

Ken Salazar

1955–

UNITED STATES SENATOR 2005–2009
DEMOCRAT FROM COLORADO

With his election in 2004, Ken Salazar became the first Hispanic American from Colorado to serve in the U.S. Senate. A fifth-generation Coloradan, Salazar crafted a reputation as an independent voice supporting agricultural and conservation interests and an advocate for comprehensive immigration reform. “My view is that U.S. Senators are elected for a six-year period because we are supposed to exercise our own independent judgment,” Salazar noted en route to becoming one of the Senate’s key centrists.¹

Kenneth Salazar was born March 2, 1955, in Alamosa, Colorado, to Henry Salazar and Emma M. Montoya Salazar.² He and his seven siblings were raised on the family ranch in the San Luis Valley, where his ancestors settled in the 1850s. Salazar grew up poor—his family’s house was not equipped with electricity until the 1980s—and the foundation for his future was his experience on the family farm. He graduated from Centauri High School in Conejos County, Colorado. Raised in a devout Catholic family, Salazar spent two years in the seminary before attending Colorado College, graduating in 1977 with a degree in political science. He went on to earn his law degree from the University of Michigan in 1981. Salazar met Hope Hernandez in Denver in 1980. The couple married in 1985 and raised two children, Melinda and Andrea.³

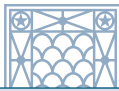
After practicing law in Denver for several years, Salazar served as chief legal counsel for Colorado Governor Roy Romer from 1987 to 1990. He then accepted an appointment to head the state department of natural resources, where he gained bipartisan acclaim for authoring the state constitutional amendment creating the Great Outdoors Colorado program. It was, Salazar said, “the only tool ever created at state level to help in the preservation of farmlands, open spaces and river corridors.”⁴ Funded through lottery proceeds, the program became one of the

most successful land conservation efforts in the United States.⁵ Salazar’s knowledge about and passion for land issues prompted Senator Ben Campbell of Colorado to recommend him as head of the federal government’s Bureau of Land Management, but Salazar declined this opportunity and returned to private practice in Denver.

On November 3, 1998, Salazar won election as Colorado’s 36th attorney general, making him the first Hispanic to win statewide office.⁶ He established a Fugitive Prosecutions and Gang Prosecution Unit and an Environmental Crimes Unit within the attorney general’s office.⁷ In the wake of the shooting at Columbine High School, Salazar joined the governor in organizing a summit on youth violence and supporting a ballot measure to limit the sale of firearms at gun shows.⁸ As in his initial victory, Salazar was re-elected in 2002 as a centrist candidate who drew unaffiliated and crossover voters.⁹

In early 2004, Senator Campbell announced his intention to retire from the Senate, triggering a scramble in both parties to produce a nominee. Salazar announced in March that he planned to run for the open seat.¹⁰ After soundly defeating Colorado Springs educator Mike Miles in the Democratic primary, with 73 percent of the vote, Salazar faced Pete Coors, chairman of the Coors Brewing Company, in the general election.¹¹ The candidates agreed on the need for investment in renewable energy and domestic exploration for oil and gas. Both candidates also supported the PATRIOT Act and gun rights, but Salazar backed additional privacy protections and a ban on assault weapons. The candidates differed principally on tax policy. Salazar proposed allowing federal tax rates to return to their pre-2001 levels for those earning more than \$250,000 a year and supported the inheritance tax for estates worth more than \$10 million. Coors, on the other hand, proposed making all President George W. Bush’s tax cuts permanent





and further reducing dividend and capital gains taxes.¹² Salazar defeated Coors on November 2, 2004, with 51.3 versus 46.5 percent of the vote.¹³

Salazar and newly elected Senator Mel Martinez of Florida became the first Hispanics to serve in the U.S. Senate since 1977. Salazar's older brother, John, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives the same day to represent a Colorado district, making the Salazar brothers the second pair of Hispanic brothers to serve simultaneously in Congress. Ken Salazar consistently resisted attempts to label him as an advocate for Hispanic issues. "It wasn't the Hispanic community that voted me in," he said. "I have to work on all the issues that affect the state of Colorado. I don't see myself working on a specific Hispanic agenda."¹⁴

