

Bennie Thompson
1948–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM MISSISSIPPI

1993–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

A veteran of Mississippi politics for nearly 40 years, Bennie Thompson is an eight-term Member of the U.S. House and chairman of the Homeland Security Committee. Having grown up in the segregated South, Thompson has watched Mississippi government evolve from an era when blacks had no political clout to the present, when African Americans hold a number of the state's elective offices. His congressional career has focused on the interests of his largely agricultural constituency and on improved access for minorities to economic opportunities and health care.

Bennie G. Thompson was born in Bolton, Mississippi, on January 28, 1948, to Will and Annie Lauris Thompson. He grew up in an all-black neighborhood and was educated in segregated schools. His father, who died when Bennie was a teenager, was an auto mechanic, and his mother was a teacher. In 1968, he graduated from Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Mississippi, with a bachelor of arts degree in political science. In college, he was a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and volunteered on the congressional campaign of famed civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer. Though Hamer did not win election to Congress, her example and the experience of registering African Americans in southern voting drives inspired Thompson to pursue a career in politics.¹ He earned a master of science degree in educational administration from Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1973. Thompson later pursued doctoral work in public administration at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. Thompson married his college sweetheart, London Johnson, a schoolteacher, and they raised one daughter, BendaLonne.² He briefly worked as a public school teacher in Madison, Mississippi, but when he won election to the board of aldermen in Bolton, Mississippi, white officials challenged the election in court and forced Thompson to resign his teaching position. The courts upheld the election results, and Thompson served as a town alderman from 1969 to 1973, when he won election as the town's mayor. He served in that capacity for six years. In 1980, Thompson was elected to the Hinds County board of supervisors, where he served 13 years.

In 1993, when four-term Democratic Representative Mike Espy of Mississippi resigned his seat to become Secretary of Agriculture in the William J. (Bill) Clinton administration, Thompson entered the race for the open seat. The district encompassed west-central Mississippi, taking in urban areas such as Jackson, the state capital, and a nearly 230-mile stretch of agriculturally dependent communities along the Mississippi Delta that included some of the poorest counties in the country. On the Democratic side, his two principal contenders were Henry Espy, the brother of former Representative Mike Espy, and James Meredith, a 1960s civil rights activist and the first African American to attend the University of Mississippi. In the all-party open primary in March 1993, GOP candidate Hayes Dent won with a 34 percent plurality. Thompson was second, with 28 percent. In accordance with state election law, the top two finishers squared off in the April 13 special election. Henry Espy threw his support behind Thompson, who worked hard to turn out the African-American vote. Thompson prevailed against Dent, with a 55 percent majority.³ In his subsequent seven re-election bids, Thompson has won by comfortable margins. In 2006, he won election to his seventh term, with 64 percent of the vote, against Republican candidate Yvonne R. Brown.⁴

Representative Thompson claimed his seat in the House on April 20, 1993, and received assignments on three committees: Agriculture, Merchant Marine and Fisheries, and Small Business. Thompson remained on the Agriculture Committee through the 108th Congress (2003–2005). In the 105th Congress (1997–1999), Thompson was assigned to the influential Budget Committee, where he remained until he won a seat on the newly created Select Committee on Homeland Security. In 2005, when Homeland Security became a standing House committee, Democrats tapped Thompson as the panel's Ranking Member. In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Thompson became the first-ever Democratic chairman of the committee.

Representative Thompson has sought federal dollars for infrastructure improvements, access to improved health care, and better schools for his district. In 2000, Thompson was a lead author and sponsor of a measure that created the National Center for Minority Health and Health Care Disparities. From his seat on the Agriculture Committee, Thompson, with support from the Congressional Black Caucus, prodded the Agriculture Department to disburse more federal aid to minorities, who Thompson argued have been discriminated against for decades. He also has been a leading defender of affirmative action programs.⁵

FOR FURTHER READING

"Thompson, Bennie," *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=T000193>.

NOTES

- 1 Jesse Carney Smith, ed., "Bennie G. Thompson," *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 26 (Detroit: Gale Group, 2000).
- 2 "Official Biography of Congressman Bennie G. Thompson," <http://benniethompson.house.gov/HoR/MS02/About+Bennie/> (accessed 31 October 2007).
- 3 Michael J. Dubin et al., *United States Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 785; Tim Curran, "Thompson Wins, Farr Tops Calif. Field; Democrat Takes Espy Seat, 55–45%," 15 April 1993, *Roll Call*; Thomas B. Edsall, "In Mississippi Delta, House Race Is as Complex as Black and White," 14 March 1993, *Washington Post*: A8.
- 4 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 5 *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2007): 566; *Almanac of American Politics, 2000* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1999): 909–910.