



# LEGISLATIVE REFERENCE BUREAU

## Black Members of the Wisconsin Legislature, 2021— An Overview and Historical List

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## Introduction

When the 2021 Wisconsin State legislature convened on January 4, 2021, ten African American legislators took their seats in the assembly and the senate. This is the largest number of Black lawmakers ever in Wisconsin history to serve together in the state legislature. Of the more than 5,650 people who are estimated to have served in the Wisconsin State Legislature since 1848,<sup>1</sup> only 32 have been African American, but the proportion of African American legislators has increased steadily over the past half century. Since the mid-1970s, Black legislators have taken seats in the senate, won elections to the assembly, and gained membership on powerful legislative committees. This paper provides a brief introduction to the service, achievements, and leadership of Wisconsin's Black lawmakers.

## Background

While the Wisconsin Constitution, ratified in 1848, granted voting rights to white men, it took another 18 years for Black men to gain full suffrage. A referendum on extending suffrage to Black men appeared on a statewide ballot in 1849; the majority of voters who responded to the referendum approved the measure. However, the State Board of Canvassers counted ballots that abstained from voting on the referendum as votes against the measure, causing the measure to fail. And it wasn't until 1866, when the Wisconsin Supreme Court determined that Black men in Wisconsin had legally acquired the right to vote in 1849, that they finally gained access to the polls.<sup>2</sup>

Securing the right to vote removed one barrier to Black Wisconsinites' power to achieve representation in state government. Still, the Wisconsin Legislature would not become integrated until 1907.

## Assembly firsts

In January 1907, Republican Lucian H. Palmer was sworn in to the assembly, becoming the state's first Black legislator. Although little is known about his campaign, press accounts of Palmer's activities in the legislature suggest that he exceeded the low expectations set for him by his white peers.<sup>3</sup> Palmer introduced a resolution protesting the

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1. This estimate builds upon a previous estimate calculated for "Serving the State: Wisconsin Legislators, 1848–2019," *Wisconsin History Project* 1, no. 1 (Madison, WI: Legislative Reference Bureau, April 2019).

2. Gillespie v. Palmer, 20 Wis. 544, 555–56. For a detailed account of the history of Black suffrage in Wisconsin and the 1866 court ruling that determined Black men in Wisconsin had in fact earned the right to vote legally in 1849, see Christy Clark-Pujara, "Contested: Black Suffrage in Early Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 100, no. 4 (summer 2017): 21–27. Women in Wisconsin would not gain full voting rights until 1920.

3. Although one newspaper characterized Palmer as a pawn of Democrats, who sought to torpedo Republicans' chances of winning the seat, another newspaper attributed his electoral victory to a "hard personal canvass." "Echoes of the Election," *Daily Northwestern* (Oshkosh, WI), November 17, 1906; "M'Govern Wins by Close Vote; State Ticker Is In," *La Crosse Tribune*, November 7, 1906.

racially motivated discharge of 167 Black soldiers in Brownsville, Texas;<sup>4</sup> he invited a Black speaker to deliver an address on racial justice in the assembly chamber;<sup>5</sup> and he successfully convinced colleagues to vote down measures he opposed.<sup>6</sup> Within months, the same newspaper that had dismissively characterized Palmer's election as a fluke would recognize that Palmer had single-handedly killed a bill otherwise expected to pass.<sup>7</sup> The notion of the Black politician was no longer unthinkable in Wisconsin.

Still, after Palmer completed his two-year term, no African American officials were elected to the legislature for the next 18 sessions, a gap of 36 years. In the early part of the twentieth century, Black Wisconsinites composed a very small percentage of the population, giving them minimal power at the polls, even in cities with growing Black communities, such as Milwaukee, Beloit, and Madison.<sup>8</sup> However, one such community—Milwaukee's Sixth Ward—would help secure an electoral victory for Democrat Cleveland Colbert on November 3, 1942. But this victory was fleeting. While the initial canvass reported Colbert as winning by six votes, his white opponent, Progressive Philip Markey, challenged the results. The recount found Markey to have won by 10 votes, and Markey was inaugurated as a member of the assembly.<sup>9</sup>

