The Honorable Albert Russell Wynn

U.S. Representative of Maryland (1993–2008)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript

May 5, 2021

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC

"As an African-American Representative and leader, I felt a responsibility to conduct myself in a certain way, to approach the job with a certain seriousness, to avoid any negative conduct that would cause problems or reflect badly on me as an African-American leader. I tried my best to do that. I also tried to take up issues that were of national concern and join in. I'm not one of those people who say, 'I have to be up front.'"

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Abstract

After serving in the Maryland state legislature for a decade, Albert Russell Wynn was one of 16 African-American lawmakers newly elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1992. In this oral history, Wynn reflects on his early life growing up in segregated North Carolina and Virginia. He outlines his approach to constituent service as an elected leader and how his tenure in the Maryland state house of delegates and senate prepared him to legislate on Capitol Hill. Wynn also shares memories of his first congressional race and recalls what set him apart from the other candidates on the campaign trail.

Throughout the interview, Wynn discusses the evolution of Black representation in state and federal government. He notes that the focus of the Congressional Black Caucus expanded as its ranks nearly doubled after the 1992 election. What had been a mostly urban-based caucus—with representation from some of the biggest cities in the country—evolved to include voices from southern and suburban communities. Wynn discusses his legislative priorities and explains how his tenure in office was shaped by his congressional district, which had the largest concentration of federal workers in the country. He also details his campaign to get on the Energy and Commerce Committee and his agenda as the chair of the Environment and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee in the 110th Congress (2007–2009).

Biography

WYNN, Albert Russell, a Representative from Maryland; born in Philadelphia, Montgomery County, Pa., September 10, 1951; graduated from DuVal High School, Lanham, Md., 1969; B.S., University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1973; attended Howard University Graduate School of Political Science, Washington, D.C.; J.D., Georgetown University School of Law, Washington, D.C., 1977; director, Prince George's County, Md., consumer protection commission, 1977-1982; member of the Maryland state house of delegates, 1983-1987; member of the Maryland state senate, 1987-1993; elected as a Democrat to the One Hundred Third and to the seven succeeding Congresses until his resignation May 31, 2008 (January 3, 1993-May 31, 2008).

Read full biography

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, https://bioguide.congress.gov and the "People Search" section of the History, Art & Archives website, https://history.house.gov. For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

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Interviewer Biography

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—THE HONORABLE ALBERT RUSSELL WYNN OF MARYLAND—

ETHIER: This is Grace Ethier with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. Today's date is May 5th, 2021. I am joined by Congressman Albert [Russell] Wynn of Maryland. We're going to discuss his time in the House of Representatives as part of our project commemorating the 150th anniversary of the first Black Representative, Joseph [Hayne] Rainey of South Carolina. This interview is taking place over [Microsoft] Teams.

Congressman Wynn, thank you so much for being part of this project and talking with me today.

WYNN: Well, it's my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me to participate. I think this is quite significant that you're doing this. It's a sign of progress in our times.

ETHIER: Absolutely, yes. We're excited for you to be part of it.

We're going to start with your early life and political interest. You were born in Philadelphia, but part of your childhood was spent in North Carolina, before your family moved to the DC area. What was that experience like, spending some of your formative years in the South in the 1950s, and then what were your or your family's expectations and thoughts about moving to Prince George's County?

WYNN: Well, living in the South at that time was really a very interesting experience. I'll use the term "interesting" loosely. It was during a time of segregation. There was a great deal of prejudice and racism if you will. But the interesting thing was, we were living in such separate communities that you weren't as conscious of it as people are today, looking from the outside. When you're in it, it's the community you lived in, and we had all of the traditional commercial institutions. There was a Black pharmacy. There was a Black

doctor. Obviously, the Black barber shop. We had all the small businesses that you would see. In that sense, it wasn't as hostile on a day-to-day basis.

Having said that, whenever I went over to my grandparents' house in Warrenton, North Carolina—I grew up in Warrenton, North Carolina, until I was about seven—my mother would always point out the hanging tree, where Blacks had been hung, which is about a mile, mile and a half up the road from my grandparents' house. So day-to-day, you were in a Black, African-American culture with the churches and all the other activities and the school activities on a separate basis, but you were always aware that there were people out there who really hated Blacks. There was significant hostility.

But I think I had a very good childhood. Both my grandparents came up in a semi-rural small town in an environment [where] people knew each other, a high level of religiosity and Christian beliefs. It was a good upbringing. I had the benefit of two strong grandfathers. It was a good start.

We moved to Washington when I was about seven because my father was part of that group of African-American men moving northward, looking for work. He visited Philadelphia, where I was born, back to North Carolina, then up to Michigan to try to work in an auto plant. That didn't work out—back to North Carolina and then up to Washington, DC. Finally, he got a job with the Department of Agriculture and then moved us up to Washington, DC. So that's how I left the rural, small-town South and moved into DC for about a year. And then, we moved into Maryland, and we were part of a—at that time—small group of folks who were able to find housing.

It was interesting. Just outside of Washington, DC, is the section that we moved to, and there was literally a highway, and on both sides of that highway for about 10 miles, you can find Black homeownership, small

communities—certainly nothing fancy, but very working-class communities. That's where I grew up, in Prince George's County, through high school. As I say, a working-class community, heavily influenced by government employees. And then, well, off to college. Let me stop there.

ETHIER: When you moved to Prince George's County, were schools segregated?

