Barbara-Rose Collins
1939–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1991–1997
DEMOCRAT FROM MICHIGAN

A longtime community activist and single mother, Barbara-Rose Collins was elected to Congress in 1990 on a platform to bring federal dollars and social aid to her economically depressed neighborhood in downtown Detroit. In the House, Collins focused on her lifelong advocacy for minority rights and on providing economic aid to and preserving the family in black communities.

The eldest child of Lamar Nathaniel and Lou Versa Jones Richardson, Barbara Rose Richardson was born in Detroit, Michigan, on April 13, 1939. Her father supported the family of four children as an auto manufacturer and later as an independent contractor in home improvement. Barbara Richardson graduated from Cass Technical High School in 1957 and attended Detroit's Wayne State University majoring in political science and anthropology. Richardson left college to marry her classmate, Virgil Gary Collins, who later worked as a pharmaceutical salesman to support their two children, Cynthia and Christopher.[1] In 1960, the couple divorced, and, as a single mother, Barbara Collins was forced to work multiple jobs. She received public financial assistance until the physics department at Wayne State University hired her as a business manager, a position she held for nine years. Collins subsequently became an assistant in the office of equal opportunity and neighborhood relations at Wayne State. In the late 1960s, Collins heard a speech by black activist Stokely Carmichael at Detroit's Shrine of the Black Madonna Church. Inspired by Carmichael's appeal to African Americans to improve their own neighborhoods, Collins purchased a house within a block of her childhood home and joined the Shrine Church, whose sociopolitical agenda focused on uplifting black neighborhoods. In 1971, Collins was elected to Detroit's region one school board, earning widespread recognition for her work on school safety and academic achievement. Encouraged by the Shrine Church pastor, Collins campaigned for a seat in the state legislature in 1974, hyphenating her name, Barbara-Rose, to distinguish herself from the other candidates.[2] Victorious, she embarked on a six-year career in the statehouse. Collins chaired the constitutional revision and women's rights committee, which produced *Women in the Legislative Process*, the first published report to document the status of women in the Michigan state legislature.[3]

Bolstered by her work in Detroit's most downtrodden neighborhoods, Collins considered running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 1980 against embattled downtown Representative Charles Diggs, Jr.; however, Collins's mentor Detroit Mayor Coleman Young advised her to run for Detroit city council instead, and she did successfully.[4] Eight years later in the Democratic primary, she challenged incumbent U.S. Representative George W. Crockett, who had succeeded Diggs. In a hard-fought campaign, Collins held the respected, but aging, Crockett to a narrow victory with less than 49 percent of the vote. Crockett chose not to run for re-election in 1990, leaving the seat wide open for Barbara-Rose Collins. Collins's 1990 campaign focused on bringing federal money to Detroit, an economically depressed city whose population was moving to the suburbs. Her district's rapidly rising crime rate (one of the highest in the nation) also affected the candidate.[5] In 1989, Collins's son was convicted of armed robbery, and she concluded that he went astray because he lacked a strong male role model. "I could teach a girl how to be a woman, but I could not teach a boy how to be a man," she later told the *Detroit Free Press*.[6] Drawing from this experience, Collins tried to strengthen black families, rallying under the banner "Save the Black Male." In a crowded field of eight candidates, Collins won her primary with 34 percent of the vote, a victory that amounted to election to Congress in the overwhelmingly Democratic

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district. Collins sailed through the general election with 80 percent of the vote and was re-elected twice with even higher percentages.[7]

One of three black women in her freshman class, Collins sought the influence and counsel of longtime Michigan Representative John Dingell, Jr., who helped her gain a seat on the Public Works and Transportation Committee (later Transportation and Infrastructure).[8] She also received assignments to the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology and the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families. She later traded these two panels for Government Operations (later named Government Reform and Oversight) and the Post Office and Civil Service Committee, where she chaired the Subcommittee on Postal Operations and Services in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995). A member of the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Women's Caucus, Representative Collins was appointed a Majority Whip At-Large from 1993 until 1994.

