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Neil Allen

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## How Texans Opposed Civil Rights Legislation in the 1960s: Evidence from Letters to Future House Speaker Jim Wright

BY NEIL ALLEN

This article examines the role of Civil Rights in the career of future House Speaker Jim Wright, and the views of Texans about nondiscrimination legislation. Drawing on letters sent to Wright (D-TX) commenting on the legislation that became the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1968 (Open Housing) Civil Rights Act, this article examines how Texas citizens reacted to, and mostly opposed, nondiscrimination legislation. This analysis finds that economic and property rights arguments are the most common type of argument, and explicitly racist arguments are relatively rare. This article also places the opposition of Jim Wright's constituents to Civil Rights legislation in the larger context of his mixed record on the issue while a back-bench representative, and how this record supported his later rise to leadership of Democrats in the House of Representatives.

Jim Wright is best known as Speaker of the House from 1987-1989, and for his rapid fall from power due to an ethics scandal in 1989. But before he was a leader in the House, he represented the Fort Worth-based Texas 12th district during debates over Civil Rights legislation in the 1950s and 1960s. Wright compiled a mixed voting record on Civil Rights, voting against the 1964 Act but voting for the 1957 and 1968 Civil Rights Acts and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Wright successfully navigated through this tumultuous period while representing a district supportive of segregation, positioning himself to move into the House leadership in the 1970s. Using archival records, this paper establishes the strength of opposition to civil rights legislation in the Texas 12th district, and illuminates the sources of that opposition. It finds that Wright's constituents were overwhelmingly opposed to Civil Rights Legislation, and that the opposition was heavily oriented toward support for property rights.

While civil rights bills were seriously debated in Congress since at least the 1940s, and civil rights legislation has been debated and passed

in the 1970s and 1990s, the period from 1963-68 contained the most serious and sustained action in the area since at least Reconstruction. Congress passed the momentous Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the less important 1968 Civil Rights Act focused on fair housing. Versions of the 1968 legislation were hotly debated in 1966 and 1967 as well. Votes on these bills evidenced cross-party coalitions in support and opposition, and also the shrinking of the pro-civil rights coalition over time. This period provides an opportunity to examine how future leaders like Jim Wright navigated this complex issue environment. Wright's election as House Majority Leader in 1976 was particularly notable, considering that he was elected by a caucus that had become strongly committed to the pro-integration position that Wright himself came to relatively late.

The 88th-90th Congresses (1963-1969) included seven members that would later enter or advance in congressional leadership: Wright of Fort Worth, Carl Albert of Oklahoma, Hale Boggs of Louisiana, Gerald Ford of Michigan, John Rhodes of Arizona, Robert Dole of Kansas, and Robert Michel of Illinois. This article focuses on Wright, whose election as House Majority Leader in 1976 was the last in a continuous string of victories by candidates in contested leadership elections that were more closely identified with the Southern conservative wing of the party than their opponents, referred to in a recent work as "The Austin-Boston Connection.

This article first discusses the career of Jim Wright in Texas and national politics, with a focus on his complex relationship to Civil Rights. I then discuss the arguments made by citizens who wrote to Wright about Civil Rights in the 1960s, drawing on archival records from his papers housed at Texas Christian University. I then conclude with a discussion of the role of Civil Rights and property rights in the shift of Texas from a Democratic to Republican state.

### **Jim Wright as Future Congressional Leader and "Southern Liberal"**

Jim Wright was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1954, and served until his resignation in 1989. He had previously served as the elected Mayor of the small city of Weatherford west of Fort Worth, and served one term in the Texas State House from 1947 to 1949. He was "known as the foremost liberal" in the Texas House



delegation in the 1950s in particular due to his willingness to oppose the interests of petroleum producers. He was ambitious and upwardly mobile throughout his career, first focusing on winning a Senate seat. When Lyndon Johnson became Vice President in 1961, Wright ran for the open Senate seat and finished third, less than two percentage points behind the appointed Democrat Sen. William Blakely. Wright would have likely beaten Republican John Tower in the runoff, as Blakely lost Texas liberal support due to his conservatism. Wright attempted to gain the nomination to run against Tower in 1966, but ended his campaign after his fundraising fell below expectations.

