

Diane Edith Watson

1933–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

2001–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

Formerly an educator, a state legislator, and a U.S. ambassador, Diane Watson entered the U.S. House of Representatives as an unusually experienced freshman. From her seats on the Oversight and Government Reform Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Watson quickly established herself as a legislator whose interests ranged from welfare reform to foreign aid for African nations facing the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Diane Edith Watson was born on November 12, 1933, in Los Angeles, California, the daughter of William Allen Louis Watson and Dorothy Elizabeth O’Neal Watson. She graduated with an A.A. from Los Angeles City College and a B.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1956. Watson later earned an M.S. from California State University in 1967 and a Ph.D. in education administration from Claremont College in 1986. After graduating from UCLA, Watson worked as a teacher and a school psychologist in the Los Angeles public schools. She was an associate professor at California State University from 1969 to 1971 and then worked in the California department of education and served on the Los Angeles unified school board. Watson won election as a state senator in 1978, an office she held for 20 years. She was the first African-American woman in the state senate and chaired the health and human services committee. In 1998, President William J. (Bill) Clinton nominated her as U.S. Ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia, a post she held for two years.

In December 2000, U.S. Representative Julian Dixon, who had just been re-elected to a 12th term in Congress from his central Los Angeles–Culver City district, died. In April 2001, Watson prevailed with a 33 percent plurality in the special Democratic primary to choose Dixon’s successor, while her nearest competitor received 26 percent.¹ In the June 5, 2001, special election, Watson carried the heavily Democratic Los Angeles district with 75 percent of the vote. In her three subsequent re-election bids, Watson has won her district with more than 80 percent of the vote.²

When Watson was sworn in to the U.S. House on June 7, 2001, she was assigned seats on the Government Reform Committee (now the Oversight and Government Reform Committee) and the International Relations Committee

(now the Foreign Affairs Committee). As a former ambassador, she took a keen interest in American foreign policy, particularly as it related to issues of racism and health in the developing world. In the summer of 2001, Watson attended the United Nations Conference on Racism, Xenophobia, and Other Intolerance in Durban, South Africa. She called on the United States to host its own conference on racism and reform to the education, justice, and health care systems, to make “reparations” for the practice of American slavery.³ In early 2002, Watson took to the House Floor to support the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act, noting that incidents of violence against Arab Americans, which had risen since the 2001 terrorist attacks, were “the tip of a proverbial iceberg.”⁴

Watson also called for the United States to expand aid to sub-Saharan African nations fighting an HIV/AIDS pandemic that in some countries had infected more than a quarter of the adult population. Aside from humanitarian considerations, she argued, the crisis had repercussions for regional stability and American national security because of the strain it placed on so many developing economies. The disease, she observed, “in the very near term, if more is not done, may challenge the very notion of law-based nation states.” She also linked the chaos the disease could cause with instability favorable to terrorist actions. “Let us not forget that Al Qaeda terrorist leader Osama bin Laden has exploited the misery of another state where civil society has collapsed—Afghanistan—to serve as a base for his terror network,” Watson said.⁵

During the 107th and 108th Congresses (2001–2005), Representative Watson established herself as an advocate for what she describes as “commonsense” welfare reform in California. Watson supported reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program, which provides education, childcare, job training, and employment to welfare recipients by providing states with federal funds to develop and manage their own welfare programs. Representative Watson also has been an advocate for increasing funding to the Cal-Learn program to help teen mothers complete their educations and get jobs.⁶ In addition, she introduced several bills, including legislation to develop a state plan for responding to medical disasters in the event of a biological or chemical weapons attack.⁷ She also advocated passage of a plan that would fully fund seniors’ medical prescriptions.

FOR FURTHER READING

Katsimbras, Amofia, ed. *Senator Diane E. Watson, Ph.D. 1978–1998: Legislative History* (Sacramento: California State Senate, 1999).

Watson, Diane E., “The Effects of the Desegregation Controversy on Trustee Governance in the Los Angeles Unified School District 1975–1980.” (Ph.D. diss., Claremont University, 1987).

“Watson, Diane Edith,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000794>.

Watson, Diane E., and Beverly J. Rambo. *Your Career in Health Care* (New York: Gregg Division, McGraw-Hill, 1976).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

California State Archives (Sacramento, CA). *Papers*: Correspondence and chronological files of state senator Diane Watson, 1978–1980, two cubic feet. Includes Sacramento and district files, miscellaneous legislative counsel drafts; constituent problems correspondence; bill files, 1979–1982, four cubic feet; bill files, 1981–1986, 1.5 cubic feet.

NOTES

- 1 “Diane Watson: Member of Congress, California 32, Democrat,” July 2002, *Campaigns and Elections*: 18.
- 2 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 3 *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (6 September 2001): 5447.
- 4 *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 2nd sess. (7 February 2002): 219.
- 5 *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (29 November 2001): 572; *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (11 December 2001): 9089.
- 6 “Meet Congresswoman Diane Watson,” http://www.house.gov/watson/meet_congresswoman.html (accessed 2 January 2005); *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 2nd sess. (17 April 2002): 384; *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 2nd sess. (8 May 2002): 2170.
- 7 *Politics in America, 2002*: (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 130–132.