

Charles Djou

1970–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2010–2011
REPUBLICAN FROM HAWAII

In May 2010, Charles Djou won a surprise special election victory to become only the second Republican since statehood to represent Hawaii in the U.S. House of Representatives. Although his career on Capitol Hill lasted only a few months, Djou worked to control spending and lower taxes, and he was not afraid to break ties with his party on issues he felt strongly about.

Charles J. Djou was born in Los Angeles, California, on August 9, 1970. Both of his parents had immigrated to the United States from across the Pacific. His father was born in Shanghai, China, and fled to Hong Kong during the Chinese Communist Revolution in the late 1940s. Djou's mother grew up in Bangkok, Thailand.¹ When he was a boy, Djou's family moved to Hawaii and settled on the southeastern side of Oahu.² He graduated in 1988 from the famed Punahou School in Honolulu and traveled east for college, earning both a bachelor of arts degree in political science and a bachelor of science degree in finance from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in 1992.³ Four years later he earned a law degree from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

In 2001 Djou joined the United States Army Reserve and served in Afghanistan's Kandahar Province with the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, a light infantry division, from 2011 to 2012.⁴ Afterward, in his private career, Djou worked as an attorney for a small number of firms in Hawaii. He married Stacey Kawasaki, whom he had met shortly after law school when they worked for the same law practice. They have three children, Nick, Tori, and Alli.⁵

In 1998 Djou waged an unsuccessful campaign for a seat in Hawaii's state house of representatives. But two years later, he ran again and won, serving the Kahaluu and Kaneohe areas on Oahu's east coast. In the state house, he served on the finance committee, the labor and public

employment committee, the public safety and military affairs committee, and the transportation committee.⁶ He had a reliably conservative voting record, opposing legislative pay raises and working to shrink Hawaii's spending.⁷ As a member of the finance committee, Djou led the push to open its budget deliberations to public view.⁸ In mid-January 2002, in just his first term, Djou was elected party floor leader, becoming the youngest Republican officer in the Hawaiian legislature's history.⁹

After one term, redistricting erased his seat in the state house and drew him into a neighboring district represented by a fellow incumbent.¹⁰ In response, Hawaii Republicans began drafting Djou to run for lieutenant governor. Djou declined, however, and began exploring a run for the Honolulu city council.¹¹

To prepare for the city council run, Djou moved to East Honolulu, not far from where his wife's family lived. By the summer of 2002, he began to earn solid reviews in the Honolulu newspapers.¹² To combat what he saw as runaway spending, Djou wanted to refocus the city's finances on "core city services, like road paving and law enforcement salaries."¹³ Honolulu's public service sector "should be something that hums neatly and efficiently in the background," he said.¹⁴ Djou won the general election that November, beginning what became nearly a decade-long stint on the city council.¹⁵

Djou became perhaps the most prominent conservative on the city council during the 2000s. He fought tax increases, looked to cap spending, and repeatedly voted against the city's budget, which grew year after year. He worked to pass ethics reform, improve Honolulu's recycling program and increase its use of "alternative energy."¹⁶ Djou cycled on and off as chairman of the powerful zoning committee, using his influence to put a proposal to build a \$5 billion rail project up for a public vote.¹⁷





Early in 2010, the incumbent Representative from Hawaii's 1st District, Neil Abercrombie, resigned from the House to focus on his gubernatorial campaign, opening a seat that encompassed Djou's hometown.¹⁸ Abercrombie had served in the House since 1991, creating a 20-year backlog of Honolulu politicians looking to serve in national office. Djou, according to one Capitol Hill newspaper, had been planning for an eventual House campaign as early as November 2007.¹⁹ Following Abercrombie's resignation, Djou decided to run for both the special election to serve out the remainder of the 111th Congress (2009–2011) as well as the general election for the 112th Congress (2011–2013) in November 2010.²⁰

Republicans on the mainland quickly took interest in Djou's candidacy. In the first half of 2009, the National Republican Congressional Committee, the party's House campaign arm, included Djou in its "Young Guns" program and ran ads criticizing Abercrombie for his support of the recent stimulus package. Taking a more moderate stance, Djou argued that Republicans and Democrats needed to "work together" to spend the funds "wisely."²¹ "For me," Djou said a few weeks later, "my campaign has been about bringing a sense of accountability and responsibility back to the federal government."²²

