



Image courtesy of the Member

## *Robert Menendez*

*1954–*

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1993–2006

UNITED STATES SENATOR 2006–

DEMOCRAT FROM NEW JERSEY

The son of Cuban immigrants with a keen mind for foreign policy, Robert Menendez rose steadily through the world of New Jersey politics to fulfill his childhood dream of becoming a United States Senator. “I have walked in the shoes of the average New Jerseyan all of my life,” Menendez said in 2005, “and I know the challenges they face.”<sup>1</sup>

Robert Menendez was born on January 1, 1954, in New York City, one of three children born to Mario, a carpenter, and Evangelina Menendez, a seamstress. The couple emigrated from Havana, Cuba, to New York, eventually settling across the Hudson River in Union City, New Jersey. Menendez graduated from Union Hill High School in 1972 and went on to earn his bachelor’s degree in political science from St. Peter’s College in Jersey City in 1976. Three years later, he was awarded a J.D. from Rutgers University’s School of Law in Newark. Menendez is divorced, with two children, Alicia and Robert, Jr.

Menendez became involved in community issues early on, and in college he won a spot on the Union City Board of Education. He served on the school board from 1974 to 1978, and once he completed his law degree, he took a job with Union City’s mayor. After racketeering charges were leveled against his boss, Menendez ran for mayor in 1982 but lost to his embattled mentor. Four years later, he ran again and won; he served as mayor until 1992. Beginning in 1987, Menendez also served in the state assembly, stepping down in 1991 when he was appointed to a vacant state senate seat; he was elected to a full term later that year.<sup>2</sup>

Congressional redistricting in 1992 created a majority-Hispanic district in northern New Jersey, running along the Hudson River from North Bergen to Perth Amboy. That year incumbent Representative Frank J. Guarini, Jr., declined to seek re-election, clearing a path for Menendez.<sup>3</sup> Menendez defeated the mayor of Jersey City in the Democratic primary and won the general election with 64.3 percent of the vote, becoming the first Hispanic elected to represent New Jersey in the U.S. Congress. Menendez easily topped Republican opponents in each subsequent re-election campaign for the House, securing between 70 and 80 percent of the vote.<sup>4</sup>

Menendez served on two standing committees in the House: Public Works and Transportation (later renamed Transportation and Infrastructure) and Foreign Affairs (later renamed International Relations). From the 107th until he left the House in the 109th Congress (2001–2006), he was Ranking

Member of the International Relations Committee's Western Hemisphere Subcommittee. He sought to bolster state-building initiatives in Latin America and supported the United States' travel and trade restrictions against Cuba's communist government.<sup>5</sup> On Public Works and Transportation, Menendez emerged as a leading proponent of public mass transit and of a new commuter tunnel connecting New Jersey to Manhattan under the Hudson River. In 2001 party leadership appointed him to chair the Democratic Homeland Security Taskforce; a year later he joined the new Select Committee on Homeland Security for the 107th Congress (2001–2003).<sup>6</sup> In addition to his committee duties, Menendez served as one of the Democrats' chief deputy whips (105th Congress, 1997–1999) and as vice chair of the House Democratic Caucus (106th–107th Congresses, 1998–2002). In late 2002, he became the first Hispanic Member to chair the House Democratic Caucus.

In 2005 Senator Jon S. Corzine won his bid for Governor of New Jersey and announced that he would appoint Menendez to his vacant Senate seat. Menendez was sworn in as the junior Senator from New Jersey on January 18, 2006. That fall in the general election he defeated his Republican challenger by 9 points in the contest for the full six-year term.<sup>7</sup>

In the Senate, Menendez has served on five committees: Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs (109th–112th Congresses, 2006–2013); Budget (109th–111th Congresses, 2006–2011); Energy and Natural Resources (109th–111th Congresses); Foreign Relations (110th–112th Congresses, 2007–2013); and Finance (111th–112th Congresses, 2009–2013). He currently chairs the Banking Committee's Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation and Community Development and the Foreign Relations' Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Global Narcotics Affairs. He has remained a hawk on Cuba, challenged America's military operations in Iraq, and opposes efforts to privatize Social Security and Medicare.<sup>8</sup> Respected as a prodigious organizer and fundraiser, Menendez was named as Chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee in November 2008 and held this position for the 111th Congress (2009–2011).<sup>9</sup> He currently serves as Chairman of the Democratic Hispanic Task Force.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, "Robert Menendez," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

## NOTES

- 1 David W. Chen, "Menendez Basks in Appointment to the Senate, if Only Briefly," 10 December 2005, *New York Times*: B6
- 2 Jeffrey Gettleman, "William Musto, 88, a Mayor Re-Elected on His Way to Jail," 1 March 2006, *New York Times*: 16.
- 3 "Menendez to Seek Congressional Seat," 8 April 1992, *New York Times*: B4.
- 4 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 5 Alain L. Sanders, "Crafting an American Agenda for Hispanics and for the Nation: Interview with Congressman Robert Menendez (D-NJ)," *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy* 16 (2003–2004): 19–29.
- 6 Miguel Perez, "Menendez Says Nation Must Guard Its People and Their Rights," 10 October 2001, *The Record*: A11.
- 7 CQ Press, *Guide to U.S. Elections*, sixth edition, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2009): 1456.
- 8 "Official Biography of Senator Robert Menendez," <http://www.menendez.senate.gov/biography/> (accessed 2 May 2012).
- 9 Emily Pierce, "A Super Day; Menendez Rises, Shines," 28 August 2008, *Roll Call*, 36; David M. Herszenhorn, "Schumer Out, Menendez In," 25 November 2008, *New York Times*: 20.