

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

G. K. Butterfield
1947–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM NORTH CAROLINA

2004–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

After serving for more than 15 years as a North Carolina judge, including a term on the state supreme court, G. K. Butterfield won a 2004 special election to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives. Re-elected to the 109th Congress (2005–2007) less than four months later, Representative Butterfield secured prominent committee assignments from which he tended to the agricultural and small business interests of his district.

George Kenneth (G. K.) Butterfield was born on April 27, 1947, in Wilson, North Carolina. His father, George Kenneth Butterfield, won a seat on the Wilson city council in the 1950s—making him one of a handful of African Americans to hold political office in the state since Reconstruction. Town officials later changed the election format to deprive the senior Butterfield and all black candidates of a chance to win further elections. “I saw how the political system was manipulated to obtain an unfair result,” the younger Butterfield recalled. “Having seen that injustice has made me want to be involved politically.”¹ Butterfield served two years in the U.S. Army as a personnel specialist, from 1968 to 1970, before graduating from North Carolina Central University in 1971 with a bachelor’s degree in sociology and political science. Three years later he earned a J.D. from North Carolina Central University and commenced private law practice. Butterfield later went on to serve as president of the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers, filing several successful voting rights lawsuits. In November 1988, he won election to the North Carolina superior court, where he served for 12 years. In 2001, North Carolina Governor Mike Easley appointed Judge Butterfield to the North Carolina supreme court, where he served for two years. In 2002, Butterfield lost his re-election bid and was subsequently appointed special superior court judge. Butterfield is divorced, with two daughters, Valeisha and Lenai.

In 2004, when incumbent Representative Frank Ballance announced his retirement from the U.S. House, Butterfield was nominated by local Democrats to run in the special election.² The district, which covered large swaths of eastern North Carolina, is solidly Democratic and largely rural and poor and is one of two majority-black congressional districts in the state. Butterfield ran on a platform that promised more federal dollars to help small business development revitalize the local economy. He noted, “[W]e need to understand the role that small business plays in economic development and I think that’s where the congressperson can be really valuable.”³ On July 20, 2004, Butterfield won the special election with 71 percent of the vote against Republican challenger Greg Dority, to serve out the remainder of the term in the 108th Congress (2003–2005). Both men also won simultaneous primary elections for the full term in the 109th Congress. In November 2004, three times as many voters went to the polls, and Butterfield again prevailed against Dority with a 64 percent majority.⁴ Representative Butterfield faced no opposition in his 2006 re-election.

Representative Butterfield was sworn in to office on July 21, 2004. “The people of the First District are no different from your constituents,” Butterfield told his colleagues afterward in a floor speech. “They want our government to work to enable all people to experience the American dream.”⁵ He received assignments on the Agriculture and Small Business committees. He retained the Agriculture Committee assignment in the 109th Congress, but resigned from the Small Business panel to accept a seat on the Armed Services Committee. In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Butterfield gave up these assignments for a seat on the Energy and Commerce Committee, where he serves as vice chair of the Subcommittee on Energy and Air Quality. He also serves on the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee. Butterfield is one of eight Chief Deputy Whips, making him the first Democrat from North Carolina to serve in this position.⁶

One of Representative Butterfield’s chief legislative aims has been to improve the economy of his district by reducing unemployment and bringing federal money to help small businesses in northeastern North Carolina. Representative Butterfield’s assignment to the Agriculture Committee was important to the region’s farm-based economy, particularly tobacco farmers. In late 2004, he backed a federal buyout program for tobacco producers that eventually passed the House. From his seat on the Armed Services panel, Butterfield has opposed a navy plan to build a test airstrip where naval aviators could conduct more than 30,000 practice flights per year. He objected to the navy’s site selection process and was successful in eliminating the appropriation for the project.⁷

FOR FURTHER READING

“Butterfield, George Kenneth, Jr., (G. K.)” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B001251>.

NOTES

- 1 *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2007): 744.
- 2 Lauren W. Whittington and Erin P. Billings, “Embattled Ballance Retiring,” 10 May 2004, *Roll Call; Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2005): 759–760.
- 3 William L. Holmes, “Butterfield Wins Special Election; Will Face Dority in November,” 21 July 2004, Associated Press; Jay Cohen, “Ballance Casts Shadow Over 1st District N.C. Race,” 14 July 2004, Associated Press.
- 4 Cindy George, “Former Justice Wins 1st District; Butterfield Fills Ballance’s Seat,” 21 July 2004, *News and Observer*: A16; Holmes, “Butterfield Wins Special Election; Will Face Dority in November”; “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 5 *Congressional Record*, House, 108th Cong., 2nd sess. (21 July 2004): H6497.
- 6 *Politics in America, 2006*: 759; *Politics in America, 2008*: 743–744; “About G. K. Butterfield,” <http://butterfield.house.gov/aboutgk.asp> (accessed 17 October 2007).
- 7 *Politics in America, 2006*: 759.