

*David Wu*

1955–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1999–2011

DEMOCRAT FROM OREGON

**D**avid Wu, who immigrated to America in the 1960s, had never held political office before he won a seat representing the suburbs of Portland, Oregon, in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1998. Described by one journalist as “an energetic fusion of gabby extrovert and musing intellectual,” Wu pursued an ambitious agenda during his House career and was not afraid to break with Democrats or businesses in his district on hot-button issues.<sup>1</sup> “We have a certain bandwidth,” Wu said of Congress’s capacity to juggle multiple issues. “Education has always been a top priority. Human rights is a particular passion of mine. There hasn’t been a lot of legislation in Congress on that,” he said in 2008. “I’ve been outspoken. Health care and energy are things that are very, very important to Oregon and the district.”<sup>2</sup>

David Wu was born on April 8, 1955, on the island of Taiwan off the coast of mainland China. When he was only an infant, his father, Keh Chang (K. C.) Wu left to study in New York, leaving Wu, his mother Helen, and his sisters back home. In 1961 Wu and the rest of his family immigrated to America, reunited with his father, and settled in southern California after K. C. took a job with a defense contractor.<sup>3</sup> Wu learned to speak English in the first grade and was quickly drawn to classes in science, math, and technology.<sup>4</sup> In 1977 he graduated from Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, with a degree in biology before beginning medical school at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. While training to become a doctor, however, Wu realized that he found policy more interesting than medicine.<sup>5</sup> He left Harvard for Yale Law School, earning a JD in 1982.

Wu settled in Portland in his late 20s and, after clerking for a federal judge on the Ninth Circuit, began a successful career as a lawyer for the region’s technology companies.<sup>6</sup> He was active in his community, serving on

Portland’s planning commission for three years in the late 1980s, occasionally writing op-eds for his local paper and leading the drive to make Suzhou, China, Portland’s sister city. Wu had worked on Jimmy Carter’s and then Gary Hart’s presidential campaigns, but in Portland his political activities generally took place behind the scenes.<sup>7</sup> Wu’s first marriage ended in divorce in 1992. He married his second wife, Michelle Maxine Wu, about four years later. They separated in late 2009 and later filed for divorce. Together they have a son and a daughter.<sup>8</sup>

During the 105th Congress (1997–1999), three-term Democratic Representative Elizabeth Furse decided not to run for re-election, opening a seat from Oregon’s 1st District, which encompassed downtown Portland and stretched northwesterly toward the coast and included all of Clatsop, Columbia, Washington, and Yamhill Counties as well as parts of Multnomah and Clackamas Counties.<sup>9</sup> The area was home to a number of major technology companies, earning northwestern Oregon the nickname of “Silicon Forest,” a riff on California’s famed Silicon Valley.<sup>10</sup>

Despite having little political experience, Wu declared his candidacy for the House in the summer of 1997.<sup>11</sup> Although he knew the tech sector inside and out, Wu’s main campaign theme became access to universal education.<sup>12</sup> He wanted to pump federal money into the nation’s Head Start preschools, hire 100,000 new public school teachers, invest in research and job training, and make college more affordable with federal grants.<sup>13</sup> He supported gun control, wanted to see Congress reinforce Social Security, and lauded efforts in Oregon to protect migratory salmon populations.<sup>14</sup>

His main opponent in the party’s primary was Linda Peters, chairwoman of the Washington County board of commissioners, who drew early funds from national groups, forcing Wu to lend his campaign money from





his personal savings.<sup>15</sup> Peters then missed the deadline to appear in the statewide Oregon voters' guide, and on May 3, 1998, Wu picked up a major endorsement from the *Oregonian* newspaper. "Peters has the resume," the editors wrote, "but Wu has the chops. He displays the sharp intellect and grasp of detail that the job demands, and he exudes the passion and energy that the voters deserve. He's simply a better fit for the future of this diverse, evolving district."<sup>16</sup> Wu defeated Peters with about 53 percent of the vote.<sup>17</sup>

