

Interview with G. J. Sutton, Chairman, Texas legislative black caucus, San Antonio, Texas, December 13, 1974, conducted by Jack Bass and Walter de Vries, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: You're saying there isn't much difference between politics twenty-five years and today?

Sutton: Basically no.

J.B.: You've been involved politically during that entire period.

Sutton: Yes. In fact my first elective office was in 1948. Union Junior College board. That's a county wide election. I was elected to the board of trustees of the Union College.

Walter de Vries: Can you kind of give us a synopsis of your background in politics.

Sutton: Well, I was born in San Antonio and I've been in politics from about 1940, I would say, actively, until the present time. I was the first black elected to anything in the deep South. In 1948, as I say, I was elected to this board. I've been active in state-wide elections and presidential elections. I've been to three national Democratic conventions. The last one was '68 in Chicago. The one that I value the most, of course, was 1960 when the Kennedy-Johnson team was selected in Los Angeles. Been active in local politics. Politics in general.

W.D.V.: What elected offices have you held?

Sutton: Only the two. On the board of trustees of the Union Junior College district and state legislature.

J.B.: You were elected to the legislature in what year?

Sutton: '72.

J.B.: Am I correct that you're chairman of the black caucus?
How many black legislators are there in Texas?

Sutton: Yes. Well, there are nine now. There were eight of us during the last session.

J.B.: All in the house?

Sutton: All in the house. Impossible to get a black in the senate because the district that we did have, they cut into three. Barbara Jordon's district. They gave her the Congressional district and took the senate district away from us.

J.B.: Was that a quid pro quo type arrangement?

Sutton: I don't know. I wasn't in the legislature then. I really don't know.

J.B.: What have the changes in the role of black politics been during that time.

Sutton: I think blacks have become more sophisticated political-ly. Of course, when you get into black politics, you're getting into a very involved sort of a situation in that with blacks politics is a means of survival. The only difference is today I think blacks recognize certainly more widely their role in politics than they did let me say twenty-five years ago. Today we're sort of like, let me say, the Irish. Who, as you know, came over as indentured servants and, of course, rose through politics. The Fitzgeralds and so forth on to the Kennedies. As you see blacks being elected all over the country, especially in the South, you see that recognition. Blacks really consider politics as one

means by which we can get out of this lowly status that we've been assigned to throughout the years. So I think politics today represents more to the black people than it did even fifteen or twenty years back. I just attended a black caucus--attended a mini-convention. And of course the black caucus, when we were dissatisfied with at least one provision in the charter. It showed almost complete black unity on issues that effect the black people politically.

J.B.: How does the Texas legislative black caucus function? Do you meet regularly as a caucus?

Sutton: No, we didn't. You know we've only been a caucus for one session. In Texas we have biennial sessions. Of course this time it was a little different in that we had the constitutional convention to which the legislature sent its delegates to this convention. We were sort of a loosely knit type group. We hope to be more firmly united so far as structure is concerned. Of course I don't think that we can do very much more than we did in the last session. Because as I view it, the most that any black political caucus--be it state or Congressional--its biggest value is its sensitivity that it gives to that body. And I'm not talking about just black issues. I'm talking about issues that effect the poor generally. Issues that escape those who have not been through the struggle that black people have. Of course, black people, being poor, generally, understand problems and are very sensitive to those problems of the poor.

J.B.: Texas is unique among the southern states of the old confederacy in that not only is there a black minority but there's a Mexican-American minority which has certain similar problems and backgrounds,

stemming primarily from large numbers being in conditions of poverty, low income. Mexican-Americans we have spoken to say that the priorities among Mexican-Americans tend to be education, housing and jobs. In so far as issues are concerned, would those be the same priorities that blacks have?

Sutton: Yes, generally. Of course not necessarily in that order. Probably ours would be jobs first. Housing. Education. I think we differ on background. Background makes us differ when it comes to the matter of education. Certainly we feel a great need for education. But when we talk about education we're not talking about higher education necessarily or academic education entirely. We're talking about that education which equips one to get a job and to command a living. There was a time when we thought in terms of the professions as the apex of education among black people, but no longer. We have recognized the fact that now the job situation is such that. . . well, let us say that we have computers and we have sort of a mechanized society where we use machines and so forth. So maybe vocational and technical education is what we stress more than the professional type education. So that's why I would list them probably jobs, housing and education.

J.B.: Would there be a distinction in that between say a black perspective and a Mexican-American perspective? An emphasis on vocational and technical education. Is it your feeling that Mexican-Americans may tend to look at it differently.

Sutton: Yes. They tend to stress more on higher education and professions. That's my feeling. I argued with some of my brown brothers. We've been through that.

J.B.: How about kindergartens? Where does that fit on the scale of priorities in Texas?

Sutton: Among black people, you're saying. Now there again you have a difference in Mexican-American. Let me say this, I do not intend in any way to downgrade our brown brothers and sisters. Because certainly I have a feeling of them just as I do any other American. I think they have a tendency to deal more with education on kindergarten level than blacks in that they have a handicap of language, culture and so forth that we do not have. Now of course, we believe in kindergarten, but we have not stressed it nearly as much as you find among Mexican-Americans. Because they are talking about bi-lingual education. They're talking about overcoming not just language handicap but also cultural handicaps. We don't have that problem. We believe in the American educational system as it is. All we're asking for is equal educational opportunities. So let me say we don't stress kindergarten over elementary or secondary schools, if that's what I gather you mean.

