



Cardiss Collins

1931–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1973–1997
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

Electing to 12 consecutive terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, Cardiss Collins ranks as one of the longest-serving minority women in the history of Congress. Succeeding her late husband, Representative George Collins, after his death in 1972, Cardiss Collins continued his legacy as a loyal politician in the Chicago Democratic organization directed by Mayor Richard Daley. One of only a handful of women to serve in Congress for more than 20 years, and the only black woman in the chamber for six years, Representative Collins evolved into a dedicated legislator who focused on the economic and social needs of her urban district.

Cardiss Hortense Robertson was born on September 24, 1931, in St. Louis, Missouri, to Finley, a laborer, and Rosia Mae Robertson, a nurse. Upon graduating from the Detroit High School of Commerce in Michigan, she began work in a factory tying mattress springs while living with her maternal grandmother in Chicago. She later found employment as a stenographer at a carnival equipment company. Attending night classes at Northwestern University, she earned a business certificate in 1966 and a diploma in professional accounting one year later.¹ After graduation, Cardiss Robertson remained in Chicago, where she worked for the Illinois department of labor as a secretary and later with the Illinois department of revenue as an auditor until her election to Congress.

Robertson gained her first political experience serving as a committeewoman for Chicago's Democratic ward organization. In 1958 she married George Washington Collins and participated in his various campaigns for alderman, committeeman, and U.S. Representative, while raising their son, Kevin.² On November 3, 1970, George Collins won both a special and a general election to fill a U.S. House seat representing Chicago that was vacant following the death of Illinois

Representative Daniel J. Ronan. In his two terms in Congress, Collins served on the House Government Operations and Public Works committees. As a World War II veteran, the Democratic Representative worked to improve conditions for African Americans serving in the military. Known as a diligent, but quiet, Member who rarely spoke on the House Floor, Collins had close political ties to Richard Daley.³

In December 1972, shortly after George Collins won election to another term in Congress, he died in an airplane crash near Chicago's Midway Airport. His widow later recalled, "I never gave politics a thought for myself. When people started proposing my candidacy right after the crash, I was in too much of a daze to think seriously about running."⁴ Collins overcame her initial reluctance, however, and announced her candidacy for the special election to fill the vacant congressional seat that encompassed the predominantly African-American west side of Chicago.⁵ Created in the apportionment of 1947, the inner-city district was one of five congressional seats located in Chicago, each a product of the local political machine.⁶ With the solid backing of Mayor Daley's Cook County Democratic organization, Collins handily defeated her opponents Otis Collins, a former state representative, and Milton Gardner, a Columbia University law student, in the Democratic primary, winning 84 percent of the vote.⁷ On June 5, 1973, she became the first African-American woman to represent the state of Illinois in Congress by defeating Republican contender Lar Daly and Independent Angel Moreno, with a convincing 92 percent of the vote.⁸

Although she was anxious to continue the work begun by her husband in Congress, Collins had much to learn. Her lack of political experience, exacerbated by her entrance midterm, led to unfamiliarity with



congressional procedures. During her early tenure, Collins often relied upon her colleagues in the House to teach her more about the basic rules of Congress. Collins also had to overcome her reserved demeanor. A few years after taking office, she noted, “Once people learned I had something to say, I gained confidence.”⁹

During her first term in Congress, Collins served on the Committee on Government Operations (later Government Reform and Oversight). As a member of the panel throughout her tenure in Congress, Collins chaired two Government Operations subcommittees: Manpower and Housing and Government Activities and Transportation. As chair of the latter subcommittee from 1983 to 1991, Collins worked to improve safety in air travel and fought for stricter controls on the transportation of toxic materials. She eventually rose to the position of Ranking Democrat of the full committee during the 104th Congress (1995–1997). Collins also served on the Committee on International Relations (later Foreign Affairs) from 1975 to 1980, the District of Columbia Committee during the 95th Congress (1977–1979), and the influential Committee on Energy and Commerce (later Commerce) from the 97th through the 104th Congresses (1981–1997), chairing the Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness Subcommittee in the 102nd and the 103rd Congresses (1991–1995). Additionally, Collins was the first African American and woman selected as a Democratic Whip At-Large.

Four years after taking office in 1973, Collins commented that her primary objective as a Representative was to “provide better living and working conditions for people [on Chicago’s west side] and other low and moderate income people throughout the country.” Known for her commitment to the issues directly affecting her constituents, Collins spent eight days each month in her district to ensure that she stayed abreast of their concerns.¹⁰ The close attention Collins paid to her district reaped benefits at the polls. For more than two decades, Collins won by comfortable margins in the strongly Democratic district, typically defeating her Republican opponents by

more than 80 percent.¹¹ Collins did, however, experience some difficult primary races during the mid-1980s (against Danny Davis, who later succeeded her)—a consequence of the decline in power of the Cook County Democratic organization that accelerated with the death of Richard Daley in 1976.¹² She proved resilient without the influential machine that helped launch her congressional career; devoid of its strict control, Collins was able to develop as a politician and to pursue her own legislative interests.

