



## Gary A. Franks

1953–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1991–1997  
REPUBLICAN FROM CONNECTICUT

As the first black Republican Representative to serve in the U.S. House in nearly six decades, the GOP promoted Gary Franks as its newest African-American spokesperson when he won his seat in Congress in 1990.<sup>1</sup> Franks was a zealous champion of conservative causes, including welfare reform, opposition to affirmative action, and support for Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. “The whole Republican philosophy is self-help,” Franks avowed. “I believe in less government. I believe that we don’t have to tax and spend constantly to maintain our society.”<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Franks’s difficulty connecting with his primarily middle-class white constituency, as well as his contentious fights with the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), and at times, with the leadership within his own party, contributed to his political defeat.

Gary Alvin Franks was born in Waterbury, Connecticut, on February 9, 1953. He was the youngest of six children of Janery Petteway Franks and Richard Franks, a mill worker who left school in the sixth grade. Education was valued in the Franks home; all the children attended college, and three earned doctoral degrees.<sup>3</sup> Gary Franks was an all-state basketball player at Sacred Heart High School in Waterbury. In 1975 he earned a B.A. from Yale University. After working as an industrial relations agent for three companies in Connecticut, Franks started his own real estate firm in Waterbury. Inspired by his friend, Representative John Rowland of Connecticut, Franks entered politics to bring “new blood” to the Waterbury Republicans.<sup>4</sup> Franks ran unsuccessfully for state comptroller in 1986. That same year, he was elected to the Waterbury board of aldermen, where he served until 1990. Franks married Donna Williams in 1990, gaining a stepdaughter, Azia. The couple’s daughter, Jessica, was born in 1991, and their son, Gary, Jr., arrived in 1994.

In 1990, Rowland, whose district encompassed a

mix of working-class and wealthy towns in western and central Connecticut, including Gary Franks’s hometown of Waterbury, vacated his House seat to run for governor of Connecticut. Franks sought the Republican nomination based on his conservative politics, winning the GOP endorsement by beating out five candidates at the district’s Republican convention in July 1990.<sup>5</sup> In the general election, Franks faced former Democratic Representative and television anchor Toby Moffett. Formerly representing a neighboring district, Moffett was elected to Congress in 1974, serving four terms before losing bids for the U.S. Senate in 1982 and the Connecticut governor’s post in 1986.<sup>6</sup> The campaign drew national attention. Though a Republican had held the district since Rowland upset the Democratic incumbent in 1984, the seat was considered vulnerable. Registered Democrats outnumbered Republicans almost three to two. The district contained only a small black population (under 10 percent), and Franks’s campaign did not emphasize his race.<sup>7</sup> The campaign came down to a referendum on economic policy, as the northeastern economy spiraled toward recession. Franks ran on a conservative platform, promising no new taxes, supporting a cut in the capital gains tax, and advocating a constitutional amendment outlawing the desecration of the American flag. He also attacked the American welfare system for creating a “spiral of government dependency.”<sup>8</sup> Moffett tried to tie Franks’s platform to former President Ronald W. Reagan’s economic policies, claiming that the former administration had left the economy flat in its wake.<sup>9</sup> The tight race drew high-powered endorsements and campaign appearances. President George H. W. Bush, First Lady Barbara Bush, and Vice President Dan Quayle visited the district on Franks’s behalf. Actor Robert Redford and former Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O’Neill campaigned for Moffett. Franks



won the election with 52 percent of the vote.<sup>10</sup> He was the first African-American Representative to be elected from Connecticut. Franks's unique position immediately attracted a barrage of media attention, making him one of the most recognizable Members of his freshman class.<sup>11</sup> He won assignments on the Armed Services and Small Business committees, as well as on the Select Committee on Aging.

