

CONNECTICUT'S FOURTH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

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CONNECTICUT'S FOURTH  
CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT  
HISTORY, POLITICS, AND THE  
MAVERICK TRADITION

Gary L. Rose

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*In Memory of Spike*



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## *Preface*

I have had a long and intimate relationship with Connecticut's fourth congressional district. For approximately thirty years, in my capacity as a political science professor, I have been asked by journalists to provide commentary concerning the congressional campaigns that have been waged in this most unusual and dare I say "special" congressional district. Journalistic inquiries are often directed to my attention from local, state, and national media outlets. I do my very best to offer clear and objective analysis, which I know reporters appreciate. Working as a professor for a university located in the district and knowing a number of the key political figures in the district have contributed to a useful vantage point from which to offer political commentary. I have also been fortunate to host educational forums which feature the congresspersons who represent the fourth district. And I have hosted a number of presentations involving both formidable and less than competitive congressional challengers.

There is little doubt that congressional campaigns in the fourth congressional district are intriguing to journalists and media commentators. Much of this interest can be attributed to the style of those who have represented the district in Congress. At the same time, the controversial policies promoted by the district's congresspersons, along with the unique demographics of the district, seem to add to the intrigue. The fascinating personalities who reside within the fourth district, along with the district's close

association to New York City, especially Wall Street, are additional reasons why journalists are drawn to the district's politics.

Many of my students over the course of the past three decades have been fortunate to work as interns on the staffs of fourth district congressmen. And many of my students have worked as interns on the campaign staffs of fourth district congressional candidates, including both incumbents and challengers. To date, virtually every student that I have placed in a field internship in this district has found the experience educational and rewarding. Fortunately the internships have involved substantive and meaningful tasks; my students do not stand at copiers or fetch coffee for their field supervisor. "Incredible," "fascinating," and "challenging" are some of the words used by my students to describe their experiences, and as a result of their internships several have expressed a desire to enter public service. Congressmen such as Stewart B. McKinney, Christopher Shays, and Jim Himes have served as excellent role models for young and aspiring public servants.

My personal and professional connection to the fourth congressional district is what motivated me to conduct this case study. After observing the political landscape of the district for three decades, I concluded that the time had arrived to conduct an empirical investigation into the district's political history and political trends. I also thought readers would want to know something about those individuals who have represented this district in Congress, information beyond that which appears in political almanacs and congressional reference books. I decided that I would compile information on the district from World War II to the present. In my view, a span of seventy years would be sufficient to capture the political character and nuances of this most unusual congressional district.

My case study unfolds in the following manner. The Introduction discusses why Connecticut's fourth congressional district merits a special investigation. I examine how the district is unique in the context of congressional politics. I also suggest that a partisan realignment, a term commonly used by political scientists to describe the electorate's shift from one party to another, appears

to be taking place in the fourth district.<sup>1</sup> I further argue that the realignment within the fourth district could be representative of realignments currently underway in congressional districts in other parts of the country, most notably the New England region.

Chapter One begins the empirical inquiry. In this chapter, I examine the district's geographical shape and demographics, illustrated throughout by maps and federal census data. The chapter concludes with several broad generalizations about elements of both continuity and change in the district's geography and demographics.

Chapter Two focuses on the political transformation of the district. Patterns of voting behavior within the district's seventeen communities and party registration figures across time are presented in the form of maps and tables. The conclusion which emerges from the data is that the district is undergoing a very slow, but observable, realignment. The cities are still heavily Democratic, but the once predictable Republican suburbs are becoming more competitive.

Chapter Three profiles the congresspersons who have represented the district from 1943 to the present. The profiles include some very colorful and controversial characters, several of whom were political "mavericks" during their years in Congress. It will be evident to the reader that the fourth congressional district tends to produce a very different breed of congressperson than many other districts. The congresspersons presented in this chapter include Clare Boothe Luce, John Davis Lodge, Albert Morano, Donald Irwin, Abner Sibal, Lowell P. Weicker, Jr., Stewart B. McKinney, and Christopher Shays.

Chapter Four describes and analyzes the 2008 congressional election, which resulted in Democrat Jim Himes's historic victory over Republican Congressman Christopher Shays. I suggest that the election of 2008 marks the beginning of a new era in fourth district politics. Himes's defeat of Shays further underscores a congressional district in a state of transition.