With the open seat, the 1st District's general election quickly garnered national attention.<sup>18</sup> Wu's main opponent was Molly Bordonaro, a young Republican from Portland's wealthy western suburbs who also had never held public office.<sup>19</sup> Just as he did during the primary election, Wu touted his educational reforms as the lynchpin of his campaign.<sup>20</sup> By August, the local Portland paper called the contest in the 1st District "the hottest congressional race in the state."<sup>21</sup>

Wu received campaign help from House Democrats and, by mid-September, he had taken the lead in the polls.<sup>22</sup> On the eve of the election, the press asked Wu what he envisioned for Portland's future. "I'd like to see a 21st century where all children start life well taken care of," he said, emphasizing the importance of early education. "I would like to see, in my lifetime, the final triumph of democracy around the world, everywhere, people being able to ... enjoy the human rights that we sometimes take for granted in this country."<sup>23</sup>

On Election Day, Wu won in a nail-biter, taking 50 percent of the vote. His 1998 victory was the closest in his career. Over the next decade, Wu never won with less than 55 percent of the electorate. In 2008, riding the wave of Democratic excitement at Barack Obama's presidential candidacy, Wu captured nearly 72 percent, his largest margin of victory.<sup>24</sup>

In his first term, Democrats assigned Wu to committees where he would spend his entire House career, the Committee on Education and the Workforce (later renamed the Committee on Education and Labor), and the Committee on Science (later renamed the Committee

on Science and Technology, then renamed again as the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology). Combined, the two committees perfectly fit his legislative agenda. "I see myself in a sweet spot, in a really, really sweet spot," he told the *Oregonian* a decade after receiving his initial assignments. "It's a sweet spot because it's economic growth. It's jobs."<sup>25</sup> During the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Wu also served a brief stint on the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Outside of his immediate committee jurisdiction, Wu joined the New Democrat Coalition, and in the 107th Congress (2001–2003), he served as chairman of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus.<sup>26</sup>

In the House, it did not take Wu long before he made headlines for a controversial decision to oppose a trade deal with China that companies in his district, including juggernauts Nike and Intel, supported.<sup>27</sup> For years, Congress had refused to grant China permanent most favored nation (MFN) status (later called permanent normal trade relations) because the federal government claimed China had committed human rights violations against its citizens. MFN status carried with it generous trade terms, making it a huge economic boost.<sup>28</sup> Because of certain loopholes, however, China had enjoyed MFN benefits for years and, by the 1990s, had become one of America's main trading partners.<sup>29</sup>

For Wu, who had spent his earliest years in the shadow of Beijing, the human rights situation in China struck a chord.<sup>30</sup> He had opposed MFN status for China for almost a decade and, in 1991, said it would be "an act of political cowardice" if the United States relaxed trade restrictions before China improved its human rights record.<sup>31</sup>

As a corporate lawyer, Wu had once called himself "a foot soldier of capitalism," but he also believed "that the marketplace must be leavened by" a general sense of decency, that the United States had a moral obligation to use its purchasing power to spur democratic reform.<sup>32</sup> "I believe in engagement. I believe in trade. We're not going to shut it down, but we have to do everything we can to help create some breathing space for progressive forces within China."<sup>33</sup>



“He’s a key vote in a lot of ways,” one of Nike’s lobbyists said in the spring of 2000. “There’s a lot of attention on Mr. Wu right now.” Such a spotlight was rare for a freshman legislator, but Wu worked closely with the Democratic Whip’s office to generate opposition to the measure.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the China trade bill passed in a bipartisan vote.<sup>35</sup> It was not the last time Wu bucked powerful interests back home either. In 2005 Wu emerged as the only member of the Oregon delegation to oppose the construction of a casino in the Columbia River Gorge, protesting the possible environmental impact on the area.<sup>36</sup>

