



Julius Caesar (J. C.) Watts, Jr.

1957–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1995–2003
REPUBLICAN FROM OKLAHOMA

A college football hero, charismatic conservative, and gifted public speaker, J. C. Watts had star power when he took the oath of office as a Member of the first Republican majority in 40 years. One of two black Republicans in Congress in his freshman term, Watts cited his humble roots in a segregated Oklahoma farm town as the source of his belief in self-reliance and disdain of social welfare. “I wasn’t raised to be a Republican or Democrat,” Watts recalled. “My parents just taught by example. They taught me and my brothers and sisters that if you lived under their roof, you were going to work.”¹ Watts quickly became one of the GOP’s most visible spokesmen, quickly rising to the position of Republican Conference Chair—the fourth-highest-ranking Republican in the House. His uneasy relationship with party leaders and a desire to spend more time with his family cut short Watts’s Capitol Hill career in its prime.

Julius Caesar (J. C.) Watts, Jr., was born in the farming community of Eufaula, Oklahoma, on November 18, 1957. His mother, Helen Watts, a homemaker, raised six children: Melvin, Lawrence, Mildred, Gwen, J. C., and Darlene. Watts’s father, Julius Caesar (Buddy) Watts, was a police officer, a businessman, and a minister. The elder Watts also served on the Eufaula city council, and along with his brother, Wade, was active in the Democratic Party and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Wade Watts headed the Oklahoma branch of the NAACP for 16 years.² J. C. Watts was one of the first black children to attend a previously all-white elementary school in Eufaula. At Eufaula High School, Watts was the first African-American quarterback for the school’s football team; some of Watts’s teammates from the mostly segregated local community protested at first.³ While in high school, Watts fathered two daughters with two different women. One child, Tia, was adopted

by Watt’s Uncle Wade.⁴ Watts married his other daughter’s mother, Frankie Jones, whom he first met at his seventh birthday party. The couple raised five children: LaKeshia, Jerrell, Jennifer, Julia, and Trey.⁵

After graduating in 1976, Watts played football and studied journalism at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. At first, he was a seventh-string quarterback. Discouraged with his minimal playing time, he left school multiple times. In each instance, his father persuaded him to return.⁶ In 1979, Watts became the starting quarterback and led the Sooners to Orange Bowl victories in 1980 and 1981. He was named the bowl’s most valuable player both years, and he was inducted into the Orange Bowl Hall of Fame in 1992. Watts’s athletic prowess provided him with motivational speaking opportunities while he was in college.⁷

Following Watts’s graduation in 1981, the New York Jets, a National Football League (NFL) team, offered him a place on their roster, but it was not in his favorite position as quarterback. Watts turned down the NFL offer and played from 1981 to 1986 in the Canadian Football League (CFL).⁸ Watts then returned to Oklahoma to become a youth minister at Sunnyvale Baptist Church, in Del City, Oklahoma. Ordained in 1993, he supplemented his ministerial income by opening his own highway construction company. His discontent with government regulation of his business led him to contemplate running for office.

Despite the Watts family’s long-standing public support for the Democratic Party—Buddy Watts once quipped that “a black man voting for the Republicans makes about as much sense as a chicken voting for Colonel Sanders”—J. C. Watts subscribed to the Republican message of social and fiscal conservatism.⁹ He first considered changing his party allegiance when he covered a 1980 Oklahoma senate





★ JULIUS CAESAR (J. C.) WATTS, JR. ★

campaign as a journalism student and found that his views were more in line with those of the Republican candidate, Don Nickles.¹⁰ He officially changed his party affiliation in 1989. “I switched my registration not out of convenience but out of conviction,” Watts later recalled. “I knew what I was doing would not be popular. It created some strain, even in relationships I had built over the years. But I knew in my heart that this was the right road, the honest road for me to take and remain true to my own principles.”¹¹ In 1990, Watts ran for a seat on the Oklahoma corporation commission, an organization that regulated the state’s telephone, oil, and gas industries. With Oklahoma party loyalty tending to split along racial lines, officials in the state Republican Party eagerly embraced Watts.¹² He won a seat on the commission, serving as chairman from 1993 until his departure in 1995.¹³

In 1994, seven-term Representative Dave McCurdy of Oklahoma announced that he was running for the U.S. Senate and local Republican businessmen urged Watts to run for McCurdy’s seat. McCurdy represented a conservative southwest Oklahoma district, with several oil reserves and three major military installations. Agriculture was also a major industry and the district included the University of Oklahoma in Norman.¹⁴ Watts entered the primary as a “textbook conservative”: He favored the death penalty, school prayer, a balanced budget amendment and welfare reform. He also opposed abortion and cuts in defense spending.¹⁵

