

Manuel Luján, Jr.

1928–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1969–1989
REPUBLICAN FROM NEW MEXICO

Manuel Luján, Jr., served 10 terms in the U.S. House, making him the second-longest-serving Representative in New Mexico’s history and the longest-serving Hispanic Representative in New Mexico to date. A Republican in an era when nearly all the Hispanic Members of Congress were Democrats, he rarely faced stiff competition for re-election, despite the fact that his district leaned Democratic. Luján made his greatest mark as a member of the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, on which he was the Ranking Member from 1981 through 1985. Criticized by environmental groups for being pro-business, Luján sought to balance environmental conservation with development and public use, paving the way for his appointment as Secretary of the Interior after he retired from the House. While in Congress, Luján focused on regional issues and on the needs of his constituents. “If I’m remembered for anything, I’d rather be remembered for constituent service than national legislation,” he said.¹

Manuel Luján, Jr., was born on a small farm near the Indian pueblo of San Ildefonso on May 12, 1928, to Manuel Luján, Sr., and Lorenzita Romero. Lujan’s mother was a teacher and served as county clerk in Santa Fe County, New Mexico. Also a teacher, Luján, Sr., later used his visibility as the successful owner of an insurance company to launch a career in politics, serving as mayor of Santa Fe, New Mexico, from 1942 to 1948.² Additionally, he made unsuccessful bids for a seat in the U.S. Congress in 1944 and the governorship of New Mexico in 1948.³ Luján, Jr., attended Our Lady of Guadalupe in elementary and junior high school before graduating from St. Michael’s High School in Santa Fe in 1946. He then attended St. Mary’s College in California, earning a B.A. from New Mexico’s College of Santa Fe in 1950. While an undergraduate, Luján married Jean Kay Couchman on

November 18, 1948. The couple had four children: Terra Kay, Jay, Barbara, and Jeff.⁴ After graduating from college, Luján worked at his father’s insurance company and served in the National Guard Reserve.

With his father’s strong roots in New Mexico, Luján, Jr., was well positioned for a career in politics. He bolstered his credentials by serving as vice chairman of the New Mexico Republican Party, and built strong community ties by serving on the Bernalillo County Crime Commission and holding leadership roles with the Coronado Kiwanis and the Knights of Columbus.⁵ After an unsuccessful run for the New Mexico state senate in 1964, Luján sought the Republican nomination for the U.S. House four years later. The elections for the 91st Congress (1969–1971) marked the first time New Mexico had two distinct districts. (Previously New Mexico had two At-Large seats.) Luján campaigned for the seat in the district in northern New Mexico. Primarily rural, except for Albuquerque and Santa Fe, the area encompassed 14 counties. In a crowded primary, Luján bested five opponents—including Schuble Cook, the Republican nominee in 1966 for one of New Mexico’s two At-Large seats—to secure the Republican nomination.⁶

In the 1968 general election, Luján challenged five-term Democratic Representative Thomas Morris. During the campaign, Luján represented himself as a newcomer who would bring change to New Mexico. He aligned himself with Republican presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon, who carried the state in the fall. Luján emphasized his strong attachment to the community, including his years in the family business, and accused Morris of ignoring northern New Mexico during his tenure in the House.⁷ He also criticized his opponent’s emphasis on the value of congressional experience, which he described as a “seniority symphony” with the “same old lyrics” but no



real benefits for constituents.⁸ Luján advocated a return to fiscally conservative principles, calling for more-efficient government expenditures. “We must fight to keep vital government installations in New Mexico and move forward to develop a diversified economy, government, tourism and agriculture,” he observed. “We should emphasize private business to create jobs.”⁹

