34 Esteban E. Torres (D)

Of West Covina — Elected 1982, 8th term

Biographical Information

Born: Jan. 27, 1930, Miami, Ariz.

Education: East Los Angeles College, 1959-63; California State U., Los Angeles, 1963-64; U. of Maryland, 1965; American U., 1966.

Military Service: Army, 1949-53.

Occupation: International trade executive; autoworker; labor official.

Family: Wife, Arcy Sanchez; five children.

Religion: Unspecified.

Political Career: Sought Democratic nomination for U.S. House, 1974; UNESCO ambassador, 1977-79.

Capitol Office: 2269 Rayburn Bldg. 20515; 225-5256.

Committees

Appropriations

Foreign Operations, Export Financing & Related Programs; Transportation

Banking and Financial Services



In Washington: Torres' loyalty to the Democratic leadership in Congress and its key constituencies, including organized labor, helped earn him a deputy whip's post in the 102nd Congress and a seat on the Appropriations Committee in the 103rd Congress.

Given Torres' close ties to unions, his pledge in 1993 to vote for NAFTA (which most in the labor movement opposed) was a boost to the Clinton administration's efforts to line up support for the treaty. When the officials heading President Clinton's transition to a second term in 1996 went in search of a new secretary of Labor, Torres' name was in the mix.

A labor leader for the United Auto Workers before he came to Congress, Torres earned consideration for the Cabinet post when opposing forces battled over two other candidates: White House Public Liaison aide Alexis Herman and former Democratic Sen. Harris Wofford of Pennsylvania, who was named to head Clinton's National Service program after his defeat for re-election in 1994. Labor groups such as the AFL-CIO favored Wofford, who they believed would be a stronger advocate for their interests, but female and black activists backed Herman, who is black.

With his Hispanic heritage and his labor background, Torres emerged as a possible compromise pick for the Labor post. The Wall Street Journal recommended Torres for the job because of his vote for NAFTA, and his candidacy for the Labor slot gained such momentum that NBC at one point mistakenly reported that Clinton had tapped Torres for the job and asked Herman to head the Small Business Administration instead. The Los Angeles Times reported that Torres was confident enough he was going to Labor that he encouraged his son-in-law to campaign for his House seat once he left it.

Torres' name also came up in connection with the vacancy for secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), but ultimately, Clinton chose Herman to head Labor and Andrew M. Cuomo to take the top job at HUD.

So Torres returned to his work on Appropriations, where in the 105th he gained a spot on the Transportation Subcommittee, putting him in a good position to defend California's interests as lawmakers on the companion Transportation and Infrastructure Committee consider reauthorization of the nation's highway and mass-transit programs.

Democratic leaders also indicated their continued affinity toward the Californian early in the 105th when they asked him to fill a temporary slot on Banking and Financial Services, where he had once served. He was appointed to the panel just before it began work on a Republican proposal for overhauling the nation's housing programs.

A former assembly line welder who sometimes shows off the tattoos on his hands from his days as a street gang member, Torres has opted for a quiet role in most of his activities. But in 1993 he was thrust into the limelight when it came time to vote on NAFTA. Torres was lobbied hard to vote against the pact and pushed by the Clinton administration to vote for it.

He voted yes — but for a price. He told Clinton he wanted the establishment of a jointly funded binational North American Development Bank (NADBank) that would help industries and workers hurt by the trade agreement. The White House agreed, and pledged $225 million for the bank. In 1996, he appeared at the opening of the NADBank U.S. Community Adjustment and Investment Office.

When announcing his vote for the trade pact, Torres told the House: "What has surprised me is that my friends in the North American labor movement, so far, have failed to grasp the enormous opportunity and potential in the NAFTA for spreading the vision and reality of industrial democracy throughout this hemisphere."

Early in 1997, Torres found himself amid controversy again. An opponent of efforts to tighten sanctions against Cuba in 1996, he traveled with fellow Democrat Xavier Becerra of California, the new chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, to the island nation in December of that year. The trip, sponsored by San Antonio-based

CALIFORNIA 34
East Los Angeles County suburbs; West Covina

The 34th is emerging as a middle-class Hispanic district that likes to vote Democratic; it is an almost ideal place for someone like Torres to run. It begins with more than one-third of East Los Angeles, runs east through Montebello and Pico Rivera, goes up north a bit for La Puente and drops down to pick up most of Whittier and all of Santa Fe Springs and Norwalk.

