



Mel Reynolds

1952–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1993–1995
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

Persistent in the face of defeat, Mel Reynolds earned a seat in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995) after two unsuccessful bids against Illinois incumbent Gus Savage in the Democratic primary. Perceived by national party leaders as a standout with political promise, Reynolds received a seat on the influential Ways and Means Committee—a rare honor for a freshman Representative—during his term in Congress.¹

Mel Reynolds was born on January 8, 1952, in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, to Essie Mae and Reverend J. J. Reynolds. When he was a child, his family moved to Chicago, where he attended public schools, including Mather High School.² Reynolds received an A.A. from Chicago City College in 1972, and two years later graduated with a B.A. from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. One of the first African Americans from Illinois to be selected as a Rhodes Scholar, Reynolds earned an LL.B. from Oxford University in 1979. He also completed a master's degree in public administration at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in 1986. While at Harvard, Reynolds met his future wife, Marisol Concepcion. The couple married in 1990 and had three children: Corean, Marisol Elizabeth, and Mel, Jr.³

Reynolds initially worked as an assistant professor of political science at Roosevelt University in Chicago and hosted a local radio talk show. He also launched the organization American Scholars Against World Hunger to fight famine in Africa. Reynolds earned a reputation as a community activist, participating in an antidrug campaign on Chicago's South Side and directing the Community Economic Development and Education Foundation, which provided scholarships to local students.⁴ He gained valuable political experience working on the campaigns of several unsuccessful Democratic presidential candidates, including Edward M. (Ted) Kennedy, Jesse Jackson, and

Michael Dukakis.⁵ In 1987, Reynolds participated in Chicago Mayor Harold Washington's victorious re-election campaign.

Without experience in elective office, Reynolds challenged the four-term Democratic incumbent Gus Savage for the congressional district encompassing portions of Chicago's predominantly African-American South Side. As a young (36-year-old), untested candidate, Reynolds impressed experts with an efficient campaign that focused on his status as an outsider to Chicago's powerful ward system and on his roots in the community. "It's more of a commitment to me than just a job," he remarked during the contest. "Obviously as a black Rhodes Scholar, I can work in any corporation in America. I've chosen to be in my community."⁶ Reynolds placed a distant third in the 1988 primary, garnering only 14 percent of the vote.⁷ Despite the loss, he made another run for the district seat two years later, citing unhappiness with Savage's representation of the urban district. In a race featuring three candidates, Reynolds made a strong showing, with 43 percent of the vote, partly reflecting voters' growing discontent with the incumbent Savage, who had a history of making controversial remarks as well as a volatile relationship with the press.

In 1992, Reynolds orchestrated a third campaign to unseat Savage. This time, no other opponents challenged the incumbent, ensuring that votes would not be split among several candidates. Reynolds also received a boost with the 1992 redistricting that shrank Savage's stronghold in urban black neighborhoods, replacing them with white suburbs south of Chicago. In the March primary, Reynolds easily defeated Savage, 63 to 37 percent.⁸ He went on to earn 78 percent of the vote in the general election against Republican candidate Ron Blackstone and third-party opponent Louanner Peters. In his subsequent election, he



bested two challengers in the Democratic primary with 56 percent of the vote and easily defeated a write-in candidate in the general election to earn a second term in the House.⁹

During his first term in Congress, Reynolds successfully lobbied for a seat on the powerful Ways and Means Committee. With the backing of longtime committee chairman Representative Daniel Rostenkowski of Illinois, Reynolds became the first freshman in 14 years to be awarded the coveted assignment.¹⁰ In 1993, Reynolds joined Rostenkowski in voting for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a measure aimed at promoting economic growth between United States, Canada, and Mexico. As the only two Democrats representing Chicago to back the controversial legislation, both Members faced widespread criticism from organized labor leaders who believed the free trade program would undermine wages and job security for American workers. However, the two Representatives reaped the gratitude of President William J. (Bill) Clinton—who had pushed for NAFTA's passage in the House and Senate—aiding their re-election bids in 1994.¹¹

During his short stint in the House, Reynolds sought to improve conditions for his many impoverished constituents by backing an earned income tax credit and hosting a series of job fairs in Chicago.¹² He also worked to curb crime in his district, primarily by supporting gun control. In 1993 the Chicago Representative authored a bill to facilitate lawsuits against gun manufacturers for deaths or injuries caused by their firearms. He also proposed doubling the excise tax on guns, with a portion of the additional revenue to be allocated for urban hospitals that cared for uninsured patients with gunshot injuries.¹³ “If we are truly serious about addressing the senseless slaughter taking place on our streets, we must hold people and corporations responsible for their actions, as well as provide relief to those impacted so heavily by the destructive cost of gun violence,” Reynolds remarked.¹⁴

Although Reynolds had an auspicious beginning in the House, a series of legal problems jeopardized his career.¹⁵

Early in his first term, published reports emerged alleging that Reynolds owed thousands of dollars in campaign debts and educational loans.¹⁶ The Illinois Representative explained that he had delayed paying his student loans so that he could fund his three election campaigns. “It was a question of priorities, a question of me spending my life trying to do what I believe was right,” Reynolds commented.¹⁷ In August 1994 a Cook County grand jury indicted Reynolds on counts of criminal sexual assault, child pornography, and obstruction of justice. Reynolds denied having an affair in 1992 with his accuser—a 16-year-old campaign worker.¹⁸

Initially, Reynolds managed to weather the controversy and retain his position in Congress, winning re-election to a second term with no significant opposition in the general election.¹⁹ With the opening of the 104th Congress (1995–1997), Republicans gained control of the House for the first time in 40 years. As the lowest-ranking Democrat on the Ways and Means Committee, Reynolds lost his position when Republicans reduced the number of seats for the panel; he received a spot on the Economic and Educational Opportunities Committee.²⁰ When a Chicago jury found Reynolds guilty of multiple criminal counts, including having sex with a minor and obstruction of justice, calls for his resignation among Democrats reached a crescendo.²¹ Reluctantly, Reynolds resigned from the House, effective October 1, 1995.²²

Reynolds spent two and a half years in jail for the sexual misconduct conviction. Later indicted and convicted on federal charges of bank and campaign fraud, he remained in prison until President Clinton commuted his sentence shortly before leaving office in 2001.²³ The former Representative attempted to resurrect his political career by running against Representative Jesse Jackson, Jr., who had succeeded him in office, but his comeback stalled when he received only 6 percent of the vote in the 2004 Democratic primary.²⁴

FOR FURTHER READING

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NOTES

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