Salazar was sworn in as a Member of the 109th Congress (2005–2007) on January 4, 2005, and received assignments on the Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry; Veterans' Affairs; and Energy and Natural Resources Committees. Two years later, he relinquished his seat on the Veterans' Affairs Committee for a spot on the influential Finance Committee. He also served on the Select Committee on Ethics and on the Special Committee on Aging.¹⁵

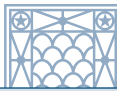
Salazar's self-description as "a moderate Democrat with an independent streak" was evidenced throughout his Senate service.¹⁶ He was a member of the "Gang of 14," a group of seven Republicans and seven Democrats who forged a compromise on judicial nominees. Salazar also joined several other Senators to filibuster the reauthorization of the PATRIOT Act on the basis of civil rights. He voted with Republicans to protect gun manufacturers from lawsuits, enhance bankruptcy rules, and confirm Judge John G. Roberts as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.¹⁷ Salazar's independent streak gave him more clout in a Senate that was evenly and sharply divided along party lines. A seasoned political observer noted, "The relatively small number of people who are near the center become significant players. And he's done that. He's now one of the go-to guys."¹⁸

Salazar used his position to weigh in on two of the day's most contentious issues: energy development policy and immigration reform. Based on his earlier work at the

state level and on his experience as a longtime sportsman, he emerged as one of the Senate's leading advocates for balancing energy development with environmental sustainability. In 2005 he worked with colleagues from both parties to pull from a defense bill language that would have authorized drilling for oil and gas in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). As the debate about exploration in the ANWR intensified, Salazar pushed his colleagues to seek long-term solutions to meet energy needs. "Ultimately, this fight is not about barrels of oil, it's about the deeper moral decisions we make as a nation about how best to address our energy needs," Salazar said.¹⁹ He was a primary cosponsor of the Renewable Fuels, Consumer Protection, and Energy Efficiency Act of 2007, which sought to increase America's use of renewable fuels.

Salazar was also intimately involved in grueling negotiations in 2006 and 2007 within the Senate and with President George W. Bush to craft comprehensive immigration legislation. "Failure on immigration reform is not an option," he said.²⁰ The resultant proposal—the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006—passed the Senate in May 2006. The bill featured provisions for border security and a guest worker program for the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States.²¹ Salazar described the effort, which he helped advance with leading Democrats like Edward (Ted) Kennedy of Massachusetts and Republicans like John McCain of Arizona, as one "that dealt with creating a system of law and order, that would have taken us out of the lawlessness we currently have in our country with respect to immigration and have created a comprehensive system to deal with these major issues of national security, economic security, and moral values."²² Ultimately, the immigration measure did not clear the House, and efforts to revive it in the following Congress failed.

Salazar was nominated December 17, 2008, to serve in President Barack Obama's Cabinet as the nation's 50th Secretary of the Interior. He was unanimously confirmed by the Senate on January 20, 2009.²³ "I look forward to helping build our clean energy economy, modernize our interstate electrical grid and ensure that we are making wise



use of our conventional natural resources,” he said after his nomination.²⁴ Salazar worked to reform regulatory agencies, particularly the Minerals Management Service, after he took office. He also continued to support the forms of renewable energy that he had championed as a legislator.²⁵

FOR FURTHER READING

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

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

University of Colorado (Boulder). *Papers*: Senatorial papers. Collection size is unspecified and access may be restricted.

NOTES

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- Mike Soraghan, “Salazar’s Aisle-Crossings Have Some Democrats Fuming,” 20 March 2005, *Denver Post*: A34. See also M. E. Sprengelmeyer, “Salazar Remains a Maverick,” 23 December 2005, *Rocky Mountain News*: 5A.
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