



William Levi Dawson

1886–1970

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1943–1970
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

The third African American elected to Congress in the 20th century and the first black Member to chair a standing committee, William L. Dawson served in the House of Representatives for nearly three decades. A product of the influential Chicago Democratic machine, Dawson remained loyal to the organization and the political party that propelled his long congressional career. Committed to the cause of civil rights, Dawson recognized the importance of “forceful but behind-the-scenes action through regular political channels.”¹ His reserved demeanor and his reluctance to alienate the political establishment led many African-American leaders of the era to question his commitment to civil rights reform and undermined his role as a national leader in the movement for racial equality. Dawson, who described himself as a “congressman first and a Negro second,” avoided highlighting his race, preferring instead to build a base of power using the established seniority system of the House of Representatives.²

William Levi Dawson was born in Albany, Georgia, on April 26, 1886, to Levi Dawson, a barber, and Rebecca Kendrick. William had six siblings. He credited his father and sister with keeping his family together after his mother died when he was a child.³ Upon graduating from Albany Normal School in 1905, Dawson 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.⁴ In 1917 he became a first lieutenant with the 365th Infantry of the American Expeditionary Force. 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.⁵

Dawson represented the GOP when he entered the Chicago political scene. In 1928, he waged an unsuccessful bid in the Republican primary against incumbent Martin Madden for the urban congressional district that encompassed much of the black population residing on Chicago’s South Side. Undeterred by the loss, Dawson continued to pursue a career in politics. He became an ally of Chicago’s first African-American alderman, Oscar De Priest, who won a special election to fill the vacancy left by Representative Madden’s death in 1928.⁶ In 1933, with De Priest’s critical backing, 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.⁷ In his second attempt to win a House seat in 1938—an off-year election in which Republicans ran well nationally—Dawson earned the Republican nomination by defeating De Priest but lost to Democratic incumbent Arthur W. Mitchell in the general election, 53.4 to 46.6 percent.⁸ Dawson’s support from the Democratic mayor and his decision to challenge De Priest reflected the pull of the Democratic Party on Chicago blacks, the lure of patronage rewards within the Democratic machine, and a general impatience with the old guard of black leaders tied to the GOP.⁹ Having challenged his mentor, 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.¹⁰

Dawson’s political career 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 “the influence and liberalism of Franklin D. Roosevelt” 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 voting blocs. In time, Dawson’s followers controlled as many as five wards that generally offered overwhelming majorities to local, state, and national Democratic candidates. When Arthur Mitchell chose not to seek a fifth term in the House in 1942, Dawson opted to run for Congress a third time—as a Democrat. With the solid backing of the Democratic machine, Dawson earned the party nomination by defeating Earl Dickerson, a Chicago alderman.¹¹ Dawson went on to beat Republican William E. King, a former Illinois state senator and his longtime political nemesis, in the general election—earning 53 percent of the vote—to begin a congressional career that lasted nearly three decades.¹² An experienced public servant with solid community support, Dawson benefited from his close ties to the Chicago political machine, which actively courted aspiring African-American politicians.¹³ Shortly after beginning his first term in the House, Dawson remarked that he hoped to play a role in the “enhancing of the American Dream.”¹⁴ Throughout his tenure in Congress he remained focused on bettering the lives of the African Americans in his district.

During his first two terms in office, Dawson was on the Coinage, Weights, and Measures; Invalid Pensions; and Irrigation and Reclamation committees. He also served on the Expenditures in the Executive Departments Committee (renamed Government Operations in 1952) from the 78th through the 80th Congress (1943–1949) before ascending to committee chair in 1949. The first African American to chair a standing committee, Dawson held the post until 1970, with the exception of a single term in the 83rd Congress (1953–1955), when Republicans controlled the House.¹⁵ Dawson downplayed the fanfare associated with his historic chairmanship, which included a dinner in his honor hosted by leading national and Illinois Democratic

leaders. “I’m not interested in that particular phase,” he commented. “I just want to do a good job.”¹⁶ Dawson also served on the Insular Affairs Committee (later named Interior and Insular Affairs) from 1943 to 1946 and from 1951 to 1952 and on the District of Columbia Committee from 1955 to 1970.