J.B.: I wasn't so much stressing it over it as the fact that Texas has secondary and elementary schools, of course, but does not have full public kindergarten.

Sutton: From that aspect, naturally of course, we feel that we should have the kindergarten. But I was addressing myself to the Mexican-American as to why he stresses it. And we're for that. So it does not mean that we're not for the kindergarten as such.

J.B.: Is there any active formal or informal coalition between say the black and the brown caucus in the legislature?

Sutton: Yes, to some extent. I don't know how large the Mexican-

American caucus is. I know we have about eighteen with Spanish surnames in the legislature, in the house. How many belong to the caucus--I know all of them don't. All the blacks belong to the caucus but all of them don't. And those who do. . . we have good relations.

Carlos Truon, Ben ^{Perez} Riez in Houston . Most of the Mexican-Americans here. But unfortunately I don't think all of them belong to the Mexican-American caucus. ^[I'm not] telling you what their membership is, you know, but in talking with them we gather that they all don't belong to the caucus.

W.D.V.: Can we go back to what you said earlier. That as far as you're concerned politics really hasn't changed much in the last twenty-five years. I'd like to know what you mean by that, in terms of blacks or all Texas politics.

Sutton: Well, let's talk about reform, so-called reform. I can remember politics in the so-called boss ruled days. Even now you hear, when they are talking about, let us say, council-manager form of government, that we don't want to get back to the old boss rule type politics. Single member districts. They don't call them. . . they talk about aldermanic form of government, you know. That's their fight against single member districts today. Now what they call boss rule, like that, is no different from city councils who operate under a city manager form of government. If anything, it's more oppressive in that under the average city manager form of government--and most of the big cities in Texas have some form of councilmanic government--it's just as oppressive or more as under the so-called aldermanic form of government. Let's take it on the national level. They talk about boss rule on the national level. Last

time we saw the Democratic convention, in my way of thinking, was completely rulled by McGovern, even to the point of disregard to the women of I think North or South Carolina. In disregard to the blacks. In disregard to most of the liberal groups in this country. To get to the California delegation. Because that's where the votes were that was the turning point. And to say that McGovern offered reform within the Democratic party. . . . In effect, I saw no reform. I saw as much control. Now the control had changed hands. I'm not saying for the better. I'm not saying that it didn't admit more blacks, more women, more minorities in general--which I think is good. But at the same time, what it did, it brought in those minorities and those women who could be controlled. So actually there was no difference. Now view it on the state level. There's very, very little difference today as it was twenty-five, thirty years ago. I remember going to the state legislature to appear before committees on people's issues. What a problem we had. But having served in the legislature, and I've served on human resources committee--which most of the people's bills come through--I hear the same questions asked today that were asked twenty-five years ago. We look at the various cities. There's more blight in the cities than there was twenty-five years ago. There's more hunger. And politics controls all of that. It controls our very lives. So, for those reasons, I see no difference. Today you have a Rockefeller. Well, back then you had

W.D.V.: Why hasn't there been a change?

Sutton: Well, I think there hasn't been change because people are under control of the. . . . There's been no change in this country. The DuPonts, the Rockefellers, the Fords, the Mellons control the country

today as they did back there. No basic change.

W.D.V.: The same thing's true of Texas?

Sutton: More or less.

W.D.V.: Big wealth controls.

Sutton: . . . controls. More so.

J.B.: Do you have any insights from having been in the legislature and having a closer observation of power at work? What is the role of big money in Texas in determining political decisions?

Sutton: I gave a personal privilege speech which I would like to give you, during the convention. And in this speech I didn't have much time to talk about it, didn't go into detail, but I pointed out what vested interests had gotten into the constitution. They got everything they wanted. You had oil, and you had the railroad commission. You had the University of Texas system. You had all your delegated funds. The highway department. The judicial system, they got what they wanted. Everybody, all the special interests, got what they wanted. So, big money controls Texas, there's no doubt about it. Oil, of course, is the biggest thing in Texas. lobbyists in Austin. How many people's lobbyists do we have? Not very many. I think Common Cause is about the only one we've got that really has any strength.

J.B.: How effective is Common Cause in Texas?

Sutton: I think it's very effective. It's new, of course. But I think Common Cause, along with environmentalist groups such as Sierra Club and those groups. . . . I think for the length of time they've been in operation, I think they're very, very effective.

W.D.V.: Do you see things changing at all in the next ten years?

Sutton: You know, things can't get worse. They've got to get better. Yes, there will be some change. Texas. I'd like to broaden it a little bit. I'd like to talk about the entire South. I think there will be changes. I think a reasonable change will be that the blacks will help bring about this change in that year by year the legislature is going to have more and more blacks in the legislatures over the South. The same is true in Texas. We have several suits now before the Supreme Court. We're going to increase our numbers here. But you talk about states like Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, where you have these large black populations. Even Louisiana. Year by year the legislatures are going to become more black. And as they become more black, naturally there's a tendency toward enactment of more liberal legislation, more people oriented legislation. Certainly you're not going to have the racist-type legislation you've had in the past, neither the reactionary type legislation. So I think there will be a change, a change for the better. As more blacks, and minorities, and women are elected to the various state houses and city councils and commissioners courts throughout Texas and the South.