The Civil Rights politics of Texas in the 1950s and 1960s were a complex mix of continued Jim Crow segregation along with gradual progress toward integration. Conservative Governor Alan Shivers fought against post-Brown v. Board of Education school desegregation with the rhetoric of interposition, echoing the "massive resistance" politics of his counterparts in Virginia and the Deep South, using the Texas Rangers to prevent court-ordered integration in Mansfield and Texarkana. A liberal like Ralph Yarborough, however, could win election in 1957 at the height of the post-Brown backlash, and fight off a segregationist challenge from future President George H.W. Bush in the 1964 general election. Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson, occupying legislative and executive leadership roles in Washington, charted a middle path.

This complexity of Civil Rights politics was present in the Metroplex region that sent Wright to Washington. Fort Worth had a White Citizens' Council as early as 1955, and the NAACP was active in the city in the years after Brown v. Board of Education. North Texas State College (now the University of North Texas) in nearby Denton had long denied admission to black undergraduates, but peacefully complied with a federal court ruling in 1955, enrolling over 247 black students by 1958 (Marcello 1996). This pattern of gradual integration stimulated by legal action and peaceful protest activity fits the larger pattern identified by Brian Behnken in his study of the Dallas civil rights experience. He argues that the "Dallas Way" of business-oriented consensus politics provided opportunity for black protest actions to stimulate gradual integration: "To maintain the positive image of the city and promote business growth, Dallas's leaders proved willing to negotiate with blacks and implement desegregation measures." This movement toward integration occurred while Dallas County sent Bruce Alger, a



right-wing anti-integration Republican, to Congress until 1964, and in 1960 voters in the Dallas School District voted against school integration by a four-to-one margin.

Operating on the left of Texas politics in the 1950s and 1960s, Jim Wright was vulnerable to attack as an integrationist, in particular because of his record as, by Texas standards, a liberal leader of the UT College Democrats while an undergraduate. The student group called for anti-lynching legislation, ending the poll tax, and integrating the university's law school. When running for reelection to the Texas House of Representatives in 1948, Wright's Democratic primary opponent attempted to use the ongoing NAACP litigation involving the University of Texas Law School against him. Eugene Miller, a former state legislator, said Wright wanted "every uppity nigra with a high school diploma" to attend the University of Texas Law School. Wright responded by running a newspaper ad saying "I believe in the Southern tradition of segregation and have strongly resisted any efforts to destroy it." Wright attempted to stay within the mainstream of Texas Democrats, opposing particular facets of Jim Crow while protecting against right-wing militant attack.

Wright continued his rhetorical support for segregation during his early service in the U.S. House. When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled public school segregation unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and ruled that schools must be integrated "with all deliberate speed" the following year, Wright followed the lead of more senior Southern leaders in supporting the rejected "separate but equal" standard that had been precedent since *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. Then in his first term, Wright said the Supreme Court "erred in judgment . . . I feel that segregation could be ideally maintained without discrimination, that is possible for facilities to be equal while being separate." This rhetorical support for segregation, while maintaining his legislative focus on bringing federal resources to Fort Worth and Texas with his seat on the Public Works Committee, followed the example set by Speaker Sam Rayburn (D-Bonham) and Rayburn's former protégé then-Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson. Rayburn and Johnson maintained rhetorical support for segregation, strengthening their ties to Southern conservatives while also retaining support of the progressive liberal minority within their respective Democratic caucuses.

The white backlash that swept the South, particularly the Deep South, in the years following *Brown* eroded this mildly segregationist



middle ground that Wright and other Texas liberal and economically-populist congressmen were attempting to occupy. The congressional manifestation of the regional backlash was the "Southern Manifesto," a militant segregationist statement of principles produced by Deep South Senators. The Manifesto's creators, led by Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, did not ask Rayburn or Johnson to sign, saving them from a choice that would have inflamed a large portion of the caucus they were attempting to lead. Russell and other senior Southern Senators also were attempting to support a future presidential run by Johnson, which would only be possible if he could be acceptable to non-Southern liberals in the party.

Lowly back-benchers like Jim Wright, however, had to make a public choice to sign or refuse to sign. Following the pattern seen in other Peripheral South states like Florida, North Carolina and Tennessee, the Texas House delegation split on the issue. Right-wing members from rural areas of the state, like Martin Dies and John Dowdy of East Texas and O.C. Fisher of West Texas, signed the Manifesto and continued to incorporate anti-integrationist arguments into their broader anti-communist conservatism. Wright Patman of Northeast Texas, whose populist criticism of large financial institutions as Chair of the Banking Committee made him a hero to younger Texas liberals like Wright, signed the Manifesto. Facing a right-wing primary challenge, representing the part of the state most similar to the Deep South, Patman acted to protect his position of power over other areas of public policy.