WYNN: Yes, they were. As a matter of fact, that's where I got my first interest in politics, in a segregated middle school. I was on the student council. That whet my appetite, and I found that I actually had a great passion for this kind of work: student government, planning activities, organizational work. I did that all the way through high school and into college and on into law school. It really was something that I found that I was very drawn to and very interested in.

ETHIER: Building off of that, your first taste of the political process, did the civil rights movement have a role in your decision to become involved in politics?

WYNN: Absolutely. I had the benefit of influence. A strong influence is obviously Martin Luther King on the one hand, but also Malcolm X on the other hand. There was an evolution that I experienced in terms of awareness. I guess now people call that "wokeness," but at that point it was just kind of social consciousness—an awareness—that there were problems of racism and discrimination and significant economic problems and criminal justice problems and that politics was a way to address that. But it was very clear to me as I transitioned from high school to college—I was in an environment where you had the March on Washington, you had [President Lyndon B.] Johnson's Great Society legislation, you had Johnson's civil rights legislation, voting rights and public accommodations—all those things occurred during

my formative years. It obviously had a significant impact of basically making me aware that the political process was a vehicle to deal with these issues.

ETHIER: You mentioned Martin Luther King and Malcolm X as sources of political inspiration to you. Did you have any role models or mentors that you worked with directly that really helped you form this identity as well?

WYNN: Well, I wasn't aware, but at the time, one of my grandfathers was very political, in the sense that he followed—this is back in North Carolina—he followed politics, religiously. I can remember watching, on a black-and-white TV, the Republican National Convention, which was then gavel-to-gavel coverage, as was the Democrats'. It just happened to be on that particular convention. I saw people seeming to have so much fun screaming, "I like Ike," and all these balloons cascading down, and I said, "That looks interesting. That looks like fun." I remember when I went to my first convention, as I walked in and saw the stage and all, I reflected back on my days as a little boy with my grandfather, him insisting that we watch the political conventions, rather than cartoons. So I would say he was a big influence.

I'd also say a lot of the African-American male teachers that I encountered in middle school. Because I went to a segregated middle school, and so, several of the teachers represented educated and fairly successful African-American men. I think they had an influence on me in terms of my perception of what was supposed to happen, relative to people as they progress through life. That they weren't supposed to necessarily have to just be subservient or work in a farm setting where they were basically raw labor. That people with education could aspire to do a lot of other things. I won't try to name them, but they were just a group of men that impacted me right at the middle school-level

who were teachers that I give a lot of credit to for my value system and perspective.

ETHIER: I love hearing about your grandfather's influence. For the transcript, can you tell me his name?

WYNN: Charles C.S. Wynn. I think that would be the way I'd expect because everyone knew him as C.S.

ETHIER: Great. Back to Prince George's County, when did the schools become desegregated, and what was that change like for you?

WYNN: Well, the process began around 1965, '66 for me. The first time I went to an integrated school was not the major wave of integration in Prince George's County. This was kind of the toe in the water as they begin some very incremental changes around the edges and sending some kids to White schools. As I said, ninth grade was the first time that I experienced that.

That was different. I can remember very vividly. There were only about 15 of us in a school of about 500—maybe 20. When I came in, the principal, he was welcoming, and as he was saying, he looked at me and he said, "Oh, you look like you play a little football," and so went on to get all excited and talked about the football—and, me? Well, my interest was in whether they had a student council association because that's what I was interested in. I think he was a little disappointed that I was not an athletic star but rather, was more interested in band and student government.

ETHIER: Your father worked for the Department of Agriculture, and you mentioned being in this community that was very much involved in the government or employed by the government. Did his work shape your ideas about government?

WYNN: Well, let's put it this way. We were adjacent to Washington, DC, in the Maryland suburbs. A lot of people did get what was considered then a "good government job." These were basically entry-level or second-level jobs—no executive level, no appointees, none of that. African Americans, if you can get a job at the Department of Agriculture, Post Office, Navy Yard—that was a basis of a lot of employment in the community that I lived in. For those people who were employed, they were basically teachers and government workers, and people like that, postal workers.

I always saw the government as an employment source because at that time, the private sector was significantly closed off, segregated, if you will, with the exception of jobs in labor. When I say labor, jobs with physical labor. So you either got a government job, in which case you were in pretty good shape, or you'd end up working in a blue-collar, hard labor job in a lot of instances.

ETHIER: My next question fast-forwards a little bit, but we can certainly come back to anything in your early years if you feel like it's significant to your time in Congress. But I read in a newspaper from your time in the state legislature that you felt you were part of the "second wave," is what you said, of Black politicians, transitioning from civil rights focus to economic rights oriented. Can you explain what you meant by that, by the second wave, and why that was important to you?

WYNN: Well, that was my interpretation of it, that the first wave of people who had come in before me [in] the state legislature in Maryland and nationally, had to focus on civil rights issues, had to focus on public accommodations. Heck, we were in the '70s and early '80s, and you still hadn't fully implemented a 1954 *Brown* v. *Board of Education* desegregation order. There were a lot of civil rights issues that those folks had to grapple with, and they were really

the first: the first Black woman in the Maryland legislature, the first committee chairman, those kinds of things.

I think as more African Americans came into the Maryland legislature during my era, we begin to look at more broad economic issues and minority participation, minority business issues, state contracting issues. All these were the types of things—obviously, education funding was also a big issue—but I think we began to take up, maybe, a broader array of issues that reflected the increase in population, the increase in maturity and sophistication of the population, the increase in education levels. I think that was a change.