Collins's career was focused on her campaign promises of economic and social aid for the urban black poor. In October 1992 Collins began encouraging agricultural growers to donate excess food that would otherwise go to waste to urban food banks and shelters.[9] Collins generally supported President William J. (Bill) Clinton's economic and job stimulus initiatives; however, she vocally opposed adopting the North American Free Trade Agreement, arguing that opening American borders to cheaper Mexican products would take domestic manufacturing jobs away from urban minority workers.[10] Though she favored the bill's final version, she voted against the President's April 1994 omnibus crime bill, objecting to its extension of the death penalty to several more federal crimes and opposing a section that mandated life in prison for people convicted of three felonies. Collins argued that these provisions would affect minorities disproportionately, declaring, "I think justice is dispensed differently for people of color, be they black or Hispanic."[11] Collins's family advocacy was apparent in her enthusiastic support of the October 1995 Million Man March, a mass rally of African-American men in Washington, DC, to demonstrate commitment to family. Collins planned to provide water for the marchers, "The idea is electrifying. . . . Black men will be reaffirming their responsibility for black women and for the black family," she said.[12] Collins also advocated considering housework, childcare, volunteer work, and time devoted to a family business as components of the gross national product. "If you raise the status of women," she declared, "we would be more conscious of the family unit."[13]

With her focus on domestic issues, Representative Collins generally opposed increasing foreign aid. "Our cities are hurting," she observed. "We must learn how to take care of America first."[14] However, in April 1994 Collins and five other Democratic House Members were arrested after staging a sit-in at the White House to protest American policy toward Haiti. In the wake of the island nation's military coup, the protestors called for greater acceptance of Haitian refugees and demanded a stronger embargo against Haiti.[15] "What's being done to Haitians is inhumane and immoral," Collins said. "The fact of the matter is we welcome Hungarians with open arms, we welcome Vietnamese with open arms, we welcome Cubans with open arms, but when it comes to black Haitians, we tell them, 'Stand back we don't want you,' the result being that hundreds are drowned at sea, children and women eaten by sharks."[16] All six Members were fined and released.

While Collins was popular among her constituents, she drew negative publicity when the Justice Department and the House Ethics Committee investigated her office in 1996 for the alleged misuse of campaign and scholarship funds.[17] Though Collins was initially unopposed in the 1994 primary, six opponents entered the race following the controversy. Challenger Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick defeated the incumbent in the primary by a 21-point margin and went on to win the general election. Barbara-Rose Collins remained active in local politics. In 2001, she won a seat on the Detroit city council. Collins was re-elected to the council for a second term in 2005.

FOR FURTHER READING

"Collins, Barbara-Rose," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000633.

NOTES

1 The couple's third child died in infancy.

2 DeWitt S. Dykes, Jr., "Barbara-Rose Collins," *Notable Black American Women,* Volume 2, Jessie Carney Smith, ed. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1996): 135 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAW*). The couple's third child died in its infancy.

3 Dykes, "Barbara-Rose Collins," *NBAW*.

4 Ibid.

5 *Almanac of American Politics, 1996* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1995): 710.

6 Dykes, "Barbara-Rose Collins," *NBAW*.

7 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.

8 Dykes, "Barbara-Rose Collins," *NBAW*.

9 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (5 October 1992): 3074.

10 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (21 October 1993): 8336; *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (26 October 1993): 8436.

11 *Politics in America, 1996*: 685.

12 Francis X. Clines, "Organizers Defend Role of Farrakhan in March by Blacks," 13 October 1995, *New York Times*: A1.

13 Maria Odum, "If the G.N.P. Counted Housework, Would Women Count for More?" 5 April 1992, *New York Times*: E5.

14 Adam Clymer, "House Votes Billions in Aid to Ex-Soviet Republics," 7 August 1992, *New York Times*: A1.

15 Peter H. Spiegel, "Members Arrested in Haiti Protest," 25 April 1994, *Roll Call*.

16 Kenneth R. Bazinet, "Congressmen Arrested Outside White House," 21 April 1994, United Press International.

17 In January 1997, the House Standards of Official Conduct Committee found Representative Collins guilty of violating 11 House rules and federal laws; however, the panel did not recommend disciplinary action because Collins had already left office. A historical chart of all formal House ethics actions is available at http://www.house.gov/ethics/Historical_Chart_ Final_Version.htm. See also Robyn Meredith, "Ethical Issues Pose Test to a Detroit Lawmaker," 2 August 1996, *New York Times*: A10; Sarah Pekkanen, "Ethics Committee Issues Scathing Report on Collins," 8 January 1997, *The Hill*.