

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

*Barack Obama*  
1961–

UNITED STATES SENATOR  
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

2005–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

In July 2004, after delivering a stirring keynote address at the Democratic National Convention, Barack Obama burst onto the national political scene, later winning a landslide victory to become a U.S. Senator from Illinois. He is only the fifth African American in congressional history to serve in the U.S. Senate.

Barack Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on August 4, 1961, the son of Barack Obama, Sr., and Ann Dunham Obama. Barack, Sr., an economist, was born and raised in Kenya and grew up raising goats with his father, who was a domestic servant for the British.<sup>1</sup> He met and married Ann Dunham, who grew up in a small town in Kansas, while both were students at the University of Hawaii. When Obama, Jr., was two years old, his father left to attend Harvard. Soon thereafter his parents divorced. He lived for a while in Jakarta, Indonesia, when his mother remarried to an Indonesian oil manager. The family resettled in Hawaii, where Obama attended the Punahou Academy. From 1979 to 1981, he attended Occidental College in Los Angeles, California, before completing a bachelor of arts in political science at Columbia University in 1983. He moved to Chicago in 1985 to work for a church-based group that sought to improve living conditions in impoverished neighborhoods. He then attended Harvard Law School, serving as the first African-American president of the *Harvard Law Review*. In 1991, he graduated with his J.D. and married the former Michelle Robinson. The couple have two daughters, Malia and Sasha.<sup>2</sup>

Obama entered local politics through his work as a community activist in a blighted South Side Chicago neighborhood. He practiced civil rights law and lectured at the University of Chicago Law School. In 1996, he was elected to the Illinois state senate. He served in that capacity from 1997 through 2004, pushing through a state earned income tax credit and an expansion of early childhood education. In 2000, he unsuccessfully challenged four-term incumbent U.S. Representative Bobby Rush in the Democratic primary for a seat representing most of Chicago's South Side.

In 2004, after incumbent U.S. Senator Peter Fitzgerald, a Republican, announced his retirement, Obama joined a crowded field of candidates in the Democratic primary for the open seat. He garnered 53 percent of the vote, topping two favored candidates—State Comptroller Daniel Hynes and a wealthy securities trader, Blair Hull (who spent \$29 million on his campaign). Obama emerged as a national figure during that campaign, delivering a rousing keynote address on the second night of the Democratic National Convention in the summer of 2004, when he dared Americans to have “the audacity of hope.” He explained, “It’s the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs. The hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores. . . . The hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too.” Obama won a landslide 70 percent of the vote against Republican candidate Alan Keyes.<sup>3</sup>

When Obama took his seat at the start of the 109th Congress (2005–2007), he received assignments on three committees: Foreign Relations, Environment and Public Works, and Veterans’ Affairs. In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Obama left the Environment and Public Works panel and earned two additional committee posts: Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs and Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. During the 110th Congress he also served as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee’s Subcommittee on European Affairs.

During his first three years in the Senate, Obama focused on issues such as lobbying and ethics reform, veterans’ benefits, energy, nuclear nonproliferation, and government transparency. From his seat on the Veterans’ Affairs Committee, Obama secured disability pay for veterans and advocated greater services and assistance for returning service members who served in Iraq. As a member of the Environment and Public Works Committee, Senator Obama sought to reinvigorate a national dialogue about developing more-energy-efficient vehicles and alternative energy sources. On the Foreign Relations Committee, he worked with then-Chairman Richard Lugar of Indiana to initiate a new round of nonproliferation efforts designed to find and secure nuclear and conventional weapons around the world.

In February 2007, Senator Obama announced his intention to run as a candidate for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

“Obama, Barack,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=O000167>.

Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

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#### NOTES

- 1 *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995, reprint 2004): 9–27.
- 2 William Finnegan, “The Candidate: How the Son of a Kenyan Economist Became an Illinois Everyman,” 31 May 2004, *The New Yorker*; “Official Biography of Barack Obama,” <http://obama.senate.gov/about/> (accessed 26 October 2007); *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2007): 322–323.
- 3 “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).