During the 96th Congress (1979–1981), Collins became the chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), augmenting both her influence and her standing in the House. As only the second woman to hold the leadership position in the CBC and as the fourth black woman ever to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives, Collins found herself in the spotlight. The high visibility of her position encouraged her to become more outspoken. At one fundraiser, Collins voiced the growing disillusionment of the CBC, declaring, “We will no longer wait for political power to be shared with us, we will take it.”¹³ Members of the CBC praised Collins, citing her ability to lead with fairness and to create an atmosphere that encouraged unity through debates rather than arguments.¹⁴ As chairwoman, Collins voiced disapproval with President James Earl (Jimmy) Carter’s record on civil rights. She criticized the President for failing to gather enough congressional support to pass legislation making Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday a federal holiday. Collins also disparaged the House for its failure to pass the bill, alleging that “racism had a part in it.”¹⁵

Throughout her 24 years in Congress, Collins dedicated herself to the advancement of African Americans and other minorities. According to Collins, some federal agencies, such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Federal Trade Commission, and the U.S. Justice Department, were not upholding the provisions of the Civil Rights Act requiring agencies that received federal funding to provide information on their affirmative action programs. Her 1985 findings as chair of the

House Subcommittee on Government Activities and Transportation led her to ask Congress to curb funding to specific agencies, arguing, “Laws that have been debated and passed by the courts cannot arbitrarily be negated by individuals.” In the 1980s, she continued her defense of affirmative action by drawing attention to the hiring practices of U.S. airlines, which rarely placed African Americans in professional positions.¹⁶ Representative Collins’s push for equality in the aviation industry helped pave the way for an amendment to the Airport and Airway Safety, Capacity, and Expansion Act of 1987, requiring that 10 percent of all concession stands in airports be run by minority- and women-owned businesses.

Collins also worked to prevent federal tax write-offs for advertising firms that discriminated against minority-owned media companies. Hoping to “provide black and other minority station owners with a mechanism for redress,” Collins argued that financial penalties for offending agencies would help combat discrimination and level the playing field for all media organizations. She also crusaded against gender and racial inequality in broadcast licensing. On several occasions, Collins introduced legislation to preserve Federal Communications Commission policies designed to increase the number of women and minorities owning media companies.¹⁷

In an effort to promote equal opportunities for women in sports at colleges and universities, Collins introduced the Equality in Athletic Disclosure Act on February 17, 1993. This amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965 directed colleges and universities to publicize the rate of participation in athletic programs by gender. In recognition of her commitment to gender equity in athletics, Collins was inducted into the Women’s Sports Hall of Fame in 1994.¹⁸ Collins also cosponsored the Universal Health Care Act and the Health Security Act in 1993 and urged the National Institutes of Health to focus on the health issues that concern minorities, since “little use has been made of studies on minority prone diseases despite the significant disproportionate array of health conditions.”¹⁹ A longtime advocate of increasing breast cancer awareness, Collins drafted legislation to help elderly and disabled women receive Medicare coverage for mammograms and introduced a law designating October as National Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

Collins declined to run for re-election to the 105th Congress (1997–1999). Although she vowed to remain active in Democratic politics, she decided to end her career in elective office, telling reporters, “I’m going to be 65 next year, and that’s the time many people retire.”²⁰ After completing her last term, Collins returned to Chicago, Illinois. She later moved to Alexandria, Virginia.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Collins, Cardiss,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000634>.

NOTES

- 1 Marie Garrett, “Cardiss Collins,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 2003): 204 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAW*).
- 2 Garrett, “Cardiss Collins,” *NBAW*.
- 3 “Rep. George Collins (D-Ill.) Killed in Chicago Jet Crash,” 10 December 1972, *Washington Post*: B4.
- 4 Garrett, “Cardiss Collins,” *NBAW*: 205.
- 5 Joel Weisman, “Congressman’s Widow Elected in His Place,” 6 June 1973, *Washington Post*: A7.
- 6 Leo M. Snowiss, “Congressional Recruitment and Representation,” *American Political Science Review* 60 (1966): 628–629.
- 7 “House Race Won By Widow,” 18 April 1973, *Washington Post*: A22.
- 8 “Widow Wins a Bid for Husband Seat,” 18 April 1973, *New York Times*: 42; Andrew H. Malcolm, “Illinois Elects Its First Black Woman to Congress, on 92% of Vote,” 7 June 1973, *New York Times*: 11; “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html.
- 9 Jacqueline Trescott, “The Coming Out of Cardiss Collins,” 21 September 1979, *Washington Post*: C1.
- 10 Garrett, “Cardiss Collins,” *NBAW*.
- 11 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html.
- 12 Roger Biles, *Richard J. Daley: Politics, Race and the Governing of Chicago* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995): 221–222, 232; *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1993): 474–475.
- 13 Jacqueline Trescott and Elisabeth Bumiller, “The Raucous Caucus,” 24 September 1979, *Washington Post*: B1.
- 14 Trescott, “The Coming Out of Cardiss Collins.”
- 15 *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1989): 345.
- 16 “Cardiss Collins,” *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 10 (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group, 2002) (hereinafter referred to as *CBB*). See also *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 1st sess. (26 February 1985): E633.
- 17 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 1st sess. (3 January 1991): E32.
- 18 Karen Foerstel, *Biographical Dictionary of Congressional Women* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999): 63; “Colleges Told to Publish Sports Costs,” 3 December 1995, *New York Times*: 37.
- 19 “Cardiss Collins,” *CBB*.
- 20 “A Chicago Democrat is Quitting Congress,” 9 November 1995, *New York Times*: B14.



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