



Augustus Freeman (Gus) Hawkins

1907–2007

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1963–1991
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

Augustus F. Hawkins's political career spanned 56 years of public service in the California assembly and the U.S. House of Representatives. As the first black politician west of the Mississippi River elected to the House, Hawkins guided countless pieces of legislation aimed at improving the lives of minorities and the urban poor. More reserved than many other African-American Representatives of the period, Hawkins worked behind the scenes to accomplish his legislative goals. Known by his colleagues on the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) as the "Silent Warrior," the longtime Representative earned the respect of black leaders because of his determination to tackle social issues like unemployment and his commitment to securing equal educational opportunities for impoverished Americans.¹ "The leadership belongs not to the loudest, not to those who beat the drums or blow the trumpets," Hawkins said, "but to those who day in and day out, in all seasons, work for the practical realization of a better world—those who have the stamina to persist and remain dedicated."²

Augustus Freeman (Gus) Hawkins was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, on August 31, 1907. The youngest of five children, he moved to Los Angeles, California, with his parents, Nyanza and Hattie (Freeman) Hawkins, and siblings in 1918. Nyanza Hawkins, a pharmacist and formerly an African explorer, left his native England for the United States.³ Resembling his paternal English grandfather, Gus was often mistaken for a Caucasian throughout his lifetime. After graduating from Los Angeles's Jefferson High School in 1926, he earned a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1931.⁴ Although he planned to study civil engineering in graduate school, Hawkins's lack of financial support, exacerbated by the Great Depression, forced him to alter his career path. He

opened a real estate company with his brother Edward and took classes at the University of California's Institute of Government. Newly interested in politics, Hawkins supported the 1932 presidential bid of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the 1934 gubernatorial campaign of Upton Sinclair, a famous muckraker and author of *The Jungle*.⁵ Hawkins quickly converted his political awareness into a career by defeating 16-year veteran Republican Frederick Roberts to earn a spot in the California assembly, the lower chamber of the state legislature. During the campaign, Hawkins criticized Roberts for remaining in office too long; ironically, the future Representative became known for the longevity of his public service. While serving in the state assembly, Hawkins married Pegga Adeline Smith on August 28, 1945. After she died in 1966, he married Elsie Taylor on June 30, 1977.⁶

As a member of the California assembly from 1935 to 1963, Hawkins compiled a substantial legislative record that centered on the interests of his predominantly African-American and Hispanic Los Angeles district. In addition to chairing the joint legislative organization committees, he introduced a fair housing act, a fair employment practices act, legislation for low-cost housing and disability insurance, and provisions for workmen's compensation for domestics. In 1958, Hawkins lost a bid to become assembly speaker—widely considered the second-most-powerful elected office in the state behind the governor—to Ralph M. Brown of Modesto, but Brown named Hawkins chairman of the powerful rules committee.⁷ After two years in that post, Hawkins set his sights on the U.S. Congress. "I felt that as a Congressman I could do a more effective job than in the [state] Assembly," Hawkins remarked. In 1962, Hawkins entered the Democratic primary to represent a newly created majority-black congressional district encompassing



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central Los Angeles.⁸ His campaign received a boost when President John F. Kennedy endorsed him. With an established civil rights record, Hawkins easily defeated his three opponents—Everette Porter, an attorney, Ted Bruinsma, a business consultant, and Merle Boyce, a physician—with more than 50 percent of the vote.⁹ His momentum continued as he won the general election by a landslide, capturing 85 percent of the vote against an African-American attorney, Republican Herman Smith, to earn a spot in the 88th Congress (1963–1965).¹⁰ After the election, Hawkins remarked, “It’s like shifting gears—from the oldest man in the Assembly in years of service to a freshman in Congress.”¹¹ Even though the California state legislature reapportioned the Los Angeles district four times after Hawkins’s initial election, the district remained predominantly African American and Hispanic and consistently supported Hawkins, who won by more than 80 percent throughout his career.¹²

As a Representative, Hawkins championed many of the same causes he promoted in the California assembly. During his first term in Congress, he sat on the Education and Labor Committee, which was chaired by the flamboyant and controversial Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of New York. Eventually rising to chairman, a position he held from the second session of the 98th Congress (1983–1985) until his retirement at the end of the 101st Congress (1989–1991), Hawkins wielded considerable authority over issues relating to education and employment. He also served on the House Administration Committee from the 91st through the 98th Congresses (1969–1985), acting as chairman for the final two terms. Hawkins chaired the Joint Committee on the Library during the 97th Congress (1981–1983) and the Joint Committee on Printing during the 98th Congress. He left all three panels when he assumed the chairmanship of the Education and Labor Committee.¹³ The California Representative served on the Joint Economic Committee from the 97th Congress to the 101st Congress.

