

Matthew G. Martínez

1929–2011

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
 DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA 1982–2000
 REPUBLICAN FROM CALIFORNIA 2000–2001

Matthew Martínez, whose career took him from East Los Angeles to Washington, won a special election to the U.S. House and later unseated a longtime incumbent, serving a total of 10 terms in Congress. Along the way, Martínez worked to address the education and labor concerns of his working-class district. “You know, a poor little ghetto kid from East Los Angeles standing in the hallowed halls of Congress—that’s got to be the American Dream,” Martínez said shortly after he was elected to the U.S. House.¹

One of nine children born to Matthew and Helen Martínez, Matthew Gilbert (Marty) Martínez was born February 14, 1929, in Walsenburg, Colorado. His father was a Texas-born coal miner of Mexican heritage. The family moved to East Los Angeles when Martínez was a year old.² He attended local public schools and later told the *New York Times* he left home at age 12 because his mother beat him. “I ran away from home, hid out, bummed off friends, stole milk and bread, and learned how to survive,” he said.³ An older brother took him in and convinced him to return to school, and Martínez eventually graduated from Los Angeles’ Roosevelt High School. From 1947 to 1950, he served in the U.S. Marine Corps, attaining the rank of private first class. In 1956, using the GI Bill to study business, he earned a certificate of competence from the Los Angeles Trade Technical School. Martínez married Elvira Yorba, and they raised five children: Matthew, Diane, Susan, Michael, and Carol Ann.⁴ He opened a furniture upholstery shop in the 1950s, moving the business from Hollywood to Monterey Park in the Eastern Los Angeles suburbs. He also worked as a building contractor. Later, Martínez and his wife separated for many years, divorcing in the early 2000s. Martínez subsequently married Maxine Grant.⁵

Martínez’s political career began at a Los Angeles

hamburger stand, where he gathered with neighbors to discuss issues affecting Monterey Park. He was a member of the local Rotary Club, and during his years as a business owner he switched his political affiliation from Democratic to Republican. From 1971 to 1974, he served on the Monterey Park planning committee and embarked on a career in elective politics. Martínez changed his affiliation back to the Democratic Party shortly after winning a seat on the Monterey Park city council. He served on the council for six consecutive years, two of them (1974–1975) as mayor of Monterey Park. In 1977 he was appointed to the California Solid Waste Management Board.

In 1980 Martínez launched an uphill campaign against well-regarded California assemblyman Jack Fenton, an incumbent Democrat who represented a swath of suburbs east of Los Angeles for nearly two decades. Martínez, who maintained that Fenton had failed to keep in touch with the changing district, received an unexpected boost weeks before the Democratic primary; California Assemblyman Howard L. Berman of Los Angeles threw his support behind Martínez in a campaign blitz that propelled him to victory.⁶ In the general election, Martínez prevailed with 72 percent of the vote in the heavily Democratic district.⁷

If Los Angeles’ political machine propelled him into office, Martínez’s decision to work with local Hispanic-American activists kept him there. He regained his proficiency in Spanish, which he had spoken as a child but abandoned because the Los Angeles public schools discouraged bilingualism.⁸ At times Martínez was impatient with activists who worked outside the established political system. As a freshman state assemblyman, for instance, he assailed Californios for Fair Representation—a group of younger Latino activists pushing to create majority-Hispanic districts—for “a



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total lack of sophistication” after they walked out of a reapportionment hearing in Sacramento.⁹

During his brief stint in the California assembly, Martínez compiled a notable record, serving on the agriculture and local government committees. He authored bills to promote safeguards for oil recycling and pharmacy prescriptions; both were signed into law. He also helped push through a measure reinvigorating a plan for the long-stalled completion of the Long Beach Freeway and promoted measures to curb gang violence.¹⁰

In 1982, when six-term Democratic incumbent U.S. Representative George E. Danielson resigned after being appointed to a state appellate court, Martínez declared his candidacy for the seat. Danielson, who had served five years as Deputy Majority Whip in the U.S. House, represented a district that overlapped a large section of Martínez’s assembly district. Meanwhile, a redistricting plan backed by the leader of California’s delegation in the U.S. House, Phil Burton of San Francisco, had created two new districts east of Los Angeles—California’s 30th and 34th Districts—with the intention of getting more Hispanics elected to Congress. The new 30th District ran from the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains in its far northeastern corner, swept southwestward along the valley east of Los Angeles, and enveloped towns including Alhambra, Montebello, Monterey Park, Bell Gardens, and El Monte. Some 54 percent of the population was of Hispanic descent, and the district had a healthy ratio of registered Democrats (nearly two to one). With his wide name recognition, Martínez enjoyed the support of many of the state’s leading Hispanic politicians and civic organizations.¹¹