W.D.V.: Specifically in terms of Texas, the movement toward single member districts is going to accelerate this. Is that right?

Sutton: Yes, that what we think.

W.D.V.: That's what you meant by these suits?

Sutton: That's right. And only through single member districts. I went to the legislature because of single member districts. It's the only way blacks can be elected, except where you have--like Dallas, we had one elected at large. Two. One succeeded the other who was killed.

Because of the threat of it, we got one elected in Austin this past year, past election. But it's only through single member district. We don't have anybody in the senate because they cut that senate seat out. It's only going to be through single member districts. One man, one vote concept. Are we going to, in Texas, increase our numbers in the legislature.

W.D.V.: Among Texas blacks are there any recognized state-wide leaders who all blacks across the state can identify with?

Sutton: I don't know. I'm the wrong person to ask. I'm well known. I have friends all over the state. But only the people can tell you. People ask me, how do you relate to the young? How do you relate to the poor blacks, let us say? You know, I'm poor. My answer to that is, ask them.

W.D.V.: We just find that in most southern states there are really no recognized state-wide black leadership as such. There tend to be regional leaders.

Sutton: Probably so. I think that's more or less true. We're just not getting a real national . I looked at it in Kansas City. There wasn't much difference in it than there was in 1956 in Chicago at the first black caucus meeting I attended at a national Democratic convention. So I would agree that it's more or less regional.

J.B.: What role does Barbara Jordan have? Does she have any role beyond Houston, within the black community politically?

Sutton: I've known Barbara ever since she's been in politics.

But to answer your question, I think now Barbara has become. . . I think most blacks have heard of her. Since the Judiciary hearings on the Nixon affair, I think that she became certainly more widely known in Texas, as she did all over the country. The media has been exceptionally kind to Barbara.

J.B.: Does she play any leadership role in Texas within the black community outside of Houston, on any state-wide basis?

Sutton: Well, she hasn't had much chance to. Barbara's only been in the Congress one term. I don't think she's spoken here. I guess she's spoken in Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth. Some other cities I guess. But not the type role, I think, that you're talking about. And again I say that I would agree that unfortunately we are sort of localized or regionalized. There's a reason for it.

J.B.: Is there any sort of state wide association of elected black officials in Texas?

Sutton: No. We're getting ready to organize one, legislative black caucus is thinking about that. There is none. All elected school board, mayors. . . .

J.B.: Members of Congress, too, I would presume.

Sutton: Yes. In fact we've discussed that with Barbara. Now. To call a meeting of all black elected officials. Judges. . . .

J.B.: Do you anticipate this will be successful?

Sutton: Yes.

J.B.: Are you familiar with the Georgia association?

Sutton: No.

W.D.V.: You think this will be organized next year?

Sutton: Yes. In fact I'm almost sure it will be. It's got to be.

J.B.: What sort of communication do you have with the Congressional black caucus? In other states, frequently they will use locally elected black officials, communicated through the Congressional black caucus, to give input to white Congressional representatives from their areas in regard to specific legislation before Congress. For example, in Georgia and South Carolina, local black elected officials are contacted through the Congressional black caucus in regard to getting support of local Congressmen for specific legislation in Congress.

Sutton: We don't have that type of communication. I know all the members of the black caucus. A number of them I know very, very personally because I've been in politics. But we do not have that type communication. white Congressmen will tell me. . . "I saw Charlie ^{Rangle}~~Wrangle~~" or somebody.

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--percent of the blacks. has the other ten percent. Maybe we've got one half of one percent in the district. So you see, we don't have that deal with us personally. If that answers your question.

J.B.: I was wondering about elsewhere in Texas.

Sutton: I don't think so. Let me say this, I think you have more patronizing-type white Congressperson--or Congressmen so far, aren't they, from Texas? I'm not too sure that those down in east Texas, or even central Texas, would want to go through a black Congressman. I think they feel they can do it themselves. So paternalistic type Con-

gressmen come from Texas.

W.D.V.: Do you find blacks out of your legislative district contacting you in the state house?

Sutton: Yes. Let me say, that's true with all of us. After all, there are only eight of us. And four from Houston. Represent only three cities. *In this sense,* Texas is no different from any other state in the Union. The biggest population in the penitentiaries is black. When we went, we began to investigate the prison system. And word gets around. people interested in us. Never had anything like that before. So we get six or seven letters, or as many as ten a day, during the session. My mail will probably average four a day throughout the rest of the year. They come from parents of people who are in the penitentiary. They come from wives, they come from children. So we are contacted. They know we're in the legislature. They have so-called representation. Somebody from their district. Most of them are rather large. But they've never done anything for them and they don't feel they're going to do anything now. So they contact us.

W.D.V.: Are you able to do something?

Sutton: Yes.

W.D.V.: Isn't that a change in Texas politics for blacks?

Sutton: Yes, it has been.

J.B.: Do you do something for them directly, or do you go back through their representative?

Sutton: No, we do it directly. We do it directly because we know that their representative is not tuned to their needs. I don't be-

lieve he does it for whites

No reflection on

him so far as his

the prison set up. They

don't have the same feeling that we do. For example, I got a letter from an inmate in the penitentiary and he tells me that he has a twelve year sentence and has served ten years. After I look at it *[and go]* over his file, I write a letter and have it hand carried over to the board of pardon and parole. And three days later I get a letter from him thanking me. He's in Houston. And there are so many. . . . I mention that because that's not an extreme thing.