Only one term after he took office, Hawkins was thrust into the political spotlight by the 1965 Watts riots,

which leveled an impoverished section of Los Angeles in his district. Hawkins challenged his fellow lawmakers to help his constituents, saying, “The trouble is that nothing has ever been done to solve the long-range underlying problems.”¹⁴ He described the rioting as an expression of desperation, partially due to the absence of long-promised federal antipoverty funds, but did not condone the violence.¹⁵ Throughout his career, Hawkins also eschewed the militant approach of some of his congressional colleagues, arguing, “We need clearer thinking and fewer exhibitionists in the civil rights movement.”¹⁶

From the beginning of his career on the Hill, Hawkins worked to improve the quality of life for minorities. In 1964 he toured the South with three white Representatives to champion African-American voter registration and to observe discrimination. Praising the volunteers who risked their lives to fight oppression, Hawkins recalled, “Being congressmen didn’t exempt us from the constant terror felt by anyone challenging established racial practices.”¹⁷ Among Hawkins’s most notable accomplishments in his early years in the House was the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—a federal agency to prevent discrimination in the workplace—in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Hawkins believed targeting discrimination in the workforce was essential to the advancement of civil rights. Although pleased with the passage of the legislation, he called the civil rights bill “only a beginning.” He added, “It is incomplete and inadequate; but it represents a step forward.”¹⁸ Hawkins also succeeded in obtaining an honorable discharge for 167 black soldiers who were dismissed from the 25th Infantry Regiment of the U.S. Army after being falsely accused of a public disturbance in Brownsville, Texas, in 1906.¹⁹

Hawkins’s modest role in the CBC strongly suggested his divergence from the tactics of black leaders. Selected vice chairman of the organization during its first term of existence (1971–1973), Hawkins never occupied another leadership position in the CBC.²⁰ In 1980, he remarked that the CBC “could do a better job,” since “now it’s 85 percent social and 15 percent business.”²¹ Hawkins’s

nonconfrontational manner did not conform with the radical and militant civil rights movement that swept through much of the country during the 1960s. While other African-American Representatives of the period, such as Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and William L. Clay, Sr., of Missouri, routinely voiced their outrage about racial discrimination on the public stage, Hawkins focused on producing change through legislation. But despite his dedication to the civil rights movement and his legislative efforts to promote racial equality, Hawkins's political pragmatism conflicted with the militant tactics of the other black Members. Explaining his position, Hawkins said, "Racializing an issue defeats my purpose—which is to get people on my side."²² Unlike some African Americans who worked on civil rights legislation only with other black politicians, Hawkins formed alliances with labor groups and white ethnic groups to increase the likelihood of advancing his agenda.²³

Hawkins enthusiastically backed much of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society legislation, but he found fault with the administration's foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Though he did not believe the Vietnam War undermined domestic efforts to end poverty, he noted that the United States made a mistake in "believing we can impose our way of life on other people."²⁴ Hawkins's criticism of the war escalated throughout the 1960s and continued into President Richard M. Nixon's administration. Serving on a select committee to provide specialized information to the House about U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Hawkins and 11 congressional colleagues set off on a fact-finding mission to Southeast Asia in June 1970.²⁵ During the trip, Hawkins and Democratic Representative William Anderson of Tennessee—the only Representatives to tour a South Vietnamese prison for civilians on Con Son Island—reported witnessing prisoners, including women and children, locked in "tiger cages" and suffering from extreme malnutrition.²⁶ They drafted a House Resolution urging Congress to "condemn the cruel and inhumane treatment" of prisoners in South Vietnam. The two Representatives

also pressured President Nixon to send an independent task force to investigate the prison and "prevent further degradation and death."²⁷ Hawkins's 1970 tour of Vietnam convinced him that America should withdraw its troops from Southeast Asia.²⁸

