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by Nancy Beck Young

"The Truth is, politics is the masses controlling. One who is against politics is against the people ruling and therefore against our American way of life and our Democratic form of government."

— Wright Patman, 1941

Historians and political scientists share an interest in the study of elections, one of the fundamental elements of our democracy. Historians tend to focus on the campaigns of a single individual or year, while political scientists study broader trends within the political process. An analysis of the problems political scientists study from the context of Wright Patman’s career will provide new insights into the application of political science theory on one congressman’s actual process of going before the voters.

Elected to Congress from the first district in northeast Texas in 1928 and continuously reelected until his death in 1976, Patman’s twenty-four campaigns provide an ideal opportunity to examine the changing methods of running for office during the twentieth century. Patman’s career suggests a framework for evaluating the advantages of incumbency as exemplified by the use of patronage and federal projects, especially regarding the appointment of postmasters, and its effect on the political process. Patman soon became a master of what Richard Fenno has since termed “home style” or keeping up with the needs of his district. Patman’s career also provides an opportunity to explore the permanent campaign as a historical phenomenon. Conservatives—usually Democrats but sometimes Republicans—waged an ongoing challenge to the sitting congressman from the late 1930s through the early 1960s. How did Patman, noted for his Southern economic liberalism, manage these challenges? Finally, the latter years of Patman’s career coincided with the rise of the Republican Party in the South. What was the response of an incumbent Democratic congressman to this important change on the political landscape?

Patman made his initial race for Congress in 1928. He already had compiled an eight-year record of service in Northeast Texas, ranging from a seat in the Texas legislature to election as district attorney for the Texarkana region. Patman challenged a fourteen-year incumbent, Eugene Black, who had lost touch with his rural constituents. If Black stayed in Congress longer he would build enough seniority to thwart any challenger. Patman, at the age of thirty-four, needed to act before his window of opportunity closed. Black had not amassed a strong legislative record of accomplishment. Instead he preferred work behind the scenes. The Great Depression began well before the October 1929 market crash for rural Americans, who had suffered through a depressed agricultural economy in the 1920s, and the same was true for Black’s district. Patman exploited Black’s votes against various agricultural relief measures in the 1920s, including the McNary-Haugen bill, which proposed a system of

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price supports for American farmers and the sale at cost of agricultural commodities overseas.

Patman did not simply rely on the conflicting visions of the political economy between himself and Black to gain favor with the voters. Instead, the aggressive young challenger plotted a campaign strategy that mixed modern techniques with older verities in hopes of overcoming Black’s advantages of incumbency. Patman sought the support of James H. “Cyclone” Davis, a long time fixture in Texas politics who had been with the Farmers Alliance, the Populist Party, the Prohibition movement, the Ku Klux Klan, and a member of Congress from 1915-1917. Davis had challenged Black in 1922, and Patman supported the incumbent. In 1928, Patman relied on Davis to perform an advisory role in the preparation of campaign literature and statements. Patman also used Davis on his campaign staff in the latter months of the contest. Davis, a crowd pleaser, delivered several speeches for Patman.

Opposition research played a key role in Patman’s campaign. He communicated with the business, professional, and political leaders who could give him credible information about Black’s record in Congress. A secondary purpose of these communications involved generating support for his own candidacy, because Patman already knew much of the information about which he inquired from the Congressional Record. Patman corresponded with the state and national chapters of the Anti-Saloon League about the extent of Black’s support of prohibition measures. To make an issue of discriminatory freight rates, Patman solicited the support of the East Texas Chamber of Commerce. Patman corresponded with members of Congress about Black’s legislative service, asked the American Federation of Labor for statistics about Black’s voting record, and also sought information about the entirety of Black’s congressional record from the Congressional Information Bureau. This pattern of thorough research into the background of his opposition became a Patman trademark.

Mass mailings and numerous public appearances characterized Patman’s maiden campaign for Congress, and he followed these strategies throughout the remainder of his congressional career. He secured various lists, including teachers, school trustees, and former jury members, for use in selected mailings throughout the district to gain support for his candidacy. Patman understood that each “list contains the names of good substantial citizens, and each list carries the names from almost every section of the country.” He also made an aggressive speaking tour in the district, often covering the same territory as his opponent and delivering over ninety speeches during the course of the campaign.

