

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

*Chaka Fattah*  
1956–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE  
DEMOCRAT FROM PENNSYLVANIA

1995–

A Philadelphia native, Chaka Fattah has represented a U.S. House district covering large sections of the northern and western parts of the city for seven terms. Fattah served 12 years in the Pennsylvania state legislature before winning his first House election in 1994. “I hope my accomplishment, my achievement, will be in legislation, not in how high a position I reached,” Fattah, a member of the influential Appropriations Committee, once explained. “It wouldn’t matter to me what position I had if I got two or three bills passed. Very few people actually drive the policy machine. I want to be one of those people.”<sup>1</sup>

Chaka Fattah was born Arthur Davenport on November 21, 1956, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the fourth of six sons of Russell and Frances Davenport. His father was a U.S. Army sergeant, and his mother was an editor at the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the oldest black newspaper in America, and served as vice president of the Philadelphia Council of Neighborhood Organizations. His parents divorced when he was young, and Fattah’s mother remarried. She renamed her son Chaka, after an African Zulu warrior. Her social activism shaped Fattah’s political development. “I grew up in a home where being involved in community life was a norm,” Fattah recalled.<sup>2</sup> Fattah attended the Community College of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School. In 1986, he graduated with an M.A. in government administration from the University of Pennsylvania’s Fels School of State and Local Government. Fattah held several community development positions before making his first bid for elective office in 1982. He unseated a Democratic incumbent by 58 votes to win a seat in the Pennsylvania house of representatives. At age 25, he was one of the youngest people ever to serve in the state legislature. In 1988, Fattah won a seat in the Pennsylvania senate.<sup>3</sup> As a freshman senator, Fattah chaired the education committee. Fattah is married to Renee Chenault-Fattah, and they have four children.

Fattah made his first bid for the U.S. House of Representatives in 1991, when Representative William H. Gray III retired from a seat that covered large areas of Center City Philadelphia, West Philadelphia, Chestnut Hill, and the University of Pennsylvania. In the special election to succeed Gray, City Councilman Lucien Blackwell received the Democratic nomination, and Fattah ran under the Consumer Party banner. Blackwell won with 39 percent of the vote to Fattah's 28 percent. In 1994, Fattah again challenged Blackwell in the Democratic primary and prevailed with 58 percent of the vote. In the heavily Democratic and majority-black district, he won the general election with 86 percent of the vote. In his subsequent six re-election campaigns, Fattah has won easily—most recently with 89 percent of the vote in the 2006 election.<sup>4</sup>

Since entering Congress in 1995, Fattah has held seats on several committees, including Economic and Educational Opportunities (later renamed Government Reform), Government Reform and Oversight (later renamed Education and Labor), Small Business, the Standards of Official Conduct, House Administration, the Joint Committee on Printing, and Appropriations. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has appointed Representative Chaka Fattah Chairman of the Urban Caucus. The caucus brings together House Members who represent the nation's largest metropolitan areas to formulate ideas on how to best address the challenges faced in America's urban communities.

In Congress, Representative Fattah has focused on issues of access to a quality education. His biggest legislative success came in 1998 when he won congressional backing for GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), a federally funded measure to prepare low-income students to enter college and excel. To date, more than \$2 billion has been appropriated for the program, which is available to millions of students.<sup>5</sup> Representative Fattah developed the College Retention Program, which gives low-income students access to low-interest loans and work study programs. In the 109th Congress (2005–2007), Fattah introduced his Student Bill of Rights Act, requiring each state to certify with the U.S. Secretary of Education that its public school system provides students with equal access to resources and qualified teachers.<sup>6</sup>

Fattah also has proposed legislation drawing from his background in housing reform and urban renewal projects. He has championed a plan to allow homeowners a two-year grace period from defaulting on mortgages because of unforeseen circumstances. His Transform America Transaction Fee proposal calls for the elimination of all federal taxes on individuals and businesses—and their replacement with a revenue system based on transaction fees.<sup>7</sup>

#### FOR FURTHER READING

“Fattah, Chaka,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=F000043>.

Fenno, Richard F. *Going Home: Black Representatives and Their Constituents* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2002): 114–177.

#### NOTES

- 1 Richard Fenno, *Going Home: Black Representatives and Their Constituents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 120.
- 2 Fenno, *Going Home*: 117, 119.
- 3 “Chaka Fattah,” *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 11 (Detroit, MI: Gale Publishing Inc., 1996).
- 4 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at [http://clerk.house.gov/member\\_info/electionInfo/index.html](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html).
- 5 “About Congressman Chaka Fattah,” <http://www.house.gov/fattah/about/about.htm> (accessed 28 November 2007).
- 6 *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2005): 872–873; “About Congressman Chaka Fattah.”
- 7 *Politics in America, 2006*: 872; “About Congressman Chaka Fattah.”