



Juanita Millender-McDonald

1938–2007

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1996–2007
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

A fast-rising star in California politics, Juanita Millender-McDonald won her seat in the U.S. House of Representatives just six years after capturing her first elective office. From her position on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Representative Millender-McDonald shaped federal transportation legislation that directly affected her district and numerous federal programs. In 2007, she made history by becoming the first African-American woman to chair a standing congressional panel, the House Administration Committee.¹

Juanita Millender was born on September 7, 1938, in Birmingham, Alabama, one of five children raised by Shelly Millender and Everlina (Dortch) Millender. After Everlina Millender's untimely death, Shelly Millender, a minister, moved his family to California. On July 26, 1955, Juanita Millender married James McDonald, Jr. By the time she was 26, the couple had five children. A homemaker for 15 years, Juanita Millender-McDonald returned to college, earning a B.S. in business administration from the University of Redlands in Redlands, California, in 1981. Millender-McDonald earned a master's degree in educational administration from California State University in Los Angeles in 1988. After teaching math and English in a public high school, she worked as an administrator in the Los Angeles Unified School District—eventually directing its gender equality programs.²

Millender-McDonald first entered elective politics at the local level in Los Angeles and served as a delegate to the Democratic National Conventions in 1984, 1988, and 1992. In 1982, she worked on behalf of the unsuccessful gubernatorial campaign of longtime Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley. Thereafter she worked on several local campaigns before entering a 1990 election for a seat on the Carson City Council. She displayed adroitness at

building networks for political support during that race. The first time she asked for the support of then-U.S. Representative Mervyn Dymally, the Representative declined, telling Millender-McDonald, “Local politics is too divisive; I don’t want to get involved.” But she was persistent. Dymally said, “She came back, this time with a delegation of friends and supporters. I said, ‘What do you want?’ She said, ‘I need your endorsement.’ I said, ‘You have it.’”³ Millender-McDonald became the first African-American woman elected to the council and in 1991 served as Carson City mayor *pro tempore*. In 1992, following the reapportionment of California state assembly districts, Millender-McDonald defeated two incumbent assemblymen whose Los Angeles-area districts had been merged. The contest broke down along racial lines, and Millender-McDonald prevailed when the incumbents split the white vote; she went on to serve in the California state assembly until 1996.⁴ Within her first year in the assembly, she chaired two panels: the committee on insurance and the committee on revenue and taxation. From those posts, she sponsored a major transportation bill to create the Alameda Corridor, a national transportation artery designed to improve railroad and highway access to the San Pedro Bay Ports, which constitute one of the nation’s largest shipping complexes.⁵

In December 1995, Millender-McDonald announced her candidacy to fill a U.S. House seat left vacant by the resignation of convicted Representative Walter R. Tucker III. Tucker’s congressional district—which encompassed suburbs south of Los Angeles, including Carson and Compton—was heavily Democratic and working-class. African Americans and Hispanic Americans composed roughly 75 percent of the population. No GOP challenger entered the March 26, 1996, special election contest. Millender-McDonald and nine others, including fellow





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state assemblyman Willard H. Murray and Robin Tucker, the wife of Walter Tucker, vied for election to the remainder of the term in the 104th Congress (1995–1997). With support from former longtime speaker of the state assembly and San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, Millender-McDonald won with 27 percent of the vote; her nearest competitor, Murray, received 20 percent. In the simultaneous Democratic primary for the full term in the 105th Congress (1997–1999), Millender-McDonald prevailed over Murray by an even narrower margin: 24 to 21 percent.⁶ In the fall 1996 campaign for the 105th Congress, she defeated Republican Michael E. Voetee with 85 percent of the vote. Representative Millender-McDonald won her subsequent five re-election campaigns with majorities of at least 75 percent. In 2006, she defeated Republican Herb Peters with 82 percent of the vote.⁷