Wright, however, joined the majority of the Texas House delegation in rejecting the strident position of the Southern Manifesto. Historian Tony Badger, attempting to explain why border-state Senators and House members rejected the Manifesto, attributes the Texas pattern to the influence of Rayburn. The Speaker saw the document as a potential wedge within his fractious caucus. The state's position in the 1950s House was as strong as any in history, with the Speakership and several committee chairmanships. This was only possible if the Democratic Party could stay relatively united and in the majority. Also Rayburn and Johnson were engaged back home in a struggle for control of the state party, against the conservative faction led by Governor Alan Shivers that wanted to withdraw support from the national Democratic Party's presidential ticket in 1956. This ultimately successful effort of Rayburn and Johnson depended on isolating the more militant anti-federal government conservatives within the party.



In justifying his more integrationist stance, Wright drew on his Christian (Presbyterian) faith, stating that "hatred is evil in the sight of God. The Negro is a child of God, as am I and as are my kinsman. He possesses an immortal soul, as do we." Wright would continue this support for limited integration by voting for the 1957 Civil Rights Act, which was limited to the right to vote and had little practical effect on Southern society.

Like many more moderate Southerners in Congress, Wright offered mixed and conflicted positions on the more consequential Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s. He voted against the 1964 Civil Rights Act, citing support for property rights. He supported the more popular Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the quite controversial Civil Rights Act of 1968, with its mostly ineffectual focus on open housing. This eventual move to a more integrationist position would serve him well in the most important election of his career, his narrow victory as House Majority Leader in 1976.

### **Constituent Letter Data**

Like every member of Congress, Jim Wright received letters from constituents and other citizens commenting on issues of the day. Fortunately for students of Civil Rights, Congress and Texas History, Wright and his staff preserved incoming correspondence on Civil Rights legislation from 1963-1966, totally 893 individual letters. This archive opens a window on the opinions of everyday Texans in this period of contestation and transformation of racial norms and rules. It also illuminates the expectations that constituents had of representatives like Jim Wright, and the cross-pressures elected officials experience.

Citizens who write letters to their congressman are a clearly self-selected group. The decision to write to a person who they likely know only from popular media and sometimes a newsletter marks them as more interested in public affairs than their fellow citizens, and likely holding more definite and considered opinions. Archival data like that under review here is best understood as a measure of "motivated public opinion," providing a more narrow but deeper look into the attitudes of citizens on legislative issues than possible in public opinion polling.

Letters provide a measure of district opinion, both in terms of basic support and opposition and the substantive content of actual and potential voters. While the letters sent to congressional offices are not a representative sample of district or voter opinion, they do commu-



nicate to legislators and their staff the views of those they represent. Particularly in the 1960s, when polling was infrequent at the national level and virtually nonexistent at the district level, letters provided members a proxy for district opinion. Taeku Lee, in *Mobilizing Public Opinion* (2002), argues that letters to the president have significant advantages as a measure of public opinion over opinion polls, in that they do not contain “non-attitudes” and contain argumentative content.

This article examines letters to Congressman Jim Wright, sent to his Washington office and preserved in the James Wright Papers at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. The collection contains files with letters from 1963 and 1964 addressing the legislation that became the 1964 bill. The archive also preserves letters from 1966 addressing that year’s proposal, mainly concerning the inclusion on Title IV, an open housing provision that would have applied to sales of owner-occupied homes and rental of units in structures with at least four units. No letters have been preserved from 1967 and 1968 concerning the modified and weakened open housing bill that became the 1968 Civil Rights Act.

There is no definite way of knowing that a given folder contains all letters sent to a congressman like Wright on a given issue during a particular time. All files analyzed here contain both support and opposition to legislation, which supports the assumption that there is not a corresponding “For” or “Against” file that was discarded. It is likely that staff discarded some portion of out-of-district and out-of-state letters, particularly since the practice of congressional offices was often to only reply to in-district letters. The data analyzed below, although limited by multiple kinds of selection bias, support generalizations about support for civil rights legislation, and the content of arguments made by constituents.

All letters were coded for Support or Opposition to Civil Rights legislation. I only included letters where support or opposition to Congressional action is clear from the text. I did not include letters that expressed an opinion but did not express support or opposition, although these were few in number. I did not include letters asking for a copy of legislation, unless the request was part of a larger argument for or against legislation. I counted a letter as commenting on legislation if the writer mentioned a bill number, a proper or informal name for a specific bill, or referencing action by Congress. Letters that specifically called for action on school desegregation or limitation of the power of the Supreme Court were not included, although these were also few in number.



