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## *Mazie K. Hirono*

1947–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2007–2013

UNITED STATES SENATOR 2013–

DEMOCRAT FROM HAWAII

An immigrant from Japan who came to Hawaii as a child, Mazie Hirono credits her mother’s bravery for inspiring her decades-long political career. “My mother decided that she needed to get us all away so that we could have a chance at a better life; [she showed] tremendous courage and risk taking. She showed me that one person can make a difference. So my path to the U.S. Senate was a highly unlikely one, but it also points out not only how one person can make a difference, but also what a great country the United States is.”<sup>1</sup>

Mazie Hirono was born in Fukushima, Japan, on November 3, 1947, the daughter of Laura Chie Hirono. Laura Hirono left an abusive marriage by escaping with her elder son Roy and daughter Mazie aboard a ship bound for Hawaii. The family lived in a single room in a boarding house, and, at age 10, Mazie Hirono started working to support the family.<sup>2</sup> Hirono became a naturalized American citizen in 1959, when Hawaii became a state. She later married Leighton Kim Oshima and has one stepchild.

After graduating from Kaimuki High School in Honolulu, she earned a psychology degree at the University of Hawaii in Manoa in 1970.<sup>3</sup> She became active in politics by managing several state legislative campaigns.<sup>4</sup> Hirono earned a juris doctorate degree from Georgetown University in Washington, DC, in 1978. She later served as deputy attorney general of Hawaii in the anti-trust division and worked in a private legal practice. In 1980 she won a seat in the Hawaii state house of representatives, serving until 1994, when she was elected lieutenant governor. Hirono lost a close race for governor in 2002.<sup>5</sup>

In 2006 Hirono entered the Democratic primary to succeed Representative Ed Case of Hawaii, who had announced his bid for a seat in the U.S. Senate. The district—one of two in Hawaii—included parts of Oahu outside Honolulu and the rest of the Hawaiian Islands; the constituency had a large Asian population (28 percent) and had only ever elected Democrats.<sup>6</sup> With wide name recognition and the backing of national women’s rights organizations, Hirono campaigned on her work in education, land reform, and workers’ compensation, winning the primary with 22 percent of the vote against nine other contenders.<sup>7</sup> In the general election, she won 61 percent of the vote. She garnered majorities of 70 percent or more in the next two elections.<sup>8</sup>

Joining a new Democratic majority in the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Hirono served on the Education and Labor Committee and the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, staying with both throughout her House career.

She also served briefly on the Small Business and the Ethics Committees and the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee.<sup>9</sup>

In the House, Hirono introduced the Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act, which sought recognition for a Native-Hawaiian government, similar to those of Native Americans on the mainland.<sup>10</sup> The bill passed the House, but died in the Senate.<sup>11</sup> Hirono also pursued legislation to help low-income Native Hawaiians purchase homes.<sup>12</sup> She advocated for early childhood instruction, introducing the Providing Resources Early for Kids (PRE-K) Act to provide grants to states to hire more qualified educators, to buy supplies, and for nutrition funding for preschools.<sup>13</sup> She championed growing American tourism by introducing the bipartisan VISIT USA Act.<sup>14</sup>

In 2011, when Senator Daniel Akaka announced his retirement, Hirono entered the primary to succeed him, winning with 57 percent of the vote against former Representative Case.<sup>15</sup> Running on her efforts to protect Social Security and investments in early childhood education and alternative energy, Hirono won 62 percent of the vote in the general election against Republican Linda Lingle.<sup>16</sup>

Hirono received seats on the Senate Armed Services, Judiciary, and Veterans' Affairs Committees in the 113th Congress (2013–2015). As the only immigrant serving in the Senate, Hirono threw herself into drafting the Senate's 2013 comprehensive immigration reform legislation, successfully including 11 amendments and prioritizing family unity.<sup>17</sup>

During the 114th Congress (2015–2017), Hirono became Ranking Member on the Armed Services Committee's Seapower Subcommittee. She left the Judiciary Committee and took seats on the Intelligence, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Energy and Natural Resources Committee—where she served as Ranking Member on the Water and Power Subcommittee. In the 115th Congress (2017–2019), she served as Ranking Member on the National Park Subcommittee. Hirono also moved from the Select Committee on Intelligence back to the Judiciary Committee.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Women's Media Center, "A Personal Interview with Mazie Hirono, Hawaii's First Woman Senator," accessed 2 June 2016, <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/feature/entry/a-personal-interview-with-mazie-hirono-hawaiiis-first-woman-senator>.
- 2 "Mazie K. Hirono Bio," Mazie K. Hirono's official campaign website, accessed 8 November 2006, <http://mazieforcongress.com/index.cfm/preset/bio> (site discontinued); *Almanac of American Politics, 2008* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 2007): 511; "About Mazie," on Senator Mazie Hirono's official website, accessed 16 February 2016, <https://www.hirono.senate.gov/about>; *Politics in America, 2010* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2009): 309.
- 3 *Politics in America, 2012* (Washington, DC: CQ-Roll Call, Inc., 2011): 297.
- 4 *Politics in America, 2010*: 310.
- 5 *Almanac of American Politics, 2008*: 511.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 510–511; "It's Official: Hirono Enters Race for U.S. House," 28 April 2006, *Honolulu Advertiser*: 3B.
- 7 *Almanac of American Politics, 2008*: 511; Nicole Duran "Primaries in Paradise: Hirono Leads Democratic Field But No Sure Thing," 21 September 2006, *Roll Call*: n.p.
- 8 Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>.
- 9 *Congressional Directory*, various editions; Garrison Nelson and Charles Stewart III, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1993–2010* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2011): 757–758; *Congressional Record*, House, 112th Cong., 1st sess. (14 July 2011): H5050.
- 10 See H.R. 505, 110th Cong. (2007); *Congressional Record*, House, 111th Cong., 2nd sess. (23 February 2010): H722; *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (7 May 2007): H4535.
- 11 See H.R. 862, 111th Cong. (2009) and H.R. 1250, 112th Cong. (2011).
- 12 H.R. 835, 110th Cong. (2007); H.R. 2786, 110th Cong. (2007); *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (27 March 2007): H3166; *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (24 July 2007): H8310. The legislation sought to bolster previous laws setting aside land for indigenous Hawaiians—dating back to the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1921.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (18 June 2007): H6589; H.R. 3289, 110th Cong. (2007); H.R. 2655, 110th Cong. (2007); *Politics in America, 2010*: 309.
- 14 H.R. 3341, 112th Cong. (2011).
- 15 "Hirono Announces She Will Run For Akaka's Senate Seat," 19 May 2011, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*: n.p.; Derrick DePledge, "Case, Hirono Duke It Out" 27 July 2012, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*: n.p.; DePledge, "Hirono Beats Case" 12 August 2012, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*: n.p.
- 16 Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present."
- 17 "Immigration," on Senator Mazie K. Hirono's official website, accessed 16 February 2016, <https://www.hirono.senate.gov/issues/immigration>.
- 18 "About Mazie."