

GREYSON TEAGUE

## Oscar DePriest and Black Agency in American Politics, 1928–1934

**Abstract:** Currently, much of the literature surrounding Black politics in the 1920s and 1930s understates the role that Black citizens and politicians played in challenging Jim Crow and white supremacy at the national level. Instead, different factors like the “cage” that white Southerners placed on Civil Rights legislation or the influence that New Deal programs had on electoral decisions in the Black community. After realignment, Black Americans and their allies were then able to launch more effective challenges against white supremacy. Although these narratives contain much explanatory power, oftentimes they overlook critical aspects of Black politics during this period that complicate this narrative. Examining the career of Oscar DePriest, the first Black congressman elected in the twentieth Century, this article argues that Black citizens and their representatives were able to explicitly affect politics at the local, state, and federal levels through DePriest’s career prior to realignment.

**Keywords:** Oscar DePriest, Black politics 1920s–1930s, Black congressmen, New Deal

One of the most important political shifts in American history was the 1936 shift of African Americans from voting for Republicans to voting for Democrats at the national level. This led to the creation of the New Deal coalition of African Americans, white Southerners, labor unions, and intellectuals. Its formation has been covered by numerous scholars like Nancy Weiss, Harvard Sitkoff, Eric Schickler, and others. Collectively, they have documented how the New Deal, along with associated overtures from the national party and labor unions, created an incentive for African Americans to join the Democratic Party that had not existed in the past.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this, Republican apathy and the power of Southern Democrats beholden to Jim Crow stifled almost all movement on Civil Rights at the national level prior to this realignment.<sup>2</sup>

This new political reality for Black Americans, along with their allies, led to a new era of challenging white supremacy and Jim Crow at the national level in the following decades and a reconceptualization of the role that race played in American politics through the 1930s and postwar periods.<sup>3</sup>

Although this dominant narrative contains much explanatory power, it often understates the role that Black citizens and their representatives played in challenging white supremacy and forcing national leaders to respond to their demands prior to this electoral shift. Instead, the political and economic changes brought about by the New Deal are given primary agency in creating the conditions that led to the challenge of Jim Crow and the recontextualization of race in American politics. “The key to Black electoral behavior,” Weiss wrote, “lay in economics rather than race” in this period.<sup>4</sup> Ralph Bunch argued that “the New Deal for the first time gave broad recognition and existence to the Negro as a national problem and undertook to give specific consideration to this fact in many ways.”<sup>5</sup> Other scholars focus more on the actions of white actors. Sitkoff argued that the person who “did more to alter the relationship between the New Deal and the cause of civil rights” was Eleanor Roosevelt.<sup>6</sup> The actions of some Black elites like Robert Vann, the editor of the *Pittsburg Courier*, are examined, but they are viewed through a top-down lens of early political realignment that emphasizes how their work with other elites helped drive early political realignment in certain states and cities. Grassroots Black organizing and its effects receive little examination.<sup>7</sup>

The main goal of this article is to correct this narrative. It does that by highlighting how Black political agency through the career of Oscar DePriest, the first African American to serve in Congress in the twentieth century, shows the centrality of Black political action outside of this traditional narrative challenged white supremacy. It also contributes to the broader reimagining of Black politics and its influence on the development of the American state and politics prior to Black political realignment.

Usually, scholars have noted DePriest as either a transitional figure due to his status as a Black Republican right before the political alignment or as a stepping-stone toward eventual realignment or for his later successors in Congress.<sup>8</sup> Instead, this article argues that DePriest’s career points toward the expanding power of what Megan Ming Francis calls an “organized citizen agency” that affected the development of the state. It also builds on the work of scholars like Keneshia Grant and Lisa Materson and others who examine the influence of local Black organizing on politics in Northern cities in the wake of the Great Migration.<sup>9</sup> Just like how Francis shows how the NAACP was able to “impact the governing institutions at the local, state, and national levels,” this

article will show how the actions of DePriest and those who supported him directly contributed to forcing local, state, and national actors to both confront their demands and execute them to some extent, even if unsatisfactorily.<sup>10</sup> Instead of national politics existing under a “Southern cage” that blocked any and all effective resistance to these issues, DePriest and his allies were able to force these issues on the national stage.<sup>11</sup> By focusing on these issues during a transitory period in American history, this article also answers the call of Kimberly Johnson for literature in American political development to move beyond traditional critical junctures like the New Deal and Reconstruction when considering how the American state developed with respect to race. It also helps with Johnson’s other goal of decentering the South because it challenges many scholars’ presumption of the unchallengeable dominance of the Southern-cage national stage.<sup>12</sup>

Although critical of how some scholars overemphasize the Southern cage around issues of race, this article does provide support for these authors’ research into how Jim Crow functioned at the highest levels of politics by arguing that, in some ways, it needs to be expanded.<sup>13</sup> Jim Crow not only influenced policy but also dictated the social aspects of Congress. Jim Crow was more than a political and legal system, it was “a cultural one that revolved around daily performances of race,” according to historian Stephen Berrey.<sup>14</sup> Although Berrey’s application of these ideas is focused on everyday interactions of common people, his ideas about racial routines extend to the halls of Congress. DePriest refused to let Jim Crow, politically and socially, go unchallenged throughout his career, and white Southern members used the powers at their disposal to retaliate. Although DePriest was theoretically their equal, white Southerners challenged his credentials, enforced racist social norms, and even threatened his life, all without consequences. Here was one aspect of Black agency that they could neither control nor circumvent like they had the Fifteenth Amendment, but they, along with their allies, could enforce the dictates of Jim Crow making one of their own lesser within their own ranks.

#### THE ELECTION OF THE FIRST BLACK CONGRESSMAN IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

DePriest was born on March 9, 1871, in Florence, Alabama. His family quickly left the South, however, after an attempt to lynch Congressman James T. Rapier, a Black Republican serving in Congress. This failed attempt eventually led to a different lynching victim breaking free from the mob only

to be shot right by the DePriests' door. With reconstruction collapsing, the family moved to Salina, Kansas, as part of the greater internal migration of ex slaves to Kansas during this period. After a brief stint in Toledo, Ohio, as a young adult, DePriest moved to Chicago in 1889 and began working as a house painter. Eventually, DePriest saved enough capital to enter the real estate business. His real estate business, however, would quickly become exploitative. He would buy apartments on Chicago's racial borderlands from white owners, initially keeping the same rent prices, but many white tenants then moved because they did not want a Black landlord while DePriest evicted others. He then targeted Black tenants to replace his departing white ones, doubling the price for these Black tenants. Taking advantage of both the lack of housing available to Chicago's Black migrants and the lack of knowledge many migrants had about housing situations in the North when they first arrived would be how DePriest generated wealth for most of his life.<sup>15</sup>

DePriest entered local Republican politics in the early 1900s when he attended one of the party's precinct meetings. They were holding an election for precinct captain, and DePriest did not vote at first. After the vote came back in a tie, he realized that he could use his status as a tiebreaker to give himself leverage. He then went to both candidates and haggled deals from both of them, but he eventually gave his vote to the candidate who promised to make him precinct secretary upon that candidate's election. From that point on, he was involved in local Republican politics. He served as a member of the Cook County Commission and a member of the city council at various points throughout the next two decades, becoming the first African American to do so in the later position. He would leave the city council in disgrace after charges of corruption, but he was cleared of all charges in a trial. He would eventually align himself with the political machine of Mayor Bill Thompson in the 1920s, thus setting the stage for a political comeback. Throughout his early political career, however, DePriest was also backed by Black women organizers who supported him throughout his corruption charges, including Ida B. Wells-Barnett. They would have a fall-out later over DePriest's support of the Thompson machine, thus weakening DePriest's standing with some parts of the community during the early 1920s.<sup>16</sup>

