



Bennett McVey Stewart

1912–1988

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1979–1981
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

Electing to succeed Representative Ralph Metcalfe after his sudden death shortly before the general election in 1978, Bennett McVey Stewart continued the tradition of African-American representation of Chicago's South Side that began with the election of Oscar De Priest in 1928. A product of the once-powerful Chicago machine, Stewart never gained a solid footing in his district during his one term in the U.S. House. His re-election defeat in 1980 symbolized the waning influence of the local political organization and marked the end of a historic era of machine dominance in Chicago.

Bennett McVey Stewart was born in Huntsville, Alabama, on August 6, 1912, to Bennett Stewart and Cathleen Jones. He attended public schools in Huntsville and graduated from high school in Birmingham, Alabama. In 1936, Stewart received a B.A. from Miles College, in Birmingham, Alabama. While attending college, Stewart met his future wife, Pattye Crittenden. The couple married in 1938 and had three children: Bennett, Jr., Ronald, and Miriam.¹ From 1936 to 1938 he served as assistant principal of Irondale High School in Birmingham. Stewart returned to Miles College as an associate professor of sociology from 1938 until 1940, when he joined an insurance company as an executive. In 1950 he became Illinois state director for the company, a position he held for 18 years. Stewart's subsequent position—as an inspector with Chicago's building department of urban renewal advising property owners on financing renovations—sparked his involvement with politics. Following a path similar to those of other influential African-American politicians in Chicago, Stewart won election to the Chicago city council as an alderman from the 21st Ward in 1971. A year later he was elected Democratic committeeman for the same ward; he held both offices until 1978.

When Representative Ralph Metcalfe died unexpectedly

in October 1978, Stewart became a central figure in the power struggle that emerged to fill the vacant House seat. Desperate to regain control of the political scene in Chicago after the death of Mayor Richard J. Daley and the much-publicized falling-out between Metcalfe and the machine organization, the ward committeemen from the Chicago district named Stewart the Democratic candidate for the general election. Recognized as a party loyalist, Stewart resembled previous machine-backed candidates for Congress who had a clear allegiance to the Democratic city organization. Stewart's candidacy was controversial among many constituents in the predominantly black urban district who had recently grown accustomed to a new style of representation that placed race above local party concerns.² Although speculation surfaced that Metcalfe's son would seek the Democratic nomination, or that black leaders would stage a write-in campaign to re-elect Metcalfe posthumously in order to force a special election, Stewart ultimately prevailed as the Democratic nominee.³ Stewart was originally slated to run against political novice and shoe salesman Jackie Brown, but Republican leaders, sensing the untested Stewart's vulnerability, hoped to make a late substitution on the ballot. A. A. (Sammy) Rayner, a former alderman and perennial candidate for the congressional seat, filed suit when the Illinois state board of elections rejected a petition to replace Brown.⁴ Rayner eventually won his case, but Stewart proved victorious in the November election, defeating his Republican opponent with 58 percent of the vote.⁵ Despite Rayner's claim of voting fraud, Stewart earned a spot in the 96th Congress (1979–1981) on January 3, 1979, and received a premier assignment on the Committee on Appropriations.⁶

During his short tenure in the House, Stewart focused on the needs of his urban constituents. He vigorously supported federal loan guarantees for the financially



troubled Chrysler Corporation, which employed more than 1,500 workers in his Chicago district.⁷ As a member of the Appropriations Committee, Stewart backed federal emergency relief to provide low-income constituents with heating assistance. Declaring that the appropriation was “a small price to pay to help alleviate the burdens imposed on the poor,” Stewart praised his House colleagues for passing the measure, which helped many of his constituents.⁸ The Illinois Representative also worked to extend the length of public service employment programs, citing the necessity for a longer transition period for residents of cities like Chicago, which had a higher rate of unemployment than the national average.⁹ In 1980, Stewart requested a General Accounting Office (GAO) analysis of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA). Prompted by a charge of financial misconduct, the GAO revealed that inefficient management had driven the CHA to the verge of bankruptcy.¹⁰

Although not as outspoken on racial issues as some black Members of the 96th Congress, at times Stewart drew attention to matters concerning African Americans. In 1979, he criticized a proposed constitutional amendment to prohibit public school busing. Recalling the humiliating segregation practices he had grown up with in Birmingham, he branded the proposal an “attempt to undermine the Fourteenth Amendment” and an effort to re-establish segregation in the United States.¹¹ Stewart carried on the efforts of Ralph Metcalfe when he introduced a resolution designating February as Black History Month. “We must not continue to permit the history and heritage of black people to be ignored,” Stewart exclaimed. “If we educate our Nation’s youth, black and white, about the heritage of our whole society we may be

able to eliminate racial tensions that have existed in the past.”¹² A vocal supporter of the establishment of Martin Luther King, Jr., Day as a federal holiday, he remarked that recognizing the civil rights leader in this manner would be an important step in promoting equality among the races in the United States. In 1983 Congress passed a law designating the third Monday in January as a public holiday honoring King.¹³