The section of East Los Angeles that is in the 34th is the heart of East L.A.'s business district. Stores are well-kept and generally are owned or operated by Hispanics. The area just to the north, around the 60 Freeway, is populated by what used to be called "Muppies," or Mexican yuppies, who have come in and fixed up many old homes.

Montebello is an upper middle-class Hispanic area, with a lot of home-grown residents who have never lived elsewhere. It lies to the east of the small city of East Los Angeles and is bordered by four freeways, making it a convenient for commuters. It is heavily Democratic: Torres took 68 percent of its vote in 1992, the first time he ran here.

Pico Rivera has been described as pure Middle America, Hispanic-style. This area also is very supportive of Torres. The biggest employer in the city is Northrop Grumman, which builds part of the B-2 bomber here. In 1994, the plant was downsized from about 7,800 employees to about 5,900 employees; it is scheduled to close in 1999.

Up in the district's northeastern corner, past Rose Hills Memorial Park (one of the country's largest cemeteries), is La Puente, a working-class, heavily Hispanic city with 37,000 residents and a registered-voter base that is about two-thirds Democratic.

Down south a bit, the district includes most of Whittier, the 34th's most Republican area. The city is still recovering from being the epicenter of an October 1987 earthquake. Some houses damaged in the quake have been repaired, but vacant lots are not uncommon. Multifamily homes are mixed closely with single-family homes in some areas, but not in the part of Whittier just outside the district, where half-million-dollar houses (and the GOP) dominate.

Farther south is Santa Fe Springs, an industrial area featuring light manufacturing and oil wells. Two-thirds of the city's 15,500 residents are Hispanic, but they have not flexed their political muscles here as they have elsewhere.

At the southern end of the 34th is Norwalk, the district's largest city with 94,000 residents. Though the city has close to a majority of Hispanics and a majority of Democrats, residents tend to be conservative-minded in presidential voting. However, Norwalk went heavily for Bill Clinton in 1992. The city is bounded by four freeways, including the Glenn Anderson, which was completed in 1994. Los Angeles' Green Line light rail opened in 1995, giving the area a boost.

Bill Clinton easily carried the district in the 1996 presidential race, getting 64 percent of the votes. Torres won an eighth House term just as comfortably, with 68 percent.

1990 Population: 573,047. White 325,099 (57%), Black 11,060 (2%), Other 236,888 (41%). Hispanic origin 357,143 (62%). 18 and over 402,266 (70%), 62 and over 64,984 (11%). Median age: 29.

Southwest Voter Research Institute, prompted Cuban-American Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Lincoln Diaz-Balart, both Florida Republicans, to resign from the Hispanic Caucus in protest in January 1997.

Torres, who did not see his father again after his father was deported during the Depression when Torres was five, has been active in the debate over immigration. He was given the role of offering a Democratic leadership-backed amendment when the Appropriations Committee in February 1994 considered a bill providing emergency earthquake relief to California.

The amendment, which was adopted by the committee, modified a proposal by California GOP Rep. Ron Packard that would have cut off all disaster aid, except for emergency medical assistance, to illegal immigrants. Under Torres' amendment, illegal immigrants would remain eligible for emergency food, shelter, medical services and safety programs.

In 1996, he voted against immigration overhaul legislation the GOP pushed to crack down on illegal immigrants. It passed 305-123.

On Banking, where he served through the 102nd Congress, Torres was generally comfortable with the agenda of activist liberal Democrats who called the shots. He worked as a conciliator, smoothing the rough edges of members' personal and philosophical conflicts to help keep legislation moving. He was one of a small group of Democrats on good terms with the panel's irascible chairman, Henry B. Gonzalez of Texas.

The most contentious battle Torres took on was an attempt to strengthen federal regulation of the nation's credit reporting industry. The proposal, which gives consumers greater access to their credit histories and makes it easier for them to correct errors, died in the 102nd Congress because of opposition from credit bureaus and their congressional allies, but it gained momentum in the 103rd and became law as part of the fis-

cal 1997 omnibus spending bill. Torres said "the monumental change ... means peace of mind for millions of Americans."

Although his past lives as a former street-gang member and assembly line worker give Torres a "tough guy" image, he has a gentler side. In the spring of 1993, a retrospective of his artwork was shown in a Washington, D.C., gallery, and some of his artwork is featured on his World Wide Web page. He has created oil and acrylic paintings, prints, and pencil and ink sketches.