Hawkins was determined to use his position as a Member of Congress to curb unemployment in the United States. In 1975, an economic downturn caused unemployment to soar to 8.5 percent—the highest rate in a generation. The joblessness rate for nonwhites—nearly 14 percent—was especially devastating to inner-city African Americans.²⁹ From 1974 to 1975, Hawkins worked with Senator (and former Vice President) Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota to draft legislation aimed at reducing unemployment levels to three percent over a period of 18 months. Introduced in 1976, the bill took two years until passage. On the House Floor, he rebuked his colleagues for allowing the measure to lose momentum and urged immediate action, saying both chambers of Congress had "a serious responsibility for coming to grips with the formulation of a national economic policy."³⁰ The Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act of 1978, also known as the Humphrey–Hawkins Act, set a target of reducing the unemployment rate to 4 percent by 1983, but the final version of the bill, which only vaguely resembled the ambitious first draft, contained few substantive guidelines for reaching the target level.³¹ At the October 1978 White House signing ceremony, President James Earl (Jimmy) Carter observed that the legislation was a tribute to Senator Humphrey, who had died earlier that year. Hawkins, who received a standing ovation for his role in the bill, recalled, "the legislation was clearly symbolic"—a judgment shared by many experts.³²

Hawkins dedicated much of his career to enacting legislation concerning education, job training, and equality in the workplace. In 1974, he authored the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. Four years later, he served as floor manager for a measure to increase the effectiveness of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act; his efforts led to the creation of 660,000 new



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jobs.³³ That same year, Hawkins sponsored the Pregnancy Disability Act to increase the rights of working women. In an impassioned plea to his colleagues, he said, “We have the opportunity to ensure that genuine equality in the American labor force is more than an illusion and that pregnancy will no longer be the basis of unfavorable treatment of working women.”³⁴ With the passage of the bill in 1978, discrimination against pregnant employees became illegal.

In 1984 Hawkins became chairman of the Education and Labor Committee a month after the sudden death of the former chair, Representative Carl Perkins.³⁵ As chairman, Hawkins continued his aggressive pursuit of increased educational opportunities for the underprivileged. During the 1980s he focused on legislation to increase spending for adult literacy and childhood education. In 1988 he helped secure the passage of the School Improvement Act (also known as the Hawkins–Stafford Act), a bill that altered the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965)—landmark legislation that authorized federal aid to U.S. schools—by stipulating that only schools demonstrating improved academic achievement would receive federal aid.³⁶ By the time Hawkins took over the Education and Labor Committee, his liberal politics contrasted with those of a conservative President. He sparred repeatedly with President Ronald W. Reagan regarding marked increases in military spending, while his New Deal-style proposals were periodically opposed by Republicans and by many younger Democrats.

During his final terms in office, Hawkins suffered a series of major legislative setbacks. Unable to muster enough support for an extensive overhaul of the welfare system, he also failed to push through a federal childcare program and a substantial increase in the minimum wage.³⁷ The final blow was President George H. W. Bush’s veto of a civil rights bill sponsored by Hawkins. Passed by both the House and Senate, the Civil Rights Act of 1990 sought to increase job protection for minorities and women.³⁸ Even with a presidential veto looming, Hawkins uncharacteristically declined to compromise, declaring, “We have had enough input from all parties on the bill.”³⁹ Hawkins portrayed the President’s decision as a “national retreat from civil rights,” and when the Senate failed to overturn the veto, Hawkins’s legislation did not become law.⁴⁰

In the face of increased opposition, Hawkins continued to support federally funded education and employment programs. He refused to shift his ideology, despite the fact that many in the Democratic Party considered his beliefs outdated. His frustration with the tenor of the institution and his age led him to retire at the end of the 101st Congress in 1991.⁴¹ For many years he lived on Capitol Hill. Months after his 100th birthday, Hawkins died on November 10, 2007, in Bethesda, Maryland. “He passed on a new tradition,” noted former House colleague Yvonne Burke of California, “that African Americans can be elected, get high position in committees and set the tone and become leaders.”⁴²

FOR FURTHER READING

“Hawkins, Augustus Freeman (Gus),” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=H000367>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Howard University (Washington, DC), Manuscript Division, Moorland–Spingarn Research Center. *Oral History*: In the Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, 1969, 26 pages. An interview with Representative Augustus (Gus) Hawkins conducted by Robert Wright on February 28, 1969. Representative Hawkins discusses the history of Title VII (equal employment) of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, antipoverty programs and their relationship to the 1965 Watts Riots, and the operations of congressional committees.

