

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

John Lewis

1940–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM GEORGIA

1987–

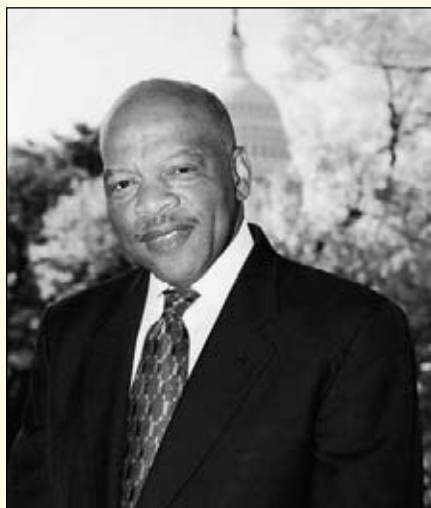


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Dubbed “the Conscience of the U.S. Congress,” John Lewis spent his early life as one of the principal leaders of the nonviolent civil rights movement initiated by Martin Luther King, Jr.¹ Now in his 11th term in the U.S. House, Representative Lewis holds a seat on the powerful Ways and Means Committee, from which he speaks with passion and authority about issues related to the legacy of that movement.

John Robert Lewis was born on February 21, 1940, in Troy, Alabama, to Eddie and Willie Mae Lewis. His parents originally were sharecroppers before they bought a 110-acre farm, where they raised cotton and peanuts. To help support the family of 10 children, Eddie Lewis drove a school bus and Willie Mae worked as a laundress.² John Lewis grew up attending segregated public schools. Shy and soft-spoken, Lewis was drawn to preaching. He eventually earned a bachelor of arts degree in 1961 from the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee. Lewis then enrolled at Fisk University, also in Nashville, graduating with a B.A. degree in religion and philosophy in 1967.

Lewis played a central role in the American civil rights movement. He was a founder and chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), eventually becoming one of the “Big Six” civil rights leaders—the others being King, Whitney Young, A. Phillip Randolph, James Farmer, and Roy Wilkins. He participated in the Freedom Rides to desegregate commercial busing in the South. He helped to organize the March on Washington, delivering a keynote address at the August 1963 gathering.³ Lewis also led the Bloody Sunday protest in Selma, Alabama, when baton-wielding state troopers beat and tear-gassed peaceful marchers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965. That event provided the catalyst for the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Lewis later served as associate director of the Field Foundation and directed the Voter Education Project of the South Regional Council. In 1968, Lewis married Lillian Miles; the couple has one son, John.

Lewis first ran for congressional office when Atlanta Representative Andrew Young resigned his U.S. House seat in 1977 to serve as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. In a crowded special primary on March 15, 1977, Lewis won 29 percent of the vote—second in a field of 12, behind Atlanta City Council Chairman Wyche Fowler. In a run-off several weeks later, Fowler prevailed with 62 percent of the vote.⁴ In 1977, President James Earl (Jimmy) Carter appointed Lewis to head the federal volunteer agency ACTION. He remained there four years before winning election to the Atlanta city council.

In 1986, when Fowler retired to run for the U.S. Senate, Lewis entered the Democratic primary for the seat that covered most of Atlanta and rural areas in southwest Fulton County. Reapportionment in 1982 had turned a district that formerly was half-white into one that was nearly two-thirds black. In a runoff primary against his former SNCC colleague and then-Georgia State Senator Julian Bond, Lewis went door to door in the district in a relentless grass-roots effort that won over a coalition of poor inner-city blacks and voters in majority-white precincts. He prevailed with a 52 percent majority.⁵ In the general election, Lewis defeated Republican candidate Portia A. Scott with 75 percent of the vote. In his subsequent 10 re-election campaigns, Lewis has won by similar margins, running unopposed since 2002.⁶

When Lewis entered the House in January 1987, he was assigned to two committees: Public Works and Transportation and Interior and Insular Affairs. In the 101st Congress (1989–1991), he received an additional post on the House Select Committee on Aging. He relinquished all three assignments in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995) after winning a coveted seat on the powerful Ways and Means Committee, which sets tax policy. He has remained on that panel since and currently serves as Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight. Lewis also served in the 108th Congress (2003–2005) on the Budget Committee. In addition, Representative Lewis has served as a Chief Deputy Whip for the Democratic Caucus since 1989. In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Lewis serves as Senior Chief Deputy Whip.

Representative Lewis's legislative interests draw chiefly from his background as a civil rights activist; he supports legislation to protect and expand voting rights measures and to provide better access to health care for minorities. Lewis's legislation creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, a unit of the Smithsonian Institution, was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2003.

FOR FURTHER READING

"Lewis, John R.," *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=L000287>.

Lewis, John. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

Howard University, Moorland–Spingarn Research Center (Washington, DC). *Oral History*: 1967, 175 pages. Interview with John Lewis includes recollections of student sit-ins in Nashville, Tennessee, in the early 1960s. Lewis also discusses the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and its activities, including Freedom Rides and demonstrations in Selma, Alabama. Lewis recalls his role in the March on Washington and his association with Martin Luther King, Jr. Restrictions; no quotation or citation without Lewis's written permission.

NOTES

- 1 Peter Carlson, "Nonviolent Fighter; John Lewis Retraces the Route That Led to the Future," 9 June 1998, *Washington Post*: D1.
- 2 "John (Robert) Lewis," *Current Biography, 1980* (New York: H. W. Wilson and Company, 1980): 222.
- 3 John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); see also Lewis's official biography at http://johnlewis.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=31 (accessed 29 October 2007).
- 4 *Current Biography, 1980*: 224.
- 5 Joe Davidson, "Lacking Issues, Veteran Civil-Rights Allies Take to the Low Road in Georgia Race for Congress," 8 August 1986, *Wall Street Journal*: 36; Art Harris, "Georgia Rivals in Bitter Runoff," 31 August 1986, *Washington Post*: A4; *Politics in America, 1988* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc. 1987): 366–367; *Almanac of American Politics, 1988* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc. 1987): 298–299.
- 6 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.