

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

Melvin L. Watt

1945–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM NORTH CAROLINA

1993–



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Melvin Watt, an eight-term House veteran from North Carolina, is a high-ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee and the House Financial Services Committee. He chaired the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) in the 109th Congress (2005–2007). A vocal advocate for civil liberties, Watt has sought to build ties to business interests from his seat on the Financial Services Committee.

Melvin L. (Mel) Watt was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, on August 26, 1945. He attended segregated public schools in Mecklenburg County. When Watt started college, southern universities had recently been desegregated, so he was among a relatively small number of blacks enrolled in the state university system.¹ He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, graduating Phi Beta Kappa with a business administration degree in 1967. Three years later, Watt earned his J.D. from Yale Law School. He returned to Charlotte, where he entered the North Carolina bar. For the next 20 years, Watt worked in private practice, specializing in minority business and economic development law.² He eventually served as president of the Mecklenburg County Bar. He married Eulada Paysour and they raised two sons, Brian and Jason. He served a single term in the North Carolina state senate, from 1985 to 1987, but left to spend more time with his teenage sons. Much of Watt's early political work was behind the scenes. He managed the successful campaigns of a rising African-American politician, Charlotte City Councilman and Mayor Harvey Gantt.

After managing Gantt's unsuccessful effort to win a U.S. Senate seat against incumbent Jesse Helms in 1990, Watt ran for elective office himself. In 1992, redistricting created a majority-black (53 percent) congressional district in central North Carolina that stretched through parts of 10 counties and included portions of Durham, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and Charlotte.³ In a crowded primary field, Watt carried 47 percent of the vote, defeating his closest rival, North Carolina State Representative Mickey Michaux, by 19 percentage points.⁴ Against Republican Barbara Gore Washington, Watt captured 70 percent of the vote in the general election. In his subsequent seven re-election bids, Watt has won by comfortable margins, usually by 65 percent of the vote or more. In 1998, during a controversial effort to reconfigure Watt's district, Watt experienced his narrowest margin of

victory, when he turned back Republican challenger John (Scott) Keadle with 56 percent of the vote. In 2006, Watt was elected to his eighth consecutive term, with 67 percent of the vote.⁵

When Watt entered the U.S. House in January 1993 he received an appointment to the Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs Committee (later renamed Financial Services), where he currently serves as chairman of its Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. He also was assigned to the Judiciary Committee. Watt has served on both panels throughout his House career, and in the 109th Congress he served as Ranking Member of the Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law. For a single term in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), he served on the Post Office and Civil Service Committee before it was abolished in the following Congress. In addition, Watt has served on the Joint Economic Committee in the 107th and 108th Congresses (2001–2005). In the 109th Congress, Watt was unanimously elected chairman of the CBC.

In Congress, Representative Watt established a reputation as an independent liberal. As a freshman in the 103rd Congress, Watt voted with the Democratic majority nearly 90 percent of the time, although he broke with President William J. (Bill) Clinton to vote against the North American Free Trade Agreement and the administration's 1994 Crime Bill.⁶ During the 1990s, Watt also criticized efforts to dismantle federal welfare programs and some tough crime measures, especially those in support of the death penalty. Watt also backed a universal health care system.⁷

Watt's extensive preparation for and detailed knowledge of legislation being considered are widely recognized by his peers.⁸ On the Judiciary panel, he has vigorously defended constitutional prerogatives and civil liberties. In 2001, shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks, he was one of a minority of House Members to oppose the USA PATRIOT Act, sweeping legislation that granted expanded powers to law enforcement agencies.⁹ On the Financial Services Committee, however, Watt tended to work with Republicans across the aisle and to focus on the business interests, particularly banking, that dominated his district.¹⁰

FOR FURTHER READING

"Watt, Melvin L.," *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000207>.

NOTES

- 1 Arati Sontakay, "Giving 'Em Mel: Congressman Doesn't Shy From Hot Seat," 11 September 1995, *Business Journal of Charlotte* 10 (No. 22): 3.
- 2 "About Congressman Watt," <http://watt.house.gov/aboutmel.asp> (accessed 28 November 2007).
- 3 Ronald Smothers, "2 Strangely Shaped Hybrid Creatures Highlight North Carolina's Primary," 3 May 1992, *New York Times*: 29.
- 4 Tim Curran, "In NC, Civil Rights Lawyer Watt Wins 'I-85' Primary; Walter Jones Jr. Headed for Runoff," 7 May 1992, *Roll Call*.
- 5 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/2006election.pdf.
- 6 Ellen J. Silberman, "Watt Spent Most of First Term Learning," 4 November 1994, States News Service; Sontakay, "Giving 'Em Mel."
- 7 *Almanac of American Politics, 2000* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1999): 1029–1031.
- 8 Sontakay, "Giving 'Em Mel."
- 9 *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2005): 779.
- 10 *Politics in America, 2006*: 779.