The CBC—a traditionally liberal organization that was then composed entirely of Democrats—accepted Franks as a member upon his election. Franks spoke regularly at caucus meetings during his first term, and he often disagreed with the other members of the CBC. For example, Franks voted against the 1990 Civil Rights Bill, which the CBC almost universally supported. Although he had experienced discrimination, Franks said he did not approve of a system requiring employers to hire a certain percentage of minorities; he argued that enforced quotas would encourage employers to move jobs from his Connecticut district to states that were more racially homogeneous to avoid the requirements.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Franks said, “I question whether some Democrats truly want a civil rights bill or if they want a political issue.”<sup>13</sup> President George H. W. Bush rejected the bill, primarily because of the quotas provision, and the House failed to override his veto.<sup>14</sup>

Franks also attracted national attention as the only member of the CBC to support the nomination of federal Judge Clarence Thomas—an African American who was slated to replace Thurgood Marshall, the first black Supreme Court Justice, when he retired. The CBC rejected Thomas's conservative record, particularly his opposition to affirmative action. By contrast, Franks defended him, calling the CBC's failure to endorse Thomas “politics at its worst.” Franks noted that Thomas's “approach to issues may be different from liberals, but his determination and concern for fairness and justice would be the same.”<sup>15</sup> Black conservatives rallied behind Thomas, and the Senate confirmed him on October 15, 1991, by a vote of 52 to 48 that was split nearly along party lines.<sup>16</sup>

In 1992, Franks faced the first of a series of tough re-election campaigns. Though a looming national figure, two strong candidates opposed Franks: Democratic probate judge James Lawlor and Independent Lynn Taborsak, a former Democratic state representative.<sup>17</sup> Both opponents attacked what they called Franks's weak stance on federal plans to cancel the construction of Seawolf submarines in Groton, Connecticut. The project was important to the state's economy and, as Connecticut's sole member on the Armed Services Committee, Franks received mail from constituents about the rumored closing of the military base in Groton. Concerned voters claimed he was often unavailable for comment on the subject.<sup>18</sup> Franks dismissed the attacks as a liberal smear campaign spawned by fear that he would lure African-American voters to the Republican Party. He ultimately benefited from a split Democratic vote, winning with a 44 percent plurality.<sup>19</sup>

Franks relinquished his seat on the Armed Services Committee for an assignment to the Committee on Energy and Commerce (later Commerce), a highly desirable panel that usually requires Members to give up all other committee assignments. He also returned as a member of the CBC, which added 14 Representatives after the 1992 elections, bringing the organization's membership to 40 and establishing it as a significant voting bloc. Courting a sympathetic Democratic President, William J. (Bill) Clinton, liberals in the caucus began to assert their authority. Previously a link between the CBC and Republican President George H. W. Bush, Franks lost power within the caucus. Several members objected to Franks's attendance at the caucus's strategy sessions, insisting that he was a mole for the Republicans, and the CBC unofficially ejected Franks from these meetings.<sup>20</sup>

An exasperated Franks publicly announced his intention to resign from the CBC on Friday, June 14, 1993, but recanted the following Monday, citing an influx of phone calls and mail from constituents imploring him not to resign.<sup>21</sup> Though he continued to criticize some of the caucus's policies, Franks declared, “As long as I am a Member of Congress and black, I will continue to

belong to the CBC.”<sup>22</sup> However, Franks was soon barred from the first half-hour of CBC meetings—traditionally reserved for lunch—marking the first official barrier to his membership. Faced with growing negative publicity, CBC chairman Kweisi Mfume of Maryland eventually smoothed over the rift, announcing in August 1993 that Franks would be allowed full participation in all caucus activities and promising that, during his tenure as chairman, the caucus would embrace “diversity and plurality.”<sup>23</sup> Yet Franks remained at odds with the majority of the caucus and eventually stopped attending meetings.