I think that's still going on today because you still have major civil rights issues connected to Black Lives Matter and the anti-racist movement. But you also see significant concerns about economic issues, job growth, high-skilled employment opportunities, things like that.

ETHIER: Fast-forwarding again, why did you decide to run for Congress in 1992?

WYNN: I had been in the state legislature for 10 years. I had been on the judicial proceedings committee, and then I was on the budget and tax committee, which is a combination of an appropriations and ways and means. I also had been on the ways and means committee in the [state] house. I felt I had the appropriate experience, both substantively and politically having ran a couple of times, to step up to the next level.

The way the district was designed, it was designed to provide an opportunity for a minority candidate to be competitive. I never said it was a Black or a minority district, but demographically, the numbers were certainly favorable to an African-American candidate, and quite a few people ran. I think there were probably 21 people in all, running between the two parties. I know on my side, there were, I believe it was 11 or 12 running in that primary.

Obviously, the open seat, a lot of people ran: other state senators, county council people, what have you.

ETHIER: How did you build support in the district? Did any groups or organizations support your candidacy?

WYNN: Well, I got good support. I was not the favorite. In fact, I was a little bit back in the pack based on the early polling. But I ran a somewhat unique—at that time—retail campaign, focusing on a lot of personal contact. We call it "the morning waves" when you're out on the corners and you're actually waving to voters. But, at that time, people hadn't done that. We started doing it, every morning, and then some afternoons. We were also out at Metro stations. A lot of handshaking, basically. Grocery stores, you name it. Wherever there were people, we would go. That's what we put most of our energy. We had a modest media campaign: radio, Black radio, basically—well, Black and White radio—and mail.

But, basically, the engine for our campaign was retail politics on steroids. We really touched some people. I had a great team, a lot of energy. Obviously, people viewed it as a tremendous opportunity. Having been in the state senate 10 years, I'd made friends and what have you that were helpful to me.

ETHIER: Can you describe a little bit more by what you mean by retail campaign?

WYNN: Well, let me tell you. I mentioned the media campaign, I mentioned the mail campaign. The retail campaign involves knocking on doors on a daily basis, going by barber shops, grocery stores, Metro stations, back-to-school nights. Retail politics involves actually touching voters. We did that, I think, better than anybody else. We just really put an emphasis on that. Campaigns in the past in this area—you basically used mail and were dominated by the political establishment. Whoever they tapped was going to be the winner.

Well, it was splintered, so the political, quote, "establishment" didn't weigh in totally. It was a very competitive race. I think the thing that got me was—I only won by one point—was the fact that we did so much retail politics that we came from behind and were able to succeed.

ETHIER: We've talked to a lot of former Congresspeople who have shared the power of a handshake. I like hearing that from you as well.

You mentioned that the district was designed to have a minority candidate be competitive. Can you describe a little bit more, the district that you were running in? So the physical location, demographics, things like that.

WYNN: The district, then the Fourth Congressional District, was composed of parts of two counties: Prince George's County, which was significantly African-American at the time—and I got the portion that did have a high African-American population—and then Montgomery County, also in the suburbs that had had some African Americans and other minorities, but was also a very liberal community. I had parts of these two counties basically inside the Washington Beltway—that's a loose demarcation. So the closest-in suburbs of Washington, DC, which happened to have a heavy minority demographic.

ETHIER: Race was a major part of the 1992 election from the Clarence Thomas [Supreme Court] confirmation to the significant number of Black candidates that were running from the South. How did this national news shape your campaign in your district?

WYNN: Well, one of the things about my campaign was, we really stayed district focused. We didn't so much focus on the national. I mean, we addressed national issues—education funding and going after Republicans—but basically we were talking to people about what kind of representation they were going to have and trying to convey the idea that we were going to be

focused on local concerns, which largely had to do with federal employees and issues relating to federal employees, and pay raises and working condition, and discrimination—which was a major issue during my time in Congress, discrimination in the federal workforce. We didn't so much talk about the national climate or the idea that this was going to be an African American—or perhaps be—an African American-held district. We focused on, "Okay, we want to meet you, we want you to know who we were, we want to hear your concerns," and we listened and talked with people about things that didn't have to do with Congress. Maybe it had to do with school boards, maybe it had to do with water and sewer, sidewalks, whatever.

What I said to my team first—and then to my staff later when I got to the Hill—most people don't know Congressman from council from school board member from state senator. They don't know that. They know you're in office. If you're in long enough, they'll attach a title to you. But basically, they want help with their problems, so our position has to be, "We're here to help with your problems, help solve your problems, whether or not it's a foreign policy issue, or a national economic issue, or a civil rights issue." The point we were trying to make is, our approach to leadership, our style of leadership, was going to be hands-on and constituent focused.

I won't say we were oblivious to the national environment. We were certainly aware of the national environment, but we're also very disciplined, "Let's win this race," and that's what we did.

ETHIER: What was the most memorable moment of the 1992 campaign for you?

WYNN: We're standing on the corner, waving, early in the morning in Montgomery County, the northern part of my district. And a White woman comes up, and she asked about my views on pro-choice or pro-life. My attitude had

always been, it's better to be candid than try to be evasive. If you've been evasive, you don't gain anything. If you're candid, some people will at least respect you. Well, so I answered her. I said, "I'm pro-choice," and she leaned back, and it looked to me as though she was about to swing at me. I also leaned back as though to cause her to miss. Well, it wasn't. She leaned back so she could lean forward and give me a big hug.

