

Steve Austria

1958–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2009–2013
REPUBLICAN FROM OHIO

Becoming just the second person of Filipino heritage to serve as a voting Representative in Congress, Steve Austria won election to the U.S. House of Representatives amid the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression.¹ As a proponent of shrinking government services and spurring small business growth, Austria quickly worked his way onto the influential Appropriations Committee, where he could tend to the economy of his southwestern Ohio district. But when Ohio's congressional delegation shrank by two seats during reapportionment after the 2010 Census, Austria's House career ended abruptly.

Steve Austria was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on October 12, 1958, to Clement and Jean Brockman Austria. His father, a medical doctor, was born in the Philippines and fought alongside Filipino rebels and General Douglas MacArthur against Japanese forces during World War II. Clement later immigrated to the United States from Tiaong, Quezon, to the Cincinnati area, where he attended medical school; Jean Austria worked as a nurse.² By observing his father's work on the Greene County Central Committee of the Republican Party, Steve Austria became interested in politics and "realized that through public service I could have a positive impact on people's lives."³ The oldest of nine children, Austria grew up in Xenia, Ohio, a community about an hour's drive northeast of Cincinnati. In 1977 he graduated from Carroll High School in Riverside, Ohio, and in 1982 earned a bachelor of arts degree in political science from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Austria worked for more than 15 years as a financial advisor. He married Eileen Crotty, whom he met in the 1980s while putting up campaign signs during an Ohio state senate election.⁴ The couple raised three sons: Brian, Kevin, and Eric.

When Austria embarked on his political career by succeeding his father on the GOP's Greene County

Central Committee, Clement Austria counseled him to campaign door-to-door to get to know voters. "My father was absolutely right. I never lost an election, and I credit that to my father's advice and all the time I spent in the district, listening to constituents," Steve Austria recalled years later.⁵ In 1998 he challenged incumbent Republican state representative Marilyn Reid in the GOP primary. Austria upended Reid, who was in the midst of an ethics scandal, and went on to win the general election. He served briefly in the Ohio state house of representatives from 1999 to 2000 before winning election to the state senate. Austria served in that chamber from 2001 to 2008, rising to the position of majority whip during his last three years there. He also chaired the judiciary and highways and transportation committees.⁶ His focus in both chambers was to crack down on crime. Austria authored bills to increase penalties for child rapists and for offenders who solicit sex with minors online; he also helped pass a bill that allowed Ohioans to carry concealed weapons.⁷

When nine-term incumbent U.S. Representative David L. Hobson announced his retirement from Congress, Austria joined the race for the vacant seat. The district, which was adjacent to Republican Leader John Boehner's Cincinnati-centered district, encompassed six counties (and parts of two others) in the southcentral portion of the state, from the Miami Valley region near Dayton to just south and east of Columbus. The district was a mixture of rural and residential areas, with industrial and agriculture businesses; it was also home to several military facilities, including Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and the Springfield Air National Guard Base.

The Austrias had a long connection to Hobson, and one political almanac described Hobson as a political mentor to Steve. Eileen Austria was also a longtime staffer for Hobson going back to his time in the Ohio legislature





and later served as his congressional district director.⁸ As the favorite in the GOP primary, Austria defeated three opponents with 55 percent of the vote; his next closest competitor, Ron Hood, a former state representative, garnered 34 percent.⁹

In the 2008 general election, Austria faced attorney Sharen Swartz Neuhardt. Austria benefitted from the fact that the district was conservative-leaning; he also enjoyed a fundraising advantage of \$1.2 million to Neuhardt's \$900,000. However, the campaign was not without its challenges. A political blogger claimed that Austria plagiarized portions of columns he wrote for a local newspaper. Another paper, the *Dayton Daily News*, rendered an editorial judgment that "What he's most likely to do is to settle into a long, long career of keeping people back home happy, while remaining on the congressional back benches."¹⁰ But these bumps in the road were soon overshadowed by the revelation that for six years Neuhardt housed a Rwandan refugee who was not legally in the country.¹¹ Austria eventually pulled away with a comfortable, 58-percent majority of the vote on Election Day.¹² Afterward, as the economic crisis in the fall of 2008 deepened, he told the press, "The No. 1 issue we've got to get to work on is the economy. We've got to create new jobs and bring new businesses into the area. We've got to keep government spending under control, and I'm going to have a challenge in D.C. to do that."¹³ Austria became just the second person of Filipino heritage—behind Robert C. (Bobby) Scott of Virginia—to serve as a full voting Member of the House.¹⁴

