

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ROBERT L. JOHNSON III

*This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Robert L. Johnson III and is taking place on February 5, 2009. The interviewer is D'Andra Orey.*

**Orey:** This is D'Andra Orey, chair and professor of the Political Science Department at Jackson State University. I am conducting an oral history interview with Representative Robert Johnson. Today is February 5, 2009. We are in the office of Representative Bobby Moltz's office. And this interview is made possible by the Mississippi Humanities Council. The interview will be archived or codeposited with The University of Southern Mississippi and Jackson State University. I'd like to start the interview with Representative Robert Johnson, if you will provide for us just some background information. First, would you state your full name for the record and followed by the spelling of it?

**Johnson:** My name is Robert L. Johnson III, R-O-B-E-R-T, middle initial L, which is Lee, J-O-H-N-S-O-N, and from Natchez, Mississippi.

**Orey:** Where and when were you born?

**Johnson:** I was born in Natchez, Mississippi, November 29, 1958.

**Orey:** What are the names of your parents?

**Johnson:** My parents; my father's name is Robert L. Johnson; my mother's name is Joyce Johnson, and strangely enough, she was a Johnson before she got married, but no relation to each other.

**Orey:** OK. (laughter)

**Johnson:** Where did you grow up, how long have you lived in Mississippi?

**Orey:** I grew up in Natchez, Mississippi. My family, for generations, have been in Natchez, Mississippi. I was born and raised there. My father's father is attorney—my father's grandfather is an attorney, senator (inaudible) whose name was Robert Johnson and was a very successful businessman who owned his own funeral home. And my grandfather, my father's father, was one of the few college graduates in town, attended

Morehouse College, but my father's father was killed in the Ribbon Club fire when my father was only three years old. As a result of that, he was the only child and the business was lost, and so my father had to start over—well, my father's family. My grandmother had three kids, no—who became a single parent at a very young age, and so my father started working, when he was about five years old, washing dishes. They went from a family who owned a business to—who lost all that because the patriarch of the family was gone and so—but anyway, that—those kind of—that's sort of the background where I started and that will be significant later when I talk about some other things that had a great deal of influence on me. My mother's father, family owned a great deal of land that they lost through typical ways that people lose through tax sales and essentially was stolen out from under them, but his father, Mr. Alfred Reed, was a slave—his grandfather was a slave who had learned to read and write, who was able to draft his own papers and was able to draft papers that allowed him to travel back to Virginia during—even when—during the existence of slavery to get his wife and bring her back down here. So he was a free man by the time the war was over with, but they were a family—they were the Reeds and later on after marriage to Johnsons, who also owned a great deal of land there that since then has—some of it's still in the family but it's—that's part—that's my home, that's where we grew up.

**Orey:** OK, and what's your religious affiliation?

**Johnson:** African-Methodist Episcopal.

**Orey:** OK. Will you tell me just a little bit about your childhood and what was life like, you know, growing up in Natchez, Mississippi.

**Johnson:** My father, as I told you his father died when he was—was killed in a fire when he was three and he had to work from the time he was five. He finished high school and after trying—after trying to go to college for a year, he had a young wife and I was the oldest child, we had a young son, so he came back to go to work. He picked up a trade as a bricklayer, turned that into a pretty good business and had us working from the time I was five or six years old working the summer with my daddy laying brick. But we also raised cattle. He grew up on a farm and as he became more and more successful as a bricklayer, he bought land. By the time I got to be about twelve or thirteen years old, we owned about 300 acres of land and were raising about a hundred head of cattle a year. So I would, during the summers I would work for my father and on the weekends during the week we would bale hay, and I had to make sure we fed cows and took care of them, mended the fences. So I grew up on a farm and sort of in the construction business. My mother was a school teacher. While my father worked, she—and she went back to school at Alcorn [State University], graduated from Alcorn, and when she graduated from Alcorn at that time they didn't allow you to go to graduate school at Ole—well, the programs they could take advantage of in Mississippi, the way I understand it, that they would pay for you to go somewhere else. And so she—they provided her money because they didn't allow her to go to Ole Miss [University of Mississippi] to get a master's degree, she