DePriest also became a target of racist attacks during this period. In the Spring of 1921, his home was bombed. Local reports explained that the attacker's motive was DePriest's continual encroachment of Chicago's racial borderlands with his business. This coincided with the general tension between Black and white Chicagoans during this period as over 50 racially motivated bombings occurred in the city from 1917 to 1921. Many of those

bombings, including DePriest's, were carried out by white criminals who were contracted by white property owners according to police reports. DePriest was not injured in the blast, but these direct attacks on his life would unfortunately not end with this bombing as his political career advanced.<sup>17</sup>

DePriest's comeback would not come until 1928, but events in the interim would provide the opening for DePriest to eventually become a congressman. Two factors contributed to this. First, the district was a product of the residential segregation that was commonplace in the urban North after the Great Migration. Black Americans were funneled into segregated neighborhoods where landlords like DePriest took advantage of them. Looking for work, more freedoms, an escape from racialized violence, or simply following their communities, many Black Americans settled in Chicago looking for a new life that was better than the one they had left in the Jim Crow South.<sup>18</sup> Second, Republicans controlled the redistricting process in Illinois throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Because Illinois retained the same number of congressional seats for most of this period, there was no constitutional requirement at this time that districts have equal populations and that African Americans were staunchly Republican, so there was no incentive to break up the district due to its racial demographics. This meant that African Americans became the majority in Illinois's First Congressional District.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, there were two practical ways to obtain a majority: either win a majority of Black voters supplemented with a few white voters or win a large majority of white voters and a respectable minority of Black voters. Martin Madden, the longtime congressman of the district, opted for the former because African Americans controlled the balance of power in the district. This electoral power was mainly concentrated in the Second Ward, the heart of the district that had a high percentage of Black residents and voters.<sup>20</sup> Madden made multiple attempts to appeal to his Black constituents either through support of Civil Rights, as he did with the Dyer antilynching bill, or by making broad statements in support of Black rights. Madden, however, rarely used his powerful position as the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee to do anything meaningful for his Black constituents. He neglected his Black constituents for low-level patronage positions such as positions at the Post Office despite promises to do so. Only pressure by local Black political figures like Ed Wright led him to fulfill his promises.<sup>21</sup>

Madden's disregard for his Black constituents, whom he owed his career to, led to multiple challenges to Madden by Black politicians throughout his career. Early efforts were led by Wright. He advocated for African Americans to have more power within Chicago politics in places where they constituted a

majority of the voters or that Black politicians should represent Black people. These efforts alienated Wright from the larger Republican Party in Chicago. He then made one final longshot bid for political power in 1926 by challenging Madden in the Republican primary. He lost. William Dawson, a future Black congressman and a protégé of both DePriest and Wright, was inspired by Wright and decided to take up his mantle.<sup>22</sup>

Dawson decided to primary Madden in 1928 for the same reasons Wright did. The *Chicago Defender* and other local papers ignored Dawson and ran pieces that specifically praised Madden for helping the race in various capacities, such as defending funding for Howard University from attacks by Southerners in Congress.<sup>23</sup> When combined with the support from many regulars within the Chicago political machine, both white and Black, Dawson faced a nearly impossible battle. His message was simple. He believed that Madden had two fatal flaws: “Mr. Madden ... doesn’t live in the district. He is a white man. Therefore ... he can hardly voice the hopes, ideals and sentiment of the majority of this district.” He lost the primary to Madden in a landslide, though most of his support came from the Black sections of the district. Ironically, DePriest played a major role in attacking Wright and Dawson during their bids because Thompson supported Madden, but he would be the beneficiary of their advocacy.<sup>24</sup>

After the primary, Madden passed away, thus leaving a vacancy on the Republican slot for the congressional ticket. Immediately, there was speculation about nominating an African American to replace Madden due to the demographics of the district and the pressure that Dawson and Wright placed on the local political machine. Dawson’s name was immediately mentioned as a possibility due to his recent challenge, but this would not come to pass. But his and Wright’s demands that Black politicians represent Black people were heard. DePriest, with Thompson’s support, was nominated to run for Congress after a series of quick behind the scenes moves by the future congressman. His nomination immediately made national news because many expected DePriest to easily win the seat in the fall due to the district being majority Black, thus restoring Black representation in Congress. DePriest, however, also faced legal troubles. Prosecutors charged with aiding and abetting racketeers as a part of raids on the criminal underground that he and many members of the Chicago establishment contributed to. The charges were later dropped after the election.<sup>25</sup>

Thankfully for DePriest, the indictment did not play a major role in the fall campaign, but other issues arose. The first was a third-party Black challenger who took up the mantle that Wright and Dawson had as outside agitators. This candidate, William Harrison, saw DePriest as too connected to

the white power brokers who skirted their promises to support Black patronage positions and wanted to take advantage of his indictment. This threatened to split the Black vote, but that was not the only threat to Black solidarity. Democrats, in response to DePriest's nomination, considered trying to replace their white candidate with a Black one to take advantage of the increase in support from African Americans that Democratic presidential nominee Al Smith was receiving in the eyes of local Democratic leaders. Smith had the behind-the-scenes backing of the NAACP's Walter White as well as that of Black nationalist Marcus Garvey. Garvey backed Smith with his newspaper *Negro World* running headlines like "Every Negro with a Ballot Must Vote for Alfred Smith."<sup>26</sup>

Although Democrats did not eventually nominate a Black candidate, they were the primary beneficiaries of the split in the Black vote between DePriest and Harris. Though DePriest did not seriously campaign at the national level for the party as he would later, many Black Republican women did by arguing that the GOP was still the party of Lincoln.<sup>27</sup> Their efforts bore fruit for DePriest and the party by counteracting the small, but noticeable, increase in the Black vote for Democrats during the 1928 election.<sup>28</sup> Black women activists like Jennie Lawrence limited these defections by organizing throughout the First District. The efforts of Lawrence and other women in Chicago's Black community were enough to help DePriest score a narrow victory over his two opponents.<sup>29</sup> Early scholarship on Black voters in Chicago also indicated that white voters, beyond their general racism, felt threatened by the idea of a Black majority and therefore became less willing to support Black candidates. Indeed, DePriest himself said that he won his seat "only by the solidarity of the Negro voters."<sup>30</sup> This solidarity and Black political agency gave DePriest the votes to become the first Black person elected to Congress in the twentieth century.

### TEA PARTIES AND EARLY DAYS IN CONGRESS

With DePriest's victory, he was now joining the Jim Crow Congress. Almost immediately he and his family faced this reality as they moved to Washington DC, a segregated city that practiced Jim Crow.<sup>31</sup> The presence of a Black congressman had immediate ramifications for Washington social circles, as they now had to prepare for the reality that a Black man and his family now had access to a space that had been exclusively white for the past 28 years. One of the first significant issues was the change of membership qualifications for the Congressional Club, a clubhouse for family members of Congress. Prior to

early 1929, immediate family members were simply given membership. After the election of DePriest, the possibility of his wife, Jesse DePriest, joining this exclusive social circle caused a sudden change in membership requirements that required a sponsor for admission at the behest of an Indiana member's wife.<sup>32</sup> The DePriests did not make an issue of this, but the enforcement of segregated social spaces would become the norm during their stay in Washington and be at the center of other controversies.

