

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

William J. Jefferson

1947–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM LOUISIANA

1991–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

When William Jefferson won election to the U.S. House in 1990 from a New Orleans-centered district, he became the first African American to represent the state of Louisiana since Reconstruction. Jefferson, who had more than a decade of experience in the Louisiana state senate, specialized in economic matters and eventually earned a seat on the influential Ways and Means Committee.

William Jennings Jefferson was born on March 14, 1947, in Lake Providence, Louisiana. Jefferson grew up in poverty in a family of 10 children in the far northeastern part of the state. In 1969, he graduated from Southern University Agricultural and Mechanical College with a B.A. degree. Three years later, on scholarship, he earned a J.D. from Harvard Law School. In 1996, Jefferson earned a Master of Laws in taxation from Georgetown University. After law school, he served for a year as a law clerk for veteran U.S. District Court Judge Alvin B. Rubin in New Orleans. From 1973 to 1975, Jefferson then served as a legislative assistant to Senator J. Bennett Johnston of Louisiana. Jefferson is married to Dr. Andrea Green-Jefferson, and they have raised five daughters: Jamila, Jalila, Jelani, Nailah, and Akilah.¹

Jefferson entered elective politics in the late 1970s, when he defeated a white incumbent for a Louisiana senate seat that covered the affluent Uptown section of New Orleans. He served in Baton Rouge for 12 years, working on the finance committee and chairing the special budget stabilization committee, which was created to rein in state spending and develop more accurate revenue projections. He also chaired the influential governmental affairs committee, which had oversight of reapportionment.² In 1982 and 1986, Jefferson was an unsuccessful candidate for mayor of New Orleans.

In 1990, when 17-year House veteran Corinne C. (Lindy) Boggs announced her retirement, Jefferson entered a crowded field to succeed her. The district covered much of New Orleans proper, the wealthy Uptown section, Algiers on the west bank

of the Mississippi River, and the sprawling Kenner suburbs on the city's west side. In 1983, court-ordered redistricting made it the state's first majority-black district and, by 1990, Representative Boggs was the last white Representative in the country to represent a majority black-district. Jefferson was one of four principal contenders in the October open primary, which included Marc H. Morial, son of former mayor Dutch Morial (who served from 1978 to 1986 and the city's first African-American mayor), a state senator who had been endorsed by the governor, and a prominent city school board member. Jefferson finished first with 25 percent of the vote, with Morial trailing at 22 percent.³ In the spirited two-man November runoff, Jefferson prevailed with 53 percent of the vote. In his subsequent seven re-election campaigns, Jefferson won handily with 73 percent of the vote or more.⁴

When Jefferson took his seat in the House in the 102nd Congress (1991–1993), he earned seats on the Education and Labor and the Merchant Marine and Fisheries committees. In the following Congress, he relinquished those assignments for a coveted spot on the Ways and Means Committee. When the Republicans took control of the chamber for the 104th Congress (1995–1997) Jefferson lost his Ways and Means post and was transferred to the National Security Committee (later renamed Armed Services), the House Oversight Committee (later renamed House Administration), and the Joint Committee on Printing. In the next Congress, Jefferson again won an assignment to the exclusive Ways and Means Committee, relinquishing his prior assignments. He remained on Ways and Means until June 2006, adding an assignment to the Budget Committee in the 109th Congress. In the 110th Congress, Jefferson was assigned to the Small Business Committee.

In Congress, Jefferson specializes in trade and tax issues. New Orleans is a major U.S. port, and trade is a primary economic engine. Jefferson has advocated trade opportunities in neglected markets such as Brazil and Africa. He served as co-chair of the Africa Trade and Investment Caucus and also chaired the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation board of directors. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which flooded much of New Orleans and its surrounding environs in August 2005, Jefferson pushed for reforms to the Small Business Administration (SBA) disaster loan program, which was criticized in the aftermath of the storm. The House also passed Jefferson's amendment to extend the deadline for minority-owned businesses in his district to rebuild under the SBA's redevelopment program.⁵

In 2006, Jefferson was re-elected to a ninth term against Democratic challenger Karen Carter, with 57 percent of the vote.⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

"Jefferson, William Jennings," *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biobdisplay.pl?index=J000070>.

NOTES

- 1 "Official Biography of William J. Jefferson," <http://www.house.gov/jefferson/biography.shtml> (accessed 2 November 2007).
- 2 *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 644.
- 3 *Almanac of American Politics, 1992* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1991): 513.
- 4 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 5 *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2007): 435; "Official Biography of William J. Jefferson."
- 6 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.