Nor was Wu afraid to cross party leaders on controversial votes. In 2003, for instance, Wu voted for a Republican bill to expand the country’s Medicare program. Democrats decried the proposal for threatening the stability of the program, and throughout the vote Wu sat stoically as Members buzzed around him. According to the *Washington Post*, a rotating cast of Democrats lobbied him, but Wu stayed silent until the final seconds when he voted yes after enough Republicans had switched their votes to pass the measure.<sup>37</sup> Wu was one of just 16 Democrats to vote for the bill, and he shocked some constituents back home. “In my view,” Wu told the *Oregonian* after the vote, “I delivered to my constituents and my conscience the right thing to do.”<sup>38</sup>

Wu also pursued a number of local projects for his district. In 2002, for instance, he introduced the Fort Clatsop National Memorial Expansion Act, authorizing the Interior Department to buy land adjacent to the existing national memorial—the location where Meriwether Lewis and William Clark had wintered during their western expedition—in order to create a trail system linking the memorial to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>39</sup> President George W. Bush signed it into law on August 21, 2002. Two years later Wu helped direct tens of millions in federal funding to companies in Oregon that were developing safety equipment for the U.S. military, and he also helped procure \$15 million to dredge the shipping canal in the Columbia River.<sup>40</sup>

For Wu, serving on the Education Committee was deeply personal, and he credited the educational

opportunities he had as a child for the success he experienced as an adult. “Education was my way up in the world,” he said during his first campaign in 1998. “To me this is not the issue du jour. This is my life.”<sup>41</sup> Wu served on multiple subcommittees: Employer-Employee Relations (106th Congress [1999–2001] and 108th through 109th Congresses [2003–2007]); Early Childhood, Youth and Families (106th Congress); 21st Century Competitiveness (107th through 109th Congresses); Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness (110th and 111th Congresses [2007–2011]); and Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions (110th and 111th Congresses).

In his first few terms, Wu introduced a number of educational initiatives, but he found limited success. His bills included proposals to reduce class size, to improve classroom technology, to create new work-study programs, and to open funding for colleges and universities “serving Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.” He also worked to simplify the process of transferring from two-year to four-year universities. His efforts to reform certain types of student loans and their tax requirements attracted a good deal of support, and he recruited 85 cosponsors for his Student Loan Fairness Act of 2005. “Making it harder for students to go to college not only undercuts our promise to individuals, it undermines America’s economy and world leadership,” he said in 2006.<sup>42</sup>

When Democrats retook the House in the 110th and 111th Congresses, Wu continued pushing the issues. He worked to expand visa quotas for immigrant employees with advanced degrees who worked for companies that funded college scholarships, and after a flood ravaged the town of Vernonia, Oregon, in 2007, Wu petitioned the Appropriations Committee in 2008 to help the school district buy new technology.<sup>43</sup> He also sought to improve the education and training opportunities available to military veterans living in rural areas.

Along with the Education Committee, the Science Committee was something of a natural home for Wu. Although he had hoped for a seat on the Judiciary Committee to work on intellectual property law, Wu settled into a number of Science subcommittees: Space



and Aeronautics (106th through 111th Congresses [1999–2011]); Technology (106th Congress); Energy (107th and 108th Congresses [2001–2005]); and Environment, Technology, and Standards (109th Congress [2005–2007]). When the Democrats regained the majority following the 2006 elections, Wu was named chairman of the Science Committee’s Subcommittee on Technology and Innovation for both the 110th and 111th Congresses, where he worked to both strengthen federal initiatives helping startup technology firms and to improve math and science education.<sup>44</sup>

Wu notched an early legislative victory in the 110th Congress when he introduced the Technology Innovation and Manufacturing Stimulation Act of 2007 (H.R. 1868) on February 15, 2007. The bill funded the National Institute of Standards and Technology for two years and created a number of new research and development programs at the 106-year-old organization. Wu’s subcommittee considered the bill two months later and, after amending it twice, passed it by voice vote. Once the measure cleared the full committee on April 30, the House approved it four days later, 385 to 23. Although the Senate never considered it, H.R. 1868 became law after the House attached it to the America COMPETES Act, which President Bush signed into law in early August 2007.<sup>45</sup>