J.B.: That has actually happened?

Sutton: Yes. And there are so many they never come up for parole.

W.D.V.: Just administrative oversight or deliberate discrimination?

Sutton: Deliberate. Evidently deliberate. For example, I've been writing letters to board of pardon and parole, I don't know, fifteen years at least. Offering jobs, in some instances, to those who are incarcerated, up for parole. When they write me, these same people, still in the penitentiary. . . . When I pull their files I find that there's no letter from me. Of course, not to say that the money these people have paid lawyers. And I find in their files no communication whatsoever from attorneys who have been taking their money. That sort of thing. So I couldn't say it's administrative oversight.

W.D.V.: Before 1972 were there many blacks in the legislature?

Sutton: Two.

W.D.V.: So the big increase was 1973.

J.B.: That came with single member districts.

Sutton: That came single member districts. You had one in Houston because Houston was the only city that had a single member district. Why I don't know, but they only had one. But with the court case, when they had to redistrict, we got four out of Houston. Three out of Dallas.

W.D.V.: Were you treated in the legislature this past term the way you thought you would be, or the way you thought you'd be perceived by the rest of the legislators? You must have had a certain set of notions or perceptions about how it would be like in Austin as a black from this district for the first time.

Sutton: Let me say, I wasn't concerned as to whether I'd be liked or not. I didn't really consider myself a freshman. As I said, I've appeared before the legislative committees. I remember back there in 1955 and '57, I sat in the gallery and heard all the hate bills passed in the state house in Austin. I heard the word nigger all over the floor. And I've heard it up until the sixties, even. So I didn't consider myself a freshman. I was going to address myself to the issues of the day. If they liked it, well and good. If they didn't, it really didn't matter. I've been in politics long enough to know that when there are eight of us, vote-wise, offered very, very little in solving any of these problems. I felt that the main thing to do was to raise the issues. One of the things that the reactionaries do not want, or the power structure, is the light of day. They can't stand the light of day. I understood that. And I had no problem. In fact the first bill that I passed was an adoption bill. That bill changed the law by which,

in Texas, only whites could adopt white children, only blacks could adopt black children. That was the first bill I passed. That bill passed with one dissenting vote. It was unconstitutional, of course. They knew it, but it was still on the books. But I mention that to show you that I was not trying to dodge any issues. Let me say, I knew that they were not going to take me as a man equal to them. They still don't. They won't when I leave the legislature. I don't kid myself.

W.D.V.: How about in terms of committee assignments, where your bills were assigned?

Sutton: Yes, we had no problems there. We had an agreement.

W.D.V.: The rest of the blacks feel that way?

Sutton: Yes. We had an agreement with the speaker that we would be spread over most of the important committees. And we were. So we had no complaint whatsoever on committee assignments. Actually, we didn't have too much trouble getting our bills out of committee. And we had a run with them on the floor. I don't believe many of us have much quarrel.

J.B.: Mr. Sutton, let me ask you about the role of the black caucus in the constitutional convention. Let me tell you what my understanding is, and tell me if I am correct. The proposed constitution was voted down by three votes and that all eight members of the black caucus voted against the constitution. The press accounted hinged upon primarily the inclusion of the right to work provision in the constitution. Is that correct? I presume there are more subtleties involved than that. Or is that basically it.

Sutton: Unfortunately, basically what you've read is correct.

I was one, and I think representative Thompson from Houston was the other one, who opposed it purely on the document. The rest of them, of course, opposed it on the right to work issue. I saw it as an anti-black constitution. As I say, I'm going to give you one--if I can find it--of my personal privilege speech.

J.B.: I'd like very much to have that.

Sutton: In there I point out the document itself was no good. In fact the last day of the convention, I talked about the mountain labored and brought forth a mouse. I called this document a mouse. That's all it was.

J.B.: You're saying basically it was a document that protected vested interests and wealth.

Sutton: That's right, that's what I held against it. Oil, yes. Plus the fact that there was no inclusion in this constitution--and the speaker and the powers that be within the convention kept it out--of protection of human rights. Couldn't even get the language of the '64 civil rights act into the basic document.

J.B.: An attempt was made and failed, is that correct?

Sutton: Yes, several times.

J.B.: Was there any attempt to put in something, say, such as right to council?

Sutton: Yes, we tried that in the judicial article and it failed.

WDV: How about a human rights commission?

Sutton: Everything. We tried everything. We tried a human rights commission.

J.B.: The reason I ask that is the new Louisiana constitution has a very strong provision in that field, including constitutional guarantee of the right to council. And they had a black legislator heading up that particular article. And it passed in popular referendum in large part because it got an overwhelming black vote. Business community generally opposed that constitution in Louisiana.

