

John Salazar

1953–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2005–2011
DEMOCRAT FROM COLORADO

With his election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2004, John Salazar became one of a handful of farmers serving in Congress. From his seat on the Agriculture Committee, Salazar used his experience as a seed-potato farmer and a state legislator to defend his district's interests in agriculture and conservation. "There are only four, maybe six of us [farmers] here in Congress," he said. "If we can't stand up for farmers, we shouldn't be here."¹

John Salazar was born July 21, 1953, in Alamosa, Colorado, to Emma and Henry Salazar. A fifth-generation resident of the San Luis Valley, he was raised with his seven siblings on the 52-acre family ranch on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains. Salazar grew up poor—his family's home did not have electricity until the 1980s—and he learned to love farming by working on his father's alfalfa and potato farm. After three years at St. Francis Seminary in Cincinnati, Colorado, Salazar served four years in the U.S. Army. He went on to earn his business degree from Adams State College in Alamosa, Colorado, in 1981.² He married after leaving the military. Salazar and his wife, Mary Lou, had three children: Jesus, Esteban, and Miguel.³

Salazar returned to the family ranch and began a career as a seed-potato farmer. His success landed him on the cover of the potato growers' journal *Spudman* in 1990, and he was named Colorado seed-potato grower of the year from 1995 to 1996.⁴ While a farmer, Salazar became active in local agricultural organizations. He served on the Rio Grande water conservation district, where he successfully opposed a private company's effort to buy local water rights to divert water to Denver's suburbs. He was appointed to the Colorado agricultural commission in 1999. In 2002 he was elected to the Colorado state house of representatives, where he continued to oppose measures to divert water out of the region.⁵ "We shouldn't develop a garden spot on the

Front Range while drying up the West Slope and the [San Luis] Valley," he argued.⁶

In November 2003, Republican U.S. Representative Scott McInnis announced his retirement from the U.S. House of Representatives, and Salazar announced his intent to run for the open seat in the general election the following year.⁷ "Being a potato farmer, I've learned that if you want to increase your harvest, you have to rotate your crops from time to time," he said. "Well, now it's time for Colorado to rotate its congressional crop, so we can get more of a harvest out of our representatives."⁸ Colorado's 3rd Congressional District was at its largest during that time, spanning an area that was roughly the size of Arkansas. The district extended east of the Front Range, including the city of Pueblo and most of the Western Slope.⁹ Salazar had no opposition in the Democratic primary. In the general election, Salazar faced the Republican candidate, Colorado department of natural resources director Greg Walcher.

During the campaign, Salazar highlighted his experience as a farmer and businessman, voicing his support for agriculture, renewable energy, health care reform, balanced budgets, tax incentives for small businesses, and the repeal of the federal inheritance tax. But he focused on local issues, particularly water access.¹⁰ He highlighted his opposition to a highly unpopular referendum—supported by Walcher the previous year—that guaranteed up to \$2 billion in revenue bonds to fund water projects, characterizing it as a "billion-dollar grab of the Western Slope and rural water by the Front Range."¹¹ He also advocated for the creation of a federally funded water conservation program to keep water in the region.¹² Walcher attempted to tie Salazar to presidential candidate John Kerry and criticized him for supporting the elimination of tax cuts for high-income earners.¹³ The race was highly competitive, and



both parties spent millions.¹⁴ Salazar narrowly defeated his opponent, with 51 percent of the vote, becoming one of only five Democrats nationally to win a seat that had been Republican in the previous Congress. He was re-elected with more than 60 percent of the vote in 2006 and 2008. His younger brother, Ken Salazar, was elected in 2004 as the junior Senator from Colorado.¹⁵

