

KEEPING THE FAITH: AFRICAN AMERICANS RETURN TO CONGRESS, 1929–1970

LESSON PLAN THREE



RECOMMENDED GRADE LEVEL: Grades 7 to 12



OVERVIEW

This activity is designed to accompany the contextual essay “Keeping the Faith: African Americans Return to Congress, 1929–1970,” from the *Black Americans in Congress* website, history.house.gov/exhibitions-and-publications/baic/black-americans-in-congress/. Students have the opportunity to learn more about the Black Americans who served in Congress from 1929 to 1970. Students are encouraged to analyze the role African-American Representatives and Senators played in Congress during this era, as well as the ways in which they may have changed the institution.



CURRICULUM CONNECTION

- U.S. History, American Government, Social Studies, African-American Studies
- Great Depression, World War II, Civil Rights Movement, Cold War, Women’s Rights



OBJECTIVES

1. Students should be able to identify the African Americans who served in Congress from 1929 to 1970.
2. Students should be able to recognize the ways in which African Americans won national elective office from 1929 to 1970.
3. Students should be able to identify important issues and trends surrounding the African Americans who served in Congress from 1929 to 1970.



LESSON PLAN

1. To help introduce students to the upcoming activity, lead a brief discussion using the questions below:
 - a. What were some of the important issues and events in America from 1929 to 1970?
 - b. If asked to describe an average Member of Congress (House or Senate) during this time period, how would you answer?
 - c. Have there been many African Americans who have served in Congress? (Ask students to compile a quick list.)
2. Ask students to read the contextual essay “Keeping the Faith: African Americans Return to Congress, 1929–1970,” either independently or in groups. Encourage students to take notes and to write down any unanswered questions they encounter during the reading.
3. Once students have completed the reading, have them answer the **Comprehension Questions**. Review the answers as a class.
4. Next have students answer the **Critical Thinking Questions**. Review the answers as a class.
5. Choose one of the options listed under the category **Main Exercise** (Cooperative or Hypothetical). If necessary, students can use the online resources listed at the end of the activity to complete the **Main Exercise**.
6. Time permitting, conduct one of the **Suggested Extended Activities**.



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS ON THE SURFACE

1. Who was the first black Member elected during this era? How long had it been since an African American had been elected to Congress?
2. Who was the first African American popularly elected to the Senate? Which state did he represent? How many terms did he serve?
3. Who was the first African-American Congresswoman? What state did she represent? What was her campaign motto?
4. How did the black Members of this period compare with their Reconstruction-Era predecessors? List three similarities and three differences.
5. Define the “Second Reconstruction.”
6. Provide two examples of how black Members confronted discrimination at the U.S. Capitol.
7. What were some of the major legislative issues affecting African-American Members during this era?



CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS DIGGING DEEPER

1. How did the Great Depression and the New Deal contribute to the changing party alliance of many African Americans during this era?
2. What were some of the major factors that led to increased opportunities for African Americans seeking political office? What potential obstacles did blacks continue to face when seeking elective office? What obstacles did they face after they were elected to Congress?
3. How did the military experiences of many black Members of the era influence their outlook on race relations and their future political careers?
4. Compare and contrast the congressional careers of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of New York and William Dawson of Illinois. (Make sure to discuss tenure, legislation, committees, legislative style/approach, and basic background such as the district or the state in which each man served.)
5. Representative Augustus (Gus) Hawkins of California once said, “The leadership belongs not to the loudest, not to those who beat the drums or blow the trumpets, but to those who day in and day out, in all seasons, work for the practical realization of a better world—those who have the stamina to persist and remain dedicated.” What do you think he meant by this statement? Explain how this statement touches on the tension and discord surrounding the contrasting styles of representation employed by black Members of the era.
6. Why did African-American Members not play a more prominent role in the civil rights legislation enacted during this era? How did they balance outside pressures with the institutional pathways of Congress?
7. How do you think the experiences of black Members from this era may have contributed to the eventual formation of a caucus for African Americans?



MAIN EXERCISE OPTION 1: COOPERATIVE

Working in small groups, choose a former black Member of Congress from this era and follow the directions below:

- a. Read the profile for your Member.
- b. Write down any important notes.
- c. Scenario: You have been assigned the task of designing a museum exhibit to describe the life of Congressman or Congresswoman _____. The exhibit should include information on all aspects of his or her life, but should focus on the Member’s congressional service.

What should be included:

- Original title of exhibit that helps explain his or her legacy
- 50-word exhibit label that summarizes congressional career
- Three artifacts chosen by you that best represent the Member’s legacy
- A creative teaching tool for museum visitors that covers the highlights of his or her career in Congress (committees, key legislation, state or district represented, etc.)

OPTION 2: HYPOTHETICAL

1. You are a visitor in the House Gallery during the debate on either the 1964 Civil Rights Act or the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Write a two-page letter to your family describing the debate and the atmosphere on the floor and in the gallery.
2. You are a black Congressman representing an urban, majority-black district in the 1950s. The chairman of one of your committees has asked you to round up support for a bill that would increase funding for public education. Although the legislation would be received favorably in your district the chairman is a vocal opponent of civil rights. Draft a two-page memo to the chairman outlining your reasons for accepting or declining his request.
3. You are a longtime staffer for a black Member from this era. Prepare and deliver a five-minute speech for a district event detailing the Member’s career and significant accomplishments. Make sure to provide an insider’s perspective on his or her daily activities based on your observations as a member of his or her staff.



SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Design a timeline of significant events for African-American Members who served during this era.
2. Write a two-page editorial for the school newspaper on one of the black Members from this era.
3. Design a campaign bumper sticker for a black candidate for Congress from this era.
4. Invite a local civil rights leader to speak about his or her experience in the movement.
5. Draft language for a resolution sponsored by a black Member of the era on one of three hypothetical topics:
 - a. Increasing funding for commemorative celebrations honoring the achievements of African Americans
 - b. Creating a series of historic walking tours in major American cities focusing on the civil rights movement
 - c. Forming a federally-funded “think tank” to write public policy on how to provide increased employment opportunities for recent African-American graduates



ONLINE RESOURCES

History, Art & Archives | U.S. House of Representatives

A collaborative project between the Office of the Historian and the Clerk of the House's Office of Art and Archives. Together, the offices serve as the House's institutional memory, and a resource for Members, staff, and the general public.

history.house.gov

Online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*

Searchable database that contains biographical information on every person who served in Congress.

bioguide.congress.gov

Senate Historical Office

Includes information on the history and art of the U.S. Senate such as facts and milestones, historical statistics, featured biographies, and a photographic collection.

senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Senate_Historical_Office.htm

Congress.gov | Library of Congress

Searchable database of congressional legislation from 1973 to present (bill text and roll call votes are available from 1989 to present).

congress.gov

GPO Federal Digital System

Includes links for searchable databases of the *Congressional Record* and *House Journal* (1994 to present) as well as information on how to find the nearest federal depository library.

gpo.gov/fdsys