Sutton: I think blacks are going to have to oppose the rewriting of any constitution that does not have a strong--[Interruption]. Unless there is strong protection within any new constitution--and I know I said this in New York when I was speaking to a club one of my brothers belong to, a political club--telling those people that those who had relatives and friends in the South to beware of all these new constitutions, especially in the South, that don't have strong provisions by which civil rights are protected. Because of the fact that it was our last constitution that brought about segregation laws. And any new constitution can bring about similar laws, even though they know that these laws eventually will be declared unconstitutional. There's nothing to keep them from coming forth with them. I've had experience in these civil rights cases. Being turned down on the district level. Having to go all through the gauntlet of the state courts to the state supreme court. And maybe being turned down on federal district level and having to go through that again. Anyway, you've got to maybe ten years, even though they know that it's unconstitutional. There's nothing that's going to prevent them, under a new constitution, to enact segregation laws or similar laws.

W.D.V.: Are you saying you don't agree with those who firmly state that race is no longer important in Texas politics?

Sutton: No. The fact that you must have single member districts means that race is an issue. I mean if I can't run at large. . . I'm not sure that I can win a senate seat in my district. Even though we are actually the deciding vote as to who is to become senator.

members of the legislative district. I doubt that I could win a senate seat in this particular district.

W.D.V.: So you don't think it's diminishing as an issue.

Sutton: I think it has to diminish. But you know, let's recognize the fact that we're in a computer age when we've been to the moon. And we've still got machines up there going to these other planets. So I think we've got to think in terms of today. Back to the constitution, another objection of mine was that it didn't bridge the gap from 1876 until 1974. I think anybody can say that yes, things have improved. But have they improved as everything else has improved? I think not.

W.D.V.: I'd like to ask you a little about black political strategy. We interviewed mayor Johnny Ford in Tuskegee, Alabama, who at that point was endorsing George Wallace. How did that strike you?

Sutton: Well, I couldn't see it. I could understand it.

W.D.V.: Just as a matter of strategy.

Sutton: Well, I do not know the political situation in Alabama. I don't know that I can even comment on it. But from a black perspective, looking at it from Texas, I could not take the same position that he took

in Texas. I would not.

W.D.V.: Why not?

Sutton: I see no change in Wallace. The only way I could speak for Wallace I'd have to see some of the things he's done, not what he says or intimates.

W.D.V.: Ford argues that by reaching this kind of rapport or detente with Wallace that he got things for his community from the state government.

Sutton: Maybe he did. I'm not going to argue that. I don't know. He didn't get very much, I don't think, and maybe the fact that he got was good. Of course we've got to recognize the fact there have been periods in our lives when not going backward was progress. That may be what is true with Ford and Tuskegee situation. I was basing what I was saying upon my having met Ford. He and I are members of the same fraternity. And then talking with other blacks from Alabama, who do not take that same position.

W.D.V.: You don't think that's a workable political strategy for blacks?

Sutton: No I think it's got to be more than that. Got to be more basic than that.

J.B.: Do you think it had the effect of letting Wallace off too easily? That's the fallacy of the strategy?

Sutton: Yes. Yes it is. You see, I take the position I'm really not responsible for my lot. I must take what is given to me. But I'm not going for anything less than the whole loaf. It's been my experience

that if you go for a half loaf you get slices; if you go for slices, you get crumbs. I go for the whole loaf. If all I can get is the slices, it's not my fault. But I certainly feel that it's poor strategy when we let any politician--and whose fate depends upon our vote to a great extent--off the hook. As a people, we've got to demand our rights and go for all our rights. I don't think that black people can compromise. I think compromise certainly infers that all things are equal and you're dealing across the table as equals. But that isn't true when blacks deal with the power structure. We are dealing at a lower level and we must understand that. And when we get in, I don't think we're compromising, I think we're selling out. I think we deal as far as we can deal. I don't think we accept this and say all right. I think we go on to deal another day.

J.B.: How do you evaluate Senator Bentsen? Both as a Senator and as a potential president.

Sutton: I think Bentsen is an intellectual. I understand he's a wealthy man. I don't like his position on busing. I don't like his position on oil depletion allowance. I liked his position certainly in the latter stages of Vietnam. Don't know that I know the Senator too well. I was not for him in the primary when he ran against Yarborough. I was with Yarborough, naturally. I think he has a problem of name identification. You're talking about as he relates to blacks in this country and in Texas, isn't that what you're gearing your question to? I think, just like my brother and I were discussing coming down on the plan from Kansas City. He was going to Austin to speak to the NAACP. You

know who my brother is? Ever heard of my brother?

J.B.: Percy Sutton.

Sutton: Yeah. Well, he had met Bentsen and his evaluation of him was that, in a certain manner, Bentsen is not yet ready to speak to black roots. I'm going to have some blacks to meet Bentsen here in the next couple of weeks. And those are some of the things we're going to discuss with him. His position on black issues, on issues that effect black people. I don't think he really recognizes the fact that the oil depletion allowance means anything to blacks. Probably doesn't, in Texas. But over the country--I'm talking about the black politicians now--it really means something to them. The issue of busing is a very sensitive issue. I'm not talking about the way he feels about it. It's one that needs to be addressed forthrightly. And he has not addressed himself that way.

W.D.V.: How do you evaluate Gov. Briscoe? Both as a legislator now and as a black.