On the stump, Patman made a good appearance. He stood five-feet, ten-inches tall and had twinkling blue eyes. His hair, thick, dark, and curly, showed early signs of receding. Most important, he enjoyed the luxury of having a strong and powerful voice that was pleasing to his audience. Foreshadowing Lyndon B. Johnson’s use of the helicopter in 1948, Patman relied on modern technology to make his canvass of the region. He drove one of the first Model A’s in the area. He realized that “everybody was looking for the new Ford and I got more people to come see the Ford than to see me.” When driving through the country the candidate would stop and talk to people about his campaign whenever two or more voters gathered around. Patman left nothing to chance.
He relied on associates to assist with such local arrangements as distributing posters and handbills. To generate the good will of other office seekers, Patman printed a circular containing important political information about filing deadlines and convention schedules and then distributed it to them. He prepared this political calendar for the remainder of his career.6

In the contest in 1928, Patman sold himself as a forthright young challenger trying to keep the campaign focused on the issues. But at every turn he attacked some part of Black's record. Both in his opening address and in subsequent correspondence with Black, Patman suggested thirty joint debates over the course of the campaign. Black initially agreed to the challenge. Black also refuted Patman's assaults on his record in newspaper advertisements and in the Congressional Record, but Patman stood his ground: "You have accused me of being unfair in my speeches .... If I am unfair, the Congressional Record is unfair as I am quoting from that record .... Since you charge me with misquoting your record, which I deny, I feel that fairness demands that you meet me in joint discussion and let the people be the judge of which of us has misquoted the record. If you fail to meet me, I shall take your failure as an admission of the charges and will so contend to the voters of this district." Patman then made the contents of his correspondence with Black public record.

Black continued to deny Patman's charges. He compared his challenger with "a man who said that he could prove by the Bible that there is no God and then he turned to Psalms, Ch. 53, first verse and read: 'There is no God.' His hearers demanded that he read the rest of it and then he read the whole sentence and it read: 'The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.' " Black, already weary of his challenger's constant attacks, canceled the joint debates when he learned of Cyclone Davis' participation in Patman's campaign.'

While Patman had hoped the debates would showcase his oratorical skills and seal his victory, he did not back off Black when the debates were canceled. Instead Patman adopted a new theme. While criticizing Black's inattention to legislation, Patman argued that "the door of hope should not be closed in the face of the young manhood of our country by letting our Congressmen inherit their offices .... Any Congressman who has been in office so long should either try to go higher or get down and give somebody else a chance." Ironically, the man who eventually served forty-seven years in Congress complained that Black had held office too long.

Patman's record of accomplishment as a state legislator and as a district attorney, combined with his promise for a more aggressive response to the agricultural crisis within the region and Black's failure to address these issues, provided the challenger enough space to win the office. After the votes were tallied Patman garnered fifty-four percent of the total and carried eight of eleven counties. Later in his career challengers reminded Patman and the voters of his remarks about the duration of tenure in office, hoping that they could dispose of Patman as he had done of Black. Patman then argued the importance of seniority in dealing with national issues. Furthermore, Patman's constant legislative action, combined with his ability to take care of the needs of his constituents — especially in the area of increased federal spending in the region — converted many critics into supporters. For example, during and after the Second World War Patman succeeded in locating three ordnance plants and a steel mill in the
region that by 1962 provided a combined weekly payroll of $703,000.4

After his first election Patman did not encounter electoral challenges until 1936. In the intervening years, Patman amassed an enviable record as an advocate for the economically disadvantaged with appeals for early payment of the World War I soldiers bonus, aid to small businesses in their struggle against large retailing units, and small farmers, including tenants and sharecroppers, and built up a sizable amount of ill-will towards his agenda both within and outside his district.