Luján’s campaign demonstrated the candidate’s tireless effort. Luján had driven his father around the state during his political campaigns in the 1940s, and in his own 1968 campaign he adopted another personal approach: traversing the northern portion of the state, which rarely saw At-Large House candidates, and visiting the homes of thousands of constituents.¹⁰ His strategy paid off. Luján won 53 percent of the vote to unseat the incumbent for a spot in the 91st Congress.¹¹ In the other New Mexico House race, businessman Ed Foreman (a former U.S. Representative from Texas) defeated incumbent Representative Johnny Walker. Luján and Foreman were the first Republicans from New Mexico who were elected to the U.S. House since Albert Simms in 1928.¹²

Luján’s arrival in Washington, D.C., in 1969 began auspiciously; his freshman peers in the Republican Party selected him as a member of the executive committee of the Republican Committee on Committees, the body responsible for Republican committee assignments.¹³ This influential assignment enabled Luján to secure a spot on the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, a panel of major importance to his mostly rural district. Luján remained there his entire career and served as the Ranking Republican on the committee in the 97th and 98th Congresses (1981–1985).

Luján demonstrated his interest in environmental preservation during his second term in the House, urging the federal government to purchase the Vermejo Ranch, a 485,000-acre tract of private land that spread across New Mexico and Colorado.¹⁴ After legislation that would have allowed the government to buy the land failed to reach the House Floor in the waning days of the 92nd Congress (1971–1973), Luján continued to voice his concern about the fate of what he called “some of the most

scenic areas of the United States.”¹⁵ In the 93rd Congress (1973–1975), Luján introduced his own measure to authorize the acquisition of the Vermejo Ranch. Although the House never voted on his bill, Luján’s resolve to reserve wilderness land for public use became a hallmark of his career. One of Luján’s crowning achievements in the House was the passage of his New Mexico Wilderness Act in 1980. For two years, he worked to balance competing interests involved in incorporating more than 600,000 acres of land in New Mexico into the National Wilderness Preservation System. “Every effort has been made in it to satisfy the interests of everyone involved from the mining interests to the timber interests, from the cattlemen to the conservationists,” Luján said. Later the New Mexico Representative called the new wilderness areas “one of the most complete packages in the United States.”¹⁶

Despite these conservation efforts, Luján earned a reputation as an advocate for opening federal lands to recreation and commerce because he frequently supported increased mining, grazing, and logging on federal lands, including areas in New Mexico. Criticized by environmental groups that believed he valued business interests over conservation, Luján insisted he wanted “a balance between preservation and development.”¹⁷

In 1981 Luján’s interest in developing natural resources shifted temporarily when he learned that the Department of the Interior planned to lease 700 acres of New Mexico wilderness for oil and gas development. Furious that Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt and President Ronald W. Reagan had not informed him of their intention, Luján introduced legislation to prohibit further leases of wilderness area for development.¹⁸ Not wanting to lose an important Republican ally on the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, Watt attempted to make amends by proposing to ban federal mineral leasing until 2000, but exceptions that would open certain wilderness areas to development without congressional approval made the proposal objectionable to Luján, who responded by introducing the Wilderness Protection Act of 1982. “Everyone, even the hardliners, oppose[s] drilling in the wilderness,” Luján observed. “This is just recognizing the

fact that nobody wants it and putting it into writing.”¹⁹ Luján’s bill, H.R. 6542, passed the House on August 12, 1982, but failed to reach a vote in the Senate.

Aside from his disagreement with Watt, Luján advocated additional exploration and development of nuclear energy during his time as Ranking Member of the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee. Concerned that “frivolous actions” by states would “impede the progress of a major Federal program,” Luján proposed an amendment to the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982 that would allow either the House or the Senate—rather than both chambers—to override a state’s objection to an interim facility to store nuclear waste. The New Mexico Representative contended that his amendment would “achieve a proper balance” between states’ rights and the need to develop a national solution for the disposal of nuclear waste.²⁰ Ultimately, the House narrowly defeated his amendment.²¹ Luján worked closely for more than a decade with Interior and Insular Affairs Chairman Morris Udall of Arizona on the issue of nuclear waste disposal. Udall, a Democrat, praised his Republican colleague for avoiding partisanship.²²