In some respects Dawson was an atypical politician and machine leader. He disliked personal publicity, was wary of the media, and lived unpretentiously. Also, 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 his constituents’ complaints, requests, and opinions. He kept a firm grip on his share of power in Chicago, dispensing patronage and favors through his political machine and its ancillary organizations.¹⁷ A prominent figure in the upper echelons of the Chicago Democratic machine, Dawson played a key role in Richard J. Daley’s election as mayor of the Windy City in 1955.¹⁸ In 1960, John F. Kennedy’s narrow victory in the key state of Illinois was largely dependent on the voters in Dawson’s wards, leading to widespread speculation among the press that the President-elect would express his gratitude by inviting Dawson to become Postmaster General. When the offer came, the 74-year-old Dawson declined, saying he would be more useful to the new administration as a senior Representative in the House.¹⁹

During his first term in the House, Dawson was the only African American serving in Congress. Two years later, a second black Representative, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of New York, joined Dawson. Dawson and Powell drew intense media attention and scrutiny because of their race and their strikingly different legislative styles.²⁰ Powell, who epitomized the more militant wing of the civil rights movement, publicized racial inequality, including segregation in certain areas of the Capitol, at every conceivable opportunity. Dawson, on the other hand, eschewed issues that focused exclusively on race. Unlike Powell, he rarely challenged racial discrimination publicly, choosing instead to work behind the scenes to pass legislation to assist his district and the Democratic

Party. Dawson's workman-like approach and unswerving loyalty to the party eventually brought him a position of national prominence: vice chair of the Democratic National Committee (DNC).²¹ Throughout his 27 years in Congress, Dawson consistently supported the interests of the Democratic Party. Even when most other African-American leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr., denounced Lyndon B. Johnson's foreign policy in Southeast Asia, Dawson remained an enthusiastic backer of the Democratic President. In 1965, Dawson used Johnson's phrase "nervous Nellies" to describe critics of the Vietnam War, comparing those who underestimated the communist threat in Southeast Asia to those who underestimated Hitler's potential power before the outbreak of the Second World War.²²

His philosophy of working within the establishment and his perceived passivity to discriminatory practices drew criticism from some civil rights groups, who believed Dawson squandered the opportunity to use his authority as a committee chair and a leader of the DNC to promote meaningful change for African Americans. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People condemned his "silence, compromise and meaningless moderation" on issues concerning African Americans, including his refusal to back the Powell Amendment, aimed initially at prohibiting 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.²³ Powell intimated that Dawson 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.²⁴

Dawson reacted angrily when detractors charged he failed to adequately represent his race. "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."²⁵ 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."²⁶

Dawson occasionally chose a public forum to draw attention to racial injustice. The Daley machine, which had propelled him to office, had been largely unattuned to the needs of Chicago-area blacks—preferring to recruit pliant black elites who eschewed activism. With the 1960s civil rights movement, the machine's practice of "racial containment"—segregation in public housing, school districts, and jobs in the city's police and fire departments—intensified.²⁷ A significant personal exception to Dawson's legislative approach was his introduction of a major civil rights bill on the House Floor in 1963. Dawson's bill was not novel or radical; it echoed many of the proposals then being considered in Congress and eventually rolled into the 1964 Civil Rights Act: voting rights, ending discrimination in public accommodations, the creation of a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and the prohibition of discrimination in federally funded programs. "There is a crisis in America that is now a national danger," he pronounced, carefully enunciating his petition on behalf of the "citizens of the First Congressional District of Illinois. . . . Unless something is done about it, and it must be done soon, this crisis will become a national calamity."²⁸

During his tenure in the House, Dawson sought better appointments for blacks in the federal civil service and judiciary, supported southern voter registration drives, and blocked congressional efforts to undermine the integration of public schools in Washington, DC. He also opposed poll taxes and legislation he thought placed an excessive tax burden on low-income citizens. A dedicated supporter of equal employment opportunities, Dawson remarked, "The right to work is the right to live" and "every American citizen is entitled to a job in this country."²⁹ In 1951, Dawson played an integral role in ensuring that the Universal Military Training Act furthered the desegregation

of the armed forces initiated in 1948; he helped defeat the Winstead Amendment, which would have permitted military personnel to choose whether they wanted to serve in white or black units. Dawson made a rare speech 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.”³⁰