I can remember because my team was out there, and we started laughing. They were laughing at me because they could see that I was anticipating a blow, and instead I got a hug. I thought that was one of the nicest moments. She said, "Well, thank you. I appreciate you giving me an honest answer. I happen to agree with you." At 7:00 in the morning, that was very, very pleasant.

ETHIER: That was a very humanizing moment of the campaign, I'm sure.

WYNN: Oh yes, definitely. That was the thing about retail campaigning in the style that we campaigned in—which is more common today but, at that time, not so much—was that it did enable you to really touch people. If it's raining out there and they're looking at you like you're a fool, if it's a bright sunny day and cars are honking, if people want to stop and talk in the middle of traffic—all those things about people and humanity are on display, early in the morning when people are on their way to work. It was a good experience for me. I enjoyed it.

ETHIER: Had you done that before with your state campaigns as well?

WYNN: Not so much. See, again, the state campaign was more mail oriented. I mean, we knocked on doors, but the morning waving and the working at the Metro stations, that kind of thing, not so much. We'd go out, we'd knock on doors,

and we'd go to events. But we didn't walk into barber shops in my state races, so this was a new phenomenon.

Because part of the problem was, in a crowded field, trying to figure out, of 11 people—and like I said, at least more [than] half of them were established politicians—how to break out. We were able to break out because they said, "These guys are crazy. They're in the streets all the time. In the morning, they're in the streets. In the evening, they're at the Metro station. We see you everywhere." We were trying to create a real sense of energy, and I think we were able to do that. It was much more important to accomplish that in a new congressional district where a lot of people have not voted for me or were outside of my state district, as a means of introducing myself.

ETHIER: Building off that, did your experience in Maryland's house of delegates and state senate help you? You already touched on the campaign, but if you wanted to mention anything more about campaigning, and then later on in your career in the House.

WYNN: I think my experience in the state legislature helped immensely. I served first in the Maryland house of delegates for four years on the ways and means committee, learned tax policy, the limits of government, the fact that you can want a lot of things, but you have to be able to pay for it. Then, I went over to the state senate, six years there, judiciary issues, and then appropriations and more tax issues. I learned the mechanics of government and how things work. I learned the art of politics.

I can remember a delegate telling me—who went on to become a judge—he put his arm around me and said, "Look, let me tell you how this works. Politics is an art of the doable. It is basically a matter of finding a compromise, cutting a deal, getting something done." That stuck with me

throughout my political career. I think that foundation of really understanding how politics works, and the limitations of government, and spending and taxing—all that information that I gained at the state level was absolutely critical to coming to Congress.

I think for the most part, you see people who've had this experience at either state or local government, and actually governing, have a better approach in terms of willingness to work things out and get things done. Now, a lot more advocates and activists who have stronger ideological beliefs but don't understand the necessary compromises and dealmaking that's required to actually pass legislation. So yes, I think the state legislature was absolutely an essential ingredient of my ability to function in Congress.

I never expected to run for Congress. My ambition had always been to get into the state legislature. When I accomplished that, I felt, "Hey, this is where I'm going to be. I'm going to try to stay here as long as I can." Then, the opportunity presented itself in '92, so I ran, feeling that I was well-qualified based on experience. But no, I was not someone who always dreamed of running for Congress.

ETHIER: You were elected with 16 other African Americans in 1992, a majority of which were from southern states and also had political backgrounds like yourself. From your perspective, what factors do you think played into, at that time, so many African Americans being elected from the southern part of the country? And then, did you and your fellow freshman Members have any specific goals going into Congress?

WYNN: Well, a then-recent court case ruling on congressional redistricting created a dynamic where districts had to be drawn to allow an African-American community to vote cohesively and have someone from that community be

competitive, which I mentioned earlier. So what you did was basically, that year, draw a lot of competitive districts where African Americans had a good chance of winning. No guarantees, of course, but certainly, they had a good and fair chance of winning, with respect to the South in particular. And Maryland is, in many ways, a southern state below the Mason-Dixon line. So we were all part of that movement, and we benefited from that. We were very aware of that.

We came in and almost, I believe, doubled the size of the Congressional Black Caucus [CBC]. But we also brought something very different, which was a southern, rural, agricultural perspective, whereas previously, the Congressional Black Caucus had been, basically, Representatives from the big cities: New York, Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, Los Angeles, on and on and on. But now, you had people from small towns or rural communities: Macon, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, and places in Mississippi. We brought some different perspectives—Maryland and the federal government worker issues. We brought a new set of issues into the Congressional Black Caucus and basically broadened its scope.

ETHIER: Did anyone act as a mentor to you when you first arrived to Congress?

WYNN: I sought out Parren [James] Mitchell, who was the first Black Member of Congress from Maryland. I sat with him, and I asked him how to do the job and what was important. He emphasized to me the importance of developing minority business.

ETHIER: Why did you seek him out?

WYNN: Well, first of all, he was the Black Congressman from my state. Second, he was extremely well respected. He was one of the founders of, I believe, the Congressional Black Caucus. He had a stellar reputation in terms of working

to help the African-American community. It was a broadening of the civil rights tradition because he had been a civil rights leader in Baltimore. It was a broadening to include economic issues and economic rights, relative to small minority businesses.

