

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

John Conyers, Jr.
1929–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM MICHIGAN
1965–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

Representative John Conyers is the longest-serving African American in congressional history. As chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Representative Conyers heads a panel that has oversight over the Department of Justice and the federal courts as well as jurisdiction over copyright, constitutional issues, consumer protection, and civil rights.

John Conyers, Jr., was born in Detroit, Michigan, on May 16, 1929, the eldest of four sons of John and Lucille (Simpson) Conyers. His father was a United Auto Workers representative. John, Jr., attended Detroit public schools, graduating from Northwestern High School in 1947. He served in the National Guard from 1948 to 1950 before enlisting as a U.S. Army private for four years. Conyers attended officer candidate school and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. He was assigned to the Army Corps of Engineers in Korea, where he served in combat for a year. In 1954, Conyers left active duty with an honorable discharge, serving three more years in the Army Reserves. In 1957, using the GI Bill's educational benefits, Conyers earned a bachelor of arts degree from Wayne State University and, a year later, an L.L.B. from Wayne State Law School. After graduating, Conyers joined the staff of Michigan Representative John Dingell, Jr. From 1958 to 1961, he served as Dingell's legislative assistant. After passing the Michigan bar in 1959, he cofounded the law firm of Conyers, Bell & Townsend. In 1961, Michigan Governor John B. Swainson appointed him as a referee for the Michigan workmen's compensation department, and he also worked as general counsel for several labor union locals. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy appointed Conyers to the National Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, which promoted racial tolerance in the legal profession. In 1967, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference chose him as the recipient of the Rosa Parks Award, presented by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Conyers married Monica Ann Esters in June 1990. They have two sons: John III and Carl.¹

Conyers's first political interests developed during the mid-1950s while he was a college student, when he joined the Young Democrats and served as a precinct official for the local Democratic Party. In late 1963, he ran for a newly reapportioned U.S. House seat that had been drawn from two districts that had covered Detroit. The new district encompassed middle- and upper-middle-class sections of the city, with a predominantly African-American population, and included Conyers's childhood neighborhood. Local Democratic Party officials refused to support him in the primary, arguing that the 35-year-old was too young and lacked experience in elective office. Conyers ran anyway, supported by a large volunteer force at the precinct level. With the campaign slogan "Jobs, Justice, and Peace," he defeated the party-backed candidate, Richard H. Austin, by a slim margin of 45 votes.² In the heavily Democratic district, Conyers easily won the general election with 84 percent of the vote. In his subsequent 20 successful re-election campaigns for his House seat, Conyers has never been seriously challenged, winning his general elections by a minimum of 82 percent of the vote. In 2006, Conyers won re-election with 85 percent of the vote against Republican Chad Miles.³

Upon taking his seat in the House in January 1965, Conyers won a coveted assignment on the Judiciary Committee—becoming the first African American ever to serve on that panel. He has served there ever since. In 1995, Representative Conyers became Ranking Member and, when the Democrats regained control of the House in 2007, Conyers was named chairman. He has served on two other panels: Government Operations, from the 92nd through the 103rd Congresses (1971–1993), and Small Business (1987–1993). Conyers chaired the Government Operations Committee from 1989 until early 1995, when the Republicans won control of the House. He is one of only a handful of black Members of Congress to chair multiple standing committees.

Representative Conyers played a leading role in the passage of major legislation during his four-decade career. Among the measures he helped pass are the Help America Vote Act (2002), the Violence Against Women Act (1994), the Motor Voter Bill (1993), the Jazz Preservation Act (1987), and the Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday Act (1983). He was one of the 13 founding Members of the Congressional Black Caucus. At the start of the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Representative Conyers began his 42nd year of House service, making him the second-longest-serving House Member (behind fellow Michigan Representative John Dingell, Jr.) and one of the 25 longest-serving Members in congressional history.⁴

FOR FURTHER READING

"Conyers, John, Jr.," *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000714>.

NOTES

- 1 For more biographical information, see *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2007): 534–535; *Current Biography, 1970* (New York: H. W. Wilson and Company, 1970): 94–95; and the official biography of John Conyers, Jr., at http://www.house.gov/conyers/news_biography.htm (accessed 30 November 2007).
- 2 Michael Powell, "The Democrats' Seasoned Frontman; John Conyers, Sounding a Persistent Note on the Impeachment Inquiry," 13 October 1998, *Washington Post*: D1; *Current Biography, 1970*: 94–95.
- 3 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 4 Mildred Amer, "Members Who Have Served in the U.S. Congress 30 Years or More," 7 July 2007, Report RL30370, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.