These tensions would continue to foment prior to his being sworn in. DePriest expected some challenge to the legality of his membership in Congress due to the charges hanging over them. These were dropped before he was sworn in, but DePriest and his allies still anticipated a stunt by the South to challenge his qualifications using procedural quirks and stalling tactics, especially because white Southerners foreshadowed them in the national press.<sup>33</sup> At this time, members of the House were sworn in state by state alphabetically. After Alabama was sworn in, the plan was for one of these members to challenge DePriest's qualifications prior to the Illinois delegation being sworn in. Fellow Illinois Representative Elect Ruth McCormick used her inside connections as the wife of a former senator to help DePriest get seated without his credentials being questioned by the South. In particular, she was friends with Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the wife of Republican Speaker Nicholas Longworth, and used this connection to push Speaker Longworth to change the custom of how the House was sworn in. Longworth was likely sympathetic to DePriest because when he was first elected, he owed his election to the Black voters of his district providing the decisive votes and agreed to alter the process.<sup>34</sup> Instead of a state-by-state process, Longworth swore the members of the House en masse to avoid a challenge to DePriest's credentials. This process stands to this day, so DePriest's mere presence in the chamber immediately changed the way the House operates.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, DePriest's connections with McCormick were due in part to the Black female activists who had helped support his campaign, as many of them also supported her due to her stances on decreasing Southern representation in Congress through the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>36</sup>

The tea party incident involving Jesse DePriest became another flashpoint of the practices of Jim Crow surrounding Congress. Mrs. DePriest became the center of controversy when she was invited by First Lady Lou Henry Hoover to a tea party to which all the wives of members of Congress had been invited. Mrs. Hoover anticipated that this would cause a stir, so she took the initiative to split the traditional tea party that was held for all congressional wives into four separate sections, with Jesse DePriest invited for the last of the four events.



Mrs. DePriest's invitation immediately drew condemnation from Southerners, especially those in Congress. This condemnation, however, was sparked not simply by the desire to assert white supremacy but also by a desire on behalf of Southern Democrats to show that President Hoover opposed Jim Crow and white supremacy in the aftermath of the 1928 election.<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned above, there was a small but noticeable shift in the 1928 election of Black voters toward the Democratic Party. More noticeable, however, was the fact that Herbert Hoover carried many states in South, with Smith only able to hold onto the Deep South and Arkansas. The Hoover administration saw this result as an opening for a new Southern Strategy for the Republican Party that explicitly appealed to the white supremacy of the region by advocating for a "lily-white" Republican Party that no longer saw Southern African Americans as a significant constituency for the party. This strategy had been a part of the Republican Party throughout the 1920s, but the Hoover administration made this a centerpiece of its political strategy to expand on Hoover's victory by almost exclusively appointing whites to patronage posts in the South. Although there appears to be no explicit decision to disregard the votes of Northern African Americans, especially because the party continually sent out Black Republicans to Northern cities to turn out Black voters, almost no Northern African Americans would interpret these moves in a positive light.<sup>38</sup>

Hoover's early acquiescence to Jim Crow paid off for the first few months of his presidency with respect to quelling potential controversies. For example, there was little Southern resistance to the National Memorial Commission, a group that was to solicit private donations for an auditorium that African Americans could use. The eventual auditorium, however, would adhere to Jim Crow, so there was little effort to halt the bill. These calculations changed, however, after Representative George Tinkham, a Republican from Massachusetts, introduced a bill that would have enforced the Fourteenth Amendment's provision that would decrease congressional representation if voting rights were denied for any reason other than a crime. This immediately caused Southern Democrats to attack both Tinkham and the Hoover administration as committed to racial equality, thus providing the opening to attack the administration's efforts in the South. This measure did not pass the House because Republicans were divided on the issue, but it provided a spark for Southern Democrats to attack anything remotely resembling racial equality.<sup>39</sup>

Jesse DePriest's presence at the White House tea party became one of those instances. Southern Democrats caused an outrage over the issue, many

using explicitly racist language on the floor of Congress to defame the DePriests, African Americans, and the Hoover administration. The administration defended itself by saying that because the event was an “official” event, then Mrs. DePriest had to be invited; otherwise, it would be an instance of state discrimination. The initial controversy eventually faded away, but it would leave lasting damage on Hoover’s lily-white Southern Strategy as many Southern whites (as well as Northern whites) condemned Jesse DePriest’s presence at the White House. Hoover, for his part, would blame DePriest for the incident because he announced his wife’s invitation prior the event, thus blaming the DePriests’ simple presence for the controversy instead of the racism of the South. Ironically, some political observers thought that the tea party incident would strengthen the administration’s image with Black voters who had defected to the Democratic Party in 1928, thus giving Hoover electoral strength with the Black constituencies he seemed willing to frustrate or set aside by taking up the white South’s side on issues like segregation.<sup>40</sup>

Oscar DePriest used this as an opportunity to increase his national standing as well as campaign for the GOP and Black organizations. This would come in the form of an event put on with the NAACP. At the event, scheduled to take place before Mrs. Hoover’s presence at the tea party in late June, DePriest tried to both increase his standing as a virtual representative for all African Americans and try to increase the Republican Party’s standing with Black voters. Recognizing the political ploys at play here, DePriest told his audience at the NAACP event that Southern Democrats started their outbursts “for the political effect at home.”<sup>41</sup>

DePriest would continue to be an engine for controversy due to his presence as a Black man in Congress. One member, Alabama Democrat Miles Allgood, resigned from the House Enrolled Bills Committee over DePriest’s inclusion on the committee. Allgood, a backbench Southerner, likely tried to capitalize on the racism of the white South for his own political future, but nothing much came of this political stunt. Virginia Republican George Pritchard also refused to have an office next to DePriest.<sup>42</sup> DePriest would continue to gain national prominence through his speaking arrangements, which he continued throughout the summer and fall. Although this would win him praise from many, especially as he continued his assault on Southerners and disregard for the constitutional rights of African Americans, this also drew criticism from some of his constituents. The *Chicago World* noted how his speaking engagements often left little time for legislating for concerns for his constituents. There was some truth to this statement, as DePriest did not

introduce or cosponsor any piece of legislation during his first term beyond a simple bill to settle a claim for a Black woman in Alabama.<sup>43</sup>

In DePriest's defense, however, he did not have much chance to legislate. Throughout his tenure in Congress, he would only serve on the committees for Enrolled Bills, Indian Affairs, Invalid Pensions, and Post Office and Post Roads. All of these were relatively minor committees, though Post Office helped secure patronage positions and Indian Affairs could be more important to a representative in other parts of the country. In an era where seniority on a single committee was the only realistic way for many to obtain power, however, this points to how Congressional leadership did not see much value in placing DePriest on any major committees.<sup>44</sup>

#### RESPONSES TO THE GREAT DEPRESSION, MEXICAN REPATRIATION, AND CAMPAIGNS

The lack of bills introduced by DePriest did not mean he did not concern himself with issues related to legislation—far from it—especially once the Great Depression hit. African Americans would go on to be one of the worst hurt groups in the country by the Depression. Although some historians have argued that “there is no appreciable cause-and-effect linkage between the Crash and the Depression,” the effects were immediately felt in the Black community.<sup>45</sup> In Chicago, the Urban League reported that white workers were displacing Black workers in the low-paying jobs that were usually reserved for Black workers. Of course, workers of all races lost jobs, but the racism of the time meant that Black workers were the first fired. Thus, the economic downturn hit Black wage earners quicker and harder while some white workers found temporary work through their displacement.<sup>46</sup>

