

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

Eleanor Holmes Norton

1937–

DELEGATE

DEMOCRAT FROM THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

1991–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

A civil rights and constitutional lawyer, a former chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and a tenured professor of law, Eleanor Holmes Norton has carried her lifelong commitments to Congress as the Delegate for the District of Columbia. Since 1991, Norton has tirelessly advocated DC congressional voting rights and DC statehood while using innovative approaches to obtain federal funds and legislation to improve the city's economy and tax base. "I have been elected to Congress not to further my own interests, but to bring resources and respect to the District of Columbia," she said. "The ethics of the bar require zealous representation. That's how I understand my relationship to my folks."¹

Eleanor Holmes was born in Washington, DC, on June 13, 1937, the oldest of three daughters of Coleman Holmes, a civil servant, and Vela Lynch Holmes, a teacher. She attended Dunbar High School in Washington, DC, and earned a B.A. at Antioch College in Ohio in 1960. Norton earned an M.A. in American studies in 1963 and a law degree in 1964, both from Yale University. While a student, she worked in the civil rights movement with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. After graduating, she clerked for federal Judge A. Leon Higginbotham in Philadelphia. She then became assistant legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union. In 1965, Eleanor Holmes married Edward Norton. The couple raised two children, Katherine and John, before divorcing in 1993. In 1970, New York Mayor John Lindsay appointed Eleanor Holmes Norton to chair the New York City Commission on Human Rights.² In 1977, President James Earl (Jimmy) Carter appointed her chair of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, where she served until 1981; she was the first woman to chair the commission. During the 1980s, she was a full-time tenured professor at Georgetown University Law Center, where she still teaches one course annually.

In 1990, Norton defeated five challengers in the Democratic primary for an open seat as the District of Columbia's Delegate in the U.S. House. In the general election, she won 62 percent of the vote in the heavily Democratic city. She has faced little or no opposition in nine re-election bids.³

When Norton entered the 102nd Congress (1991–1993), she won assignments on three committees: District of Columbia, Post Office and Civil Service, and Transportation and Infrastructure. In the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), she was appointed to the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress. In 1995, the District of Columbia Committee was absorbed by the Government Reform Committee (later renamed Oversight and Government Reform), where Norton now serves. In the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Norton won a seat on the Homeland Security Committee. In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), she chairs the Transportation Committee’s Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management.

For the first time in the city’s history, Norton won a vote as Delegate on the House Floor in the Committee of the Whole through a new rule she requested. In subsequent decisions, the federal courts ruled that the House could grant Delegates the right to vote in the House Floor committee by rule, as it had traditionally in other committees. This vote was withdrawn in the 104th Congress (1995–1997) when the Republicans assumed control of the House, but was returned in the 110th Congress when the Democrats resumed control. Current House rules allow Delegates full participation in the legislative process, excepting full voting rights on the House Floor. Delegates may introduce legislation, speak on the House Floor, and even chair committees. Yet Norton is the only Member of Congress whose constituents have no final congressional vote, although they pay federal income taxes and serve in the military.

Norton has been a vocal and articulate leader in the fight to secure DC statehood and voting rights and to improve the city’s services and infrastructure.⁴ In an effort to win statehood for the District, she authored the New Columbia Admission Act, which went to an unsuccessful vote on the House Floor. She then sponsored the No Taxation Without Representation Act for congressional votes, a bill that was also introduced in the Senate. In 2007, the House passed a bipartisan bill sponsored by Norton and Representative Tom Davis of Virginia to create House seats for largely Republican Utah and the mostly Democratic District of Columbia. (The bill is pending in the Senate.) She successfully fought congressional initiatives to nullify local laws, including repeals of the city’s ban on handguns, the use of local funds to lobby or seek court relief for congressional voting rights, and needle exchange programs to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS.⁵

FOR FURTHER READING

Lester, Joan Steinau. *Eleanor Holmes Norton: Fire in My Soul* (New York: Atria Books, 2003).

Marcovitz, Hal. *Eleanor Holmes Norton* (Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003).

“Norton, Eleanor Holmes,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=N000147>

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- 1 Joan Steinau Lester, *Eleanor Holmes Norton: Fire in My Soul* (New York: Atria Books, 2003): 274–276.
- 2 “Eleanor Holmes Norton,” *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 7 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1994) (hereinafter referred to as *CBB*).
- 3 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 4 “Eleanor Holmes Norton,” *CBB*; Lester, *Fire in My Soul*: 286.
- 5 *Almanac of American Politics, 2002* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 2001): 358–359.