In the 1994 election, Connecticut State Senator James Maloney overcame a close primary to win the Democratic nomination, and using a strategy employed by Franks’s previous opponents, he accused the incumbent of being out of touch with his constituents. Television ads became a focal point in the campaign. In the weeks leading up to the election, Maloney unleashed a series of ads attacking Franks’s positions. Franks responded with television spots focusing on his support for business and welfare reform. Franks’s strategy proved effective; he won a narrow victory, with 52 percent of the vote.<sup>24</sup> Franks took his place in the first Congress in 40 years to have a Republican majority.

Franks played a significant role in crafting the GOP welfare reform package, which was launched in the fall of 1995. The plan set strict penalties for welfare recipients who refused to look for work after having collected benefits for two years, and made welfare difficult for immigrants to access. Also, mothers who could not determine their children’s paternity would have more difficulty receiving benefits.<sup>25</sup> Franks spoke candidly about his own relatives’ experience in the system, praising the Republican plan as one that encouraged the achievement of economic independence. “Our welfare system continues to play the role of fish-delivery man for able-bodied people. Instead, we should help—and insist—that able-bodied people catch their own fish,” Franks said, explaining his party’s position.<sup>26</sup> In 1995, Franks was appointed to attend the conference to resolve the differences between the House and Senate versions of the reformed welfare system. Franks

fought to save his own proposals, which would cap the amount of money per child that was given to families on welfare and provide a debit card for food stamps.<sup>27</sup>

Franks opposed affirmative action more zealously than many of his GOP colleagues, who had championed the issue in their campaign to recapture the congressional majority. The 1995 Supreme Court ruling in *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña* held that affirmative action policies had to withstand “strict scrutiny,” meaning that they must show clear evidence of righting a past discriminatory practice. The contemporary policy in the federal government provided special set-asides and preferences for minorities and women. Franks argued that the extra entitlements were a form of discrimination. “I do not want my children to feel that they are inferior to white children,” he declared. “I do not want someone to put their thumb on the scale in order for them to succeed.”<sup>28</sup> Congressional Republicans supported Franks’s efforts; however, many GOP House Members objected to the speediness with which Franks proposed to implement the changes.<sup>29</sup> “I question the sincerity of a number of Republicans on the issue,” Franks said to reporters. “They love to get the political mileage out of it, but when it comes time to vote, they don’t want to do it.”<sup>30</sup> Franks questioned the veracity of Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia, claiming Gingrich had promised his support for the amendment. Franks later apologized to Gingrich, noting that he would follow the Speaker’s lead on the issue.<sup>31</sup>

Maloney returned for a rematch against Franks in a 1996 campaign that was largely a referendum on the implementation of the GOP’s Contract With America. With more support from the national and local Democratic Party, Maloney defeated Franks 52 to 46 percent.<sup>32</sup> Though the long coattails from President Clinton’s decisive re-election victory factored into Franks’s defeat, he also attributed his loss to a lack of support from the Republican Party—noting that the GOP estimated he was well ahead in the polls just months before the election and had refused to pay for what seemed like a safe district—and to the united front between labor and

liberals. He also observed that several prominent black liberals had made appearances in his district “to spread lies, and half-truths about my record.”<sup>33</sup>

Franks refused to step out of the political spotlight. As he hinted in his 1996 autobiography, Franks made a bid against incumbent Democratic Senator Christopher Dodd in 1998. The campaign was considered a long shot against the entrenched Dodd, an 18-year veteran of the Senate whose father, Thomas, had preceded him in the chamber.<sup>34</sup> Franks pulled in support from Republicans, including former Vice President Dan Quayle, who stumped for him.<sup>35</sup> Describing himself as a “real conservative and a real Republican,” Franks campaigned on the national issues he had championed in Congress.<sup>36</sup> He supported the creation of a modified flat income tax and the elimination of capital gains and inheritance taxes. Franks also endorsed a strong national defense, the preservation of Medicare and Social Security, and the death penalty. However, Dodd ran away with the race, with 65 percent to Franks’s 32 percent.<sup>37</sup> After Franks lost the election, he returned to his real estate business in Waterbury.

## FOR FURTHER READING

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“Franks, Gary A.,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=F000348>.