Herbert Hoover based his response in conservative economic principles, so his idea that “the federal government should use all of its powers” to help stem or reverse the economic downturn was largely limited to conservative, laissez faire economic orthodoxy.<sup>47</sup> This resulted in policies like the Hawley-Smoot tariff, the highest tariff in American history, which did nothing to help stem the oncoming depression.<sup>48</sup> One area where the government settled on action quickly and decisively, however, was immigration. Undocumented immigration from the Southern border, as defined by the Reed Johnson Act of 1924, was racialized through the Southwest's “Juan Crow” and the tactics of employers who exploited the cultural differences between Latino/a workers and other ethnic and racial groups. Many politicians therefore turned to Mexican migrants as scapegoats for taking jobs from white Americans.<sup>49</sup>

DePriest was an early supporter of this legislative effort, and he billed it as a way to solve many of the economic woes for African Americans. Even though he was not a member of the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, DePriest was invited to question witnesses and make remarks in support of the legislation, at one point saying that “it is the worst folly imaginable and a gross oversight in the field of economics to be confronted with the spectacle of millions of American laborers out of work and aliens permitted to hold jobs and set up an unfair, un-American (*sic*) competition” for jobs.<sup>50</sup> He believed that those born outside of America were part of legally “admit[ed] hordes of Mexican laborers” that stole jobs from true Americans, and some in the Black press also echoed these sentiments.<sup>51</sup> Given that Mexican workers were a part of the Chicago workforce that could often compete with African Americans for jobs, DePriest likely thought that he would be helping his Black constituents by eliminating a potential rival for jobs, but this situation also points toward the general attitude of DePriest toward government help during the Great Depression. He would favor limited government action in areas where its power was established, like immigration, but would not favor government intervention into the economy.<sup>52</sup>

DePriest spent much of 1930 campaigning in and around Black majority areas, usually in support of the Republican Party or at the invitation of the NAACP, as DePriest had a strong working relationship with Walter White due to his earlier work with the NAACP.<sup>53</sup> He would draw a primary challenger, but DePriest would easily defeat him. This was due in part because DePriest took steps to shore up his support within elements of the Black community that had opposed either him or his faction of Republicans prior to him entering office.<sup>54</sup>

This strength at home allowed DePriest some leeway in how he engaged with different audiences during his various speaking tours that year. Although DePriest himself was firmly Republican, he would tell Black communities to vote for the candidate that would best represent their wishes, regardless of party. He would also take this opportunity to denounce Black activists who advocated for a broad definition of equality in the United States. DePriest would openly tell Black audiences that they should not fight for social equality because the only way to earn respect would be for them to improve their own communities and that most of their failures were their own.<sup>55</sup>

DePriest’s most notable efforts were in opposition to Judge John Parker, an open segregationist that Hoover nominated to the Supreme Court to gain support among white Southerners. DePriest and the NAACP launched an extensive lobbying effort to stop the nomination, which included attacking

various individuals in the Black community who lobbied for Parker and threatening to target Senators in the fall who voted for confirmation. This eventually led to Parker's nomination failing by two votes, which DePriest said made 1930 "a good year for us" regarding efforts by himself and the NAACP.<sup>56</sup> Although some have argued that "blacks had little to do with the decision" to not vote for Parker by Senators, many contemporaries did not see it that way.<sup>57</sup>

This public exposure came with significant risk, however, as DePriest was the target of both an assassination plot by local political enemies in Chicago and threats from the Ku Klux Klan. These attacks came as a larger part of the post-Parker effort of the NAACP and its allies to defeat those who supported his nomination. When DePriest went to Birmingham to speak in opposition to Senator Tom Heflin, who was himself a Klan member, Heflin made threats on DePriest's life because of this speaking engagement.<sup>58</sup> Heflin would not be the only Southern member to physically threaten DePriest that year. Democrat Martin Dies ran his first campaign in his East Texas district by focusing on racial issues to beat an incumbent. One of his campaign promises was to physically beat DePriest if he ever spoke ill about Southern white men as he had against Parker. Dies would not fulfill this campaign promise, but it helped secure him a seat in Congress, showing that DePriest was an effective boogeyman in the eyes of many white Southerners.<sup>59</sup>

DePriest's engagements did not keep him from securing a second term, as he won his reelection campaign, although he would sacrifice many of his political connections along the way. He lost the support of Mayor William Thompson during the campaign because DePriest aligned himself with Representative McCormick in her campaign for the Senate in 1930. Due to McCormick's husband being the owner of the *Chicago Tribune*, an anti-Thompson paper, DePriest had to choose who to support. Most of his Black constituents had backed McCormick, and McCormick had been a part of the effort to stop Southerners from questioning DePriest's credentials, so DePriest sided with her and became functionally independent from the Republican machinery. As a result, DePriest almost certainly improved his performance with the Black women voters in his district even as many of them had begun to defect from the Republican Party because of its lily-white overtures.<sup>60</sup> DePriest's victory of 8,000 votes was also proof of continued strength as he increased his margin of victory over 1928 even in the midst of a landslide loss for Republicans. The results, however, still indicated that DePriest was unpopular with his white constituents as his opponent, Howard Baker, waged a strong campaign with white voters as his electoral base. The solidarity of the Black community, again, saved DePriest from defeat.<sup>61</sup>

DePriest's second term was not as eventful as his first. In part, this was due to the Republicans being in the minority in the House, which meant that he had little political power.<sup>62</sup> He was more active in introducing his own legislation this term, pointing towards a minor break in DePriest's trend of only supporting measures that secured basic constitutional rights for African Americans. He introduced an ex-slave pensions bill that provided for a \$30 monthly pension for former slaves. This was an ideological break from his earlier stances of supporting strict *laissez faire* measures to help African Americans, but this was an isolated incident. Beyond this, DePriest introduced a bill to provide back pay for (mostly) Black public school teachers in Washington DC and for a bill authorizing taxes on alcohol in early 1932. Always a wet, DePriest advocated for the legalization of alcohol and would support the eventual ratification of the Twenty-first Amendment as well. The rest were bills giving relief to specific individuals. None of these bills, however, ever received a hearing or made it out of committee.<sup>63</sup>

Because his legislative power was limited, DePriest continued to campaign vigorously for both the NAACP and the Republican Party during this period. He often drew large crowds and well-known local figures or elicited strong support from those whom he visited. DePriest was a crucial part of the effort of the Mobile, Alabama NAACP to help secure money during a fundraiser to help with the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, a group of Black men who were charged with raping two white women. Robert Bagnall, the national Director of Branches for the NAACP, instructed the secretary of the Alabama branch of the NAACP to ensure that he had "canvassers carefully organized so as to ensure good returns" on donations during DePriest's visit to the branch.<sup>64</sup> Although DePriest did eventually speak in Mobile after there were questions about location and cost, his presence showed that he was not necessarily a unifying figure for the Black community there. Beyond the KKK again threatening DePriest, some Black pastors publicly declared that "no outsider from the North is wanted in our city to stir up racial strife."<sup>65</sup> One of these men was on the Executive Committee for the Mobile NAACP branch, but he was removed as a result of his opposition to DePriest.<sup>66</sup> Incidents like these show how DePriest's national reputation was used by the NAACP for its goals, particularly in major cases like the Scottsboro case, and how support for him was sometimes equated with support for the organization's goals depending on the circumstances.

