



Katie Beatrice Hall

1938–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1982–1985
DEMOCRAT FROM INDIANA

Unable to exercise her constitutional right to vote before the civil rights era and subject to segregation laws, Katie Hall felt trapped in her tiny southern hometown until she heard speeches by African-American Representatives Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of New York and William Dawson of Illinois that led her to believe she could attain a quality education and a better life outside Mississippi.¹ Hall eventually sought public office and became the first African American from Indiana to serve in the House of Representatives. Among her chief accomplishments was piloting a bill through Congress to make Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a national holiday.

On April 3, 1938, Katie Beatrice Green was born to Jeff and Bessie Mae Hooper Green, in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. One of 12 children, Katie attended the public schools in Mound Bayou and received a bachelor of science degree from Mississippi Valley State University in 1960. During her junior year of college, in 1957, she married John H. Hall. The couple had three children: Jacqueline, Junifer, and Michelle. In 1968, Katie Hall received an M.S. degree from Indiana University in Bloomington. She subsequently taught social studies in Gary, Indiana, an industrial city on the south shore of Lake Michigan. Hall's early political involvement included campaigning for black lawyer Richard Hatcher, a Gary mayoral candidate. This experience encouraged her to enter electoral politics herself. Hall ran an unsuccessful campaign for the Indiana state house of representatives in 1972 but won a seat in 1974. Two years later, Hall was elected to the state senate, where she served from 1976 until 1982. She also served as the chairwoman of the Lake County Democratic Committee from 1978 to 1980 and chaired the 1980 Indiana Democratic convention.

In September of 1982, Indiana Democratic Representative Adam Benjamin, Jr., died suddenly

of a heart attack. Katie Hall attended a public forum a week after the Representative's death to discuss a possible successor and was surprised to hear her name mentioned, although her aspiration to national office was not new. "I had always thought about running for Congress," she admitted, but refrained because "I saw Adam as a very highly respected Congressman who did the job very well. I saw him as a person who was undefeatable."² Patricia Benjamin, the Representative's widow, also expressed interest in succeeding her husband. Under Indiana law, the chairman of the district's Democratic committee selected the nominee to fill the vacancy for the remainder of the 97th Congress (1981–1983).³ Then-chairman Richard Hatcher, whom Hall considered her political mentor, remembered Hall's support for his mayoral campaigns.⁴ He selected his protégé to run for the vacant seat that represented the northwest corner of the state, anchored by Gary. At the same time, the committee nominated Hall—with Hatcher casting the deciding vote—for a full term in the 98th Congress (1983–1985) to represent a newly reapportioned district.⁵ The district's boundaries remained relatively unchanged after the reapportionment, and white northern Indiana Democrats expressed concern over Hall's electability because of her race. Although downtown Gary was primarily black, the racial composition of the entire district was 70 percent white.⁶ A legal battle ensued when Patricia Benjamin's supporters claimed that, as chairman of the old district, Hatcher did not have the right to select a candidate for the new district.⁷ The courts refused to overturn Hatcher's decision. Hall's nomination as the Democratic nominee for both the vacancy and the full term was tantamount to election in the working-class, Democratic district and she defeated her Republican opponent, Thomas Krieger, with 63 percent to win election to the remainder of the 97th Congress.⁸ She simultaneously



won election with 56 percent of the vote for the 98th Congress.⁹ Upon her election, Hall became the first black woman from Indiana to serve in the U.S. Congress.

When she arrived in Washington to be sworn in on November 2, 1982, Representative Hall received seats on the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service and the Committee on Public Works and Transportation, assignments that were typical for freshman Members. Representative Hall voted with the Democratic majority against much of the Ronald W. Reagan administration's legislative agenda, focusing on education, labor, and women's issues. In addition, Representative Hall became involved in the fight to alleviate famine in Africa when she witnessed widespread suffering during a congressional trip to northern Ethiopia. Hall also supported a variety of measures designed to reduce her urban, industrial district's high rate of unemployment and to mitigate the attendant social problems of crime, family debt and bankruptcy, and alcohol and drug abuse. As a member of the House Steel Caucus, Hall endorsed the Fair Trade in Steel Act, which was intended to revitalize Gary's ailing steel industry.

Katie Hall made her most lasting legislative contribution as chairwoman of the Post Office and Civil Service Subcommittee on Census and Population. Devoted to commemorating the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in July 1983 Hall introduced a bill to make King's birthday a federal holiday. Since King's assassination in 1968, similar measures had been introduced annually, but all had failed. As a nod to her negotiating abilities, Hall was assigned as the floor manager for the measure. The primary argument against the bill, advanced by fiscal conservatives, was the large cost of the holiday to the federal government, estimated at \$18 million in holiday overtime pay and lost work time.¹⁰ Hall courted detractors by moving the holiday from a fixed date—King's January 15 birthday—to the third Monday in January to prevent government offices from having to open twice in one week and thereby saving money. Under Hall's leadership, the House Subcommittee on Census and Population passed the measure in a five to one vote, sending it to the House