In 2010 Austria won easy re-election to the House—cruising through his primary and winning the general election against Democrat William R. Conner 62 to 32 percent, with two other minor party candidates capturing the remainder of the vote.¹⁵ In that election, control of the majority swung to Republicans on a wave of discontent with President Barack Obama and the Affordable Care Act. "The American people have spoken loud and clear," Austria said after the election. "They are tired of Washington not listening to them and pushing through policies for the expansion of government and creating more spending. We

as Republicans are going to stop that and turn this country around. That all starts with helping the job creators."¹⁶

At the opening of his first term in 2009, Austria won assignments to the House Budget and Homeland Security Committees. Given that he was a member of the House minority, these were solid committee assignments. Moreover, fellow GOP freshmen named him president of their class.¹⁷

At the opening of the 112th Congress (2011–2013), after Republicans captured the House majority, Austria moved to the exclusive Appropriations Committee and gave up his prior assignments. On Appropriations, Austria held seats on three subcommittees: Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies; Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies; and State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs.

Recovering from the economic crisis and battling the federal deficit consumed Austria's legislative agenda. South Central Ohioans had elected him on a platform that called for shrinking the size of the federal government. *Politics in America* said he was not so much of a "conservative firebrand" as he was "a reliable Republican vote and a consistent critic of what he calls unsustainable budget deficits."¹⁸ Austria spoke on the floor on a number of occasions but usually in sharply messaged one-minute speeches or in colloquies. Invariably, these revolved around his fiscally conservative views. In a March 2009 colloquy on the economy, the economic stimulus, and carbon use cap-and-trade proposals, Austria said, "When you start combining, increasing taxes, when you start combining the debt that we are just continuing to increase, to try and tax and spend your way out of an economic crisis I don't believe is the right way to go. We can do better than that."¹⁹ In another colloquy a few weeks later, Austria advocated relief for families and small businesses through tax cuts, noting, the "Federal Government right now thinks that they can just spend all they want for as long as they want, just continue to borrow, and now they're going to start taxing families and all so that they can keep this feel-good spending going on. And I think the Americans, as they begin to realize what's going on here in D.C., are



becoming more and more outraged, and businesses are already very concerned on how they're going to be able to continue to survive."²⁰

In early 2009, in the first major vote of his career, he joined with his Republican colleagues who unanimously opposed a nearly \$800 billion economic stimulus bill (which the Democratic majority passed). His comments to the *Columbus Dispatch* at the time compared the stimulus bill to the Keynesian economics of the New Deal. He drew criticism for his claim that President Franklin D. Roosevelt "tried to borrow and spend, he tried to use the Keynesian approach, and our country ended up in a Great Depression. That's just history." He later withdrew the statement, insisting that he meant to convey the idea that Roosevelt, who was elected three years after the crisis began, implemented policies that did not help end the economic crisis.²¹ While Austria voted with his party on most major issues, he was one of several dozen Republicans to vote for an expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (S-CHIP).

Like most freshman Members, Austria was attentive to his district. With his district's heavy military presence, he promoted it as a region that could help lead U.S. cybersecurity policy and the use of advanced security and military applications (such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles—UAVs) through partnerships among local universities and private businesses. He supported federal loan guarantees to help build a uranium enrichment plant in a neighboring district. In the 111th Congress, he introduced a bill that barred the use of funds to transfer enemy combatants from Guantanamo Bay to any facility in Ohio and advocated keeping the Guantanamo detention facility open. In the 112th Congress, as he had in the prior one, he authored the Health Savings and Affordability Act, which would have expanded health insurance deductions and health savings accounts. Referred to the Ways and Means Committee, the proposal received no major action. Austria also introduced the Colonel Charles Young Home Study Act to direct the Interior Department to conduct a study of the National Historic Landmark site in Xenia, Ohio, for possible inclusion in the National Park System. Young,

an African-American U.S. Army intelligence officer and commander in the Spanish-American War, helped lead the 1916 hunt for Pancho Villa in Mexico.²²

After the 2010 Census and resulting reapportionment, Ohio lost two of its 18 House seats. When the Ohio legislature drew up the new map, it dismantled Austria's district, throwing most of his constituency into a new district where Republican Mike Turner had the upper hand as a five-term House veteran. Austria faced the unpalatable options of taking on Turner or moving out of the new district into a neighboring one where he would challenge Republican Steve Stivers, a first-term incumbent but also a close ally of Speaker Boehner.²³ On December 29, 2011, Austria announced that he would retire from Congress rather than wage an uphill fight in a GOP primary that "pitted friends against friends."²⁴