Beginning with the election in 1936, Patman confronted what would become his own version of the permanent campaign which found him constantly on the watch for challengers. Although his opponent withdrew before the primary in 1936, Patman did not convince other critics of his congressional agenda to forego future challenges. One supporter warned Patman that the mood of the district was shifting away from support for New Deal relief programs: "People are getting thoroughly disgusted with the relief idea and program, and this includes the working people. I understand that you can't get a bricklayer in Texarkana now because they are all working on the relief business." Throughout the remainder of his career Patman had to assuage challengers from the right who had grown weary of his reform efforts. Nevertheless, Patman managed to strike a healthy balance between Southern liberal advocacy for economic reform and patronage for his constituents and retained a solid power base. Part of his success stemmed from his constant contact with constituents through the publication of a weekly newsletter and frequent trips back home.9

On April 7, 1936, David M. Phillips, pastor of the Rose Hill Baptist Church in Texarkana, announced his candidacy for Congress. Hugh Carney, a former district judge, told Patman that Phillips' financial backing originated with "some of your enemies among the big boys up North and East." Carney believed there was no reason to worry because "the idea all over this congressional district is that if you want anything done in Washington and want it done right and it is just, then [Patman] can get it done. And that is the God's truth. You are about the only man that we have had up there that has the ability to do these things and that would do them efficiently." Patman agreed that his main opposition came from those who had not gotten jobs from the government. Other rumors placed the source of Phillips' financial backing with the chain stores, a form of economic organization that Patman often attacked. Commenting on Phillips' outside funding, O.B. Briggs, a local businessman, noted that the "people see it that if Wright Patman is defeated by big interests sending money into his District it will be years before any other Congressman will attempt to fight these interests." In the contest, Patman "[wanted] just as large a majority as possible, which will be considered as an endorsement of my record in the past."10

Phillips employed much the same strategy in his race against Patman in 1936 as Patman had used against Black in 1928. A Patman supporter noted that "this fellow Phillips is sure working. [He] is just as busy as can be and is all over the country in the rural sections doing Patman just as Patman did Black. He is scattering his campaign literature everywhere. He sure has some bad things that he tells on Patman," which included false assertions that the congressman's social life revolved around alcohol, night clubs, and wild parties.
In this and subsequent campaigns, Patman carefully avoided Black’s mistakes by keeping up with the needs of his district. Patman also refused requests for a division of time. The incumbent, whose popularity with voters caused one observer to compare his trips to the region with the second coming of Christ, did not wish to help his challengers draw a crowd. In this and future contests, Patman relied on an informal network of political advisors and campaign managers drawn from, but not limited to, the ranks of area postmasters who had the responsibility of keeping up with political intelligence in their locale and informing the Congressman. Patman also asked that one or two friends from each county meet to discuss strategy for the coming race. Despite passage of the Hatch Act in 1939, which prohibited partisan political activity on the part of government employees, Patman still expected and received regular reports from the postmasters. Patman took an active role in the management of post office affairs throughout his district; he also kept track of his postmasters’ contributions to the Democratic National Committee.

Even though Patman’s opponent withdrew before the primary in 1936, the financial and business interests in Dallas and outside of the state opposed to Patman were not ready to acknowledge the incumbent’s grip on the First Congressional District. Two years later Patman drew opposition from George P. Blackburn, district judge for Lamar and Fannin counties. The primary election of 1938 presented Patman with the first of many conservative Democratic challenges that he would face during the middle of his career, which included serious primary opponents in 1940, 1944, 1948, 1950, 1952, 1954, and 1956. The election of 1938 also proved a difficult one for New Deal Democrats throughout the nation. One observer correctly predicted that “the anti-Roosevelt idea will have ... more effect than anything else at this time.” Elmer Patman warned his cousin of the possible political repercussions of voting to establish minimum wages and maximum hours. He guessed that should the measure pass area businesses would close and “a large number of men will be out of work .... I am sure that the general purposes of the Bill are good, but I would consider the political effect at this time. It just might be that you would lose more than you would gain by supporting the measure.” Patman discounted this advice, arguing that the bill would “automatically increase [Works Progress Administration] wages.”

Patman learned that Blackburn had tried to “stir up trouble among the WPA employees and applicants” with suggestions that WPA workers in the First Congressional District received lower than average wages. Patman requested that the agency see to it that various job applicants be accommodated. Sam Rayburn, a powerful Democratic congressman from nearby Bonham, Texas, also solicited aid from the WPA for his friend Patman. “Wright Patman, one of the best Administration supporters here and one of our ablest fellows, has developed opposition. They are trying to tell that people in Dallas get higher wages than they do in Lamar, Delta and Hopkins Counties, and I am simply writing you to say that any way you can be helpful to Wright, I think would be a real service.”