University of California, Los Angeles (Los Angeles, CA), Department of Special Collections, Library. *Papers*: 1935–1990, 137 linear feet. The Augustus Hawkins Collection contains the series Legislative Files, Subject Files, Correspondence Files, District Office Files, Education and Labor Committee Files, California State Assembly Files, and Miscellaneous Material. The papers cover subjects such as civil rights, employment, equal opportunity, education, job training, and childcare. The two series with perhaps the greatest research value are the legislative files, since they document Hawkins’s attempts to enact legislation and his committee service; and the subject files, which provide background information, including Hawkins’s handwritten notes, for many of his legislative efforts. A finding aid is available in the repository and online.

NOTES

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- 2 *Congressional Record*, House, 101st Cong., 2nd sess. (27 October, 1990): E3656.
- 3 “Hawkins, Augustus,” *Current Biography, 1983* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1983): 176.
- 4 Shirley Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress* (Washington, DC: United States Capitol Historical Society, 1998): 39.
- 5 For the most recent work on Roosevelt’s 1932 election, see Donald A. Ritchie, *Electing FDR: The New Deal Campaign of 1932* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007). See also Greg Mitchell, *The Campaign of the Century: Upton Sinclair’s Race for Governor of California and the Birth of Media Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992).
- 6 Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 221–223; Washington, *Outstanding African Americans of Congress*, 39–40; “Hawkins, Augustus,” *Current Biography, 1983*: 176–179.
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- 8 Gladwin Hill, “16 Men Battling in California for Eight New Seats in House,” 20 October 1962, *New York Times*: 10; Richard Bergholz, “Democrats Facing Primary Problems,” 31 May 1962, *Los Angeles Times*: A1.
- 9 Richard Bergholz, “District Changes Listed for Voters,” 8 April 1962, *Los Angeles Times*: A2.
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- 11 “Negro, Congress-Bound, Loath to Leave State,” 8 November 1962, *Los Angeles Times*: 16.
- 12 William J. Eaton, “Hawkins Retiring—But Not Quitting,” 23 December 1990, *Los Angeles Times*: 3A.
- 13 Hawkins also served as acting chairman of the Joint Committee on Printing during the 96th Congress (1979–1981). See Garrison Nelson et al., *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1947–1992: Committee Histories and Member Assignments Volume 2* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1994): 395.
- 14 Peter Bart, “Officials Divided in Placing Blame,” 15 August 1965, *New York Times*: 81.
- 15 Augustus Hawkins, Oral History Interview, 29 February 1969, Manuscript Division, Moorland–Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC: 10–11.



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- 16 “Augustus F. Hawkins,” *Politics in America, 1989* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1988): 181.
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- 18 *Congressional Record*, House, 88th Cong., 2nd sess. (10 February 1964): 2733.
- 19 Paul Houston, “Black Ex-Soldier,” 2 December 1972, *Los Angeles Times*: 1; John Dreyfuss, “Waiting Pays Off,” 19 April 1973, *Los Angeles Times*: A3. For a useful overview of the Brownsville affair, see Ann J. Lane, *The Brownsville Affair: National Crisis and Black Reaction* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1971). For an additional perspective on Theodore Roosevelt’s role in the Brownsville affair, see Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001): 452–455, 464–467.
- 20 Robert Singh, *The Congressional Black Caucus: Racial Politics in the U.S. Congress* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998): 65.
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- 22 *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1989): 181.
- 23 Augustus Hawkins, Oral History Interview: 20; “Hawkins, Augustus,” *Current Biography, 1983*: 177.
- 24 Augustus Hawkins, Oral History Interview: 18.
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- 29 See “Table Ba583–596, Unemployment Rate, By Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origins: 1947–2000,” *Historical Statistics of the United States, Volume 2: Work and Welfare*, Susan B. Carter et al., eds (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 95.
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- 40 Trescott, “The Long Haul of Rep. Gus Hawkins”; Helen Dewar, “Senate Upholds Civil Rights Bill Veto, Dooming Measure for 1990,” 25 October 1990, *Washington Post*: A15.
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