Early in his House career, Luján promised to focus on constituent service and the needs of his congressional district. “I think of myself more as a nuts and bolts type of individual rather than trying to push some federal program with far-reaching effects,” Luján noted.²³ As the Representative of a district with high levels of structural unemployment, especially in the rural northern counties, he supported legislation to extend tax credits to businesses that would come to economically deprived states like New Mexico. Luján’s district included several Indian reservations. Throughout his tenure, Luján supported tribal sovereignty and sponsored numerous laws to improve the lives of Native Americans in his state.²⁴ Like most Western Congressmen (of both parties), Luján sought to protect local water rights and opposed what he viewed as excessive federal control over New Mexico’s water resources.²⁵

During his time in office, Luján embraced fiscal conservatism and supported a balanced budget. The Congressman saw his fiscal agenda as vital to the country’s

economic well-being, believing that excessive federal spending would lead to dangerous levels of inflation. Since Luján generally favored military appropriations, he advocated cuts in discretionary domestic spending. He also argued that economic growth would result only from reduced taxes and the elimination of excessive federal regulations.²⁶ Luján also had a philosophical reason to reduce federal spending. “This dependence on Government,” he contended, “is a result of years of conditioning during which that very Government was too fast to try to solve every problem any individual, city, county or State might have.”²⁷ In the end, the Congressman believed he failed to implement the fiscal aspect of his agenda. “I went there to balance the budget,” Luján said after announcing his retirement in 1988. “In 20 years we haven’t done that.”²⁸

Luján’s regional focus and attention to his district were evident at the polls during the 1970s; although he was opposed by several prominent New Mexican Democratic candidates, he managed to win re-election by comfortable margins.²⁹ But in 1980, Luján’s bid for a seventh term in the House was unexpectedly challenged by the former executive director of the state Democratic Party, Bill Richardson. Despite his lack of elective experience, Richardson ran an aggressive, well-financed campaign, attacking Luján’s voting and attendance record and targeting Hispanic voters (he spoke Spanish and was Mexican American).³⁰ Luján touted his seniority, committee work, and focus on the district. “I believe my record of service to my constituents is unmatched in the Congress,” he said.³¹ Luján defeated Richardson by a razor-thin margin, with 51 percent of the vote, though Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan easily bested incumbent President James Earl (Jimmy) Carter in the state.³² Luján blamed his close call on complacency, saying, “It had been too easy before. It won’t happen again.”³³

Viewed by Democrats as vulnerable because of the tight race in 1980, Luján also had to contend with redistricting before the next election. A population increase necessitated the creation of a third congressional district for New Mexico. The legislature created a new, heavily Democratic

district in northern New Mexico that included the state capital, Santa Fe.³⁴ Luján's new constituency was centered in Albuquerque and its immediate suburbs, an area that had seen considerable development of the aerospace, technology, and military industries after World War II. Despite the district's more favorable makeup, Luján encountered another tough Democratic challenge: Jan Hartke, the treasurer of New Mexico and the son of former Indiana Senator Vance Hartke.³⁵ But Luján had learned from the mistakes of his re-election bid in 1980, in which the incumbent had not even hired a campaign manager. He directed a well-financed, energetic campaign and defeated Hartke, winning 52 percent of the vote. In his remaining re-election bids, Luján earned 65 percent of the vote in 1984 and 71 percent in 1986.³⁶

In 1985 Luján gave up his position as Ranking Republican on the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee to become the Ranking Republican on the Science and Technology Committee. He retained this position during the 99th and 100th Congresses (1985–1989).³⁷ A member of the Science and Technology panel since the 95th Congress (1977–1979), Luján recognized that the committee's work was increasingly meaningful in his newly drawn district. With his constituency shifting from a rural to an urban base and Albuquerque's growing emphasis on technology, Luján's position as Ranking Member on the Science and Technology Committee became an even more effective tool he could use to serve his district. Issues associated with nuclear development and energy were particularly important to central New Mexico. The Los Alamos National Laboratory was founded in 1942 to coordinate the development of an atomic bomb during World War II. After the war, the lab, which played a key role in the creation of the hydrogen bomb and other Cold War weapons, employed thousands of people and became vital to New Mexico's economy.