Martínez faced an onslaught of opponents in the June 8 Democratic primary to decide the candidate for both the special election to fill the rest of Danielson’s term as well as for the 1982 general election. Although former Danielson aide Dennis S. Kazarian came within roughly 400 votes of defeating him in the primary, Martínez prevailed before facing Republican lawyer Ralph R. Ramirez in the special election, which would be based on the old district boundaries. With the low voter turnout typical of special elections, Martínez repelled Ramirez’s challenge by a

margin of less than 1,000 votes—winning 51 to 49 percent in the July 13 contest. He was sworn in as a Member of the 97th Congress (1981–1983) on July 15, 1982, and was assigned to the Veterans’ Affairs and the Education and Labor Committees.¹²

The redistricting plan that gave Martínez a seat in the 97th Congress ensured that he would have a difficult time returning in the 98th Congress (1983–1985). Part of Burton’s plan to boost the number of Latino candidates for Congress involved disassembling the district of his longtime political foe Republican Representative John H. Rousselot, a one-time John Birch Society member and an eight-term House veteran. With his old district redrawn, Rousselot was faced with taking on a friend and fellow Republican in a neighboring district or challenging the up-and-coming Martínez.¹³ Minutes after Martínez was sworn into the House on July 15, 1982, Rousselot challenged him to a series of 16 debates in the major towns in the new district. Martínez demurred, saying, “Rousselot’s whole tactic is to bulldoze somebody and buffalo them, and he started in right away. I’ve got a surprise for him. He’s going to know what it’s like to be bowled over.”¹⁴

Martínez was a formidable opponent, strolling through the precincts handing out campaign literature while portraying Rousselot as a carpetbagger who was unfamiliar with most of the district. Martínez was “rough around the edges” in the words of a Democratic activist, occasionally offering blunt assessments that his campaign staff scrambled to qualify.¹⁵ But while Rousselot emphasized his experience and his service to the district’s many Hispanic voters—being photographed with Los Angeles Dodgers ace pitcher Fernando Valenzuela and spending campaign funds for Spanish lessons—Martínez played down ethnic politics. “I’m not a Hispanic candidate,” he said. “I’m an American candidate.”¹⁶

To match Rousselot’s spending during the campaign, Martínez again secured the backing of California’s Democratic machine alongside party superstars like Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts.¹⁷ The race centered on Social Security reform, and Martínez attacked Rousselot for advocating cost-cutting measures during a

weak economy. The high unemployment rate early in the Ronald W. Reagan administration made Rousselot's task even more difficult. Martínez prevailed 54 to 46 percent on Election Day as California Democrats picked up six new seats; overall, Democrats added 27 seats to their already solid House majority. In the 1984 primary, Martínez beat back a challenge by Gladys C. Danielson—the wife of the previous Representative of the 30th District—and defeated Republican Richard Gomez, 52 to 43 percent, with a third-party candidate taking the remaining 5 percent of the vote. In subsequent general elections he won by approximately 60 percentage points.¹⁸

Martínez left the Veterans' Affairs Committee after one term but retained his post on the Education and Labor Committee for his entire House career. He served as chairman of its Subcommittee on Employment Opportunities from the 99th through the 101st Congresses (1985–1991). He served as chairman of the Human Resources Subcommittee for the 102nd and 103rd Congresses (1991–1995) until Republicans gained the majority after the 1994 elections. He also served at various times on the Committees on Small Business, Government Operations, Foreign Affairs, and Transportation and Infrastructure as well as on the Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families. Additionally, he joined the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and served as its chairman for a portion of the 99th Congress (1985–1987).¹⁹

Throughout his career, Martínez was a strong advocate of the nation's public schools. In 1987 he strenuously opposed a proposal to divert funds for bilingual education to other programs for non-native English speakers, such as immersion. "You shouldn't dilute the bilingual education budget for what should be another federal program," he insisted.²⁰ "I am an immersion product. Fifty percent of students who started with me failed by the time they were in ninth or tenth grade."²¹ Martínez was among the minority opposition to a 1997 effort by Republicans to authorize tuition vouchers to help low-income parents send their children to private schools. "Just like we abandoned the poor parts of our cities ... this bill will leave our public schools in ruin in search of a panacea for just a few," he declared.²²

