

**PERMANENT INTERESTS:****THE EXPANSION, ORGANIZATION, AND RISING INFLUENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN CONGRESS, 1971–2007****RECOMMENDED GRADE LEVEL:** Grades 7 to 12**OVERVIEW**

This activity is designed to accompany the contextual essay “Permanent Interests: The Expansion, Organization, and Rising Influence of African Americans in Congress, 1971–2007,” from the *Black Americans in Congress* website, [history.house.gov/exhibitions-and-publications/baic/black-americans-in-congress/](http://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 1971 to 2007. 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
- Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, Cold War, Women’s Rights, Voting Rights and Redistricting, Watergate

**OBJECTIVES**

1. Students should be able to identify some of the African Americans who served in Congress from 1971 to 2007.
2. Students should be able to recognize the ways in which African Americans won national elective office from 1971 to 2007.
3. Students should be able to identify important issues and trends surrounding the African Americans who served in Congress from 1971 to 2007.

**LESSON PLAN**

1. To help introduce students to the upcoming activity, lead a brief discussion using the questions below:
  - a. What have been some of the important issues and events in America from 1971 to present?
  - 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 Black Americans who have served in Congress? (Ask students to compile a quick list.)
2. Ask students to read the contextual essay “Permanent Interests: The Expansion, Organization, and Rising Influence of African Americans in Congress, 1971–2007,” 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. What year did black Members of Congress form the Congressional Black Caucus? Why did this mark an important milestone?
2. Who and when was the first African-American woman elected to the Senate? Generally, what role did African-American women play in Congress during this period?
3. What role did the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (and its subsequent extensions) play in African Americans' efforts to win election to congressional office? What background did individuals from this era have in state and local politics—and did it differentiate them from other generations of blacks in Congress?
4. What were some of the major legislative issues affecting African-American Members during this era?
5. How did African Americans fare in achieving leadership positions in this era? Provide two examples.
6. Name two factors that contributed to the rapid rise in numbers of African Americans in Congress during this period.
7. Describe one instance in which black Members differed over a bill or major national issue debated in Congress.



## CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS DIGGING DEEPER

1. How do you think the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s contributed to changing the role of African Americans in politics in the late 20th century? Provide two examples to support your answer.
2. What effect did the creation of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) have on African Americans' experience within the institution of Congress? How did the CBC change the nature of the national debate on issues important to Black Americans?
3. Did African-American Members of this era typically work within the prescribed traditions of Congress or did they challenge the system? Use evidence to support your answer.
4. Compare and contrast the congressional careers of any two former African Americans who served during this period. (Make sure to discuss tenure, legislation, committees, and basic background such as the district or the state in which each individual served.)
5. What do you think was the single most important advancement for African Americans in Congress during this period? Explain your answer.
6. Discuss and explain some of the long-term trends and short-term factors that contributed to black candidates' success during the 1992 elections.
7. Despite the fact that three Black Americans served in the U.S. Senate during this era—no more than one has served in that chamber at any given time. Why do you think African Americans' participation in the Senate has lagged that of their counterparts in the House—and lagged that of other groups who made considerable inroads in the Senate during this era, such as women?
8. Reflecting on the differences between black Members of Congress in the mid-20th century and their successors, William (Bill) Gray III of Pennsylvania once observed: "Many of the [early] Black Caucus members came out of the heat of the civil rights struggle. We have a group of new members whose strategies were shaped in the post-civil rights movement—who use leverage within the system. We see ourselves not as civil rights leaders, but as legislators . . . the pioneers had made it possible for us to be technicians." Do you agree with Gray's assessment? Explain your answer.

**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 the Member's 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 an African-American Representative elected to office in this era. You are a member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and have largely supported that organization throughout your career in the House. You recently have been appointed to a prominent leadership position by your party. Party leaders have asked you to support a budget plan that differs from one supported by the CBC. Based on what you've read about black Members who attained leadership positions in this era, explain how you might seek to balance these competing loyalties.
2. You are an African-American Member of Congress during the 1990s at the height of the debate about cutting back spending on the national welfare system—potentially affecting millions of urban and rural poor. Take one of the two following positions:
  - a. You support leaving welfare intact. Write a 300–400 word floor speech (for the House or the Senate) in which you try to persuade your colleagues to support your position and to encourage them to vote with you.
  - b. You support changing the welfare system. Write a 300–400 word floor speech (for the House or the Senate) in which you set out the reasons you support changing welfare and ask your colleagues to vote with you.
3. You are an African-American candidate for either the House or the Senate, campaigning in the 1990s. Develop a list of specific issues that you will incorporate into your campaign platform (i.e. education, foreign policy, economic policy, health care). Beyond these issues, decide how you will craft your campaign message: will you appeal to traditional “black interests” or will you run as a candidate who appeals to a wide cross section of voters in your district? Offer justifications for your strategy.

**SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES**

1. Design a timeline of significant events for the African Americans in Congress who served during this era.
2. Track voting records of black Members on key issues of the period (e.g. apartheid, welfare and housing, voting rights).
3. Write a 100-word obituary for one of the African-American Members.
4. Design a campaign website for a black candidate for Congress during this period.

5. Draft language for a resolution sponsored by an African-American Member of Congress from this era on one of three hypothetical topics:
  - a. Encouraging U.S. economic or diplomatic sanctions against a country with documented human rights abuses
  - b. Promoting better access to educational opportunities in college for urban and rural poor
  - c. Instituting a policy of reparations to compensate the descendants of American slaves



## 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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://gpo.gov/fdsys)