

★ TEXAS Legends

Barbara C. Jordan

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Barbara Jordan's career in Texas politics represents both personal and institutional victories. Jordan graduated from Boston University Law School. Her first two efforts at winning a seat in the Texas House of Representatives were foiled by a system that chose the twelve members of the House from Harris County at large through a countywide vote that diluted the political strength of minorities. Under this system, even though about 20 percent of Houstonians were African American, none of Harris County's representatives were black. However, the *Baker v. Carr* (1962) and *Reynolds v. Sims*

(1964) U.S. Supreme Court decisions required that members of the state legislature had to be elected from districts that were roughly equal in population, thus putting an end to the at-large system. Helped by the newly drawn single-member districts (SMDs) mandated by the Court's decisions and by the removal of the poll tax as a barrier to voting, Jordan was elected to the Texas Senate in 1966 and became the first woman to serve in the Texas Senate and the first African American to serve since 1881.

Initially, Jordan faced insults from some legislators, who called her "Mammy"

or "the washerwoman" behind her back.¹ However, Jordan's intelligence and political skills won over many of her fellow legislators, and the Texas Senate unanimously elected her as president pro tempore in 1972. Later that same year, Jordan became the first black woman from the South to win election to the U.S. House of Representatives.

While in the U.S. Congress, Jordan became an important player in the impeachment of President Richard Nixon, delivering a speech in which she declared, "My faith in the Constitution is whole; it is complete; it is total. And I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction, of the Constitution." In 1976, she became the first African American woman to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention, delivering what many observers consider one of the best speeches given at a party convention.

While much of what Barbara Jordan accomplished resulted from her character and intelligence, her political career would not have been possible without the Supreme Court opening the door to more representative legislative bodies through its redistricting decisions that protected the representation of minorities.

i. James L. Haley, *Passionate Nation: The Epic History of Texas* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 545.