In November 1944, Democrat Le Roy Simmons<sup>10</sup> handily defeated the incumbent Markey to represent the assembly's Milwaukee-6 District as the state's second Black legislator.<sup>11</sup> Simmons served four terms in the assembly before being defeated by Isaac Coggs in the 1954 primary.<sup>12</sup>

During all but two sessions between 1945 and 1972, there was only one African American official serving in the legislature. In 1955, the incumbent Coggs and freshmen Assemblymen Cecil B. Brown Jr. and Walton Bryan Stewart became the first Black elected officials to serve together in the legislature. After spending the next three sessions as the only Black member of the legislature, Assemblyman Coggs served with one other Black assemblyman, Raymond Lee Lathan, during the 1963 session.

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4. "Colored Man's Request," *La Crosse Tribune*, February 14, 1907.

5. "Negro and Socialist in Debate," *Eau Claire Leader*, March 31, 1907; "Pleads Chance for Negro," *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 22, 1907.

6. "Negro and Socialist in Debate," *Eau Claire Leader*, March 31, 1907; "Colored Member Speaks," *Daily Northwestern* (Oshkosh, WI), June 29, 1907; "Capitol Park Scheme Killed," *Daily Journal* (Racine, WI), July 1, 1907.

7. "Colored Member Speaks," *Daily Northwestern* (Oshkosh, WI), June 29, 1907.

8. William F. Thompson, *The History of Wisconsin, Volume VI: Continuity and Change, 1940-1965* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1988), 322.

9. Genevieve G. McBride and Stephen R. Byers, "The First Mayor of Black Milwaukee: J. Anthony Josey," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 91, no. 2 (winter 2007-08), 11. See also "Recount Defeats Negro Candidate," *Racine Journal Times*, November 15, 1942. The Assembly Committee on Elections investigated the recount itself, finding Markey to have won by nine votes and ultimately introducing a resolution that declared Markey the rightful winner. *Journal of Proceedings of the Sixty-Sixth Session of the Wisconsin Legislature, January 13-August 3, 1943* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, 1943), 344-48.

10. Sources refer to Simmons as Le Roy, LeRoy, and Leroy. For consistency, this paper adopts Le Roy.

11. Simmons won on a vote of 4,010 to 2,841. "Summary of Assembly Vote by Districts (November 1944)" in Howard F. Ohm and Hazel L. Kuehn, eds., *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1946* (Madison, WI: Legislative Reference Bureau, 1946), 676.

12. "Vote for Assemblymen by Districts, Primary Election" in M. G. Toepel and Hazel L. Kuehn, eds., *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1954* (Madison, WI: Legislative Reference Bureau, 1954), 664.

In 1977, Representative Marcia Coggs became the first African American woman to serve in the Wisconsin Legislature. In 1981, Coggs was joined in the assembly by Representative Annette Polly Williams, the second African American woman elected to serve in the legislature. Williams served in the assembly for a total of 15 sessions, or 30 years, longer than any other woman or African American legislator in state history.

## Senate firsts

After mounting a successful primary challenge to Democratic incumbent Mark Lipscomb in September 1972, Monroe Swan became Wisconsin's first Black state senator in January 1973.<sup>13</sup> Watching the inauguration ceremonies from the balcony was Mattie Belle Woods, campaign manager for former Assemblyman Le Roy Simmons, who remarked, "This is the moment I have been waiting for for many, many years."<sup>14</sup> Swan himself downplayed his unprecedented election. "Being the first black senator has no special legislative value," he remarked to reporters. Rather than dwell on this milestone, Swan said, he promised "to represent the interests of all the people in my district."<sup>15</sup>

In 1981, Gary George succeeded Swan representing the Sixth Senate District and become the state's second Black state senator. George went on to serve in the senate for a total of 12 sessions, or 24 years, longer than any other Black senator in state history. In 1993, Gwen Moore became the first Black woman seated in the senate.

