

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

Edolphus Towns

1934–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

1983–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

Edolphus Towns, a former social worker and community activist in Brooklyn, New York, serves as a 13-term veteran in the House, where he holds an assignment on the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee. In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Towns was appointed chairman of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee's Subcommittee on Government Management, Organization, and Procurement. He has focused on issues such as education, health care, and better access to technology for minorities.

Edolphus (Ed) Towns was born on July 21, 1934, in Chadbourn, North Carolina, the son of Versie and Dolphus Towns. His father was a sharecropper in a region where tobacco was an important agricultural product. Edolphus attended the local public schools, graduating from West Side High School in 1952. Towns earned a bachelor of science degree from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro in 1956. Towns later earned a master's degree in social work from Adelphi University in Garden City, New York. For two years after college, he served in the U.S. Army. After being discharged in 1958, Towns taught at Medgar Evers College and Fordham University in New York City, and in the city's public schools. He also worked as a program director and administrator in two city hospitals, from 1965 to 1975. Towns married the former Gwendolyn Forbes in 1960, and they have two children, Darryl and Deidra.

Edolphus Towns entered politics through his work in various civic associations. He held his first political position beginning in 1972 when he won election as the Democratic state committeeman for the New York 40th Assembly District in Brooklyn. In 1976, he was appointed Brooklyn's first African-American deputy borough president, where he served until 1982.

In 1982, Towns entered the Democratic primary for a newly created seat representing portions of the northern and eastern sections of Brooklyn, including Williamsburg, Bushwick, and Fort Greene. In the majority-black and Hispanic district, Towns defeated two Hispanic candidates, with roughly 50 percent of the vote.¹ In the general election, Towns was heavily favored and defeated Republican James W. Smith, with 84 percent of the vote. Towns has won by large pluralities in

subsequent general elections, claiming 85 percent of the vote or more in his 12 re-election bids.² He was challenged several times in Democratic primaries (particularly after his 1997 endorsement of Republican Rudolph Giuliani for mayor); the toughest challenges occurred in the 1998 and 2000 primaries, when he defeated lawyer Barry Ford by margins of 16 and 14 percent, respectively.³ Redistricting following the 2000 Census brought in part of Midwood in south-central Brooklyn and bolstered Towns's base. The current district is one of the state's most diverse, comprising black, Hispanic, Caribbean, and Jewish voters, and is solidly Democratic: The Democratic Party has a 13 to 1 registration advantage.⁴

When Representative Towns took his seat in the House on January 3, 1983, he was assigned to three committees: Government Operations (later renamed Oversight and Government Reform), Public Works and Transportation, and the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control. Towns has remained on the Oversight and Government Reform Committee for his entire House career. In the 101st Congress (1989–1991), he won a seat on the prestigious Energy and Commerce Committee, where he has remained since. At the end of the 104th Congress (1995–1997), Towns left his Public Works and Transportation assignment.

Representative Towns's legislative interests have included education, health care, financial services, and the environment. Among his legislative accomplishments, Towns counts the Student Right to Know Act, which mandates that colleges report student athlete graduation rates.⁵ In the 107th Congress (2001–2003), Towns introduced a measure to place sports agents under the oversight of the Federal Trade Commission in an effort to stop unethical recruitment practices.⁶ He has secured federal funding for programs for the gifted and talented and for bilingual education as well as for enhanced teacher training. Towns helped create the Telecommunications Development Fund to provide capital to small and minority-owned businesses that provide high technology. In addition, in recent Congresses he has sponsored a measure to implement technology upgrades at historically black colleges and those that serve minorities generally.⁷

Representative Towns and his son, Darryl, a New York state assemblyman, are the first African-American father–son team to serve simultaneously in New York public office.

FOR FURTHER READING

"Towns, Edolphus," *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=T000326>.

NOTES

- 1 Jane Perlez, "Towns Wins in Bid for Richmond's Seat," 24 September 1982, *Washington Post*: B7.
- 2 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 3 Jonathan P. Hicks, "Congressman Squares Off With Brooklyn Challenger," 17 August 2000, *New York Times*: B3; *Almanac of American Politics, 2000* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1999): 1124.
- 4 *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2005): 716.
- 5 "Official Biography of Edolphus Towns," <http://www.house.gov/towns/bio.shtml> (accessed 30 November 2007).
- 6 *Politics in America, 2006*: 715.
- 7 Ibid. "Official Biography of Edolphus Towns."