the other hand some people may offend me. I don't plan to spend my time fighting out the question where a Negro may eat his lunch at the capital or whether he may be shaved in the House barber shop. What I am interested in is to help this grand President of ours feed the hungry and clothe the naked and provide work for the idle of every race and creed over which floats the stars and stripes." Mitchell criticized his predecessor's efforts to desegregate the Capitol, saying that De Priest's battles for equality in the House had "arrayed race against race." "I am not going into Congress as a Negro with a chip on my shoulder thinking I am of an inferior race and that every man's hand is against me," he said. "I am going in as an American citizen, entitled to my rights, no more, no less, and I shall insist on them. I'm going as the representative of all the people of my district."⁶

Mitchell served on the Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads throughout his eight years in the House, but one of his first acts as a Member of Congress was to introduce antilynching legislation in January 1935. He would introduce the same bill in each of his four terms in office. Mitchell also attempted to use his position in the House to draw attention to racial discrimination in employment and the need for voting rights protections for African Americans. Starting in his first Congress, he repeatedly offered bills that would outlaw racial discrimination in the civil service. Mitchell tried to eliminate the civil service application requirement that called for job seekers to provide a photograph. To avoid the possibility of discriminatory hiring, Mitchell proposed that fingerprints be used instead. Mitchell also supported legislation that would outlaw the poll tax.⁷

In 1935, Mitchell also introduced a bill to create a five-member Industrial Commission on Negro Affairs based in Washington, DC. His proposal required that at least three Black commissioners serve on the panel and provided the commission with a broad mandate to investigate and compile information regarding economic problems facing Black communities across the United States. The commission would also serve in an advisory capacity, on call to review new information or answer questions from government agencies. As with his antilynching bill, Mitchell introduced a version of this proposal in each of his four terms.⁸

During his time on Capitol Hill, Mitchell was a consistent and reliable backer of President Roosevelt and the New Deal. In 1936, the Illinois Congressman gave a seconding speech for Roosevelt's renomination at the Democratic Convention and directed the Democratic effort to turn out Black voters for Roosevelt in western states. Mitchell maintained that the New Deal addressed many of the problems faced by Black Americans—whom he called “America's largest and most neglected minority group.” On several occasions, Mitchell spoke on the House Floor to celebrate the jobs programs and relief efforts associated with the New Deal. He praised President Roosevelt's economic answer to the Depression, declaring that the New Deal had produced the best conditions for Black Americans since emancipation. New Deal initiatives such as the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration provided jobs and invested millions of federal dollars in Black communities, and Mitchell repeatedly referenced the positive impact of this material aid in his campaigns and on the floor.⁹

Mitchell also defended Roosevelt's plan to reorganize the federal judiciary in 1937, including a proposal to expand the number of justices on the Supreme Court, noting that unfavorable court rulings had perpetuated discrimination against African Americans. He criticized the court for frequently using the Fourteenth Amendment to protect large corporations and property holders instead of applying the amendment to the rights of citizens and the equal protection of the law.¹⁰

In 1940, Mitchell introduced a bill to fund the American Negro Exposition in Chicago, an event to commemorate the 75th anniversary of emancipation from slavery and to celebrate the accomplishments of African Americans in the years since. Mitchell hoped the exhibition would highlight the successes of African-American farmers and alleviate unemployment in Chicago by reversing the tide of African-American migration from the rural South to urban centers. “We have to attract these people to agriculture and get them out of these cities,” he testified before the Committee on the Library. His bill was signed into law and provided \$75,000 to fund the exposition.¹¹

During World War II, Mitchell criticized the treatment of Black soldiers, noting that the discrimination endured by African-American troops undermined the nation's stated objective “to extend and protect the doctrine of genuine democracy.” Mitchell also nominated several Black candidates for the U.S. military academies.¹²

In 1936, NAACP President Walter White criticized Mitchell for not doing enough to pass effective civil rights legislation. White focused on Mitchell's antilynching bill, which he considered weak in contrast with a proposal from Senators Robert Ferdinand Wagner of New York and Edward Prentiss Costigan of Colorado. The NAACP had endorsed the Wagner–Costigan bill, which contained language defining mob violence and provided stronger enforcement provisions that made clear that the act of lynching, and the failure of government officials to prevent mob violence, deprived individuals of equal protection of the law and due process. For the NAACP, Mitchell's bill left room for interpretation and limited application of the law should it be enacted. Mitchell insisted that he had introduced “the only bill that is going to pass.”¹³

In the 75th Congress (1937–1939), the NAACP accused Mitchell of actively obstructing an antilynching bill introduced by Representative Joseph Andrew Gavagan of New York, which was the House version of the Wagner–Costigan proposal and had received the NAACP's endorsement. Gavagan circulated a discharge petition, which required the signature of a majority of House Members, to force the bill out of committee and onto the floor for debate. But at the same time, Mitchell sent Members a message announcing imminent hearings to be held in the Judiciary Committee on his antilynching bill, H.R. 2251—a move that confused many Members regarding the need to sign the discharge petition. The discharge petition was successful, but House Judiciary Committee chair Hatton William Sumners of Texas hastily organized a hearing on Mitchell's bill on March 31 and reported the bill to the floor for debate. In remarks printed in the *Congressional Record*, Mitchell stated that his bill had the potential to pass while Gavagan's bill would be deemed unconstitutional because of the excessive powers it granted to the federal government. On April 12, after the House declined to consider Mitchell's bill, he announced that he would support any antilynching measure. “The authorship of this bill means absolutely nothing as compared with the importance of its passage.” The House passed the Gavagan bill on April 15—and Mitchell voted for it—but it died in the Senate. During his next two terms, Mitchell supported subsequent antilynching measures backed by the NAACP and introduced by Gavagan.¹⁴

Mitchell also made a significant contribution to desegregation outside the halls of Congress. In April 1937,

he traveled from Chicago to Hot Springs, Arkansas, on the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad. When the train crossed into Arkansas, a conductor forced Mitchell out of the Pullman car, for which he had two first-class tickets. The Illinois Representative rode the rest of the journey in a car designated for Black passengers that he described as “filthy and foul smelling.”¹⁵

Mitchell responded to the injustice as both a Member of Congress and as a private citizen. First, he sued three Chicago-based railroad companies and filed a complaint with the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), contending that interstate trains should be exempt from the Arkansas law requiring segregated accommodations. In 1938, Mitchell introduced a bill to prohibit segregated accommodations in interstate travel, which died in committee. In the courts, however, Mitchell made more progress. After the ICC and a federal district court dismissed his complaint, Mitchell made history by joining a select number of sitting Members of Congress ever to argue a case before the Supreme Court. In April 1941, the high court unanimously ruled in *Mitchell v. United States et al.* that Black passengers had the right to equal accommodations and treatment during interstate travel. Mitchell hailed the decision as a “step in the destruction of Mr. Jim Crow himself.” However, the court’s opinion did not address the legality of segregation itself. The ICC did not prohibit segregation on interstate trains or buses or in the public waiting rooms of railroad or bus stations until 1955.¹⁶

By the early 1940s, Mitchell had begun to pursue additional solutions to injustice. In 1940, he voted against the continuation of the House select committee investigating “un-American activities,” led by Democratic Representative Martin Dies Jr. of Texas. The Dies Committee was originally created to uncover Nazi and pro-fascist organizations in the United States but frequently accused New Deal officials of having Communist sympathies. Mitchell was one of only 21 Democrats to oppose the committee, siding with President Roosevelt, who had been critical of the panel’s scrutiny of some of the most significant New Deal figures and programs.¹⁷

Mitchell also spoke out against southern Democrats in a 1942 speech on a bill to eliminate the poll tax. He boldly criticized his Democratic colleagues for consistently opposing aid legislation designed to improve the lives of African Americans, noting they refused to change their ways

even as Black soldiers were serving abroad in World War II. “In sections where the color of a man’s skin determines his citizenship rights there is no real democracy,” Mitchell said.¹⁸

In 1942, Mitchell declined to run for re-election to the 78th Congress (1943–1945). Officials in Chicago’s Democratic organization were angry that Mitchell had defied machine orders in pursuing his lawsuit against the Chicago-based rail companies for forcing him to leave his first-class seat in Arkansas and let Mitchell know they planned to withdraw their support. Democratic leaders instead chose his rival, William L. Dawson, partially because they believed he would be a stronger candidate in a competitive Democratic primary and the general election versus Republican opposition. Publicly, Mitchell gracefully accepted the end of his time in Congress, claiming that he was ready for a new phase in his public-service career and that he would devote his efforts to improving race relations. After retiring from the House in January 1943, he moved to Petersburg, Virginia, where he had bought a large tract of land, and devoted himself to farming, lecturing, and practicing law. In 1950, he joined the Southern Regional Council, an interracial civil rights advocacy group, on a speaking tour throughout the South. He died in Petersburg on May 9, 1968.¹⁹

Manuscript Collection

Chicago History Museum, Research Center (Chicago, IL). *Papers*: 1898–1968, 31 linear feet. Correspondence, clippings, and other papers (chiefly 1934–1942) relating to Arthur W. Mitchell’s business activities and service in Congress. A finding aid is available in the repository and online.

Notes

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- 5 Arthur Evans, “Later Returns Cut Democrat Gain in Illinois,” 8 November 1934, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 2; Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/>; Harold Smith, “G.O.P. Candidates See Victory,” 20 October 1940, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: S1.
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 - 11 House Committee on the Library, unpublished hearing on H.R. 8826, 76th Cong., 3rd sess. (1940): 7; H.R. 8826, 76th Cong. (1940); To authorize an appropriation to assist in defraying the expenses of the American Negro Exposition to be held in Chicago, Illinois, during 1940, Public Law 76-522, 54 Stat. 220 (1940).
 - 12 *Congressional Record*, Appendix, 77th Cong., 2nd sess. (16 July 1942): A2790; “Negro Youth Qualifies, Enters Naval Academy,” 16 June 1936, *New York Times*: 31.
 - 13 “Walter White Raps Arthur Mitchell,” 7 May 1936, *Atlanta Daily World*: 1; Nordin, *The New Deal’s Black Congressman*: 212–213; “DePriest Criticised by Mitchell Before Dixie Audience,” 23 March 1935, *Afro-American*: 3.
 - 14 “Assail Mitchell as Anti-Lynch Bill Obstacle,” 18 March 1937, *Philadelphia Tribune*: 1; “Anti-Lynch Petition Signed,” 2 April 1937, *Atlanta Daily World*: 1; “Congress Thrown into Confusion on Anti-Lynch Bill By New Move,” 20 March 1937, *Chicago Defender*: 4; *Congressional Record*, Appendix, 75th Cong., 1st sess. (7 April 1937): 747–748; *Congressional Record*, House, 75th Cong., 1st sess. (12 April 1937): 3385; *Congressional Record*, House, 75th Cong., 1st sess. (7 April 1937): 3253; *Congressional Record*, House, 75th Cong., 1st sess. (15 April 1937): 3563–3564; Nordin, *The New Deal’s Black Congressman*: 221.
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William L. Dawson

1886–1970

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

1943–1970

Democrat from Illinois



Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

The third African American elected to Congress in the twentieth century and the first Black Member to chair a standing committee, William L. Dawson served in the U.S. House of Representatives for nearly three decades. A product of the influential Chicago Democratic machine, Dawson was a champion of the cause of civil rights and recognized the importance of working through institutional channels in Congress to build power. Dawson, who was known for his reserved demeanor and allegiance to the Democratic Party, used the established seniority system of the House of Representatives to amass legislative influence on Capitol Hill. “A whole lot of publicity isn’t necessary to get things done,” the Chicago Representative said. “Ninety-tenths of the work of Congress is done off the floor.”¹

William Levi Dawson was born in Albany, Georgia, on April 26, 1886, to Levi Dawson, a barber, and Rebecca Kendrick. One of six siblings, Dawson credited his father and sister with keeping his family together after his mother died when he was a child. Upon graduating from Albany Normal School in 1905, he worked his way through Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, as a porter and a waiter. He graduated in 1909 with a bachelor’s degree, and three years later he moved to Chicago. After attending Kent College

of Law and Northwestern University—both in Chicago—Dawson enlisted in the U.S. Army during World War I. In 1917, at the age of 31, he became a first lieutenant with the 365th Infantry of the American Expeditionary Force. Dawson later noted that he was “above draft age and did not have to go,” but he believed “it was the duty of every citizen to rally to the colors in time of danger.” After returning to Chicago, he resumed his studies at Northwestern and was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1920. Dawson married Nellie Brown on December 20, 1922, and the couple had two children: William Dawson Jr. and Barbara.²

In 1928, Dawson waged an unsuccessful bid in the Republican primary against incumbent Martin Barnaby Madden for the congressional district that encompassed numerous Black neighborhoods on Chicago’s South Side. Undeterred by the loss, Dawson continued to pursue a career in politics, becoming an ally of Chicago’s first African-American alderman, Oscar De Priest, who later won a special election to the House to fill the vacancy left by Representative Madden’s death in 1928. In 1933, with De Priest’s support, Dawson won election to the Chicago city council. Two years later, backed by Chicago’s Democratic mayor, Edward J. Kelly, Dawson won re-

election to a four-year term; he served a total of six years as an alderman. In his second attempt to win a House seat in 1938, Dawson defeated De Priest, who had lost his bid for re-election to the House in 1934, in the Republican primary. But Dawson lost to the incumbent Arthur W. Mitchell in the general election, attracting about 47 percent of the vote to Mitchell's 53 percent. In a city struggling with the economic effects of the Great Depression, Black Chicagoans welcomed President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal reforms. Dawson felt the pull of the Democratic Party, the lure of patronage rewards within the Democratic machine, and a general impatience with the old guard of Black leaders tied to the GOP. Having challenged De Priest, Dawson effectively severed his ties to leading Black Republicans, who passed him over for the party nomination for another term on the city council. Running as an Independent, he failed to secure re-election.³

