



Julian Carey Dixon

1934–2000

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1979–2000
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

For more than two decades, Representative Julian Dixon operated as a congressional insider who succeeded in several key committee assignments because of his low-key, evenhanded style. “I don’t mean to be critical of anyone else’s style, but I think it’s better to have an impact on the issue than to give a speech that gets picked up in the national press,” Dixon said.¹ A native of Washington, DC, who represented a Los Angeles district, Dixon became the first African American to head an Appropriations subcommittee in 1980 when he took over the chairmanship of the Subcommittee on the District of Columbia. Additionally, he chaired the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, which investigated allegations that Speaker Jim Wright of Texas had violated House rules (the investigation eventually precipitated Wright’s resignation in 1989). He also held a high-ranking position on the sensitive Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, solidifying his status as one of the House’s important behind-the-scenes institutionalists.

Julian Carey Dixon was born in Washington, DC, on August 8, 1934. His father was a longtime postal worker. Dixon attended Monroe Elementary School in northwest Washington, DC, before moving to the Culver City section of Los Angeles with his mother at age 11.² He graduated from Dorsey High School in 1953. From 1957 to 1960, Dixon served in the U.S. Army, attaining the rank of sergeant. In 1962, he graduated with a bachelor of science degree from Los Angeles State College; five years later he earned a law degree from Southwestern University in Los Angeles. Dixon married Felicia Bragg, and the couple had a son, Cary Gordon, before divorcing. Dixon later married Betty Lee.³

Dixon’s political career began when he became a legislative aide to California State Senator Mervyn Dymally. In 1972, he won election to the California

assembly, filling the seat of Yvonne Burke, who embarked on a successful campaign for a Los Angeles-based seat in the U.S. House. Dixon registered as an immediate force in Sacramento, chairing the assembly’s Democratic caucus—he was the first freshman legislator to hold that post—and attaining positions on the influential ways and means and criminal justice committees. His signal piece of legislation was a criminal and juvenile justice measure that brought \$55 million in state funding to California counties. Dixon built a network of important allies in addition to Dymally and Governor Jerry Brown, including Speaker Leo T. McCarthy, Assemblyman Henry Waxman, and Assembly Majority Leader Howard Berman. (The latter two eventually served alongside Dixon in the U.S. House of Representatives.⁴)

When three-term U.S. Representative Yvonne Burke announced she was retiring from the House to run for the post of California attorney general in 1978, Dixon entered the race for the vacant House seat. The district encompassed much of West Los Angeles, including Culver City, Inglewood, and Palms, a neighborhood adjacent to Beverly Hills. With registered Democrats composing 76 percent of the constituency, the district contained a cross section of wealthy, middle-class, and working-class voters and a plurality-black population (estimated at 38 percent of the district); the constituency also included a large white population and a growing Hispanic segment.⁵ Dixon was one of three major contenders in a field of eight that vied for the Democratic nomination, including two other prominent African Americans: California State Senator Nate Holden and Los Angeles City Councilman David S. Cunningham. The primary reflected an ongoing conflict among three political factions competing for control of the black vote in Los Angeles. Dixon was supported by Lieutenant Governor Dymally, Holden



was backed by Los Angeles County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, and Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley endorsed Cunningham.⁶ During the primary, Dixon relied on his connections to state legislators such as Berman and Waxman, using their help to launch a complex direct-mail campaign that challenged Holden's credentials as a state legislator.⁷ Berman's brother, Michael, served as Dixon's campaign manager. In September, Dixon handily won the primary, with 48 percent of the vote; Holden was runner-up, with 34 percent.⁸ That win assured Dixon a House seat. Without an opponent in the general election, he did not maintain a campaign headquarters and did little campaigning, emphasizing health care and moderately priced housing for seniors, as well as energy issues, during his relatively few appearances.⁹ Redistricting after the 1980 and 1990 censuses changed the geography of the district, eliminating some precincts, but did not dilute the district's heavily Democratic composition; African Americans still accounted for roughly 40 percent of the population after 1980, and that percentage remained steady through 2000. In his subsequent 11 re-election bids, Dixon won by lopsided margins, capturing between 73 and 87 percent of the vote.¹⁰

When Dixon claimed his seat in the House in January 1979, he won a coveted assignment on the Appropriations Committee—a rare coup for a freshman Member. Dixon later claimed that he had convinced party leaders to give him the seat “using three hats”: First, his predecessor, Yvonne Burke, had served on the panel for the previous two Congresses; second, he had experience in the appropriations process in the California assembly; finally, he suggested the panel needed more minority representation.¹¹ Dixon remained on the Appropriations Committee for the rest of his long House career. In 1980 he became the first African American to win a subcommittee chairmanship on the Appropriations panel, taking over as head of the District of Columbia Subcommittee. In the 98th Congress (1983–1985), Dixon received an additional assignment on the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct (widely known as the

Ethics Committee). In 1993, House leaders tapped Dixon for a seat on the influential Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, where he remained through the 106th Congress (1999–2001), by which time he had become the Ranking Democrat on the panel.

