



Denise L. Majette

1955–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 2003–2005
DEMOCRAT FROM GEORGIA

Upsetting a veteran incumbent in the Democratic primary for a congressional seat from Georgia, Denise Majette coasted to victory in the general election, earning a spot in the U.S. House of Representatives for the 108th Congress (2003–2005). One of five new African-American Members elected in 2002, Majette described herself as “pro-choice, anti-death penalty, for protecting rights of workers and making sure that everyone has access on a level playing field.”¹

Denise L. Majette was born on May 18, 1955, in Brooklyn, New York, the daughter of Voyd Lee and Olivia Carolyn (Foster) Majette. Until 1972 she resided in New York, where one of her role models was Shirley Chisholm, the first black Congresswoman. Majette attended Yale University, graduating with a B.A. in 1976. After college, she decided to attend law school because of her anguish over President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963. “I wanted to be able to use the law to effect social change and make things better for people who otherwise didn’t have those opportunities,” she later recalled.² After earning a J.D. in 1979 from Duke University Law School, Majette began her professional career as a staff attorney at the Legal Aid Society in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and later served as a clinical adjunct law professor at Wake Forest University. In 1983, Majette moved to Stone Mountain, Georgia, with her husband Rogers J. Mitchell, Jr., and their two sons from former marriages, to accept a position as law clerk for Judge R. Keegan Federal at the superior court of DeKalb County. Over the next two decades, Majette served as a law assistant to Judge Robert Benham of the Georgia court of appeals, a special assistant attorney general for the state of Georgia, and a partner in an Atlanta law firm. In 1992, Majette became a judge of administrative law for the Atlanta office of the Georgia state board of workers’ compensation. On June 8, 1993,

Georgia Governor Zell Miller appointed Majette as a judge on the state court of DeKalb County. During her nearly 10 years as a judge, Majette presided over a variety of court proceedings, including criminal trials, civil cases, and hearings.³

On February 5, 2002, Majette resigned from the bench, announcing her candidacy as a Democrat for a seat in the Georgia congressional district encompassing the suburban area east of Atlanta—although she lacked the high profile of the Democratic incumbent, five-term Representative Cynthia McKinney. Majette said she decided to run for public office because she felt McKinney had become disconnected from the issues affecting DeKalb County. The race garnered national attention after McKinney implied that President George W. Bush deliberately ignored pre-September 11 intelligence reports suggesting an imminent terrorist attack and that his big-business supporters profited in the wake of the attacks. Majette capitalized on the controversy that surrounded her opponent’s remarks. Also, she received a strong endorsement from Zell Miller, who had been elected a U.S. Senator. Middle-class voters flocked to Majette in the August 20, 2002, primary, joined by Republicans who took advantage of Georgia state law, which allowed voters to switch parties during primaries. Majette captured 58 percent of the vote. In the general election she easily defeated her Republican opponent, Cynthia Van Auken, gaining 77 percent of the vote.⁴

Upon being sworn in to the U.S. House of Representatives in January 2003, Majette observed, “I was just looking around the room and appreciating the kind of work the Congress will have to do and how that will impact the nation and the world.”⁵ Majette received assignments on the Budget, Education and Workforce, and Small Business committees and chaired the



Democrats' Task Force on Jobs and the Economy. She also assumed a leadership role in her brief tenure in Congress, as an Assistant Democratic Whip and as president of the Democrats' freshman class.

During her first year in Congress, Majette sponsored legislation to designate Arabia Mountain in southeast DeKalb County as a national heritage area, a classification that would increase tourism and make the metropolitan Atlanta region eligible for millions of dollars in federal funding. Testifying before the House Resources Committee's Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands, Majette called the locale "a living history lesson" and urged the preservation of the "area's unique heritage for future generations."⁶ As a member of the Small Business Committee, she criticized President Bush's proposed budget for fiscal year 2005, citing concerns for the many female- and minority-owned small businesses in her district.