Based on the returns from the 2008 election, when Democrats won by a landslide in the 1st District, Djou's candidacy looked like a longshot.²³ But he remained optimistic heading into 2010, saying, "I think the Republican Party does have a good message about diversifying our economy, about trying to keep more money in the pocketbooks of consumers."²⁴

Djou's platform included a number of traditional Republican initiatives, such as job creation, trade, lowering taxes, balancing the budget, limiting earmarks, and reducing spending.²⁵ In theory, Djou also supported reforming parts of America's health care system but wanted to see Congress include changes to malpractice insurance and to allow insurance companies to sell plans across state lines.²⁶ "Djou is everything the GOP could hope for in a viable Hawaii candidate," said one editorial in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* later that month, "local,

moderate, against all tax increases and is even an officer in the Army Reserve."²⁷

Despite some conservative tendencies in the district, Hawaii was historically Democratic and was President Barack Obama's home state. Djou maintained a much more moderate tone compared to the election politics on the mainland, and his long service on the Honolulu city council also made him well versed in the district's issues. Political handicappers predicted a close race.²⁸ "Nothing can make a powerful statement for the Republicans about the 2010 midterm elections than to send a Republican from Barack Obama's hometown to the Congress in the special election," Djou told *Roll Call* in March 2010.²⁹

Hawaii conducted the special election almost entirely by mail-in ballot, and on May 22, Djou defied the early odds and won, taking 39.4 percent of a surprisingly large turnout and beating the two leading Democrats, state senator Colleen Hanabusa and former U.S. Representative Ed Case, who split the Democratic vote.³⁰ Djou became only the second Republican Representative from Hawaii to serve in the House (before statehood, Hawaii had sent a number of Republican Delegates to the House). "The congressional seat is not owned by one political party," Djou said after his victory. "This congressional seat is owned by the people."³¹

Two days after his victory Djou and his family flew to Washington.³² Just after 5:00 p.m. on May 25, 2010, Charles Djou took the oath of office and was sworn in by Speaker Nancy Pelosi. After introductory remarks by Congresswoman Mazie Hirono of Hawaii and House Minority Leader John Boehner of Ohio, Djou addressed the chamber. "I want all the voters to know that every single day I have the privilege of serving them I will never, ever forget the trust and confidence they have vested in me," he said. "It is a testimony to the greatness of the United States of America that I, a son of immigrants from China and Thailand, have the privilege of calling myself a Member of the United States Congress."³³

House Republicans assigned Djou to two popular and powerful committees, the Armed Services Committee and the Budget Committee.³⁴ On the Armed Services Committee, a natural home for the Army reservist with a large military constituency, he served on two subcommittees,



the Subcommittee on Readiness and the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities.

His first appearance with the Budget Committee occurred on June 9, 2010, when the House heard testimony from Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke. From his seat on the dais, Djou questioned Bernanke about the viability of additional economic stimulus and whether new free trade agreements would help the U.S. economy.³⁵ A month later, during another Budget Committee hearing on the effects of the 2009 stimulus, Djou seemed to reach across the aisle, telling the Secretary of Agriculture that he was “far more concerned about fixing things and looking forward in the future than continuing to lay partisan blame.”³⁶

Entering the House in late May during an election year, however, left Djou with little time to legislate. He introduced his first bill (H.R. 5720) on July 13, 2010, and offered his final bill of the 111th Congress only a month later, just before Congress recessed for the summer. In total, Djou introduced 12 resolutions during the 111th Congress, including two bills to rename post offices in Honolulu; the FACT Act (H.R. 5857), which would have lowered corporate income tax; the Family Reunification Act of 2010 (H.R. 5880), which would have amended certain immigration requirements; and the Citizenship and Service Act of 2010 (H.R. 6327), which would have enabled undocumented young people to become “conditional permanent” U.S. residents if they met certain educational qualifications. Djou also broke from his party on a handful of hot-button issues. He was one of only five Republicans to vote for the repeal of the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy and later was one of only eight Republicans to vote for an immigration overhaul.³⁷