Dixon quickly earned a reputation as an institutional player who worked effectively behind the scenes and shunned the limelight. “I do not work the press,” he said. “I never had a press aide, as such. I realize that there are sexy issues one can get a lot of public attention working on. I have not avoided those issues but I have not pursued them.”¹² Dixon's quiet, but effective, approach brought him several difficult assignments, demonstrating the level of trust House leadership placed in him. He was eventually tapped as chairman of the rules committee for the 1984 Democratic National Convention—another first for an African American. At the start of the 99th Congress (1985–1987), House leaders chose Representative Dixon to head a sensitive post as chairman of the Ethics Committee. Political columnist David Broder, called Dixon's selection as Ethics Committee chairman a “sign of the maturation of American politics,” adding, “Dixon is a fascinating example of the emerging alternative style of black leadership: a person who makes his way not by the militance of his advocacy of civil rights or other racially linked issues, but on the basis of personal and intellectual qualities that cross racial and ideological divisions and make an effective bridge-builder.”¹³ It was during the following Congress that Dixon presided over an investigation into a book deal that critics suggested had earned Speaker Jim Wright outside income in violation of House rules. Numerous other complaints were filed against Wright after the investigation began. Under Dixon's leadership, the Ethics Committee released a 456-page report by an outside counsel indicating that the Speaker had violated House rules on numerous counts. When the committee signaled its willingness to investigate the allegations in the report, Wright stepped down in June 1989.¹⁴ Dixon was lauded as a fair-minded, effective leader who imparted a bipartisan ethos to the committee's deliberations and conclusions.

Dixon also chaired the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) in the 98th Congress. His role as a conciliator sometimes caused friction among the members of the caucus. In 1983, several CBC members criticized Dixon for refusing to bring the caucus's alternative budget to the House Floor for a vote. Submitted annually, the CBC budget was a symbolic effort to highlight the legislative needs and programs that were important to the African-American community. Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill of Massachusetts had asked Dixon to pledge support for the House Budget Committee measure in an effort to secure rank-and-file Democrats' votes. Knowing he could extract some concessions for his support, the CBC chairman agreed. "Our purpose, hopefully, is not to go down to defeat with honor," Dixon explained. "Our purpose is to have some success."¹⁵

Dixon's other principal focus was the District of Columbia Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee. He took over the post from Representative Charlie Wilson of Texas in early 1980, having said, "because of my background in dealing with urban problems in the state legislature, and my fondness for the District by way of birth, I would take it if it became available."¹⁶ While some Members would have considered the post an insular burden because it afforded little opportunity to address issues in individual districts, Dixon believed his subcommittee chairmanship dovetailed nicely with the interests of his urban and working-class constituents: "My people aren't parochial," he explained. "They have expanded horizons."¹⁷

From that post, Dixon balanced competing tensions and political impulses in the House between those seeking to grant the federal city greater autonomy on the path to complete home rule and those who sought to exercise a greater oversight role of the capital, particularly through the power of the purse. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Dixon sought to bring the District of Columbia's budget under control while appropriating federal dollars for important programs. Some political observers noted that he had as much impact on the city as its congressional

delegates during that period. The editors of the *Almanac of American Politics* summed up Dixon's approach to the District and its various leaders, such as longtime Mayor Marion S. Barry, as "sympathetic but not sycophantic."¹⁸ Eventually, Dixon grew disillusioned with the actions of city officials as the city fell deeper into debt and Barry was beset by legal problems because of his use of illicit drugs. "I have personally come to the conclusion that the District government has not acted in good faith with the Congress," Dixon said at an Appropriations Committee hearing in 1995. "I wanted to think the best. Now I believe the worst."¹⁹ Even then, he fought efforts by the Republican-led House to cut the city's federal payment.

Dixon also pursued legislative items pertaining to issues that were important to the African-American community. He authored a resolution, passed by the House, to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Dr. Benjamin Mays, the longtime president of Morehouse College in Atlanta and a mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He also sponsored a resolution designating September 1983 Sickle Cell Anemia Awareness Month. Among Dixon's legislative interests that related directly to his district were initiatives to establish a mass transit system in Los Angeles (for which he secured more than \$3.8 billion in federal funding from 1983 to 2000), as well as programs to promote low-and moderate-income housing and better access to health care. He also helped secure federal relief funding for Los Angeles after the 1992 race riots and the 1994 Northridge earthquake. In a 1997 omnibus measure, he managed to win a \$400 million loan for the development of the Alameda Corridor, which connected the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach with national rail lines.²⁰ Dixon also worked to create a loan guarantee program for small businesses and contractors that were hurt economically by military base closings in southern California.²¹ Although he campaigned only minimally in his district, Dixon remained close to his constituency and was widely regarded as a facilitator between the political and ethnic factions of the area. At several points, Dixon was mentioned as a possible candidate for a seat on the powerful Los Angeles



★ JULIAN CAREY DIXON ★

County board of supervisors (where his predecessor served after she left the House), but he chose to remain in the U.S. House.