Martínez also advocated for America's working class. In the 99th and 100th Congresses, he drafted legislation that prohibited private employers from making lie detector tests a condition for employment. Calling this practice "voodoo craft," Martínez claimed lie detectors had become "judge and jury and God in determining workers' fate."²³ The measure became law in 1988. Martínez also opposed a proposal to permit a subminimum training wage for minority groups and youth, characterizing this as "a way to get around paying the minimum wage to minorities and those who are at the very bottom of the employment ladder."²⁴ After the Republicans gained the House majority in 1995, he argued for a 90 cent increase in the minimum wage and opposed legislation that would have allowed businesses to save money by offering compensatory time instead of overtime pay.²⁵

He also opposed the Teamwork for Employees and Managers (TEAM) Act because of a provision that would have undercut the power of labor unions, and his concern for the American worker led him to vote against the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993.²⁶ Martínez asserted, "Free trade is the best course for America as we try to maintain our economic leadership," but he refused to support NAFTA because he believed it lacked provisions to retain American jobs and protect American workers.²⁷ Martínez was one of 21 Representatives from the California congressional delegation to vote against the measure.

Martínez championed several significant pieces of legislation in the early 1990s. He sponsored the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act (first passed in 1965) in the 102nd Congress, including sustained funding for Meals on Wheels and the Administration on Aging, which implemented the act's programs.²⁸ In the 103rd Congress, he served as floor manager for the passage of H.R. 5194, to reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (first passed in 1974). The bill also created new programs for gang intervention and established the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which provided temporary shelter, support services, and counseling for "those young people, who have been cast

off in a sea of distrust and exploitation.”²⁹ He was the prime sponsor of the National Community Service Act (P.L. 103-82)—a priority of the William J. (Bill) Clinton administration—which offered educational incentives for community service and created AmeriCorps, a network of service-oriented programs modeled on the Civilian Conservation Corps of Martínez’s youth.³⁰ “This [program provides] the opportunity for young people to earn and learn—to develop a sense of community and have confidence in themselves and others,” he said.³¹ Though pared down from the original version, the bill was signed into law by President Clinton on September 21, 1993.³²

Usually a reliable liberal vote on economic and social issues, Martínez diverged from his party in several key areas. A supporter of abortion rights, he advocated allowing privately funded abortions at overseas military hospitals and allowing federal employee health plans to pay for abortions. He also supported requiring states to fund abortions through Medicaid for victims of rape or incest or to save a woman’s life.³³ However, he supported a ban on “partial-birth” abortion and was one of 70 Democrats to vote to override Clinton’s veto of the legislation. As a member of the National Rifle Association, he opposed passage of the Brady Bill—which required a five-day waiting period before the purchase of a handgun—but supported the 1994 assault weapons ban.³⁴ He also adopted a conservative position on the environment, opposing U.S. involvement in the U.N. conservation program while criticizing the Environmental Protection Agency for overregulation.³⁵

In 2000 Martínez was challenged by state senator Hilda Solis, whose district overlapped with roughly 97 percent of his. Solis called Martínez’s votes on abortion, gun control, and environmental regulations “dramatically out of touch.”³⁶ She received endorsements from EMILY’s list—a group dedicated to electing pro-choice women to Congress—and from significant labor organizations.³⁷ “They don’t mean a damn thing,” Martínez said of Solis’ endorsements. “When I first ran for state Assembly in 1980, every single union endorsed the incumbent and I still won.”³⁸ Still, Solis outraised Martínez four to one, and chipped away at his political backing, winning the support

of many in California’s congressional delegation.³⁹ Others remained neutral.⁴⁰ Martínez garnered just 28.5 percent of the primary vote to Solis’s 62.2 percent.⁴¹

In his remaining months in the House, Martínez aligned himself with Republicans, opposing the Democrats on many votes. On July 27, 2000, Martínez formally switched political parties. “I didn’t leave the Democrat Party, the Democratic Party left me,” he said.⁴² “I no longer want to be part of a party where loyalty is not rewarded with support.”⁴³ Noting that he agreed with many Republican positions, including tax cut proposals, he said “Republicans were more understanding of American values.”⁴⁴ Despite vowing to run as a Republican in 2002, Martínez returned to private life.⁴⁵ He died in Fredericksburg, Virginia, on October 15, 2011.