In 1932, DePriest would once again stand up for Hoover, but he would continue to send mixed signals regarding whether African Americans should remain loyal to the Party of Lincoln. For example, even though he was often

physically threatened by Southern Democrats, DePriest urged African Americans in Greensboro, North Carolina, to explicitly vote for Democrats if they could vote because “the Republican party wasn’t worth a cuss to the Southern negro.”<sup>67</sup> Conversely, DePriest would argue while campaigning for the Hoover in 1932 that “it is strange how democrats have the temerity to ask Negroes in the North to support their ticket while in the South the democrats deny Negroes the privilege of participating in their local or national politics.”<sup>68</sup> As historian Michael Brandon points out, these contradicting statements indicate that DePriest, while a staunch partisan, did begin to see how the best way for African Americans to gain their rights was to form a bloc vote and then vote for candidates, regardless of party, that would advance their interests and be beholden to them and depend on their votes.<sup>69</sup> For Black voters in Illinois First Congressional District, that person was still Oscar DePriest, as he held onto his seat in 1932 even as Hoover and the Republicans lost in a landslide. Again, DePriest was backed by the organizing of Black women, as “DePriest was one of the few members of his party to survive the onrush of the mighty Democratic wave which swept Roosevelt” into power thanks to their efforts.<sup>70</sup>

#### DEPRIEST AND THE NEW DEAL

Like most Republicans, DePriest came to despise the New Deal and worked against it. Ironically, however, DePriest would play an important role in helping at least one New Deal agency become more open to African Americans, thereby increasing its popularity with the Black community. This would also be the first time a significant piece of legislation included an antidiscrimination clause in employment.

When Roosevelt called a special session of Congress once his term began, Congress passed a series of bills in a whirlwind that would eventually be called “The Hundred Days,” a standard that almost all presidents have tried to uphold during their efforts to pass legislation in the early days of their term.<sup>71</sup> Sometimes before even seeing the bills, Congress passed the legislation that the President requested with only token opposition. On only a few pieces of legislation, like an amendment to allow “the free coinage of silver” attached to what became the Agricultural Adjustment Act, did serious debate ensue.<sup>72</sup>

DePriest missed votes on many of these crucial pieces of legislation (at least the ones that formally recorded votes), but he had a direct influence on one of the most famous pieces of legislation during this period: the Unemployment Work Relief Act. This act gave the President the authority to create what became the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), arguably the

most popular New Deal program. Although debate ensued in the House, DePriest offered a simple amendment: “That in employing citizens for the purpose of this act no discrimination shall be made on account of race, color, or creed; and no person under conviction for crime and serving sentence therefor (*sic*) shall be employed under the provisions of this act.” It passed and was never stripped from the bill.<sup>73</sup>

This was the first major antidiscrimination clause in employment at the federal level and the first significant law that outlawed race-based discrimination to have much notable enforcement. (The overturned Civil Rights Act of 1875 and The Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, which had vague provisions that technically outlawed race-based discrimination in transportation but were designed to be ineffective to placate white Southerners, were never meaningfully enforced.)<sup>74</sup> This was likely due to the general atmosphere of the time that allowed for major pieces of legislation to be passed with little to no oversight, but ultimately no definitive record exists as to why it was not stripped later. Although it did not prevent rampant discrimination in the CCC, it was explicitly responsible for bringing Southern African Americans into the CCC in the first place. Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge was threatened with removing all CCC funds from the state if the corps did not employ African Americans. He then set up segregated units for Black enrollees. President Roosevelt, however, often concurred in the efforts to discriminate against African Americans in the CCC despite the clear intent of DePriest and the statutory language preventing such action, but the CCC still became one of the most popular New Deal programs with African Americans.<sup>75</sup> Some 200,000 African Americans across the country sent \$700,000 a month home thanks to the CCC. DePriest’s antidiscrimination clause paved the way to forcing the white South to employ Black workers in public works programs meant to help the poor instead of giving all the jobs to whites.<sup>76</sup> Employment in the CCC and other New Deal programs would be what pushed many African Americans toward the Democratic Party, and DePriest helped that process, which would in turn eventually lead to his defeat.

#### THE BATTLE OVER THE HOUSE CAFETERIA

After this, DePriest was an enemy of the New Deal and largely did not support its programs. With no meaningful way to challenge Roosevelt’s political program as a part of the minority party he often turned to fighting against Jim Crow. The most direct attack that DePriest took on the Jim Crow Congress came in 1934. In the House, there were three separate restaurants. There was a



private one reserved for members. DePriest, as a member, had access to this restaurant, and no one questioned his use of it. Some members would protest his presence by eating in the Senate cafeteria, but no major incidents arose because of DePriest's personal use. There were a few instances, however, where DePriest brought mixed racial groups to the members' cafeteria in which DePriest was reprimanded for breaching racial etiquette. These matters, however, did not cause a public outcry, but they were a rebuke of DePriest for not following Jim Crow. There were also two public restaurants, one for whites and one for Blacks. These were widely accepted by white members North and South; Massachusetts Congressman Charles Underhill commented that Blacks were "happier" with a segregated restaurant. DePriest did not challenge this practice until a Black member of his staff, Morris Lewis, who regularly dined in the white restaurant, was ejected on the orders of North Carolina Democrat Lindsay Warren. He was the chair of the House Accounts Committee, which oversaw the operations of the House restaurants.<sup>77</sup>

DePriest then made a public call to desegregate the public restaurants on the floor of the House. After his resolution was referred to the House Rules Committee, DePriest then started a drive among members to remove the petition from the Rules Committee and force the whole House to vote on the issue. This caused an uproar in the South, with many Southern congressmen standing ready "to protect the country from the diabolical schemes" of desegregating the House restaurant.<sup>78</sup> This led to two main movements beyond the halls of Congress to desegregate the lunchroom. The first one was a mail campaign directed by the NAACP in which DePriest had a nominal role. The organization called upon its members to send their members of Congress a telegram in support of DePriest's resolution. There were also letters sent by the organization to all members of Congress, to which many responded by saying that they would give the matter a fair debate. A few Southerners wrote expressing contempt for the desegregation efforts.<sup>79</sup> This applied national pressure on the situation and would contribute to the resolution's eventual passage.

The other movement was led by students and professors at Howard University. Many of them began to try to forcibly sit in at the House and Senate restaurants, an early case of the direct-action technique later used by student activists in the early 1960s, after a Black service worker was ejected from the Senate restaurant.<sup>80</sup> In one instance, Ralph Bunche, a political science professor at Howard, walked in with Charles Edward Russell, a founder of the NAACP, to eat at the restaurant. They were begrudgingly served. When a Howard history professor was denied service, however, the NAACP began

legal proceedings against the House cafeteria.<sup>81</sup> Simultaneously, a group of Howard undergrads marched to the House cafeteria to demand service in the white section. They were denied entry one day due to the cafeteria falsely labeling the public cafeteria as being in use for members only that day. The firing of a Black staffer who was a student at Howard for serving a classmate only fueled the protests. After police dispersed them, there was an altercation between a Howard student and a Black doorman, which led to the arrest of the student. The charges were later dropped after his classmates raised money for bail.<sup>82</sup>

Warren and other Southerners then attacked the protestors, and DePriest initially joined in the attacks on the students calling them “uncontrolled youth and radicals.”<sup>83</sup> His message changed on the floor of the House the next day as he began attacking Southerners and others who were accusing him and others of wanting social equality between the races by saying, “When Negroes came to this country originally they were all Black; they are not now because somebody has had a good deal of social equality [laughter and applause]; social equal-ity not sought by colored women; social equality forced upon them because of the adverse economic situation down [in the South].”<sup>84</sup> This mocking speech was so well received that within the hour DePriest had the required number of signatures for his discharge petition to force the House to vote on his resolution. Both the resolution and the petition were bipartisan, with the Democratic votes coming strictly from Northern Democrats.