Long and Wortham, a law firm located in Paris with investments in chain stores, encouraged and financed Blackburn’s race. Patman knew that Long and
Wortham represented the Dallas-based Texas Power and Light and the cotton seed mills, so he was not surprised to learn of their opposition to his reelection. Yet Blackburn’s charges that Patman was not supportive of WPA workers indicated the challenger’s attempts to position himself as endorsing the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. A Patman strategist told the congressman that Blackburn risked alienating his financial backers: “Blackburn claims to be with the Administration in certain parts of its program, but the men who are actively aligned with him are known to oppose the Administration Program and that would indicate they are anti-Administration . . . . Some direct questions publicly issued would probably put him on the spot with his own hometown citizens, because he would be afraid to antagonize his backers, or his voting friends.”

Patman asked the administration for help with his campaign because of the various outside business interests working against him. He believed he could handle criticisms of his vote for the wage-and-hour bill but asked that the president write a letter explaining the rationale behind the WPA wage scale. Patman told Agriculture Secretary Henry A. Wallace that the secretary of the Texas Cotton Ginners Association had made speeches for Blackburn that were critical of his actions in Congress and of administration agricultural policy. “He used lots of sarcasm and ridicule in his speeches, all intended to try to break down the Government’s program. He is also trying to arouse the farmers against the Administration on account of the wage and hour bill, and me particularly because I voted for it. Possibly it would be a good idea for you to get up two or three meetings in this District and get someone to address the people.” The Agricultural Department agreed to such a plan providing that an organization within Patman’s district issue the invitation.

The administration did not jump at Patman’s request for political endorsement in part out of its policy to stay out of primary election disputes and in part out of dissatisfaction with Patman’s political advocacy of the WWI soldiers bonus and other policies that were anathema to the Democratic president. Roosevelt even avoided meeting with Patman when he passed through Texas. Patman complained to the White House when Blackburn charged that the administration had snubbed him. “My ‘yes, but’ Democrat opponent claims that Mr. Roosevelt ignored me on his trip to Texas and the administration is really against me for renomination.” The Texarkana Democrat asked his friend Rayburn for help with the administration. Rayburn told the White House that “I would like to have a word from the president that would correct or stop this talk. I may say that Patman has been one of the most loyal supporters that the President has had voting against as few administration measures as probably any member of Congress. I am not trying to draw the president into any primary fight but it seems to me that it would be perfectly all right for the president . . . to wire Patman something. Frankly he is going to be elected overwhelmingly anyhow I think. But we may need him in the future as we have in the past.” The only response Patman received from the White House was an apology that the president’s secretary delivered. Patman did not need a word from Roosevelt to demonstrate his mettle to his constituents, who overwhelmingly returned him to office, but his victory did not quiet conservative opposition within the business community.
In his perpetual fight with large, outside business concerns, Patman never relied solely on people in the First Congressional District to support his campaign fundraising. Instead his continuing electoral success relied on outside contributions from financial concerns that benefited from Patman's presence in Washington. In 1938 George Burger requested that all independent tire dealers contribute to Patman so he would have necessary funds to buy radio time. In 1940, Paul D. Carroll, a member of the Texas Board of Pharmacy from Texarkana, arranged for traveling salesmen to collect signatures in support of Patman from merchants while making their rounds. Patman informed other supporters in the business community of this and asked that they do the same. In 1946, Fred F. Florence, president of the Republic National Bank in Dallas, wrote Patman to offer his support in the coming campaign. That same year, John W. Dargavel promised the backing of the National Association of Retail Druggists. In 1948, Burger encouraged his organization, the National Federation of Small Businesses, to support Patman in his campaign. And in 1962, Patman received contributions from various savings and loan association officials throughout Texas.18

Patman's challengers throughout the 1940s and 1950s emphasized conservative themes in their attempts to unseat him. These decades were the zenith of intra-party Democratic conservatism in Texas, and Patman, as a liberal Southern Democrat, had to adapt not only to the cycle of the permanent campaign but also to an increasingly stronger challenge from the right that included racial demagoguery, criticisms of federal budgetary decisions, and a more visible display of technology in politics. A review of the election returns for 1940, 1944, 1948, 1950, 1952, 1954, and 1956, indicate that never more than forty-five percent of the voters in the district responded to the conservative rhetoric.19