Despite his longevity and influence, Dawson never assumed a leadership role among African Americans in Congress. His disinclination to place race before the party clashed with the confrontational spirit adopted by many black leaders during the 1960s. When black Members drafted political statements to publicize issues of importance to minorities and promote a sense of unity among African-American Representatives, Dawson’s name was often absent—an indication of the growing rift between Dawson and his black colleagues.³¹ By the end of his career, the Illinois Representative found himself on the

defensive for failing to disassociate himself from the Daley machine, which by the late 1960s was widely perceived as insufficiently committed to the cause of civil rights.³²

Dawson rarely faced any significant opposition in his re-election bids from the predominantly black district. Regardless of the mounting criticism against him, he typically earned between 70 and 80 percent of the vote.³³ Even when poor health prevented him from playing an active role in Congress and on the campaign trail during his final few terms in the House, Dawson continued to enjoy comfortable victories against his opponents. However, by the mid-1960s Dawson’s organization exhibited signs of decay. Burdened by age and ill health, he skillfully receded into the background while continuing to groom the African-American ward leaders of Chicago’s South Side whom he helped place in power. On November 9, 1970, only six days after his handpicked successor, Ralph Metcalfe, won election to his seat, Dawson died of pneumonia in Chicago.³⁴ “Politics with me is a full-time business,” Dawson once remarked. “It is not a hobby to be worked on in leisure hours, but it’s a job—a full-time job that pays off only if a man is willing to apply the energy, start from scratch and profit by his experience.”³⁵

FOR FURTHER READING

“Dawson, William Levi,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000158>.

Wilson, James Q. “Two Negro Politicians: An Interpretation,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 4 (November 1960): 346–369.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Chicago Historical Society (Chicago, IL). *Papers*: 1943–1970, approximately 150 items. Correspondence, speeches, newspaper clippings, press releases, testimonials, and other papers relating to the career of William L. Dawson, a Chicago, Ill., lawyer, alderman, and U.S. Representative (Democrat). Includes material on the elections of 1944, 1948, 1952, and 1964 and letters from Presidents Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson.

Fisk University (Nashville, TN), Special Collections, Library and Media Center. *Papers*: 1938–1970, 20.8 feet. The papers of William Levi Dawson contain correspondence (1930s to 1960s) with major U.S. political figures; speeches by Dawson before the House of Representatives, the Democratic National Convention, church groups, and other organizations; biographical data; scrapbooks of clippings; certificates, plaques, and awards; printed matter; and photos. A finding aid is available in the repository.

Howard University (Washington, DC), Manuscript Division, Moorland–Spingarn Research Center. *Papers*: ca. 1942–1972, approximately five linear feet. The congressional papers of William Levi Dawson consist of correspondence, writings about Dawson, speeches, legislation, voting records, and subject files. Also included are photographs, sound recordings, and memorabilia. A finding aid is available in the repository.

NOTES

- 1 For observations about Dawson’s legislative style, see William L. Clay, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad, 1992): 366; Robert Nelson, “Political Goals Emerge: Chicago Negroes Rallied to Ballot,” 30 October 1963, *Christian Science Monitor*: 3.
- 2 Ellen Hoffman, “Rep. William L. Dawson Dies,” 10 November 1970, *Washington Post*: B6.
- 3 “People in the News,” 2 January 1949, *Washington Post*: M2.
- 4 Thaddeus Russell, “William Levi Dawson,” *American National Biography* 6 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 258–259 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*); Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971): 185.
- 5 Hoffman, “Rep. William L. Dawson Dies”; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 185.
- 6 Robert L. Johns, “William L. Dawson,” in Jesse Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1998): 270 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*).
- 7 Nancy Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983): 87, 89–90.
- 8 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 9 See, for example, Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*: 78–95; and William J. Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit: Black Politics and the Chicago Machine, 1931–1991* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992): 47–68.
- 10 Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit: Black Politics and the Chicago Machine, 1931–1991*: 75–77.
- 11 Harold Smith, “Congress Fight in 1st District Holds Spotlight,” 22 February 1942, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: S5.
- 12 Harold Smith, “Feud Heightens King’s Chances in the 1st District,” 8 March 1942, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: S2; “Election Information, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 13 See Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*: 89–91.
- 14 “William L. Dawson,” *Current Biography, 1945* (New York: H.W. Wilson and Company, 1945): 144.
- 15 “Negro in Congress Hailed,” 22 January 1949, *New York Times*: 6.
- 16 “People in the News”; “Negro in Congress Hailed,” 22 January 1949, *New York Times*: 6.