ETHIER: Did you continue to grow your relationship with him throughout your career?

WYNN: I did, until his passing. Now, you have to understand, his was the historic Black district in Maryland, which was Baltimore-based. Mine was the newly created suburban Washington district, so I obviously continued to follow him while he was in Congress and always went to him for advice. He was succeeded by Kweisi Mfume, the first time Kweisi ran. Kweisi and I, in turn, developed a great relationship. Kweisi was followed by Elijah [Eugene] Cummings, who'd served with me in the Maryland state legislature, so we had a little bit of a reunion. I've always had an affinity for that Baltimore district.

ETHIER: I think I read in the newspapers about that reunion.

So in your first term—and you've sort of been touching on this—the Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs Committee used a section of your district as a test site to study discrimination in lending practices. When I was reading about it, I had never come across a case study like this before in committees. I'm sure there are others, but I hadn't known of it. Why was your district chosen? Did you play a role in that decision? And then, what was the goal and the findings of this study?

WYNN: Well, I was involved. I was on the Banking Committee. I approached the chairman, Chairman Henry B. González, and I asked him if he'd come out and host a session where the African-American business community could

present some of their concerns about contracting and also about lending practices and lending discrimination. Because in order to get contracts, obviously you have to have access to capital. The whole question of access to capital was one which Parren Mitchell had passed on to me, and which I in turn, sitting on that committee, was able to raise.

Predictably, they found, yes, there's discrimination in lending or disparities in lending. Part of it has to do with the lack of relationships—which is another way of saying racist—but we thought that was helpful. At the time, it was groundbreaking. We got some discussions and conversations going that evolved into the issues that we're having now, in terms of, again, access to capital. But the conversation started back then.

ETHIER: Do you remember anything about the process of choosing your district? When I read that, I was taken with, here you are, as a freshman Member, and the committee chairman is agreeing to use your district as a test site. So anything about making that decision, and then, also what it did for you and your district and how constituents were seeing you?

WYNN: One of the things you do, you talk to your committee chairman and build the relationship. I had a good relationship with the chairman, and I kept telling him about this access to capital problem and small business guys were having difficulty. Well, as a Hispanic Member, he knew exactly what I was talking about. His community was experiencing the same thing. So he was very amenable to doing this, to putting a spotlight on this issue.

As I said, I think it meant a great deal because I think the people in the district could see that I was focused on the concerns that were important to them. I mean, this wasn't a national or a global issue, but it was an issue. Because my district is also home to one of the largest communities of

African-American businesses, private-sector businessmen, in the country—at that time—so there was a hotbed of interest. So that, obviously, was helpful to me politically as well because I think people saw that I was taking the job seriously.

ETHIER: That goes right into my next question, which is about your advocacy for small and minority-owned businesses. Is there anything more you want to say about why that was important to you in your district, perhaps why Congressman Mitchell suggested it to you? And then, what role you think Congress should have in promoting the interests of Black-owned businesses?

WYNN: Well, private sector economic growth is obviously critical in this country, in a capitalist society. For a lot of reasons, largely having to do with racism and discrimination, African-American businesses were not having the same opportunities, not having the same ability to borrow money to be successful—or if you had a little bit of money, to get contracts.

That was an issue that I personally felt was very important because I felt that as part of the civil rights movement, we had to talk not just about civil rights, but economics rights and economic power. You could not always expect other communities to create job opportunities. You had to generate job opportunities within your own community. Part of that is small business [and] minority small business. That became really my passion while I was on the Hill.

I chaired the Congressional Black Caucus Minority Business Task Force. I often tell people that on 9/11, the task force was meeting when someone said, "There's been an attack, we're evacuating the Capitol," and several Members of Congress of the Congressional Black Caucus who were attending that meeting—all of us rushed out with the rest of the folks in Congress.

But that was an issue that I thought was very important because if these businesses could thrive, it'd create more job opportunities for other African Americans—in view of what, at that time, was a pretty significant problem of employment discrimination, private-sector employment discrimination.

It's much different now, obviously, with the social justice movement, and people talking about diversity and inclusion. Back then, they weren't talking about that. Private sectors were not talking about it. It was important that the businesses that were in the Black community thrive because they were also an engine to help other people—not just within employment, but then the charitable contributions and all the other things that businesses contribute to communities. We needed to have that balance in the African-American community. That's why I always thought it was so important.

ETHIER: Were there any specific memorable moments you have relating to working on this topic, perhaps a big victory that you achieved, or maybe a setback?

WYNN: Well, I have a specific memory. It's not so much the legislation. But we put together among the first business fairs, small minority business fairs. What I did was, I brought all the representatives of all the government agencies out to my district, and I invited all the minority businesses, women-owned businesses, Hispanic businesses, African-American businesses, small businesses generally, to come out. Because one of the problems was these businesses did not have access to these agencies and these procurement opportunities and contracting opportunities. They didn't have business developers or lobbyists, anybody like that. I was able to connect a lot of people to the contracting procurement process in government. That enabled them to have an opportunity to participate.

We also were fighting against a government policy which was toward consolidation. I remember we had some setbacks and we had some success, along the way, of arguing that we should not be consolidating so many of these small contracts because when you consolidate, you deny opportunities for minority businesses to participate. People were arguing on the other side, "But you have great efficiencies if you can have larger contracts." Yes, but the same people keep getting the contracts. That was an argument. But I think we actually made some progress on that issue of not consolidating contracts, and also, connecting local small and minority businesses to government procurement officers.