On the House Floor, Djou often used his congressional megaphone to recognize and praise the accomplishments of his constituents.³⁸ He also spoke in favor of America’s trade deal with South Korea and supported the House GOP’s crowd-sourced budget-reducing tool called YouCut.³⁹

During debate on H.R. 5822, the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2011, Djou sided with the Obama administration and lamented the decision by House Republicans not to

include his amendment that would have restored funding to help America’s Armed Forces begin moving from Okinawa, Japan, to Guam. Later, toward the end of the 111th Congress, Djou strongly supported H. Res. 1735, which condemned North Korea for attacking South Korea on November 23, 2010. “We must strengthen our bonds between the United States and South Korea to stand as a bulwark against the aggressive and repressive North Korean Government,” he said.⁴⁰

Djou’s career in the House lasted only a few months. Whereas Democrats had split the ticket during the special election, he faced only Colleen Hanabusa heading into the general election. Djou was in a dead heat with Hanabusa by mid-October and raised more than a half million dollars as voting neared.⁴¹ In an effort to help his candidacy, House Minority Leader Boehner promised to assign him to the powerful Appropriations Committee if the GOP took the House.⁴² Two weeks before Election Day, however, Djou experienced a large setback when Hanabusa won the endorsement of the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*.⁴³ In the end, Djou took 46 percent of the vote and lost the general election by 11,417 votes.⁴⁴

After his loss, Djou returned to Capitol Hill for the remainder of the Congress. In his last address, Djou thanked the voters of the 1st District for the opportunity to serve them in the House. “I believe that a vibrant two-party democracy is better at preserving liberty than one-party monolithic rule,” he said. “But I also believe one of the beauties of our Nation is that the voters always have the final say. . . . Yielding to the final word of the voters is something that I always will respect.”⁴⁵

After leaving the House, Djou returned to Hawaii. In 2012 he won the Republican nomination for his old seat, but lost in the general election. He ran again in 2014, but lost in the GOP primary. In June 2016, Djou entered a three-way race for mayor of Honolulu against the incumbent Kirk Caldwell and the city’s previous mayor Peter Carlisle. In a close campaign, Djou came in second to Caldwell, but since neither candidate received a majority of the votes, the election headed to a runoff. Djou ended up losing the runoff later that November.⁴⁶