That summer Wu won another legislative battle when the Science and Technology Committee approved his amendment to the Solar Energy and Advancement Act, clarifying language in the bill that made community colleges eligible to receive federal grants for training programs in solar power. Although the House never took up the bill, sections of it, including Wu’s amendment, were wrapped up in the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007.<sup>46</sup>

As subcommittee chairman in the 111th Congress (2009–2011), Wu wanted to leverage government resources to ignite innovation. “It meshes every priority I can think of. It meshes with everything I’ve been doing,” Wu said, noting the support from Democratic leaders. “The speaker [Nancy Pelosi] is really hip to innovation,” he pointed out. And the Obama administration, he said, also “really gets it in terms of innovation.”<sup>47</sup>

As chairman of the Technology and Innovation Subcommittee in the 111th Congress, Wu used his seat to help better prepare the country to deal with natural disasters, holding hearings on earthquakes, hurricanes, and wildfires. In an effort to coordinate the federal agencies that helped predict and respond to natural disasters, his bill, the Natural Hazards Risk Reduction Act of 2010, passed the House in a landslide vote, 335 to 50, on March 2, 2010.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately for Wu, the Senate never considered it.

In addition to natural disasters, Wu’s subcommittee conducted hearings on a multitude of different subjects from 2007 to 2011, including the effect of globalization on domestic innovation, federal initiatives for small design and tech firms, the commercial ramifications of federal research, federal cybersecurity policy, the development and regulation of new medicine, airline security technology, environmentally sensitive construction technologies, and improvements to America’s energy grid.<sup>49</sup>

Following an accusation that the press described as “an unwanted sexual encounter ... with a young California woman,” Wu resigned from the House on August 3, 2011. He had initially decided not to stand for re-election in 2012, but after pressure from Democratic leadership and in the face of a looming ethics investigation, Wu stepped down.<sup>50</sup>

## MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

**Library of Congress, Asian Division** (Washington, DC). *Oral History: 2003–2011*, 8 linear feet. The collection contains videocassettes, DVDs, photographs, and documents related to an oral history project conducted by the United States Capitol Historical Society to document the service of Asian Americans in Congress. David Wu is included among the interviewees.

## NOTES

- 1 Steve Suo, “Wu vs. Bordonaro: An Ambitious Race for First in the 1st: Wu,” 4 October 1998, *Sunday Oregonian*: A1. His hometown newspaper, the *Oregonian*, once described Wu as “a wild card.” See Jeff Kosseff, “Wu Proves to be a Wild Card in Congress,” 1 September 2006, *Oregonian*: A1.
- 2 Jeff Kosseff, “District 1—Wu Pushes Energy, Health, Education,” 21 October 2008, *Oregonian*: A4.