Dawson's political career was revived in 1939 with his acceptance of Mayor Kelly's offer of the post of Democratic committeeman for Chicago's second ward. In line with the growing shift of many African Americans from the Republican to the Democratic Party, Dawson cited President Roosevelt's New Deal agenda as his primary motivation for changing parties. As a committeeman, Dawson efficiently organized his political base, using his precinct workers to help transform other predominantly Black wards into Democratic strongholds. In time, Dawson's followers controlled as many as five wards that generally offered overwhelming majorities to local, state, and national Democratic candidates.⁴

When Arthur Mitchell declined to seek a fifth term in the House in 1942, Dawson opted for a third campaign for a congressional seat—this time as a Democrat. With the solid backing of the Democratic machine, Dawson earned the party nomination by defeating Earl Dickerson, a Chicago alderman. Dawson went on to beat Republican William E. King, a former Illinois state senator and his longtime political rival, in the general election—earning 53 percent of the vote.⁵

During his first two terms in office, Dawson served on three committees: Coinage, Weights, and Measures; Invalid Pensions; and Irrigation and Reclamation. He wanted a seat on Judiciary Committee, but lost out to another Illinois Representative, Martin Gorski. He also served on the Expenditures in the Executive Departments Committee from the 78th through the 80th Congress (1943–1949)

before ascending to committee chair in 1949; the committee was renamed Government Operations in 1952. Dawson held this leadership position for ten nonconsecutive terms, only ceding the gavel for one term when Republicans briefly assumed control of the House during the 83rd Congress (1953–1955). Dawson's historic chairmanship was celebrated in the press and at a dinner in his honor hosted by leading national and Illinois Democratic leaders. Dawson spent 15 years on the District of Columbia Committee from the 84th Congress to the 91st Congress (1955–1971), and he also served on the Insular Affairs Committee—later named Interior and Insular Affairs—for two brief stints during the 78th and 79th Congresses (1943–1947), and again during the 82nd Congress (1951–1953).⁶

During his first term in the House, Dawson was the only African American serving in Congress. On February 9, 1943, Dawson made his first speech on the House Floor. He criticized the actions of the House Un-American Activities Committee, which had accused a Black employee at the U.S. Treasury Department, William Pickens, of harboring Communist ties. Dawson called the accusations baseless and declared the unquestioned loyalty of Pickens, who Dawson had known for 40 years.⁷

During his tenure in the House, Dawson steadfastly supported equal employment opportunities. He believed “every American citizen is entitled to a job in this country,” and introduced several fair employment bills between 1945 and 1949 to prohibit job discrimination based on race or national origin. In 1944, he testified before the House Labor Committee in support of similar legislation. “The right to work is synonymous with the right to live,” he declared.⁸

Dawson also vigorously opposed the use of the poll tax by state governments and introduced bills to outlaw them as a qualification for federal elections. After the House passed an anti-poll tax bill in 1943, Dawson promoted it before the Senate Judiciary Committee, where he asserted that poll taxes were adopted for the “deliberate, vicious, undemocratic purpose of disfranchising large numbers of Negroes and white people because of their economic status.”⁹

In 1944, a second Black Representative, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York, joined Dawson in Congress. Dawson and Powell drew intense media attention and scrutiny because of their strikingly different legislative styles. Powell, who epitomized a more confrontational approach within

the civil rights movement, criticized racial inequality, including segregation in certain areas of the Capitol, at every conceivable opportunity. Unlike Powell, Dawson disliked personal publicity, was wary of the media, and lived unpretentiously. He personally attended to many of the details of his office. When in his district, Dawson spent part of each day at his headquarters listening to complaints, requests, and opinions from his constituents. He kept a firm grip on his share of power in Chicago, dispensing patronage and favors through his political machine and its ancillary organizations. Dawson worked behind the scenes to pass legislation to assist his district, particularly as he gained power in Congress.¹⁰

Throughout his 27 years in Congress, Dawson consistently supported the interests of the Democratic Party. In 1948, Dawson addressed the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, praising President Harry S. Truman's civil rights record and taking the opportunity to denounce the agenda of the Republican majority in the House. In 1950, his unswerving loyalty to the party eventually led to a position of national prominence: vice chair of the Democratic National Committee (DNC). Dawson's tenure as vice chair was controversial at the time. The Democratic Party simultaneously touted the appointment and tried to ward off criticism from southern Democrats who objected to Dawson's prominent role in the party. Dawson did not comment publicly on the controversy and largely avoided confronting southern Democrats in the press.¹¹

There was no equivocating on the appointment of Dawson as chair of the House Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments in 1949. The Illinois Representative was well-positioned to eventually secure the gavel and lead the panel as the third-ranking Democratic member of the committee. Two significant changes in the House Democratic Caucus led to his quick ascension to the chair. First, Carter Manasco of Alabama, the ranking Democrat on the committee in the 80th Congress (1947–1949), lost his bid for re-election in 1948. Next in line was Representative John W. McCormack of Massachusetts. But when the Democrats took back the House majority in the 81st Congress (1949–1951), McCormack was elected Majority Leader and was therefore ineligible to chair the committee. The start of Dawson's chairmanship in January 1949 led to howls of protest from southern Democrats. Joseph Franklin Wilson of Texas resigned from the committee rather than work under Dawson's leadership,

and several southern Democrats requested that Speaker Sam Rayburn of Texas intervene to force another appointment. In a show of solidarity with Dawson, McCormack remained on the committee despite the tradition of Majority Leaders declining committee assignments.¹²

One of Dawson's first legislative achievements as chair was to shepherd through Congress President Truman's plan for reorganizing executive departments. Dawson sponsored the Reorganization Act of 1949 and his committee held hearings on the bill. It became law in June 1949. The act enabled the President to create new agencies and restructure existing departments, so long as plans were approved by Congress. Both the House and Senate had 60 days to review the President's proposals, and either chamber reserved the right to block their implementation.¹³

As chair of Government Operations, Dawson mainly held hearings on federal spending and touted the millions of dollars he claimed his committee saved the government through its investigations. For instance, in 1957, the committee began an inquest into federally funded scientific research programs. Dawson was concerned that within a federal department or agency, "such a program can be seriously impeded by wasteful duplication, excessive administration costs, complicated procedures, and organizational financial bottlenecks." In July 1958, Dawson chaired the Government Operations subcommittee hearing exploring the decision-making process for defense spending. In 1966, Dawson's committee criticized the federal government's research priorities after discovering that 90 percent of research and development funding was allocated to nuclear energy, space, and defense programs. Meanwhile, "civilian programs" to mitigate water pollution and address urban housing and transportation issues were overlooked. Dawson also led the Government Operations Subcommittee on Executive and Legislative Reorganization from the 84th to 89th Congresses (1955–1967). While Representative Powell had served as chair of a special subcommittee in the 81st Congress, Dawson was the first Black Member to head a formal subcommittee organized at the start of the session.¹⁴

In 1951, Dawson played an integral role ensuring that the Universal Military Training Act furthered the desegregation of the armed forces first initiated in 1948. He helped defeat the Winstead amendment, proposed by William Arthur Winstead of Mississippi, which would have permitted military personnel to choose whether they wanted to serve in White or Black units. Dawson spoke on

the House Floor during the debate to urge his colleagues to end racial discrimination in the military, mentioning that an injury he sustained during World War I would not have become a lifelong affliction had he been allowed access to a White hospital. Commenting proudly that he “led Americans in battle,” Dawson proclaimed, “If there is one place in America where there should not be segregation, that place is in the armed services, among those who fight for this country.”¹⁵

Dawson was often criticized for not fully employing his authority as a committee chair and a leader of the DNC to promote meaningful change for African Americans. The NAACP condemned his “silence, compromise and meaningless moderation” on issues concerning African Americans, including his refusal to back the Powell amendment, which prohibited federal funding for segregated schools. Although Dawson opposed the measure because he feared the rider would undermine all aid to education, his caution disappointed many of his own staff members. Powell intimated that his colleague cared more about his position in Mayor Daley’s Chicago political machine than the success of the civil rights movement—a sentiment shared by other prominent Black leaders and civil rights groups. But Dawson took a more pragmatic approach. He viewed the political machine as an effective political organizing tool in ward politics rather than an inherently corrupt institution—and he questioned the need for the type of outspoken activism associated with Powell. “The world is full of orators, but it isn’t full of organizers,” he told a reporter in 1946. “In this 2d Ward, we’ve got organizers. I don’t need to make speeches to get out the vote.”¹⁶

After the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till—a Chicago resident who was visiting family in Mississippi—Dawson was publicly chastised by the NAACP for neither speaking out in defense of Till’s family nor denouncing his murder. Dawson declined to respond to these allegations—an approach that exacerbated criticism of the Chicago Representative. Privately, however, Dawson worked behind the scenes, helping Emmett Till’s mother, Mamie Bradley, to convince Mississippi officials to release her son’s body so that he could be buried in Illinois and he aided Bradley with funeral arrangements.¹⁷

Dawson refuted detractors who accused him of failing to adequately confront issues important to Black Americans. “How is it,” he wondered, “that after fighting all my life for the rights of my people, I suddenly awaken in the September

of life to find myself vilified and abused, and those who know me well and what I have stood for are accusing me of being against civil rights.” Reacting to criticism that his infrequent speeches in Congress were a sign of ineffective leadership, Dawson defended his approach to politics while maligning some of his outspoken Black colleagues, noting, “I use speeches only as the artisan does his stone, to build something. I don’t talk just to show off.”¹⁸

Throughout his congressional career, Dawson balanced his work in Washington with his determination to remain influential in Chicago Democratic politics. He maintained a strong presence in the city’s ward politics while serving in Congress, doling out patronage positions and maintaining a strong Democratic organization. He played a key role in Richard J. Daley’s election as mayor of Chicago in 1955. In 1960, President John F. Kennedy’s narrow victory in the key state of Illinois was largely dependent on the voters in Dawson’s wards. Dawson’s efforts to mobilize support for Kennedy led to widespread speculation among the press that the President-elect would express his gratitude by inviting the Chicago Representative to become Postmaster General. Kennedy did in fact offer the Chicago Representative the position, but the 74-year-old Dawson declined, insisting he would be more useful to the new administration as a senior Member in the House. Some questioned the authenticity of the offer, with the press insinuating that the position was never intended for Dawson but instead was a political maneuver to continue to build support from Black Americans.¹⁹

Dawson introduced antilynching legislation several times in the 1940s and 1950s. He also introduced a major civil rights bill on the House Floor in 1963. His bill echoed many of the proposals then being considered in Congress and eventually rolled into the 1964 Civil Rights Act: voting rights, the end to discrimination in public accommodations, the creation of a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and a provision to prohibit discrimination in federally funded programs. “There is a crisis in America that is now a national danger,” he declared. “Unless something is done about it, and it must be done soon, this crisis will become a national calamity.”²⁰

Despite his longevity and influence, Dawson never assumed a leadership role among the small number of African Americans in Congress. He clashed with the confrontational spirit adopted by many Black leaders during the 1960s. When Black Representatives began to organize

and act collectively in 1969, Dawson declined to be part of the group. In May 1970—six months before his death—he did join his Black colleagues in criticizing President Richard M. Nixon for not agreeing to meet with them.²¹

As a loyal Democrat, Dawson supported the Vietnam War and President Lyndon B. Johnson's increasingly unpopular foreign policy in Southeast Asia. In 1966, when the Department of Defense reported that the death rate of Black soldiers in Vietnam was higher than that of White soldiers, Michigan Representatives John Conyers Jr. and Charles C. Diggs Jr. expressed concern and called for further investigation. Dawson considered the war an opportunity for African Americans, who he said had "a great gain to make in the present conflict" while noting that he had not yet read the report. "When we are out there, carrying our load and holding our own," Dawson declared, "the differences of race are wiped out." From 1967 to 1968, Dawson delayed the publication of a committee report that was critical of Johnson administration policy on land reform in Vietnam. John Emerson Moss of California, chair of the Government Operations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and Government Information, had authored a report that blamed the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development for failing to promote the redistribution of land from landlords to farmers in South Vietnam. This process instead was implemented by the Viet Cong in territory it controlled in South Vietnam—a move calculated to further the organization's revolutionary goals at the expense of the anticommunist forces. Dawson delayed publication of the report for five months to avoid embarrassing the administration. Shortly after, Dawson proposed to abolish the Foreign Operations Subcommittee after the full committee's budget was slashed. Dawson said that the reorganization was necessary due to lack of funding, but some suspected that he made the decision at the request of the Johnson administration. The reorganization plan was scrapped after the House approved a higher budget for the committee.²²

Dawson rarely faced any significant opposition to his re-election. Several Black Republicans challenged him in the 1950s and 1960s, offering pointed critiques of his policy choices and voting record. Regardless of the mounting criticism against him, Dawson typically cruised to victory, earning between 70 and 80 percent of the vote. His age and his poor health—he had a stroke when he was 71 in 1957—prevented him from playing an active role on the

campaign trail in the 1960s. Nevertheless, he continued to enjoy comfortable victories against his opponents in the general election.²³

By the end of his career, however, the Illinois Representative found himself on the defensive for refusing to disassociate himself from the Daley machine, which by the late 1960s was widely perceived as insufficiently committed to the cause of civil rights. He also faced growing criticism from members of his own party and from civil rights groups. For example, in 1966, he faced a primary challenge from Fred Hubbard, a YMCA youth worker who focused his campaign on framing Dawson as a machine politician unfit to respond to the needs of the district. Dawson remained in Washington during the lead-up to the primary, unconcerned about his opponent, and Hubbard dropped out of the race before the vote. In the general election, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized for his Republican opponent, David Reed, yet Dawson won easily. In their treatise on the significance of the nascent Black Power movement, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton wrote that Dawson had "become assimilated" and allowed the White power structure in the city of Chicago to rule over the Black community like "Britain over the African colonies."²⁴

Dawson won again in 1968 before deciding to retire at the conclusion of the 91st Congress (1969–1971). On November 9, 1970, only six days after his handpicked successor, Ralph H. Metcalfe, won election to his seat, Dawson died of pneumonia in Chicago.²⁵

Manuscript Collections

Fisk University (Nashville, TN). *Papers*: 1938–1970, 20.8 linear feet. The papers of William L. Dawson contain correspondence (1930s–1960s) with major U.S. political figures, speeches by Dawson before the U.S. House of Representatives, Democratic National Convention, church groups, and other organizations, biographical data, scrapbooks of clippings, certificates, awards, printed matter, plaques, and photos.