would—she—turned out to be a good thing, paid for her to go to USC, so she got a master's in public education at the University of Southern California and came home. She eventually retired as an assistant superintendent, but I grew up in a house and my mother was a teacher and my father was a bricklayer, and on a farm, learned how to work doing a lot of hard work even as a ninety pound young man, you just, you know, it was something—you had that to do. So understanding the value of work and part of it was my father's philosophy and psychology was, if he makes it hard enough and see how hard it is to work with your hands and get dirty and be tired all the time, maybe you'll—he wanted all of us to go to college. And so even though he didn't feel like he had that opportunity, he thought it was very important; his father had had that opportunity and he wanted it for us.

**Orey:** Speaking of college, can you explain a little bit about your educational opportunity or educational experience?

**Johnson:** I graduated from North Natchez High School in 1996, North Natchez Rams, and we, myself and a good friend of mine, both got academic scholarships to Washington University. We had a teacher who was from St. Louis who was our seventh grade teacher who was kind of mentored us and stayed, you know, sort of watched us all through high school and always encouraged us to go away to school. And she had gone to Washington University and encouraged us to apply there, and we got scholarships, and so I went to—I started Washington University in 1976 and was there for three years, eventually transferred to the University of Illinois in Champagne where I received my bachelor's degree in political science and urban studies. I stayed there and went to law school and got my law degree, came back home, came back to Mississippi immediately, because during the summers during law school I worked as an intern at the attorney general's office, so when I would—I'd always intended, no matter where I was, I'd always say when I left to go to college that I was going to come back home. I had some departures from that from time to time while I was away to college thinking I wouldn't, but as it turned out, it was important to me to come home. I felt like there was a lot to be done, and so I came back home and began work for the attorney general's office in 1986 under Edward Pittman, Edwin Pittman. When he moved on, I worked for Mike Moore, and in 1989, I went into private practice with Charles Griffin and we started a firm, Griffin and Johnson. I did that in Jackson for a year and then moved back to Natchez where I opened up my own practice.

**Orey:** And can you tell me just a little bit as relates to your political career, what was the first office you ran for and, you know, when did you start the State Legislature?

**Johnson:** I ran for the State Senate in 1992. I had always wanted to be involved in politics when I was growing up. I'm fifty years old. I can remember going to Christmas parades and watching Santa Claus, and right behind Santa Claus would be guys, Ku Klux Klan members, in the Christmas parade on horses. A good friend of mine and my cousin's father, Wallace Jackson, was killed in a car bomb that was put up under his truck

seat because he was the treasurer of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and he had gotten promoted at the tire plant down there over a white guy, and those things stuck with me. I watched my father, not that long afterwards, I watched my father and my mother march in protest marches at the risk of losing jobs and losing business. At a young age, at even ten, I was a member of the young members of the NAACP and my parents were a member in the NAACP. We—I would tote picket signs. We would picket businesses that were involved in racist activities or who wouldn't hire black people or who wouldn't promote black people. We did all those kind of things. So in 1992 when I—in 1990 when I moved back home, I knew then I wanted to do something, I just didn't know what. There was a legislative redistricting that had been done where they added a number of African-American seats or seats that could be won by African Americans and that opportunity availed itself for me in 1992. Senate District 38 was the district that was actually not—it was majority black, but it shouldn't have been won by a black and not by a black in Adams County, but I decided to run anyway. The first office I ran for I ran against an incumbent, Pat Welch who had been—who was a two-term incumbent from McComb. Only 6 percent of the district was in Adams County so I went over to Pike County, a place nobody knew me and campaigned extremely hard and we won that, and I stayed elected in that position for three terms. After another redistricting, they took more of my area and the area in Natchez became even smaller, and I was defeated in an election after being, after in my third term by Calvin Butler, an African American in Pike County. But, in all fairness, it always should've been that somebody from Pike County who occupied that seat because the district—55 percent of the district was in Pike County, so they wanted somebody from that area. That, the southwest Mississippi area at that—when I was in the Senate was represented by two senators, both of whom was from Natchez, and that wasn't completely fair, so. After sitting out a year and deciding I would commit more of my time to my law practice, a mentor and a good friend of mine, Philip West, resigned from the House of Representatives and ran for the mayor of Natchez, got elected, that seat became open, and I was encouraged by people who supported me to run for the House of Representatives to fill that seat, because they wanted me to be back in the legislature. I did, I won, and I've been here one term; this is my second term and I was unopposed the next time.

