

Esteban Edward Torres

1930–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1983–1999

DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

A Korean War veteran and a longtime antipoverty activist in East Los Angeles with strong ties to unions, Esteban Torres served eight terms in the U.S. House. His career on Capitol Hill put him in the vanguard of Latino influence in U.S. politics. “When he took this seat in Congress, it was a period when we didn’t have much representation in the Hispanic community,” noted Vic Fazio of California, a longtime House colleague. “Now the gates are down, their political power is on the rise. It’s a career like Esteban Torres’ that has really made it possible for these younger people to have the opportunities for public service.”¹

Esteban Edward Torres was born in Miami, Arizona, on January 27, 1930, at a mining camp owned by the Phelps–Dodge Company. When Torres was five years old, his father was deported to Mexico and he never saw him again. Esteban, along with his mother, Rena Gómez, and his younger brother, Hugo, moved to East Los Angeles in 1936, where he attended the public schools and graduated from James A. Garfield High School in 1949.² He was brought up by his mother and grandmother, Teresa Baron-Gómez, who instilled in him a sense of cultural pride. “My mother and my grandmother were very strong women, very educated and very proud to be Mexicans,” Torres remembered years later. “They were the ones that taught me to defend my rights, to shame me for not being Mexican.” Torres grew up in tough neighborhoods, crediting his survival to a structured family life anchored by his mother and his ability to find a middle ground among competing factions. “I was a barrio kid,” Torres recalled. “I grew up in the toughest environment anybody could grow up in. A lot of gangs. It was a depression. It was tough to get decent housing.... I was able to move between gangs and not alienate one group or the other. I had rapport with everybody. People always felt I was a

peacemaker.”³ From 1949 to 1953, Torres served in the U.S. Army, fought in the Korean War, and was honorably discharged with the rank of sergeant first class. Torres used his benefits from the GI Bill to study at the Los Angeles Art Center in 1953. Over the next decade, he took courses at East Los Angeles College and California State University at Los Angeles. He took graduate-level courses, at the University of Maryland in economics and at American University in Washington, D.C., in international relations. Torres married Arcy Sanchez of Los Angeles on January 22, 1955. The couple raised five children: Carmen, Rena, Camille, Selina, and Esteban.⁴ “I thought about teaching in fine arts, but we had started raising a family and I had to go to work as a welder on the [assembly line at an auto plant],” Torres recalled. “I would take home pieces of metal, especially junk parts that were going to get scrapped, and develop larger pieces, labeled by the kind of car it was; Dodge, DeSoto, all those.” His interest in metal sculpting remained part of his life. “I saw so much conflict in the fight for social justice, in this country and abroad,” Torres recalled, “I couldn’t help being affected.... There’s a lot of frustration and revolt in me that comes out in my work.”⁵

Torres was introduced to politics by way of his activism in the local branch of the United Auto Workers (UAW) Union. In 1958 his coworkers elected him chief steward of the Local 230. He was later appointed the UAW organizer for the western region of the United States. In 1963 he was tapped by Walter Reuther as a UAW international representative in Washington, D.C., and from 1964 to 1968 he served as the union’s director of the Inter-American Bureau for Caribbean and Latin American Affairs. In 1968 Torres returned to Los Angeles, founding The East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU), a community action organization that grew under his





stewardship into one of the nation's largest antipoverty agencies. While serving as TELACU's chief executive officer, Torres also was active in other local organizations, such as the Los Angeles County Commission on Economic Development, the Mexican-American Commission on Education, and the Plaza la Raza Cultural Center.

In 1974 Torres made his first bid for elective office, running in the Democratic primary for a U.S. House seat representing California's 30th Congressional District. He faced George E. Danielson, a two-term incumbent who had been an FBI agent, an attorney, and a member of the California state assembly and senate. The district was 42 percent Hispanic and covered a large swath of suburbs east of Los Angeles. Danielson benefited from being an incumbent and from the visibility he had gained as a member of the House Judiciary Committee during the Watergate investigation.⁶ Danielson prevailed in the June 1974 primary election, with roughly 54 percent of the vote to Torres's 37 percent.⁷

Torres returned to the UAW and for several years was assistant director for International Affairs. In 1976 he was appointed as a delegate to the International Metalworkers Federation Central Committee meetings in Geneva, Switzerland. When President James Earl (Jimmy) Carter took office in 1977, Torres was considered for Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, but instead he served from 1977 through 1979 as Carter's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The person who filled the position, whose rank was comparable to that of an ambassador, was required to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate. Torres served as a White House aide from 1979 through 1981.