## Milestones in legislative leadership

In the Wisconsin Legislature, committee chairpersons have the power to advance legislation by scheduling hearings on bills. In 1959, Assemblyman Isaac Coggs became the first Black legislator to chair a legislative committee when he was appointed to lead the assembly's Public Welfare Committee. In 1981, Marcia Coggs, Isaac Coggs's widow, became the first Black woman appointed to chair a legislative committee, the assembly's Aging, Women, and Minorities Committee. Between Isaac Coggs's and Marcia Coggs's terms in the legislature, Representative Lloyd Barbee chaired the assembly's Enrolled Bills Committee and Judiciary Committee for two sessions. One of Wisconsin's most prominent civil rights leaders, Barbee worked as a legislative aide for Assemblyman Coggs<sup>16</sup> before

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13. Swan's election was not without controversy, as Lipscomb alleged that Swan had committed voter fraud and violated the Corrupt Practices Act. However, a John Doe investigation found these allegations to be unsubstantiated, and the senate voted to seat Swan. Patricia Simms, "Swan Election Challenges," *Wisconsin State Journal*, December 29, 1972; "No Violations in Swan Case, Judge Declares," *Wisconsin State Journal*, January 27, 1973; "Senate Votes to Seat Swan, Allows Kasten to Abstain," *Capital Times*, February 7, 1973.

14. "First Black State Senator Is Nervous," *Daily Northwestern* (Oshkosh, WI), January 1, 1973.

15. Patricia Simms, "Choosing Challenge Unit Snags First Senate Session," *Wisconsin State Journal*, January 2, 1973.

16. Barbee-Wooten, Daphne E., ed., *Justice for All: Selected Writings of Lloyd A. Barbee* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2017), 22.

winning Coggs's open seat representing the Milwaukee-6 Assembly District. Presently, Representative Shelia Stubbs is co-chair of the Speaker's Task Force on Racial Disparities and of the Assembly Subcommittee on Law Enforcement Policies and Standards, a subcommittee of the task force; Senator Julian Bradley is chair of the Senate Committee on Utilities, Technology and Telecommunications.

The Joint Committee on Finance, considered one of the most powerful committees in the legislature because it is responsible for reviewing appropriations and revenue bills, as well as the biennial budget bill, gained its first African American member in 1965, when Representative Barbee was appointed to the committee. In addition to Barbee, six other Black legislators have been appointed to the committee: Representative Marcia Coggs, Senator Gary George, Representative Spencer Coggs, Representative Antonio Riley, Senator Lena Taylor, and Senator LaTonya Johnson. In 1984, Senator George became the first Black legislator to co-chair the Joint Committee on Finance, a position he held until 1993. In 2012, Senator Taylor became the first African American woman to co-chair the Joint Committee on Finance and second Black legislator to serve in that role.

Serving in legislative leadership positions is another way in which state senators and representatives have the power to shape their party's agenda and promote legislative proposals. In 1985, Representative Spencer Coggs was elected vice chair of the minority caucus in the assembly, becoming the first African American to hold a position in legislative leadership in either house; he served in that capacity for three sessions.<sup>17</sup> In 1995, Senator Gwen Moore was elected senate majority caucus pro tempore, becoming the first African American legislator to hold a position in legislative leadership in the senate. In 2003, Representative Robert L. Turner, who had previously served as vice chair and sergeant at arms of the minority caucus, became the first African American legislator chosen to chair the assembly's minority caucus; he served in that capacity for two sessions.

## Other notable milestones

With the exception of two legislators, all of Wisconsin's Black senators and representatives have been Democrats. Lucian Palmer was the first Black Republican to serve in the assembly, and he remains the only Black Republican ever to serve there. In January 2021, Julian Bradley, a first-time legislator, became the first Black Republican seated in the senate.

Over the past three decades, Black legislators have started to represent more districts in more counties. In 1991, Representative Turner became the first Black member of the legislature elected from a district in Racine County. Representative Stubbs, who represents a district covering the south and west sides of Madison, also made history in

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17. In a 2003 special election, Coggs, a nephew of Isaac and Marcia Coggs, was elected to the senate, where he served as the majority caucus's sergeant at arms during the 2007 session.