**Orey:** Those are two offices.

**Johnson:** Those are the only two positions I've run for and that—and I'm currently serving in the House of Representatives District 94.

**Orey:** And how would you describe your legislative style? So in other words, did you represent your constituents based on their requests or did you research the district and representing them according to your own expertise?

**Johnson:** I based on a little of both. First and foremost on their requests; I respect their requests. And but I also do—I believe in research, I do a lot of research, look at the needs

of the district, and I pair it in my legislation based on what I think the district needs and based on the request of my constituents.

**Orey:** How would you describe race relations in the State Legislature, just on, you know, when you first entered the legislature or in the Senate at current?

**Johnson:** When I entered the Senate, there was an influx of the largest number of African Americans that had served. And at that time, we represented the largest delegation of African-Americans legislators in the country. And what I found was that there was not so much resistance, there was just a unfamiliarity with dealing with that number of African Americans in this setting, and so I found that the leadership in the Senate accepted that idea, not to the level that I wanted it to, but accepted the influx, you know, as a practical matter, as something that was real and that had to be dealt with. I find that as a—that race relations in the Mississippi State Legislature is—there is mutual respect, but there's still some resistance, I think, to ideas that, whose time has come in terms of where we're going to move forward as a state. And so there's a lot of entrenchment, arguably on both sides, but more so on the majority population, I think, about some things I think need to change. And the difference is, I think a lot of people would think that there are a lot of gains and that we ought to be satisfied. I think a lot of African Americans, maybe they think that, but in my opinion the fact that there's no chairman of a major money committee on the Senate side and that where you do have African Americans senators who are chairman on the—for instance, on the Senate side—those committees are heavily weighted with people who don't have the same interests as that chairman, so it makes it difficult for them to have an agenda that they can promote, which I think is, you know, there's no point in being chairman if you don't have that kind of power. In the House of Representatives, my biggest complaint, and people think there are a lot of gains, but you do have an African-American chairman of Ways and Means, but when you consider that the power in the legislature, sure is in Ways and Means, but it is also in Appropriations, Public Health, and Transportation, which are the three largest money committees—I describe them—and I think if you control the budget, you control money, you control policy, and we—I don't think we are—and in fact the numbers support the fact that we are not at all represented in those power positions. When you consider that we have one of the, if not the largest delegation of African-American legislators, the largest number of chairmen, but we don't have the control of the right, of the kind of control in our leadership positions to push an agenda that I think you can push through the way you need to. You need those kind of leadership, you need those kind of chairmanships to have leverage. Even if you don't have the number, you need those to have the leverage to make some things happen. And I find it very difficult to say that race relations are good when I can't get even—and I think Billy McCoy is a good speaker and he's a fine man, but I don't think that people are sensitive to the idea that you got a corridor where black people live through the Delta, southwest Mississippi, and when you consider that there has not been a chairman of Highways and Transportation from any of those areas, white or black, and they've all been from northeast Mississippi, and when you consider that if you want to improve the economic stability of an area, or you got to

improve highways, ingress, egress, those kind of things, and we don't have control of what I—what could be one of the largest budgets in the state, not even—not control, but we're not even in numbers represented on those kind of committees. I just think that it becomes window dressing as opposed to something substantive.