Sutton: I think that Governor Briscoe is the first program orientated governor we've ever had. I'm talking about people's programs. Which was a pleasant surprise to me. I was not for Briscoe the first time. I was for him the second time [against] Sissy Farenthold. I was for Sissy the first time. I was with him the second time. He was governor, he was going to win, and Sissy had no real program for black people, any people. I think she had an issue the first time but I didn't see any the second time. I'm a politician. I don't lose sight of the fact that he's a very wealthy man and has vested interests. But I do

believe that he's probably more honest, most forthright, one of the poorest politicians in the accepted description of the word politician. I think that he has a weak staff in that they don't have experience, that they guide him certainly not in his best interests. But I think that as a legislator he's one of the best governors that one could work with. We have no problem whatsoever in seeing him. We differ on issues. He understands it. For example, the death penalty. He knew better than to ask us to be for the death penalty. His law and order program, he knows we are against it. He doesn't push in that area at all. I think that as a southern governor and as one who hasn't had too much experience in politics, if he gets the right people around him, he is going to be an effective governor. Especially with a four year term. And I hope he wants it for another four years.

W.D.V.: --Preston Smith, John Connally and Daniel and Shivers from a black perspective. That pretty well covers the twenty-five year span.

Sutton: Shivers, Daniel, Connally and Smith and then Briscoe. I knew them all. Shivers was, and is, a reactionary politician. He got a very, very low vote in the black community. Let me say, up to Briscoe, they ran poorly in the black community. Every governor from Shivers on through Briscoe. Now this second time, Briscoe did well in the black communities. But there really was no difference in them. I think some of them stood out for some of the special things they did against us. For example, Price Daniel. . . . I talked about those hate bills that were passed here where it made it unlawful to belong, in effect, to the

NAACP and various other groups. He passed specific legislation against us. Of course, some of these others did, too. But most of the real discriminatory laws were passed even before their time. Unless you say that John Connally did start the trend toward blacks on boards and commissions. He was really the first governor who gave us representation to any extent. Smith followed, not much more representation than Connally gave us. Briscoe, one of his weaknesses is appointment of blacks. And that's an area in which we are going to address ourselves with the governor during this next session. The black caucus is. In that we feel that there should be--certainly with three appointments coming up on the University of Texas board of regents, there should be one brown and one black of those three appointments. The same is true of the Texas A&M system. And that we should have black representation on all of the major boards and commissions throughout this state. Some of them are going to have to be increased. I don't know whether you know. In Texas you have any number of three man--

[End of side of tape. Proceed to next tape.]

--he made them white. By law. See, they were classified as colored. Most Mexican-Americans disagree with me. I never use the word Anglo because I consider it a racist word.

WDV: But all the Mexican-Americans we talk to use the word.

Sutton: I know it. around, either, most of them that you talk with, I don't think.

W.D.V.: What do you call them?

Sutton: I call them Mexican-Americans. Chicanos. The young, I

know they want to be called Chicanos.

W.D.V.: Not brown.

Sutton: Browns, too, yes. I think all of those are acceptable to them depending on what group you're dealing with. The young like the word Chicano. Most of the young. Nothing's literal, you know.

was the man who made them white. And the reason for it was an agreement they had with Mexico to use slave labor from Mexico. They had this agreement with the Mexican government to make all Mexican Americans--called them Latin-Americans in that day. The reason I say that Anglo is a racist word. I never heard of that word. It's probably in the dictionary but it certainly wasn't in general use, certainly not in Texas, until Viva Justa made them white. They had to distinguish between the whites. So they called these newly created whites, Latin Americans. They were like we. We didn't like to be called black, for good reasons. They didn't like to be called Mexicans, back then. But they, like we, have changed. So I never use the term Anglo because to me it's a racist word and I'm not racist. I feel very, very deeply against racism.

W.D.V.: Can you foresee at all in the future the election to a statewide office of a black?

Sutton: I think it will come on a national level first. I think we'll have a black vice president.

W.D.V.: Before you'll have a state-wide black here in Texas.

Sutton: That's right. I think the trend is toward it. I think predominantly in California. Brown, in Colorado, the lieutenant governor.

I think the trend has started that way and we'll have lieutenant governors. Eventually we'll have a governor or two over the country. Just as we have mayors of big cities now. We hope to have a black mayor of New York City sometime in the near future. I think it will come that way. I think first we might have--and I think we're going slowly toward it--I think an Mexican-American on a judicial level will have it before we do. Because they've got them on district levels and also appellate level. I think they'll get it. But we'll probably get it before they do state-wide office like lieutenant governor or attorney general. I think it will come on a national level before we get it in Texas.

J.B.: Getting back to Bentsen, how do you feel about the type of campaign he waged in 1970? Against Yarborough.

Sutton: I wasn't with him. I think he won it with money. I'm almost sure he did. Plus the fact that Yarborough did not campaign as he should have. I think he spent, and maybe rightfully so, his time at Congress. Didn't come down very much. took their poll and they saw there was a possibility of beating Yarborough and they put the money in it. And they beat him. I think it was just that simple. I don't think it was any low level campaign, necessarily, that defeated Yarborough. I think it was money and the fact that either Yarborough didn't get the money, certainly he didn't campaign as he had in previous years. But nationally, I think as a presidential candidate, he has a long ways to go. Name identification. I think that's his big problem. He talks about him being head of the Congressional candidates committee,

and speaking all over the country. But who's he speaking to? A few politicians. Some published in the paper. But I don't think that's enough. I don't think enough people in Texas know him. He's only been there two years. I think they will get to know him. But he has a long ways to go. I think he has a good chance for the vice presidency.

J.B.: How do you evaluate Yarborough? Now and looking back on his career as Senator.

