

Rep. Jim Chapman, Jr. (D),
Representative from Texas, District 1

District background and political analysis:

FIRST DISTRICT

A stranger might think, if he was plunked down in one of the counties near the Arkansas or Louisiana borders, that he was in the separate and distinct state of East Texas: for that is how many people here respond when they talk about where they live. The distinction is made to mean that this is not the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex or some other big metropolitan part of Texas; east Texas is small town and rural, incomes are relatively low and wives seldom work, where you find more churches and Wal-Marts than fern-clad restaurants and Gallerias. No barren plains here; the land is green and only mildly undulating, overrun it seems with vegetation, swampy down by the rivers; the towns are no longer the dusty crossroads they were in the days before roads were paved; and some old buildings have been carefully preserved, but they are pretty plain places still. East Texas is clearly part of the Deep South, with almost no Mexican-Americans and more blacks than any part of America farther west.

About half of east Texas -- the northeastern corner of the state, but with jagged boundaries to exclude the oil towns of Tyler and Longview -- forms the 1st Congressional District of Texas. The largest city here is Texarkana, with its city hall so squarely on the Texas-Arkansas line that different wings serve Texarkana, Texas, and Texarkana, Arkansas. This is part of the historic Democratic heartland: Bonham, the home of Speaker Sam Rayburn, is just one county west of the district; the district that elected Speaker Carl Albert is just across the Red River in Oklahoma. The 1st District was represented for nearly 50 years by Wright Patman, an old-fashioned populist, who began his career by moving the impeachment of Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon (forcing him to resign to become Ambassador to Britain) and who ultimately became Chairman of the Banking Committee; a gentle and good-humored man, he was voted out of his chairmanship at 81 in 1974, died in 1976, and was replaced by a much more conservative Democrat, Sam Hall.

The 1st District was the scene in summer 1985 of what could have been the pivotal political battle of the middle 1980s in Texas -- but wasn't. Senator Phil Gramm had long wanted to undermine the Democrats' hold on rural Texas, and pounced on the 1st District as a battleground; he caused Sam Hall, a judicious an with few enemies, to be appointed a federal judge, and recruited Edd Hargett, a former Texas A&M and pro quarterback who lived in one of the poorer towns in the 1st District, to be the Republican candidate. Money and topflight consultants poured in, while the Democrats were handicapped because they had more than one serious candidate. Gramm claimed, plausibly, that if a Republican could win in the 1st in a nonpresidential year, Republicans could win in any southern district.

But this particular Republican didn't win. Even before the primary, Senator Lloyd Bentsen and Campaign Committee Chairman Tony Coelho were raising money to oppose Hargett. He fell short of the 50% needed to win without a runoff, and Democrat Jim Chapman, a former district attorney, proved to be an adept candidate. Hargett stumbled on the trade issue, saying "I don't know what trade policies have to do with bringing jobs to east Texas" -- despite the recent closing of the Lone Star Steel plant in Morris County. That and a relentless emphasis on Social Security helped Chapman to a 51%-49% win.

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Democrats naturally exulted, the more so when it became clear that Gramm's attempt to stimulate Republican challengers in rural southern districts for 1986 would come to nothing; Hargett himself declined to run again, and Chapman was reelected unopposed. Yet it was a close thing; this is one of the strongest yellow dog Democratic districts left in the country, and it nearly fell. The elderly voted heavily for Chapman, young voters heavily for Hargett -- not a good harbinger for the Democrats either. They will probably hold onto the 1st now; Hargett passed up the 1986 House race, lost a race for state Senate, and seems unlikely to run for anything again. But Democrats remain vulnerable in similar districts in the future.

Personal: Elected Aug. 3, 1985; ; Washington, District of Columbia; home, Sulphur Springs; University of Texas, B.A. 1968, Southern Methodist University; J.D. 1970; ;

Career: Practicing attorney; District Attorney, 8th Judicial District of Texas, 1976-84.

Committees:

Committee on Public Works and Transportation (20th of 32 Democrats). Subcommittees: Aviation; ~~Water~~ Water Resources.

Committee on Science, Space, and Technology (19th of 27 Democrats). Subcommittees: Energy Research and Development; Science, Research, and Technology; Space Science and Applications.

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