In 1982 Torres considered running in the 30th District after Representative Danielson was appointed to a seat on the California court of appeals, but Matthew Martínez, the former mayor of Monterey Park, decided to run in the special election to fill that vacancy. House Democrats, led by California Representatives Phillip Burton and Edward Roybal, convinced Torres to run in the newly created 34th Congressional District. As the state's Democratic

powerhouse, Burton had orchestrated the decadal statewide redistricting plan, which supporters hailed as masterful and detractors deemed maniacal. One political observer described Burton's effort—which netted the Democrats six more congressional seats in the 1982 elections—as a “jigsaw puzzle designed by the inmate of a mental institution.”⁸ The editors of the *Almanac of American Politics* noted that the new 34th District “was Burton's *pièce de résistance*” along with two other majority-Hispanic Los Angeles-area districts.⁹

The new crescent-shaped district included a large swath of suburban East Los Angeles that was bounded roughly by the Interstate 10 corridor to the north and the Interstate 5 corridor running south and east; West Covina, Valinda, and La Puente lay on its northern side, and Norwalk and South Whittier lay on its southern borders. The district was 48 percent Hispanic. Torres secured the support of the local political machine, led by U.S. Representative Henry Waxman and California assemblyman Howard Berman (who won a Los Angeles-area seat in the U.S. House in the fall of 1982). His platform was pro-labor, but he took a more conservative approach on social issues, such as abortion, which he opposed. In the Democratic primary, he faced former Representative Jim Lloyd, a three-term veteran and a former mayor of West Covina, who had lost a bid for re-election to the House in 1980. Torres stressed his experience in Washington and won the endorsement of most House Democrats in the California delegation.¹⁰ But Lloyd, who had the backing of some prominent Democrats, such as Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dan Rostenkowski of Illinois, argued that Torres was a “carpetbagger,” who had not registered in the district until early 1982 after declaring his candidacy. Torres, who was a longtime resident of East Los Angeles (just west of the new district), responded that Lloyd had “never picked walnuts or cabbage or lived in the barrios here.”¹¹ Torres was better funded than Lloyd, and in a sometimes-bitter race that political observers predicted would be neck-and-neck, he prevailed over Lloyd by 51 to 36 percent. A third candidate received 13 percent of the vote.

In a district where roughly two-thirds of the residents were registered Democrats, Torres was heavily favored in the November general election against Republican candidate Paul Jackson. Jackson had lived in the district for decades, served on a number of civic associations, and enjoyed a long career on the Los Angeles police force. The two candidates clashed on major issues. Torres derided President Ronald W. Reagan's supply-side economics, supported a bilateral nuclear freeze between the superpowers, and advocated pumping more federal dollars into urban infrastructure improvements. "Our cities are really in a state of decay—our road systems, our bridges, our waterways, our court facilities," Torres said.¹² Jackson, whose platform embraced the policies of the Reagan administration, including a massive defense buildup, hoped to tap into the large number of blue-collar Democrats who helped give Reagan a 13 percent margin of victory in the district in 1980. But with a plethora of built-in advantages, including the poor economic conditions, which he pinned on the President's policies, Torres prevailed, 57 to 43 percent.

Reapportionment after the 1990 Census made the district "an almost ideal place for someone like Torres to run," observed a political almanac.¹³ The new district was 62 percent Hispanic and added Montebello, an upper middle-class Hispanic town, to Torres's existing base. In his subsequent seven re-election campaigns, Torres won by healthy margins, garnering at least 60 percent of the vote. In his final election in 1996, he won 68 percent of the vote against Republican candidate David Nunez and two minor party candidates.¹⁴

When Torres took his seat in the House in January 1983, he won assignments on the Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs Committee (later renamed Banking and Financial Services) and the Small Business Committee. He chaired two subcommittees during his tenure: In the 102nd Congress (1991–1993), he chaired the Banking panel's Subcommittee on Consumer Affairs and Coinage, and in the 101st Congress (1989–1991), he chaired the Small Business Subcommittee on Environment and Labor. At the start of the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), Torres

lobbied for and won a seat on the exclusive Appropriations Committee, leaving his other assignments. He served on the Foreign Operations, Export Financing and Related Programs Subcommittee and eventually gained a seat on the Transportation Subcommittee.

Torres chaired the Congressional Hispanic Caucus in late 1988, before the start of the 101st Congress (1989–1991). Torres's Democratic colleagues from the California delegation elected him whip for the Southern California area, giving him an entry-level position on the party leadership ladder. In the 102nd Congress (1991–1993) Torres was tapped by the Democratic leadership as a deputy whip.

Torres's position as an early advocate of environmental justice for minorities developed from his efforts to close a neglected landfill in his district. He helped craft the Hazardous Waste Control Act of 1983, which required landfill owners to conduct studies on the health risks their properties posed to nearby communities. He served as chairman of the Small Business Subcommittee on Environment and Labor in the 101st Congress.