Howard University, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center (Washington, DC). *Papers*: 1942–1972, approximately 5 linear feet. The papers of William L. Dawson include biographical sketches, campaign material, speeches, correspondence, writings about William Dawson, legislative files, committee files, photographs, and memorabilia.

Chicago History Museum (Chicago, IL). *Papers*: 1943–1970, 0.5 linear feet. Correspondence, speeches, newspaper clippings, press releases, testimonials, and other papers relating to the career of William L. Dawson, a Chicago, Illinois, lawyer, alderman of the second ward, and U.S. Representative (Democrat from the 1st District of Illinois; 1943–1970). He succeeded Arthur W. Mitchell as the second African-American Democrat to represent the First District. Collection includes some material on the elections of 1944, 1948, 1952, and 1964, and a few letters from Presidents Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson.

Notes

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Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

1908–1972

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

1945–1967; 1969–1971

Democrat from New York



Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

An unapologetic activist, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York left his mark on Congress during his 12 terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. Powell earned the support of many African Americans in his Harlem district and across the nation for his legislative battles against racial discrimination. Never one to shun the spotlight, the New York minister and politician relished his position as a spokesperson for the advancement of African-American civil and political rights. Powell fought tirelessly to pass civil rights legislation and harness the power of the federal government to combat segregation. Speaking in Chicago in 1965, Powell reflected on his position in the House, where he had become chair of the Committee on Education and Labor with jurisdiction over legislation related to schools, job programs, and anti-poverty efforts. “This is legislative power. This is political power.” Powell insisted. “I use myself as an example because this is the audacious power I urge every black woman and man in this audience to seek.”¹

Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was born in New Haven, Connecticut, on November 29, 1908. At the age of six months, he moved to New York City with his older sister Blanche and his parents, Mattie and Adam Clayton Powell Sr., a Baptist preacher. The family relocated to New York

when the elder Powell was assigned to serve as a minister at the century-old Abyssinian Baptist Church in midtown Manhattan. Under his leadership, the congregation grew into one of the largest in the United States, and Powell Sr. oversaw the move of the church to Harlem in the 1920s.²

After graduating from Townsend Harris High School in New York, Powell attended the City College of New York. In 1926, he transferred to Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. As an undergraduate, he often circumvented the socially accepted racial barriers of the period because many students and faculty assumed he was White. When he tried to join an all-White fraternity, the students inquired into his background and rejected him. Powell was criticized by the small number of Black students at Colgate for this attempt to pass as White. This experience led Powell to a personal reckoning about race and his place in American society.³

A year after graduating from Colgate in 1930, Powell earned a master’s degree in religious education from Columbia University in New York City. In 1933, Powell married Isabel Washington, an actress. Powell later adopted Washington’s son, Preston, from her previous marriage. After Powell and Washington divorced, Powell married musician, singer, and actor Hazel Scott in 1945; they had

a son, Adam Clayton Powell III. They divorced in 1960, and that same year Powell married Yvette Flores Diago. They had a son, Adam Clayton Powell IV.⁴

Powell used his position as assistant minister and business manager of the Abyssinian Church to press for change in the predominantly African-American community in Harlem. In the early 1930s, he organized mass meetings and a march to demand reforms at Harlem Hospital, which had a history of discriminatory practices towards Black doctors and nurses. Beginning in 1932, he administered a church-sponsored relief program that provided food, clothing, and temporary jobs for thousands of Harlem's homeless and unemployed. During the Great Depression, Powell established himself as a charismatic and commanding civil rights leader—directing mass meetings, rent strikes, and public campaigns that forced employers including restaurants, utilities, Harlem Hospital, and the 1939 World's Fair in New York City to hire or promote Black workers. Powell's early social activism earned him the steadfast support of Harlem residents and helped lay the foundation for his future political career.⁵

In 1937, Powell succeeded his father as pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church. A popular community leader, he decided to run for local office. After earning the endorsement of New York City mayor Fiorello Henry La Guardia, the 33-year-old Powell easily won a seat on the New York City council in 1941. During World War II, Powell used speaking engagements and columns in *The People's Voice*, a weekly newspaper he published and edited from 1941 to 1945, to attract national attention, denouncing racial discrimination within the United States and calling for the end of segregation in the U.S. military. Powell gained additional political experience during the war years by serving on the consumer division of the New York State office of price administration.⁶

In 1942, following the 1940 Census, New York officials created a new congressional district that encompassed much of Harlem and was nearly 90 percent Black. Powell's local civil rights activism and city council service positioned him for a strong bid for the new House seat in 1944. His campaign platform focused on the advancement of African-American rights, including the promotion of fair employment practices and a ban on poll taxes and lynching. Powell received support from two influential organizations in the newly drawn district: the Abyssinian Church and the local Democratic machine, Tammany Hall. But Powell, who said that he would “never be a machine man,” worked

to put distance between his candidacy and the influence of Tammany. “I will represent the Negro people first,” he said. “I will represent after that all the other American people.” He later clarified his remarks, emphasizing that he would represent the people of his Harlem district “irrespective of race, creed or political affiliation.”⁷

Powell's Republican opponent was Sara Pelham Speaks, a Harlem lawyer. Both Powell and Speaks took advantage of state election laws allowing candidates to run in multiple party primaries. But Speaks proved no match for Powell, who won the Democratic primary with more than 80 percent of the vote and the GOP primary with 57 percent. Powell also received the American Labor Party designation, allowing him to run unopposed in the general election and earn a spot in the 79th Congress (1945–1947). He was the first African-American Member of Congress to represent New York. Powell's demand for racial equality and his uncompromising demeanor resonated with his Harlem constituents, whose strong backing essentially guaranteed Powell a House seat for most of his career.⁸

When Congress convened on January 3, 1945, William L. Dawson of Illinois, the only other Black Representative, escorted Powell into the House Chamber for his first day in office. Powell and Dawson remained the only African-American Members of Congress from 1945 to 1955. During his first term on Capitol Hill, Powell served on the Committees on Indian Affairs, Invalid Pensions, and Labor. Powell was also a member of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs from the 84th through the 86th Congress (1955–1961). In 1947, the House merged the Education Committee and the Labor Committee, and Powell remained on the new panel for 11 terms. In the 87th Congress (1961–1963), Powell was named chair of the Education and Labor Committee, holding the gavel for three terms. He was the second Black Representative to chair a standing committee in the House—William Dawson had first achieved that honor in 1949.⁹

During Powell's first term, he introduced legislation to extend congressional representation and the right to choose presidential electors to District of Columbia residents. He also sponsored bills to outlaw lynching and the poll tax, to end segregation in the armed forces and public transportation, and to prohibit employment discrimination.¹⁰

Soon after his arrival in Washington, Powell challenged the informal regulations forbidding Black Representatives from using Capitol facilities reserved for Members. Following the

lead of Oscar De Priest, Powell often took Black constituents to the Whites-only House restaurant and ordered his staff to eat there. Powell also successfully campaigned to allow Black reporters in the House Chamber's press gallery in 1947.¹¹

Powell's uncompromising stance on discrimination within Congress led to numerous confrontations with John Elliott Rankin, a Democrat from Mississippi and one of the chamber's most notorious segregationists. Even before Powell's election to Congress, Rankin disparaged attempts to integrate the Capitol. In 1943, Rankin condemned protesters as a "gang of communistic Jews and Negroes" trying "to storm the House restaurant, and went around here arm in arm with each other." When Rankin made known his intention to avoid sitting near African-American Members on the House Floor, Powell responded to the insult by sitting close to Rankin whenever possible. Powell noted he was "happy that Rankin will not sit by me because that makes it mutual. The only people with whom he is qualified to sit are Hitler and Mussolini." Powell's maiden speech on the House Floor condemned a racist attack Rankin had made on Jewish journalist Walter Winchell. "Last week democracy was shamed by the uncalled for and unfounded condemnation of one of America's great minorities." Powell continued, "I am not a member of that great minority, but I will always oppose anyone who tries to besmirch any group because of race, creed or color." Powell also denounced the racial slurs uttered in the House by Rankin and other southern Democrats, at one point demanding a parliamentary inquiry into whether the use of "disparaging terms" on the floor was acceptable under the House Rules.¹²

In 1945, Powell spoke out against the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). DAR had refused to allow his wife, Hazel Scott, a jazz pianist and singer, to perform in the concert venue owned by the organization, Constitution Hall in Washington, DC. A few years earlier, DAR had barred Marian Anderson, an African-American singer, from performing in the concert hall. In response, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt arranged for her to perform on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial instead. Hopeful that First Lady Bess Truman's reaction would be similar to Roosevelt's, Powell became enraged when she refused to intercede. His characterization of Bess Truman as the "last lady" of the land, in response to her decision to attend a previously scheduled DAR tea, instigated a lingering feud between President Harry S. Truman and the New York

Representative that resulted in Powell's exile from the White House during Truman's years in office. Though the Truman administration eventually denounced DAR's decision to deny Scott the opportunity to perform, the disagreement also fueled a heated debate on the House Floor in which Rankin insinuated that Powell had directed "communistic attacks" at the President and the First Lady.¹³

In the 81st Congress (1949–1951), Powell introduced a fair employment practices bill, which would have prohibited discrimination in hiring and established a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee. In 1949, Powell became the first Black Representative to chair a subcommittee when he was appointed to lead the Committee on Education and Labor's special subcommittee on the legislation. The subcommittee held extensive hearings in May 1949. Powell pushed against efforts to water down the bill in the House and Senate. The bill eventually passed the House but not before opponents had significantly altered it with amendments. Then the measure stalled in the Senate.¹⁴

One of Powell's lasting legislative contributions was an anti-discrimination clause he attached to federal spending bills to ensure that Congress did not direct public funds on organizations or programs that denied equal opportunity to all Americans. He deployed this rider so often it became known as the Powell Amendment. His first attempt to make use of this tactic, in an amendment added to a 1946 school lunch bill that prohibited federal funds to any states that discriminated in the disbursement of the money, became law. Significantly, Powell's first rider did not challenge segregation, rather Powell called for funds to be "allocated fairly" even within segregated school systems. Powell wanted to force his colleagues to reckon with disparities in federal funding and consistently introduced his rider into debate on appropriations bills. Working with the NAACP, he refined his amendment to include an anti-segregation clause. In the wake of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Powell added his amendment to ensure that no funds would support segregated schools to the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration's 1956 school construction bill. This proved controversial even among liberal anti-segregationists, some of whom feared that an uncompromising approach might jeopardize the bill. When the bill was defeated, Powell was accused of stalling school funding, but he stood firmly by his efforts. After nearly two decades of amendments, Powell's rider was included in Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.¹⁵

Powell's commitment to using the federal treasury to ensure the equal treatment of Black Americans earned him the nickname "Mr. Civil Rights." Similar to the efforts of other civil rights leaders, Powell's stance came with certain risks in an institution not known for its tolerance. During a July 1955 meeting of the Education and Labor Committee, avowed segregationist and West Virginia Democrat Cleveland Monroe Bailey punched Powell in the jaw out of anger from what he perceived as Powell's continued efforts to undermine the committee's legislative efforts with his rider. The encounter, which drew national attention, apparently ended with a conciliatory handshake.¹⁶

Powell often framed the Black struggle for civil and political rights in the United States in an international context. In 1955, he attended the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, despite efforts by U.S. officials to dissuade him. Privately, U.S. Department of State officials expressed concern that Powell's presence at Bandung might be interpreted as a sign of tacit U.S. approval for the conference, which brought together non-aligned nations in the Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. While Powell observed the meeting of newly independent African and Asian nations, reporters confronted him about the appalling conditions faced by African Americans. Acknowledging the existence of discrimination back home, Powell pointed to himself as an example of improved circumstances for minority groups in the United States. Upon his return, he urged President Eisenhower and other American policymakers to stand firm against colonialism and to pay greater attention to developing nations. To keep the issue in the public eye, Powell made speeches on the House Floor that celebrated the anniversaries of the independence of nations such as Ghana, Indonesia, and Sierra Leone.¹⁷