Floor. In opening the debate on the House Floor, Hall reminded her colleagues, "The legislation before us will act as a national commitment to Dr. King's vision and determination for an ideal America, which he spoke of the night before his death, where equality will always prevail."¹¹ Hall's persistence paid off. On August 2, 1983, more than 15 years after King's assassination, the bill passed the House by a vote of 338 to 90. On November 2, 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed the measure into law.¹² Impressed by Hall's success, veteran lawmaker William (Bill) Gray III of Pennsylvania observed, "Sometimes when you get to the goal line it's good to go to someone fresh and new to take it over. She brought a freshness of approach, a spirit of reconciliation to what had sometimes been a bitter battle."¹³

In her 1984 bid for renomination and re-election to the 99th Congress (1985–1987), Katie Hall faced a formidable challenge. Despite her many widespread supporters, including Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill of Massachusetts, two strong Democrats challenged Hall in her district primary: former Adam Benjamin aide Peter Visclosky and county prosecutor Jack Crawford. Hall maintained that intraparty opposition was based partially on her race and gender. During one debate Hall declared, "If I wasn't black and female, there wouldn't be a contest."¹⁴ Reverend Jesse Jackson, whose name appeared on the primary ballot for the Democratic presidential nominee, also rallied to her aid.¹⁵ In the May primary, Hall lost the Democratic nomination to Visclosky by a margin of 2,367 votes and immediately cited racial injustice.¹⁶ However, the most detrimental development was that aside from Hatcher, prominent African-American officials in Gary had failed to support her, resulting in only a 50 percent voter turnout in the predominantly black city.¹⁷ Hall also questioned returns in areas where polls indicated she ran stronger than the final count.¹⁸ She filed a petition and won a suit for a recount of the primary results; however, the recount only confirmed her losing margin.

After Congress, Hall continued to be active in Indiana Democratic politics. In 1986 and in 1990, she tried

unsuccessfully to recapture the Democratic nomination in her old House district. Hall returned to Gary and served as the vice chair of the city's housing board. Hall became the Gary city clerk in 1985. She resigned in January 2003 after pleading guilty to charges of federal mail fraud.¹⁹

FOR FURTHER READING

Catlin, Robert A. "Organizational Effectiveness and Black Political Participation: The Case of Katie Hall," *Phylon* 46 (September 1985): 179–192.

"Hall, Katie Beatrice," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=H000058>.

NOTES

- 1 Steven V. Roberts, "Mississippi Gets a Representative From Indiana," 26 November 1982, *New York Times*: B8.
- 2 Jan Carroll, "Katie Hall Could Be First Black Representative From Indiana," 21 September 1982, Associated Press.
- 3 "Black Woman Nominated to Succeed Benjamin," 13 September 1982, Associated Press.
- 4 Carroll, "Katie Hall Could Be First Black Representative From Indiana."
- 5 James R. Dickerson, "Indiana Democrats Feud Over Benjamin's Seat," 19 September 1982, *Washington Post*: A10.
- 6 "Black Woman Nominated to Succeed Benjamin"; for statistics on the white majority, see *Almanac of American Politics, 1984* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1983): 387; Julia Malone, "Folks Back Home Speak Their Piece to Representatives," 8 September 1982, *Christian Science Monitor*: 1.

- 7 Dickerson, "Indiana Democrats Feud Over Benjamin's Seat."
- 8 "Gary Indiana Newspaper Rejects Candidate's Newspaper Ad," 27 October 1982, United Press International; Roberts, "Mississippi Gets a Representative From Indiana."
- 9 "Election Information, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 10 Larry Margasak, "Courting Conservatives to Back King Holiday," 14 August 1983, Associated Press.
- 11 *Congressional Record*, House, 98th Cong., 1st sess. (2 August 1983): 22208.
- 12 A three-year grace period also was part of the compromise; see Sandra Evans Teeley, "King Holiday Bill Approved by House Panel," 1 July 1983, *Washington Post*: A10. The Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday was first observed on January 20, 1986. See Steven V. Stathis, *Landmark Legislation, 1774–2002* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2003). See also the House bill history in the final *House Calendar* for the 98th Congress. For the Reagan bill signing, see David Hoffman, "King Is Saluted as President Signs Holiday Into Law," 3 November 1983, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 13 Margasak, "Courting Conservatives to Back King Holiday."
- 14 E. R. Shipp, "Rep. Katie Hall Facing Tough Fight in Indiana," 7 May 1984, *New York Times*: B8.
- 15 David S. Broder and Kevin Klose, "Two States' House Primaries Will Involve Interracial Battles," 5 May 1984, *Washington Post*: A7.
- 16 "Mrs. Hall Loses Bid for Renomination in Indiana; Racism Charged," 10 May 1984, *Washington Post*: B19.
- 17 "Racism, Low Voter Turnout Blamed for Black Congresswoman's Defeat," 9 May 1984, Associated Press.
- 18 "Black Congresswoman Seeks Recount After Loss in Democratic Primary," 22 May 1984, Associated Press.
- 19 Barbara Sherlock, "Gary Official Resigns After Pleading Guilty; City Clerk Accepts Mail Fraud Charges," 29 January 2003, *Chicago Tribune*: N2.