2019 when she became the first African American to represent a Dane County district in the legislature. In January 2021, Sambah Baldeh became the second African American to represent a Dane County district. In January 2021, Senator Bradley became the first Black legislator to represent a district spanning parts of four counties: Walworth, Racine, Waukesha, and Milwaukee. Aside from Representatives Turner, Baldeh, and Stubbs and Senator Bradley, each of the Black legislators who has served or is currently serving in the legislature has represented a district located entirely within Milwaukee County.

Representative Kalan Haywood is the youngest African American ever elected to serve in the Wisconsin Assembly. At 19, Haywood was one of the youngest state legislators in the nation when he took office in 2019.<sup>18</sup>

Of the seven African American representatives currently serving in the assembly, three are first-time legislators. Of the three Black legislators currently serving in the senate, two have had previous experience serving in the assembly. Senator Taylor is currently the legislature's longest-serving Black member.

## Conclusion

Wisconsin's pioneering Black legislators were literally few and far between, yet they overcame significant obstacles and racial prejudice to win elections, pursue far-ranging policy objectives, pave the way for other Black Wisconsinites to serve in the legislature, and hold other elected offices.<sup>19</sup> In addition to being the largest group of Black politicians ever to serve collectively in legislature, the three senators and seven representatives seated for the 2021–22 session have also set new records by being the largest number of Black legislators ever to serve together in their respective houses. ■

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18. *2019–20 Wisconsin Blue Book* (Madison, WI; Legislative Reference Bureau, 2019), 161.

19. Currently, four African American former state legislators are serving in elected offices outside the legislature: Mandela Barnes is lieutenant governor of Wisconsin, Spencer Coggs is treasurer of the City of Milwaukee, David Crowley is Milwaukee county executive, and Gwen Moore represents Wisconsin's Fourth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. She is the first Black legislator from Wisconsin elected to the U.S. Congress.

## Timeline

- 1907** Lucian H. Palmer is seated in the assembly to become the state's first Black legislator.
- 1945** Assemblyman Le Roy Simmons becomes the state's second Black legislator.
- 1955** Assemblymen Cecil B. Brown Jr., Issac Coggs, and Walton Bryan Stewart are the first Black elected officials to serve together in the legislature.
- 1959** Assemblyman Isaac Coggs is the first Black legislator to chair a legislative committee.
- 1965** Representative Lloyd Barbee becomes the first African American member of the Joint Committee on Finance.
- 1973** Monroe Swan becomes the first Black state senator.
- 1977** Marcia Coggs is seated in the Wisconsin Assembly, becoming the first African American woman to serve in the Wisconsin Legislature.
- 1981** Representative Marcia Coggs becomes the first Black woman to chair a legislative committee.
- 1984** Senator Gary George becomes the first Black legislator to co-chair the Joint Committee on Finance.
- 1985** Representative Spencer Coggs is elected vice chair of the minority caucus in the assembly, becoming the first African American to hold a position in legislative leadership in either house.
- 1991** Representative Robert L. Turner becomes the first Black member of the Wisconsin Legislature to represent a district located in Racine County.
- 1993** Gwen Moore becomes the first Black woman seated in the Wisconsin State Senate.
- 1995** Senator Gwen Moore is elected senate majority caucus pro tempore, becoming the first African American legislator to hold a position in legislative leadership in the senate.
- 2003** Representative Robert L. Turner becomes the first African American legislator chosen to chair the assembly's minority caucus.
- 2012** Senator Lena Taylor becomes the first African American woman to co-chair the Joint Committee on Finance.
- 2019** At age 19, Representative Kalan Haywood is the youngest African American legislator to serve in the Wisconsin Assembly. Representative Shelia Stubbs becomes the first African American to represent a Dane County district.
- 2021** Senator Julian Bradley becomes the first Black Republican to serve in the Wisconsin Senate as well as the first Black legislator to represent Senate District 28. Ten Black legislators serve in the 2021–22 session of the Wisconsin Legislature—the most ever to serve together in state history.



