



Walter R. Tucker III

1957–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1993–1995
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

Hailing from a Southern California political dynasty, the well-educated and ambitious Walter R. Tucker III began his career in elected office by taking his father's seat as the youngest mayor of Compton, California. He subsequently defeated an incumbent's daughter for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Tucker arrived in Washington in 1993 with the goal of "bring[ing] positive attention to Compton," a city that had recently been wracked by destructive race riots.¹

Born May 28, 1957, Tucker was one of four children in a prominent political family in Compton, California. His father, Walter R. Tucker II, worked as a dentist who entered politics in 1967, when he won election to the Compton school board. He was eventually elected mayor of Compton. Tucker's mother, Martha, was a real estate agent and writer. The Tucker family was often referred to as the "Kennedys of Compton" because of its political power. Tucker graduated from Compton High School in 1974. He attended Princeton University from 1974 to 1976 before returning home to finish his studies at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles in 1978. Tucker went on to earn his J.D. at Georgetown University Law School in Washington, DC, in 1981, after which he returned to Compton to practice law. Tucker served as deputy district attorney for Los Angeles County from 1984 to 1986.² He also earned a certificate of ordination from the School of the Word and practiced as an associate minister of the Bread of Life Christian Center in Carson. Tucker's wife, Robin, and their two children—Walter IV and Autumn—lived with the extended Tucker family in a sprawling home near Compton city hall.

Tucker entered elective politics when his father died of cancer in his third term as Compton's mayor in 1991. Tucker ran to succeed him and, on April 16, 1991, became Compton's youngest mayor. Tucker's

mayoral tenure focused on economic improvement in the impoverished city. Once a bustling economic center—former President George H. W. Bush had a home in the city in the late 1940s—Compton experienced an economic downturn starting when race riots broke out in 1965. High poverty, crime, and gang violence had since plagued much of the city.³

In 1992, six-term U.S. Representative Mervyn Dymally announced his retirement. Dymally represented a swath of the low-income neighborhoods in southwest Los Angeles, including Compton. African Americans made up 34 percent of the district, and Hispanics made up another 40 percent of the electorate.⁴ Dymally endorsed his daughter, Lynn—a member of the Compton school board—to succeed him. However, Tucker emerged as the strongest of three challengers who vigorously opposed Lynn Dymally in the Democratic primary.⁵ The campaign took a unique twist nearly one month before the primary, in May 1992, when a Los Angeles jury's verdict in favor of four police officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King sparked a series of race riots in the city. Compton suffered an estimated \$100 million in damage; nearly 200 buildings were vandalized, and more than 130 separate arson fires were reported.⁶ As mayor, Tucker quickly took charge in the wake of the riots. Images of Tucker touring the city with black activist Reverend Jesse Jackson were shown on national television. Tucker won the nomination with 39 percent over Dymally's 37 percent. Carson City councilwoman Vera Roble DeWitt took 11 percent, with two other candidates splitting 12 percent.⁷ Tucker easily won the general election in the overwhelmingly liberal district, with 86 percent of the vote.⁸

Assigned to the Public Works and Transportation and Small Business committees, Tucker emerged as a labor-friendly Representative with a liberal voting record. He



backed tax-exempt funding to construct the Alameda Corridor, a truck and rail line that would expedite the shipment of cargo from the port of Los Angeles inland through the congested city.⁹ Despite heavy lobbying, Tucker made a rare break from President William J. (Bill) Clinton's administration by voting against the North American Free Trade Agreement, fearing the loss of low-wage jobs in the Los Angeles area. Tucker focused primarily on the task of alleviating unemployment and poverty in a district with chronic unemployment problems. He was credited with securing \$5.9 million in extra police funds for southern California.¹⁰ He also submitted legislation designating the week of February 14 as a period for people to perform kind deeds without expecting anything in return.¹¹

In March 1994, federal prosecutors revealed that Tucker and a member of the Compton city council were the subjects of a federal bribery investigation. "I unequivocally and categorically deny all charges that have been brought against me," Tucker stated upon his indictment. "I have complete faith in God, who is my shield and my defense. I will not allow this matter to impede on the important work that I am doing in the U.S. Congress."¹² On August 22, he officially pled "not guilty" to 10 counts in a federal district court in Los Angeles. Tucker accused the Federal Bureau of Investigation and federal prosecutors of targeting him because he was a black official. Upon his arraignment, supporters rallied on the courthouse steps, holding signs reading "Tucker Is Innocent—Witch Hunt" and "Stop Racism 1994. Leave Tucker Alone."¹³