**Orey:** OK, and speaking of sort of window dressing as opposed to something substantive, do you think or have you had any experiences or can you recollect any times where blacks in leadership positions have been able to leverage power?

**Johnson:** Yes, I mean Ed Blackmon on the judiciary does it, you know, every year. Percy Watson in Ways and Means, he does it whenever he can have support of the people around him. Those kind of positions, those are good indicators, good representation of what you can do if you have those kind of positions. But consider now, we make up 40 percent of the population, and I just named two committees.

**Orey:** Right.

**Johnson:** And I just think that you got to have more power and control than that. Now, I will say that in the House of Representatives under speaker Billy McCoy that African Americans are exercising more leverage, more power than we have since my time in the legislature. I just think that we not only, not only the majority leadership, the white legislators, but the black legislators, too, have to expect more and have to demand more. I mean black legislators have to demand more and white legislators have to understand that we understand it that more has to be done.

**Orey:** On the grounds of race, have you faced any major hurdles in your career, your legislative career based on race?

**Johnson:** That's sort of a kind of a difficult—I think so; other people would argue not. I think so because of what I expect I think is a whole lot—some people think it's unreasonable. I can tell you that when, for instance the last speakers' race, everybody black, except for two people, supported Bill McCoy. My only reason, I like Speaker McCoy and I'm a great, big, loyal supporter of his now, but where we—where I sort of departed from that is that, you know, I told Speaker McCoy that I thought that an African American should be Chairman of Transportation, Public Health, of Ways and Means, you know, two or at least two of those, that until we start getting that kind of leverage that will, you know, it's not how many chairmen, it's which chairmen and that was something that he wasn't in a position to do at that time. And so, to me, that's a major hurdle. We have legislative redistricting coming up this year. We, you know, we've never been chair even though Henry Kirksey knew more about redistricting than anybody. You know, he did that on his own; nobody appointed him chairman of anything. But do you—I mean can you imagine what kind of leverage you would have and in a state that is still under the Justice Department in terms of what it can do on voters' rights issues. There should be an African-American chairman of apportionment elections. That's just my feeling.

And that was something else that couldn't be done, something else I asked that should be done, and that didn't happen. And now we're in a position to draw legislative districts, congressional districts and I, you know—those are the kind of things I think we ought to, you know, be in a position now. Somebody—we got a vice chairman; well, vice chairmen can't call a meeting, they can't appoint subcommittee chairmen, they can't poll, they can't pull legislation out or bring legislation up, they are exactly what they say, they are vice chairmen, you don't really have any power, it's a nice title, but within that framework to the extent I think race relations are a lot better than anybody expects them to be, but those are the kind of things that I measure progress by, you know, so.

**Orey:** So it sounds like—do you support McCoy?

**Johnson:** I do support McCoy.

**Orey:** Did you support McCoy before the (inaudible)?

**Johnson:** I did not. I did not because it—because I'm of the philosophy—McCoy and I are closer philosophically, a whole lot closer than the gentleman I did support. But the gentleman I did support, there were things that I thought that should happen that he was willing to make happen, and so I just, I treat politics like that, I treat it just like I treat my—it is a—it's whatever you can leverage, whatever you can leverage on behalf of the people that you represent. I had an opportunity under the other candidate to name a black chairman of Transportation, a black chairman of Portion Elections, and, uh, and to have a black speaker pro tem in the House of Representatives. All those positions are extreme—and a black chairman of Ways and Means or Appropriations. So three of the five demands that I had for Speaker McCoy were met by the other person, but they were met, not because philosophically he agreed with me, but because he found himself needing the vote and having to make those commitments. And I—now, I think it would've been a difficult role, but if you have a majority number of African Americans on those committees chaired by the people on those committees, you can leverage with other people. I don't care how conservative or right-winged they are, if I control Transportation, the dollars and where the highway is going to go, where the—you know, how that money's going to be spent, if I control Public Health or if I have control of how districts are going to be drawn where people are going to get elected, then whatever I need out of Ways and Means, Appropriations or wherever I—Education, then those people have to come through me or come through—not—now, I don't mean me personally, but say a group, the group of people that represent my—the interests that we choose to represent for our folks, then you leverage those positions of power to get things in other places just like they would do with the committees they have. I don't think we have enough of that with the African-American chairmen that we can say [snaps his fingers], “Uh, yeah, I'm not interested in what happens in Conservation. I mean I'm interested in some conversation if you—even though I'm not chairman, if you want something out of—if you want your district, if you want to have something to say about how your district is drawn, if you want to have something to say about what, you know,