Per the resolution, there was now a committee formed to investigate the charges and propose a solution. The body was made up of three Democrats and two Republicans, with DePriest appointing the Republicans and House speaker and fellow Illinoisan Henry Rainey appointing the Democrats. There were worries immediately because Rainey publicly declared that he thought, if anything, that whites were discriminated against because they paid higher prices than Black patrons. Also given that Rainey represented Southern Illinois, which was culturally similar to the South, DePriest and his allies worried that the members he would appoint would not be open to desegregation. Of the Democrats appointed, only one had supported the initial resolution, thus giving a bare majority to those who supported the resolution. It was at this point that the NAACP began another letter-writing campaign to influence the members of the committee. The organization also worked with other groups like the YWCA to organize individuals who might be able to write letters or persuade Chairman Warren to desegregate the restaurant.<sup>85</sup>

Activism surrounding the cafeteria protests also began to die down. Around this time, Howard University leadership feared retaliation for the

actions of students and some faculty, believing that they would be labeled communists. Many rejected this sentiment in both the press and the student body, but ultimately the role of Howard University students and faculty subsided after this point due to pressure from the administration. There were legitimate fears of being called communists, however, as the Senate was investigating supposed communist activity at Howard that would be concluded in the next few years.<sup>86</sup>

Even if activism continued, it seems unlikely it would have accomplished much, as the fears of DePriest and activists were confirmed when the committee voted on party lines to keep segregation in place. This effectively killed the desegregation effort, as no other members wanted to continue the fight. Also at this time, the NAACP opened communication with the ACLU for legal help with the case. There was a communication breakdown between the two organizations, which led to the case being stalled and eventually dropped. The NAACP records do not clearly indicate what caused this to happen.<sup>87</sup> This effectively brought an end to the efforts to desegregate the House cafeteria.

Overall, this was DePriest's most direct attack on the Jim Crow Congress throughout his tenure, and it forced Congress to explicitly affirm its dedication to enforcing its racist social contract within its halls. The actions of various Black actors, however, forced this issue on Congress. Without the work of DePriest, the NAACP and Black students at Howard, Jim Crow would have likely remained unchallenged because no other actors in either party or the administration challenged the dictates of Jim Crow.

This would also be the last attack that DePriest would make on the Jim Crow Congress. He would lose his 1934 reelection bid to Black Democrat Arthur Mitchell, a fellow migrant from the South. The election was notable because it was the first Congressional race to feature two Black candidates from the major parties. DePriest's rejection of the New Deal and the slow realignment of Black voters eventually became enough to end his Congressional career. In one campaign speech, Mitchell explicitly tied Roosevelt to Black history by arguing that the New Deal was FDR's "Reconstruction." DePriest countered that many Blacks suffered under its programs and went so far as to call the New Deal's control of cotton production under the Agricultural Adjustment Act "reenslavement." To deflect these charges, Mitchell brought a Black man from Mississippi to Chicago so that he could testify that the New Deal saved him from foreclosure on his house after he personally called and talked to FDR and got a loan to stop the foreclosure.<sup>88</sup> In spite of these statements by DePriest, most African Americans in Chicago had some connection to the New Deal and its policies, however, and benefitted from its

programs, like the CCC, even if they were often the last to receive these benefits. Ironically, DePriest's successful efforts to make the New Deal somewhat open to African Americans helped lead to his eventual defeat.<sup>89</sup>

Mitchell would go on to win a narrow victory over DePriest. Though DePriest still won a clear majority of the Black vote based on ward breakdowns, Mitchell drew enough Black support combined with a strong turnout from ethnic whites to win the election. In a twist of irony, Mitchell's Black support often came from the efforts of Black women activists like Rachel Blight, the 3rd Ward Committeewoman for the Democrats and the first woman of either party to hold a leadership position. She campaigned for Mitchell and activated many of the women who had campaigned for DePriest in support of Mitchell. For these Black women voters, although they appreciated DePriest's continual challenges to Jim Crow, the abandonment of Civil Rights efforts of the GOP combined with the economic realities of the Great Depression led them to organize against the man who owed much of his later electoral success to their efforts. DePriest would face Mitchell in a rematch in 1936, but he would lose that election too. He would run in the GOP primary again in 1938 and 1940, but he lost those elections to his old protégés William Dawson and William King, respectively. These losses signaled the end of his congressional and national career. He would remain a player in local politics and served as an alderman from 1943 to 1947. He passed away from old age on May 12, 1951.<sup>90</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although DePriest was the most institutionally powerful and elite African American during his tenure in Congress, his career points toward the expanding power that Black citizens and voters were able to wield to exert pressure on national politics. The grassroots political organizing that created the space for his eventual ascension to Congress, the subsequent organizing around the campaigns he was involved in, his constant campaigning against the social and political dictates of Jim Crow, the insertion of a nondiscrimination clause into a key piece of New Deal legislation, and the advocacy of his allies points to the coordinated activism at the local and national level that forced the state to respond to the demands of one of its most discriminated communities. Although the New Deal certainly played a major role in the development of how race and Civil Rights were viewed on the national stage, it did not create the conditions for Black Americans to challenge racism on a national stage. That already existed, as DePriest's career shows. And when DePriest no longer served the interests of the Black female political organizers who campaigned

for him, they found a new champion and helped end DePriest's national career. The New Deal and the Depression did not provide the genesis of their activism; the long-standing political goals of Chicago's Black community did. The New Deal only changed the focus of those goals. Our understanding of the Black freedom struggle needs to expand to include the stories of people like DePriest and the Black organizers in Chicago, who found ways to extract meaningful victories from the state prior to the creation of the New Deal Coalition, and their influence on discussions regarding race at the national level.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Joan Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Eric Schickler, *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932-1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). See also Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 124–32; Michael Kazin, *What It Took to Win: A History of the Democratic Party* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022), 172–203.

<sup>2</sup> David A. Bateman, Ira Katznelson, and John Lapinski, *Southern Nation: Congress and White Supremacy after Reconstruction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2014). Other scholars also emphasize how Republicans abandoned Black interests. See Paul Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances: Race and Party Competition in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 81–85; Jeffery A. Jenkins and Justin Peck, *Congress and the First Civil Rights Era, 1861-1918* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Schickler gives the most detailed overview of this, but it is also found in narratives on labor and Civil Rights history. See also Jacquelyn Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233–63; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941*, 4th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); Robert H. Zieger, Timothy J. Minchin, and Gilbert J. Gall, *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). There is also a subset of literature that details how the contradictions of the New Deal eventually led to its undermining, especially in urban and suburban areas after World War II. See Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, first Princeton classics ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle*

for *Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Andrew R. Highsmith, *Demolition Means Progress: Flint, Michigan, and the Fate of the American Metropolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 210.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph J. Bunche and Dewey W. Grantham, *Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR: A Carnegie-Myrdal Report Emphasizing the American South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 93.

