

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

Charles B. Rangel

1930–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

1971–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

As dean of the New York State delegation, Representative Charles Rangel is one of the five most senior Members in the House of Representatives and the second-longest-serving African American in congressional history. In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Representative Rangel became the first African American to chair the powerful Ways and Means Committee and is one of a small group of blacks who have chaired multiple congressional committees.

Charles Rangel was born on June 11, 1930, in Harlem, New York City. The second of three children, he was raised by his mother, who was born Blanche Wharton, and his maternal grandfather, Charles Wharton. From 1948 to 1952, Rangel served in the U.S. Army and was awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart in the Korean War after being wounded and leading 40 U.S. soldiers from behind enemy lines.¹ After graduating from DeWitt Clinton High School, Rangel, in 1957, earned a bachelor of science degree from New York University under the GI bill. Three years later, he completed a J.D. at St. John's University Law School. In 1960 Rangel passed the New York Bar and began practicing law. In 1963, he was appointed Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York. He later served as counsel to the speaker of the New York assembly and on the President's Commission to Revise the Draft Laws. On July 26, 1964, Rangel married the former Alma Carter. They raised two children, Steven and Alicia. They have three grandsons.

Rangel's interest in politics was piqued by his work for the state assembly and the New York City housing and redevelopment board, and by his service as a legal adviser to many individuals in the civil rights movement. In 1966, he ran successfully for a seat in the New York assembly, representing central Harlem. During his two terms in Albany, Rangel emerged as a leading advocate for inner-city constituents while forging a bipartisan friendship with Republican Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller.²

In the 1970 Democratic primary, Rangel narrowly defeated renowned veteran U.S. Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., for his Harlem-based seat and prevailed in the general election. Powell had represented the district—encompassing Harlem, East Harlem, the Upper West Side, Washington Heights, and Inwood—since its creation in 1944. In his subsequent 18 re-election campaigns, Rangel won by lopsided majorities of 87 percent or more.³

Rangel took his seat at the opening of the 92nd Congress (1971–1973). In the 94th Congress (1975–1977), he became the first African-American member of the prestigious Ways and Means Committee, which writes federal tax law, and ascended to the chairmanship in 2007. He also was assigned to the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control in 1975 and chaired that panel from the 98th through the 102nd Congresses (1981–1993). Rangel cofounded the Congressional Black Caucus, serving as the group's chairman in the 94th Congress.

Representative Rangel emerged as a forceful critic of the drug trade and illicit drug use. He also focused on opening up economic opportunities for minority groups and the poor. He authored a 1993 provision providing tax breaks to promote investments and jobs in inner-city neighborhoods called “empowerment zones.” Rangel authored the Low Income Housing Tax Credit—a measure that significantly boosted affordable housing built in the United States.⁴ For veterans, Rangel founded the Office of Minority Affairs in the Veterans Administration.

In 1987, Rangel contributed to the demise of the apartheid government of South Africa as the author of the “Rangel Amendment.” Denying certain tax benefits to U.S. corporations, the legislation forced major U.S. companies to withdraw from the country, weakening the government and clearing the way for the emergence of democracy. In 2000, the Representative's historic African Growth and Opportunity Act became law, providing for the first time incentives for U.S. trade with sub-Saharan Africa. He also founded the Rangel State Department Fellows Program, which has significantly increased the representation of minorities in the U.S. Foreign Service.

As part of an economic stimulus bill to rejuvenate the U.S. economy after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Rangel managed to extend unemployment benefits for workers; this was particularly important to those in the travel and lodging industries in New York.⁵ Rangel has brought millions of dollars into his district, helping to spur the economic revitalization of Harlem.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Rangel, Charles B.,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=R000053>.

Rangel, Charles B., and Leon Wynter. *And I Haven't Had a Bad Day Since: From the Streets of Harlem to the Halls of Congress* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2007).

NOTES

- 1 “Charles B. Rangel,” *Current Biography, 1984* (New York: H. W. Wilson and Company, 1984): 338.
- 2 See, for example, Paul Good, “A Political Tour of Harlem,” 29 October 1967, *New York Times Magazine*: SM34; *Current Biography, 1984*: 338.
- 3 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 4 “Official Biography of Congressman Charles B. Rangel,” <http://www.house.gov/rangel/bio.shtml> (accessed 27 November 2007).
- 5 *Almanac of American Politics, 2000* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1999): 1138; *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2005): 725–726; see also “Official Biography of Congressman Charles B. Rangel.”