### Argumentative Content: Letters to Jim Wright

Letters from constituents not only provide data on support or opposition to particular legislation, they reveal the type of arguments that underlie support or opposition. A letter that argues the 1964 Civil Rights Act should be opposed by their congressman because it is unconstitutional shows a different foundation for opposition than one who claims their opposition comes from a belief that non-whites are inferior. The kinds of arguments made for and against legislation reveal the reasons for those positions, and also the kind of arguments writers think will be persuasive.

All letters analyzed in this article were coded for their general stance toward Civil Rights Legislation, and five argumentative types: Property Rights, Constitutional, Communist/Socialist, Totalitarian, and White Supremacist/Racist. Many letters used more than one type, and the majority of letters used none. Some letters merely called for support or opposition to legislation, and others had argumentative content that did not fit into my typology. I define and discuss each type below with evidence from the Wright collection.

#### (See Table 1)

Nearly nine out of ten letters in the Civil Rights files of Jim Wright, housed at Texas Christian University, express opposition to civil rights legislation. Many letters merely urge Wright to vote against legislation, as he did in 1964, but not in 1965 and 1968. Others use creative metaphors to illustrate their opposition. A married couple from Fort Worth wrote on June 4, 1966 that the proposed open housing legislation was “garbage”:

*My husband and I are small property owners, and we think the bill is so rotten it stinks. When we find anything around our house that stinks we throw it into the garbage. We expect you to do the same with that bill.*

Some writers, like this constituent from Fort Worth in 1966, presented fantastical slippery-slope arguments about the push for civil rights legislation:

*If Bills of this nature are passed, how far are we from the legislation that would make it a federal crime for a person to reject any marriage proposal on the ground the refusal involves the other party's civil rights? Not too*

*long back, I would have regarded this question as ludicrous; now it appears to be no small thing.*

Many writers in opposition to legislation presented variations on the theme of a loss of core American values, often linked with arguments that civil rights legislation was merely a Trojan Horse for some other nefarious goal. A frequent refrain was that bills were "10% civil rights, and 90% federal power."

These defenses of the established order in American politics used several distinct, but often complimentary, types of argument. After reading a subsample of letters, I selected four types that seemed common or likely in letters: Property Rights, Constitutional, Communism/Socialism, and White Supremacist/Racist. After coding around half of the Wright letters, I added an additional type for Totalitarian.

The most common type of argument, present in 37% of letters, was Property Rights. A letter received this code if the writer argued explicitly that legislation was eliminating property rights, or the rights of property owners. I also included letters that argued that legislation took away the right of owners to make decisions involving their property. Some letters in this category also made reference to specific examples, like defending the ability of an owner of a house to rent a room to a person of their choosing.

An illustrative example, from a Fort Worth resident on June 9, 1963, makes reference to Wright's relative liberalism and connects it to property rights and other values:

*I disagree most emphatically with your work in the U.S. House of Representatives for you have continually spoken for the trend toward Socialism in this country. I am against the Administration's proposed Civil Rights Bill. It is an unconstitutional attempt to deprive American (sic) of their property rights. . . . You have made me a Republican.*

This letter, like many others, joins a property rights argument to other argumentative types discussed below. This letter is typical of those supporting Property Rights, in that those rights are presented as universal, not specifically as enjoyed by white Americans. A letter from the National Restaurant Association on Nov. 1, 1963, presented a more concrete argument against the public accommodations section of the bill that became the 1964 Civil Rights Act:



*By subjecting private business to unnecessary harassment and by enabling the Federal Government to exert more control over individual rights and over private business, the proposals, if enacted, can only result in the diminution of free enterprise and of the rights and freedoms of all citizens.*

Property Rights is presented here as a universal concept at the core of American politics and society. Some writers also presented a pragmatic case for property rights, focusing on the experience of the property owner under proposed legislation:

*A property owner, acting in good faith, might be accused of denying the right of a member of a minority group or anybody else, for that matter, to buy his property. The accuser has the right to sue the owner of such property. Whether the accuser is acting in good faith or out of sheer malice the end result will be the same. The property owner may face months or years of costly litigation trying to establish his innocence. He will not be able to dispose of his own property while settlement of the case is pending. To many in our mobile American society where jobs often demand frequent transfers, this could mean disaster.*