Majette fought to protect a variety of federally funded programs during her term in the House. She believed the Bush administration had failed to adequately fund education initiatives, and was an outspoken critic of the President's record on domestic violence against women. "It saddens me to think that millions of women continue to be abused each year, while this administration sits idly by, taking no initiative and, in some cases, decreasing resources available to battered women," Majette said.⁷ She also voted against overhauling Medicare, labeling the Republican-sponsored Medicare Prescription Drug and Modernization Act of 2003 a "sham" that failed to include "adequate prescription drug coverage that our mothers and grandmothers absolutely deserve."⁸ In 2003, she joined

two of her Democratic colleagues, Chris Van Hollen of Maryland and John Tierney of Massachusetts, in proposing an amendment to increase spending for Head Start. "The program doesn't just teach children to read," Majette argued. "It provides nutritional support, it makes sure that children are properly vaccinated at the appropriate time, that parents are also being supported and supportive of the efforts, that children are given the overall support they need. It's not just about teaching them their colors."⁹

On March 29, 2004, Majette surprised her House colleagues, and even some of her staff, when she announced her candidacy for the Georgia Senate seat that was being vacated by the retiring Zell Miller. Not wanting to miss the opportunity to run for an open Senate seat, Majette entered the race despite the absence of a statewide fundraising network and her lack of name recognition outside the Atlanta area.¹⁰ Forced into a runoff because she did not gain a majority in the Democratic primary, Majette defeated millionaire businessman Cliff Oxford by using an effective grassroots campaign. The first African American to earn a nomination for the U.S. Senate from the state of Georgia, Majette lost in the general election, receiving only 40 percent of the vote against three-term Republican Representative Johnny Isakson.¹¹

"It was a leap of faith for me, another step in my spiritual journey," Majette remarked after her loss.¹² She expressed no regrets. In 2005, Majette began work as a judge in DeKalb County. A year later she won the Democratic nomination for Georgia superintendent of schools, a position with oversight of the daily operations of the state's department of education.¹³ But she lost by a wide margin in the general election.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Majette, Denise L.,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M001145>.

NOTES

- 1 *Politics in America, 2004* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 277.
- 2 Jeffrey McMurray, “Majette Says Spiritual Calling Prompted Belated Senate Run,” 16 June 2004, Associated Press.
- 3 “Who Is Denise Majette?” at <http://www.majetteforcongress.org> (accessed 6 November 2002).
- 4 “New Member Profile: Denise Majette,” 9 November 2002, *National Journal*; “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 5 Melanie Eversley, “Enormity of Duty Awes Capitol Hill: Georgia’s Freshmen Sworn in,” 8 January 2003, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: 6A.
- 6 Donna Williams Lewis, “Majette Makes Appeal for Heritage Area; Designation Would Make as Much as \$1 Million per Year Available,” 25 September 2003, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*: 1JA; Ben Smith, “Majette Coming Into Her Own in Congress,” 1 May 2003, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: 2JA; Mae Gentry, “2004 The Year in Review; It Only Looked Like Politics Stood Alone in Reshaping the Country,” 30 December 2004, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: 1JB.
- 7 *Congressional Record*, House, 108th Cong., 2nd sess. (22 June 2004): 4746; Brian Basinger, “Majette Defies Conventional Election Theories,” 24 October 2004, *Florida Times-Union* (Jacksonville, FL): A1.
- 8 *Congressional Record*, House, 108th Cong., 1st sess. (26 June 2003): 5956.
- 9 Melanie Eversley, “Majette Joins Head Start Fight; Bill Urges Federal Funding,” 22 July 2003, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: 5A.
- 10 Lauren W. Whittington, “Majette Shaking Up Ga. Politics,” 30 March 2004, *Roll Call*; Peter Savodnik and Michael Rochmes, “Majette Seeks Senate—Colleagues Stunned,” 30 March 2004, *The Hill*: 1.
- 11 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; Savodnik and Rochmes, “Majette Seeks Senate—Colleagues Stunned”; Dick Pettys, “Majette Looks for Funds, Foot Soldiers in U.S. Senate Battle,” 20 October 2004, Associated Press.
- 12 Anna Varela, “Election 2004: Isakson’s Romp Beats Expectations; 18-Point Margin Laid to Turnout, High Profile,” 4 November 2004, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: 5C.
- 13 Corey Dade, “Majette Accepts Job as Part-Time Judge,” 22 December 2004, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: 2D; “Across Metro Atlanta & the State; Georgia Votes 2006: State School Superintendent,” 8 November 2006, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: 7D.