Patman used caution in dealing with the race issue. While he never directly challenged the prevailing social mores of white Southern society, he did not publicly defend the ideology of white supremacy. Instead, Patman sought, with varying degrees of success, the middle ground. In 1940, Patman declared that African Americans would not be permitted to vote in the Democratic primary, and continued to endorse this policy until the Supreme Court overturned the white primary. In 1946, two years after that decision, Patman solicited the votes of his African American constituents. Frank King, a Texarkana dentist, told Patman that “in a close race the negro is now the balance of power in your district. You will recall on several occasions I have pointed out some hard looking black brother or sister and called them your constituents – such statement is no longer a joke.” Such truths did not remove the need to appeal to a white constituency paranoid about increased African American political power. and in 1948, supporters warned Patman that he should affirm the state's rights doctrine, advice which he readily heeded. Despite these tactics the opposition criticized Patman for his support of federal aid to education. “Federal aid ... means that in the schools of the first congressional district of Texas that eventually there might be, not one school for whites and one for blacks; but one school for all.” In navigating the choppy waters of civil rights, Patman believed that Democrats opposed to the party position on civil rights would be no happier with the Republicans but instead should “fight the questions out in our own Party.” By the middle of the 1950s,
Patman used local community activists as intermediaries and quietly strengthened his ties to the black community, a constituency that generally supported his agenda for a more liberal economic policy. Patman’s series of conservative challengers believed him vulnerable on the question of segregation, and in 1956, Kenneth W. Simmons, mayor of Avinger and chairman of the Northeast Texas Defense Area Committee, made it a major issue in his race for Congress, using one-minute television advertisements each night that emphasized the issue. According to one source, Simmons planned “to beat [Patman] on the segregation question .... [Patman] received 97% of the negro vote last time, and had refused to take any stand on the segregation issue.”

Patman was more forthcoming with his defense of the federal government’s spending policies. Thus his political opponents frequently relied on these issues in their campaigns. In 1944, Abe Mays, a former state representative and outspoken critic of the New Deal, centered his attack on Patman’s distribution of patronage in the district and its relationship to federal budgetary priorities. He criticized the “henchmen [Patman] has in all the towns, the postmasters, the many men that have received fat contracts from the Government because of the war.” Mays asked voters “Do you know about the Government wanting to purchase 800 lots in Texarkana to build homes for war workers, and the present Congressman appointing one of his own henchmen as the local czar over the deal? How much money do you suppose they made off these deals, at yours and my expense? I’ll tell you they made plenty, and don’t you let anyone tell you otherwise.” Six years later Mays challenged Patman for a second time, and he argued that there was no difference between the economic policies of Josef Stalin and Harry S Truman. Early in the 1950s a group called Democrats Opposed to Socialism entered the political arena in northeast Texas for the purpose of unseating Patman. One of the group’s organizers claimed “there are three million employees on the government payroll and a million more receiving handouts. They’re going to fight and fight hard for their paycheck .... Too many of our people have gone money mad. They haven’t time to save the country. But unless they do something and do it now, our nation will collapse. We can’t go on as we are and survive.”

During the 1940s and 1950s new methods of communication and transportation played a greater role in the political arena. For example, the use of radio and television as a means of reaching the voters accelerated. Even in the campaign in 1938 radio had played a role in the final weeks of the contest. As an incumbent, Patman often reacted to the use of new technology rather than set trends. In 1950 Patman learned that perennial challenger Abe Mays was “spending about $1,000 a week on radio time alone.” In 1954, Simmons copied Lyndon B. Johnson by making a campaign tour of the district by helicopter. Patman estimated that Simmons spent $50,000 to make the race against him that year. In the rematch in 1956, Simmons opened his campaign in the middle of January on television. Patman had discussed with Eugene B. Germany, president of Lone Star Steel, the wisdom of using a helicopter much as Simmons had done in 1954 and planned to do again in 1956. Another Lone Star Steel official agreed with their decision against such a plan because “your use of a ‘copter would prevent your making capital of the fact that your opponent is using such an expensive tool to get votes when he has no visible means of paying the tab himself. It further would prevent raising the question
of ‘who’s paying the bill?’” Nevertheless, Lone Star Steel arranged and paid for thirty-three commercials during the last four days of the campaign. In addition, Patman made an hour-long film telling the story of his life and public service. His county campaign managers also took to the television to discuss his reelection, and on the day before the election Patman’s friends conducted a television marathon in support of his candidacy.22