During much of his tenure in the House, Powell used his platform as a Member of Congress to attract headlines beyond Capitol Hill. He received national attention when he broke ranks with the Democratic Party to endorse President Eisenhower's re-election bid in 1956. Powell threw his support behind Eisenhower's Republican administration because he was dissatisfied with the Democratic nominee for President, Adlai Stevenson, and his choice for Vice President, Alabama Senator John Jackson Sparkman. Southern Democrats sought to retaliate against Powell, calling for Democratic leaders to strip him of his seniority. The NAACP defended Powell, persuading Speaker Sam

Rayburn of Texas and Representative Emanuel Celler—dean of the New York delegation and chairman of the Judiciary Committee—not to take punitive action. Nevertheless, Powell's House enemies succeeded in firing two of Powell's patronage appointees. Of greater consequence to Powell's career, Education and Labor Committee Chair Graham Arthur Barden of North Carolina, a fervent segregationist, denied Powell one of the five subcommittee chairmanships, even though he was the third-ranking Democrat on the full committee.¹⁸

In 1958, Powell was indicted for income tax evasion by a federal grand jury. The 1960 trial ended with a hung jury, but the federal government continued to investigate his finances. Tammany Hall withdrew its support for Powell in the 1958 Democratic primary—a decision machine leaders claimed stemmed from the New York Representative's support for Eisenhower, not his legal problems—and backed Black candidate Earl Brown, a Harlem city councilman. Nevertheless, Powell easily captured the nomination for his Harlem district.¹⁹

In the 1960s, the New York Representative was criticized for taking numerous trips abroad at public expense, payroll discrepancies, and a high level of absenteeism for House votes. Asked to justify his erratic attendance record on the Hill, Powell replied, "You don't have to be there if you know which calls to make, which buttons to push, which favors to call in." For most of his career, Powell remained relatively unscathed by public criticism. He was re-elected with ease and lost little in terms of legislative clout on Capitol Hill.²⁰

When Representative Barden retired after the 86th Congress (1959–1961), Powell, next in seniority, became chair of the Committee on Education and Labor, a position he held until January 1967. Powell's service as chair marked the most productive period of his congressional career. The committee approved more than 50 measures authorizing federal programs for increases in the minimum wage, education and job training opportunities for deaf Americans, school lunches, vocational training, student loans, and standards for wages and work hours, as well as aid for institutions of elementary and secondary education and public libraries. "We have been a more productive committee in the last year and a half than the New Deal," a committee member noted in 1965. "It has been under Powell's chairmanship and you've got to give him credit for that."²¹

The legislation introduced by Powell's committee helped shape much of the social policy agenda of the

John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations. In particular, Powell worked closely on bills related to President Johnson's signature initiatives, the Great Society and the War on Poverty. From the 87th Congress to the 89th Congress (1961–1967), for example, Powell's committee held hearings on bills related to education and antipoverty programs. Powell also personally chaired the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the War on Poverty Program in the 88th Congress (1963–1965), which held extensive hearings on the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.²²

By the mid-1960s, Powell faced criticism not only from longtime enemies but also from committee members dismayed by his irregular management of the committee budget. Those who often interacted with Powell as a committee chair were critical of his frequent absences and unpredictability. His actions off the Hill continued to elicit criticism from colleagues and the public. In 1963, for instance, Powell refused to pay compensation to New Yorker Esther James, who won a court-ordered slander judgment against Powell after he alleged she was transporting money from gamblers to corrupt police officers in Harlem. The public case, which lasted several years, irked Powell's colleagues and led to the New York Representative adopting a self-imposed exile from his district. For more than a year, Powell avoided arrest by making brief appearances in Harlem only on Sundays since state law prohibited serving civil contempt warrants on that day of the week.²³

Amid mounting legal problems, questions about his wife's role on his congressional staff, and accusations that he had misused travel funds for personal business, the House confronted Powell in the 89th Congress (1965–1967). Lawmakers established a special subcommittee of the Committee on House Administration to investigate the accusations against the Harlem Congressman. Led by Wayne Levere Hays of Ohio, the subcommittee held hearings in December 1966 and, in its final report, substantiated the allegations against Powell and concluded that he had misused the finances of the Education and Labor Committee.²⁴

The subcommittee compiled sufficient evidence to spur the House Democratic Caucus to strip Powell of his committee chair on January 9, 1967. Powell had won re-election easily, but on January 10, as the new Congress convened on the House Floor, Powell was told to step aside as Members were sworn in. The House then passed House

Resolution 1, which created a select committee to determine if Powell should be seated. On February 23, the chair of the select committee reported its findings. Although the committee majority decided that Powell should be sworn in, it also advised that he be censured, fined, and stripped of seniority. One of the committee members, John Conyers Jr. of Michigan, cited precedent saying that punishment for past misconduct cases had never exceeded censure and that no other Member had been stripped of seniority.²⁵

On March 1, 1967, the House rejected these proposals and voted 307 to 116 to exclude Powell from the 90th Congress (1967–1969). Powell was subsequently re-elected to fill his own vacancy on April 11, 1967, with 86 percent of the vote but refused to take his seat and spent most of the term on the island of Bimini in The Bahamas. "Keep the faith, baby," Powell said when questioned about his exclusion from the House, confident that his actions would be vindicated.²⁶

After he was re-elected to a twelfth term in November 1968, the House allowed Powell to take his seat when he arrived for the 91st Congress (1969–1971), but his colleagues voted to deny him his seniority and to fine him for misusing payroll and travel finances. Powell also took the House to court, claiming it did not have the authority to keep him from taking his office in March 1967. In June 1969, the Supreme Court ruled the House had acted unconstitutionally by excluding Powell from the 90th Congress.²⁷

Despite the legal absolution, Powell never regained his former influence or authority in Congress. Still confident he would earn another term in the House, Powell entered the Democratic primary in 1970 and declared, "My people would elect me ... even if I had to be propped up in my casket." Some of his constituents, however, had grown tired of his legal troubles, negative publicity, and infrequent attendance in Congress. His strongest opponent in the primary, Harlem-based New York state assemblyman Charles B. Rangel, highlighted Powell's absenteeism, using campaign literature marking the major votes he had missed. Even in the face of a formidable primary challenge, Powell made few public appearances. Rangel, who benefited from redistricting that diluted Powell's base of power in Harlem by adding to the district a slice of the mostly White Upper West Side, won the primary by a slim 200-vote margin to become the Democratic candidate and the eventual Representative for his district. Powell contested the primary election results, but although the recount reduced the margin of victory from 203 to 150 votes, Rangel prevailed.²⁸

Powell had been diagnosed with cancer in 1969, and his health declined after he left Congress in January 1971. He retired as minister of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and spent most of his time in Bimini. He died on April 4, 1972, in Miami, Florida.²⁹

Notes

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Charles C. Diggs Jr.

1922–1998

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

1955–1980

Democrat from Michigan



Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1954 at age 31, Charles C. Diggs Jr. was the first African-American lawmaker to represent Michigan in Congress. On Capitol Hill, Diggs was an ardent supporter of civil rights and an impassioned advocate of increased American aid to Africa. As a principal architect of home rule for the District of Columbia and a driving force behind the formation of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), Diggs crafted an international legacy during his 25 years in the House. For Representative Diggs, aiding the development, independence, and self-rule of majority-Black African countries was part of a larger struggle for Black equality throughout the world that also encompassed the civil rights movement in the United States. “The destiny of Afro-Americans in the United States and of Africans in Africa is inextricably linked,” he wrote.¹

Charles Coles Diggs Jr., the only child of Charles Diggs Sr. and Mamie Ethel Jones Diggs, was born in Detroit, Michigan, on December 2, 1922. Prominent in Detroit, the Diggs family owned a local mortuary, a funeral insurance company, and an ambulance service. In the 1920s, Detroit, the hub of the U.S. automobile industry, underwent a massive transformation as African Americans moved from the

South to the North in search of better opportunities. Between 1920 and 1930, Detroit’s Black population tripled—growing at a faster rate than any other major northern city. Charles Diggs Sr. personified rising Black influence in Detroit and in 1936 became the first African-American Democrat elected to the Michigan state senate. After graduating from Detroit’s Miller High School in 1940, Charles Diggs Jr. enrolled at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. After two years, Diggs transferred to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. While still an undergraduate, he entered the United States Army Air Forces as a private on February 19, 1943. During World War II, Diggs, who worked in administrative roles, served alongside the famed Tuskegee airmen in Alabama. Commissioned a second lieutenant in 1944, Diggs was discharged from the military on June 1, 1945. Diggs resumed his academic career, enrolling in Detroit’s Wayne University School of Mortuary Science. After graduating in June 1946, the newly licensed mortician joined his father’s funeral business, serving as chairman of the House of Diggs, Inc. Diggs also delivered commentary on current affairs (interspersed with gospel music) as part of a weekly radio show sponsored by his business. Married four times, Charles Diggs Jr. had six children.²

In 1944, Charles Diggs Sr. became embroiled in a legislative bribery scandal and served 15 months in prison. Upon his release in 1950, Diggs Sr. sought to reclaim his position in the legislature. He won re-election, but in an unprecedented move, the Republican-controlled Michigan senate refused to seat him and another state senator-elect because of their criminal records. Outraged by the events that prevented his father from resuming his political career, Diggs Jr. interrupted his studies at the Detroit School of Law to enter the special election for his father's seat. Diggs won the election and served in the Michigan senate for three years before setting his sights on the United States Congress. Using the campaign slogan "Make Democracy Live," he defeated incumbent Representative George D. O'Brien by a two-to-one margin in the August 1954 Democratic primary in the Detroit district which had a majority-White population. Building on the momentum from the primary, Diggs easily defeated Republican Landon Knight—the son of John S. Knight, editor and publisher of the *Detroit Free Press*—in the general election, capturing 66 percent of the vote to become Michigan's first African-American Representative.³

After winning a seat in the 84th Congress (1955–1957), Diggs remarked, "This is a great victory for the voters of the Democratic Party, and it also settles deeper issues—the racial issue. This is proof that the voters of the Thirteenth District have reached maturity." Diggs rarely faced serious opposition in subsequent elections, typically winning by more than 70 percent in a working-class urban district that saw a rapid decline in population and a substantial rise in the percentage of Black residents due to the loss of job opportunities following the departure of auto factories from Detroit and the decision of White families to move out of the city and into suburbs as Black families moved into majority-White neighborhoods, a phenomenon known as White flight.⁴

Upon entering Congress, Diggs was assigned to the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs and the Veterans' Affairs Committee. Unlike many Members, Diggs did not pursue seats on high-profile committees as he accrued seniority. Instead, Diggs chose assignments that allowed him to work on often overlooked but vital policies important to his African-American constituents, as well as on international human rights issues. In 1959, Diggs joined the Foreign Affairs Committee, remaining there until he left Congress in 1980. In 1969, Diggs became the chair of the

Committee on Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Africa. In 1963, Diggs became a member of the Committee on the District of Columbia and remained there the rest of his tenure, becoming chair of the committee in 1973.⁵

Early in his career, Diggs, whose father was from Mississippi, used his platform to bring attention to the oppression of Black Mississippians and the growing civil and voting rights movements in the state. One of Diggs's first public speeches as a Representative was at a voting rights rally in the all-Black town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Diggs expressed confidence that African Americans in Mississippi could end Jim Crow in the state. Returning to his campaign slogan, he told the crowd that "if we keep up the fight to make democracy live, we will get the justice espoused by Almighty God and the Constitution of the United States." Then in September 1955, the first-year Michigan Representative garnered attention from the national media when he attended the trial in Sumner, Mississippi, of two White men accused of murdering Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy, for allegedly whistling at a White woman. In January 1956, Diggs inserted into the *Congressional Record* an article from *Look* magazine in which the two men, who had been found not guilty by an all-White jury, confessed to Till's murder. For Diggs the trial and the confession with immunity further illustrated the urgent need for civil and political rights for African Americans in Mississippi. When Diggs discovered that the county where the trial was being held had no registered Black voters, he suggested that Mississippi's representation in Congress should be reduced—echoing Members from earlier decades who called for the enforcement of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, requiring reduced congressional representation for states that discriminated against qualified voters. Two months later, Diggs proposed that President Dwight D. Eisenhower convene a special session of Congress to consider civil rights issues.⁶

In 1956, Diggs supported an amendment by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York to prohibit federal educational funds for states that refused to abide by the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*. Powell included these anti-segregation riders into federal funding bills so often they became known as the Powell Amendment. A year later, however, Diggs refused to support the Powell Amendment when the Harlem Representative once again introduced it to the

same education bill that had been under debate during the previous Congress. The House had already passed civil rights legislation that year, and Diggs argued “the objective we seek to provide a remedy in school desegregation cases can best be achieved by means other than an appropriate amendment to this bill.” In the late 1950s and early 1960s, as civil rights protests spread throughout the South, Diggs frequently introduced legislation that targeted various segregation laws and discriminatory practices. He introduced measures for voting rights, prohibitions against discrimination in federally funded hospitals, fair employment, antilynching, and the creation of a joint congressional civil rights commission. He also was a tireless advocate of the Civil Rights Act of 1957.⁷

In February 1965, Diggs and 14 other Representatives, including John Conyers Jr. of Michigan and Augustus F. “Gus” Hawkins of California, visited Selma, Alabama, during the ongoing voting rights campaign involving Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The delegates went there to investigate the treatment of protesters by the police and study how Selma officials deprived African Americans of the right to vote. Four years later, in May 1969, Diggs marched with 12,000 people in Charleston, South Carolina, to support Black hospital workers who were seeking the right to organize and bargain collectively.⁸