## Black members of the Wisconsin legislature

The following tables compile the names of all members of the Wisconsin Legislature who have identified themselves or been identified in the press as African American or Black. Tables 1 and 2 list all Black members alphabetically by house and indicate their party, district, occupational background, and sessions of service. Table 3 lists the members serving in each session.

**Table 1. Alphabetical list of Black senators, 1981–2021**

Name	Party	District	Occupations	Sessions served
Bradley, Julian	Rep.	28	Manager for telecommunications and insurance companies	2021
Coggs, G. Spencer†	Dem.	6	Health officer, postal worker, industrial printer	2003, 05, 07, 09, 11
George, Gary R.	Dem.	6	Attorney	1981, 83, 85, 87, 89, 91, 93, 95, 97, 99, 2001, 03
Harris Dodd, Nikiya	Dem.	6	Former nonprofit fundraiser, precollege coordinator, preschool teacher	2013, 15
Johnson, LaTonya †	Dem.	6	Former family childcare provider/owner, insurance agent, financial employment planner	2017, 19, 21
Moore, Gwen †	Dem.	4	Former housing officer with Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority, development specialist with Milwaukee City Development, program and planning analyst with Wisconsin Departments of Employment Relations and Health and Social Services	1993, 95, 97, 99, 2001, 03
Swan, Monroe	Dem.	6	Employment program director, former material expediter	1973, 75, 77, 79
Taylor, Lena C. †	Dem.	4	Attorney	2005, 07, 09, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21

† Served in both houses.

**Table 2. Alphabetical list of Black representatives, 1907–2021**

Name	Party	District	Occupations	Sessions served
Baldeh, Sambah	Dem.	48	Information technology project manager, small business owner	2021
Barbee, Lloyd A.	Dem.	Milwaukee 6, Milwaukee 18	Attorney	1965, 67, 69, 71, 73, 75

Table 2. **Alphabetical list of Black representatives, 1907–2021**, continued

Name	Party	District	Occupations	Sessions served
Barnes, Mandela	Dem.	11	Community organizer	2013, 15
Bowen, David	Dem.	10	Legislator, former Milwaukee County Board supervisor	2015, 17, 19, 21
Brown Jr., Cecil B.	Dem.	Milwaukee 13	Tax consultant, public relations counselor, insurance agent	1955
Coggs, Elizabeth M.	Dem.	10	Legislator	2011
Coggs, G. Spencer†	Dem.	16, 17	City of Milwaukee health officer	1983, 85, 87, 89, 91, 93, 95, 97, 99, 2001, 03
Coggs, Isaac N.	Dem.	Milwaukee 6	Accountant	1953, 55, 57, 59, 61, 63
Coggs, Marcia P.	Dem.	18, 12, 18	Legislator	1977, 79, 81, 83, 85, 87, 89, 91
Crowley, David	Dem.	17	Legislative and county board supervisor aide	2017, 19
Drake, Dora	Dem.	11	Response training facilitator for criminal justice professionals, sales representative	2021
Fields, Jason	Dem.	11	CEO of investment firm, certified financial education instructor; former stockbroker, investment banker, business owner	2005, 07, 09, 11, 17, 19
Grigsby, Tamara	Dem.	18	Social worker	2005, 07, 09, 11
Haywood, Kalan	Dem.	16	Student, nonprofit consultant	2019, 21
Johnson, LaTonya †	Dem.	17	Legislator, former family childcare provider/owner	2013, 15
Lathan, Raymond Lee	Dem.	Milwaukee 13	Minister	1963
Moore, Gwen †	Dem.	7	Housing and economic development analyst	1989, 91
Moore Omokunde, Supreme	Dem.	17	Milwaukee County Board supervisor	2021
Morris, Johnnie (Morris-Tatum)	Dem.	11	Executive director, community organization	1993, 95, 97, 99, 2001, 03
Myers, LaKeshia	Dem.	12	Educator, small business owner, former subcommittee clerk, U.S. House of Representatives; former legislative aide, Wisconsin State Senate	2019, 21
Palmer, Lucian H.	Rep.	Milwaukee 6	Steward	1907
Riley, Antonio R.	Dem.	18	Staff assistant to mayor of Milwaukee	1993, 95, 97, 99, 2001, 03
Simmons, Le Roy J.	Dem.	Milwaukee 6	Salesman	1945, 47, 49, 51
Stewart, Walton Bryan	Dem.	Milwaukee 2	Law clerk, building contractor, tavern and restaurant operator	1955