where I take the Highway Transportation legislation, then let's talk." And that's the way I've watched things get done in the legislature. That's how things get done in the legislature that maybe not you and I, you know, that had political science in college, they don't—I don't, you know, you read about it, you're not necessarily taught it, but you know that's how it happens.

**Orey:** Now, let's just back up with respect to that speakers' race.

**Johnson:** Yeah.

**Orey:** That was probably the closest speaker race ever—

**Johnson:** Yeah.

**Orey:** — in the history of Mississippi.

**Johnson:** Yes.

**Orey:** Can you just describe for us, real briefly, how that speaker race sort of evolved?

**Johnson:** Uh—

**Orey:** And the outcome.

**Johnson:** OK, speakers—

**Orey:** Actors.

**Johnson:** The people started running for speaker five or six or maybe almost a year before that time comes. At the time people were running for speaker, you're also running to get reelected to come back to the House of Representatives. And so you get, start getting letters from people who are interested in the position. And like everybody else, I got letters and hadn't really considered doing anything but going doing what everybody else did. But it occurred to me, because I had had a similar experience in the Senate, that—and I talked to other members of the Black Caucus about this, that we ought to start talking about—for instance, no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, Williams Clay's book, as a legislator, veteran legislator, a Missouri legislator, talked about how you have to be prepared to deal with people politically. Don't get so wrapped up into traditional loyalties that you don't leverage anything or try to get anything done on behalf of the people that you represent, you have a duty to do that first. And so that speaker's race evolved and Speaker McCoy called me personally and asked me for it, and I told him yes. But then I called him back and after I gave it more thought I said, "Look, I want to support you, but I got to tell you there are some things I'm concerned about that I want to see happen that sound extremely dramatic, but, and probably maybe a reach, but those



things I talked to you about earlier.” And he said, “Well, let’s talk about them.” We talked about them and he said, “Those are the things—he didn’t say that I’ll think about them, he told me “Those are the things that I cannot do.” And to me that—that, for my purposes, was unacceptable. I know how the legislature works. When he told me he could not do them, he didn’t say he’d think about it. I understood that to mean that even though people say they don’t promise things to other people that other people had been promised, though, and those people were not African Americans. The other person running, who I did not necessarily, you know, I very rarely vote the same way he does, didn’t necessarily agree with him, but he wanted—he asked to talk to me and he asked to talk to everybody. Everybody talks to everybody. But I talked to him and quite flatly told him the things that I thought had to happen in order for me to be effective, in order for the people I represent to be affected in a way, positive way, and I thought that African Americans throughout the state could be affected positively that in a way that we had never been if we had this kind of leadership and leverage. And he sat down and there were a series of meetings, not just with me, with other African American legislators, and we actually sit down and not any promises but agreements that these things we’ll have because you can’t promise anything but you can make them—you can have an understanding that these are the things that I’m committed to philosophically to make happen. And I got those assurances that I could rely on from one candidate and didn’t get them from another one. And I went to Speaker McCoy and I had that conversation with him and to his credit, he looked at me and understood exactly what I said, what I—he understood what I was talking about and I think was impressed with the fact that I understood the process enough that made a request of him that I don’t think anybody else had ever made. No—well, nobody, no African American had ever made. Go ahead.

