



Image courtesy of the Member

## *Grace Flores Napolitano* 1936–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1999–  
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

Grace Napolitano entered community politics in the 1980s, built wide name recognition as a city mayor and California assemblywoman, and won election to the U.S. House in 1998. In Washington, Napolitano has focused on water, mental health, transportation, and securing federal dollars for her district.

Graciela (Grace) Flores was born in Brownsville, Texas, on December 4, 1936, to Miguel Flores and Maria Alicia (Ledezma) Flores. After graduating from Brownsville High School in 1954, she married Federico Musquiz and had five children: Yolanda, Federico, Edward, Miguel, and Cynthia. The family moved to Southern California, where she continued her education at Cerritos College. In 1982, several years after her first husband passed away, she married California restaurateur Frank Napolitano. The two live in the Los Angeles suburb of Norwalk in the home Grace has maintained for more than 50 years.

Napolitano worked for four years for the California Department of Employment before moving to Ford Motor Co., where she spent 22 years. In 1974 Napolitano was appointed a commissioner on the International Friendship Commission, a sister city program in which Norwalk was paired with the Mexican town of Hermosillo. The program focused on cultural exchanges, and the experience pulled Napolitano into public service.<sup>1</sup>

In 1986 Napolitano was first elected to the Norwalk City Council by a 28-vote margin. Four years later, she won her second term by the largest margin in city history. In 1989 Napolitano's council colleagues elevated her to mayor. In 1992 she was elected to the California Assembly, where she served until 1998. There she emerged as a leader on international trade, environmental protection, transportation, and immigration issues. Napolitano earned a reputation as a champion for small business, women, economic expansion, and job creation. She chaired the Women's Caucus and the International Trade Committee and served as vice chair of the Latino Caucus.

In 1998, upon the retirement of Representative Esteban Torres, Napolitano entered the primary race to succeed him. She used \$200,000 of her retirement funds and drew from the political base of her assembly district, which encompassed much of the largely Hispanic middle-class Democratic congressional district. She won the primary by 619 votes and captured the general election with 67 percent of the vote. Napolitano has been re-elected six times, running unopposed in 2004 and winning her other elections by margins of 70 percent

or higher in a district stretching from East Los Angeles to Pomona.<sup>2</sup>

Napolitano has served on the Natural Resources Committee since entering the House in January 1999. In the 106th Congress (1999–2001), she also served on the Small Business Committee. In the 107th Congress (2001–2003), she won an additional post on the International Relations Committee. In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), she took a seat on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, where she still sits. Napolitano was unanimously selected chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus for a two-year term during the 109th Congress (2005–2007).<sup>3</sup> She also serves as co-chair of the Congressional Mental Health Caucus, having been prompted to take action on the issue by a report showing that Latina teenagers have the highest suicide rate of any ethnic or racial group in the country. Napolitano is focused on the effect of post-traumatic stress disorder on our troops and on seniors suffering from depression.

Constituent service tops Napolitano's congressional agenda. "As far as passing legislation, that is not the main reason I went to Washington," Napolitano said. "I want to be able to open the doors like I have at the county and state level."<sup>4</sup> Napolitano also has worked with the Small Business Administration assisting minorities to gain financial assistance to grow their businesses.

On the Natural Resources Committee, Napolitano worked with the U.S. Energy Department to clean up a 10-million-ton uranium tailings pile in Utah that leaches into the Colorado River, which is the source of one-third of Southern California's drinking supply. She also has teamed with regional members of Congress to help secure \$55 million in federal funds to continue the cleanup of key Superfund sites in Los Angeles-area aquifers. In the 110th and 111th Congresses (2007–2011), she chaired the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water and Power, and she is currently its Ranking Member. Napolitano's major accomplishments on the Transportation Committee have been securing funding for the Alameda Corridor East project, the I-5 freeway expansion, separating railroads from roadways to reduce accidents and congestion, purchasing clean-energy buses for local cities, and extending the Metro Gold Line into East Los Angeles.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, "Grace Flores Napolitano," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

Polanco, Richard G. and Grace Napolitano. *Making Immigration Policy Work in the United States* (Sacramento: California Latino Legislative Caucus, 1993).

## NOTES

- 1 *Politics in America, 2002* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2001): 129.
- 2 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 3 "Napolitano Selected to Lead Congressional Hispanic Caucus," 18 November 2004, [http://www.napolitano.house.gov/press\\_releases/pr111804.htm](http://www.napolitano.house.gov/press_releases/pr111804.htm) (accessed 29 December 2004).
- 4 Norah M. O'Donnell, "The Votes Are In After Battling Torres, Napolitano Claims His Seat," 15 June 1998, *Roll Call*.