By 1962 the politics of getting elected to Congress had changed significantly for Wright Patman. Gone was reliance on district postmasters to provide written intelligence reports. Any activity in which these old standbys participated had to occur away from both Republican and Democratic critics willing to charge Patman’s appointees with Hatch Act violations. By 1962 the permanent campaign, ironically enough because this was the last race in which Patman faced a serious opponent, had evolved to the point where Patman’s opposition undertook serious political activity over a year before the Democratic primary. A thorough analysis of this race must take into account the context in which it occurred. Communist hysteria nationally and the increasing influence of the Republican Party in Texas brought Patman serious opposition from the right in the Democratic primary and Republicans in the general election. Thus that year’s contest proved significant in the larger context of the changing political landscape in Texas and the South.

Evidence of strong opposition became apparent in August 1961. Bascom Perkins reported to Patman that a group of leading citizens in Mt. Pleasant had organized behind the candidacy of Sam B. Hall, Jr., a Marshall attorney, and had received direction from conservative political leaders in Dallas. “It is a crafty, cunning and shrewd approach…. Every religious group of any size in this town is represented…. This is a type of political approach that I am afraid that you are not familiar with. You understand that banks now have a great deal of power over people, and the theory of this type of a political approach is to make people afraid to oppose them.” Perkins also charged that the Southwestern Electric Power Company and Eugene B. Germany were behind the efforts to unseat Patman. Perkins recommended that Patman use radio and television to appeal to the voters and present an image of strength. During the fall Abe Mays, who had challenged Patman previously, took to the air waves for the duration of the campaign in support of Hall and broadcast a daily radio program critical of the incumbent.23

Hall used the Constitution as an issue to question Patman’s support for an activist federal government. Hall emphasized the centrality of the original intent of the Constitution to American society, calling it the “greatest and best system yet devised for allowing government to fulfill its proper roll.” Patman questioned Hall’s knowledge of the Constitution and pointed out the challenger’s past affiliation with the Constitution Party, whose “main idea, if any, is to abolish the Federal income tax; and the opposition’s candidate was still making speeches as late as November describing the federal income tax as a communistic plot.” Hall promised the introduction of legislation outlawing the Communist Party.24

Patman ignored the G.O.P. challenge until after the May primary. Patman supporters worried that a strong showing by Jack Cox, the Republican candidate in the governor’s race against John Connally, could help the
Republican Party locally which had “unlimited time to spend on organization.” One local official explained that the G.O.P. captured a quarter of the vote because “they had a very fine organization which worked hard, where as we waited until the last two weeks and then emphasized publicity rather than real organizational effort. Perhaps the vote was a real tonic, in that it made us aware of our local shortcomings.” Patman agreed that a lack of organization by the Democrats aided Republican totals in November.25

Patman’s elections provide a glimpse of the evolving sophistication of campaign organization, including the use of scientific polling methods, the use of the union label, and the use of professional political consultants. By 1962, Patman relied on his local campaign staff to contact leading supporters in towns throughout the district to receive the latest political information. Patman had a well-run campaign headquarters that operated a telephone bank. Staff members also coordinated an absentee vote drive and a general get-out-the-vote effort among likely Patman supporters. Office workers supervised the preparation of mailings to all poll tax holders, a special mailing from the congressman to union members, and another mailing from the AFL-CIO Labor Council to union members. Patman’s campaign staff coordinated their efforts with local labor leaders who took charge of distributing placards, bumper stickers, and literature in area plants and shopping centers. On election day the Patman campaign conducted an aggressive get-out-the-vote drive complete with cars to transport the voters.26

