



Image courtesy of the Member

Mario Diaz-Balart 1961–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2003–
REPUBLICAN FROM FLORIDA

Growing up, Mario Diaz-Balart and his family “didn’t go to sporting events,” he remembered shortly after his 2002 election to the U.S. House of Representatives. “We talked politics.” Like his father and older brother, Diaz-Balart has prioritized public service. In fact, “service,” he said, “is what drives the family.”¹

Mario Diaz-Balart was born on September 25, 1961, in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, to Rafael Diaz-Balart and Hilda Caballero. The Diaz-Balarts had been one of Cuba’s most powerful political families in the mid-20th century: Rafael had been majority leader in the island’s national legislature, and his sister—Mario Diaz-Balart’s aunt—had married a young politician named Fidel Castro. But when Fulgencio Batista came to power in Cuba, the elder Diaz-Balart joined the new administration, and Castro rebelled against it. With Castro’s rise, the Diaz-Balarts left the island and moved repeatedly before settling in the Miami area shortly before Mario was born.²

After completing his early education, Diaz-Balart enrolled at the University of South Florida but withdrew in 1982 to campaign and work for Miami Mayor Xavier Suarez. After his stint in the mayor’s office, Diaz-Balart won election to the Florida state house of representatives in 1988. He served in the house until 1992, when at age 31 he became the youngest successful candidate for the state senate. Diaz-Balart moved quickly through the leadership, becoming chairman of the ways and means committee and earning a reputation for fighting government waste and protecting the rights of the state’s minority residents. Florida’s term limits forced him out of the senate in 2000, but that year he again won election to the state house, where he chaired the redistricting committee. While in the state legislature, Diaz-Balart was also a public relations executive for a private firm. He is married to Tia Diaz-Balart. They live in Miami with their son.³

In 2002 Diaz-Balart ran for Florida’s 25th District seat in the U.S. House. One of two districts Florida gained after the 2000 Census, the 25th District encompassed a large swath of produce farmland and the Everglades in southern Florida between the cities of Naples to the west and Miami to the east.⁴ He campaigned unopposed in the Republican primary and overwhelmed his Democratic opponent in the general election, winning by 29 percent. Diaz-Balart supported the country’s hard line against Castro’s Cuba, and he received support from many incumbent House Republicans, including his brother,

Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart.⁵ In the eight years he represented the 25th District, Diaz-Balart faced little opposition on the campaign trail. His closest race was in 2008, when he won the general election by about 6 percent. In the fall of 2010, he ran unopposed for Florida's 21st District seat in the House, a predominantly suburban district just to the west of Miami which had been represented by Mario's brother Lincoln for 18 years.⁶

Diaz-Balart's committee assignments in the House have been few but powerful: the Budget Committee (108th–111th Congresses, 2003–2011), the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee (108th–111th Congresses), the Science Committee (later renamed Science and Technology: 109th–111th Congresses, 2005–2011), and the exclusive Appropriations Committee (112th Congress, 2011–2013).⁷ The jurisdiction of his initial committee seats dovetailed with Diaz-Balart's legislative interests and South Florida has benefitted accordingly. Diaz-Balart has won billions in funding for highway and metro rail development in and around the Miami area, and in 2003 he successfully protected additional billions in federal funds for the rehabilitation of the Everglades' fragile ecosystem. He has supported efforts to reform the internal revenue code by making permanent certain deductions, including commuting costs, and has sought similar ways to help struggling U.S. homeowners.⁸

Also, Diaz-Balart has emerged as a prominent voice on immigration and trade issues, fighting to protect access to bilingual government services, opposing efforts to criminalize illegal immigration, and supporting the Central American Free Trade Agreement.⁹ He has remained ardently opposed to Castro's regime in Cuba, and, in 2003, that stance became the underlying reason for his decision to create the Congressional Hispanic Conference, a predominantly Republican caucus he continues to chair. Diaz-Balart's legislative interests have taken root in other caucuses outside the House chamber: He founded and is co-chair of the Everglades Caucus, and he helped establish the Washington Waste Watchers to combat government fraud.¹⁰

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Mario Diaz-Balart," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 Oscar Corral, "New Diaz-Balart in Congress Adds to Family's Growing Political Dynasty," 6 January 2003, *Miami Herald*: A1.
- 2 Maya Bell, "Brothers' Ascent to Power: Part Destiny, Part Dynasty," 6 January 2003, *Orlando Sentinel*: A1; Abby Goodnough, "All in the Family, Brothers Wage War on Uncle Fidel," 8 March 2006, *New York Times*: A18; *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2005): 274.
- 3 *Politics in America, 2006*: 273–274; "Official Biography of Mario Diaz-Balart," <http://mariodiazbalart.house.gov/index.cfm?sectionid=37§iontree=7,37> (accessed 17 May 2012); *Politics in America, 2012* (Washington, D.C.: CQ-Roll Call, Inc., 2011): 251.
- 4 *Almanac of American Politics, 2010* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, 2009): 407–408.
- 5 Oscar Corral, "Policy Toward Cuba Is Ripped," 4 October 2002, *Miami Herald*: B1; Elaine DeValle, "2 Familiar Faces Hope to Capture Seat in Congress," 8 September 2002, *The Miami Herald*: B6; Oscar Corral, "U.S. House Speaker Hastert Backs Diaz-Balart in Hialeah," 6 October 2002, *Miami Herald*: B4.
- 6 *Politics in America, 2004*: 264; *Politics in America, 2010* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2009): 266; "Official Biography of Mario Diaz-Balart," <http://mariodiazbalart.house.gov/index.cfm?sectionid=37§iontree=7,37> (accessed 17 May 2012).
- 7 Garrison Nelson and Charles Stewart III, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1993–2010* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011): 675.
- 8 *Politics in America, 2006*: 274; *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2007): 266; *Politics in America, 2010*: 266.
- 9 *Politics in America, 2010*: 266.
- 10 "Official Biography of Mario Diaz-Balart," <http://mariodiazbalart.house.gov/index.cfm?sectionid=37§iontree=7,37> (accessed 3 August 2010).