



Image courtesy of the Member

## *Ileana Ros-Lehtinen*

### *1952–*

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1989–  
REPUBLICAN FROM FLORIDA

A childhood refugee from Fidel Castro's communist regime, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen emerged as a powerful voice in her South Florida community and a major critic of the tyrannical regime. Her historic 1989 election to the U.S. House of Representatives made her the first Hispanic woman and the first Cuban American elected to the U.S. Congress.

Ileana Ros was born in Havana, Cuba, on July 15, 1952, and moved with her family to the United States shortly after Castro came to power in 1959. After graduating from Southwest Miami High School in 1970, she earned an Associate of Arts degree from Miami-Dade Community College in 1972, a B.A. in Higher Education from Florida International University (FIU) in 1975, and an M.A. in Educational Leadership from FIU in 1985. In 2004 she received her Doctorate in Higher Education from the University of Miami. She also founded a private elementary school, serving as a teacher and as its chief administrator. From 1982 to 1986, she served in the Florida House of Representatives as a Republican (she was its first Hispanic woman), and from 1986 to 1989, she served in the Florida Senate. During her time in the State Senate, she helped create the Florida Pre-Paid Program and met and married State Representative Dexter Lehtinen, who later went on to serve as the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida. Ros-Lehtinen is mother and stepmother to four adult children.

After the death of Representative Claude Pepper on May 30, 1989, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen sought the Republican nomination for the vacant seat and won the special election on August 29, 1989. Ros-Lehtinen defeated her Democratic rival by a 53 to 47 percent margin. Her victory put the seat in Republican hands for the first time since its creation in 1962. In 1990 and 1992, Ros-Lehtinen comfortably won re-election by 60 and 64 percent, respectively.<sup>1</sup> From 1994 to 2000, she was re-elected without opposition. In her last five re-election campaigns, she won against Democratic candidates with between 58 and 69 percent of the vote.

After Ros-Lehtinen took the oath of office on September 6, 1989, she was assigned to the Foreign Affairs and Government Reform Committees. She served on the Government Reform Committee until 2007, and in the 112th Congress (2011–2013) Ros-Lehtinen was selected to chair the House Foreign Affairs Committee, making her just the second Hispanic-American woman to chair a standing congressional committee.

During her career, Ros-Lehtinen also has chaired several Foreign Affairs subcommittees, including Africa, International Economic Policy and Trade, International Operations and Human Rights, and Middle East and Central Asia. In this respect, Representative Ros-Lehtinen has been a leading advocate for the promotion of human rights in countries like Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and China. She is a steadfast supporter of Israel's right to exist in peace and security as a democratic Jewish state. She has also served as Vice Chair of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere and has served on the Budget Committee.

Ros-Lehtinen's well-known leadership and service to the South Florida community have included a number of initiatives that have safeguarded the environment, promoted job creation, and shaped local infrastructure and transportation. She has worked tirelessly to reinvigorate the Miami River in downtown Miami and to expand PortMiami so that it can serve larger Post-Panamax ships. Ros-Lehtinen also has been a strong supporter of expanding Miami International Airport so it can serve the growing South Florida community and continue to be the gateway to the Americas.

Representative Ros-Lehtinen has also worked to restore the housing market while protecting affordable housing. As the wife of a Vietnam veteran and the stepmother of Marine aviators, Ros-Lehtinen is passionate about supporting our nation's military, bolstering veterans' health care, and ensuring that returning veterans have access to a college education.

Valuing the trust between government and its citizens, Ros-Lehtinen has been a strong advocate for strengthening Medicare. She aims to guarantee the promise of Medicare that is efficient, solvent, and sustainable.

As a mother and a grandmother, Representative Ros-Lehtinen has championed anti-bullying legislation and the prevention of child trafficking. Furthermore, her support for modernizing the Coast Guard fleet ensures that the hardworking men and women of the Coast Guard have the tools they need to effectively patrol the Florida coast from trafficking of narcotics.

On the civil rights front, Ros-Lehtinen is a founding member of the LGBT Equality Caucus and continues to strive for equality for all people regardless of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, "Ileana Ros-Lehtinen," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

Fernández, Mayra. *Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Legisladora* (Cleveland, OH: Modern Curriculum Press, 1994).

## NOTES

- 1 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.