As the number of African-American Representatives increased in the late 1960s, Diggs looked for ways to forge more effective working relationships with other Black Members. Diggs was especially disappointed with the way Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and William L. Dawson—the two most senior Black Members—rarely worked together. In 1969, Diggs organized the Democratic Select Committee (DSC) to promote the exchange of ideas between Black Members. Black Representatives newly elected to the 91st Congress (1969–1971)—Shirley Chisholm of New York, William Lacy “Bill” Clay Sr., of Missouri, and Louis Stokes of Ohio—embraced the idea of a network for African Americans in the House but pressed for a more formal organization with political clout. In February 1971, Diggs and the other 11 Black House Members reorganized the DSC into the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). Diggs served as the CBC’s inaugural chair from 1971 to 1973 and called the new caucus “the first departure from the individualistic policies that characterized black congressmen in the past.”⁹

In 1973, nearly a decade after he joined the Committee on the District of Columbia, Diggs assumed the gavel when the former chair, South Carolina segregationist John Lanneau McMillan, failed to win renomination to the House. “I don’t plan to be the unofficial mayor of Washington,” Diggs said about his new position. “The city already has a mayor and City Council. I don’t intend to become involved with the day-to-day operations of the city government.” Instead, Diggs sought to increase the autonomy of the District of Columbia by advocating for home rule for the nation’s capital, which had undergone a shift from a majority-White population to majority-Black after schools were desegregated in the 1950s. In 1973, he succeeded in bringing a bill to the House Floor authorizing partial self-government for Washington, DC. Before the House voted, he reminded his colleagues that “When we talk about self-determination for the District of Columbia we are not only talking about a matter of local interest, but because of the unique role of this capital community, it is of concern to each one of the Members of the 435 districts across this country.” Behind Diggs’s leadership, the House overwhelmingly passed the measure, which gave the District the ability to elect a mayor and city council for the first time since 1874, but allowed Congress to retain ultimate control of the city’s budget and a veto on laws passed by the council. On December 24, 1973, President Richard M. Nixon signed the District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization Act into law. Despite Diggs’s support for home rule, as chair he also supported legislation to delay transferring to the city council the power to revise the District’s outdated criminal code. During his tenure as chair of the Committee on the District of Columbia, Diggs also helped establish the University of the District of Columbia.¹⁰

In addition to promoting a domestic civil rights agenda, Diggs focused on legislation shaping U.S. policy toward Africa. Diggs was dubbed “Mr. Africa” because of his dedication to and knowledge of African affairs. The Michigan Representative visited the continent often. In 1957, Diggs accompanied then Vice President Nixon as part of the official U.S. delegation to several newly independent African countries. Among the stops was Ghana, where the delegation observed the country’s celebration of independence from British control. Diggs said that African countries, such as Ghana, that gained their independence in the post-World War II years helped “prove to the world the equal capabilities and potentialities

of the black man once he is freed of his yoke.” A year later, he attended the All-African People’s Conference in Ghana. In February 1969, he headed a fact-finding mission to civil war-torn Nigeria to investigate relief programs for civilians and to explore a possible cease-fire.¹¹

After being named chair of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa in 1969, Diggs worked to prioritize Africa within America’s larger diplomatic agenda. In his new leadership role, which he held for a decade, he emphasized the importance of increased American aid to the newly independent African countries and the end of racist policies in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and South Africa.¹²

Diggs led the early charge by African-American Members of Congress to denounce the apartheid regime in South Africa. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he advocated for an end to sugar import quotas that benefited South Africa. He also conducted a series of hearings to investigate how some American businesses and government programs helped the economy of South Africa, despite the official U.S. opposition to the country’s racist policies. “Since the whole world abhors South Africa’s racial policy,” Diggs explained during the hearing, “businessmen should question whether they are using their considerable power to bring pressures to bear on the authority to alter policies.” In 1971, he led a bipartisan congressional delegation to South Africa to observe firsthand its business practices and apartheid system. His aggressive stance and outspoken criticism of apartheid led the South African government to bar him from the country during a trip in 1975.¹³

Diggs also sought to overhaul America’s trade relations with Rhodesia. In response to the United Nations’ 1968 trade embargo against Rhodesia, Senator Harry Flood Byrd Jr. of Virginia drafted an amendment that exempted chrome and other materials deemed to be of national importance from the embargo. But since the bulk of U.S. trade with Rhodesia involved chrome, the Byrd amendment effectively stated that the United States would not abide by the embargo. Diggs supported an unsuccessful effort to derail the amendment in the House. At Diggs’s urging, the CBC later filed suit against the American government for continuing to import Rhodesian chrome. Diggs and the CBC argued that the government had no basis for prioritizing chrome since American companies used it for consumer supplies rather than national security.¹⁴

In the early 1970s, during a brief stint as a member of America’s delegation to the United Nations, Diggs emerged

as the leading House critic of continued Portuguese colonialism in Angola and Mozambique. In October 1971, President Nixon appointed Diggs as a delegate to the United Nations. In this position, Diggs urged the United States to stop opposing U.N. resolutions condemning Portugal’s policy. Just two months into his appointment, he resigned from the U.S. delegation to the United Nations to protest what he perceived as the continued “stifling hypocrisy” of U.S. government policy toward Africa. In 1975—after a new regime took power in Portugal—Angola and Mozambique won their independence. A short while later, a civil war erupted in Angola between Communist forces backed by Cuba and the Soviet Union and non-Communists (UNITA) supported by South Africa. After press reports revealed that the CIA had covertly assisted UNITA, Diggs used his position as chair of the Africa Subcommittee to help win House support to cut off funding for the CIA operation. In 1976, Congress approved an amendment offered by Senator Richard Clarence “Dick” Clark of Iowa that officially banned covert aid to Angola.¹⁵

Diggs’s political fortunes declined when he became the focus of a federal investigation. In March 1978, a grand jury indicted Diggs on multiple charges, including taking kickbacks from his congressional staff. After a nine-day trial, he was convicted on October 7, 1978, in a Washington, DC, district court of committing mail fraud and falsifying payroll forms. Throughout the trial and the appeals process, he asserted his innocence, claiming he was a victim of “selective prosecution” because of his race. Despite his conviction, voters from Diggs’s Michigan district re-elected him a month later with 79 percent of the vote. After his re-election, Diggs voluntarily relinquished his committee and subcommittee chairs as he appealed his legal case but voiced his determination to vote on the floor. Diggs’s decision to serve out his term until his appeals were exhausted aroused the indignation of many in the House, especially first-term Representative and future Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia, who spearheaded an unsuccessful effort to expel Diggs from Congress. Following the release of a report by the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, the House unanimously censured Diggs on July 31, 1979. After the Supreme Court refused to review his conviction, Diggs resigned from the 96th Congress (1979–1981) on June 3, 1980. One month later, he entered a minimum-security prison in Alabama; he served seven months of a three-year federal sentence. In a 1981 interview, Diggs stated,

“I considered myself a political prisoner during my incarceration. I was a victim of political and racist forces. I will go to my grave continuing to profess my innocence.”¹⁶

After his release from prison, Diggs opened a funeral home in suburban Maryland and resumed his education, earning a bachelor’s degree in political science from Howard University in 1983. Diggs launched a brief and unsuccessful political comeback in 1990, losing a bid for a seat in Maryland’s house of delegates. On August 24, 1998, Charles Diggs Jr. died of complications from a stroke in Washington, DC. Following his death, John Conyers Jr. of Detroit, Diggs’s House colleague of many years said, “Congressman Diggs paved the way for an entire generation of African American political leaders, not just in his home state, but throughout the nation.”¹⁷

Manuscript Collection

Howard University, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center (Washington, DC). *Papers*: 1951–1964, approximately 965 linear feet. The bulk of the Charles C. Diggs Jr. collection covers 1954–1963. The papers include correspondence, speeches, photographs, constituent inquiries, personal, family and business papers (House of Diggs Funeral Home), materials documenting the founding of the Congressional Black Caucus, Diggs’s work as chair of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, the National Black Political Convention, the United Nations, as well as Diggs’s trial, conviction, and appeal. It also contains audiovisuals, awards, scrapbooks, and printed material. Finding aids are available for the 42 boxes of Subcommittee on Africa materials and photographs.

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Robert N.C. Nix Sr.

1898–1987

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

1958–1979

Democrat from Pennsylvania

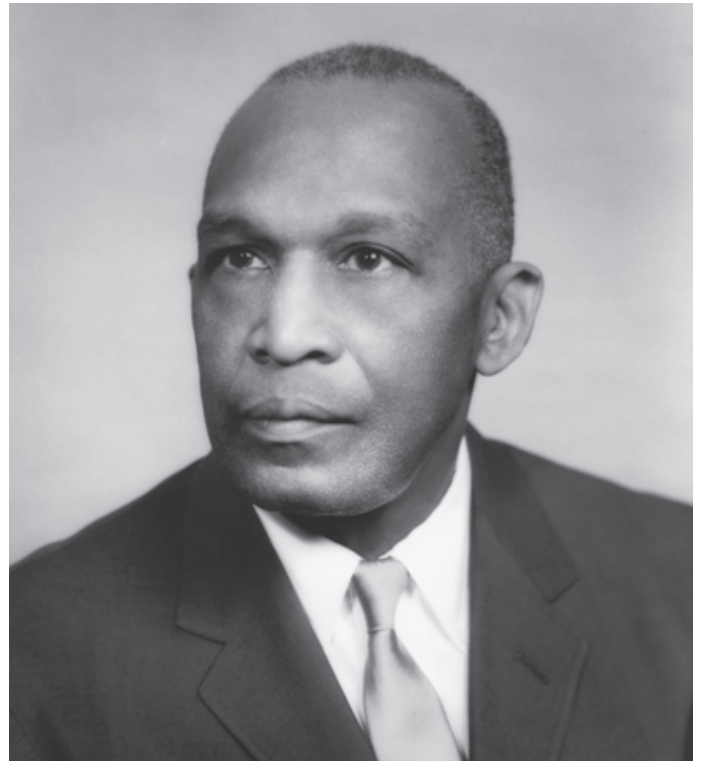


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In 1958, longtime Philadelphia Democratic powerbroker and state official Robert N.C. Nix Sr. won election to the U.S. House of Representatives, becoming the first Black lawmaker from Pennsylvania to serve in Congress. During his two decades in Congress, Nix also became only the fourth Black Member to chair a standing committee in the House. From his seat in Washington, Nix maintained influence back home in Philadelphia and also addressed a wider agenda, advocating for civil rights legislation. Nix called on his House colleagues to recognize the national crisis that resulted in the violent repression and disenfranchisement facing Black Americans in states like Mississippi, warning that “these crimes cry out for positive and courageous action, not tomorrow, but now.”¹

Robert Nelson Cornelius Nix Sr. was born on August 9, 1898, in Orangeburg, South Carolina, the third of four children of Nelson C. Nix and Sylvia Nix. His father was born enslaved and later became the dean of South Carolina State College. Nelson Nix was a longtime friend of former Black Representative Thomas E. Miller of South Carolina and spoke at his funeral in 1938.²

Robert Nix later moved to New York City to live with relatives. He graduated from Townsend Harris High School

in New York City before enrolling in Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania. After earning a bachelor’s degree in 1921, Nix continued his education at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, from which he graduated three years later. In 1925, Nix began practicing law in Philadelphia. He first became active in politics when he was elected a Democratic committeeman from the forty-fourth ward in 1932. He retained this position for 26 years, serving as chairman for the final eight. From 1934 to 1938, Nix worked for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a special deputy attorney general in the revenue department and as a special assistant deputy attorney general. Nix married Ethel Lanier, and they had one son, Robert N.C. Nix Jr., who became the chief justice of the Pennsylvania state supreme court in 1984.³

When five-term Democratic Representative Earl Chudoff resigned in 1958 to become a Philadelphia judge, Nix entered the special election to fill the vacant congressional seat encompassing sections of Philadelphia on both sides of the Schuylkill River. With solid backing from the local Democratic machine, Nix won the unexpired term, defeating Republican Cecil B. Moore, an African-American attorney, with 64 percent of the vote. House colleagues applauded

as Nix was sworn in to the 85th Congress (1957–1959) on May 20, 1958, joining Black Representatives William L. Dawson of Illinois, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York, and Charles C. Diggs Jr. of Michigan. That same year, Nix was chosen unanimously as chair of Philadelphia's thirty-second ward, a position he held until his death in 1987.⁴

During his first two terms in the House, Nix served on two committees: Merchant Marine and Fisheries; and Veterans' Affairs. In the 87th Congress (1961–1963), Nix relinquished his initial assignments for a seat on the Foreign Affairs Committee, where he remained for the rest of his tenure in the House and where he eventually chaired the Foreign Economic Policy and Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittees. In the 88th Congress (1963–1965), Nix joined the Committee on the Post Office and Civil Service. After 14 years, Nix was named chair of the committee in the 95th Congress (1977–1979), his final term in office. Nix also served brief tenures on the Select Committee on Standards of Official Conduct during the 89th Congress (1965–1967) and the Select Committee on Crime during the 91st Congress (1969–1971).