Sutton: I think he had one of the better records on people's issues of any Senator in the South. I think to some extent he was like Kefauver and this man down in Florida. Pepper. That type.

J.B.: How do you evaluate Lyndon Johnson?

Sutton: I think Lyndon was one of those who comes along very, very rarely. I think he was a master politician. And the way I distinguish between a master politician and an ordinary one is that the master sees trends, the other one doesn't. And the master politician has caught on to it and he's gone before the other one realizes the trend is there. You can take Lyndon Johnson and civil rights. civil rights. I think he did more for civil rights than any. . . . I think there's no denying, than any president we've ever had. I knew him. Even before he was a Congressman. I knew him when he was with the NYA under Roosevelt. I knew him when he was orientated. I also knew him when he was elected to Congress. I knew him when he was elected to the Senate. I saw a big change in him when he went to the Senate. And then I saw this big change in him when, out in California, he accepted the post with Kennedy to run as vice president. I saw the change as vice president.

And certainly as president. I have a high regard for him in the field of civil rights. I consider that he was a good politician. I think he was maybe next to Roosevelt among the best politicians the Democratic party has produced. He was very powerful. He understood politics, and as I said, I think he saw trends. He was always ahead of other politicians. I think he enriched himself along the way, which is all right. His business. How he did it, of course I don't know. Investments and that sort of thing. He was a very successful politician. I think that his feelings towards civil rights were genuine at the time that he was for civil rights.

J.B.: How do you assess his lasting impact on Texas politics and on southern politics?

Sutton: You mean as president or in his retirement?

J.B.: In his entire political career.

Sutton: I think that was his power base. I think that's what made Kennedy, even over the objections of Robert Kennedy selected him. Because of the power he would have, in Texas. I think that's going to be a consideration for Bentsen and the vice presidency. Texas is, I think, fifth in votes. And Lyndon had good southern connections. I think he changed the South somewhat. I can never forget Lyndon. . . . I was in the Texas delegation ^(at the 1960 convention) and I can remember that morning with Sam Rayburn and Lyndon addressing our delegation. He told us that he was going as vice president on the ticket with Kennedy. The Texas delegation was enraged. The majority of them. I think he put it very forthrightly. He said "How else can a southerner become president?"

You see what happened to me two days ago." He was talking about the vote against Kennedy. And he said "this is the only way to do it." They said "Civil rights, too?" He said yes, civil rights, too. That's the way he handled the Texas delegation. I was still not sold on Lyndon. I knew him, as I said, and very well, I thought. And I was still, even though I heard him debate Kennedy on the issue of civil rights in Los Angeles--and he was far and away ahead of Kennedy--I still was not convinced. I followed Lyndon Johnson to the Florida delegation and the Georgia delegation. He was there appealing to them for their support. And they raised all sorts of questions. Same questions raised by the Texas delegation. He had control of the Texas delegation. They talked about going home but he knew they weren't going home. He controlled too much here in Texas. Especially the people who were with that delegation. Great number of them elected at large and hand picked by him. But I heard him talk to this Florida and Georgia delegation. And he said essentially the same thing. He talked to both delegations. When they came to the area of civil rights, he said--he talked about the emerging nations of Africa--"No longer can we deal under the table. We've got to deal across the table. We've got to talk man to man and the area of civil rights is something that's real. It's here. We must address ourselves to it." He was very forthright in his stand with Kennedy and with the platform as adopted at that convention. But still that did not quiet neither the Florida nor the Georgia delegation. I remember what he said to the Florida delegation. And he said essentially the same thing to the Georgia delegation. I don't know what they wanted, the Georgia delegation. But finally he said "you wanted" some dam, I don't

what dam it was. He said "We are about to get that dam for you. Defeat me if you will. But don't forget that if you defeat me, Mr. Sam will still be speaker of the House and I'll be the majority leader." He shut them up, too. He said the same thing to the Georgia delegation. I say that to show what type politician he was. He was a very powerful politician. He knew where the power was. He used the power. He was one of the politicians who knew what power was and how to use it. So I think that he had great input in the South and certainly in Texas. He controlled everything in Texas. What is Texas without oil? He made a soft bed for all the people. He was for civil rights, yes, but he was also for oil. When the came into south Texas in the agriculture field, citrus farms and so forth, he didn't bother them. And displaced the small farmer, even the big farmer, in Texas. He protected them. He controlled most of the cable television in Texas. He controlled radio. He controlled a whole lot of things in Texas. With the type of control he had, he didn't have any trouble with this state.

J.B.: But you viewed his commitment to civil rights as genuine?

Sutton: Yes, in light of the fact that he was a politician. I'm trying to get that over. I knew him when he taught school, as I said. Mexican school down here. And I was very impressed with him when he was in the NYA under Roosevelt. I remember Williams, who was regional director over Lyndon . I think that he had real concern for the poor. Real concern. I think after he got into the Senate he decided that he had to make a little money. I think once he got in position--I heard Lyndon say to groups time after time

groups as he traveled and campaigned. "Free me."

He was talking about "now I have to be elected on this Texas basis." I don't know really whether it was his excuse or what it was, but that's what he told black people as he traveled, especially in the North.

J.B.: Is this '60 or '64?

