



Image courtesy of the Member

Henry Cuellar

1955–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2005–
DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

Henry Cuellar hails from one of America's busiest border crossings, a Texas town where different people and ideas move back and forth between Mexico and the U.S. every day. In a sense, this constant exchange has given Cuellar a unique perspective on the American experience, one that appreciates solutions which benefit people of all stripes and political persuasions. "I'm just a big believer in bipartisanship," he said in 2011.¹

Henry Cuellar, the oldest of eight children, was born in Laredo, Texas, on September 19, 1955, to Martin and Odilia Cuellar, migrant workers from Tamaulipas, Mexico. Though his parents had little more than an elementary-level education, Cuellar became a voracious reader while driving cattle in central Texas. He earned an associate's degree in political science from Laredo Community College in 1976 before graduating two years later from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., with a bachelor of science degree in Foreign Service. In 1981 he earned a law degree from the University of Texas, Austin. He then opened a practice specializing in customs and worked as an adjunct professor of international commercial law at Texas A&M International from 1984 to 1986.² He earned a master's degree in international trade from Texas A&M International and a Ph.D. in government from the University of Texas, Austin, in 1998. Cuellar and his wife Imelda are the parents of two daughters, Christy and Catie.

Cuellar's political career began in 1987 when voters from his native Laredo elected him to the Texas state house of representatives, where he served for the next 14 years. In the state legislature, Cuellar found his way into the Democratic leadership and earned spots on powerful committees. In 2001 he was appointed Texas secretary of state, but he quickly resigned to challenge incumbent Republican Henry Bonilla for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Cuellar lost in the general election that year, but after redistricting in 2003, he ran again, this time in Texas' new 28th U.S. Congressional District, where he faced incumbent Democrat Ciro D. Rodriguez in the primary. At the time, only the eastern half of Laredo was located in the 28th District, which ran north from the border with Mexico up and around the city of San Antonio. The close Democratic primary necessitated two recounts before a state court ruled Cuellar the victor. In his predominantly Hispanic and Democratic district, Cuellar won the general election by 20 points. In 2006 federal courts redrew the 28th District to include all of Laredo and Webb County.³ Since his first victory,

Cuellar has faced increasingly less opposition in the party primary (running unopposed in 2008 and 2010) and has won by comfortable margins in the general elections.

Upon taking his seat in the House during the 109th Congress (2005–2007), Cuellar was assigned to the influential Budget and Agriculture Committees. During the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Cuellar’s committee workload grew as he moved from the Budget to the Homeland Security and the Oversight and Government Reform Committees. His push for compromise—in 2006 Cuellar noted that “we’ve got to legislate from the middle”—won him the chairmanship of Homeland Security’s Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response, where he worked to combat gang violence and to strengthen laws governing sex offenders who violate parole.⁴ As subcommittee chair, Cuellar also helped build relationships and facilitate communication between federal and local law enforcement agencies along the country’s southern border. In 2010 Cuellar became chairman of the Subcommittee on Border, Maritime and Global Counterterrorism.⁵ During Cuellar’s tenure on the Agriculture Committee he has used his seat to provide drought relief and to combat the damaging effects of cattle fever ticks.⁶

With his background in customs law and having come from a district contiguous with Mexico, Cuellar has emerged as a prominent voice on international issues, especially trade. A member of the Blue Dog Coalition, Cuellar supports a self-styled “fiscally conservative” approach to government spending, supporting Pay-As-You-Go legislation to offset costs.⁷ In 2005 Cuellar backed the Central American Free Trade Agreement, a corollary to the long-standing North American Free Trade Agreement, to open trade and capital investments in Central American markets. He founded and has co-chaired the House Pro-Trade Caucus, and his independent streak prioritizes the interests of his district. As he told one Texas newspaper in 2005, “I have always put my community first before any political party.”⁸

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, “Henry Cuellar,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 Gary Martin, “Cuellar Shies away from Endorsement,” 30 October 2011, *San Antonio Express-News*: B3.
- 2 Gary Martin, “Mr. Cuellar Goes to Washington,” 5 January 2005, *San Antonio Express-News*: 1A; Chuck Lindell, “Cuellar’s First Days in Office Will Be Test,” 19 January 2005, *Austin American-Statesman*: A1; *Almanac of American Politics, 2010* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, 2009): 1476; “Official Biography of Henry Cuellar,” <http://cuellar.house.gov/Biography/> (accessed 28 May 2010).
- 3 *Almanac of American Politics, 2010*: 1478; *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2007): 1006; “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 4 Todd J. Gillman, “Balance of Power Is Shifting to the Center,” 19 November 2006, *Dallas Morning News*: 11A; Jesse Bogan, “Cuellar Plan Gets a Tepid Response,” 3 September 2005, *San Antonio Express-News*: B1; Hernán Rozemberg, “Millions for Containing Violence Closer,” 5 October 2005, *San Antonio Express-News*: B8.
- 5 *Almanac of American Politics, 2010*: 1478; “Official Biography of Henry Cuellar,” <http://cuellar.house.gov/Biography/> (accessed 28 May 2010).
- 6 “Official Biography of Henry Cuellar,” <http://cuellar.house.gov/Biography/> (accessed 28 May 2010).
- 7 Ibid; Henry Cuellar, “We Are PAYGOing Our Way out of Federal Debt,” 25 February 2010, *San Antonio Express-News*: 4.
- 8 As quoted in Lindell, “Cuellar’s First Days in Office Will Be a Test.”