In his first Floor speech, Nix participated in debate on a pending bill to limit the power of the U.S. Supreme Court to review the decisions of state courts. In effect, the bill would empower the state courts to interpret the law without the possibility of Supreme Court review. Nix spoke forcefully against the bill and called for the structure of appeals to remain in place. Nix argued that if this law passed, "state courts then could and would interpret [new laws] in a manner that would deny to minority groups the basic decencies."⁵

Throughout his House career, Nix remained closely connected to the political machine back home that helped him earn a spot in Congress. In line with the practices of the machine organization that prioritized constituent services, Nix held regular Saturday hours in his district office to listen to the concerns of his constituents. He also promoted urban development measures for his Philadelphia district. He sponsored a bill to appropriate funding to equip the Philadelphia Navy Yard for production of nuclear-powered ships. He also backed bills to set guidelines for urban renewal proposals and provide funding for projects and mass transportation.⁶

Nix also searched for ways the federal government might alleviate unemployment. In 1959, he introduced an early version of what would eventually become the

Area Redevelopment Act of 1961, which focused federal funding on job training and loans to spur employment in the private sector. In 1966, Nix proposed a bill to establish a "senior service corps" to employ workers older than 60 who otherwise struggled to find work.⁷

As one of the few Black Members in the House during the 1950s and 1960s, Nix worked to transform the goals of the civil rights movement into federal legislation. In 1959, Nix introduced a measure to prohibit racial discrimination in public places against anyone wearing a U.S. military uniform. "To treat a man who wears that uniform with contumely merely because of the color of his skin is an insult to America and to everything for which our country stands," Nix said on the House Floor.⁸

In April 1963, Nix provided a timeline of violence in Mississippi against civil rights activists. He called for immediate, decisive action by the House to protect individual rights in the South. Seeking to enforce the second section of the Fourteenth Amendment, Nix authored a bill to reduce a state's representation in Congress when the rights of its voters were violated—echoing previous measures introduced unsuccessfully in the House for six decades.⁹

A week before the August 28, 1963, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Nix spoke on the House Floor in support of the goals of the demonstration. The march, Nix said, was part of "the struggle for freedom which dates from the time Negro slavery was first introduced in the American Colonies, in 1619." He provided a quick survey of the many times popular demonstrations had occurred in American history, linking the 1963 march to earlier protests which sought to leverage the power of the federal government to correct injustice. In the century since emancipation, Nix said, Black Americans had been "teased with mere tastes of freedom." But the March on Washington would demand the government extend and protect the civil and political rights articulated in the Constitution. "The promised land is here," he proclaimed, "now, awaiting only the complete and immediate removal, by our fellow Americans, of the racial fence which has surrounded it and kept Negroes out for 300 years."¹⁰

During the House debate on the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Nix countered critics who maintained that African Americans from his native state of South Carolina had ample opportunity to register to vote. He urged passage of the bill and highlighted the many levels of intimidation and the barriers that hindered significant Black representation in the state and throughout the South.¹¹

For most of the 1960s, Nix followed the Democratic Party line by supporting the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations. Although some of his Democratic colleagues criticized America's involvement in the Vietnam War, Nix, a senior member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, consistently backed executive foreign policy initiatives. He introduced an amendment to the Foreign Military Sales Act requiring the executive branch to provide Congress with information on the identities of and fees received by agents who negotiated arms sales for American firms. Nix was able to make use of his foreign policy experience in 1973 when he was named a delegate to represent the United States at the fall session of the United Nations General Assembly. As chair of the Subcommittee on International Economic Policy, Nix led an investigation into the use of funds by defense contractors and other American multinational corporations to pay foreign consultants, agents, governmental officials, and political parties.¹²

Nix had the reputation as an institutionalist in Congress, but in 1965, he introduced a measure to lengthen the constitutional term of service in the House from two years to four so that Members could improve their legislative expertise and dispense with the constant campaigns for re-election. In 1967, he sought to prevent the House from denying Representative Adam Clayton Powell Jr. his seat in the 90th Congress (1967–1969). Nix argued that Powell “did not receive the fair and impartial trial guaranteed to every American citizen.” Nix also made a legal argument against the process the House established for investigating and determining the fate of Powell. “The Congress of the United States is honor bound to admit its error, and to correct its wrong,” he declared. In June 1969, the Supreme Court vindicated Nix's argument when it ruled that the House had acted unconstitutionally in refusing to seat Powell.¹³

Nix remained loyal to the local Democratic machine that helped begin his career on Capitol Hill, and Black critics in his district in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Cecil B. Moore, Nix's one-time opponent and president of the Philadelphia NAACP, accused him of not doing enough for the national interests of Black Americans. Others expressed concern that his behind-the-scenes efforts would not produce significant legislative gains. Nix, in response, took issue with the more confrontational methods of some of his Black House colleagues. “I've seen people come into this Congress feeling it was incumbent upon them to give everybody hell, talking

about all the wrongs and fancied wrongs that happen everyday,” he said. “They didn't correct a damn thing. ... The legislation they sought to present to the House later on received little interest from any source.” For Nix, building a rapport with his colleagues—even those who disagreed with him—was the starting point for constructive action. “In voicing your disapproval, you don't make your fellow member of Congress responsible for what you're condemning unless he is responsible. Nor do you condemn the whole white race.”¹⁴

In 1971, Nix joined other Black Representatives in a boycott of President Richard M. Nixon's State of the Union Address after the President refused to meet a group of Black lawmakers to discuss the administration's policies. He was also a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). By 1974, Nix was the second-most-senior Black Representative, behind Charles Diggs, but he typically deferred to less senior Members of the House within the CBC.¹⁵

In 1977, Nix's appointment as chair of the Post Office and Civil Service Committee provoked opposition from a group of younger Representatives who contended that he was not a good fit for the gavel. They contended that Nix had a “record of inactivity” and his age disqualified him from party leadership. The CBC thwarted the move to block his appointment, promising that Nix would be a skilled and committed chair. As chair, Nix introduced a bill to “require congressional approval of major policy changes” by the U.S. Postal Service in an effort to improve service. The measure passed the House with bipartisan support, 371 to 6, but faltered in the Senate. He also backed an initiative by President James Earl “Jimmy” Carter to restructure the civil service system. Portrayed as a plan to improve the efficiency of the federal government, the proposed reform was criticized by many veterans' groups and federal unions that feared the legislation would undermine the rights of civil service workers. President Carter signed the Civil Service Reform Act into law on October 13, 1978.¹⁶

Although his constituency remained overwhelmingly Democratic, Nix often faced primary challenges from African-American candidates who criticized his close relationship with the Philadelphia Democratic machine. In 1976, he barely survived a primary challenge from a young African-American minister, William H. Gray III, capturing only 48 percent of the vote. Gray accused Nix of being “invisible and unresponsive” to his constituents and

drew attention to the district's high unemployment rate.¹⁷

Two years later, Nix and Gray squared off in a Democratic primary rematch. The incumbent emphasized his congressional experience, contending that his chairmanship of a House standing committee was “the best weapon for helping this district.” But Nix performed poorly at the polls, winning only 40 percent of the vote versus Gray's 58 percent.¹⁸

After leaving the House in January 1979, Nix remained active in politics as the leader of Philadelphia's thirty-second ward. In 1985, a federal building was named after him in Philadelphia. Nix remained a ward politician until his death in Philadelphia on June 22, 1987.¹⁹

Manuscript Collection

African American Museum in Philadelphia, Research Collections (Philadelphia, PA). *Papers*: less than one linear foot. Certificates, photographs, newspaper clippings and awards related to Robert N.C. Nix Sr.'s congressional career.

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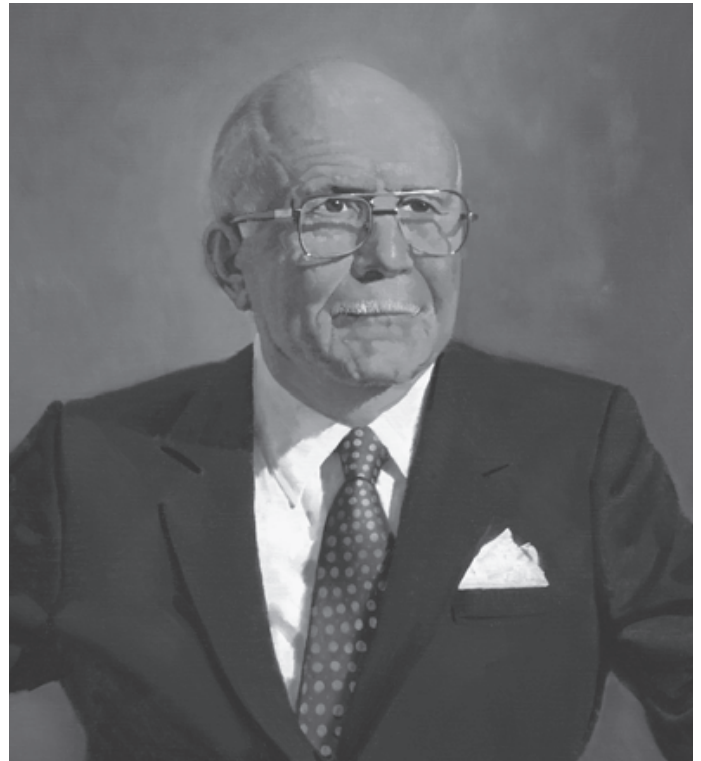
Augustus F. “Gus” Hawkins

1907–2007

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

1963–1991

Democrat from California



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Augustus F. “Gus” Hawkins’s political career spanned 56 years of public service in the California assembly and the U.S. House of Representatives. Elected to the U.S. House in November 1962 as the first Black Representative from west of the Mississippi River, Hawkins led countless efforts to improve the economic and educational opportunities of low-income and working-class Americans and to secure and expand the legislative victories of the civil rights movement. Known by colleagues as the “Silent Warrior,” Hawkins worked effectively behind the scenes to accomplish his legislative goals. “The leadership belongs not to the loudest, not to those who beat the drums or blow the trumpets,” Hawkins said, “but to those who day in and day out, in all seasons, work for the practical realization of a better world—those who have the stamina to persist and remain dedicated.”¹

Augustus Freeman Hawkins was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, on August 31, 1907. The youngest of five children, he moved to Los Angeles, California, with his parents, Nyanza, a pharmacist and business owner, and Hattie Hawkins, a homemaker, and his siblings in the early 1920s. After graduating from Los Angeles’s Jefferson High School in 1926, he earned a bachelor’s degree in economics from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1931.

Although he planned to study civil engineering in graduate school, Hawkins’s lack of financial support, exacerbated by the Great Depression, forced him to alter his career path. He opened a real estate company with his brother Edward and took classes at the University of Southern California’s Institute of Government. Hawkins and a group of like-minded friends from college organized an insurgent political club in opposition to local political leaders including Frank Roberts, a Black Republican and 16-year veteran of the California assembly who controlled their district. In 1935, Hawkins, who had accused Roberts of staying in office too long, defeated the incumbent to win a spot in the California state assembly. While serving in the state assembly, Hawkins married Pegga Adeline Smith on August 28, 1945. After she died in 1966, he married Elsie Taylor on June 30, 1977.²

As a member of the California assembly from 1935 to 1963, Hawkins compiled a substantial legislative record that centered on the interests of his predominantly African-American and Latino Los Angeles district. In addition to chairing the joint legislative organization committee, he introduced a fair housing act, a fair employment practices act, legislation for low-cost housing and disability insurance, and provisions to make housekeepers eligible for workmen’s

compensation. In 1959, Hawkins lost a bid to become assembly speaker—widely considered the second-most-powerful elected office in the state behind the governor—to Ralph M. Brown. Two years later, Brown named Hawkins chair of the influential rules committee.³

In 1962, Hawkins entered the Democratic primary to represent a newly created majority-Black congressional district encompassing central Los Angeles. Looking back on his decision to run, Hawkins remembered thinking, “I felt federal policies, including civil rights, just meant so much.” With an established legislative record and the endorsement of President John F. Kennedy, Hawkins easily defeated his three primary opponents with more than 50 percent of the vote. He won the general election by a landslide, capturing 85 percent of the vote against an African-American attorney, Republican Herman Smith, to earn a spot in the 88th Congress (1963–1965). After the election, Hawkins remarked, “It’s like shifting gears—from the oldest man in the Assembly in years of service to a freshman in Congress.” Even though the California state legislature reapportioned the Los Angeles-area congressional district four times after Hawkins’s initial election, it remained predominantly African American and Latino and consistently supported Hawkins, who won each of his general elections by more than 80 percent of the vote.⁴

During his first term in Congress, Hawkins sat on the Education and Labor Committee, which was chaired by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York. Hawkins eventually rose to chair of the committee himself, a position he held from the second session of the 98th Congress (1983–1985) until his retirement at the end of the 101st Congress (1989–1991). He also served on the House Administration Committee from the 91st through the 98th Congress (1969–1985), serving as chair for the final two terms. Hawkins also chaired the Joint Committee on the Library during the 97th Congress (1981–1983) and the Joint Committee on Printing during the 96th and 98th Congresses (1979–1981; 1983–1985). He left all three panels when he assumed the chair of the Education and Labor Committee. The California Representative also served on the Joint Economic Committee from the 97th Congress to the 101st Congress (1981–1991).

