



Image courtesy of the Member

Joe Baca

1947–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1999–
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

Joe Baca won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1999 in a special election to replace one of California's longest-serving Members. Since then, the former semi-pro baseball player has become a primary advocate to diversify America's business leadership and has helped procure funding for institutions working for the country's minority students.

Born the youngest of 15 children in Belen, New Mexico, Baca moved to Barstow, California, at age four. The son of a Santa Fe Railroad worker, Baca shined shoes and worked as a janitor before serving as a paratrooper during the Vietnam era. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in sociology from California State University, Los Angeles, in 1971 and worked for a telephone company until 1989, when he and his wife Barbara became co-owners of a travel agency.¹ The couple raised four children: Joe, Jr.; Jeremy; Natalie; and Jennifer. Baca's son Joe Baca, Jr., was elected to the Rialto city council after two years in the California state assembly.²

Joe Baca's political career began in 1979 when he was elected to the San Bernardino community college board. He spent the next 14 years on the board, waging two unsuccessful campaigns for a seat in the California state assembly in 1988 and 1990. When he won an assembly seat in 1992, Democrats in Sacramento quickly placed Baca in the leadership, electing him speaker pro tempore in 1995.³ "Some people tell me I'm too small to do some things," Baca once remarked. "But I'm not too small. I just have to work harder than the bigger guys."⁴ Two years later he nearly challenged 18-term Democratic U.S. Congressman George E. Brown, Jr., for California's 42nd District before winning a spot in the state senate in 1998. Brown died only a few months later, and Baca won the Democratic primary and then the special election in a November runoff to fill the remainder of Brown's unexpired term in the U.S. House during the 106th Congress (1999–2001).⁵ He won again in 2000 for the full term to the 107th Congress (2001–2003). Baca now represents California's 43rd District—located in southwestern California at the foot of the San Bernardino Mountains—and since his first victory more than a decade ago he has cruised to victories in the general elections.⁶

Since his swearing-in, Baca has served on four House committees: Agriculture (106th–112th Congresses, 1999–2013), Science (106th–107th Congresses, 1999–2003), Financial Services (108th–112th Congresses, 2003–2013), and Resources (108th Congress, 2003–2005, and in the 110th–111th Congresses,

2007–2011, after it was renamed Natural Resources). In 2007 when the Democrats gained control of the House, Baca became chairman of the Agriculture Committee's Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry.⁷

Baca's working-class roots have made him a champion both of organized labor and of the farmers throughout his district. His legislative interests have spanned everything from health care, to education, to transportation. Baca has used his position on the Agriculture Committee, to support the interests of low-income farmers and has worked to make Agriculture Department programs more accessible to minority growers.⁸ He has used his seat on Natural Resources to help decontaminate groundwater throughout the Santa Anna River Watershed.⁹ As a member of the Financial Services Committee, Baca has advocated for homeowners threatened by foreclosure.¹⁰

Baca is a member of numerous caucuses, including the Blue Dog Coalition and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC). Regarded as one of the more influential Hispanic legislators, Baca moved to the top of the CHC, serving as vice chairman in 2005 and as chairman in 2007 and 2008. Immigration has become a signal issue for Baca in the House, and he has pushed for thorough reform of the country's immigration and naturalization policies.¹¹ Also, throughout his tenure in Washington and in the CHC, Baca has supported access to bilingual education, helped ensure the continuation of food stamps and dietary programs for legal immigrants, and assisted in procuring millions in funding for educational institutions that serve large populations of Hispanic students.¹² "I'm a fighter," Baca has noted, "because I know what it's like to struggle."¹³

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Joe Baca," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 *Politics in America, 2002* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2001): 144–145; Lauren V. Burke and Mary Shaffrey, "Rep. Baca Joins the 106th," 1 December 1999, *The Hill*: 12.
- 2 "Official Biography of Joe Baca," <http://www.house.gov/baca/meetjoe/bio.htm> (accessed 16 March 2010); "Mayor Pro Tem: Joe Baca, Jr.," http://www.ci.rialto.ca.us/citycouncil_285.php (accessed 25 May 2010).
- 3 Patrick J. McDonnell, "State Assembly/San Bernardino and Riverside; Diversity of Districts Helps Make Contests Competitive," 24 May 1992, *Los Angeles Times*: B2.
- 4 Jerry Gillam, "Eaves' Foe Looks to Willie Brown for Help," 7 May 1988, *Los Angeles Times*: 32.
- 5 David Wert, "Battle to Succeed Brown Taking Shape," 30 July 1999, *Press Enterprise*: B4; *Politics in America, 2002*: 145.
- 6 *Politics in America, 2012* (Washington, D.C.: CQ-Roll Call, Inc., 2011): 146.
- 7 Garrison Nelson and Charles Stewart III, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1993–2010* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011): 568; Claire Vitucci, "Inland Members Get House Assignments," 10 January 2001, *Press Enterprise*: B6.
- 8 Onell R. Soto, "Adjournment Vote Note on Baca's Agenda," 19 November 1999, *Press Enterprise*: B6; *Almanac of American Politics, 2010* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, 2009): 248.
- 9 *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2005): 155; *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2007): 155.
- 10 *Almanac of American Politics, 2010*: 248; *Almanac of American Politics, 2006* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 2005): 283, 285.
- 11 *Politics in America, 2012*: 146.
- 12 "Official Biography of Joe Baca," <http://www.house.gov/baca/meetjoe/bio.htm> (accessed 16 March 2010); *Almanac of American Politics, 2004* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 2003): 275.
- 13 Official Biography of Joe Baca," <http://www.house.gov/baca/meetjoe/bio.htm> (accessed 16 March 2010); as quoted in *Politics in America, 2002*: 144.