<sup>6</sup> Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Schickler refers to race as the New Deal's "blind spot" in early years because the liberals of the time simply did not see race as part of the broader liberal agenda at that time along with the need to placate white Southerners. Schickler, *Racial Realignment*, 27–49.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis S. Nordin, *The New Deal's Black Congressman: A Life of Arthur Werges Mitchell* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997); Christopher Manning, William L. Dawson and the Limits of Black Electoral Leadership (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009). One work that does examine DePriest's career through the lens of Civil Rights, see Michael Edward Brandon, *Black Chicago's New Deal Congressmen: Migration, Ghettoization, and the Origins of Civil Rights Politics* (Gainesville, University of Florida, 2015). Brandon, however, while focusing on the consequences of the Great Migration in examining DePriest, argues that DePriest was part of a "bitter pill" that Black residents had to swallow to have some semblance of representation. DePriest, then, while important as a trend toward Black political power and agency, had no lasting influence beyond being a starting point.

<sup>9</sup> Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 20; Keneshia Nicole Grant, *The Great Migration and the Democratic Party: Black Voters and the Realignment of American Politics in the 20th Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020), 11; Lisa G. Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877-1932* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Other works that examine the influence of the Great Migration on Black political power are Henry Lee Moon, *Balance of Power: The Negro Vote* (New York: Doubleday, 1948); Manning Marble, William L. Dawson and the Limits of Black Electoral Leadership Chicago: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009); Harold Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Manning Marble, "Black Power in Chicago: An Historical Overview of Class Stratification and Electoral Politics In a Black Urban Community," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 17, no. 3 (June 1985): 157–82; Christopher Reed, "Black Chicago Political Realignment during the Great Depression and New Deal," *Illinois Historical Journal* 78, no. 4 (1985): 242–56.

<sup>10</sup> Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Katznelson, *Fear Itself*.

<sup>12</sup> Kimberly Johnson, "The Color Line and the State: Race and American Political Development," in Richard M. Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 598–600.

<sup>13</sup> Katznelson, *Fear Itself*; Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski, *Southern Nation*. Cowie, *The Great Exception*. For how the white South acted in unison on matters of race

while still having diversity in other areas see: Devin Caughey, *The Unsolid South: Mass Politics and National Representation in a One-Party Enclave* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 37–42, 67–105.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen A. Berrey, *The Jim Crow Routine: Everyday Performances of Race, Civil Rights, and Segregation in Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago*, 164–70; Brandon, *Black Chicago's New Deal Congressmen*, 39–40; Will Cooley, *Moving up, Moving out: The Rise of the Black Middle Class in Chicago* (DeKalb: NIU Press, 2018), 30. For more on Black migrations out of the South during this period, see Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 317–63; Grant, *The Great Migration and the Democratic Party*, 42–44; James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*, paperback ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 132–39.

<sup>16</sup> Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago*, 167–80; Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 291; Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 95–98; Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 130, 169.

<sup>17</sup> Brandon, *Black Chicago's New Deal Congressmen*, 136–37; *Chicago Defender*, April 26, 1921, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Grossman, *Land of Hope*; Grant, *The Great Migration and the Democratic Party*. Examples of why migrants left the South can be found in Emmett Scott, “Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916–1918,” *The Journal of Negro History* 4, no. 3 (July 1919): 290–340.

<sup>19</sup> Perry Duis, “Arthur W. Mitchell, New Deal Negro in Congress” (Master’s thesis, University of Chicago, 1966), 3–14; Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago*, 188.

<sup>20</sup> I’m specifically referring to Grant’s idea of Black Balance of Power (BOP). Black BOP, as Grant calculates it, occurs when the Black voting age population is greater than the margin of victory in an election. Adjustments can be made depending on how much turnout one wants to assume among the Black population. Grant, *The Great Migration and the Democratic Party*, 26–32, 137–38. She borrows this idea from Moon, *Balance of Power: The Negro Vote*.

<sup>21</sup> Manning, *William L. Dawson and the Limits of Black Electoral Leadership*, 61. For more on the Dyer bill, see Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State*, 98–126.

<sup>22</sup> Manning, *William L. Dawson and the Limits of Black Electoral Leadership*, 56–61.

<sup>23</sup> *Chicago Defender*, March 7, 1928, 1; *Light: America's News Magazine* (Chicago) 4, no. 20 (April 7, 1928): 12.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Manning, *William L. Dawson and the Limits of Black Electoral Leadership*, 63; *Western Outlook*, May 5, 1928, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago*, 181–82; Manning, *William L. Dawson and the Limits of Black Electoral Leadership*, 64–65; *Western Outlook*, May 12, 1928, 8; *Plaindealer* (Topeka, KS), May 25, 1928, 1.

<sup>26</sup> “Democrat May Oppose Oscar DePriest,” *The Pittsburg Courier*, August 4, 1928, 4; *Negro World* (New York), October 28, 1928, 1; Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 7–9.

<sup>27</sup> Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 182.

<sup>28</sup> Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 10–12.

<sup>29</sup> United States House of Representatives, *Election Statistics, 1920 to Present* (History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, n.d.), <http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>.

<sup>30</sup> Gosnell Harold, “How the Negro Votes in Chicago,” *National Municipal Review*, no. 22 (May 1933): 241–43; *Plaindealer*, March 15, 1929.

<sup>31</sup> For more on this, see Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> *Plaindealer*, February 1, 1929, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Lautier, Louis, “What May Happen When DePriest Presents Credentials as Congressman,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, November 21, 1928, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Jenkins and Peck, *Congress and the First Civil Rights Era, 1861–1918*, 277.

<sup>35</sup> Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago*, 183–84; “DePriest Charges Dropped in Chicago,” *The Washington Post*, April 14, 1929, M16; “Oath of Office,” History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Origins-Development/Oath-of-Office/>.

<sup>36</sup> Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 193–203.

<sup>37</sup> David S. Day, “Herbert Hoover and Racial Politics: The DePriest Incident,” *The Journal of Negro History* 65, no. 1 (January 1980): 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3031544>.

<sup>38</sup> Lily-white Republicanism is explored in various works; see Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 161–64; Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances*; Jenkins and Peck, *Congress and the First Civil Rights Era, 1861–1918*.

<sup>39</sup> Day, “Herbert Hoover and Racial Politics,” 7–9.

<sup>40</sup> Day, 6, 9–10; Brandon, *Black Chicago’s New Deal Congressmen*, 172–74; *Boston Transcript*, June 18, 1929, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Day, “Herbert Hoover and Racial Politics,” 14.

<sup>42</sup> Brandon, *Black Chicago’s New Deal Congressmen*, 178–79.

<sup>43</sup> *Chicago World*, June 29, 1929, 1, 9; H.R. 12316, 71st Congress (1929). All such pieces of legislation were accessed through ProQuest. To save space, I am omitting hyperlinks, but one can simply search for these pieces of legislation by using the above information. *The Pittsburg Courier*, May 25, 1930, 5; Carol M. Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress*, enlarged edition (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), 29.

<sup>44</sup> “DePriest, Oscar Stanton,” in History, Art, and Archives of the House of Representatives, U.S. Congress, <https://history.house.gov/People/Detail/12155#assignments>. For one example of how the desire to obtain seniority affected a Congressional career, see Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate* (New York: Random House, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Kiran Klaus Patel, *The New Deal: A Global History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 24–34. The quote is from David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39.