Luján's new prominence on the Science and Technology Committee also helped deflect criticism of what some perceived as a parochial focus at the expense of national issues.³⁸ Previously a steadfast supporter of the American space program, Luján had begun in the mid-1980s to

question the direction and management of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and he pushed for more congressional oversight.³⁹ On January 28, 1986, the New Mexico Congressman watched the televised launch of the space shuttle *Challenger* in his House office with NASA's acting administrator, William Graham. Devastated by the shuttle's explosion and the loss of the seven astronauts on board, Luján became a leading critic of NASA during investigations of the tragic accident. "I think we have been too cozy over the years with NASA," he remarked. "We never really questioned what it is that they were doing."⁴⁰ Because he was knowledgeable about and interested in the space program, Luján was one of four Members of Congress (two Representatives and two Senators) who served as advisers to the National Commission on Space, a panel created before the *Challenger* disaster to develop long-term U.S. policy on space.⁴¹

During his first term in House, Luján served on the Mexico-United States Interparliamentary Group, an organization meant to promote dialogue between legislators in the two countries. He was also one of the five founding members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, which was created in 1976. The only Republican member of the caucus, Luján often found himself in a difficult position: having to choose between the policies of the Reagan administration and those of his Hispanic colleagues in the House. The New Mexico Republican defended the President, saying Reagan's "personal philosophy of working hard to succeed" appealed to Hispanic Americans.⁴² Luján also criticized the Democratic Party's attitude toward Latinos. "Democrats tend to divide us and say, 'You poor unfortunate things,'" Luján commented. "'You were born Hispanic and you can't help it, but we have a government program that will help you.' I think it's demeaning."⁴³ But on occasion, Luján joined his Democratic colleagues on the caucus. He repeatedly spoke out against immigration reform proposals which could lead to discrimination against Spanish-speaking Americans. "Building a 'tortilla curtain' certainly is not the answer," he argued. Luján believed that identification cards, proposed to curb illegal immigration, were "offensive" and detrimental to the

core American value of freedom.⁴⁴ In 1984 and 1986, Luján broke ranks with many Western Republicans, who wanted to revise federal immigration laws. Concerned that attempts to target illegal immigration would lead employers to discriminate against Hispanics, Luján worked with other Hispanic Members to defeat the legislation.⁴⁵

In January 1988, Luján surprised political observers by announcing his decision to retire from the House at the end of the 100th Congress (1987–1989). The New Mexico Representative, who underwent coronary surgery in 1986, said health concerns played no part in his decision. “Twenty years is long enough,” he mused. “It is time to come home.”⁴⁶

But Luján did not rule out resuming his political career. Frequently considered for a Cabinet position under President Reagan, Luján also made headlines as a candidate for President George H. W. Bush’s Cabinet.⁴⁷ On December 22, 1988, President-elect Bush nominated Luján as Secretary of the Interior; the House veteran sailed through the Senate confirmation with minimal dissent. Luján retained his Cabinet position throughout President Bush’s term in office, continuing to seek a balance between developing natural resources and preserving the environment. “We can do both,” he said. “We do not have to choose between them.”⁴⁸

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, “Manuel Luján, Jr.,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

Ralph Nader Congress Project, *Citizens Look at Congress: Manuel Luján, Jr., Republican Representative from New Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: Grossman Publishers, 1972).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