With Shays out of office, six Republican candidates in 2010 set their sights on the Republican Party's nomination. Chapter Five profiles these candidates and takes the reader through the mechanics and politics of the Republican nominating contest. As predicted by

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the pundits, state senator Dan Debicella won the Republican Party's nomination. The nominating contest was nevertheless captivating and included elements of intrigue.

Chapter Six details the intense election battle between Debicella and Congressman Himes. In this chapter, I examine the key issues of the campaign, the six debates between the candidates, and the pattern of voting behavior in the district's communities. A careful description and analysis of the results of this race further reveals a congressional district in a state of political transition.

The Conclusion elaborates on the realignment occurring in the fourth district and discusses this realignment in the context of New England politics. I suggest that very challenging days lie ahead for the Republican Party in Connecticut's fourth congressional district: it is plausible to predict that doctrinaire elements of the Republican Party might gain control over the Party's nominating process, thus making it more challenging for a Republican to recapture this congressional seat.

I have enjoyed researching the material for this volume and in the process have learned much about the politics and history of the fourth district. I sincerely hope that readers of this case study will find my treatment of the fourth congressional district educational as well as interesting. It should become clear to readers of this volume that politics is never static. Gradual change is inevitable and sudden change is always a distinct possibility. An informed awareness of this volatility may allow us to be better prepared for it.

## *Acknowledgments*

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offered helpful advice during the initial stages of this study. Bill's sage observations and wealth of personal knowledge have been helpful to me throughout my academic career.

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Last, but not least, I thank my family for all their unconditional love and support. This book is dedicated to the memory of my father-in-law, David "Spike" Cole, who passed away as I was completing work on it. Spike always expressed a sincere interest in my writing and professional development, for which I am most grateful. He will be greatly missed by all who knew and loved him.

## *Introduction*

There are currently 435 congressional districts in the United States. The only common feature of the 435 districts is that each contains roughly the same number of inhabitants. Otherwise, each district is unique, with respect to its geographical shape, the social and economic characteristics of its inhabitants, and the values and political preferences of those who reside within its borders. And each district is distinctive with respect to the type of individual its voters elect to Congress. As political science professor Ross Baker notes, some congressional districts “can be astonishingly atypical of the nation at large.”<sup>1</sup>

What follows is a study of one congressional district which, to put it mildly, is rather “atypical”: the fourth congressional district in the state of Connecticut. It is the first case study ever conducted of this very unique district. Although one can argue that every congressional district in the United States deserves its own detailed case study, there is, quite frankly, something about Connecticut’s fourth congressional district that is especially interesting.

Even though the fourth congressional district is geographically located in Connecticut, many of the district’s communities, particularly those in the lower portion of Fairfield County, are in essence “bedroom communities” of New York City. People of exceptional wealth reside in these so-called “gold coast” towns, which include, among others, Westport, Greenwich, Darien, Ridgefield, and New Canaan. Lawyers, medical doctors, media personalities, celebrities, Wall Street executives,

hedge fund managers, and an array of individuals with staggering incomes populate the exclusive gated communities of lower Fairfield County. Mansions reflective of old and new wealth stand surrounded by sweeping and meticulously manicured lawns. Radiant flower gardens cared for by professional gardeners are highly visible, and property lines are often marked by majestic stone walls. Many of the gold coast's residents commute to work in New York City on a daily basis. Some take the train, some drive their Mercedes, BMW, or Lexus, while others are chauffeured in a limousine. Young children, destined for private school, are cared for by *au pairs*, regardless of whether parents work in or out of the home. Personal trainers and massage therapists also have lucrative businesses within the borders of the fourth district. It is a world and lifestyle unbeknownst to the vast majority of Americans. It should come as no surprise that Republican as well as Democratic candidates for president will troll the communities of lower Fairfield County in search of campaign contributions. Indeed, it is a well-known fact that lower Fairfield County is one of our nation's prime fundraising locales for presidential candidates.

Although impoverished communities also exist within the fourth congressional district, most notably the cities of Bridgeport and Norwalk, the fact of the matter is that the wealth of the district, its close association with Wall Street, and the liberal orientation of individuals elected to Congress from this district, have contributed to a certain mystique about the fourth district. The fourth district is well known not only in Connecticut, but also throughout the New England region for its extraordinary wealth and personal connections to powerful financial interests.