After her swearing-in on April 16, 1996, Millender-McDonald served on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and the Small Business Committee. She kept both assignments throughout her congressional tenure. As a freshman, she was appointed Ranking Member of the Small Business Subcommittee on Workforce, Empowerment, and Government Programs. In the 106th Congress (1999–2001), Democratic leaders named her a regional party whip, and in the 107th Congress (2001–2003), she co-chaired the Democratic Caucus for Women’s Issues. Then, in the 108th Congress (2003–2005), she drew assignments on the Committee on House Administration and the Joint Committee on Printing, and she was appointed Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Tax, Finance, and Exports. In the 109th Congress (2005–2007), Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi named Millender-McDonald Ranking Member of the Committee on House Administration.⁸ After the Democrats regained control of the House in the 2006 elections, she was named chairwoman of the House Administration Committee, Millender-McDonald also held the Vice-Chair post on the Joint Committee on the Library, whose membership roster was drawn from the House Administration Committee and the Senate Rules and Administration Committee.

Many of Representative Millender-McDonald’s legislative initiatives came from her seat on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. In 2001, Millender-McDonald authored the Terrorism Threat to Public Transportation Assessment Act—a measure to evaluate vulnerabilities in the nation’s mass transit systems. She also was a lead sponsor of the Nuclear Waste Responsible Component and Protection Act, which sought to ensure environmentally sound and safe means of transporting and storing chemical waste outside of inner cities. Her place on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee also allowed her to attend to transportation projects directly affecting her district. During her first months in the House, Millender-McDonald secured \$400 million in federal loan guarantees necessary to complete her state legislative work on the Alameda Corridor, a 20-mile railroad artery that connects the national rail system to the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. In the 108th Congress, Millender-McDonald helped draft the six-year Transportation Equity Act—which brought in more than \$87 million in federal money for highway projects in and around her district. Her addition to that bill, the “Projects of National and Regional Significance,” allocated more than \$6.6 billion toward major transportation projects nationally.⁹

Much of Representative Millender-McDonald’s House career was dedicated to the interests she held since her days in the California assembly: the Los Angeles public school system, job training, childcare, education, women’s issues, and combating drug abuse. Millender-McDonald also worked on promoting awareness of health issues like cervical cancer, AIDS, asthma, and bone marrow registration. Although she worked away from the limelight, Millender-McDonald occasionally orchestrated dramatic political moments. In 1996, she brought then-Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director John Deutch to a Watts town hall meeting, where Deutch fielded questions about allegations that the CIA funneled proceeds from the sale of crack cocaine to purchase arms for the Contras in Nicaragua. Three years later, seeking to boost the stalled



ambassadorial appointment to New Zealand of former U.S. Senator Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois, Millender-McDonald staged a sit-in at the office of Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, who was blocking the appointment.¹⁰

In mid-April 2007, Millender-McDonald was granted a six-week leave of absence from her House duties to receive treatment for cancer. She passed away at her home in Compton on April 22. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California remembered Millender-McDonald as “a trailblazer, always advocating for the full participation of all Americans in the success and prosperity of our country.”¹¹

FOR FURTHER READING

“Millender-McDonald, Juanita,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000714>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

California State University, (Dominguez Hills, CA). Archives and Special Collections. Papers: The Juanita Millender-McDonald Collection has not yet been processed.

NOTES

- 1 Stephanie Tubbs Jones of Ohio was simultaneously appointed chairwoman of the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct.
- 2 *Politics in America, 2004* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 138.
- 3 Quoted in Nicole Gaouette, “Juanita Millender-McDonald, 68; Southland Congresswoman,” 23 April 2007, *Los Angeles Times*: B9.
- 4 *Politics in America, 1998* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1997): 194.
- 5 *Politics in America, 2004*: 139.
- 6 *Politics in America, 1998*: 193–194.
- 7 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 8 *Almanac of American Politics, 2006* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 2005): 270.
- 9 *Politics in America, 2004*: 138; “Official Biography of Juanita Millender-McDonald,” <http://www.house.gov/millender-mcdonald/bio.htm> (accessed 22 November 2004); James Bornemeier, “Broader Horizons; Seat in Congress Opens New Doors for Juanita Millender-McDonald,” 21 April 1996, *Los Angeles Times*: A3.
- 10 Gaouette, “Juanita Millender-McDonald, 68; Southland Congresswoman.”
- 11 Ibid; Kelly McCormack and Sam Youngman, “Millender-McDonald Remembered for ‘Dignity,’ ‘Determination,’” 24 April 2007, *The Hill*: 13.