As chairman of the Banking panel's Subcommittee on Consumer Affairs and Coinage, Torres pushed measures to empower customers of financial institutions. In the 102nd Congress, Torres authored the Truth in Savings Act, which required banks to clearly disclose information about fees, terms, and conditions for savings deposits.¹⁵ The measure was signed into law. He also advocated for legislation that would give consumers better access to their credit histories and allow them to more easily challenge errors in their credit reports—a reform prompted by changes in financial recordkeeping practices made possible by new computer technology. That bill languished in the 102nd Congress but was enacted into law as part of a fiscal omnibus bill in the 103rd Congress.¹⁶ "Today, consumers' lives are an open book. Sensitive personal and financial data is bought and sold with little or no regard for the privacy of the consumer," Torres noted. "Workers are denied employment or even blackballed because of erroneous information in their files.... Clearly, it is time to regain the balance to protect American consumers against the abuses of the



credit reporting industry.”¹⁷ Torres also had a hand in major housing legislation in the 102nd Congress, inserting language that provided assistance to low-income victims of disasters. After Torres gave up his Banking post for a seat on the Appropriations Committee, Democratic leaders temporarily reassigned him to the Banking panel in the 105th Congress (1997–1999) as the Republican majority sought to overhaul national housing programs.¹⁸

A key vote in Torres’s career took place in 1993, when he supported the bill to implement the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, that created a regional trade bloc and eliminated tariffs on finished imports and agricultural products. It also dispensed with barriers and deterrents to investments within and among the three countries.¹⁹ NAFTA’s proponents believed it would spur U.S. job growth by increasing exports while improving the standard of living in Mexico; its opponents believed NAFTA would endanger American wages and jobs. The treaty was signed in late 1992 in San Antonio, Texas, and by mid-1993 a bill to fund and implement the treaty began making its way through Congress.

Many Americans in unions and the manufacturing sector opposed NAFTA because they believed it would send working-class jobs overseas. The William J. (Bill) Clinton administration sought to rally support for NAFTA by targeting key lawmakers, identifying Torres as an important ally because of his background as an autoworker, his membership in the UAW, and his ties to the Hispanic community. A Clinton advocate in Congress commented, “The symbolism of Torres supporting NAFTA is powerful.”²⁰ To woo Torres, the Clinton administration agreed to include a provision to create and fund a North American Development Bank (NADBank) in the legislation to implement NAFTA. NADBank, which the Clinton administration promised to finance up to \$225 million, would help initiate badly needed infrastructure and environmental cleanup projects—particularly in the Southwest along the border with Mexico—and through a Community Adjustment and Investment Program assist communities whose economies were negatively affected

by NAFTA. The Mexican government would match U.S. contributions, and the bank would secure international loans of approximately \$3 billion. With the NADBank commitment, Torres swung his support behind NAFTA. “What has surprised me is that my friends on the North American labor movement, so far, have failed to grasp the enormous opportunity and potential in the NAFTA for spreading the vision and reality of industrial democracy throughout this hemisphere,” Torres remarked, announcing his decision.²¹ While he understood union members’ opposition, he told the *Los Angeles Times*, “They have to live in the real world. I believe this [NAFTA] is the future.”²² Torres’s influence on fellow Hispanic lawmakers was unclear; roughly half voted for the measure, and half voted against it when the bill passed the House by a vote of 234 to 200 on November 17, 1993.

Torres and a group of other Hispanic Representatives later expressed disappointment with NAFTA and its implementation by the Clinton administration. “I’ve taken a lot of heat,” Torres said. “Certain promises were made about helping the adjustment to free trade, and they were not kept.”²³ Impatient and disillusioned because the administration had been slow to fund NADBank projects, Torres conceded, “One could argue that the Administration used ‘bait and switch’ tactics to secure our support for NAFTA.”²⁴

In 1990 Torres had given serious consideration to running for a seat on the Los Angeles County board of supervisors, but he was unable to register as a candidate because the incumbent held onto the seat until just before the filing deadline, by which time Torres had already filed papers to seek another term in the U.S. House.²⁵ In 1996, during President Clinton’s transition to a second term, Torres’s name appeared on a short list of candidates for Secretary of Labor and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, but he was not chosen for either position and remained in the House.²⁶

In early March 1998, days before the filing deadline for the fall elections, Torres announced that he would retire from the House at the end of the 105th Congress, in January 1999. “I have reached the pinnacle of success



in my own eyes,” he told reporters. “I’m leaving while in good health. My wife and I want to enjoy life, my family, my grandchildren and pursue personal goals.”²⁷ Torres endorsed his chief of staff and son-in-law, Jamie Casso, to succeed him in the Democratic primary, but Casso lost to longtime community leader Grace Napolitano, who garnered the support of the AFL-CIO. She went on to win the general election.²⁸ In retirement, Torres has pursued his passion for sculpting and painting.

FOR FURTHER READING

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NOTES

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