Watts faced a tough August primary challenge against state representative Ed Apple, winning 49 percent to Apple’s 48 percent; however, state law required a runoff primary if no candidate won more than 50 percent of the vote.¹⁶ In preparation for the September contest, Watts brought in high-powered Republicans to campaign for him, including New York Representative Jack Kemp, a football star, and National Rifle Association spokesman and actor Charlton Heston. Watts also secured the endorsement of the House Republican leadership. Apple lambasted Watts’s courting of out-of-state luminaries. Comparing his local campaign to Watts’s star-power

support, he declared, “It’s grassroots vs. glitz.”¹⁷ The runoff remained close, but Watts prevailed with 52 percent of the vote.

Watts continued to host high-profile Republicans for his general election campaign, including former President George H. W. Bush, Kansas Senator Bob Dole, and future Republican Speaker (then Republican Whip) Newt Gingrich of Georgia.¹⁸ He and his Democratic opponent, local attorney David Perryman, a self-described conservative, soon found themselves in a close, heated campaign. In an attempt to appeal to the district’s conservative farming voters, Perryman launched an advertisement depicting Watts with his Afro hairstyle in high school juxtaposed against images of himself as a teenager posing with his prize-winning pigs.¹⁹ The advertisement’s racial overtones attracted national attention and Perryman offered to change the photograph of Watts in the advertisement.²⁰ Watts’s firm conservative platform and his popularity among Oklahoma Sooners fans prevailed. He defeated Perryman and Independent candidate Bill Tiffie, with 52 percent of the vote.²¹

Watts’s victory established several milestones. He was the first black Representative elected from Oklahoma and the first Republican to win the district in 72 years.²² He was sworn in to the 104th Congress (1995–1997) as part of the GOP national tide, putting the party in power in the House for the first time in 40 years. Watts increased his victories in his next three re-election campaigns, winning by as much as 65 percent in 2000.²³ He received assignments on the Banking and Financial Services Committee and National Security Committee (later renamed Armed Services). The latter panel was crucial to the oversight of the three military installations in his district. Watts left the Banking and Financial Services Committee for a spot on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee in the 105th Congress (1997–1999). In the 106th Congress (1999–2001), he turned down a position on the prestigious Appropriations Committee when a seat opened midterm; he did not want to leave the Transportation Committee.



★ JULIUS CAESAR (J. C.) WATTS, JR. ★

The GOP hoped that Watts, as one of two black Republicans in the House (Representative Gary Franks was also re-elected to a Connecticut district), would court African-American voters, who overwhelmingly voted Democratic in national elections. Watts focused on promoting the GOP through black organizations. He often attended NAACP meetings and met with representatives from historically black colleges.²⁴ “Most black people don’t think alike. Most black people just vote alike,” he argued. “Why is it that so many people in the black community [who] would agree with Republican issues, why don’t they vote Republican? I think that’s the question we have to ask.”²⁵ However, Watts stressed that he represented his district, rather than strictly his race. “My father raised me to be a man, not a black man,” Watts declared.²⁶ “I am black, but that’s not all of who I am,” he later added.²⁷ Accordingly, Watts declined an invitation to join the traditionally liberal Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). “I think the CBC and I want the same things for the black community,” he mused. “The difference is how we get there.”²⁸

Representative Watts supported a fiscally conservative agenda, voting 95 percent of the time for legislative initiatives from the Contract With America, a 1994 Republican campaign promise to limit government spending and corruption.²⁹ Watts’s legislative emphasis was based on his belief that public assistance programs encouraged dependency in poor minorities.³⁰ In 1995, Watts teamed with Representative Jim Talent of Missouri to create the Renewal Community Project, legislation that provided tax breaks and the deregulation of small businesses, school vouchers allowing parents to choose their children’s schools, and funding for faith-based organizations assisting low-income communities. In 2000 Watts reintroduced the legislation as the American Community Renewal Act, adding tax cuts for low-income communities as well as opportunities for home ownership. The new legislation also eliminated the capital gains tax and provided a “wage credit” for businesses that hired qualified low-income employees. Watts’s goal was to help

low-income families save money. “Under the current tax system, we penalize savings and investment and productivity,” he argued. “Those are three things we should be rewarding.”³¹ The legislation gained bipartisan support. President William J. (Bill) Clinton’s administration supported the measure and Speaker Dennis Hastert dubbed the bill among the GOP’s top three priorities for the second session of the 106th Congress (1999–2001).³² The legislation was signed into law in December 2000.