University of New Mexico Libraries, Center for Southwest Research (Albuquerque). *Papers*: 1971–1982, 24 cubic feet. The congressional papers of Manuel Luján include legislative files from the 92nd Congress (1971–1973) to the 97th Congress (1981–1983). These files normally contain printed copies of bills, revised and amended bills, resolutions, and occasionally other documents relative to a specific bill or piece of legislation. There are also some special files of legislative research that were established by Manuel

Luján and his staff to provide background information on pending bills and social issues and topics including the Vermejo Park Ranch. The files contain a great deal of information on wilderness legislation and review, specifically on the Roadside Area Review and Evaluation (RARE II). Also included are constituent letters and other documents pertaining to the Equal Rights Amendment and background information on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Chapel near Eagle’s Nest, Colfax County, NM, also known as the Vietnam Veterans Peace and Brotherhood Chapel. Finally, Manuel Luján maintained a few files that reveal his stands and opinions on various legislative items. A finding aid is available in the repository and online.

Videocassette: 1983, one videocassette. An interview with Manuel Luján by Harold Rhodes.

Papers: Governor David Cargo Papers, 1967–1970, 86 linear feet. Other authors include Manuel Luján.

Papers: Governor Bruce King Papers, 1971–1974, 114 linear feet. Correspondents include Manuel Luján.

NOTES

- 1 John Robertson, “Lujan’s Incumbency Looms over Hartke Campaign,” 10 October 1982, *Albuquerque Journal*: A1.
- 2 Luján describes his early education, childhood, and parents in an interview conducted by the University of Texas at El Paso. Manuel Luján Oral History Interview, Oscar J. Martínez, University of Texas—El Paso, Institute of Oral History: 1–2.
- 3 In the 1944 election for one of the two At-Large New Mexico House seats, Luján, Sr., placed third out of four contenders, more than 14,000 votes behind second-place finisher and longtime New Mexico Congressman Antonio Fernández. “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 4 Mary Wieggers, “Home from the Hill,” 8 June 1969, *Washington Post*: 149; *Congressional Directory*, 97th Cong., (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981): 112; Martin Tolchin, “Manuel Lujan Jr.,” 23 December 1988, *New York Times*: A25.
- 5 David C. Williams, “Lujan Qualifications,” 16 August 1968, *Albuquerque Journal*: A-5. Luján provides background on his pre-congressional political experience in an interview conducted in 1975; Luján, Oral History Interview, University of Texas—El Paso: 9–11.
- 6 “4 Democrats, 6 Republicans Seek Morris’ Post,” 26 August 1968, *Albuquerque Journal*: A-8; “Morris Wins; Walker Nips Sen. Runnels,” 28 August 1968, *Albuquerque Journal*: A-15.
- 7 “Lujan Scores Morris’ Use of Helicopter,” 9 October 1968, *Albuquerque Journal*: A-11; Bob Beier, “Morris Cites His Seniority; Lujan Questions Its Value,” 13 October 1968, *Albuquerque Journal*: C-1.

