

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

Bobby L. Rush
1946–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

1993–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

As a founder of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, an ally in Harold Washington's effort to topple the Daley Democratic machine in Chicago, and a Member of Congress, Bobby Rush has devoted his political career to bringing a measure of power to those disfranchised from the political system. An eight-term Member of the House, Representative Rush serves on the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee. "My life's mission, my life's meaning, my life's definition," he once said, "is that I am a fighter for the people."¹

Bobby L. Rush was born on November 23, 1946, in Albany, Georgia, the son of Cora Lee, a beautician and teacher, and Jimmy Lee Rush, a taxi driver. At age seven, he and his four siblings moved to Chicago with his divorced mother.² His mother was a Republican precinct leader, largely because whites dominated the local Democratic machine.³ In 1963, he joined the U.S. Army, serving five years before receiving an honorable discharge. During the 1960s civil rights movement, Rush was a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In 1968, he left SNCC to cofound the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, a militant group that fought for political and economic equality. Rush helped initiate nonviolent projects in African-American communities, including a medical clinic that screened patients for sickle-cell anemia. "We were resistant to police brutality, to the historical relationship between African Americans and recalcitrant, racist whites," Rush recalled years later. Rush left the Black Panther Party in 1974 because he opposed its growing emphasis on violence and drug use. Rush earned a B.A. degree in political science from Roosevelt University in Chicago in 1973. In 1994, he earned an M.A. in political science from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and four years later he completed an M.A. in theological studies from McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. Rush, an ordained minister, and his wife of 28 years, Carolyn, have six children. One of their sons was murdered in 1999.

Rush made unsuccessful bids for the Chicago city council and the Illinois state house of representatives, but in 1983, his longtime friend U.S. Representative Harold Washington was elected mayor of Chicago, marking a moment of black ascendancy in Chicago politics. At the same time, Rush was elected alderman in the city's South Side 2nd Ward. By the time Washington died in office in 1987, Rush had built a formidable political base.⁴

In 1992, Rush challenged Representative Charles Hayes, a five-term veteran, in the Democratic primary. The district encompassed much of the African-American South Side in addition to several Irish-American communities. Rush defeated Hayes in the primary by three percentage points.⁵ In the general election, he won handily against his Republican opponent, with 83 percent of the vote. In his seven re-election efforts since, he has won 76 percent of the vote or more, including 87 percent in his 2006 re-election campaign.⁶

As a freshman Representative, Rush received assignments on three committees: Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs; Government Operations; and Science, Space, and Technology. He left those assignments in the 104th Congress (1995–1997) for a seat on the prestigious Energy and Commerce Committee, where he has remained. In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), he was appointed Chairman of its Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection. Rush's Democratic freshman class colleagues elected him class president in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), and he has been part of the Whip organization since he entered the House.

By his own estimate, Rush has brought more than \$2 billion in federal money into his district since 1993.⁷ As a freshman Member, Rush introduced legislation that passed the House as the Community Development and Regulatory Act. An advocate for improved access to health care for underserved populations, Rush has passed measures such as the Urban Asthma Reduction Act of 1999. In his first year as Subcommittee Chairman, Rush passed H.R. 20, the Melanie Blocker-Stokes Postpartum Depression Research and Care Act. Rush supports gun control and opposes the death penalty, and has introduced H.R. 2666, the Blair Holt Firearm Licensing and Record of Sale Act, a measure aimed at registering every gun sold in the United States.

While backing government programs to expand economic opportunities in urban communities, Rush does not view the federal government as a panacea. "Government is not going to solve all the problems that afflict the African American community," Rush noted. "We must look within ourselves, first and foremost. Capacity building and maintenance must become the top priority, both economically and politically, especially through entrepreneurship and education."

FOR FURTHER READING

"Rush, Bobby L.," *Biographical Directory of the U. S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=R000515>.

NOTES

- 1 Sarah Pekkanen, "The Many Paradoxes of Rep. Bobby Rush," 29 March 1995, *The Hill*.
- 2 Don Wycliff, "Soul Survivor: Bobby Rush Narrowly Escaped a Deadly Police Raid and Later Won a Long-Shot Bid for Congress," 16 November 2003, *Chicago Tribune Magazine*: 12; Dirk Johnson, "A Politician's Life, From Militant to Mainstream," 3 June 1990, *New York Times*: 22.
- 3 *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2005): 331; Pekkanen, "The Many Paradoxes of Rep. Bobby Rush."
- 4 "Bobby Rush," *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 26 (Detroit, MI: Gale Publishing Inc., 2000).
- 5 Tim Curran, "Former Black Panther Leader Gets Ready to Move to Hill After Victory Over Hayes," 19 March 1992, *Roll Call*; Tim Curran, "Black Panthers' Bobby Rush Heads for Hill," 26 March 1992, *Roll Call*.
- 6 *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2007): 325; "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; Mike Robinson, "Former Black Panther Wins Primary," 22 March 2000, Associated Press.
- 7 "Official Biography of Congressman Bobby L. Rush," <http://www.house.gov/rush/bio.shtml> (accessed 17 October 2007).