ETHIER: Awesome. Your district had the largest concentration of federal workers in the country, and I'm wondering, how did that shape your legislative agenda and play a role in your committee assignments? And who did you work with in order to provide for your district?

WYNN: The federal workforce was a driving issue in my district. I had more federal employees than any other Member of Congress. I worked very closely with Steny [Hamilton] Hoyer, whose district was adjacent to mine. Actually, my district was created from part of his former district, so we worked very closely together on federal employee issues, specifically pay raises and working conditions.

I had also another somewhat unique concern relative to federal employees—which was discrimination in the federal workplace because people were being denied raises and promotions and being unfairly disciplined. I spent a significant amount of my time dealing with constituent problems that evolved out of the federal workforce.

ETHIER: I'm trying to remember—forgive me if this wasn't you, but did you work with people who were on strike at the Library of Congress?

WYNN: I believe I did. I worked with a lot of people who were on strike. I protested at almost every agency. It would be interesting to me because constituents would come in—as I said, I had more federal employees than any other Member of Congress in my district—and constituents would come in, and everyone would say, "My agency's the worst. It's the last plantation." They always use that same phrase. "No, no, it's the State Department," "No, no, it's the Department of Agriculture." "No, no, it's the Department of the Interior," "No, no," and on and on and on.

I'm saying that to say there was a major problem of discrimination within the federal workforce, but these came up as individualized constituent cases as opposed to broad national policy issues, and because I was their Representative, I was constantly arguing with agencies and supporting protest efforts to address discrimination at various agencies. You name an agency, and someone came in and said, "It was the last plantation," and people were being fired and discriminated against and not being promoted. And it was true.

ETHIER: What avenues did you find were most helpful to address those things? Was it legislation or committee work, or like you said, meetings?

WYNN: It was individual work. This is not something that lends itself readily to legislative solutions. I mean, we haven't legislatively solved the discrimination problem in this country—yet—so you see what I'm saying. You've got to go to the agency and point out their problems. You've got to talk to supervisors and that kind of thing. We were kind of handling these issues on an individual basis.

Then, later, I worked with other Members, and we began to highlight these things with press conferences and press availabilities. I worked with an organization called Blacks In Government. Every federal agency at that time had a chapter of Blacks In Government because they were all experiencing so many of the same kinds of problems. We did a lot of work on an agency-by-agency basis. Some were more responsive than others.

ETHIER: What was the response of those agencies usually, and, again, if there are any specific memorable moments you have, please feel free to share.

WYNN: I think the agencies, for the most part, took it seriously. Some, again, more than others. We did a lot of work with NIH [National Institutes of Health], for example, and issues they have there. I think we made a lot of progress there over the years, bringing to the attention of the administration the extent of the discrimination that people were experiencing, and seeing, I think, some positive changes.

ETHIER: That's great, thank you. I think that what you're talking about, this part that's outside of legislating and outside of committees, is a really important and interesting part of being in Congress, but it's something difficult to track for historians, right? There are no hearings. So, thank you for speaking on that.

Shifting gears, a little bit, in the 105th Congress [1997–1999], you were seated on the Energy and Commerce Committee, and you focused on energy efficiency grants and electricity transmission networks. Can you describe your campaign to be seated on this committee, and then why you sought it out in addition to all of those other issues that were important to you?

WYNN: Well, Energy and Commerce has long been recognized as one of the elite committees. Elite in a sense that it has a very broad jurisdiction—then under

the leadership of the great John [David] Dingell [Jr]. There's Appropriations, there's Ways and Means, and there's Energy and Commerce, and I wanted to get there. Interestingly enough, Energy and Commerce never had a lot of African-American representation. I can remember someone saying, "You can tell that you all are powerful because you've got so few Blacks." I said, "Oh, that's not right." But it was an interesting phenomenon because it handled telecom health and so many commercial matters, and the suggestion was that they were trying to exclude African Americans from this particular committee. That's partially true. The other part was this incredible demand to get on that committee.

I can remember that one of the elements is, are you a good team player with the party? Are you helping support other candidates? Are you a good soldier? And so, in my campaign, I think I had a pretty good reputation from my other two committees, Banking—now Financial Services—and Foreign Affairs. I had a good reputation. I'd also worked as a volunteer with the whip organization. People knew who I was. I made a contribution to help the party out. I think all those factors came together to help get me on the committee.

ETHIER: From your description I'm wondering about how you were received on that committee.

WYNN: Great, great. Absolutely. As I said, one of the problems with Energy and Commerce is—particularly then, but also now—the competition to get on that committee was fierce. That accounted for the fact that there were only three African Americans on that committee when I first got on, and that was the fewest of any number of African Americans on any committee at the time.

When I got there, I found Mr. Dingell to be the most wonderful man and a tremendous leader. I just can't say enough good things about him. Not that we always agreed. As a matter of fact, we had some disagreements on things. But he had a process of where people didn't just run out and shout and condemn this or that. You worked collegially, even when you disagreed.

I just had a very good experience. I found everybody to be very welcoming—excellent staff, and a fair amount of bipartisanship. Not absolute harmony by any stretch of the imagination, but good cooperation and everyone worked well. When Republicans won the majority and Billy [Wilbert Joseph] Tauzin was the chair, I got along very well with him as well.

