



Earl Frederick Hilliard

1942–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1993–2003
DEMOCRAT FROM ALABAMA

Earl Hilliard's long career in the state legislature catapulted him into Congress—making him the first black Representative from Alabama since Jeremiah Haralson left office during Reconstruction. “We have not had a voice in 117 years,” Hilliard declared upon his first election. “I will be able to articulate the views and opinions of a group that hasn't had representation in a very long time.”¹

Earl Frederick Hilliard was born in Birmingham, Alabama, on April 9, 1942, to Iola Frazier and William Hilliard. Hilliard grew up in a segregated society and chose to attend traditionally black colleges. While a student at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, Hilliard met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The meeting had a powerful effect on him, as Hilliard vowed to become “one of King's foot soldiers in the war for racial equality.”² After receiving a B.A. from Morehouse in 1964, Hilliard received a J.D. at Howard University Law School in Washington, DC, in 1967. In 1970, he received a M.B.A. at Atlanta University in Georgia. He married Mary Franklin in 1967, and the couple had two children: Alesia and Earl, Jr.

Hilliard began his career in elective politics when he won a campaign for a seat in the Alabama state house of representatives in 1975. In 1980, he was elected to the state senate. Hilliard's senate career focused on helping the urban poor, who constituted the bulk of his Birmingham-area constituents. He also earned a reputation as a hard-fighting, tactical legislator.³ In 1991, Hilliard declared bankruptcy after a deal to sell a radio station he owned fell through.⁴ However, he thought his experience would benefit him as a legislator. “The bankruptcy gave me a chance to pay people back in an orderly manner,” he noted. “I'm able to understand what it is not to be able to pay obligations.”⁵

In 1992, redistricting gave the Alabama legislature a chance to create a single black-majority U.S. congressional

district in a state that had not sent an African American to Congress since Reconstruction. The west-central district stretched primarily from the Mississippi–Alabama border through Selma to Montgomery. The district went as far north as Tuscaloosa, with a small offshoot through Jefferson County to Birmingham. Montgomery and Birmingham made up the bulk of the urban population; however, the rest of the district's boundaries included the poor, rural areas of the black belt and the old cotton-growing regions. The district's three major cities—Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham—were battlegrounds at the heart of the 1960s civil rights movement. All the candidates in the Republican and the Democratic primaries were black, but because the district was overwhelmingly Democratic, a primary victory would be tantamount to winning the general election.⁶ Hilliard ran an arduous campaign to win the nomination. He faced a crowded field of six candidates in his June 2 primary, the favorite being Hank Sanders of Selma, a fellow state senator.⁷ The two squared off on issues of health care and job creation. Hilliard prevailed with 31 percent of the vote versus Sanders's 24 percent, sending the two into a runoff election.⁸ Hilliard narrowly defeated Sanders with 51 percent of the vote in the August runoff. The following November, Hilliard defeated Republican Kervin Jones, a black Tuscaloosa farmer, with 70 percent of the vote. In his next four re-election bids, Hilliard won at least 71 percent of the vote, running unopposed in 1998.⁹ He initially took assignments on the Agriculture and Small Business committees. In 1997, he traded the Small Business post for a seat on the International Relations Committee. An active member of the Congressional Black Caucus, Hilliard was elected vice chairman of the organization for the 105th Congress (1997–1999).

Hilliard's initial focus in Congress was creating economic opportunity for his constituents. He attempted





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to protect and expand the Alabama military installations used by the U.S. Army and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, suggesting that closing American military bases in Germany and Japan so that more funding would be available for domestic military installations.¹⁰ He also worked to protect a Tuscaloosa-area airport that was difficult to sustain because of the region's sparse population. Its only airline threatened to leave in 1995 and Hilliard feared the loss of the airport would hurt business growth in the region. "Tuscaloosa and the surrounding communities would suffer terribly without local air service, and this travel option will become increasingly important as industrial development continues in the area," he wrote to a colleague.¹¹ Due in large part to Hilliard's lobbying, the House and Senate Appropriations committees diverted limited funding to Tuscaloosa in the Essential Air Service legislation.¹² Hilliard also was crucial in convincing a Korean-based car manufacturer to open a plant outside Montgomery. At the plant's groundbreaking ceremony in April 2002, he was a featured speaker.¹³

