



Cleo Fields 1962–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1993–1997
DEMOCRAT FROM LOUISIANA

From an impoverished childhood, Cleo Fields rose to win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives at age 29, serving as the youngest Member of the 103rd Congress (1993–1995). “Chills just went down my spine,” Fields remarked about his swearing-in.¹ Yet the controversy over racial gerrymandering and the peculiarity of Louisiana’s election law extinguished Fields’s meteoric political career in the U.S. House after just two terms.

Born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on November 22, 1962, Cleo was one of 10 children of Isidore Fields, a dockworker, and Alice Fields, a maid. Isidore died after falling asleep behind the wheel of his car on his way home from working a double shift.² Poverty became a way of life for four-year-old Cleo, as the Fields household struggled to make ends meet. “I didn’t know what poor was,” Cleo Fields later recalled, “I thought mommas were supposed to put three patches in a pair of pants. In junior high school, it really hit me in the face. That’s when I realized what my mother was going through.”³ At one point, the family was evicted from a Baton Rouge apartment. Throughout his youth, Fields worked several jobs to aid his family, taking a shift at a fast food restaurant and working at the Baton Rouge mayor’s office of youth opportunity to save money for college. After graduating from McKinley High School in Baton Rouge, Fields attended cross-town Southern University, earning his bachelors and law degrees. Politics became his passion. In his early law school years, he began circulating bumper stickers to classmates that read, “I’m waiting for Cleo Fields.” Fields noted, “I didn’t know what office I would run for, so I didn’t want to be too specific.”⁴

During his final year of law school in 1986, Fields ran a grass-roots campaign for the Louisiana state senate. Without money to launch a campaign, he depended on student volunteers and the aid of his siblings to oust a well-entrenched incumbent. His eventual victory made

the 24-year-old the youngest state legislator ever elected in Louisiana. Fields’s slight, youthful build and five-foot, seven-inch frame were dwarfed by the round, tortoiseshell glasses that became his trademark. He once quipped to a crowd of voters, “I know I don’t look like a man, but I am one.”⁵ While in the state legislature, Fields focused on environmental issues and economic opportunities for minorities. He also emerged as a leader in the war against illegal drugs. Fields married his high school sweetheart, Debra Horton. The couple had two sons, Cleo Brandon, born in 1995, and Christopher, born in 1998.

In 1990, Fields ran unsuccessfully against incumbent Republican Clyde Holloway for a U.S. House seat encompassing central Louisiana that included portions of the state capital, Baton Rouge. The district’s population, which was 38 percent black, had voted for Democratic candidates in three of the past four presidential elections.⁶ Fields was runner-up in the former open-party primary, unique to Louisiana, in which all the candidates from all the parties competed. If no candidate received more than 50 percent of the vote, the state held a runoff election between the top-two vote getters. The well-entrenched Holloway won decisively with 56 percent of the vote to Fields’s 30 percent; there was no need for a runoff.

After the 1990 Census eliminated one U.S. House seat from Louisiana, Fields participated in the redistricting efforts from his state senate seat, helping to create an oddly shaped congressional district that he would seek to represent in 1992. The district hugged Louisiana’s eastern border, jutting occasionally toward the central part of the state and forming a loose “Z” shape. It encompassed a large area, stretching east and west of Baton Rouge, north up the Mississippi River to the Arkansas border and west through Shreveport, taking in a wide mix of rural and urban communities, including parts of the state’s five largest



cities and Louisiana State University. The state senate designed the district so that it would have a black majority (66 percent of the population), and registered Democrats outnumbered Republicans 8 to 1.⁷ It was one of two black-majority districts in the state; Representative William Jefferson represented the other, which covered greater New Orleans. Fields received 48 percent of the vote, making him the top vote-getter, but he fell just short of the 50 percent needed to win outright. His nearest competitor, fellow African-American State Senator Charles (C. D.) Jones, took 14 percent. The two faced one another in a December runoff. Fields ran an energetic door-to-door campaign. He defeated Jones handily with 74 percent of the vote, emphasizing three goals he would advocate throughout his political career: creating jobs, lowering the cost of health care, and reducing the federal deficit.⁸

Fields's congressional colleagues recognized his service in the state senate by electing him parliamentarian of his freshman class. He was assigned to the Small Business Committee as well as the Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs Committee. In 1995, Fields earned the highest marks in the Louisiana delegation for his liberal voting record, citing his support for gun control, abortion, and social spending.⁹ He preferred to support the proposals put forth by the Democratic Congress and the President William J. (Bill) Clinton administration rather than take the lead on many legislative initiatives.

Fields was soon preoccupied with defending the borders of his district against several lawsuits. In April 1994, the federal court in Louisiana re-examined *Hays v. Louisiana*—a lawsuit that was previously filed by four of Fields's constituents who claimed Louisianans' voting rights were hindered by a racial "supermajority" in all the state's congressional districts. The court ruled that Fields's Z-shaped district was invalid and forced another reapportionment.¹⁰ The new district resembled a wedge running between the northwest border of the state toward the center and Baton Rouge. The Representative's home remained within the district and the new borders still contained a majority-black population (58 percent). Not

satisfied, the same plaintiffs filed suit again. Only after the United States Supreme Court issued a stay in August did the 1994 election proceed with Fields running in the wedge-shaped district.¹¹ Fields won the open primary with 48 percent of the vote; he took the November 3 runoff with 74 percent over his 1992 opponent, Charles Jones.¹² However, his district lines changed four times between December 1993 and August 1994, distracting Fields from his legislative work. "For four years, I had one foot in the House and one foot across the street in the Supreme Court," Fields later recalled. "I was under a dark cloud the whole time I was up there. I never knew if I would be there the next day."¹³ Fields blamed the political enemies he made during his years in the state senate for the relentless attacks on the boundaries of his district.¹⁴