Wright, who would later vote for the 1968 Civil Rights Act that included restrictions on the choices of residential property owners, echoed this opposition to legislation on Property Rights grounds in his "Wright Slant" newsletter to constituents on June 23, 1963. This support for a Property Rights critique of then-president Kennedy's civil rights proposals garnered support from letter writers, with one correspondent from Houston writing on June 28, 1963 that Wright's statement was the "highest expression of Americanism." Responding to a constituent letter also in June of 1963, Wright drew a clear distinction between public institutions that are legitimately subject to federal government regulation, and private institutions that are exempt:

*There is in my mind a clear legal difference between publicly owned, tax financed facilities on the one hand, and private business establishments, privately owned and individually supported on a voluntary basis by individual customers on the other.*

I believe in the government's duty to protect the constitutional rights of every citizen. But one of these rights is the right of private

property. I do not want to see the government violate this right, any more than I would want it to violate any other constitutional right of our citizens.

This focus on private property that Wright shared with his constituents helps to explain how Wright supported bills focusing on voting rights in 1957 and 1965, but opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Wright continued this Private Property focus in the first phases of the open housing debates on the 89th and 90th Congresses. Responding to a Ft. Worth letter of June 26, 1966, opposing how "our government has systematically eroding the rights of one group of citizens to improve those of other citizens," Wright wrote on July 1, 1966:

*Thank you for your communication. I think you are correct in your opposition to Title IV of the proposed Civil Rights Bill of 1966. In my judgment, this provision should not and will not be enacted. I have, in fact, so advised the President.*

*Certainly I could not vote to remove from the American people a right of choice so basic and so personal as the selection of those to whom we might wish to sell or rent our homes.*

This does not mean that I favor discrimination against any race. You and I probably feel about the same way. It will be recalled that I actively supported the Voting Rights bill last year, assuring to all Americans these equal and fundamental rights of citizenship. But just as I opposed certain provisions of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 as an unwarranted invasion of the rights of private property, so I do oppose this new proposal.

Wright also voted with 20 of 22 Texas congressmen to remove Title IV (a strong open housing provision) from the 1966 Civil Rights Act. While Wright's papers do not include letters from 1967-68, it is unlikely that they would reflect any change in their opposition grounded in Property Rights. Letters to Earl Cabell, representing a similar next-door district, reflected the same trend of opposition from 1966 through 1968.

Constitutional argument was the second most common type, at 17% of letters. I counted letters in this group if the writer argued particular legislation was unconstitutional, or that constitutional rights were at stake in this issue. While writers occasionally mentioned specif-



ic constitutional provisions like the Republican Form of Government clause or Free Speech, Constitutional arguments usually were of the general variety shown here by a Houston resident on Oct. 14, 1963:

*The Civil Rights Bill of 1963 is a further extension of federal executive power created at the expense of individuals of all races. It is nothing but a law for a controlled system of life which is in direct opposition to our Constitution. . . . Stand up for Constitutional government which guarantee States and human rights as God granted us theses rights by doing everything in your power to defeat the so called Civil Rights Bill of 1963.*

Related to both Property Rights and Constitutional arguments is the next most common type, Communism/Socialism at 8%. I classified letters as in this group if they criticized legislation as Communist or Socialist (which were used interchangeably and negatively in context). Writers would have to explicitly mention either ideology, like a Fort Worth resident on June 20, 1966:

*High among the objectives of Communism is the abolition of the concept of private property. To deprive a person by law of the right to absolute ownership of property and the ability to choose within certain bounds what he may do with it, is to make a mockery of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as ascribed by our forefathers who founded this Nation of ours.*

Interference with private property or economic choice of any type is often classified as communist or socialist, usually with no reference to the rights of minorities that might have countervailing claims.

The following lengthy quote from a Smithfield, Texas resident on July 2, 1963 shows how anti-communism, support for private property and a constitutional theory based on economic rights were reinforcing concepts. This letter to Jim Wright also explicitly casts these concepts as unconnected to racial rights, but founded on universalistic concepts:

*We are not against colored people having more freedom; however, we Abhor and Detest any ruling that destroys free enterprise. We are speaking of the proposal that any café owner or owners of various other business establishments must cater to negroes whether they wish it or not.*

This is merely another step our government is taking toward becoming a Socialistic State. Businesses should always have, as in the past, the right to refuse service to anyone. When the government of the United States has the power to tell an individual how he must run his business and to whom he must cater, we no longer have a government by the people and for the people. Instead, we have something very similar to what we fought against in World War 2.

This letter also shows another argumentative type, Totalitarianism.