Hilliard attempted to assist the rural regions of his district by submitting legislation to establish a Southern Rural Development Commission, which he modeled on the Appalachian Regional Commission. The purpose of the commission was to dispense federal money to projects enhancing economic development, improving health care, and offering job training. The new commission would cover the "black belt" or agricultural region of 10 southern states; however, the measure died in committee.¹⁴ Hilliard also offered creative legislation to help his poor farming constituents, asking to add rabbit to the list of meats that were federally inspected. Hoping federal safety inspections would increase rabbit's popularity among consumers, Hilliard speculated that his constituents could breed the animals to produce the meat quickly and cheaply.¹⁵

Hilliard's frequent foreign travel as a member of the International Relations (later Foreign Affairs) Committee garnered national attention.¹⁶ In August 1997, he made an unauthorized trip to Libya. The State Department had banned American travel to Libya with a U.S. passport

as well as any business and financial transactions with the country since sanctions were imposed in 1986 and Libya was declared a terrorist state. The State Department warned that traveling to the country was "contrary to U.S. policy" and was unaware that Hilliard had made the trip until he returned to the United States.¹⁷ On September 26, International Relations Committee Chairman Ben Gilman of New York announced that the committee would review Hilliard's actions in Libya and inquire whether he had broken any laws.¹⁸ The Committee on Standards of Official Conduct eventually took up the case at the end of September.¹⁹

In cooperation with the investigation, Hilliard revealed that a Swiss company headed by a wealthy Tunisian businessman that dealt in crude oil had paid nearly \$5,000 for Hilliard's trip to Tunisia and Libya from August 21 to 25.²⁰ Hilliard claimed he went to Libya to investigate how American money was being spent abroad. "The majority of our foreign aid is spent in the Middle Eastern region between Egypt and other north African countries," Hilliard explained. "[Libya] was a country I had not been to, and I had the opportunity to go this time and I went." He noted that his trip was an attempt to "develop channels for dialogue" with the Muslim world.²¹ In a letter to his constituents, Hilliard noted that he did not use his American passport to enter the country and that he did not spend any money, which was later confirmed by the U.S. Treasury Department.²² The Standards Committee agreed with the Treasury Department's assessment and dropped the case against Hilliard in the middle of November.²³

On December 3, 1997, a Capitol Hill newspaper published a two-part story that Hilliard had broken several House rules related to campaign staffing and financing.²⁴ On June 20, 2001, the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct issued a written rebuke of Hilliard's actions. By signing an agreement admitting to the violations, he received the least severe punishment the committee could administer: a three-page letter outlining the violations, signed by the committee's Chairman and Ranking Member.²⁵

In the 2002 election, Hilliard faced a previous opponent, Artur Davis. The Harvard-educated Davis, a former assistant district attorney, returned to challenge the incumbent with greater Democratic support. He accused Hilliard of doing little for the district in his decade in office. Moreover, a slight change in district lines added more voters from counties that favored Davis and eliminated two counties that primarily favored Hilliard.²⁶ Hilliard narrowly edged out Davis in the early June primary, 46 to 43 percent, resulting in a runoff election.²⁷ But Davis overcame his earlier deficit to win the runoff against Hilliard on June 25, 56 percent to 44 percent. Hilliard returned to his law firm in Birmingham after his loss.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Hilliard, Earl Frederick,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=H000621>.

NOTES

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- 2 *Politics in America, 2002* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 19.
- 3 *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 38; “Earl Frederick Hilliard,” Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1996.
- 4 Joe Nabbefeld, “Hilliard Liable for Debts Totaling \$528,098, Records Show,” 5 September 1993, *Birmingham News* (AL).
- 5 “Earl Frederick Hilliard,” Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1996.
- 6 David Pace, “Birthplace of Voting Rights Movement Getting First Black Congressman,” 28 May 1992, Associated Press.
- 7 *Politics in America, 2002*: 20; “House Race Briefings: Featured Tuesday Primaries: AL 07,” 29 May 1992, *The Hotline*; Robert B. McNeil, “Earl Hilliard Reports Spending \$189,097 to Win Democratic Nomination,” 20 July 1992, States News Service.
- 8 Tim Curran, “Alabama Runoffs Tuesday Decide Edreich Foe, Demo Nominee to Succeed Dickinson,” 25 June 1992, *Roll Call*.
- 9 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html.
- 10 Robert Dunnavant, “Hilliard Backs Space Station Development,” 27 April 1993, *Birmingham News*.
- 11 Mike Zapler, “Hilliard Changes Strategy on Airline Service, Targeting Callahan,” 12 October 1995, State News Service.
- 12 Mike Zapler, “Tuscaloosa’s Airline Service Spared,” 26 October 1995, State News Service.
- 13 Mary Orndorff, “Hilliard Says, ‘I Vote For The Working People,’” 23 May 2002, *Birmingham News*.
- 14 Michael Brumas, “Hilliard Proposes New Agency to Help South’s Rural Poor,” 25 January 1994, *Birmingham News*; see H.R. 3901, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess.