In August 1965, in just his second term, Hawkins was thrust into the political spotlight when widespread looting, arson, and violence erupted in his district, sparked by an arrest of a Black man for drunk driving that resulted in a

confrontation with police in Watts, an underserved and largely segregated Los Angeles neighborhood. Hawkins challenged his fellow lawmakers to help his constituents, saying, “The trouble is that nothing has ever been done to solve the long-range underlying problems.” While he did not condone the civil violence, he believed it expressed a sense of desperation, partially due to the absence of long-promised federal antipoverty funds.⁵

From the beginning of his career on the Hill, Hawkins worked to secure civil rights legislation. As a member of the General Subcommittee on Labor of the Committee on Education and Labor, Hawkins influenced the writing and passage of a nationwide equal employment law and the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)—a federal agency to prevent discrimination in the workplace—in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The landmark act also prohibited discrimination based on race, color, ethnicity, or religion in public accommodations and in municipal, state, and federal services. In 1963, Hawkins sponsored an equal employment bill and worked closely with James Roosevelt of California—chair of the General Subcommittee on Labor who had also introduced an equal employment bill—to shepherd legislation through the committee and into the Civil Rights Act. Hawkins believed targeting discrimination in the workforce was essential to the advancement of civil rights. Although pleased with the passage of the legislation, he called the civil rights bill “only a beginning.” He added, “It is incomplete and inadequate; but it represents a step forward.” In 1964, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act, he toured the South with Representatives Phillip Burton of California, William Donlon “Don” Edwards of California, and William Fitts Ryan of New York to champion African-American voter registration and to observe discrimination firsthand. Praising the civil rights activists who risked their lives to fight oppression, Hawkins recalled: “Being congressmen didn’t exempt us from the constant terror felt by anyone challenging established racial practices.” Later in the decade, Hawkins took the lead in advocating for improvements to the equal employment law. Beginning in 1966, Hawkins introduced legislation to give the EEOC cease-and-desist powers to compel offending employers to cooperate. In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon signed the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, a compromise bill that allowed the EEOC to sue employers in federal court.⁶

As a Member of the Education and Labor Committee Hawkins was heavily involved in the writing of much of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society legislation, but he found fault with the administration’s foreign policy in Southeast Asia. In 1969, Hawkins argued the Vietnam War was a “mistake in our foreign policy,” caused in part by “believing we can impose our way of life on other people.” Hawkins’s criticism of the war escalated throughout the 1960s and continued into the Nixon administration. Serving on a select committee to provide specialized information to the House about U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Hawkins and 11 congressional colleagues set off on a fact-finding mission to Southeast Asia in June 1970. During the trip, Hawkins and Democratic Representative William Robert Anderson of Tennessee toured a South Vietnamese prison for civilians and reported witnessing prisoners, men, women, and children locked in small stone or cement rooms, known as “Tiger Cages,” and suffering from extreme malnutrition. They drafted a House Resolution urging Congress to “condemn the cruel and inhumane treatment” of prisoners in South Vietnam. The two Representatives also pressured President Nixon to send an independent task force to investigate the prison and “prevent further degradation and death.”⁷

In Congress, Hawkins also worked to overturn historic injustices. In 1972, he succeeded in obtaining an honorable discharge for 167 Black soldiers who were dismissed from the 25th Infantry Regiment of the U.S. Army after being falsely accused of a public disturbance in Brownsville, Texas, in 1906. A year later, he proposed legislation to compensate the surviving members of the 25th Infantry Regiment and their descendants for their loss of pension and as a reward for their unjust discharge from the military. “Great harm has been done to these men and their families—much of it irreparable,” Hawkins explained in a hearing. “Yet, money compensation will, at least in part, do some concrete justice in this matter.”⁸

Throughout his career, Hawkins was determined to use his position as a Member of Congress to curb unemployment in the United States. In 1975, an economic downturn caused unemployment to soar to 8.5 percent—the highest rate in a generation. The joblessness rate for non-Whites—nearly 14 percent—was especially devastating to African Americans. From 1974 to 1978, Hawkins worked with Senator (and former Vice President) Hubert H. Humphrey Jr. of Minnesota to draft legislation

making the federal government responsible for maintaining a low unemployment rate. Hawkins first introduced full employment legislation in 1974, that would have created federal programs to provide “to every adult American,” he explained, “the fundamental human right to useful employment at fair rates of compensation.” During four years of deliberation and negotiation, Hawkins’s ambitious legislation was reshaped and pared back. Introduced in 1976, the ultimately successful full employment legislation took two years until passage. On the House Floor, Hawkins rebuked his colleagues for allowing the measure to lose momentum and urged immediate action, saying both chambers of Congress had “a serious responsibility for coming to grips with the formulation of a national economic policy.” The Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act of 1978, also known as the Humphrey–Hawkins Act, called on the President to provide a yearly report to Congress detailing how the federal government would work to reduce the unemployment rate to 4 percent by 1983. But the final version of the bill, which only vaguely resembled Hawkins’s first draft, contained few substantive guidelines for reaching the target level. At the White House signing ceremony in October 1978, President James Earl “Jimmy” Carter observed that the legislation was a tribute to Senator Humphrey, who had died earlier that year. Hawkins, who received a standing ovation for his role in the bill, recalled, “the legislation was clearly symbolic”—a judgment shared by many experts.⁹

Hawkins dedicated much of his career to enacting legislation concerning education, job training, and equality in the workplace. In 1974, he authored the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, which coordinated federal efforts to reform the juvenile justice system and provided resources to states to help keep young people in school and prevent them from running away from home. Three years later, Hawkins sponsored the Pregnancy Discrimination Act that amended Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to make discrimination against pregnant employees illegal. In an impassioned plea to his colleagues, he said, “We have the opportunity to ensure that genuine equality in the American labor force is more than an illusion and that pregnancy will no longer be the basis of unfavorable treatment of working women.” A Senate version of the legislation became law. In 1978, Hawkins sponsored and served as floor manager for a measure to reauthorize the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, legislation to provide occupational

training and create public service jobs to counter increasing unemployment during economic recessions. Hawkins's legislation targeted funding for training and employment to "economically disadvantaged" Americans, ensured states used funds to create new jobs, and reduced fraud and abuse related to administering the program. The Senate tabled the bill in favor of a version of the reauthorization that originated in that chamber; President Carter signed the bill into law in October 1978.¹⁰

In 1984, Hawkins became chair of the Education and Labor Committee a month after the death of the former chair, Representative Carl Christopher Perkins of Kentucky. Hawkins, who was known for his behind-the-scenes legislative work, believed that his top priority as chair was to ensure his committee's work became law. "You try to get things accomplished through negotiations. . . . When seniority and leadership bring certain responsibilities, you're at the top and not trying to establish any sensational new record," he said. As chair, Hawkins continued his aggressive pursuit of increased educational opportunities for the country's underprivileged communities. In 1988, Hawkins helped secure the passage of the Augustus F. Hawkins–Robert T. Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988, which updated the landmark 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act authorizing federal aid to U.S. schools. The Hawkins–Stafford bill was an omnibus education package that reauthorized funding for disadvantaged students and children of immigrants, programs for adult education and dropout prevention, and rewards for educational improvements. As chair, he also shepherded through the House legislation to renew school lunch and child nutrition programs and a bill that would have outlined a series of national educational goals for states to enact.¹¹

During his final term in office, Hawkins suffered a series of legislative setbacks. In the face of increased opposition from both Republicans and Democrats, Hawkins continued to support federally funded education and employment programs. Hawkins was unable to push through a federal childcare program, and the House failed to override a veto by President George H. W. Bush of a substantial increase in the minimum wage. Most significantly, in 1990, President Bush also vetoed a major civil rights bill sponsored by Hawkins. Passed by both the House and Senate, the Civil Rights Act of 1990 sought to increase protection from employment discrimination for minorities and women.

Even with a presidential veto looming, Hawkins declined to compromise, declaring, "We have had enough input from all parties on the bill." Hawkins portrayed the President's decision as a "national retreat from civil rights," and when the Senate failed to overturn the veto, Hawkins's legislation did not become law. In 1991, following Hawkins's retirement, a revised version of his civil rights legislation passed both chambers of Congress and was signed into law by President Bush.¹²

Hawkins's frustration with the tenor of the institution and his age led him to retire at the end of the 101st Congress in 1991. For many years afterward he lived on Capitol Hill. Hawkins died on November 10, 2007, just months after his 100th birthday, in Bethesda, Maryland. "He passed on a new tradition," noted former House colleague Yvonne Brathwaite Burke of California, "that African Americans can be elected, get high position in committees and set the tone and become leaders."¹³

Manuscript Collection

University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Special Collections (Los Angeles, CA). *Papers*: 1935–1990, 137 linear feet. The Augustus F. "Gus" Hawkins collection consists of materials documenting Hawkins's U.S. House of Representatives service from 1963 to 1990, including his chairmanship of the House Education and Labor Committee from 1984 to 1990. A small portion of the collection relates to his service in the California assembly. The collection is arranged in the following series: legislative files; subject files; correspondence files; district office files; Education and Labor Committee files; California state assembly files; and miscellaneous material. Subjects covered include civil rights, employment, equal opportunity, education, job training, and child care. A finding aid is available in the repository and online.

Notes

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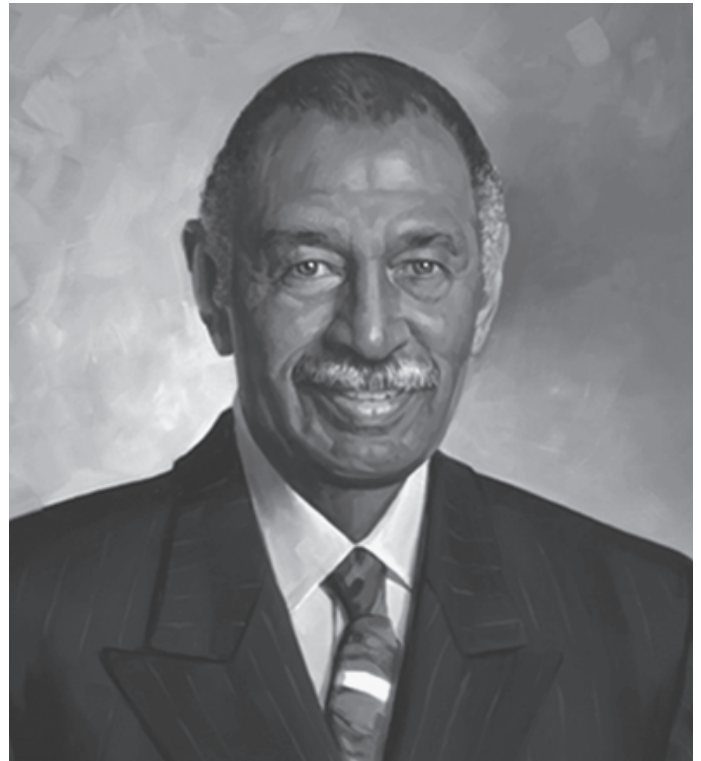
John Conyers Jr.

1929–2019

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

1965–2017

Democrat from Michigan



Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

John Conyers Jr. of Michigan served in the U.S. House of Representatives for 52 years—which, at the time of his retirement, amounted to nearly one-fifth of the House’s existence. During his career he set a number of milestones. He was the first African American to serve on the Judiciary Committee. He was one of a handful of African-American Members to head two standing committees: Government Operations and then Judiciary. And in his fiftieth year of service, he became the first African-American Dean of the House, the Member with the longest continuous service. Conyers pursued an ambitious domestic agenda in Congress, including a commission on reparations for descendants of enslaved Black Americans; universal, single-payer health care; and criminal justice. “I have been a champion of justice for the oppressed and the disenfranchised. I have never wavered in my commitment to justice and democracy,” Conyers said during his farewell address to the House.¹

The eldest of four brothers, John Conyers Jr. was born in Detroit, Michigan, on May 16, 1929, to John and Lucille Conyers. His father was an auto worker and an official for the United Automobile Workers union. His father’s work with the union spurred Conyers’s interest in politics.

“I was drawn to the struggle because my dad was a labor organizer,” he recalled. Conyers attended Detroit public schools and graduated from Northwestern High School in 1947. He served in the National Guard from 1948 to 1950 before enlisting in the U.S. Army and attending officer candidate school. Conyers was commissioned a second lieutenant with the Army Corps of Engineers and served in Korea on combat duty for a year. In 1954, he was honorably discharged and served three more years in the Army Reserves. Taking advantage of the GI Bill’s educational benefits, Conyers earned a bachelor of arts from Wayne State University in 1957 and, a year later, earned a bachelor of laws from the Wayne State Law School. In June 1990, Conyers married Monica Ann Esters. They had two sons: John III and Carl. Esters launched her own political career when she won a seat on the Detroit city council in 2005.²

Conyers’s first political experience came in college, where he joined the Young Democrats and served as a precinct official for the local Democratic Party. After college, Conyers joined the staff of Michigan Representative John David Dingell Jr. as his legislative assistant from 1958 to 1961. Conyers passed the Michigan bar in 1959 and cofounded a law firm. Michigan Governor John Burley Swainson

appointed him as a labor mediation referee for the Michigan workmen's compensation department in 1961, and he also served as general counsel for several labor union locals. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy appointed Conyers to the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, which promoted racial toleration in the legal profession.³

In the early 1960s, following a series of Supreme Court rulings that codified the idea of "one man, one vote," states were forced to reapportion their congressional districts. In Michigan the state legislature merged two House districts that stretched across a section of Detroit inhabited by White and Black middle- and upper-middle-class families. Conyers's childhood neighborhood fell within this new jurisdiction, and he decided to run in the district's Democratic primary in 1964. At the time of the election, the district was about 50 percent Black, though the percentage increased over the next decade. Conyers was 35 years old and struggled to secure the support of local Democratic leaders, who considered him young and inexperienced. He ran an insurgent campaign under the slogan "Jobs, Justice, and Peace," that tapped into his labor union contacts, the Black legal community, and his opposition to the Vietnam War. In the closely contested primary Conyers defeated his opponent by 45 votes.⁴