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, “Matthew G. Martínez,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 Kristina Lindgren, “Martinez Wins 30th District Race: Becomes 3rd California Latino Elected to Sit in U.S. House,” 15 July 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: A28.
- 2 Dennis Hevesi, “Matthew G. Martinez, 82, Ex-Democratic Lawmaker,” 27 October 2011, *New York Times*: A29; William McPhillips, “‘Used to Achieving’: Martinez Learning Fast in Assembly,” 23 August 1981, *Los Angeles Times*: SG1.
- 3 Nadine Brozen, “Teens at the Covenant House Are Ready to Talk about Their Earlier Travails,” 11 July 1992, *New York Times*: 20.
- 4 “Matthew Gilbert Martinez,” *Marquis Who’s Who*, 2003. On the GI Bill, see McPhillips, “‘Used to Achieving’: Martinez Learning Fast in Assembly.”
- 5 T. Rees Shapiro, “California Congressman Left Democrats for GOP,” 21 October 2011, *Washington Post*: B6.
- 6 McPhillips, “‘Used to Achieving’: Martinez Learning Fast in Assembly.”
- 7 See, for example, Alan Maltun, “Democrat Martinez’s Political Rise Is Fast,” 24 October 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: SE1. Berman’s support was part of a larger effort to unseat Assembly Speaker Leo T. McCarthy of San Francisco. Fenton had long been a McCarthy supporter in the state assembly. A portion of Martínez’s constituency resented the fact that he had unseated the well-regarded Fenton,



- and nurtured his political machine in the process.
- 8 McPhillips, “‘Used to Achieving’: Martinez Learning Fast in Assembly.”
 - 9 Kenneth Reich and Henry Mendoza, “Latinos Push for Political Power: But Even with 19% of State Population, Task Remains Difficult,” 17 August 1981, *Los Angeles Times*: B3.
 - 10 See, for example, Maltum, “Democrat Martinez’s Political Rise Is Fast”; McPhillips, “‘Used to Achieving’: Martinez Learning Fast in Assembly.”
 - 11 *Almanac of American Politics, 1984* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal, Inc., 1983) 146–147; Kristina Lindgren, “Assemblyman Martinez Will Run for Congress,” 11 February 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: LB1.
 - 12 *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (19 August 1982): 22248. During Martínez’s tenure, the name of the Education and Labor Committee was changed to Economic and Educational Opportunities (1995–1997) and Education and the Workforce (1997–2007).
 - 13 For more on the effects of redistricting in Southern California, see Ellen Hume, “Plan to Ensure Congress Seat for Latino May Be Backfiring,” 18 April 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: B1.
 - 14 Kristina Lindgren, “Martinez Sworn In, Gets First Challenge,” 18 July 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: SG9.
 - 15 Maltum, “Democrat Martinez’s Political Rise Is Fast”; Alan Maltum, “Martinez–Rousselot Match Lives Up to Its Billing,” 3 October 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: SE1.
 - 16 Jay Mathews, “A Gringo’s Gringo Moves His Border South,” 15 October 1982, *Washington Post*: A5. According to this news report, Rousselot also joined the Hispanic Caucus, apparently as a dues-paying (but nonvoting) associate member.
 - 17 For revised spending totals see, *Almanac of American Politics, 1986* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 1985): 172. For campaign coverage and issues, see for example, Robert J. Gore, “Bitter Campaign by Congressmen Dominates Races,” 31 October 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: SE1; Maltum, “Martinez–Rousselot Match Lives Up to Its Billing”; Alan Maltum, “Candidates Debate Jobless Issue: Martinez, Rousselot Also Clash over Social Security,” 17 October 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: SG1; Ellen Hume, “Scramble for Congress Grows Madder,” 24 May 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: B3.
 - 18 *Politics in America, 1998* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1997): 176; Tim Curran, “Rep. Martinez Will Run for L.A. Supervisor; Rep. Hopkins to Join Race for Ky. Governor,” 19 November 1990, *Roll Call*: n.p.; Tim Curran, “Martinez Pulls Out of Contest for L.A. Board of Supervisors,” 29 November 1990, *Roll Call*: n.p. Election results in several *Democratic primaries* indicated Martínez might be vulnerable to a strong primary challenger. He went from winning the 1986 primary with 81 percent to securing the 1994 nomination with only 55 percent. Nonetheless, he was unopposed in 1996 and won the 1998 primary with 67 percent of the vote.
 - 19 *Almanac of American Politics, 1988–1996* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, Inc., 1987–1995). During his career, the name of the Government Operations Committee was changed to Government Reform and Oversight (1995–1999) and Government Reform (1999–2001); Foreign Affairs was changed to International Relations (1995–2007).
 - 20 Jill Lawrence, “Specialists Oppose Administration Plan to Ease Requirements,” 24 March 1987, Associated Press.
 - 21 *Politics in America, 2000* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1999): 169; *Politics in America, 1998*: 174.
 - 22 Rene Sanchez, “House Votes against Bill to Provide School Vouchers,” 5 November 1997, *Washington Post*: A8. Martínez was later appointed by Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt to an 18-member National Educational Goals Panel to monitor progress on education goals initially set by President George H. W. Bush and the nation’s governors. See *Politics in America, 2000*: 169.
 - 23 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (12 March 1986): 4515–4516; Larry Margasak, “House Votes to Restrict Lie-Detector Use,” 12 March 1986, Associated Press.
 - 24 *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1989): 185; Gene Grabowski, “Rite of Summer: Talk in Congress about Subminimum Wage for Teens,” 27 May 1985, Associated Press.
 - 25 *Politics in America, 1998*: 175.
 - 26 Ibid; David R. Sands, “Worker-Participation Bill Tests Unions’ Clout,” 9 February 1995, *Washington Times*: B7.
 - 27 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (16 November 1993): 29319.
 - 28 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 1st sess. (26 June 1991): 16511; *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 1st sess. (12 September 1991): H6468–6469; *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (9 April 1992): H2629–H2630; *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (22 September 1992): H9000.
 - 29 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (3 August 1992): H7246; *Almanac of American Politics, 1994* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, Inc., 1993): 165; *Almanac of American Politics, 1998* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, Inc., 1997): 165.
 - 30 *Almanac of American Politics, 1996* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, Inc., 1995): 174.
 - 31 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (13 July 1993): 15434. See also *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (13 July 1993): H4532–4533; *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (20 May 1993): E1325.