ETHIER: I have to ask about John Dingell because he's such a historical heavy hitter. Is there anything else that you want to say about his leadership style and working with him?

WYNN: I think a lot of people refer to the toughness and hard-nosed approach that he had, but he was an incredibly nice and friendly person. He cared about you and what was going on your life. You could talk to him. He was a fatherly figure—I mean, that's one way to describe it. But he was also a consummate gentleman, always very respectful of the other party and their views. But he was also incredibly skilled in terms of getting legislation that was bipartisan that could pass. I had incredible admiration for him and his abilities.

ETHIER: In the 110th Congress [2007–2009] you became chair of the Environment and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee, and you held a number of hearings about regulating toxic substances, such as asbestos and mercury. In newspapers you stated that these issues were important to you because misuse of these substances affected Black communities. I'm wondering if you can

describe your campaign to becoming chair of that subcommittee, and then anything more about why it was important for you to focus on toxic substances in your hearings?

WYNN: It happened in what turned out to be my last term on the committee because of seniority. By that time, I guess I was in my tenth year on the committee or eighth year on the committee. I'd gained enough seniority to claim that subcommittee chairmanship. I thought it was a good issue. It wasn't like, "Oh, pick the one you want," it was, "Okay, based on your seniority, this is open," and so, I obviously was enthusiastic about taking it. I thought that there were great opportunities.

As it happened, it was also the year after I had my closest race, and I knew that there were political challenges—headwinds if you will—in front of me. So a lot of things I had wanted to accomplish, and I felt there would be time, I didn't get to accomplish.

But it was important to raise those issues of how we handle toxic materials from two standpoints. One: because they were toxic and dangerous, so we need to get them out of communities. The reality is a lot of dumping of those type of materials and facilities that utilized those materials were in or adjacent to African-American communities, raising environmental justice questions.

The other is: those were facilities and areas that needed to be recovered and put to a more productive use. So issues of ground fill reclamation and recycling were all very important issues—not nearly as much as they are today, but at that time we were at the very beginning of a serious discussions about, "Okay, what do we do with plastics recycling?" I remember that was one issue that I really, really wanted to work on and didn't get to because I lost. That and paint regulation, which was subsequently accomplished. We

started it. We held some hearings on it, but we weren't able to get to addressing those toxic chemicals in paint and other issues. But we did start having some good hearings to discuss the nature of those problems.

ETHIER: What was the transition like of becoming a subcommittee chair? What was important for you in terms of your own leadership style, and then who did you look to for guidance, if anyone?

WYNN: Well, I looked to Mr. Dingell. I tried to follow his example, be even-handed, be fair, be firm, and be organized. It was a very hectic time, as I said because I had political challenges. But also, that committee does so much work. Getting hearing time was challenging, but I think overall, we accomplished some positive things. But as I said, there was clearly unfinished business from my perspective.

ETHIER: We are about an hour into the interview, and I have some questions for you about the Congressional Black Caucus, your staff, and then, some retrospective questions. Do you need to take a break for some water, to stretch your legs, or anything?

WYNN: Not right now, but I do need to move quickly because I've got a hard stop at 1:55. I'll try to make my answers shorter, too. Let's see how far we can go, and then what we don't get we can reschedule.

ETHIER: That sounds awesome. Moving onto the Congressional Black Caucus. You were a member of that caucus. Did you plan on joining the caucus when you arrived on Capitol Hill? How would you describe the role of the CBC in the House? And did it change during your time in Congress?

WYNN: Well, I absolutely planned on joining. Again, Parren Mitchell had been one of the founders. As an African American, I just thought, "This is obviously something that I need to be a part of." The caucus expanded significantly when our class came on. I'm proud that one of my classmates is Honorable Jim [James Enos] Clyburn, but also, Science Committee Chair Eddie Bernice Johnson was in my class, and Ag Approps Subcommittee [Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies] Chair Sanford [Dixon] Bishop [Jr.] was in my class. We were all in the Congressional Black Caucus.

As I said, by virtue of that election in '92, the caucus broadened, its interest broadened. People brought in rural issues that had not been in the forefront before. Rural poverty issues came to the forefront. But also, suburban issues that I wanted to talk about, like federal employees and minority small business issues. So the caucus basically expanded. It continued to be the conscience of the Congress—with significant focus on civil rights issues—but I think it took on a much broader agenda, a lot more focus on economic issues and education issues, in addition to the traditional civil rights issues.

ETHIER: How did Black Members benefit from membership in the CBC? And was this something that was important to your constituency?

WYNN: Well, Members benefit tremendously just by the opportunity to share information, help reach consensus on major policy questions, share operational concerns about office management, and things like this, and develop a real camaraderie going in.

It was important to my district. My district is a very sophisticated district in terms of its closeness to Washington, DC. The people work in the federal government. They know about the Congressional Black Caucus. They follow

what's going on. They read the *Washington Post.* My district was well aware of the importance of the Congressional Black Caucus, the accomplishments of the Congressional Black Caucus. It was just something I was really looking forward to, and as I said, I got actively involved.

ETHIER: How did you organize your office on Capitol Hill? Did you bring staff with you from your time in the state legislature?

WYNN: I tried to strike a balance. I was new, I wanted to get some Hill veterans—people who had significant experience on the Hill. I also wanted to bring in people from back home who'd worked in my campaign or who had worked with me in Annapolis. I think I had a good dynamic mix of people.