Having secured the endorsement of the Democratic committeemen from the South Side for a second term in Congress, Stewart nonetheless faced mounting dissension in his party. Some local politicians harbored residual anger regarding the strong-arm tactics of party leaders who chose Stewart to replace Metcalfe after his sudden death.¹⁴ In an atypical open Chicago Democratic primary (for much of the century, the local organization selected a loyal nominee to run for Congress, who in turn rarely had any real opposition), Stewart faced three well-known opponents: Harold Washington, an Illinois state senator; John Stroger, a Cook County commissioner; and Ralph Metcalfe, Jr., the son of the late Representative.¹⁵ The results of the crowded and competitive primary indicated the growing rift between machine-backed candidates and politicians who wanted to disassociate themselves from city hall: Stewart placed a distant third behind Metcalfe, and the victorious Democratic nominee, Washington, who earned nearly 50 percent of the vote.¹⁶

After leaving Congress, Stewart served as interim director of the Chicago Department of Inter-Governmental Affairs from 1981 to 1983 and was one of Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne’s administrative assistants.¹⁷ Stewart remained a resident of Chicago until his death on April 26, 1988.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Stewart, Bennett McVey,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=S000902>.

NOTES

- 1 “Bennett Stewart, 76; Former Congressman,” 28 April 1988, *Chicago Tribune*: 10C; Leo J. Daugherty III, “Stewart, Bennett McVey,” *American National Biography* 20 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 744–745 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*).
- 2 William J. Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit: Black Politics and the Political Machine, 1931–1991* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 153–154.
- 3 F. Richard Ciccone and David Axelrod, “Dems Name Ald. Stewart to Replace Metcalfe on Ballot,” 17 October 1978, *Chicago Tribune*: 3; “Ralph Metcalfe’s ‘Replacement,’” 18 October 1978, *Chicago Tribune*: B2; Jay Branegan and David Axelrod, “Rayner Sues State in Bid for Metcalfe Job,” 25 October 1978, *Chicago Tribune*: 3.
- 4 Branegan and Axelrod, “Rayner Sues State in Bid for Metcalfe Job”; David K. Fremon, *Chicago Politics, Ward by Ward* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988): 53–54.
- 5 Jay Branegan, “Rayner on Ballot, Court Rules,” 28 October 1978, *Chicago Tribune*: S3; “Election Information, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; Fremon, *Chicago Politics: Ward by Ward*: 53.
- 6 “Rayner Charges Vote Fraud,” 23 December 1978, *Chicago Tribune*: B11; Bruce A. Ray, “Committee Attractiveness in the U.S. House, 1963–1981,” *American Journal of Political Science* 26 (August 1982): 610.
- 7 *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 1st sess. (13 December 1979): 35758–35759.
- 8 “Fuel Aid for Poor Gets House OK,” 26 October 1979, *Chicago Tribune*: 2; *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 1st sess. (30 October 1979): 30149–30150.
- 9 *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 1st sess. (27 September 1979): 26580.
- 10 “Bennett Stewart, 76; Former Congressman”; “And Now the CHA,” 9 May 1980, *Chicago Tribune*: D2; “CHA Board to Conduct Own Audit,” 14 May 1980, *Chicago Tribune*: A2.
- 11 *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 1st sess. (24 July 1979): 20404.
- 12 *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 2nd sess. (21 February 1980): 3506. The legislation, referred to the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, never made it to the floor for a vote. Metcalfe introduced several measures during his tenure to “recognize the heritage of black citizens in the United States.”
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 1st sess. (13 November 1979): 32142.
- 14 David Axelrod, “A Tossup at Polls in the 1st District,” 26 February 1980, *Chicago Tribune*: A1; David Axelrod, “Dems Endorse Stewart for Re-election in 1st District,” 4 December 1979, *Chicago Tribune*: B9; William L. Clay, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1992): 262–263.
- 15 Axelrod, “A Tossup at Polls in the 1st District.”
- 16 Aldo Beckman, “Campaign ’80: The Illinois Primary,” 20 March 1980, *Chicago Tribune*: B6. Washington, a former machine politician who severed ties with the local organization, served a little more than a term in the House before he was elected as the first African-American mayor of Chicago.
- 17 Daugherty, “Stewart, Bennett McVey,” *ANB*: 745.