

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

Donald M. Payne

1934–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM NEW JERSEY

1989–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

Donald M. Payne, the first African American to represent New Jersey in the U.S. Congress, has emerged as a stalwart advocate for federal funding for education as well as greater U.S. engagement in Africa. An experienced community activist and Newark elected official, Payne succeeded one of the House's most recognizable figures, longtime House Judiciary Committee Chairman Peter W. Rodino, Jr., after his 1988 retirement.

Donald Milford Payne was born on July 16, 1934, in Newark, New Jersey, the son of William Evander Payne, a dockworker, and Norma Garrett Payne. He grew up in Doodletown, an Italian-American section of Newark. Payne later recalled, "Everyone, whites and blacks, worked for low wages, although we didn't think of it as living in poverty, and there was a real sense of neighborhood, of depending on one another."¹ As a teenager, Payne joined a group called "The Leaguers," which sought to assist inner-city youth by providing social, educational, and work activities.² The founders, Reynold and Mary Burch, were prominent African Americans in Newark and helped Payne secure a four-year scholarship at Seton Hall University. Payne graduated in 1957 with a degree in social studies, and later pursued graduate studies at Springfield College in Massachusetts. On June 15, 1958, he married Hazel Johnson, who died in 1963. Donald Payne never remarried and has three adult children. He taught English and social studies and coached football and track in the Newark public school system before working for a major insurance company. He later served as a vice president of a computer forms manufacturing company founded by his brother.

Payne became involved in politics at age 19 as manager of his brother William's successful campaign to serve as Newark's first African-American district leader.³ He pursued community work through the local Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). From 1970 to 1973, Payne served as president of the YMCA of the United States; he was the first black to hold that position. In 1972, he was elected to the Essex County board of chosen freeholders. During his six years as a freeholder, he eventually chaired the board. In 1982, Payne won election to the city council of Newark.

Payne twice challenged Representative Rodino in the Democratic primary for a U.S. House seat encompassing Newark and portions of Essex County. Arguing that the New Jersey congressional delegation was not representative of the racial composition of the state, Payne failed to unseat Rodino in 1980 and 1986.⁴ In 1988, however, when Rodino announced his retirement, Payne became a leading contender for the nomination to fill the vacant seat. In the June 1988 Democratic primary, he defeated Ralph T. Grant by a two to one ratio. In a district that voted overwhelmingly Democratic, Payne defeated Republican opponent Michael Webb with 77 percent of the vote in the general election.⁵ In his subsequent nine re-election campaigns, he has won by similar margins.⁶

After Payne was sworn in to the House on January 3, 1989, he received assignments on the Education and Labor Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee. He has served on the Education and Labor Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee throughout his House career. In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), he assumed the chairman's gavel of the Foreign Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health. Payne has served on the Democratic Steering Committee, which determines individual committee assignments for Democratic House Members and shapes the party's legislative agenda. As a past chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, he developed a reputation as being thoughtful, determined, and low-key. "I think there is a lot of dignity in being able to achieve things without having to create rapture," he once noted. Payne also is a member of the Democratic Whip organization.⁷

Representative Payne's legislative interests include both domestic and foreign initiatives. Among the successful measures he has helped shape from his seat on the Education and Labor Committee are the Goals 2000 initiative to improve the quality of education, the Student Loan Bill, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, and the National Service Act.⁸ An advocate for inner-city redevelopment, Payne is a leading critic of civil rights crimes, racial profiling, and police brutality. As a senior member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Payne emerged as a forceful advocate for U.S. sanctions against the Sudanese government—particularly during a period of genocide in the Darfur region in 2004. He also has prodded both the William J. (Bill) Clinton and George W. Bush administrations for increased foreign aid for economic development and health care improvements in Africa.

FOR FURTHER READING

"Payne, Donald Milford," *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=P000149>.

NOTES

- 1 Joseph F. Sullivan, "A Victor in Jersey's Primary: From Coach to Congress Race," 9 June 1988, *New York Times*: B1.
- 2 *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2007): 658.
- 3 "Donald Payne," *Contemporary Black Biography* Volume 2 (Ann Arbor, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1992); Sullivan, "A Victor in Jersey's Primary."
- 4 Bill Lowry, "Rodino Facing Black Rival," 10 March 1986, *Bergen Record*: B1; Joseph F. Sullivan, "Challenge to Rodino Closely Watched," 2 June 1986, *New York Times*: B2; David Blomquist, "It's Time to Step Down, Rodino's Old Allies Say Democrats in Essex Want to Elect a Black," 14 March 1988, *Bergen Record*: A1; Joseph F. Sullivan, "Black Politicians Pressure Rodino to Retire," 9 March 1988, *New York Times*: B1; Joseph F. Sullivan, "Rodino Says He Will Retire in January," 15 March 1988, *New York Times*: B1.
- 5 Kathleen O'Brien, "Payne Gets Rodino Seat; First Black Congressman Elected from N.J.," 9 November 1988, *Bergen Record*: A19.
- 6 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 7 *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2005): 670; "Official Biography of Congressman Donald M. Payne," <http://www.house.gov/payne/biography/index.html> (accessed 29 October 2007).
- 8 "Official Biography of Congressman Donald M. Payne."