One particularly fascinating aspect of this district is the number of celebrities who make their home in one of the district's posh communities. For example, the late Bette Davis lived in the town of Weston. The late Paul Newman was a resident of Westport, the same town where Martha Stewart currently makes her home. Keith Richards, the lead guitarist of the Rolling Stones, resides in Weston. *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and movie star Robert Vaughn lives in Ridgefield. Greenwich is home to Glenn Close, Kathy Lee Gifford,

Mel Gibson, Ron Howard, Diana Ross, and Meryl Streep. David Letterman lives in New Canaan, and Christopher Walken makes his home in Wilton. The late William F. Buckley, Jr., lived in Stamford.<sup>2</sup> The presence of so many celebrities further elevates the political and social stature of the fourth congressional district and is one of many features that distinguishes it from so many others.

The district's wealth, its close connection to financial interests in New York City, as well as the presence of movie stars further explains why those individuals who have been elected to Congress from the fourth district have had the luxury of a national stage compared to members of Congress from lower profile districts. Consider, for example, the political career of former Republican Congressman Christopher Shays. Although Shays's legislative accomplishments were somewhat scant during his many years in Congress, he was still able to command a national spotlight with respect to a variety of contentious political and policy issues. When Shays broke ranks with his party in the House of Representatives and announced that he would not vote to impeach President Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the media treated his announcement as a news story of major significance. The same level of media coverage was directed towards Shays when he repeatedly voiced support for our nation's military involvement in Iraq. Shays's numerous trips to Iraq and his optimistic reports on the war's progress were the subject of frequent and extensive media reporting. He also commanded a national audience when he launched a bold and uncompromising initiative to reform federal campaign finance laws. Shays's bipartisan reform effort, which eventually succeeded, placed him in the spotlight on a daily basis. At times it seemed as if the business of Congress was revolving around the agenda of Congressman Christopher Shays. Moreover, there was routine media coverage directed towards Connecticut's fourth congressional district whenever Shays ran for reelection, particularly during the final years of his career. During the elections of 2004, 2006, and 2008, it seemed that the fourth congressional district was the epicenter of American politics. The proximity of the fourth district to New York City and the district's relationship to the New

York media market were both contributing factors to such extensive media coverage, as was the fact that in 2008 Shays was the last remaining Republican in the United States House of Representatives from the New England states.

Congressman Christopher Shays was only the latest in a line of representative from the fourth congressional district who routinely attracted a national audience. Lowell P. Weicker, Jr., was a highly visible member of the House of Representatives from the fourth congressional district. During his tenure, he was an outspoken critic of the Vietnam war, a position that was in direct contrast to that held by a majority of congresspersons in both political parties and attracted considerable media attention, earning him national recognition as a “maverick.” His one term in the United States House of Representatives served as a stepping stone to the United States Senate. During his first term in the Senate, Weicker seized the national spotlight by investigating and exposing the corruption of the Nixon administration during the Senate Watergate hearings, a position that did not endear him to many of his Republican colleagues. Like Shays, Weicker always commanded a national stage, and like Shays, Weicker’s uncanny ability to attract media coverage had its origin in the district he once represented in Congress. The fourth district has historically been characterized by many free-thinking, independent-minded, and wealthy individuals who have felt beholden to no one, particularly those in positions of political authority. Voters in the fourth district have frowned upon those who appear subject to manipulation and who are willing to follow the party line. The district’s constituents appreciate political leaders who think and speak for themselves. Thus, in many ways, Weicker was the manifestation of a congressional district which mirrored his own strong streak of political independence.

And some years before Weicker, the fourth district was represented by another outspoken maverick, Clare Boothe Luce. Luce’s freely-voiced opinions on matters pertaining to foreign affairs, her specific area of interest and expertise, were frequently contentious and publicized, and she routinely attracted the attention of the print press during her time in Congress. During her

two congressional terms, Luce emerged as a leading critic of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's foreign policies. Her blunt political views as well as her personal life were the subject of public controversy. Her marriage to a New York-based media magnate, Henry Robinson Luce, contributed to making her perennially "newsworthy," as did her residency in the fourth congressional district in Connecticut, a seat of power and affluence. The spirited and strong-willed Congresswoman who spoke her mind irrespective of political consequence was, like those who succeeded her from the fourth district, a reflection of a constituency that valued intelligent, thoughtful, and independent-minded lawmakers. It is a tradition that is deeply embedded in the political culture of Connecticut's fourth congressional district.