- 3 Suo, "Wu vs. Bordonaro, An Ambitious Race in the 1st: Wu"; "2000 Democratic National Convention Day 2, Afternoon," C-SPAN video, 3:49:03, 15 August 2000, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?158806-1/2000-democratic-convention-day-2-afternoon> (accessed 24 August 2015); *Politics in America, 2004* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2003): 840; *Almanac of American Politics, 2000* (Washington, DC: National Journal Group, Inc., 1999): 1334–1335. His father's name, and much of his family's naming history, is found in David Wu, "Newly Born on the 4th of July," 13 July 1997, *Sunday Oregonian*: C5. Wu's mother's name comes from a photo caption from "David Wu," 4 November 1998, *Oregonian*: A1.
- 4 Steve Suo, "Wu Wants to be the Talk of the Town in the 1st District: Voter Guide," 26 April 1998, *Sunday Oregonian*: D1; Jeff Kosseff, "Northwest Legislators Strut Their Science Stuff," 30 April 2007, *Oregonian*: B1.
- 5 "David Wu, Democrat Voter Guide," 26 April 1998, *Sunday Oregonian*: D9; Suo, "Wu Wants to be the Talk of the Town in the 1st District: Voter Guide."
- 6 Suo, "Wu Wants to be the Talk of the Town in the 1st District: Voter Guide"; Suo, "Wu vs. Bordonaro, An Ambitious Race in the 1st: Wu."
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Kevin Freking, "In Wake of Sex Allegation, Congressman Will Resign," 26 July 2011, Associated Press; Bill Graves, "Congressman Wu, Wife Separating," 29 December 2009, *Oregonian*: n.p.; Janie Har and Charles Pope, "Sealed Divorce Filing Said to Address Wu's Pill Use," 8 April 2011, *Oregonian*: n.p.
- 9 Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, "Elizabeth Furse," *Women in Congress*, <http://history.house.gov/People/Detail/13522?ret=True>.
- 10 *Congressional Directory*, 106th Cong. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1999): 220–221; *Almanac of American Politics, 2000*: 1334.
- 11 Jeff Maples and Harry Bodine, "Beaverton Mayor Apparently Won't Seek 1st District Seat," 24 August 1997, *Sunday Oregonian*: C2.
- 12 Don Hamilton, "Democrats Kick Off 1st District Race," 19 November 1997, *Oregonian*: E2.
- 13 Steve Suo, "1st District Race Shows Varying Styles," 15 February 1998, *Sunday Oregonian*: B7; Steve Suo, "1st District Candidates Throw Spotlight on Education," 1 March 1998, *Sunday Oregonian*: C1.
- 14 "1998 Voters' Guide: 1st Congressional District," 14 May 1998, *Oregonian* (West Zoner): 13.
- 15 Steve Suo, "Powerful PAC Puts Peters on Wish List," 14 December 1997, *Sunday Oregonian*: B2; Steve Suo, "1st District Money Race on in Big Way," 2 February 1998, *Oregonian*: A1.
- 16 "Steve Suo, "Peters Misses Deadline, Won't Appear in Voters' Guide," 22 March 1998, *Sunday Oregonian*: B2; Steve Suo, "Peters and Wu Run an Even-Money Race," 16 April 1998, *Oregonian*: D9. Quotation from "Wu for 1st District Demos," 3 May 1998, *Sunday Oregonian*: F4.
- 17 Steve Suo, "Wu Finally Wins in 1st District," 22 May 1998, *Oregonian*: D1.
- 18 Jeff Maples, "Northwest Key to Locking Up House," 18 January 1998, *Sunday Oregonian*: B2; "1st District Differences," 23 May 1998, *Oregonian*: D14; James Mayer, "Wu, Bordonaro Low-Key at Start of High-Stakes Race," 14 August 1998, *Oregonian*: C7.
- 19 Steve Suo, "Wu, Bordonaro Draw Images for Microscope," 23 September 1998, *Oregonian*: A1.
- 20 Don Hamilton, "Gephardt Makes Early Plug for Wu," 28 August 1998, *Oregonian*: C1.
- 21 Hamilton, "Gephardt Makes Early Plug for Wu."
- 22 "Poll Gives Wu Edge over Bordonaro," 11 September 1998, *Oregonian*: D12.
- 23 "David Wu: What He Says," 4 October 1998, *Sunday Oregonian*: A14.
- 24 Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>.
- 25 Charles Pope, "Wu Sees Himself at Nexus of Innovation," 12 April 2010, *Oregonian*: n.p.
- 26 *Almanac of American Politics, 2002* (Washington, DC: National Journal Group, Inc., 2001): 1276; *Politics in America, 2004*: 840.
- 27 Dave Hogan, "Wu At the Center of U.S.-China Trade Debate," 13 March 2000, *Oregonian*: A1; Don Hamilton, "Trade with China Becomes Issue in 1st District Race," 13 May 2000, *Oregonian*: D1.
- 28 For more on America's trade history with China, see James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000); Hogan, "Wu at the Center of U.S.-China Trade Debate."
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- 30 Associated Press, "Lawmaker's Opposition to China Trade Bill May Make his Re-Election Tougher," 23 April 2000, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: A5.
- 31 David Wu, "U.S. Stance on China Mistaken," 17 July 1991, *Oregonian*: D7.
- 32 David Wu, "Trade with China: Americans Should Stand Firm in Support of Human Rights," 10 November 1995, *Oregonian*: B9.