Letters are classified as using a Totalitarian type of argument if the writer claimed that civil rights legislation (usually the 1964 variant) constituted a government on the same form as the Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. The following passage from June 17, 1963 shows this classification of civil rights legislation as creating a totalitarian government.

*We, as citizens of the United States, and you, in particular, should be quite concerned with the powers that the President is trying to assume. We speak of Russia having a dictator and of Germany having had its Hitler, when we sit and watch a man that can certainly be classified as more of a dictatorial individual than either the case of Russia or Germany.*

This letter also claims that President Kennedy is attempting to become a dictator, a claim also sometimes applied to his brother Robert as Attorney General. Merely making this argument about increasing presidential power was not classified as Totalitarian.

An interesting finding of this study is the relative absence of explicitly racist or white-supremacist arguments. Only 3% of letters used a White Supremacist or Racist argument. I defined this category as including writers that argued non-whites were inferior to whites, that ascribed negative characteristics to non-whites, or that explicitly supported segregation. Some writers like a Fort Worth resident writing on June 6, 1966, made explicitly race-conscious arguments in conjunction with other argument types:

*I do not want to live in the same rooms with Negroes, Mexicans or whatever else wishes to move in with me. I have a bed room and need some one for companionship but I sure don't want a Negro or a Mexican. This makes us as bad as the Communist or Gestapo.*



Such arguments, however, only appear in 26 of 893 letters from Jim Wright's Texas constituents.

This relative lack of explicitly racial or racist appeals should not be seen as evidence of the absence of racism or white supremacy by letter writers. It however does reveal the assumptions of citizens about which arguments will likely be persuasive of their representatives, and also how underlying racist attitudes were held in conjunction with race-neutral arguments. Letter-writers were over twelve times more likely to ground their argument in economics than to reference racial characteristics.

### **Conclusion: The Shifting Politics of Race and Property Rights**

Review of letters sent by Texans to future House Speaker Jim Wright yield two significant conclusions about race in American and Texas politics. First, a skilled, or possibly lucky, politician like Jim Wright could still navigate the politics of race and federal public policy from a Texas foundation, and ascend to the national leadership of the leftward-shifting Democratic Party. Second, Wright's incoming correspondence on race in the 1960s reveals the primacy of private property rights in Texas and American political culture.

Jim Wright, like most Democratic Texas congressmen of the time, was able to avoid serious electoral challenge. The closest he ever came to defeat was in 1980, when he defeated a well-funded Republican challenge from Fort Worth Mayor Pro Tem Jim Bradshaw 60%-40% while Ronald Reagan was carrying the district 52%-46% over Jimmy Carter. What is more significant is his rise to leadership in 1976, during period when liberals and reformers were advancing within the Democratic Party. When he ran for the open Majority Leader position in 1976, he was a throwback to a different Democratic Party. As a high-ranking member of the pork-barreling Public Works Committee, he was a defender of advancement by seniority, which had been drastically weakened by reforms after the 1974 election. Wright had a mixed record on Civil Rights, and sought leadership of a party where Southern segregationists were a rapidly-shrinking minority.

Wright's voting record in the 1950s and 1960s was only partly what his constituents, or at least those constituents motivated to write letters, wanted from their man in Washington. His support in 1968 of a federally-enforced, though weak, right to buy or rent housing irrespective of race cut against the nearly 9 in 10 of respondents who opposed

federal intervention on behalf of racial minorities. But that vote on the 1968 Civil Rights Act moved him closer to his non-Southern colleagues. The growing backlash against federal social and economic action was rapidly eroding the Great Society coalition, with support for Civil Rights legislation on final passage dropping from 69% in 1964 to 59% in 1968 on final passage. Wright, along with future Majority Leader Hale Boggs of Louisiana, were two of only five of 294 members who voted on both bills, but shifted from opposition to support. This was a case of "pre-leadership signaling," showing liberal members of the caucus that Wright and Boggs were joining the pro-civil rights mainstream of the party.

Wright understood his vote against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and his roots in the segregationist one-party Texas of the 1950s and 1960s, were a liability in his 1976 race. Combined with his support for the Vietnam War and relative conservatism on domestic issues, Wright's voting record placed him behind two other ambitious Democrats as the party met to select new leadership. The other two major candidates had unimpeachable Civil Rights credentials. The frontrunner was Phil Burton (D-CA), from San Francisco, had voted for all Civil Rights bills from 1964 forward and was a leader of the reformist group of Democrats that had swelled with the 1974 Watergate landslide. Richard Bolling (D-MO) of Kansas City had an even longer record of pro-Civil Rights activity as the primary supporter of integration legislation on the powerful Rules Committee. Wright's notes for his speech to the closed-door Democratic Caucus meeting prior to the Majority Leader election outline his argument on Civil Rights. He emphasizes his votes for the 1957 Civil Rights Act, and every piece of integration legislation from the 1965 Voting Rights Act forward. He explicitly references his evolution on the issue as a Southern liberal.