## NOTES

- 1 Republican Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts also served 12 years in the Senate, departing in 1979. Delegate Melvin Evans of the Virgin Islands served from 1979 to 1981.
- 2 Peter Viles, “Connecticut Alderman Tries to Break 55-Year House Lockout,” 27 August 1990, Associated Press.
- 3 Nick Ravo, “A Black Congressional Hope in Connecticut,” 9 August 1990, *New York Times*: B1.
- 4 Gary Franks, *Searching for the Promised Land: An African American’s Optimistic Odyssey* (New York: Reagan Books, 1996): 38–39.
- 5 Franks, *Searching for the Promised Land*: 38–39.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Nick Ravo, “Ghost of Reagan in Connecticut Race,” 22 October 1990, *New York Times*: B4.
- 8 Ravo, “A Black Congressional Hope in Connecticut.”
- 9 Ravo, “Ghost of Reagan in Connecticut Race”; Viles, “Connecticut Alderman Tries to Break 55-Year House Lockout”; Jacqueline Trescott, “Rep. Gary Franks, Unexpected Republican,” 31 July 1991, *Washington Post*: B1.
- 10 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at [http://clerk.house.gov/member\\_info/election.html](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html).
- 11 *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 299.

- 12 Bill Whalen, "The Reluctant Republican Star," 8 March 1991, *Washington Times*: E1.
- 13 Trescott, "Rep. Gary Franks, Unexpected Republican."
- 14 *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1991): 473.
- 15 Bob Dart, "Fight Over Seating Thomas Splits Blacks," 19 July 1991, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*: A2.
- 16 Senate Roll Call Vote 220, 102nd Cong., 1st sess.. See "U.S. Congress Votes Database," *Washington Post*: <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/congress/102/senate/1/votes/220/> (accessed 7 February 2008).
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- 19 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
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- 21 Mary Jacoby, "Whoops! Franks Does About-Face, Will Stay in CBC," 17 June 1993, *Roll Call*.
- 22 Jacoby, "Whoops! Franks Does About-Face, Will Stay in CBC."
- 23 "Black Republican Allowed to Vote in CBC Group"; Franks, *Searching for the Promised Land*: 124.
- 24 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at [http://clerk.house.gov/member\\_info/election.html](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html).
- 25 *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1995* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1996): 7-40.
- 26 Michael Remez, "Franks Speaks for GOP in Welfare Debate," 5 May 1994, *Hartford Courant*: F1.
- 27 David Daley, "Franks Appointed to Welfare Conference Committee," 29 September 1995, States News Service.
- 28 Jill Zuckman, "Black Republican Says Party Lags on Ending Preferences," 6 August 1995, *Boston Globe*: 19.
- 29 David Lightman, "Franks to Lead Battle in Congress," 13 July 1995, *Hartford Courant*: A3.
- 30 Zuckman, "Black Republican Says Party Lags on Ending Preferences."
- 31 David Lightman, "Franks Apologizes to Gingrich," 7 September 1995, *Washington Post*: A6.
- 32 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 33 Mike McIntire, "Franks Blames GOP, Liberals, Labor, and Rat Ads for His Loss," 7 November 1996, *Hartford Courant*: A17; Nancy E. Roman, "Black Democrat Rips Franks for Votes 'Suicidal' To His Race," 21 November 1996, *Washington Times*: A4. Representative William Lacy (Bill) Clay, Sr., of Missouri lambasted the outgoing Representative in a six-page letter circulated on Capitol Hill, branding Franks "a pariah, who gleefully assists in suicidal conduct to destroy his own race."
- 34 Melissa B. Robinson, "Former Rep. to Run for Senate," 19 January 1998, Associated Press.
- 35 Robinson, "Former Rep. to Run for Senate."
- 36 "Gary Alvin Franks," Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1998.
- 37 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at [http://clerk.house.gov/member\\_info/election.html](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/election.html).