One of the first things I remember saying is—one of the Hill veterans was showing me this standard brush-off letter that she had done, and I said, "No, that's not what we do. That's not how we do it. We don't tell people 'no.' We tell people, 'We will try. We will look into it. We will see what we could do.' But we never tell people, 'This is not our jurisdiction.'" Because as I said, people don't know.

I would say probably 10 to 15 percent of the constituent inquiries I got had to do with the county school board. The Hill veteran was ready to say, "Well, we don't do school boards." I said, "No, no, no, here's what we do. 'We will look into the matter and connect you with the right people in the school system that can address this issue.'" I wanted to always be in a position where the office was saying, "Yes," and, "We'll try," and trying to help, as opposed to saying, "Oh no, we don't do this. We don't do that. We don't do the other." Because people, they're looking for leadership. They're not looking for who has what title and what narrow jurisdiction.

ETHIER: That's great. That connects to those untraceable things that we were talking about earlier. Okay, we can move into the retrospective questions now. Did you ever feel that you were representing African Americans across the country, and was that a role that you embraced?

WYNN: In part, yes. At a kind of conceptual level. As an African-American Representative and leader, I felt a responsibility to conduct myself in a certain way, to approach the job with a certain seriousness, to avoid any negative conduct that would cause problems or reflect badly on me as an African-American leader. I tried my best to do that. I also tried to take up issues that were of national concern and join in. I'm not one of those people who say, "I have to be up front."

I remember when the AIDS crisis was just beginning, and I obviously got very enthused. We'd done the research, and we were ready to run with the issue. I was not aware—I was new—that Congressman [Louis] Stokes on the Ways and Means Committee, dealing with health issues, was the person who was going to take the point for the CBC. I became aware of that and said, "Oh, absolutely. I'm supporting whatever Congressman Stokes wants to do." That is a thing where you had a national issue that was affecting a lot of people across the country.

Same thing when we had, at that time, a crisis with some huge storms in the Caribbean and Haiti and the need was to try to provide relief. It turns out another Congressman, Charlie [Charles B.] Rangel, had a large Haitian community, and so he was taking point on that.

I think as members of the CBC, we do have a responsibility and tend to work cooperatively on national-level issues that may not be necessarily impacting our local communities. But it's something where you don't have to be the

number one guy on every Black issue. You can be an Indian—you don't have to be a chief.

ETHIER: Do you think African-American Members have a unique role to play in the House of Representatives? We've been talking about this shift from the first Members to your generation, and so, has this role changed since the beginning of your House career in 1992?

WYNN: I think the way to describe it is, it has evolved and grown, as opposed to it's shifted—suggesting it moved away from. You take our core commitment to civil rights, and we've evolved and expanded in that regard. We've been described as the conscience of the Congress. I think that evolved out of our concerns and commitment with respect to civil rights and human rights—based on our experiences as a race of being the victims of discrimination, racism, and segregation, et cetera—issues of fairness. I remember John [R.] Lewis always talking about, "It is not just, it is not fair, it is not right."

We are the ones who are very likely—we, the Congressional Black Caucus—are very likely to raise issues like that. Be it in education policy, be it in foreign policy, be it in government spending, whatever the case may be, health policy, health disparities. You see the Congressional Black Caucus carrying on that original core mission, but now just expanding it to talk about health disparities, as opposed to originally talking about public accommodations and access to public accommodations.

ETHIER: Yes, thank you for that check on language. You're so right. Was there anything unexpected or surprising about your time in Congress?

WYNN: I think toward the latter part of my tenure, I noticed a real increase in partisanship, bitter partisanship, and an inability to get things done. I can recall—and I believe George [W.] Bush was the President—where we came

so close to an immigration bill, but we couldn't quite get there. And it really was partisan considerations because there were Democrats and Republicans who were ready to cut that deal.

My observation is, what has changed is people are a lot more concerned about their ideological positioning, and worried that compromise or accommodation with the other party will cause them political problems.

ETHIER: My final question for you today is, what do you think your lasting legacy will be in regards to your House service?

WYNN: I think people will remember me—certainly my constituents, I don't know that people remember, in a group of 435, that many of us over time—but I think people in my district will probably say that I worked hard, and I paid attention to local concerns, and I was involved in promoting increased participation by African Americans.

One thing that consumed a fair amount of my time was—outside of Congress but as part of my responsibilities as a Congressman—was working to bring in other African-American elected officials in local government and state government. I was very active in that. Some people say that was a mistake. I don't know, that's what I did. But I think people will remember not only that I got to Congress, but I got to Congress and also provided leadership to help other African Americans become county council members or state representatives or clerk of the court. That is the contribution that I think I made.

ETHIER: Mr. Wynn, it's been such a joy to talk to you today. I've been researching your career for a while, so it truly is an honor to talk with you about your time in the House. Thank you so much for being part of this project. Is there

anything that you wanted to say to end on or anything I didn't ask about, anything that's coming to mind?

WYNN: I've got your outline here, but I think we've covered a lot. I'm happy to, if you want to continue to pursue things on campaign finance or Clinton impeachment or those kinds of things, I'm happy to discuss them further. But you've covered a lot of ground here today.

ETHIER: Well, so did you.

WYNN: Take care, now. Have a nice day.

ETHIER: Thank you so much. You, too.