Wright specifically addressed his prior mixed record on civil rights in a letter to Democratic Houses colleagues Nov. 17, 1976, just prior to the Majority Leader vote. He writes that "I could not pretend to have a 'perfect' record on civil rights," claiming he voted against some bills "for reasons which I thought at the time to be valid but which I no longer believe to be correct." Wright cites his refusal to sign the Southern Manifesto, vote for the 1957 Civil Rights Act, and support for all post-1964 integration legislation, stating:



*I am pleased by the fact that I have probably have as good and long-standing a record of support for basic civil and human rights as anyone from my part of the country could be expected to have and survive in the political turbulent years that are behind us. My record in this regard is quite different from that of most of my colleagues from the geographic area I represent.*

The Texan attempts to diminish the sterling pro-integration records of his rivals Bolling and Burton, writing "it takes a hell of a lot more courage and conviction for a person from my area to take these public positions than it does for someone from Kansas City or California."

The evidence presented here from Wright's incoming constituent correspondence clearly support his retrospective evaluation of the political context facing a relatively-liberal Southerner deciding whether to support or oppose the 1964 Civil Rights Act. While most House members from the region did vote against the landmark legislation, Wright probably overstated the narrowness of his options. Fellow Texas liberal House member Jack Brooks, then representing a district that included Beaumont and much of rural East Texas, voted for all civil rights bills including the 1964 legislation and was consistently reelected. Charles Weltner, representing an Atlanta-centered Georgia district, voted for the 1964 Act and was narrowly reelected. But Wright's larger point about his electoral vulnerability on the issue was correct.

Wright's Civil Rights evolution was just enough to support his narrow election. Bolling and Burton had both alienated potential supporters with ideological inflexibility and an unwillingness to cultivate personal relationships. Wright's base of Southerners, conservatives and committee chairman enabled him to eliminate Bolling by two votes in the penultimate vote, and to best Burton by a single vote for the Majority Leadership. This narrow victory enabled Wright to succeed Tip O'Neil as Speaker of the House in 1986, and to function as one of the most effective modern legislative leaders until his rapid fall in 1989.

Wright was the last leader of the Democratic Party in Congress to emerge from the coalition of urban machine liberals and Southern conservatives that dominated the party in the House and often the Senate in the middle part of the twentieth century. When forced to resign over allegations of financial improprieties involving publishing contracts and campaign finance in 1989, Wright was replaced by Tom Foley of Washington State, a liberal in the reformist tradition. Not



since Wright have the House Democrats had a leader who was from the South, or from the moderate portion of the party.

The opposition to Civil Rights legislation, and to federal government action in general, that emerges from Wright's incoming correspondence reveals one source of this leftward shift in the Democratic Party. The movement of whites to the Republican Party that began on the presidential level in the 1960s would by the 1990s leave the Democrats as a clear minority in Southern congressional elections. Candidates from states like Texas could no longer count on the support of the dozens of moderate and Southern populist members necessary to advance in House leadership. This shift was evident in the ascension of Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) to the leadership of House Democrats in 2003. A protégé of Jim Wright's 1970s antagonist Phil Burton, and representing Burton's old San Francisco congressional seat, Pelosi is firmly anchored on the left end of a left-trending party. When Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-MO) left the leadership to run for president in 2004, Martin Frost (D-TX) began preparing to challenge Pelosi, then the second-ranking House Democrat. Frost, a former Jim Wright loyalist who represented much of Wright's old Fort Worth base, would have created a rerun of the 1976 Majority Leader race with a challenge to Pelosi from the moderate wing of the party. But after canvassing potential supporters, Frost decided that his chances were so slim he would not even attempt to challenge the California liberal Pelosi.

The opposition to Civil Rights, which Jim Wright sometimes joined and later repudiated, is often conceptualized as fundamentally about racism and white supremacy. But the prominence of property-rights arguments in Wright's incoming Civil Rights correspondence reveals a different facet of the anti-integration narrative. This data demonstrates the fundamental importance of individual economic rights in the American political tradition. Support for a free-market society in which individuals are unencumbered by government regulation was a powerful component of the defense of segregation. This property-rights narrative, while idealized and ignoring the valid economic rights claims of minorities, allowed supporters of segregation to connect their economic and personal interest with broader egalitarian themes in American politics.

