

Black History: Blacks in Congress and the Presidency

This year's (2009) Black History Month is especially historic as the nation welcomes the first Black President of the United States, Barack Hussein Obama to office. As we prepare to add this historical fact to the body of data that chronicles our journey as a nation, we cannot help but reflect on the other 121 Black leaders who have over time graced the floors of Congress as members of the House or Senate. This brief report, presented by the State Data Center, brings you excerpts from the publication entitled 'Black Americans in Congress: 1870-2007' prepared under the direction of The Committee on House Administration of the U.S. House of Representatives, and captions from other sources.

1870-1887

The first Blacks to arrive in Congress were Senator Hiram Revels of Mississippi and Representative Joseph Rainey of South Carolina. Their arrival was ranked among the greatest paradoxes in American history since just a decade earlier, these African Americans' congressional seats were held by white southern slave owners. From 1870 to 1887, there were 17 Black Congressmen who were referred to as 'the symbolic generation,' symbolizing the triumph of the Union and the determination of Radical Republicans to enact reforms to reshape the political landscape of the South during Reconstruction. Of the 17, eight were former slaves and the others were mulatto, mixed race, or free black classes, and relatively

well-to-do. However, they were shunned by southern whites and were never fully trusted by freedmen, who questioned whether they had Blacks' interest at heart.

They adopted various legislative strategies and focused on three primary goals, namely, education, political rights, and opportunity for economic independence. As Richard Cain of South Carolina (1877-1879) declared on the House Floor, "All we asked of this country is to put no barriers between us, to lay no stumbling blocks in our way; to give us freedom to accomplish our destiny." However, despite their distinguished service and symbolic value they were not able to accomplish much. Key civil rights and constitutional amendments were enacted before a single Black served in Congress.



"First Colored Senator and Representatives in the 41st and 42nd Congress of the United States."
(Left to right) Senator Hiram Revels of Mississippi, Representatives Benjamin Turner of Alabama, Robert DeLarge of South Carolina, Josiah Walls of Florida, Jefferson Long of Georgia, Joseph Rainey and Robert B. Elliot of South Carolina. By Currier and Ives, 1872

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1887-1929

With the end of Reconstruction in 1877, ex-confederates and their Democratic allies took power from the Republican-controlled state governments and effectively eliminated Blacks from public office. From 1887 to 1901, just five Blacks served in Congress as they encountered an institution that was generally hostile to their presence and their legislative goals. They were relegated to lower-tier committee assignments and few connections to leadership at the center of power.

As the years went by, it became more difficult for Blacks to win seats to Congress. Obstacles of the day included violence, intimidation and fraud by white supremacists; state and local disfranchisement laws that denied an increasing number of Blacks the right to vote; and contested election challenges in Congress. However, after 1901, larger social and historic forces created future political opportunities for Blacks in the northern United States. Southern black political activism moved northwards changing the social and cultural dynamic of established Black communities in northern cities, as rural, agrarian Blacks were lured to industrialized cities by jobs and greater political freedom.

Advocacy groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were founded during this era, and they lobbied Congress on issues that were of interest to the Black community. But without a single Black member in Congress to advocate Black interest, Congress refused to enact legislation to improve conditions for Blacks.

1929-1970

Black membership in Congress resumed in 1929 when Oscar De Priest entered the House in 1929. All 13 Black members who entered in this period represented northern constituencies that were majority black, urban districts, except for one, and Democrats, except for two. Both the New Deal and World War II rekindled Black political activism and paved the way for the civil rights movement.

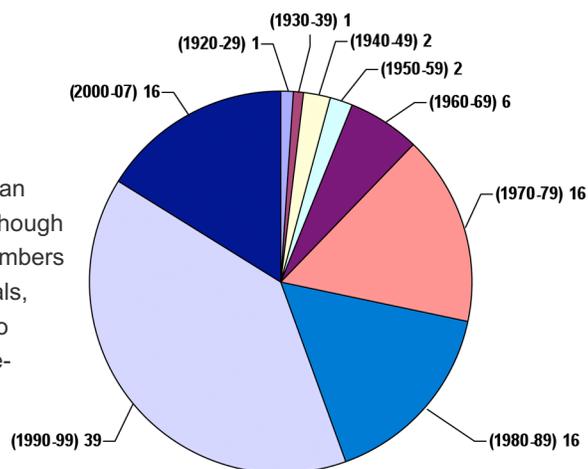
In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, Black members of Congress embarked on a long institutional apprenticeship, and attained more desirable committee assignments and leadership positions. Their accomplishments in Congress coincided with the blossoming of the civil rights movement on the streets of the South, headed by Martin Luther King, Jr., and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Though NAACP, the SCLC, and Black members of Congress shared the same goals, they differed on the tactics used to achieve them. The greatest consequence of the civil rights movement is said to be its decisive effect on the early political

development of many who entered Congress after 1970.

During this period the first African-American women, Shirley Anita Chisholm, entered congress representing a newly reapportioned U.S. House district centered in Brooklyn, New York.

The 91st Congress (1969-1971) had the highest number of Black members (11) since 1870, and they only accounted for 2 percent of the membership. But change was coming (Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Black Americans First Elected to Congress by Decade, 1920-2007



Shirley A. Chisholm (Democratic Representative from New York) an advocate for minority rights was the first Black woman elected to Congress (1969-1983).