The extreme wealth of the fourth congressional district, the district's close ties to New York City, especially Wall Street, a plethora of celebrities and influential and politically connected constituents, along with a tradition of electing outspoken and controversial members of Congress who attract national publicity are thus among the key reasons why Connecticut's fourth congressional district merits a careful case study. But there is yet another, and perhaps even more compelling reason, why a case study of the fourth congressional district is of particular value and interest. As will be evident in the following chapters, the district, which has more than often elected Republicans to Congress, appears to be in a state of political transition. To put it bluntly, it is no longer a safe haven for Republican congressional candidates. Although many of the district's constituents are affluent, a demographic trait historically associated with support for the Republican Party, such affluence no longer translates into routine and predictable support for Republican congressional candidates.

At one time in the not too distant past, there was a very close association between social class and voting behavior. This was true not only in Connecticut's fourth district but also in congressional districts in practically every region of the country. But what separated wealthy Republicans in Connecticut's fourth district from well-to-do Republicans in other regions of the country was the liberal leaning of

the district's constituents with respect to contentious social and moral issues. Republicans in Connecticut's fourth district, often referred to as "Country Club Republicans" or "Rockefeller Republicans" have always favored balanced budgets, free enterprise, limited government, and tax cuts.<sup>3</sup> Yet these same individuals have also supported civil rights for African-Americans, equal pay for women, and a woman's right to an abortion. This is a particular brand of politics that defined not just fourth district Republicans but also Republicans elsewhere in New England as well as other states in the Northeast, including New York. "Maverick" and moderate Republicans such as Lowell P. Weicker, Jr., and Christopher Shays were both representative of this Republican tradition.

But in recent years as the Republican Party's national politics moved in a more conservative direction, particularly with respect to social, cultural, and moral issues, and as the Republican Party seemed to fall under the influence of conservative southern interests, most notably evangelical Christians, the white, wealthy, educated, and socially tolerant patricians, such as those in Connecticut's fourth congressional district, began to feel estranged from the party they once knew. Although wealthy and socially progressive voters have not by any means abandoned the Republican Party, it is nevertheless clear that many of these individuals now regard the values of the GOP as inconsistent with their own political views. As a result, many "Country Club Republicans," along with young, white, and wealthy voters who are just now entering the electorate are beginning to gravitate to the Democratic Party. In 2008, many of these white and well-to-do voters in Connecticut's fourth congressional district supported Democrat Barack Obama for president and Democrat Jim Himes for Congress. And in 2010, a good number of these voters helped to reelect Himes to Congress. What also makes this political development even more fascinating is that many white and wealthy professionals who reside in the suburbs of Fairfield County are starting to exhibit, to some extent, a voting pattern similar to that of the district's urban voters. There can be little doubt that Connecticut's fourth congressional district is in a state of political

transformation, and there can be little doubt that the movement of voters in what was once a Republican stronghold toward the Democratic Party will have profound implications for the future of the district's congressional politics.

The political realignment among white and wealthy voters in communities such as those along the fourth district's gold coast, has not gone unnoticed by academics and journalists. The late Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., was the first scholar to detect a developing relationship between wealthy white voters and the Democratic Party, voters who, like those in Connecticut's fourth congressional district, were fiscally conservative yet liberal regarding social issues. In his study published in the mid 1970s, he argued that the values of the Democratic Party would be more attractive to upper-middle and upper-class Americans, and that such an ideological attraction would likely have long term implications for electoral politics:

There has been an inversion of the old New Deal relationship of social class to the vote. In wide sectors of public policy, groups of high socio-economic status are now more supportive of equalitarian (liberal) change than are the middle to lower socio-economic cohorts (within white America); and as a result liberal (often, although not always, Democratic) candidates are finding higher measures of electoral sustenance at the top of the socio-economic ladder than among middle and lower rungs.<sup>4</sup>