That November Patman for the first time met a serious Republican challenger. James A. Timberlake, a Texarkana businessman and former F.B.I. agent, made the race because of concerns for maintaining the Christian foundations of American society and cutting the budget deficit. Timberlake believed it his calling to foster the growth of the Republican Party in Texas. He thought a two-party system was necessary for the preservation of a democratic government. Timberlake characterized Patman as a wasteful spender whose policies jeopardized future generations of Americans. He engaged in a marathon swing through each county in the district trying to create a Republican network where none had existed before. Timberlake did not win, but he did represent yet another facet of the conservative challenge to Patman’s power base which ultimately would weaken the ability of liberal Democrats to hold power in Northeast Texas.27

During the remainder of the 1960s, Patman encountered no serious opposition, but, in the 1970s, the octogenarian legislator had three more campaigns – 1970, 1972, and 1974. These races, when viewed in the larger context of Patman’s political career, were anticlimactic. Even though Patman found himself in a permanent campaign cycle in the middle of his career, he had become a fixture in Washington by tending to business at home. Even local business leaders in his district often supported Patman by the 1940s. They overlooked the incumbent’s liberal voting record because of the many federal projects he procured for the region. While Patman noted in campaign after campaign the federal money his seniority accrued for the First Congressional District, he also recognized immediate political benefits of his own in the form of support from conservative community leaders, a reward that fellow liberals such as Maury Maverick, who were defeated early in their careers, never received. Patman’s career demonstrates that campaign gimmicks such as
the use of modern technology and charges of being in office too long were not enough to unseat a powerful incumbent. His constituents recognized the value of his seniority and overlooked cries that he had held the job too long.

As a campaigner Patman successfully employed the techniques of the challenger in 1928 by starting the race early, repeatedly questioning the incumbent’s record while stating his desire to avoid character assassination, and soliciting the support of likely constituencies both within and outside the district. As an incumbent, Patman did everything possible to prevent defeat by a challenger. In so doing he used many of the same strategies as conservative Democrats from the South, thus illustrating that in congressional politics sometimes greater differences exist between incumbents and challengers than between liberals and conservatives. He worked hard to keep up his relations with the district’s voters and community and political leaders. The wily Texan formed a tight clique among the postmasters and other patronage recipients who helped him navigate the waters of the permanent campaign he endured from the political right.

The development of the Republican Party in the First District continued despite Patman’s defeat of Timberlake in 1962. The growing strength of the G.O.P. in East Texas has made it more difficult for liberals such as Patman to achieve power. In reviewing Patman’s various campaigns between 1928 and 1974, elements of both change and continuity exist. The greatest change is that of challenger to incumbent, while evidence of continuity predominates when comparing Patman’s permanent campaign with more recent elections.

NOTES


While indispensable for understanding the process of elections in the modern Congress, these and other works give little attention to the precedent setting behavior of earlier elections and congressmen. On this question, historians must fill the gap. Work has been done in the way of studying individual members of the U.S. House whose careers had greater national impact. See Bruce J. DiCenzo, Keeper of the Rules: Congressman Howard W. Smith of Virginia, (Charlottesville, 1987); D.B. Hardeman and Donald C. Bacon, Rayburn: A Biography, (Austin 1987); Ingrid Winther Scobie, Center Stage: Helen Calhoun Douglas, (New York and Oxford, 1992); Charles V. Hamilton, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma, (New York, 1991); Anthony Champagne, Congressman Sam Rayburn, (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1984). However a far greater number of congressmen lack scholarly consideration.
"George J. Burger to All Independents, 6/30/38, in "Mr. Patman’s Political Files – 1938 (Special Correspondence)," Box 77C; Paul D. Carroll to WP, 3/8/40, in "Mr. Patman’s Political Files – 1940 (General Correspondence) #2," Box 78A; WP to Herschel Duncan, 3/11/40, in "Waters, Richard G. File #1," Box 78C; Fred F. Florence to WP, 5/28/46; John W. Dargavel to WP, 5/28/46, both in "Mr. Patman’s Political Files – 1946 (General File)," Box 78C; Burger to C. Wilson Harder, 5/20/48, in "Mr. Patman’s Political Files – 1948 #2," Box 79A; "Wright Patman Campaign Committee," in "Loose Material #1," Box 87A; WP Scrapbook, #51.

"Statistical Summary of Eleven of the Primary Campaigns of Wright Patman," in "[Loose Material]," Box 430A.

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