**Table 2. Alphabetical list of Black representatives, 1907–2021, continued**

Name	Party	District	Occupations	Sessions served
Stubbs, Shelia	Dem.	77	Dane County supervisor, probation and parole officer	2019, 21
Taylor, Lena C. †	Dem.	18	Attorney	2003
Toles, Barbara	Dem.	17	Community outreach coordinator	2003, 05, 07, 09, 11
Turner, Robert L.	Dem.	61	City council member, state elections board chair	1991, 93, 95, 97, 99, 2001, 03, 05, 07, 09, 11
Ward Jr., Walter L.	Dem.	17	Counselor	1973, 75, 77, 79
Williams, Annette Polly	Dem.	17, 11, 17, 10	Mental health assistant	1981, 83, 85, 87, 89, 91, 93, 95, 97, 99, 2001, 03, 05, 07, 09
Young, Leon D.	Dem.	16	Police officer and police aide	1993, 95, 97, 99, 2001, 03, 05, 07, 09, 11, 13, 15, 17

† Served in both houses.

**Table 3. List of Black legislators by session**

Session	Total	Names
1907	1	Assemblyman Palmer
1909–43	0	—
1945–51	1	Assemblyman Simmons
1953	1	Assemblyman I. Coggs
1955	3	Assemblymen Brown, I. Coggs, and Stewart
1957–61	1	Assemblyman I. Coggs
1963	2	Assemblymen I. Coggs and Lathan
1965–71	1	Assemblyman Barbee
1973–75	3	Senator Swan Representatives Barbee and Ward
1977–79	3	Senator Swan Representatives M. Coggs and Ward
1981	3	Senator George Representatives M. Coggs and Williams
1983–87	4	Senator George Representatives M. Coggs, G. S. Coggs, and Williams
1989	5	Senator George Representatives M. Coggs, G. S. Coggs, Moore, and Williams

**Table 3. List of Black legislators by session, continued**

Session	Total	Names
1991	6	Senator George Representatives M. Coggs, G. S. Coggs, Moore, Turner, and Williams
1993–2001	8	Senators George and Moore Representatives G. S. Coggs, Morris, Riley, Turner, Williams, and Young
2003	11	Senators G. S. Coggs, <sup>1</sup> George, <sup>1</sup> and Moore Representatives G. S. Coggs, <sup>2</sup> Morris, Riley, <sup>3</sup> Taylor, <sup>3</sup> Toles, <sup>2</sup> Turner, Williams, and Young
2005–09	8	Senators G. S. Coggs and Taylor Representatives Fields, Grigsby, Toles, Turner, Williams, and Young
2011	8	Senators G. S. Coggs and Taylor Representatives E. Coggs, Fields, Grigsby, Toles, Turner, and Young
2013	5	Senators Harris Dodd and Taylor Representatives Barnes, Johnson, and Young
2015	6	Senators Harris Dodd and Taylor Representatives Barnes, Bowen, Johnson, and Young
2017	6	Senators Johnson and Taylor Representatives Bowen, Crowley, Fields, and Young
2019	8	Senators Johnson and Taylor Representatives Bowen, Crowley, Fields, Haywood, Myers, and Stubbs
2021	10	Senators Bradley, Johnson, and Taylor Representatives Baldeh, Bowen, Drake, Haywood, Moore Omokunde, Myers, and Stubbs

1. Served consecutively representing the Sixth Senate District.

2. Served consecutively representing the Seventeenth Assembly District.

3. Served consecutively representing the Eighteenth Assembly District.