Sutton: '60. He did the same thing. Of course, he was going to continue. See, he's already gone through. . . . they were more or less with him in '64.

J.B.: How do you assess the impact of his 1964 civil rights act and the 1965 voting rights act in southern politics?

Sutton: Well, it's pretty hard to separate them, but certainly, from what is visible, the voting rights act is the greater. But there again, I think one builds upon the other. The vote is what we consider the turning point in that we have all these blacks in the various legislatures. We have them on local, district, county levels. So I would say the voting.

J.B.: Is that a significant change in twenty-five years? The fact that you have blacks in legislatures and other areas.

Sutton: Oh, I think it's a significant change in that it's building on the future. I think what I said about what we^{are} in Texas house it's the same, it's true in just about any state. Maryland has the largest number of blacks. But still, in numbers, we're small, even in Maryland. I don't know what the size of the Maryland house is. Most houses are large. Of course, you know, we have roadblocks in Texas. And that's another reason I voted against the document. We have a 150 member house. Georgia has 180. We're twice as large as Georgia. Georgia has a 56 member senate. We have a 31 member senate. We have

one of the smallest senates, certainly population-wise, in the country. There's a reason for that, of course.

J.B.: What is the reason for that?

Sutton: It keeps representation down.

J.B.: You're suggesting that it makes control easier by the financial interests.

Sutton: That's right. It makes control easier. We'll have less, even if we have single member districts, you see. Especially with single member districts, if you increase the senate, increase the house, we'll have more.

J.B.: Was an effort made to increase the size of the legislature?

Sutton: Yes, both houses. We wanted 60 and 180. That came out of legislative committee. To 60 in the senate and 180, 191 in the house. But it was defeated.

W.D.V.: Is there anything else that you wanted to tell us that we didn't ask?

Sutton: No, I think we've about covered the waterfront, at least all that I know.

[Interruption.]

J.B.: Your mother was a Vassar graduate and your father was a school principal.

Sutton: Yes. My mother was from Louisiana, New Orleans. She was sent to. . . she was a light and sent to Vassar. She came to San Antonio with her brother, who was a minister, and she met my father and married. There were fifteen of us. Yes. Three of us in politics. I have a brother who's on the supreme court in New York.

[Interruption.]

Absolutely. I don't know to be too differently, either. I had a tough way. Business-wise I had it tough. Because of my feelings toward people. I've been considered a liberal. Called a communist. Called everything, you know. I was never a power structure person even though I do have, I would think, *[some respect]* with business elements here. I think I understand them; I think they understand me. Downtown is my district. I have the most cosmopolitan district probably in the state. I have the very poor and I have the country clubs in my district. All the downtown area. Major bank area, major hotels. I carry the legislation for downtown. I have Fort Sam Houston in my district. I have a very affluent section of Republicans. The retired generals and colonels and so forth.

W.D.V.: You also have the Alamo, don't you?

Sutton: Yes I have the Alamo. I have the Hemisphere Plaza and all that in my district.

J.B.: Are you older than your other two brothers in politics?

Sutton: Oh yes. Much older. Percy's a baby of ^{fifty}~~fifteen~~. That's why I was so late getting into the legislature. I'm 65. I wouldn't have run except that they asked me to run. I'm glad I *[got the chance]* I don't like to brag about coming from *[the background]* Abraham Lincoln, most of them came from a log cabin. I didn't come from that type of background. My father was rich, probably. I know he was. He made more money than anybody then blacks. Because of the fact that he got the same as white principals got.

J.B.: Interesting thing though. I think most studies have shown

that blacks with higher levels of education tend to have smaller families, which in your family certainly is not true. Why did your parents decide on having such a large family?

Sutton: I never asked them. My mother had child after child. Most of us a year and some difference in age. Of course my father was an ex-slave. I guess he believed in the old tradition. . . . I think you have to understand this, too. My parents were not what we would call the upper level in thinking. We were never taught that we were better than the other children. Maybe we were fortunate, but not better. And I remember, I went to a black school in Ohio, ^{Wilberforce.} ~~with the force.~~ They taught us there that we were better than other blacks. I never got that at home. My father's friends were, in the main, so-called ordinary people. We had a farm out of town here and we spent the summers out there. We picked cotton. Father taught us to work and that sort of thing. So we didn't have the same type of family life that the average-- when you take Julian Bond, friend whom I know fairly well. Same type of background. But he different. I think if any of us have had success in politics I think it's the training we got at home. I will never forget one thing that my father told me. In those days, principals in schools were elected, yearly. And of course, as I said, being there is the best job in town. There were always people who wanted this job. But my father told me "Son, the reason I keep this job is not because of what Dr so and so thinks of me. But it's the chauffeurs, the yard men, the maids, the cooks who are working in the homes of these school board members. When I ask Professor Sutton, they are the ones who give me the recommendation, and not these other groups." What he

was telling me was that the base is on the so-called common black. I think all of us have built that way. I think that's why they came to me and asked me to run for the legislature, at my age. And not so younger a person. Was because of that.

J.B.: You say they came. Who did come? Who asked you?

Sutton: The political community, the personal community, the so-called middle class. Blacks primarily. Really, ninety percent blacks. Even though my district is not. . . it's only 43 percent black. But I think as long as I'm here it will be a black district.

a younger
black or a less known black. 55 percent white. I think I changed it a little bit.

[End of interview.]