Detroit was a heavily Democratic city, and winning the Democratic nomination was tantamount to winning the general election. That November Conyers won with 84 percent of the vote. Along with the re-election of longtime House incumbent Charles C. Diggs Jr., also from Detroit, it marked the first time that either the city or state sent two African-American Members to Congress simultaneously.⁵

Conyers served on three standing committees during his House career: the Judiciary Committee (1965–2017), becoming the first African-American Member to serve on the panel which had jurisdiction over civil rights legislation; Government Operations Committee (1971–1995), the House's major oversight and investigative body; and the Small Business Committee (1987–1995). On Judiciary, Conyers eventually headed the Subcommittee on Crime (1973–1981) and the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice (1981–1989). In 1989, Conyers became chair of the Government Operations Committee and the panel's Subcommittee on Legislation and National Security and served until Republicans won the House majority in 1995. That year, instead of staying on Government Operations, he chose to serve as the ranking member of Judiciary and

dropped his two other committee assignments. When Democrats regained control of the House in 2007, Conyers became chair of the Judiciary Committee. After the House majority flipped again, Conyers served as the committee's ranking member from 2011 until his retirement in 2017.⁶

Conyers arrived on Capitol Hill in 1965 amid major debates about both foreign and domestic policy. Early in his first term he expressed his opposition to U.S. military involvement overseas, becoming one of seven Members to vote against supplemental appropriations to fund military actions in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. As a new Member on the Judiciary Committee, he participated in the debate and passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. By February, only a month into Conyers's first term, more than 2,000 protesters—including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—had been arrested in Selma, Alabama, amid voting rights demonstrations. Diggs and Conyers organized an unofficial fact-finding mission of 15 Representatives to investigate local efforts to block African Americans from registering to vote. Just days after King's assassination in April 1968, Conyers introduced a bill for a Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday. He introduced the same bill in every Congress until it became law in 1983.⁷

In 1967, because of Conyers's work on behalf of civil rights, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was led by King, chose Conyers as recipient of the Rosa Parks Award. Parks, who had helped galvanize the modern civil rights movement after being arrested in Alabama for refusing to give up her seat on a public bus, had moved to Detroit and served in Conyers's district office from 1965 until her retirement in 1988. When Parks died in 2005, Conyers introduced the resolution that led to Parks lying in repose in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol.⁸

In 1967, Conyers played a part in deciding the fate of the House's then-most prominent African-American Member, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York, the chair of the Education and Labor Committee. After a series of legal problems and complaints about his unpredictable committee leadership, Powell was investigated by the House Administration Committee, which determined that Powell used Education and Labor funds for private business. At the beginning of the 90th Congress (1967–1969), Conyers was appointed to a select committee headed by Emmanuel Celler of New York, the chair of the Judiciary Committee, to determine whether to sanction Powell. The select committee recommended that the House allow Powell

to take his seat under the condition that he be censured, fined, and stripped of his committee seniority. Conyers filed a dissent that favored seating and censuring Powell but proposed that the House either fine the long-serving New York Democrat or strip him of his seniority, but not both. The House ultimately rejected the committee's recommendation and decided not to seat Powell at all.⁹

As the number of Black Members increased to nine in 1969 and 12 in 1971, African-American Members of Congress looked to exert more legislative influence across Capitol Hill. In 1971, Conyers was one of the founding members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), which brought together African-American legislators to work on a number of policies. Before the opening of the 92nd Congress (1971–1973), Conyers led a campaign to challenge the seating of members of the Mississippi delegation, who had supported presidential candidate and segregationist George C. Wallace of Alabama in 1968. When the Democratic Caucus decided to seat the Members-elect, Conyers led a symbolic challenge to Majority Leader Carl Albert of Oklahoma for the Speakership during the Democratic Caucus's organizational meeting. The caucus voted 220 to 20 in favor of Albert, and Conyers gained the votes of only some of the 11 other African-American Members. Conyers's follow-up motion to strip the Mississippi Democrats of their committee seniority failed 111 to 55—though in this case every Black Member voted for his measure. Conyers challenged Albert for Speaker again in the next Congress, accusing House Democratic leadership of “stagnation and reaction” when confronting the Republican administration of Richard M. Nixon. As in his previous attempt, Conyers lost by a wide margin, 202 to 25.¹⁰

Conyers was actively involved in the House's oversight of the Nixon administration. In 1972, Conyers and four colleagues introduced a resolution to impeach President Nixon for the President's escalation of the Vietnam War, which, the five Members claimed, exceeded congressional authorization. On the Judiciary Committee, Conyers also played a central role during the Watergate crisis that ended Nixon's presidency in 1974. Conyers supported the House impeachment effort against Nixon from the start and was such a consistent opponent of the administration that he was included on Nixon's notorious “enemies list” twice: once as an individual Member and again as a member of the CBC. When Vice President Spiro T. Agnew resigned

in disgrace in 1973, President Nixon nominated House Republican Leader Gerald R. Ford of Michigan to serve as Vice President. Under the provisions of the Twenty-fifth Amendment, Ford's nomination had to be approved by the House, and Conyers pushed the Judiciary Committee to act on Nixon's impeachment before considering Ford's nomination. Conyers's effort to remove Nixon before confirming Ford failed, but when the Judiciary Committee later voted for three impeachment articles against Nixon in 1974, Conyers sponsored a fourth article charging Nixon with conducting an illegal and secret war in Cambodia. Conyers's article was voted down, but the campaign to oust Nixon had its intended effect: Nixon resigned rather than risk being removed from office.¹¹

Conyers often criticized the direction of the national Democratic Party. Believing President James Earl “Jimmy” Carter to be too moderate, he endorsed Massachusetts Senator Edward Moore “Ted” Kennedy in the 1980 Democratic presidential primary. In 1984 and 1988, he backed the Reverend Jesse Jackson's bids for the Democratic presidential nomination. Conyers claimed that he had devoted more days to supporting Jackson's 1988 campaign than any other African-American Member of the House.¹²

As the chair of the Judiciary Committee's Crime and Criminal Justice Subcommittees, Conyers sought to redirect the priorities of federal crime fighting programs. He criticized the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), which provided federal funding to state and local police departments, because LEAA grants were used to fund prison construction and police technology. Conyers believed that such funding should be redirected to crime prevention programs. Stressing the need for alternatives to mass incarceration, Conyers said, “Incarceration, especially of juveniles, virtually guarantees an individual will live a life of crime.” He introduced legislation to replace the LEAA with a Bureau of Criminal Justice Assistance. The new Bureau would award grants to fund programs to address community-based crime prevention, alternatives to traditional incarceration, juvenile delinquency, and white-collar crime. In 1988, Conyers sponsored the Racial Justice Act, which would have allowed for racial statistics of those executed by a particular jurisdiction to be taken into consideration during capital punishment cases. A similar bill passed the House as part of the 1994 crime bill but was later dropped from the final version due to Senate opposition.¹³

In 1987, the Judiciary Committee faced an unusual workload, conducting three impeachment investigations into alleged misconduct by federal judges. Rather than send all three cases to the Civil and Constitutional Rights Subcommittee, which traditionally handled impeachment issues, Judiciary Committee Chairman Peter Wallace Rodino Jr. of New Jersey assigned the case of Alcee L. Hastings, an African-American U.S. judge for the Southern District of Florida, to Conyers's Criminal Justice Subcommittee. Though Rodino made the assignment to distribute the unexpected workload, he also suspected that Conyers would be sensitive to any racist motives behind the case against Hastings. After two months reviewing files and holding hearings, Conyers's subcommittee reported 17 articles of impeachment against Hastings, which the House adopted 413 to 3. Though Conyers admired Hastings's judicial career, he explained, "A black public official must be held to the same standard" as any other. "A lower standard would be patronizing, a higher standard would be racist." Conyers went on to serve as one of the House managers at Hastings's trial before the Senate.¹⁴

In 1989, Conyers became chair of the Government Operations Committee, the premiere investigative body in the House responsible for conducting oversight of the executive branch. In 1990, following a series of scandals in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development involving fraud and the diversion of funds to supporters of the Ronald Reagan administration, Conyers sponsored a bill to require Cabinet-level and other major agencies to hire a chief financial officer to report to the Office of Management and Budget, which was tasked with creating a financial management improvement plan across the federal government.¹⁵

The Judiciary Committee again confronted the crisis of presidential impeachment while Conyers was the ranking Democrat in the 1990s. As House Republicans investigated whether President William J. Clinton had committed perjury before a federal grand jury and obstructed justice amid a sexual harassment lawsuit filed against him, Conyers spearheaded the opposition and worked to prevent efforts to impeach Clinton. "This does sometimes to some people begin to take on the appearance of a coup," he said. "It's frightening, it's staggering, this is not in a developing country, we're talking about a polite, paper-exchanging, voting process in which we rip out the forty-second president of the United States." The House eventually

impeached Clinton, but the Senate did not remove him from office.¹⁶

As ranking member on Judiciary, Conyers often cooperated with his GOP counterparts. In 1996, he joined Republican Judiciary Chairman Henry John Hyde of Illinois in advancing new hate crime legislation after several African-American church burnings. Conyers managed to maintain his working relationship with Hyde even through the contentious Clinton impeachment; he and Hyde later cosponsored a measure on civil forfeitures and, in 2000, defeated a Senate bill that would have penalized newspapers for divulging classified material. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Conyers and the new Judiciary chair, Frank James Sensenbrenner Jr. of Wisconsin, crafted the USA PATRIOT Act, a landmark anti-terrorism bill.¹⁷

When Democrats regained the House majority in 2007—following 12 years of Republican rule—Conyers was elected chair of the Judiciary Committee after more than four decades of service on the panel. As Judiciary Committee chair, Conyers prioritized hearings to review what he believed to be an unfair disparity in criminal penalties for possession of powder cocaine and crack cocaine. Under the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, mandatory minimum sentences of five years were imposed on those who possessed at least 500 grams of powder cocaine, or only five grams of crack cocaine, a cheaper substance that was more prevalent in low-income communities of color, which were disproportionately targeted by the police as a result. Conyers supported the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010, which raised possession limits of crack cocaine needed for mandatory minimum sentences and eliminated minimum sentences for first-time offenders. Conyers also cosponsored the Second Chance Act, a recidivism reduction measure that funded mentorship, drug treatment, and vocational training for those who had served time in prison.¹⁸

For nearly three decades, Conyers called for reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States. From 1989 to 2017, Conyers repeatedly introduced legislation to create a commission to study and develop proposals to remedy the legacy and impact of slavery and racial discrimination in the United States since 1619. In 2007, he presided over a Judiciary subcommittee hearing to consider his bill. In April 2021, a year and a half after his death, the reparations commission bill, then sponsored by Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas, was approved by the committee and sent to the full House for the first time.¹⁹

Outside of his committee service, Conyers frequently introduced legislation to create a national health insurance program to provide comprehensive medical care for all Americans. “Universal health care is practiced more or less successfully in every other industrialized country,” said Conyers. “To have so many millions of people without any ability to afford health care is immoral, indefensible.”²⁰

At different times during his career, Conyers ran afoul of House ethics standards and rules. In the early 1990s, Conyers was among hundreds of Members who made overdrafts of their accounts with the House “bank,” an internal financial service managed by a House officer, which allowed Members to deposit their pay checks and provided overdraft protection for Members without penalty. Conyers’s 273 overdrafts were among the highest. Although the repeated withdrawals did not technically violate House Rules at the time, the lack of oversight and accountability generated significant public backlash and led to major institutional reforms. In November 2003, the *Detroit Free Press* published an extensive investigation detailing the use of Conyers’s congressional staff in political campaigns for his House races and his wife’s Detroit city council election. Following an Ethics Committee investigation, the committee reached an agreement with Conyers in December 2006 to take “a number of additional steps to ensure that his office complies with all rules and standards regarding campaign work by congressional staff.”²¹

For many years, Conyers won easy re-election to the House and showed little public interest in seeking other offices. But he surprised many when he decided to challenge Coleman A. Young for Detroit mayor in 1989. Young won the Democratic primary with 51 percent of the vote while Conyers came in third place with 18 percent. After Young retired four years later, Conyers again ran for mayor of Detroit and came in well behind with only eight percent of the primary vote.²²

Conyers experienced the closest elections of his House tenure late in his career. Beginning with the 1980 Census, Michigan began losing House seats with each reapportionment, and in 2012 Michigan’s Republican state legislature significantly redrew Conyers’s district to include communities he had never represented. In a crowded Democratic primary, opponents charged Conyers with weak constituency service, and he received a lackluster endorsement from the *Detroit Free Press*: “Our backing of Conyers has reflected the arc of his career: first enthusiastic,

then ambivalent, and now nearly agitated as his energy and effectiveness are clearly on a downward slope.” Conyers won his primary with only 55 percent of the vote. In 2014, Conyers nearly missed appearing on the primary ballot after state and local officials ruled that many of the signatures on his campaign petition were invalid. Eventually, a federal judge ruled that Conyers could appear on the ballot, and he won the primary with 74 percent of the vote.²³

In the fall of 2017, news reports revealed that two years earlier Conyers had used funds from his congressional office in a confidentiality agreement to settle a sexual harassment charge brought by a former woman staff assistant. The disclosure came amid the #MeToo movement, as women across the country used Twitter and other media platforms to speak about their experiences as victims of sexual harassment and assault. As a result, Conyers stepped down as ranking member of the Judiciary Committee before resigning from the House on December 5, 2017. Conyers died in Detroit on October 27, 2019.²⁴

Notes

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