The new trend, in Ladd's view, would be evident not just in presidential politics, but at electoral levels below the presidency. As a result, Ladd suggested that the Democratic Party's leadership base would be significantly expanded:

The fact that the upper socio-economic classes have moved toward the Democrats, especially that the intellectual stratum has become decisively Democratic, would suggest a broader leadership base for Democrats than for Republicans at subpresidential levels.<sup>5</sup>

The transformation detected by Ladd several decades ago appears to have arrived in Connecticut's fourth congressional district, driven by factors beyond the political values of the district's residents: personal lifestyle issues are also contributing to the movement of fourth district voters towards the Democratic Party. Such is the argument of *New York Times* columnist and political commentator David Brooks. His best-selling book, humorously titled *Bobos in Paradise* (2000), effectively captures the idiosyncratic lifestyles of many white, highly educated, young and upper class Americans.<sup>6</sup> Although Brooks's work is not primarily devoted to political analysis, there are elements of his work that have relevance for understanding the current political behavior of fourth district voters, particularly those living in the gold coast communities of lower Fairfield County.

According to Brooks, there is now a subset of the American population who lead a lifestyle that has been shaped by both the liberal "bohemian" values of the 1960s, and the yuppie "bourgeois" values of the 1980s. Using the first two letters of each term, Brooks describes such individuals as "Bobos." In Brooks's view, the values of these two generations have now merged into a new and unusual "hybrid" culture. This is a fascinating thesis, and as one reads Brooks's somewhat pejorative treatment of the so-called "Bobos," it is not too difficult to apply his term to the young, affluent, and highly educated residents of Connecticut's fourth congressional district. As Brooks notes, Bobos tend to watch PBS and listen to NPR. They can be high-powered professionals who, besides practicing their profession, might enjoy touring vineyards or perhaps writing a novel. These people, as Brooks puts it, are unlike the "old country club and martini suburban crowd," and instead believe it is best to show their ideals in the "things they buy and the images they project."<sup>7</sup> In essence, Bobos are very materialistic people, but they insist on conveying a somewhat counter-culture image of disdain for such things. According to Brooks, within this hybrid class of citizens, it is difficult to discern the difference between "an espresso-sipping artist from

a cappuccino-gulping banker” or “the anti-establishment renegade from the pro-establishment company man.” Bobos, in Brooks’s words, “have rebellious attitudes and social-climbing attitudes all scrambled together.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Brooks’s work is not directed towards the politics of the Bobo class, he does cite a voting study conducted in 1998 by the *National Journal* of the 261 richest towns in America. This study discovered a steady rise in support among wealthy voters for Democratic candidates. Democrats in 1980 won 25 percent of the vote in the nation’s richest communities, while in 1996 they won 41 percent of this vote.<sup>9</sup> Thus, there is reason to believe that Bobos will increasingly vote for Democratic candidates. The social, moral, and progressive lifestyle positions of the Democratic Party are more appealing to this elite class of people, rather than the more conservative and traditional values currently endorsed by the GOP. Voters such as these do not appreciate Mike Huckabee, Sarah Palin, or Newt Gingrich telling them how to live their lives.

The work of political scientist Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., which documents a transition of high-status persons toward the Democratic Party, as well as the anecdotal and keen observations of journalist David Brooks concerning the emergence of a bohemian yet materialist class of highly-educated persons, part of class shifting from traditional allegiances, are both highly relevant to understanding the political trends currently in motion: in Connecticut’s fourth congressional district and elsewhere as well. In a similar fashion, I hope that the present volume will not only demonstrate how unique and very “special” Connecticut’s fourth congressional district is but also how the district’s political trends are in some respects reflective of trends well beyond the district’s borders. Political case studies tend to be few in number and are by definition very focused and parochial inquiries, but those that do exist often underscore important recent national trends. One such study is *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, by Thomas Frank, an exceptionally insightful and revealing examination of political trends in the

“Sunflower State.”<sup>10</sup> And just as the political trends in Kansas can serve as a bellwether for national political developments, the trends revealed in a congressional district case study of Connecticut’s fourth district may also have implications beyond its borders. The fourth district could prove to be a bellwether for politics in the New England region and also provide valuable clues concerning where we are heading as a nation.