Seen from the perspective of the property and economic-rights grounded opposition to integration of Wright's constituents, the legis-



lative output of the federal government in the 1960s is even more remarkable. When President Lyndon Johnson of Texas pushed through the 1964 Civil Rights Act, he was staking his political future and that of his party on a vision of federal government action that ran counter to the understanding of American individuals rights held by Texans. Even in a then-strongly Democratic Fort Worth represented by the relatively-liberal Jim Wright, integrating public accommodations and employment was understood as a denial of fundamental individual rights.

The narrative of economic individualism, while supportive of white privilege, could be expressed by individual citizens in a facially non-racist manner. When the brief pro-federal action consensus of 1964-65 evaporated in the conflict of the late 1960s, the Democratic Texas of Lyndon Johnson and Jim Wright gave way eventually to a Republican Texas of strong devotion to individual economic liberty and opposition to federal government action. The direct achievements of Civil Rights legislation remain, as legal segregation is no more and minorities participate in the political process. But the argument of Jim Wright's constituents, that the federal government has no place limiting or influencing the economic choices of individuals and businesses, continue to drive American and Texas politics.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John McCormack unopposed for Speaker in 1961, Albert defeating Richard Bolling in 1961 for Majority Leader, McCormack's victory over Morris Udall in 1968, Albert's lopsided victory over John Conyers in 1970 for Speaker, Boggs defeating Udall and James O'Hara in 1971, Wright over Bolling and Phil Burton in 1976. Anthony Champagne, Douglas B. Harris, James W. Riddlesperger Jr., and Garrison Nelson, *The Austin-Boston Connection: Five Decades of House Democratic Leadership, 1937-1989*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The NAACP litigation, which Wright was unconnected to, eventually led to the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Sweatt v. Painter* in 1950, ruling that the University of Texas Law School must admit blacks.

<sup>3</sup> The Eisenhower administration's stronger bill, which was similar to the later 1964 Act, could not overcome a Senate filibuster in 1956. The 1957 bill was able to avoid the same fate by subjecting claims of denial of voting rights to jury trial, insuring continued white control of civil rights policy in the South.

<sup>4</sup> Phone calls to offices also serve as a kind of proxy for public opinion, but have not been preserved in archives.

<sup>5</sup> Works using by George Lovell (on Civil Rights) and Alan Brinkley (on populist critics of President Franklin Roosevelt) use archival letters to establish mass political attitudes during the New Deal period. See George I. Lovell, *This is Not Civil Rights: Discovering Rights Talk in 1939 America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*.

<sup>6</sup> Wright also replied to letters from clearly out-of-district locations (for example Houston or Dallas). This might be related to the fact that he was preparing for another statewide Senate campaign in 1966.

<sup>7</sup> I here assume that a writer in 1964 who, in a general manner, calls for Congress to support or oppose school integration is not specifically commenting on the portions of the 1964 bill that gave the federal government the ability to bring suit on behalf of children in segregated public schools. Infrequently writers would comment directly on that part of the bill, and those letters were included. Wright likely received letters in the 1950s and 1960s about school integration judicial rulings like *Brown v. Board of*



*Education*, but these were not preserved in his papers.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Wright Papers (JW), Texas Christian University Special Collections, Civil Rights File.

<sup>9</sup> JW.

<sup>10</sup> These letter writers do not address the possibility that guaranteeing civil rights might require federal action, including enhanced authority.

<sup>11</sup> JW, Civil Rights File.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> The attempt to strip Title IV failed 190-222, but the bill died in the Senate.

<sup>18</sup> A sample of letters to Cabell 1966-68, drawn from his papers at Southern Methodist University, were 82% opposed to Civil Rights Legislation.

<sup>19</sup> JW, Civil Rights File.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> JW, Undated notes, Civil Rights File.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Bolling Papers, letter from Jim Wright to Robert Dawson, University of Missouri-Kansas City Library Special Collections, Jim Wright folder.

<sup>25</sup> See Champagne et. al, 230-250.

<sup>26</sup> *Houston Chronicle* Nov. 9, 2002.

**Table 1: Argument Type, Jim Wright Letters**

Argument Type	#	%
For Civil Rights	97	11%
Against Civil Rights	796	89%
Property Rights	334	37%
Constitutional	153	17%
Communist/ Socialist	71	8%
Totalitarian	53	6%
White Supremacist	26	3%