- 8 “Same Old Song’ Laid to Morris,” 20 August 1968, *Albuquerque Journal*: A-2.
- 9 Beier, “Morris Cites His Seniority; Lujan Questions Its Value”; Wilson Cliff, “Stable Government Urged by Chavez,” 19 September 1968, *Albuquerque Journal*: C-6.
- 10 Beier, “Morris Cites His Seniority.”
- 11 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 12 Ed Foreman represented a Texas congressional district in the 88th Congress (1963–1965).
- 13 “State’s Frosh Congressmen Sworn In,” 4 January 1969, *Albuquerque Journal*: B-8; “Lujan Gets House Boost,” 7 January 1969, *Albuquerque Journal*: A-2.
- 14 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess. (12 October 1972): 35636–35637.
- 15 “Scenic Area about Lost to Public,” 14 December 1972, *Washington Post*: H1.
- 16 *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 2nd sess. (21 November 1980): 30567; “Lujan’s Wilderness Plan Wins Approval of the House,” 22 November 1980, *Albuquerque Journal*: A-14. The New Mexico Wilderness Act of 1980 became Public Law 96-550 on December 19, 1980.
- 17 William Kronholm, “Washington Dateline,” 11 October 1983, Associated Press.
- 18 William Chapman, “West’s Docile Conservatives Rebel against Big Oil in Wilderness,” 7 February 1982, *Washington Post*: A21; *Politics in America, 1988* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1987): 988–989.
- 19 Dale Russakoff, “House Group Proposes Wilderness Leasing Ban,” 9 June 1982, *Washington Post*: A4.
- 20 *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (29 November 1982): 27779.
- 21 Judith Miller, “House Opens Debate on Settling National Policy on Nuclear Waste,” 30 November 1982, *New York Times*: B9; “House Adopts N-Waste Site Location Plan,” 1 December 1982, *Albuquerque Journal*: A-1.
- 22 Paul R. Wieck, “Space Program Draws Scrutiny of Congressman,” 5 January 1988, *Albuquerque Journal*: A-6.
- 23 Luján, Oral History Interview, University of Texas—El Paso: 22.
- 24 Ralph Nader Congress Project, *Citizens Look at Congress: Manuel Luján, Jr., Republican Representative from New Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: Grossman Publishers, 1972): 8; *Congressional Record*, House, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess. (26 July 1972): 25482.
- 25 *Politics in America, 1982* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1981): 791.
- 26 Richard Beer, “Lujan Launches Re-Election Drive,” 27 September 1980, *Albuquerque Journal*: B7.
- 27 “What You Should Expect of Congress: 28 Members Speak Out,” 10 November 1975, *U.S. News & World Report*: 35.
- 28 John Robertson, “Manuel Lujan Won’t Seek 11th Term,” 5 January 1988, *Albuquerque Journal*: 1.
- 29 *Politics in America, 1982*: 791.
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- 32 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 33 Denise Tessier, “Congress Expected to Pass N.M. Wilderness Bill,” 11 November 1980, *Albuquerque Journal*: A-9.
- 34 Bill Richardson, Luján’s opponent in the 1980 general election, won a seat in the newly created New Mexico district in 1982.
- 35 “New Mexico,” 3 November 1982, *Washington Post*: A31.
- 36 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>; “Lujan’s Incumbency Looms over Hartke Campaign.”
- 37 In the 100th Congress, the Science and Technology Committee became the Science, Space, and Technology Committee.
- 38 Catherine C. Robbins, “In Retiring, Rep. Lujan Puts New Mexico in Tumult,” 19 January 1988, *New York Times*: A18.
- 39 Gaylord Shaw and Rudy Abramson, “Serious Discord at Top Levels,” 2 March 1986, *Los Angeles Times*: 1; Wieck, “Space Program Draws Scrutiny of Congressman.”
- 40 “As Shuttle Inquiry Closes, Congress Is Set for Its Turn,” 9 June 1986, *New York Times*: A20.
- 41 *Politics in America, 1988*: 987; Lujan joined Representative Don Fuqua of Florida and Senators Slade Gorton of Washington and John Glenn of Ohio on the National Commission on Space, “The National Commission on Space,” <http://history.nasa.gov/painerep/appendix.html> (accessed 2 April 2012).
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- 43 Carla Hall, “Courting Hispanic Power,” 16 September 1983, *Washington Post*: D3.
- 44 “How the 1st District Candidates View the Key Issues,” 12 October 1980, *Albuquerque Journal*: B-5.
- 45 Nancy J. Schwetzler, “Immigration Bill Unites, Mobilizes House Hispanics,” 14 June 1984, *Baltimore Sun*: A1; *Politics in America, 1988*: 988–989.



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- 47 Kronholm, “Washington Dateline.”
- 48 Barbara Rosewicz, “Interior Secretary Nominee, Lujan, Sticks to Bush Vows,” 27 January 1989, *Wall Street Journal*: A4.