

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

Gregory W. Meeks

1953–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

1998–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

Gregory W. Meeks, a former Queens prosecutor and New York state legislator, has represented his Queens-centered House district for six terms. An advocate for business development in the African-American community, Meeks once noted that his role “as part of a new generation of African American leadership, is to take us to the new phase of the civil rights movement, that is, the economic development of our community.”¹

Gregory Weldon Meeks was born on September 25, 1953, in East Harlem, New York. His father, James, was a taxi driver and handyman, while his mother, Mary, raised Gregory and his three younger siblings. He recalled growing up in a household that was active in community affairs. His political role model was Thurgood Marshall, a civil rights advocate and the first black U.S. Supreme Court Justice. “He was someone I really admired because he was trying to make conditions better for people like me,” Meeks recalled.² In 1975, he earned a bachelor of arts degree from Adelphi University on Long Island. In 1978, Meeks graduated with a J.D. from Howard University School of Law in Washington, DC. Meeks settled in Far Rockaway in Queens, where he was active in community organizations that aimed to improve city services and repair streets. He served two-year stints as an assistant district attorney in Queens, an assistant special narcotics prosecutor in New York, and a member of the New York State Investigation Commission. He later went into private law practice and, from 1985 to 1992, served as a judge on the New York state workers compensation board. His career in elective politics began in 1991 when he made an unsuccessful bid for the New York city council. Subsequently, Meeks was appointed supervising judge of the New York state workers compensation system. The following year Meeks won election to the New York state assembly, representing a Queens district from 1992 to 1997. Meeks and his wife, Simone-Marie, whom he married in 1997, have three daughters: Ebony, Aja, and Nia-Aiyana.

In 1997, when Representative Floyd Flake announced his retirement from a U.S. House seat representing Queens, Meeks emerged as a leading candidate to succeed the six-term veteran. Meeks received endorsements from Flake, the *New York Times*, and other figures in the Democratic establishment.³ As the Democratic nominee, Meeks portrayed himself as “a bridge-builder” between the party’s liberal and

moderate wings.⁴ In the five-way February 3 special election that included a New York state senator and an assemblywoman, Meeks prevailed with 57 percent of the vote. He told the *New York Times*: “I’m one who understands that, particularly in the African-American community, the key is now economic. We have to move toward the economic redistribution of our community more than we have in the past.”⁵ In his subsequent five re-elections, Meeks has prevailed by comfortable majorities of 97 percent or more.⁶

When Meeks was sworn in to the 105th Congress (1997–1999) on February 5, 1998, he received a seat on the Banking and Financial Services Committee (later renamed Financial Services). In the 106th Congress (1999–2001), Meeks also was appointed to the International Relations Committee (later renamed Foreign Affairs). Representative Meeks continues to serve on both panels. He is a member of the New Democratic Coalition and the Democratic Leadership Council.

In the House, Representative Meeks’s legislative priorities encompass improving educational opportunities, ensuring minority business participation, expanding trade, and defending civil rights. Meeks has promoted economic redevelopment in Queens, including acquiring federal money for commercial areas and office buildings, health clinics, libraries, and infrastructure improvements. He also has been attentive to economic policies affecting JFK International Airport, which is located in his district.⁷ On major trade issues, Meeks has been a “swing” vote—approving the normalization of trade relations with China in 2000 (citing the potential for new business in his district) while opposing a 2002 law that expanded the George W. Bush administration’s trade authority on the grounds that Congress should not yield power to a President who did not have its strongest confidence. As a member of the Financial Services Subcommittee on Capital Markets, Insurance, and Government Sponsored Enterprises, Meeks has sought to promote home ownership and curb predatory lending practices.

From his seat on the Foreign Affairs Committee, Meeks has called for a greater role for U.S. trade and development policies in the formulation of foreign policy. He has been a leading advocate for the advancement of Afro-Latinos, increased U.S. attention to Western Hemisphere priorities, humanitarian aid to Africa, and trade adjustment assistance to spread the benefits of trade to marginalized communities. Meeks serves on three subcommittees: Western Hemisphere, Oversight and Investigations, and Asia and the Pacific, where he is vice chairman.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Meeks, Gregory W.,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M001137>.

NOTES

- 1 “Gregory W. Meeks,” *Contemporary Black Biography* Volume 25 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 2000).
- 2 Clemente Lisi, “Rep. Gregory Meeks,” 15 February 2001, *New York Post*: 62.
- 3 “An Endorsement for Congress in Queens,” 31 January 1998, *New York Times*: A14; Sarah Kershaw, “Flake Backs Meeks for Congress,” 6 January 1998, *Newsday*: A31.
- 4 Jonathan P. Hicks, “Master of the Political Balancing Act,” 5 February 1998, *New York Times*: B5; Jonathan P. Hicks, “Queens Democrats Select Legislator for House Race,” 10 January 1998, *New York Times*: B3; Jonathan P. Hicks, “Race for Congressional Seat Nears a Heated Conclusion,” 1 February 1998, *New York Times*: A26.
- 5 Hicks, “Master of the Political Balancing Act,” 5.
- 6 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 7 *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2007): 693–694; “Gregory W. Meeks, Biography,” <http://www.house.gov/meeks/en.us.about.shtml> (accessed 17 October 2007).