In the June 1994 Democratic primary Tucker trounced his challenger, local businessman Lew Prulitsky with 84 percent of the vote. Libertarian Guy Wilson, a merchant seaman, was Tucker's only general election challenger for his 1994 re-election campaign. Though Wilson had not planned on running a serious campaign, Tucker's indictment after the primary boosted his prospects. Yet

Wilson's fringe beliefs—he claimed his first official act, if elected, would be to introduce legislation repealing the 16th Amendment, which established a federal income tax—limited his ability to run as a serious candidate.¹⁴ Tucker was re-elected with 77 percent of the vote.¹⁵ However, at Tucker's ongoing trial, the prosecution presented overwhelming evidence including video and audio tapes of Tucker demanding cash in exchange for public projects.¹⁶ Jurors deliberated for two weeks before convicting Tucker on seven counts of extortion and two counts of tax evasion on December 8, 1995. Holding his Bible outside the Los Angeles courtroom, Tucker maintained his innocence: "I believe the jury made the wrong decision. I know what happened in these circumstances. The government knows what happened. It was entrapment."¹⁷ Tucker resigned from Congress on December 15, 1995.¹⁸ On April 17, 1996, a district court judge sentenced him to 27 months in prison—less than the recommended 30 to 57 months, partially because the citizens of Compton wrote more than 200 letters in Tucker's support.¹⁹ Tucker was also responsible for paying \$30,000 in restitution upon his release.²⁰

Shortly after his resignation, Tucker endorsed his wife, Robin, to fill his vacancy in a special election to be held on March 26, the same day as the Democratic primary for the 105th Congress (1997–1999). A long-shot candidate, Robin Tucker was among eight candidates who lost the nomination to California State Assemblywoman Juanita Millender-McDonald, who prevailed with a 27 percent plurality. Robin Tucker was sixth in the crowded field with 7 percent of the vote.²¹

Before entering prison, Walter Tucker announced his desire to start a prison ministry.²² Upon his release in September 1998, Tucker served as the Southern California director of the prison fellowship, headed by Charles (Chuck) Colson, a former aide to President Richard M. Nixon aide and a central figure in the Watergate scandal.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Tucker, Walter R., III,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774– Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=T000405>.

NOTES

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- 4 *Almanac of American Politics, 1994* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1993): 178.
- 5 Tina Griego, “Elections/U.S. House of Representatives; Stormy Race for 37th District Seat Steals the Thunder,” 31 May 1992, *Los Angeles Times*: J1.
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- 7 “California House: CA 37,” 3 June 1992, *Hotline*.
- 8 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
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- 10 *Almanac of American Politics, 1996* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1995): 189.
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- 12 Jim Newton and Emily Adams, “Rep. Tucker Is Indicted; Denies Bribery Charges,” 12 August 1994, *Los Angeles Times*: A1.
- 13 Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, “Historical Summary of Conduct Cases in the House of Representatives,” available at http://www.house.gov/ethics/Historical_Chart_Final_Version.htm (accessed 26 March 2007); Michael Janofsky, “California Congressman Indicted by U.S.,” 12 August 1994, *New York Times*: A12; Ron Russell et al., “Rep. Tucker Indicted on New Charges,” 2 June 1995, *Los Angeles Times*: B1; “2 in Congress Attend Court on Charges,” 23 August 1994, *New York Times*: A13.
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- 15 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 16 David Rosenzweig of the *Los Angeles Times* provided extensive coverage of the trial from September 11, 1995, to December 9, 1995. See, for example, “Trial Opens in Tucker Bribery Case,” 4 October 1995: B3; “Witness Ends Testimony in Tucker Trial,” 18 October 1995: B1; “Tucker Demanded Funds, Witness Says,” 21 October 1995: B3; “Tucker, Agent Talk of Money on Tape,” 27 October 1995: B1; “Tucker Says Pay Was for Consulting,” 4 November 1995: B1; “Tucker Denies He Accepted \$7,500 in Return for Votes,” 9 November 1995: B3. Other coverage includes Gabriel Kahn, “Prosecution Rests in Tucker Trial,” 2 November 1995, *Roll Call*.
- 17 Kathryn Wexler et al., “Rep. Tucker Convicted of Extortion; Congressman Took Bribes While Mayor of Compton, Calif.,” 9 December 1995, *Washington Post*: A1.
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- 20 David Rosenzweig, “Tucker Loses Bid to Cut Restitution,” 10 May 2000, *Los Angeles Times*: B1.
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