In the midst of the battle to alter his district, Fields announced his candidacy for governor in 1995. Though Fields maintained the election was not about race, he quickly shored up as many black votes as possible.¹⁵ In an open-primary field that was crowded with Democrats, Fields hoped his youth as well as his race would appeal to voters. Fields won 19 percent of the vote in the open primary, finishing as the runner-up to Republican Mike Foster—whose family had a history of service in the state and who switched party affiliation just weeks before the primary election. Fields lost the runoff vote—which was mostly divided on racial lines—taking only 36 percent of the vote.¹⁶

The final blow to Fields's congressional career came on January 5, 1996, when a U.S. District Court ruled that his wedge-shaped district was unconstitutional. Representing himself, Fields appealed the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court; however, the state legislature—following the lead of the newly elected Governor Foster—adopted the plan in April 1996, despite Fields's plea to the statehouse.¹⁷ The new lines, including a larger wedge running south from the northwest border through Shreveport, retained a substantial black voting bloc in the new district, but African Americans were no longer the majority. Also, Fields no longer lived in the district he was supposed to represent;

his Baton Rouge home ended up being within the same boundaries as House veteran Republican Richard Baker's residence.¹⁸ Fields chose not to run against the very popular and well-entrenched Baker in 1996, further admitting that running in his former district would be "self-serving," as his home was no longer located there. "I don't want to leave the impression that I am bitter [about the apportionment battle]. I want people to know how honored I am," he told reporters, "Well, I got 17 percent of the white vote [in the governor's race]. For a then-33-year-old candidate like me to get 17 percent of the cross-over vote, I think that says there's a bright future ahead, a bright future."¹⁹ Fields also was optimistic that the 2000 Census would gain Louisiana an extra House seat, noting that the loss of a seat following the 1990 Census did not account for large numbers of minority and low-income residents. However, Louisiana did not pick up a seat after the next census.

Though Fields debated running for an open U.S. Senate seat when Senator Bennett Johnston retired, he ultimately decided not to run, citing his decisive loss for governor.²⁰ Upon his departure, Fields pressed to eliminate the

open-primary system that had been in place in Louisiana since 1978. He also was active in the 1996 presidential campaign, serving as a senior advisor on the Clinton–Gore re-election campaign. In 1997, he took an appointment in Vice President Al Gore's office directing a federal program that awarded grants and economic incentives to impoverished communities, classified as "empowerment zones" and "enterprise communities," each receiving a different level of federal aid.²¹ Several of these zones were located in Fields's former Louisiana district.

Fields returned to the state senate in a special election in December 1997, serving simultaneously with his younger brother, Wilson.²² Fields also began hosting a weekly radio program in Baton Rouge, called "Cleo Live," which drew prominent black politicians as guests, and he opened a law practice. Fields later admitted, "The more I get into my law practice, the less appealing returning to Congress becomes. It's been one of the most productive things I've done with my life." But, he also conceded, "When I was in Congress, I thought it was the greatest job in the world."²³

FOR FURTHER READING

“Fields, Cleo” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=F000110>.

NOTES

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- 2 Gwendolyn Thompkins, “Cleo Fields Reaching for the Mountaintop After a Tough Climb,” 13 September 1995, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA): A1.
- 3 “Cleo Fields,” *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 13 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1996).
- 4 Thompkins, “Cleo Fields Reaching for the Mountaintop After a Tough Climb.”
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1989): 629.
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- 9 Bruce Alpert, “Fields’ Focus Earns Praise From Liberals,” 29 October 1995, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA): A1.
- 10 Richard L. Engstrom and Jason F. Kirksey, “Race and Representational Districting in Louisiana,” in Bernard Grofman ed., *Race And Redistricting In The 1990s* (New York: Agathon Press, 1998): 229–265; *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1993* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1994): 22-A–23-A; *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1995): 591–592.
- 11 Engstrom and Kirksey, “Race and Representational Districting in Louisiana:” 256, 259.
- 12 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 779.
- 13 John Mercurio, “Return Engagement? Ex-Rep. Fields Plotting Political Comeback,” 8 June 2000, *Roll Call*.
- 14 Mercurio, “Return Engagement? Ex-Rep. Fields Plotting Political Comeback.”
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- 16 *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1995* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1996): 12–5.
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- 18 *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1996* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1997): 11–37.
- 19 McKinney, “‘There’s A Bright Future Ahead’: Rep. Cleo Fields Plans to Rest, Get a Job—And Return to Office.”
- 20 “Black Congressman In Louisiana Decides To Skip Senate Bid,” 13 July 1996, *New York Times*: 7.
- 21 Joan McKinney, “Fields Set To Begin Fed Work,” 28 March 1997, *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA).
- 22 “Senator Cleo Fields—District 14,” *Louisiana State Senate*, at <http://senate.legis.state.la.use/FieldsC/biography.asp> (accessed 7 March 2007).
- 23 Mercurio, “Return Engagement? Ex-Rep. Fields Plotting Political Comeback.”



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