



Image courtesy of the Member

José E. Serrano

1943–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1990–
DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

When José E. Serrano won election to the U.S. House of Representatives on March 20, 1990, he requested that his swearing-in be postponed until the 28th, since that was exactly 38 years to the day, since José, his mother, and his brother, Eli, arrived in New York City from Puerto Rico to join his father, who was working there. “Let the message go from here today to those children who live in the projects and to those children who are still on the street corners, that there is indeed a better tomorrow,” Serrano said after taking the oath of office.¹

José Enrique Serrano was born in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, on October 24, 1943, to José and Hipólita Serrano, but grew up in the Millbrook public housing project in the South Bronx. He graduated from Dodge Vocational High School in 1961 and served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps from 1964 to 1966.

Serrano spent his early career pushing to improve New York’s school system. He worked for the New York City Board of Education as a paraprofessional from 1969 to 1974, before running for and winning a seat in the New York State Assembly. Serrano served in Albany for 15 years (1975–1990), chairing the Education Committee from 1983 to 1990. In 1985 he waged an unsuccessful campaign for Bronx borough president, and he was denied an appointment to the position two years later.² When Democratic Representative Robert Garcia resigned from Congress in January 1990, Serrano immediately entered the race to fill the vacancy. Predominantly Hispanic, New York’s 16th Congressional District is located in the South Bronx between the Harlem and Bronx Rivers.³ Serrano handily defeated his Republican opponent in the special election that year, winning 92 percent of the vote. Since then, he has consistently polled more than 90 percent of the vote in his 11 re-election bids. Today Serrano is the longest-serving Member of Congress of Puerto Rican descent, the longest-serving elected official in the history of the Bronx, and the most senior member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.⁴

Serrano has served on four House committees: Small Business (100th–102nd Congresses, 1987–1993), Education and Labor (100th–102nd Congresses), Judiciary (104th Congress, 1995–1997), and Appropriations (103rd Congress, 1993–1995; 104th–112th Congresses, 1996–2013).⁵ On Education and Labor, Serrano, building on his earlier work on education policy in New York, sponsored the School Dropout Prevention and Basic Skills Improvement Act of 1990, and the Voting Rights Language Assistance Act of 1992. The 1992 law broadened the scope of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, guaranteeing

access to bilingual ballots and voter assistance for minority communities that were not included in the earlier legislation.⁶

Serrano lost his seat on Appropriations with the majority change in the 104th Congress, but returned to the panel in March 1996. Between 1996 and 2006, Serrano served as the Ranking Member of two subcommittees: Legislative (105th Congress, 1997–1999) and the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State, the Judiciary, and Related Agencies (106th–108th Congresses, 1999–2005). Serrano used his position to secure funding for many projects in the Bronx, including help for local nonprofits and a major clean-up effort of the Bronx River.

In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Serrano became Chairman of the Appropriations Committee's Financial Services and General Government Subcommittee, serving until the 112th Congress (2011–2013). When Republicans regained control of the chamber, he became Ranking Member. While Chairman, Serrano worked to increase funding for federal agencies that help protect consumers, such as the Securities and Exchange Commission, and supported efforts to improve economic development and access to financial services for economically distressed communities.

In the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), Serrano was elected chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC). With a record number of Hispanics serving that Congress, he worked to expand the CHC's profile—holding its first national conference, establishing issue-specific subcommittees, and working to identify policy goals it shared with other caucuses.⁷ Serrano has consistently criticized the United States' embargo on Cuba. He also supports an improved relationship between the United States and his native Puerto Rico; he supported the island's 1998 plebiscite and was arrested outside the White House in 2000 while protesting U.S. Navy bombing exercises on the neighboring island of Vieques.⁸

Despite his national profile, Serrano's diverse district has been his top priority in the House. "It's traditionally the place where new groups come," he said to a New York newspaper in 2004. "So this part of the Bronx is where you make your first stop, be it 20 or 30 years."⁹

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "José E. Serrano," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 101st Cong., 2nd sess. (28 March 1990): 5696–5697.
- 2 Frank Lynn, "Candidates for Borough Chief Split over State of the Bronx," 7 August 1985, *New York Times*: B1; Frank Lynn, "2 Rivals for Bronx Post Questioned on Integrity," 24 March 1987, *New York Times*: B4.
- 3 *Politics in America, 2012* (Washington, D.C.: CQ-Roll Call, Inc., 2011): 692–693.
- 4 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>; "Official Biography of Congressman José E. Serrano," <http://serrano.house.gov/about-me/full-biography> (accessed 1 May 2012).
- 5 Garrison Nelson and Charles Stewart III, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1993–2010* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011): 939.
- 6 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (24 July 1992): 19321.
- 7 Kenneth J. Cooper, "A Broken Barrier; Black, Hispanic Caucuses Meet on Capitol Hill," 14 October 1993, *Washington Post*: C2.
- 8 Kenneth R. Bazinet, "Bronx Dem Arrested in 1-Man D.C. Protest," 5 May 2000, *New York Daily News*: 32.
- 9 Bob Kappstatter, "Serrano S. Bx. Guardian Angel," 17 December 2004, *New York Daily News*: 3.