**Orey:** Now, the race was decided by one vote, was it?

**Johnson:** One vote.

**Orey:** Can you describe that?

**Johnson:** Well, at the time that the race that we got there that day, usually they are decided weeks in advance, you know when you get here, it’s just ceremonial what we do, but we actually had a real speaker’s race on the floor of the House where people had to vote. When we got there that day, we thought—I thought that we had the votes to for the other side to win, but that was one person who the day before, Linda Coleman, decided that that’s—she—that’s not what she wanted to do but didn’t exactly tell us that that’s not what she wanted to do. And she made—she voted, she was acting—no, I take that back. It wasn’t just Linda Coleman, there was a Tracy Eranda(?) who was also—it was a white legislator, both of them were kind of on the fence. They hadn’t decided what they were going to do. But we felt and had been told at various times that they were going to be, they were going to vote for Jeff Smith who was the other candidate. And on the day of the election, they actually—there looked like there was a two vote that Jeff Smith was going to win by two votes and on the day of the election both of those votes went to Billy

McCoy and he ended up winning by one vote. But that didn't—nobody knew until that morning that that was going to happen.

**Orey:** OK. Moving back as relates to your legislative approach.

**Johnson:** Yes.

**Orey:** The research shows that descriptive representation, in other words physical traits, black, white, gender, male, female actually have an impact or can have an impact on the gender setting.

**Johnson:** Um-hum.

**Orey:** In other words, that legislation can actually be introduced or bills can be introduced that have some, you know, I guess have some—it's compatible to one's racial makeup or one's gender makeup.

**Johnson:** Yeah.

**Orey:** So in other words, a female can introduce bills that are, you know, based on nurturing, for example children.

**Johnson:** Um-hum.

**Orey:** Do you see that taking place in the legislature? Do you see bills introduced based on race, do you see bills introduced based on gender so that descriptive representation impacts substantive representation is the short question?

**Johnson:** I, you know, I don't—I can tell you that I don't—I really don't see that many. You would think—you see a lot of legislation introduced by African Americans, for instance, that you would think they would be African American geared to—actually it has more to do with economics than anything else. We just happen to represent, I think, more of a concentration of poor people than a lot of white legislators do. So a lot of our legislation is geared toward improving public education, improving the status of people who are unemployed, have to do with housing, have to do with providing services for teenage pregnancy and those kind of things. I don't see a disproportionate, for instance with women. I don't see disproportionate pieces of legislation introduced that have to do with nurturing or child care or those kind of things. Most legislation is done by request, anyway, and people, smart people who know the legislative process just try to find the person they think would be the most effective person to get their legislation done. I don't see a lot—there's very little just in talking to legislators, there's not a whole lot of legislation that is born out of who that person is; a lot of its done by request or by the people they represent and so, you know, you happen to be a woman who a majority of the people you represent are cattle farmers, you're going to see a lot of agricultural

legislation, a lot of legislation dealing with stuff a lot of people don't know anything about. If you're a—for instance, there's an African-American male colleague of mine and who introduces legislation dealing with AIDS, pregnancy, and those things, I think far more than any woman does. But that's where, you know, that's somebody close to him or somebody he knows or him personally has an interest in making sure those things are taken care of, so. I don't see a tendency more towards nurturing with women and otherwise for men, I don't see it geared that way.