- 17 James Q. Wilson, "Two Negro Politicians: An Interpretation," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 4 (November 1960): 358–360.
- 18 George Tagge, "Dawson Praises Daley and Defends the Machine," 11 February 1955, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 1; George Tagge, "Kennelly Men Blast Dawson; Fight Promised," 12 January 1955, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 16.
- 19 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Fawcett Press, 1965): 140. According to historian and administration chronicler Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., President-elect Kennedy initially had no intention of offering the post to Dawson. In large part, Kennedy did not want to offend powerful southern chairmen in Congress like Senator Olin D. Johnston of South Carolina, who headed the Post Office and Civil Service Committee and who complained that the proposed offer to Dawson was an attempt by political opponents to make him take a picture with the black nominee that could be used against him in his next primary campaign. In what Schlesinger described as a "comedy of complication," Kennedy made the offer to end the speculation. As scripted by the White House, Dawson declined.
- 20 For a detailed comparison of Representatives Dawson and Powell, see Wilson, "Two Negro Politicians: An Interpretation": 346–369.
- 21 Alden Whitman, "Power in Chicago," 10 November 1970, *New York Times*: 50; Percy Wood, "Congressman Dawson! Chicago Democrat with a Clout," 6 February 1955, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 5; Drew Pearson, "Democrats Pick Negro for Job," 3 December 1949, *Washington Post*: B15.
- 22 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 190–191.
- 23 "NAACP Criticizes Rep. Dawson," 1 September 1956, *Washington Post*: 38; Hoffman, "Rep. William L. Dawson Dies"; Robert Singh, *Congressional Black Caucus: Racial Politics in the U.S. Congress* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.): 46–47; Carol M. Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): 34–35.
- 24 Hoffman, "Rep. William L. Dawson Dies"; Russell, "William Levi Dawson," *ANB*; Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890–2000* (New York: Viking, 2001): 301.
- 25 Johns, "William L. Dawson," *NBAM*: 271.
- 26 "Dawson Lauded for Leadership," 18 March 1956, *New York Times*: 85.
- 27 One scholar of Chicago politics noted, "As the racial demands escalated, the machine increasingly took on the retrograde character of a southern white supremacist Democratic party." See Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit: Black Politics and the Chicago Machine 1931–1991*: 117–118.
- 28 *Congressional Record*, House, 88th Cong., 1st sess. (29 October 1963): 20425. In light of Dawson's loyalty to the machine, the speech was likely sanctioned by Mayor Daley to help defuse rising unrest in urban black communities about continued political and social discrimination, and economic disparities.
- 29 *Congressional Record*, House, 79th Cong., 1st sess. (12 July 1945): 7485.
- 30 *Congressional Record*, House, 82nd Cong., 1st sess. (12 April 1951): 3765; John G. Norris, "Republican Efforts to Restrict Clauses Mostly Beaten Off; Conferees Act Next," 14 April 1951, *Washington Post*: 1; "Dawson Lauded for Leadership": 85.
- 31 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 192; Johns, "William L. Dawson," *NBAM*: 271.
- 32 Francis Ward, "Dawson Dies; Pioneer Black Congressman," 10 November 1970, *Los Angeles Times*: A19; Russell, "William Levi Dawson," *ANB*.
- 33 "Election Information, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; Hoffman, "Rep. William L. Dawson Dies."
- 34 Hoffman, "Rep. William L. Dawson Dies."
- 35 Johns, "William L. Dawson," *NBAM*: 271.



“POLITICS WITH ME IS A FULL-TIME BUSINESS,” DAWSON ONCE REMARKED. “IT IS NOT A HOBBY TO BE WORKED ON IN LEISURE HOURS, BUT IT’S A JOB—A FULL-TIME JOB THAT PAYS OFF ONLY IF A MAN IS WILLING TO APPLY THE ENERGY, START FROM SCRATCH AND PROFIT BY HIS EXPERIENCE.”