His announcement spared the party a bruising primary. Nevertheless, Austria was unhappy with what he perceived to be an unfair process. "I have thoroughly enjoyed working on behalf of every one of my communities, both large and small, and regret that I will not be able to continue the work I have truly been committed to, due to the redrawing of the maps," Austria said. He also noted, "Since the redistricting process began, it has been done in secrecy and with closed door deals. I join my constituents, who are frustrated and disappointed about the new maps forced upon them and the fact that they didn't have a vote in the process."²⁵

During his farewell speech on the House Floor, Austria thanked his colleagues, staff, and family, noted his pride in his Asian-American heritage, and reflected on his House career and his future. "Often, as I walk through the Halls of the Capitol or am traveling throughout the district, folks will come up to me and remind me that, when one door closes, another opens and that God has a plan for us all."²⁶ After he left the House in 2013, Austria returned to Beaver Creek, Ohio, where he founded a consulting firm. He also is a member of the Republican National Committee's Asian American Advisory Council.²⁷



NOTES

- 1 Lorraine Tong, "Asian Pacific Americans in the United States Congress," Report 97-398, 7 May 2013, Congressional Research Service: 2.
- 2 *Almanac of American Politics, 2010* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 2009): 1180. His mother's name is referenced in "Austria to Adjust to Quick Pace," 9 January 2009, *Filipino Reporter*: 6. See also "A Win by Austria Will Make History," 8 August 2008, *Filipino Reporter*: 1.
- 3 *Politics in America, 2012* (Washington, DC: CQ-Roll Call, Inc., 2011): 771.
- 4 Mary McCarty, "Steve Austria Looks Back on Career in Congress," 31 December 2012, *Dayton Daily News*: n.p.; *Almanac of American Politics, 2010*: 1179–1181.
- 5 McCarty, "Steve Austria Looks Back on Career in Congress."
- 6 "A Win by Austria Will Make History."
- 7 *Almanac of American Politics, 2010*: 1180.
- 8 McCarty, "Steve Austria Looks Back on Career in Congress"; *Almanac of American Politics, 2010*: 1179–1181.
- 9 *Politics in America, 2010* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2009): 793.
- 10 *Almanac of American Politics, 2010*: 1181.
- 11 *Almanac of American Politics, 2012* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 2011): 1280.
- 12 Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>.
- 13 Sean Golden, "Austria to Fill Seat Vacated by Retiring Rep. Hobson," 5 November 2008, *Lancaster Eagle Gazette* (OH): 1A.
- 14 Tong, "Asian Pacific Americans in the United States Congress."
- 15 Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present."
- 16 Joe Giessler, "Steve Austria Coasts Past Conner to Second Term," 3 November 2010, *Lancaster Eagle Gazette* (OH): n.p.
- 17 *Politics in America, 2010*: 793.
- 18 *Politics in America, 2012*: 770.
- 19 *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (11 March 2009): H3328.
- 20 *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (31 March 2009): H4245; see also *Congressional Record*, House, 111th Cong., 1st sess. (19 July 2011): H5169.
- 21 *Politics in America, 2010*: 793; *Politics in America, 2012*: 770–771.
- 22 See, for example, William Hershey, "Keep Guantanamo Open, U.S. Rep. Austria Says; Legislator Had Just Returned From Fact-finding Mission," 12 January 2010, *Dayton Daily News*: A4.
- 23 "Ohio Republican Rep. Steve Austria Retiring," 30 December 2011, *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/ohio-republican-rep-steve-austria-retiring/2011/12/30/gIQAECkwQP_blog.html (accessed 20 March 2015); Jonathan Strong, "How Rep. Steve Austria Became a Sacrificial Republican," 17 January 2012, *Roll Call*: n.p.
- 24 "Ohio Republican Rep. Steve Austria Retiring."
- 25 Josh Lederman, "Ohio Rep. Steve Austria to Retire, Sparing GOP Primary Showdown," 30 December 2011, *The Hill*: n.p.; Alex Isenstadt, "Departing Ohio Rep. Steve Austria Knocks Boehner," 4 January 2012, *Politico*: n.p.
- 26 *Congressional Record*, House, 112th Cong., 2nd sess. (11 December 2012): H6691.
- 27 Republican National Committee, "RNC Launches National Advisory Councils," press release, 3 March 2014, <https://www.gop.com/rnc-launches-national-advisory-councils/> (accessed 27 August 2015).



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Lancaster Eagle Gazette, November 3, 2010