**Orey:** How would you rate your experience in terms of getting legislation passed?

**Johnson:** It has been—I'm not a person that introduced—I don't introduce 200 bills a year. I introduce—I find ten to twenty pieces of legislation I really care about even—I don't introduce everything that's requested of me. But those pieces of legislation I think I can spend a lot of time with and get something done on, I try to do. So in terms of getting things passed, I've been a lot more successful in the House of Representatives, I think, than I was in the Senate. But some of it has to do with me understanding the process a little bit more, willingness to sometimes almost grovel to the point of going and following a chairman around, you literally have to walk around and make sure that they don't let you—it's not so much people kill your legislation, they don't pay attention to it and they let it die. It's not if you don't go and say, "Look, this is mine, I need you to bring it out of committee," it won't happen. For instance, I have a piece of legislation now that requires a preference that's given to Mississippi companies on purchasing contracts, bidding contracts, or anything like that that's race neutral, gender neutral but understanding that there are a lot of brothers and sisters out here who are in business in Mississippi and that if we just would give preference to people in Mississippi, a lot of them are going to get taken care of, so you don't even have to have it race, you know. And the fact—this was something that myself and some African-American contractors and business people came and would say, "Look, if we can just get it geared to our local people, we can do a lot better in taking care of it because we, you know, we make up a great deal of this population. Anyway, that was a bill that every time you talked to somebody about it, white or black, they thought it was a great idea, but that deal was about to die in the Appropriations Committee because nobody paid any attention to it. So I had to go to the subcommittee chairman, I had to go to the chairman just about every day for two weeks to make sure that bill came out and it passed the House yesterday. So I found that, you know, I've learned that you have to work a piece of legislation. If you work it, if it's something that if you can gear a piece of legislation that you take care of a broader population of people knowing that you're going to take care of the people that you're really trying—that narrow population that you represent, if you include enough people that everybody get a little something out of it, you got a good deal of—you got a good, big, good chance of getting that passed.

**Orey:** There have been some suggestions in the past, this is anecdotal, but it also relates to some empirical evidence that shows that racial polarization sometimes as it relates to bills that are introduced and voting on those particular bills. Sometimes it ends up being

along racial lines. Have you seen that to be?

**Johnson:** Absolutely, I mean legislation dealing with the Confederate flag, legislation dealing with public schools. And when I say along racial lines, it's more so—we—the African-American legislators vote as a block. We don't even have to talk about voting as a block. Their—our interests are so connected that a piece of legislation that we know that will—we know inherently will affect our folks, we're going to vote that way. And it's not so much that we vote against—I mean we vote as a block because we have those interests. There are people vote against things that we're interested in as a block, I think, just by the mere fact if they see us as a block voting for things. Now, we don't do that. I don't see African Americans voting for things just because somebody else—I mean if its just an obvious, overly right wing that we know will be harmful, sure we're going to vote against there, and, I mean if its part of an agenda that we understand, it's part of an agenda that doesn't represent our interests, absolutely. But, you know, there are things some people would argue that African Americans are entrenched in that seem kind of innocuous, like charter schools, for instance. They're, you know, in the African-American community, there's not, in the Black Caucus, there's not any support for it. In fact, there's a resistance against it. People will say, "Well, what's racial about that?" Well, historically charter schools were sort of the alternative to private schools. It's something that it was born out of an idea that people, when they couldn't do neighborhood schools, they wanted to do charter schools and set them up in a way that they would be, you know, racially, you know, homogeneous. But since then, around the country, African Americans actually have been as big a proponent of charter schools as anybody. I mean Memphis and places like that, they've been successful. But, and I say all that to say is that there are some things—Voter ID, you know, you say Voter ID, no, African Americans don't, they don't care if it's a good idea or if it's says anything that says ID, they're going to vote against it. If you say Confederate memorial, we're voting against it. I'm voting, you know, if it says Dixie Highway, I'm voting against it. You know, those kind of things. But we are—but we vote for things that you would, you know, that, you know, in order to—in terms of politically Democratic party type issues that, you know, that we probably ought to take a really close look at, that we do it just because we don't have any real resistance to that we, you know, just to get, you know, make things happen and some things you do have to compromise in order to—because we are a slim, as Democrats, we are a slim majority in the legislature, and so sometimes you have to do things in order to keep that majority and keep that power base.