Though Watts embraced his role as a conservative, he attempted to remain outside the debate on affirmative action.³³ “Affirmative action isn’t the problem,” Watts argued. “Lousy education for black kids is the problem. Until you fix these schools don’t talk to me about equal opportunity.”³⁴ Watts’s personal experience with continued racism led him to believe the United States was not ready to abolish preferences for minorities, and Watts opposed a bill submitted by fellow black Republican Gary Franks of Connecticut and Florida Republican Charles Canady in the 104th Congress to eliminate affirmative action practices in the federal government. As the bill gained momentum in the Republican House, Watts appealed directly to Speaker Newt Gingrich to block it. “Look, in principle I don’t agree with affirmative action,” he told Gingrich, “but in practice, we still don’t have a level playing field.” An emotional Watts admitted to the Speaker that he was “thinking with my heart here, not my head.” Sympathetic to Watts’s position, the Speaker arranged for the bill to die in the Judiciary Committee.³⁵

Representative Watts’s ability to draw national attention earned him a reputation as the GOP’s “Great Black Hope.”³⁶ In 1996, the Republican Party tapped him to deliver the GOP response to President Clinton’s State of the Union Address.³⁷ He was the youngest Representative and the first African American to be accorded this honor.³⁸ Watts’s response was generally well received. He spoke about reducing the role of government in American lives. “Government can’t ease all pain. In fact, Government sometimes rubs the wound raw and makes healing harder,” he argued. “I’m afraid that when the



[Clinton] Administration and others talk about race it sounds to me like the same old, same old—a bunch of sermons and sloganizing that defends the old assumption that Government can heal the racial divide.” Watts concluded that the GOP’s “mission is to return power to your home, to where mothers and fathers can exercise it according to their beliefs.”³⁹ Watts was rumored as a possible vice presidential candidate in 1996, serving as co-chairman for GOP presidential candidate Bob Dole.⁴⁰ Former Representative Kemp eventually received the vice presidential nomination.

In 1998, Watts capitalized on a GOP Conference roiled by a poor showing in the midterm elections to challenge incumbent Conference Chairman John Boehner of Ohio. Though Republicans had maintained their majority, exit polls showed high African-American voter turnout in the South, the GOP’s stronghold, and only 11 percent of these Black Americans voted Republican—down from 18 percent in 1996.⁴¹ Though he claimed he was not running as a black candidate, Watts emphasized the GOP’s need for broader appeal to minorities. In a letter to House Republicans, he wrote, “It is time to let the American people know that the Republican Party is the party of all Americans. We are the party of inclusiveness. Our ideas are good for everyone.”⁴² Supporters emphasized Watts’s strong oratorical skills, noting that the GOP lacked a charismatic spokesperson. On Watts’s 41st birthday, November 18, 1998, he prevailed against Boehner, 121 to 93, in the race for chairman of the House Republican Conference, the GOP’s fourth highest position in the House.⁴³ Watts was the first African American to join the Republican leadership and was subsequently re-elected to the position for the 107th Congress (2001–2003).

However, Watts’s tenure in the leadership proved difficult. Despite his elevated post, Watts often felt alienated by GOP decision makers.⁴⁴ He also found himself at odds with powerful Republican Whip Tom DeLay of Texas. Watts disagreed with DeLay’s often forceful leadership. As a result, the GOP Whip’s hands-on approach to gathering votes and maintaining party

unity often overstepped Watts’s role as the hub for communication within the GOP Conference. In July 1999, Watts threatened to resign from his leadership position to protest DeLay’s alleged encroachment on his duties, but he stopped short of doing so. When Majority Leader Dick Armey of Texas announced his retirement in 2002, Watts considered running to replace him and he quietly solicited the aid of congressional allies; however, DeLay openly nailed down enough votes to secure the position before Watts made an open bid for Majority Leader.⁴⁵

Watts also felt ignored by Republican President George W. Bush’s administration. In 2002, the Pentagon considered eliminating funding for an \$11 billion weapons system that would be partially assembled in Watts’s district in Elgin, Oklahoma. Watts later claimed that President Bush refused to return his phone calls after targeting the project for spending cuts. When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced the program’s demise on May 8, Watts was only given two hours’ notice from the Pentagon. An early and avid supporter of the Bush administration, Watts was furious. When the President addressed the Republican Conference on Capitol Hill the next week, Watts was conspicuously absent.⁴⁶