1971-2007

In the 1970s, the number of Black members in Congress doubled that of the previous decade. The increase in their numbers brought an increase in the momentum to organize. This was the post-civil rights movement generation of lawmakers and they created a legislative groundswell on Capitol Hill. The civil rights acts of the 1960s and court-ordered redistricting motivated Blacks and provided new opportunities for political participation for millions. As a result, many more Blacks were elected to politi-

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cal office and to Congress. Of the 121 Blacks who have graced the floors of Congress from 1870 to 2007, 86 members (71 percent) were seated in Congress after 1970. Among those seated were names like Andrew Young of Georgia (1973-1977), Barbara Jordan of Texas (1973-1979), and Harold Ford, Sr., of Tennessee (1975-1997). Also among this group was Walter Fauntroy, the first African American to represent the District of Columbia (Delegate 1971-



Walter Edward Fauntroy (Delegate, 1971-1991, Democrat from the District of Columbia)



Eleanor Holmes Norton (Delegate, 1991-present, Democrat from the District of Columbia)

1991), and Eleanor Holmes Norton (Delegate, 1991-present). The 1992 elections was particularly noteworthy as Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois (1993-1999) was elected the first Black woman and the first African-American Democrat to serve in the U.S. Senate.

In 1971, the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) was formed. Thirteen Black Members of Congress led by Charles C. Diggs, Jr., of Michigan (1955-1980) formed the CBC to address the interests of Black Americans, advance Black members within the institution, and promote and push legislation. Among their legislative achievements were the passage of the Humphrey-Hawkins Act of 1978 to promote full employment and a balanced budget, the 1983 Martin Luther King, Jr., federal holiday, and the 1986 imposed first sanctions against South Africa's all-white government for its practice of apartheid.

Black Congressional Members of this era had more experience in elective office, particularly in state legislatures, than their predecessors. They held positions on many committees and panels, including the most coveted committees, such as Appropriations, Ways and Means, and Rules, which dealt with legislative issues affecting every facet of American life. Fourteen Black members chaired congressional committee between 1971 and the first session of the 110th Congress (2007-2009). For the first time Black members rose into the ranks of party leadership, including Bill Gray as Majority Whip (1989-1991); J.C. Watts of Oklahoma, Republican Conference Chairman (1999-2003); and James Clyburn of South Carolina, Democratic Majority Whip (elected in 2007).

Despite all the inroads made by Black Americans in Congress over more than a century, Blacks in Congress continue to face new challenges. By the end of the first session of the 110th Congress

(2007-2009), 41 Black Representatives and one Black senator (Barack Obama) were representing constituencies with different geographies and varying special interest that defined their agendas. Additionally, gender diversity continued to impact the Black members of Congress. After the first Black woman in Congress, Shirley Chisholm, in 1968, another 25 African American women were elected to Congress, and played a significant role in shaping the history of Blacks in Congress.

The First Black President

November 4th, 2008, saw the election of Senator Barack Hussein Obama of Illinois to be the 44th President of the United States and the first Black person to hold this office. Barack Obama, a graduate of Columbia University and Harvard Law School, began his political career as a community activist in the South Side Chicago neighborhood in 1985. He also practiced civil rights law and lectured at the University of Chicago Law School during that time. He was

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President Barack Obama, first Black president of the United States of America (elected November 4th, 2008 and sworn in as the 44th president on January 20th, 2009)

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elected to the Illinois state senate in 1996 and served in that capacity through 2004, with main accomplishments being the passing of the state earned income tax credit and an expansion of early childhood education.

In 2004, Barack Obama joined a crowded field of candidates in the Democratic primary for an open seat just vacated by U.S. Senator Peter Fitzgerald, a Republican, who retired. Barack Obama gained 53 percent of the votes beating out other more well known candidates. It was during that campaign that Barack Obama emerged as a national figure, delivering a rousing keynote address on the second night of the Democratic National Convention in the summer of 2004. In that speech, he dared Americans to have “the audacity of hope.” He explained this to be “It’s the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs. The hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores..... The hope of a skinny kid with a family name who believes that America has a place for him too.” Barack Obama won the elections by a landslide 70 percent vote and became the U.S. Senator from Illinois in the 109th Congress (2005-2007).

During Obama’s tenure in the Senate he focused on many issues. Among these issues were lobbying and ethics reform,

benefits for veterans, energy efficiency, nuclear proliferation, and government transparency. In February 2007, Senator Obama announced his intention to run as a candidate for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination. Senator Obama campaigned on a platform of hope and change, and electrified the American people with ‘Yes We Can,’ to become the Democratic presidential nominee who went on to defeat the Republican challenger, Senator John Mc Cain of Arizona on November 4, 2008 with 53 percent of the votes.

January 20, 2009 saw the largest ever attendance at an inauguration in the history of the United States with a crowd estimated at 1.8 million. In his inaugural address, President Barack Obama asked the nation to begin the task of remaking America. He said, “Let it be said by our children’s children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God’s grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.”

This day added another page to the American history books, and more so, to Black history and Black History Month forever. It was indeed a proud moment for people of all races and ethnicity all over the world, but especially for Black Americans whose numbers were estimated at 38.7 million or 12.8 percent of the U.S. population in 2007.

Welcome Mr. President and the Obama family to the White House and to the District of Columbia, you have just increased our population by four persons.

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