

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

Sheila Jackson Lee

1950–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

1995–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

Sheila Jackson Lee won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994 in a Houston district once served by Barbara Jordan. From her seats on the Judiciary, Homeland Security, and Foreign Affairs committees, Representative Jackson Lee has focused on the needs of her district. She also has called attention to such national issues as bolstering the protection of our homeland while preserving civil liberties, health care, and job training for working-class Americans.

Sheila Jackson was born in Queens, New York, on January 12, 1950. Her mother was a nurse, and her father was a comic book illustrator. Jackson graduated from Jamaica High School and attended New York University. In 1969, she transferred with the first group of female undergraduates admitted to Yale College and graduated in 1972 with a B.A. in political science. Before receiving her J.D. from the University of Virginia School of Law in 1975, Sheila Jackson married fellow Yale graduate Elwyn Cornelius Lee in 1973; they raised two children, Erica and Jason. In 1977 and 1978, she worked as a staff counsel for the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations, which investigated the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr., and President John F. Kennedy. She left private law practice in 1987 to serve as an associate judge in the Houston municipal courts. Three years later, she won election to the first of two terms as an at-large member of the Houston city council.

In 1994, Jackson Lee challenged incumbent Craig Washington for the Democratic nomination to the Houston-area U.S. House seat. Her platform reflected broad agreement with the William J. (Bill) Clinton administration agenda. Promoting measures that would benefit the Houston economy, Jackson Lee defeated her opponent, with 63 percent of the vote, in the primary. She won handily with a 73 percent majority in the general election. In her subsequent six re-elections, Jackson Lee won easily, capturing a high of 90 percent in 1998. Jackson Lee followed a succession of prestigious Representatives from her district, including Jordan and noted humanitarian George (Mickey) Leland. Created after the 1970 Census, Jackson Lee's district was the first in Texas in which African Americans and Hispanics constituted the majority of voters.

When Jackson Lee took her seat in the 104th Congress (1995–1997), she received assignments on the Judiciary and Science (later renamed Science and Technology) committees. Her colleagues elected her Democratic freshman class president. Jackson Lee was also appointed to the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee. In 1997, she was selected as a Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) whip and thereafter as first vice chair of the CBC. By the 107th Congress (2001–2003), Jackson Lee was the top-ranking Democrat on the Immigration and Claims Subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee. In the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Jackson Lee was assigned to the Homeland Security Committee, where in the 110th Congress (2007–2009) she chairs the Subcommittee on Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection. In 2007, Jackson Lee coauthored and ensured the passage of the Rail and Public Transportation Security Act, which authorized more than \$5 billion to overhaul security for U.S. railroads, mass transit, and buses. In the 110th Congress, she also left the Science and Technology Committee for a seat on the Foreign Affairs Committee.

In Congress, Jackson Lee battled GOP initiatives to reduce welfare. In the 105th Congress (1997–1999), she pushed for legislation to protect child support and alimony payments from creditors. As a cofounder of the Congressional Children’s Caucus, she also sponsored bills to create affordable childcare for working parents and to strengthen adoption laws. Jackson Lee spearheaded efforts to reduce teenage smoking addiction and authored the “Date Rape Drug Prevention Act” to curb the availability of substances used by rapists. She also strongly defended affirmative action programs. From her seat on the Science Committee, Jackson Lee sought to restore appropriations for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in 1999, and also supported extending provisions in a 1998 bill to grow the commercial space launch industry. She persuaded the Clinton administration to make low-income Houston neighborhoods eligible for federal grants for economic development, job training, childcare facilities, and improved transportation. Jackson Lee also coauthored and helped pass the historic Notification of Federal Employees Anti-Discrimination and Retaliation (“No Fear”) Act. Described as the first civil rights act of the 21st century, the measure protects federal workers, and especially whistleblowers, from acts of discrimination and retaliation.

Jackson Lee maintained that such advocacy was part of her job representing constituents. “You have an obligation to make sure that their concerns are heard, are answered,” she explained. “I need to make a difference. I don’t have wealth to write a check. But maybe I can be a voice arguing consistently for change.”

FOR FURTHER READING

“Jackson Lee, Sheila,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=J000032>.