John Salazar was sworn in as a Member of the 109th Congress (2005–2007) on January 4, 2005, and was assigned to the Committee on Agriculture and the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.¹⁶ There he sought to protect agricultural interests, push for renewable energy development, and improve the infrastructure in his district. “As a lifelong farmer and rancher, it’s my responsibility to make sure that rural Coloradans are properly represented as Congress develops national agriculture policy,” he said.¹⁷ In 2007 he defended his constituents’ interests against an effort by the U.S. Army to expand one of its Colorado training bases by displacing numerous ranchers and farmers. Salazar and other members of the Colorado delegation successfully sponsored an amendment to block the military’s efforts. “No one can support the taking by force of their constituents’ land, homes, ranches, and towns,” he declared.¹⁸ As a member of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, he worked to improve local infrastructure; as a freshman, he secured \$32 million for his district in the 2005 highway bill.¹⁹

The only veteran in the Colorado delegation during his first two terms, Salazar was seated on the Veterans’ Affairs Committee in the 110th Congress. As a member of the committee, he sponsored the Stolen Valor Act, legislation to criminalize the fraudulent receipt of a military honor, especially the highest awards, such as the Medal of Honor and the Distinguished Service Medals. “This piece of legislation will make it easier for Federal law enforcement officials to prosecute phonies and imposters and restore the true meaning of these illustrious awards,” Salazar said on the House Floor.²⁰ The measure passed the House in December 2006 and was signed into law by President George W. Bush. “This day has been a long time coming,”

Salazar said. “The brave men and women who have earned awards for service to our country should not have these honors tarnished by frauds.”²¹ In June 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the law as overreaching; a revised act was quickly passed by the House.²²

In the 111th Congress (2009–2011), Salazar relinquished the committee seats he held previously for a seat on the powerful Appropriations Committee, where he served on the Subcommittees on Energy and Water Development, and Related Agencies and Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies. He was also selected to sit on the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, a position he used to safeguard coal-fired electricity providers seeking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.²³ In the midst of the economic crisis in 2008, Salazar opposed legislation to stabilize the financial markets but approved loans to the automobile industry. He also was a reliable vote for the Democratic leadership in the House, supporting the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the American Clean Energy and Security Act, the Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.²⁴

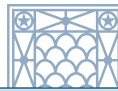
In the 2010 midterm elections, Salazar faced state legislator Scott Tipton, who had challenged him in the 2006 general election. In a contest that propelled Republicans back into the House majority, Tipton defeated Salazar, with 50.1 percent of the vote.²⁵ Salazar was appointed by Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper to lead the state department of agriculture on January 5, 2011.²⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

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

NOTES

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- Mountain News*: 16A; *Politics in America, 2010* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2009): 185.
- 3 John Salazar for Congress, "About John," <http://webarchive.loc.gov/lcwa0016/20040917003900/> http://www.salazar2004.com/about_john.asp (accessed 24 January 2011).
 - 4 Morson, "Salazar Roots Run Deep; 3rd District Hopeful Is Longtime Advocate for Area's Agriculture."
 - 5 *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2007): 187.
 - 6 Electa Draper, "Profiles: 3rd Congressional District," 14 October 2004, *Denver Post*: B4.
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 - 19 *The Almanac of American Politics, 2010*: 287.
 - 20 *Congressional Record*, House, 109th Cong., 1st sess. (12 July 2005): H5643; *Congressional Record*, House, 109th Cong., 2nd sess. (6 December 2006): H8819–H8823.
 - 21 Anne C. Mulkern, "Rep. Salazar's Bill on Falsely Claiming Medals Now a Law," 21 December 2006, *Denver Post*: B3.
 - 22 The court found that lying about military service was protected by the First Amendment. The new legislation was written to specifically address instances in which individuals benefitted from fraudulent claims of military service.
 - 23 *Congressional Directory, 111th Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2008): 398–399, 453.
 - 24 Office of the Clerk, "U.S. House of Representatives Roll Call Votes, 111th Congress, 1st Session (2009)," <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2009/index.asp> (accessed 4 May 2011); Office of the Clerk, "U.S. House of Representatives Roll Call Votes, 111th Congress, 2nd Session (2010)," <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2010/index.asp> (accessed 4 May 2011).
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