- 33 Hogan, "Wu at the Center of U.S.-China Trade Debate."
- 34 Ibid.; Associated Press, "Lawmaker's Opposition to China Trade Bill May Make His Re-Election Tougher"; Dave Hogan, "Wu, Others Take Stand Against Trade," 30 March 2000, *Oregonian*: D7; Hamilton, "Trade with China Becomes Issue in 1st District Race."
- 35 Hogan, "Wu, Others Take Stand Against Trade." For more on the politics of trade with China and the events surrounding the vote, see "Lawmakers Hand Clinton Big Victory in Granting China Permanent Trade Status," *CQ Almanac, 2000*, 56th ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 2001): ch. 20, 3–24, <http://library.cqpress.com>.
- 36 *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2007): 835.
- 37 David S. Broder, "Time Was GOP's Ally on the Vote," 23 November 2003, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 38 Quotation from Jim Barnett, "Background Check," 25 November 2003, *Oregonian*: A6; Jeff Mapes, "Wyden, Wu Test Waters Among Constituents on Medicare Bill Vote," 5 December 2003, *Oregonian*: A1; Jim Barnett and Tom Dertzel, "Congress: Looking Ahead Issues for Northwest Lawmakers Range from the Economy to Forests to ID Theft," 20 January 2004, *Oregonian*: A6; *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2005): 853.
- 39 House Committee on Resources, *Fort Clatsop National Memorial Expansion Act of 2002*, 107th Cong., 2nd sess., H. Rept. 456 (14 May 2002).
- 40 Jim Barnett, "Election 2004 1st Congressional District," 15 October 2004, *Oregonian*: A1.
- 41 Suo, "Wu vs. Bordonaro: An Ambitious Race for First in the 1st: Wu."
- 42 Jim Barnett and Michelle Cole, "Federal Cuts Sting Social Services," 3 February 2006, *Oregonian*: B1; Robert Landauer, "State Student Aid Increasingly Anemic," 16 March 2003, *Oregonian*: F4.
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- 44 "Wu for 1st District Demos"; Jeff Kosseff, "Northwest Legislators Strut Their Science Stuff," 30 April 2007, *Oregonian*: B1.
- 45 House Committee on Science and Technology, *Summary of Activities of the Committee on Science and Technology*, 110th Cong., 2nd sess., H. Rept. 935 (2009): 54–55; Public Law 110-69, 121 Stat. 572 (2007).
- 46 House Committee on Science and Technology, *Solar Energy Research and Advancement Act of 2007*, 110th Cong., 1st sess., H. Rept. 303 (3 August 2007): 52; *Summary of Activities of the Committee on Science and Technology*, H. Rept. 935: 66–67; Public Law 110-140, 121 Stat. 1492 (2007).
- 47 Pope, "Wu Sees Himself At Nexus of Innovation."
- 48 House Committee on Science and Technology, *Natural Hazards Risk Reduction Act of 2009*, Part 1, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., H. Rept. 424 (26 February 2010): 13–18, 58–64. Wu's quotation appears on page 61.
- 49 *Summary of Activities of the Committee on Science and Technology*, H. Rept. 935: 303–331; House Committee on Science and Technology, *Summary of Activities of the Committee on Science and Technology*, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., H. Rept. 698 (2010): 237–278.
- 50 Charles Pope, Beth Slovic, and Harry Esteve, "Pressure Increases for Wu to Resign," 24 July 2011, *Oregonian*: n.p.; Aaron Blake, "Oregon Rep. Wu Faces Sex Allegation," 24 July 2011, *Washington Post*: A3; Charles Pope, "Embattled Wu Won't Seek Re-Election," 25 July 2011, *Oregonian*: n.p.; Chris Cillizza, "Democratic Leaders Call for Ethics Investigation of Wu," 25 July 2011, *Washington Post*: A3; Freking, "In Wake of Sex Allegation, Congressman Will Resign."



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*Sunday Oregonian*, October 4, 1998