

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

Maxine Waters
1938–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

1991–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

On the “My Hero” Web site, a young woman named Michelle calls U.S. Representative Maxine Waters a “community hero,” explaining, “[Waters] instills the belief that you can achieve whatever you wish as long as you really strive to do so.”¹ In fact, over three decades, Representative Waters has become one of the nation’s most tenacious, unapologetic advocates for women, children, the poor, economic development, communities of color, human rights, and civil rights.

Waters’s passionate commitment to social and economic justice can be traced to the struggles her family faced during her youth. Maxine Carr was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on August 15, 1938, the fifth of 13 children. “I know all about welfare,” she recalled. “I remember the social workers peeking in the refrigerator and under the beds.”² Although she has compiled a long list of significant accomplishments and is considered one of the most powerful women in American politics, she still remembers starting work at age 13 in factories and segregated restaurants. It is perhaps her first-hand experience that has made her one of the nation’s most effective grass-roots organizers.

Waters moved to California in 1961 and, in 1970, earned a B.A. in sociology from California State University at Los Angeles. During that time, she launched her career in public service with the Head Start program, where she eventually coordinated the Parent Involvement Program. In 1976, Waters was elected to the California state assembly, where she became the first woman in state history to be elected minority whip. She eventually became chair of the Democratic caucus. As an assemblywoman, she successfully spearheaded efforts to implement the first statewide training program in the country to prevent child abuse, the largest divestment of state pension funds from South Africa, landmark affirmative action legislation, and the prohibition of strip searches by police of individuals charged with nonviolent misdemeanors.

In 1990, Waters was elected to fill the congressional seat vacated by retiring U.S. Representative Augustus (Gus) Hawkins, the first African American to represent California in the national legislature. She captured 79 percent of the vote and has not been seriously challenged since, capturing similar percentages in eight subsequent re-election campaigns.³

As a Member of Congress, Waters has provided \$10 billion under the Section 108 loan guarantee program for economic and infrastructure development in U.S. cities, tripled funding for debt relief in poor nations, obtained \$50 million for the Youth Fair Chance Program, created the Center for Women Veterans, and established the Minority AIDS Initiative. Additionally, Waters has been a leader on global peace and international human rights issues and remains actively involved in efforts to improve the plight of oppressed individuals in conflict-torn nations like Sudan, Haiti, and Liberia.

Waters's efforts have been noticed by her congressional colleagues. In 1997, she won the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, and later her Democratic colleagues elected her to the post of Chief Deputy Minority Whip. She serves on the influential House Committee on the Judiciary and she is the Chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity of the Committee on Financial Services.⁴ Waters has sponsored important measures on housing and community development, including legislation to reform the Section 8 voucher program, legislation to modernize the Federal Housing Administration, and legislation to improve the HOPE VI public housing revitalization program. Additional legislation includes the Section 8 Voucher Reform Act of 2007 (SEVRA), reforms in the Expanding Homeownership Act of 2007, and the HOPE VI Improvement and Reauthorization Act of 2007.

By the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Representative Waters was a leading member of the Democratic Party. She acquired that status by amplifying her record of advocacy at the local and state levels to become “a community activist in Congress,” in the words of an observer.⁵ In 2005, Waters cofounded and was elected chair of the 72-member Out of Iraq Congressional Caucus. One of the largest caucuses in the House of Representatives, Out of Iraq was established to consistently pressure the George W. Bush administration, to provide a voice in Congress for individuals and organizations opposed to the Iraq War, and, ultimately, to end the war and reunite U.S. troops with their families as soon as possible. Waters's family is extremely important to her. She is married to Sidney Williams, the former U.S. Ambassador to the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. She is the mother of two adult children, Karen and Edward, and has two grandchildren.

FOR FURTHER READING

Naden, Corinne J., and Rose Blue. *Heroes Don't Just Happen: Biographies of Overcoming Bias and Building Character in Politics* (Maywood, NJ: Peoples Publishing Group, 1997).

“Waters, Maxine,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000187>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

California State Archives (Sacramento, CA). *Papers*: Maxine Waters's California State Assembly bill files, 1979–1990, 30 cubic feet. *Papers*: In miscellaneous office files of Maxine Waters, 1978–1982, 11 cubic feet. Includes schedules and itineraries, ways and means committee records, budget conference papers, and elections and reapportionment committee working papers. Also includes judiciary committee correspondence on pending legislation. *Papers*: In subject files of Assemblywoman Waters, 1977–1986, unknown amount of material. Includes documentation on the Commission on Status of Women. Restricted access.

NOTES

- 1 “Community Hero: Maxine Waters,” http://myhero.com/myhero/hero.asp?hero=WATERS_TAFT_04 (accessed 21 July 2006).
- 2 *Almanac of American Politics, 2006* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 2005): 261.
- 3 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 4 *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2007): 139–140; “About Congresswoman Waters,” <http://www.house.gov/waters/bio/> (accessed 5 December 2007).
- 5 John L. Mitchell, “Undeterred Waters Crusades for Answers,” 4 March 1997, *Los Angeles Times*: A3.