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- 16 “Hilliard Says All Trips Were Official Business,” 25 May 1995, *Birmingham News*.
- 17 Michael Brumas, “Hilliard Visits Off-Limits Libya State Department Says He Wasn’t Acting On Its Behalf,” 17 September 1997, *Birmingham News*.
- 18 David Pace, “Rep. Hilliard’s Libya Trip Examined,” 26 September 1997, Associated Press.
- 19 Jock Friedly, “Hilliard Trip to Libya Sponsored by Wealthy Tunisian Businessman,” 1 October 1997, *The Hill*.
- 20 Michael Brumas, “Hilliard Confirms Traveling to Libya,” 27 September 1997, *Birmingham News*.
- 21 Michael Brumas, “Hilliard: Libya Trip Attempt at ‘Dialogue,’” 30 September 1997, *Birmingham News*.
- 22 Michael Brumas, “Treasury: Hilliard Trip to Libya OK ‘No Indication of a Violation,’” 1 October 1997, *Birmingham News*; Val Walton, “Hilliard: Libya Trip Broke No Law,” 29 September 1997, *Birmingham News*.
- 23 In April 1999, Hilliard claimed partial credit when Libyan officials handed over two suspects from the bombing of a Pan-Am commercial flight over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988. When the suspects went on trial at the International Criminal Court at The Hague, the Netherlands, in 2000, Hilliard boasted, “I’m telling you that [the trial] never would have happened had I not interceded.” See Michael Brumas, “Hilliard Says He Helped Get Libya to Hand Over Suspects,” 9 April 1999, *Birmingham News*; Michael Brumas, “Hilliard: Stepping on Toes Makes Him a Target,” 16 May 2000, *Birmingham News*.
- 24 The newspaper’s initial allegations are documented in Jock Friedly, “Hilliard’s Finances Indicate Possible Violations of Federal Law,” 3 December 1997, *The Hill*; Jock Friedly, “Hilliard Campaign Boosted His Business,” 3 December 1997, *The Hill*. Hilliard had previously come under fire after a federal campaign report revealed that he paid more than \$17,000 from his campaign funds to his family members in his 1992 campaign. Hilliard justified the payouts, noting that his family members worked for his campaign. See Michael Brumas, “Hilliard Pays Family With Campaign Cash,” 5 August 1993, *Birmingham News*.
- 25 See Committee on Standards of Official Conduct history of disciplinary actions at http://www.house.gov/ethics/Historical_Chart_Final_Version.htm; Juliet Eilperin, “House Ethics Panel Launches Probe of Rep. Hilliard’s Business Dealings,” 29 January 1998, *Roll Call*; Michael Brumas, “Capitol Hill Paper Hits Hilliard Dealings, He Calls It GOP Attempt ‘To Discredit Me,’” 4 December 1997, *Birmingham News*; Michael Brumas, “House Probe Set Off Hilliard’s Finances,” 24 September 1999, *Birmingham News*; Michael Brumas, “GOP Blamed for Probe Hilliard’s Attorney Cites Ethics Committee Chairman,” 25 September, *Birmingham News*; Philip Shenon, “House Panel Reprimands a Democrat on Finances,” 22 June 2001, *New York Times*: A1; Juliet Eilperin, “House Ethics Panel Rebukes Hilliard for Funds Misuse,” 22 June 2001, *Washington Post*: A7; Mary Orndorff, “Hilliard Takes Ethics Slap in Stride,” 25 June 2001, *Birmingham News*.
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- 27 Mary Orndorff, “Hilliard Fights for Political Life Against Davis,” 6 June 2002, *Birmingham News*.



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