<sup>46</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 242.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945*, 55.



<sup>48</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 49–50.

<sup>49</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 50–71; Paul Ortiz, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 118–27, 131–34.

<sup>50</sup> *Plaindealer*, February 14, 1930, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Brandon, *Black Chicago's New Deal Congressmen*, 188.

<sup>52</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 162–67.

<sup>53</sup> DePriest to Walter White, June 11, 1930, NAACP Papers: Board of Directors, Annual Conferences, Major Speeches, and National Staff Files, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001412-016-0147&accountid=9783>.

<sup>54</sup> *Chicago World*, November 2, 1929, 1; Brandon, *Black Chicago's New Deal Congressmen*, 196–98; Manning, *William L. Dawson and the Limits of Black Electoral Leadership*, 65.

<sup>55</sup> Brandon, *Black Chicago's New Deal Congressmen*, 204–5; *Plaindealer*, February 28, 1930, 1.

<sup>56</sup> DePriest to White, September 30, 1930, NAACP Papers: Board of Directors, Annual Conferences, Major Speeches, and National Staff Files, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001412-016-0147&accountid=9783>.

<sup>57</sup> Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 64.

<sup>58</sup> Brandon, *Black Chicago's New Deal Congressmen*, 211–13, 208–9; *Wyandotte Echo* (Kansas City, Kansas), June 20, 1930, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 328–29.

<sup>60</sup> *The Afro American* (Baltimore, Maryland), November 1, 1930, 6; Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 221–27.

<sup>61</sup> *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 8, 1930, 2; *Chicago Defender*, November 8, 1930, 1; Brandon, *Black Chicago's New Deal Congressmen*, 213–14.

<sup>62</sup> Initially, the two major parties were tied in the House with a Farmer-Labor representative holding the balance of power, but by the time the House was sworn in there had been numerous special elections due to the deaths of incoming members. Democrats won enough of those elections that they were the House majority in December of 1930 when the new Congress was sworn in.

<sup>63</sup> H.R. 10098; H.R. 10034; H.R. 3898, 72nd Congress (1931).

<sup>64</sup> Robert Bagnall to J. L. LaFlore, July 15, 1931, Papers of the NAACP, Part 12: Selected Branch Files, 1913–1939, Series A: The South, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001423-003-0345&accountid=9783>.

<sup>65</sup> Press Release, Mobile, AL NAACP, August 14, 1931, Papers of the NAACP, Part 12: Selected Branch Files, 1913–1939, Series A: The South, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001423-003-0345&accountid=9783>.

<sup>66</sup> J. L. LaFlore to Robert Bagnall, September 14, 1931, Papers of the NAACP, Part 12: Selected Branch Files, 1913–1939, Series A: The South, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001423-003-0345&accountid=9783>.

<sup>67</sup> *Wyandotte Echo* (Kansas City, Kansas), May 29, 1931, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Brandon, *Black Chicago's New Deal Congressmen*, 227.

<sup>69</sup> Brandon, 222.

<sup>70</sup> Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 232.

<sup>71</sup> For a contemporary example of this, see Voss, Stephen, "The First 100 Days," *Politico*, n.d., <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2021/washington-dc-during-joe-bidens-first-100-days-as-president-photos/>.

<sup>72</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 50.

<sup>73</sup> Rep. Oscar DePriest speaking on S. 598, 73rd Congress, 1st Sess., 77 Cong. Rec. 983 (1933).

<sup>74</sup> Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski, *Southern Nation*, 130–31; John Hope Franklin, "The Enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1875," *Prologue Magazine*, no. 6 (Winter 1974), 225–235; Greyson Teague, "Ticket to Ride: Arthur Mitchell and the Fight to Dismantle Jim Crow in Transportation," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Volume 80, No. 3 (Autumn 2021), 295.

<sup>75</sup> Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 53–55; Schickler, *Racial Realignment*, 142.

<sup>76</sup> Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 176; Schickler, *Racial Realignment*, 133; Bunche and Grantham, *Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR*, 615.

<sup>77</sup> Elliot Rudwick, "Oscar DePriest and the Jim Crow Restaurant in the U.S. House of Representatives," *Journal of Negro Education* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1966): 77–78; *Wyandotte Echo*, February 2, 1934, 3; [Name Blank] to Morris Lewis, January 24, 1934, Papers of the NAACP, Part 11: Special Subject Files, 1912–1939, Series A: Africa through Garvey, Marcus, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001421-027-0197&accountid=9783>.

<sup>78</sup> Quote from *State* (Columbia, South Carolina) quoted in *Plaindealer*, February 9, 1934, 1; H.Res. 236, Papers of the NAACP, Part 11: Special Subject Files, 1912–1939, Series A: Africa through Garvey, Marcus, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001421-027-0197&accountid=9783>.

<sup>79</sup> Dora Ogan to Robert Bacon, January 25, 1934; "NAACP Joins Restaurant Fight"; Edward Moran, Jr. to Roy Wilkins, January 30, 1934; Sterling Strong to Roy Wilkins, January 29, 1934, Papers of the NAACP, Part 11: Special Subject Files, 1912–1939, Series A: Africa through Garvey, Marcus, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001421-027-0197&accountid=9783>.

<sup>80</sup> This is most associated with the activities of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The most comprehensive account of the organization is still Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>81</sup> Russell to White, March 15, 1934; "House Café Refuses to Serve Colored University Professor"; NAACP Press Release, "NAACP to Take Capitol Café Jim Crow Fight to Courts," Papers of the NAACP, Part 11: Special Subject Files, 1912–1939, Series A: Africa through Garvey, Marcus, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001421-027-0255&accountid=9783>.

<sup>82</sup> Rudwick, "Oscar DePriest and the Jim Crow Restaurant in the U.S. House of Representatives," 78–79.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted from Rudwick, 79.

<sup>84</sup> *Congressional Record*, quoted in Rudwick, 79.

<sup>85</sup> Houston to White, March 23, 1934; Williams to White, March 26, 1934, Papers of the NAACP, Part 11: Special Subject Files, 1912–1939, Series A: Africa through Garvey,

Marcus, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001421-027-0255&accountid=9783>.

<sup>86</sup> Rudwick, “Oscar DePriest and the Jim Crow Resturant in the U.S. House of Representatives,” 79–81; U.S., Congress, Senate, *Alleged Communistic Activities at Howard University, Washington, D.C.*, 74th Congress, 2d Sess. (1936).

<sup>87</sup> [Name Blank] to Baldwin, March 26, 1934; [Name Blank] to Russell, March 16, 1934; Williams to Houston, March 26, 1934, Papers of the NAACP, Part 11: Special Subject Files, 1912-1939, Series A: Africa through Garvey, Marcus, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001421-027-0255&accountid=9783>.

<sup>88</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940*, 185–86; Duis, “Arthur W. Mitchell, New Deal Negro in Congress,” 30, 33, 40 (33 is a campaign flyer), MP, Campaign Speech 10/34, box 2, folder 5; Undated Newspaper Article about DePriest’s Attacks on the New Deal, box 2, folder 2, Chicago History Museum.

<sup>89</sup> Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 168–79; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 256–61.

<sup>90</sup> *Chicago Defender*, November 17, 1934; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 260; Duis, “Arthur W. Mitchell, New Deal Negro in Congress,” 42; Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 234; United States House of Representatives, *Election Statistics, 1920 to Present*; Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 232–33.