"Eventually someday I'd like to be able to retire to my art. It's a way of life, a way of experiencing life, both as an artist and activist," Torres told The Washington Post. "There's a lot of frustration and revolt in me that comes out in my work."

His fondness for the arts earned Torres the nomination of Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt, D-Mo., to sit on the 17-member Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution in March 1997. The first Latino member of Congress appointed to the board, he will help set policy for and oversee the management of the Smithsonian, which he has criticized for ignoring Hispanics' contributions to American development and culture.

At Home: Torres was an assembly line welder in Los Angeles during the 1950s and became active in the United Auto Workers. In the 1960s, he was tapped by UAW President Walter Reuther to start a community action project in heavily Hispanic East Los Angeles. In 1968, Torres founded The East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU), which grew into one of the country's largest anti-poverty agencies.

Torres developed Democratic contacts as an activist, but he lost a 1974 primary in his initial bid for the House. Soon thereafter he found his way into President Jimmy Carter's administration as an adviser on Hispanic affairs, and later he was named ambassador to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). When he made his second House bid in 1982, Torres billed his campaign as "Autoworker to Ambassador, the American Dream."

Torres' second try for Congress proved far easier than his first. He was running in an open 34th District created by redistricting, and he had help from the political organizations of Democrats Henry A. Waxman and Howard L. Berman. In the primary, he held off former Democratic Rep. Jim Lloyd (who had lost his seat in a neighboring district in 1980 to Republican David Dreier). In the general election Torres prevailed with 57 percent.

Since then, he has regularly won a vote share of 60 percent or better. Redistricting in 1992 changed his district little geographically and not at all politically. The 68 percent he won in 1996 was his best ever.

While cruising to re-election every two years, Torres has kept an eye on Los Angeles politics. In 1990, he hinted at a run for the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. But GOP incumbent Pete Schabarum, instead of announcing that he would step down, simply failed to file as a candidate by the March 1990 deadline. By that time, Torres had filed to run again for the House.

HOUSE ELECTIONS

1996 General		
Esteban E. Torres (D)	94,730	(68%)
David G. Nunez (R)	36,852	(27%)
J. Walter Scott (AMI)	4,122	(3%)
David Argall (LIBERT)	2,736	(2%)
1994 General		
Esteban E. Torres (D)	72,439	(62%)
Albert J. Nunez (R)	40,068	(34%)
Carl M. "Marty" Swinney (LIBERT)	4,921	(4%)

Previous Winning Percentages: **1992** (61%) **1990** (61%) **1988** (63%) **1986** (60%) **1984** (60%) **1982** (57%)

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

	Receipts	Receipts from PACs	Expenditures
1996			
Torres (D)	$186,727	$66,200 (35%)	$207,398
Nunez (R)	$11,752	$266 (2%)	$11,171
1994			
Torres (D)	$236,822	$98,745 (42%)	$178,972
Nunez (R)	$5,153	$14 (0%)	$5,115

DISTRICT VOTE FOR PRESIDENT

1996		1992	
D	91,603 (64%)	**D**	78,889 (51%)
R	39,277 (27%)	**R**	48,181 (31%)
I	10,396 (7%)	**I**	27,944 (18%)

KEY VOTES

1997	
Ban "partial birth" abortions	N
1996	
Approve farm bill	N
Deny public education to illegal immigrants	N
Repeal ban on certain assault-style weapons	N
Increase minimum wage	Y
Freeze defense spending	Y
Approve welfare overhaul	N
1995	
Approve balanced-budget constitutional amendment	N
Relax Clean Water Act regulations	N
Oppose limits on environmental regulations	Y
Reduce projected Medicare spending	N
Approve GOP budget with tax and spending cuts	N

VOTING STUDIES

	Presidential Support		Party Unity		Conservative Coalition	
Year	**S**	**O**	**S**	**O**	**S**	**O**
1996	81	15	91	5	25	69
1995	86	10	85	6	20	73
1994	90	6	90	2	25	67
1993	87	11	86	3	16	77
1992	20	70	84	5	19	73
1991	25	70	94	3	14	84

INTEREST GROUP RATINGS

Year	ADA	AFL-CIO	CCUS	ACU
1996	100	n/a	14	0
1995	90	100	21	4
1994	75	75	42	10
1993	90	92	20	0
1992	85	92	29	4
1991	80	92	20	5

ZIP CODES

California's 34th District

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