From his seat on the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the Appropriations Committee, Representative Dixon influenced U.S. assistance to foreign countries. During his tenure on the subcommittee, he drafted legislation that required the United States to oppose loans by the International Monetary Fund to any country that employed apartheid. As further evidence of his resolve to draw attention to apartheid, in December 1984, Dixon, along with two other leaders, was arrested outside the South African Embassy in Washington, DC, in a peaceful demonstration against the minority-white apartheid government.²² Dixon also was instrumental in securing increased aid for development for sub-Saharan

Africa, disaster assistance for Jamaica, and scholarships for disadvantaged South African students.

Just a month after being re-elected to a 12th consecutive term, Representative Dixon died of a heart attack on December 8, 2000, in Los Angeles. A close friend and fellow House Member from Los Angeles, Representative Howard Berman of California, described Dixon as “unique for the political class because he had his ego under control. . . . His interest was in accomplishing things and in loyalty to the institution.”²³ Recalling his service on the Appropriations Subcommittee on the District of Columbia, the *Washington Post* eulogized Dixon for his “unfailing respect for city residents,” calling him a Washington native “who never forgot his roots . . . one of the best friends the District ever had.”²⁴

FOR FURTHER READING

“Dixon, Julian Carey,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000373>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

California State University, Los Angeles (Los Angeles, CA). Special Collections, University Library. *Papers*: Details are not yet available.

NOTES

- 1 Betty Cuniberti, “Rep. Dixon Named One of Unsung Heroes on the Hill,” 12 September 1985, *Los Angeles Times*: Section 5, page 1.
- 2 Donald P. Baker, “Californian Heads Hill Unit on DC Funds,” 5 March 1980, *Washington Post*: A1; Courtland Milloy, “Mr. Dixon,” 2 August 1984, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 3 Baker, “Californian Heads Hill Unit on DC Funds”; Vernon Jarrett, “Can Black Voters Renew Their Faith?” 25 April 1980, *Chicago Tribune*: D4; David Stout, “Julian C. Dixon Is Dead at 66; Longtime Member of Congress,” 9 December 2000, *New York Times*: C15. Some sources spell Julian Dixon’s second wife’s name “Bettye.”
- 4 Doug Shuit, “Power Factions Clash in Congress Race,” 26 April 1978, *Los Angeles Times*: E1; Donald P. Baker, “Dixon Hopes to Change Attitudes; New District Appropriations Boss Sees No Quick Shift,” 6 March 1980, *Washington Post*: B2.
- 5 *Almanac of American Politics, 1980* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979): 107.
- 6 Shuit, “Power Factions Clash in Congress Race.”
- 7 Dixon and his opponents called on both black and white politicians in an effort to court African-American voters.
- 8 *Almanac of American Politics, 1980*: 108.
- 9 Jean Merl, “Two Candidates Have It All to Themselves,” 29 October 1978, *Los Angeles Times*: WS1; Doug Shuit, “Bitter Campaign by Mail Rages in 28th District,” 4 June 1978, *Los Angeles Times*: D1.
- 10 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 11 Baker, “Dixon Hopes to Change Attitudes; New District Appropriations Boss Sees No Quick Shift.”
- 12 Cuniberti, “Rep. Dixon Named an Unsung Hero: Only Californian to Make Editor’s ‘Underrated’ List.”
- 13 David Broder, “Bridge-Builder in Congress,” 12 April 1989, *Washington Post*: A23.
- 14 *Politics in America, 1998* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1997): 180; Tom Kenworthy, “House Ethics Panel to Release Unabridged Report on Wright,” 8 April 1989, *Washington Post*: A2.
- 15 Richard Simon and Nick Anderson, “Respected Lawmaker Julian Dixon Dies,” 9 December 2000, *Los Angeles Times*: B1.
- 16 Baker, “Californian Heads Hill Unit on DC Funds.”
- 17 Baker, “Dixon Hopes to Change Attitudes; New District Appropriations Boss Sees No Quick Shift.”
- 18 *Almanac of American Politics, 1988* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1987): 142; see also *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1989): 179.
- 19 Stout, “Julian C. Dixon Is Dead at 66; Longtime Member of Congress.”
- 20 *Politics in America, 1998*: 178.
- 21 Simon and Anderson, “Respected Lawmaker Julian Dixon Dies.”
- 22 Lexie Verdon, “Political Precedent Worries Some Members,” 6 May 1983, *Washington Post*: A1; “Arrests in 3 Cities,” 19 December 1984, *New York Times*: A28.
- 23 Simon and Anderson, “Respected Lawmaker Julian Dixon Dies”; Stout, “Julian C. Dixon Is Dead at 66; Longtime Member of Congress.”
- 24 Editorial, “Julian C. Dixon,” 10 December 2000, *Washington Post*: B6.