In 2002, Watts declined to run for re-election to the 108th Congress (2003–2005), citing a desire to spend more time with his family, who had remained in Oklahoma during his tenure in Washington. “This business is hard on families,” he admitted. “I don’t want to do this for the rest of my life. There are other things I want to do and can do. You have to be careful about getting on this treadmill.”⁴⁷ Prominent Representatives of both parties implored him to stay, recognizing that his unique position brought diversity to the House. “I hate to see him go,” noted CBC Member James Clyburn of South Carolina, a prominent Democrat. “J. C. is someone who really has been quietly and forcefully doing a lot of good.”⁴⁸ Civil rights leader Rosa Parks, who, in 1955, famously refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus, wrote to Watts. “If you can,” Parks implored him, “please remain as a pioneer on the Republicans’ side until others come to



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assist you. I am glad that I stayed in my seat.”⁴⁹ Though appreciative of the support, Watts noted that “the strength in this business is not hanging on. The real strength is to let go.”⁵⁰ Watts’s political ally, Republican Tom Cole, won his congressional seat in the 2002 election. Though Watts left Congress, he did not abandon the political spotlight. He formed a consulting business and currently serves as a nationally recognized political analyst.

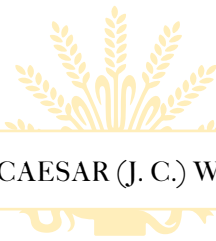
FOR FURTHER READING

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NOTES

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- 5 J. C. Watts, Jr., *What Color Is Conservative?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002): 39.
- 6 “J. C. Watts,” *Newsmakers 1999*.
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- 8 Watts started with the Ottawa Rough Riders before joining the Toronto Argonauts in 1985. In his rookie season, he led the Rough Riders to victory in the Grey Cup (the Canadian Football League championship). See “Watts, J. C., Jr.,” *Current Biography, 1999*: 591; “J.C. Watts,” *Newsmakers 1999*.
- 9 Quoted in Jake Tapper, “Fade to White,” 5 January 2003, *Washington Post Magazine*: W6.
- 10 “Watts, J. C., Jr.,” *Current Biography, 1999*: 591.
- 11 Watts, *What Color is Conservative?:* 152.
- 12 “J. C. Watts,” *Newsmakers 1999*. Though convinced of Watts’s party loyalty, Republican officials worried that African-American voters who came to the polls to vote for Watts would split their tickets and cast their ballots for other Democratic candidates. Watts called this a “sick, pathetic theory.” See Tapper, “Fade to White.”
- 13 Watts’s service on the commission was clouded by accusations that he accepted large campaign contributions from the oil and gas businesses he was responsible for regulating. See Jo Thomas, “Rising Congressional Leader Experienced in Self-Defense,” 16 November 1998, *New York Times*: A1.
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★ JULIUS CAESAR (J. C.) WATTS, JR. ★

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- 32 Jim Myers, "Watts' Plan Gets Push; Re-election Question Yet Unanswered," 7 January 2000, *Tulsa World* (Tulsa, OK).
- 33 Steven A. Holmes, "2 Black G.O.P. Lawmakers in House Differ Slightly on Affirmative Action," 6 August 1995, *New York Times*: 22.
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- 35 Ibid.
- 36 "J.C. Watts," *Newsmakers 1999*.
- 37 Watts had previously rebutted President Clinton's post-election radio address in 1994. See "Watts, J.C., Jr.," *Current Biography, 1999*: 591.
- 38 Watts's response, delivered before a live audience in the Library of Congress, was quickly overshadowed by the announcement of a verdict in the civil trial of former NFL player O.J. Simpson. Some major networks divided their screen between Simpson and Watts, quickly returning full coverage to Simpson's trial in California at the end of the Representative's statement. Katharine Q. Seelye, "G.O.P., After Fumbling in '96, Turns to Orator for Response," 5 February 1997, *New York Times*: A1.
- 39 Seelye, "G.O.P., After Fumbling in '96, Turns to Orator for Response"; "J.C. Watts," *Newsmakers 1999*.
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WATTS DECLINED AN INVITATION
TO JOIN THE TRADITIONALLY
LIBERAL CONGRESSIONAL
BLACK CAUCUS (CBC).

“I THINK THE CBC AND I WANT
THE SAME THINGS FOR THE
BLACK COMMUNITY,” HE MUSED.

“THE DIFFERENCE IS HOW
WE GET THERE.”