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- 33 *Politics in America*, 1998: 174.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 *Politics in America*, 2000: 170.
- 36 John Mercurio, “Martinez’s Last Stand? Primary Threat Divides Hispanics, Could End 20-Year House Career,” 20 January 2000, *Roll Call*: n.p.
- 37 Mary Lynn Jones, “Rep. Martinez Facing Tough Primary in Los Angeles CD,” 1 March 2000, *The Hill*: 13.
- 38 Richard Simon and Antonio Olivo, “Two Incumbent Congressmen Facing Tough Challenges; 31st District: For Martinez, the Fight Is in the Primary—and in the Family,” 23 February 2000, *Los Angeles Times*: B1.
- 39 Jones, “Rep. Martinez Facing Tough Primary in Los Angeles CD”; *Almanac of American Politics*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, Inc., 2001): 242; John Mercurio, “California Feinstein Won’t Back Martinez in Primary,” 24 January 2000, *Roll Call*; Simon and Olivo, “Two Incumbent Congressmen Facing Tough Challenges.”
- 40 Simon and Olivo, “Two Incumbent Congressmen Facing Tough Challenges”; Mercurio, “California Feinstein Won’t Back Martinez in Primary.”
- 41 *Politics in America*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2001): 125.
- 42 “Nicholson Applauds Rep. Martinez’s Move, 478th Elected Official to Flee Clinton/Gore Party,” 27 July 2000, PR Newswire.
- 43 “Martinez Joins GOP,” 27 July 2000, *Bulletin’s Frontrunner*.
- 44 “Martinez Joins GOP.”
- 45 Ben Pershing, “Martinez Gets Star Treatment,” 7 August 2000, *Roll Call*.



“NO POLITICIAN, NO MATTER
WHAT HE TELLS YOU, KNOWS
EVERYTHING. THE ONLY THING
HE CAN DO IS KEEP AN OPEN
MIND AND LEARN.”

Matthew G. Martínez
Los Angeles Times, October 24, 1982