**Orey:** So, in speaking to the polarization.

**Johnson:** Yeah.

**Orey:** Has there been opportunity, opportunities to build coalitions?

**Johnson:** Yes.

**Orey:** If so, with whom?

**Johnson:** You know, I hear people around the South talking about sometimes their coalition with African Americans and Republicans; I haven't seen that in the Mississippi State Legislature. And Republicans here seem to be getting further and further to the right and more and more difficult to coalesce with, but between African-American Democrats and white Democrats. But white Democrats are real conservative, too. I mean that, you know, it's difficult a lot of the times to coalesce, but that's who we, you know, that's who we came to the party with and that's who we, you know, end up having to dance with, but you find that the rural white Democrats are not—they vote more often with Republicans than they do with African Americans *but* to the extent that we have anybody that we can get anything done with, they're white Democrats and rural white Democrats.

**Orey:** Representative Johnson, as we get ready to bring this discussion to a close, what would you say has been your greatest successes in the State Legislature and what has been some of the great successes of your colleagues, particularly African-American colleagues, in the State Legislature?

**Johnson:** Overall, our—the greatest success, and people discount this a lot, but African-American legislators do a lot to make sure that there's not—every year, without the help of African-American legislators, there would be a great deal of harmful legislation passed that would keep more of our people in poverty, close more doors of opportunity than anybody can imagine. I hear people criticize it, “Well, you-all don't get a lot of legislation passed.” Well, we are still, even though we're a large delegation of African Americans, we are a very, we're a small minority in the legislature. We can't get anything done by ourselves and finding things that would really help our, our constituency and finding people who will partner with us to get those things done is difficult because there still is not a great deal of support just outright help for African Americans. Some of my—my greatest accomplishment, as a legislator, was when I was in the Senate being a part of judicial redistricting and being able to help actually write and draw the districts that increased the number of African-American judges here in the state. I think that has been extremely important to African Americans on a lot of different fronts; economically and in terms of the issue of justice. And since then there have been small victories with childcare, education, and those kind of things. They're not small; they're very important, but in terms of amendments and small pieces of legislation. And what I—my mission and my vision now is to do as much as I can. And for instance, we did two billion dollars in contracts, independent contracts, the State did in 2006; only three million of those dollars went to African Americans or any minority. And so that's why I'm really pushing real hard on Buy Mississippi First, a piece of legislation to amend, and a lot of that money went out of state, that we try to do all we can to create as much opportunity and, I don't mind saying it and not ashamed to say it, as much wealth in our communities because the more people we help in our community who own their own businesses, who can hire people and employ people, the more we bring those

resources, just like everybody else does, back into our communities. So I'm pushing hard to make that happen and making sure that we continue to create economic opportunities in our communities.

**Orey:** Lastly, I forgot to bring up the issue of race and gender. Now there's some research that currently exists in the legislature that talks about the intersectionality of race and gender.

**Johnson:** Yeah.

**Orey:** Do you see any differences between blacks and—black females and black males in the State Legislature? One is race and one is gender.

**Johnson:** Yeah, well yeah. I think—what I found is that white legislators and white chairmen and people in position of power seem to be a whole lot more willing to deal with African-American women legislators in terms of positions of power and influence to the extent that they can, they're more willing to—even though they don't occupy those positions to the extent that black males do, I think you will see—but that's because we just happen to have them in the positions that black males have been, but what I've found, what I see is that a willingness to do, if they had an opportunity to work closer with an African-American female. I just think that, you know, we—the passion I feel about an issue, they find it a difficult time watching me be passionate about an issue without describing that as being angry about it or being upset about it. African-American females, they think that's, you know, a passionate is very—she just cares about it, and they're willing to deal with that. Well, it's hard for me to be mild mannered about poverty or unemployment or lack of opportunity, and I get, you know, I get really intense about that, and I think that's difficult. But people are beginning to learn that those things are things that you don't have to be threatened by and that they can't. But I do find that people have it—find it easier or more willing to deal with African-American women as legislators than African-American men.

**Orey:** Anything else you want to add the discussion that you haven't added?

**Johnson:** No, I was afraid that I'd added too much already. That's about it.

**Orey:** OK, thank you for your time.

**Johnson:** All right, thank you.

(end of interview)

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