NOTES

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- 3 “Charles Djou,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000611>; Charles Djou’s LinkedIn page, accessed 10 August 2015, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/charles-djou-31305a29>.
- 4 “Charles,” on Charles Djou’s official campaign website, accessed 10 August 2015, <http://djou.com/about>.
- 5 “Stacey,” on Charles Djou’s official campaign website, accessed 10 August 2015, <http://djou.com/stacey>.
- 6 “Statewide Summary Report,” Office of Elections, State of Hawaii, 3 November 1998, <http://elections.hawaii.gov/election-results/> (accessed 27 April 2016); “The 2002 Hawaii State Legislature,” 16 January 2002, *Honolulu Advertiser*: A12.
- 7 Pat Omandam, “House Hammers Out Bill-Recall Agreement,” 21 February 2001, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.; Pat Omandam, “Republicans Stop 4 House Bills,” 7 March 2001, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.; “Djou Announces Council Run,” 25 February 2002, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.
- 8 Pat Omandam, “Let the Sun Shine In, Say Republicans,” 17 March 2001, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p. See also Richard Borreca, “Open State Budget Details to Public, Legislator Urges,” 2 April 2001, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.; Richard Borreca, “Budget Papers Now Open to Public,” 7 April 2001, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.
- 9 Lynda Arakawa, “House in Squabble Over Republican’s Double Duty,” 20 January 2002, *Honolulu Advertiser*: A29. See also Pat Omandam, “Djou’s Dual House Roles Spark Bitter Political Debate,” 19 January 2002, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.; Pat Omandam, “Bill Would Move Up Primary Election,” 26 January 2002, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.; Walter Wright, “Legislator to Run for Council,” 25 February 2002, *Honolulu Advertiser*: B3.
- 10 “Djou Announces Council Run,” 25 February 2002, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.
- 11 Richard Borreca, “Republican Party Convention Starts Amid Calls for Energetic Diligence,” 20 May 2001, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.; Walter Wright, “Legislator to Run for Council”; “Djou Announces Council Run.”
- 12 “Ernie Martin, Rep. Djou Run for City Council,” 19 July 2002, *Honolulu Advertiser*: B2; “Djou Announces Council Run”; Roig, “5 Vie for East Oahu Council Seat.”
- 13 Roig, “5 Vie for East Oahu Council Seat.”
- 14 Treena Shapiro, “Election 2002,” 20 October 2002, *Honolulu Advertiser*: A27.
- 15 Treena Shapiro, “Election 2002,” 6 November 2002, *Honolulu Advertiser*: A5.
- 16 Robbie Dingeman, “Council Weighing Property Tax Hike,” 25 January 2003, *Honolulu Advertiser*: B1; “The Hot Seat,” 27 September 2009, *Honolulu Advertiser*: B1; “Djou Seeks Backing for Spending Caps,” 23 December 2003, *Honolulu Advertiser*: B6; Robbie Dingeman, “Djou Seeks Earlier Start for Curbside Recycling,” 12 March 2006, *Honolulu Advertiser*: A34; Johnny Brannon, “Recycling Takes New Turn,” 6 September 2007, *Honolulu Advertiser*: B1; B. J. Reyes, “Councilmen Find Allies to Fight Recycling Cut,” 20 May 2009, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.
- 17 Sean Hao, “Council Votes 9-0 to Put Rail on Ballot,” 24 July 2008, *Honolulu Advertiser*: A1.
- 18 Shira Toeplitz, “GOP Says Aloha to 2010 Special Election,” 15 December 2009, *Roll Call*: n.p.
- 19 Shira Toeplitz, “The Farm Team: Hawaii,” 5 February 2008, *Roll Call*: n.p.; “Hawaii: City Councilman Eyes Abercrombie Seat in ’10,” 16 October 2008, *Roll Call*: n.p.; Shira Toeplitz, “Winds of Change Could Be Blowin’,” 20 January 2009, *Roll Call*: n.p.; Chad Blair, “Charles Djou Running for Congress,” 19 March 2008, *Pacific Business News*: n.p. Djou also appeared to be keeping his options open. The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* reported in November 2008 that Djou had also filed papers to seek the office of lieutenant governor during the 2010 election cycle. See Richard Borreca, “More Change to Occur in Next Election,” 9 November 2008, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.
- 20 Richard Borreca, “Candidates Tossing Hat in Early, Too,” 12 December 2009, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.
- 21 Aaron Blake, “NRCC Picks 13 Challengers with ‘Young Guns’ Potential,” 30 July 2009, *The Hill*: 4. Quotations from Richard Borreca, “Republican Attack Ads Target Abercrombie,” 21 February 2009, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p. See also “Hawaii EMILY’s List Backs Hanabusa in 1st District,” 8 October 2009, *Roll Call*: n.p.
- 22 Derrick DePledge, “Case Sets His Sights on Returning to Congress,” 29 March 2009, *Honolulu Advertiser*: A1.
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- 31 Mark Sappenfield, "Charles Djou: How Did a Republican Win in Obama's Hawaii Hometown?," 23 May 2010, *Christian Science Monitor*: n.p.
- 32 Craig Gima, "East Honolulu Went to Djou," 24 May 2010, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*: n.p.
- 33 *Congressional Record*, House, 111th Cong., 2nd sess. (25 May 2010): 9269–9270.
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- 36 Hearing before the House Committee on the Budget, *The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, an Update*, 111th Cong., 2nd sess. (14 July 2010): 31.
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- 43 "Send Hanabusa to Serve in D.C.," 21 October 2010, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*: n.p.
- 44 B. J. Reyes, "Djou, Hanabusa Invest Shoe Leather," 30 October 2010, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*: n.p.; B. J. Reyes, "Hanabusa Tops Djou for House Seat," 2 November 2010, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*: n.p.
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