

# Mike Honda

1941–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2001–2017

DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

Over the course of his 16-year career in Congress, the affable Mike Honda quietly attained positions of authority in the House Democratic Caucus, serving on the party’s Steering and Policy Committee and rising to a seat on the House Appropriations Committee. An advocate of tolerant and inclusive policies, Honda led the Congressional Progressive Caucus and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus and helped found the LGBT Equality Caucus. According to a political scientist based in Honda’s hometown of San Jose, Honda “really puts the K in ‘Kumbaya.’”<sup>1</sup>

Mike Honda was born on June 27, 1941, in Walnut Grove, California. His parents, Giichi (Byron) and Fusako Honda, worked on farms in the Bay Area. When Honda was six months old, the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration incarcerated thousands of Japanese Americans following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Honda’s family was among 7,000 individuals sent to the Granada War Relocation Center in Colorado.<sup>2</sup> Honda remained imprisoned even after his father joined the U.S. Military Intelligence Service (MIS) in 1943 to teach Japanese to American servicemen. Nearly 70 years later, the elder Honda and the MIS received a Congressional Gold Medal for their service during the war.<sup>3</sup>

After the war, the family returned to the Bay Area and settled in San Jose. Mike Honda graduated from San Jose High School in 1959 and served with the Peace Corps in El Salvador from 1965 to 1967. He graduated in 1968 from San Jose State University with a bachelor’s degree.<sup>4</sup> Honda married Jeanne Yoshida in 1967, and they had two children, Mark and Michelle. A longtime educator, Jeanne died in 2004 after battling cancer.<sup>5</sup>

Honda worked as a teacher and principal in San Jose throughout the 1970s and 1980s, while earning a master’s degree from his alma mater in 1974. In 1971 Honda

joined the San Jose planning commission and served for a decade.<sup>6</sup> Honda then served on the San Jose school board for the next nine years (1981–1990) before winning election to the Santa Clara county board of supervisors. In 1996 Honda was elected to the California state assembly, representing San Jose.<sup>7</sup>

In December 1999, after his local Congressman Thomas Campbell opted to run for the Senate, Honda declared his candidacy for the open House seat. Both the national Democratic Party and President William J. (Bill) Clinton offered support.<sup>8</sup> After winning the party nomination, Honda—whose campaign platforms included more funding for America’s school systems, improved civil rights protections, and open trade with China—faced off against Republican Jim Cunneen in the general election. Honda won with 54 percent of the vote. For much of his career, Honda won re-election by overwhelming majorities, often taking upwards of 70 percent of the vote.<sup>9</sup>

Centered in Santa Clara County, California’s 15th District encompassed parts of Silicon Valley, Santa Clara, and San Jose. Although redistricting shifted its boundaries and renumbered it the 17th District, high-tech manufacturing and computer science continued to dominate the local economy. The district had the highest concentration of Asian residents anywhere in mainland America.<sup>10</sup>

In the House, Honda served on several different committees: Budget (107th Congress [2001–2003] and 112th Congress [2011–2013]); Science (107th through 109th Congresses [2001–2007]); and Transportation and Infrastructure (107th through 109th Congresses [2001–2007]). Starting with the 110th Congress (2007–2009), when Democrats regained the majority, Honda served on the powerful Appropriations Committee for the balance of his career.<sup>11</sup> In the 112th Congress, Democrats named him Ranking Member of the Legislative Branch Subcommittee.





In the 114th Congress (2015–2017), he served as Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies.

Honda used his committee assignments to pursue the interests of his tech-savvy district and fought for improved support for nanotechnology.<sup>12</sup> But with new technology came new security gaps, so Honda pressed for more funding to protect individual identities and guard America's computer grid, including the Cyber Security Research and Development Act.<sup>13</sup>

The former teacher also focused on educational opportunities. Honda led the creation of the National Commission on Educational Equity and Excellence to make recommendations for improving education access to the U.S. Department of Education.

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Honda recalled Japanese-American internment and warned against renewed racial profiling.<sup>14</sup> In 2002 he voted against the authorization for the use of military force against Iraq and later worked to improve security at the U.S. Capitol.<sup>15</sup>

As a leader in the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Honda disagreed with President Barack Obama's administration on its combat policy in Afghanistan and later chaired the Progressive Caucus's Budget Task Force.<sup>16</sup>

Honda overcame an early fear of public speaking by singing karaoke, and he continued to sing in Washington. "It is a great leveler," he said. "Everyone makes themselves vulnerable."<sup>17</sup> On the Hill he developed a reputation as a coalition builder, serving as the chairman of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, where he worked on immigration policy. Honda championed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights while in Congress. He created the Anti-Bullying Caucus and the Transgender Equality Task Force in his fight to protect those who faced discrimination, such as his transgender grandchild. He also helped found the LGBT Equality Caucus.<sup>18</sup>

But changes back home to both California's primary system and to the makeup of Honda's constituency combined to make him electorally vulnerable. Numerous young Democrats in the Bay Area had become restive over the lack of turnover among an aging group of leaders. In

2011 the state of California replaced its closed primary system with a nonpartisan open primary that pitted the top two contenders against each other in the fall, regardless of party affiliation. In 2012 a young Democrat, Eric Swalwell, defeated longtime Democratic Representative Pete Stark under these new rules.<sup>19</sup>

During this time, Honda's district had become increasingly diverse. The Asian-Indian and Filipino-American population in the district had quadrupled, and the Chinese- and Vietnamese-American population had tripled. "Asian-American politics is a lot different than other ethno-American politics," Professor Melissa Michelson of Menlo College said. "It's a much weaker pan-ethnicity because there are so many different languages, different religions." Honda, in his early 70s, now faced a challenge from a younger Asian-Indian Democrat, Ro Khanna.<sup>20</sup> Khanna had worked in President Obama's Commerce Department from 2009 to 2011 and was the highest-ranking Asian Indian American in the U.S. government.<sup>21</sup>

Honda won the June 3, 2014, primary with 49 percent of the vote (Khanna took 27 percent), but because neither candidate captured a majority, the two faced off again in the general election that November. Election forecasters expected Khanna to pick up both Republican votes and support from the other Democratic candidates.<sup>22</sup> In late September, the Khanna campaign filed a complaint with the House Ethics Committee against Honda for using his official staff for campaign purposes.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Honda won re-election in a close race that was not decided until the Friday morning after Election Day.<sup>24</sup>

When Honda announced his candidacy for re-election in June 2015, Khanna had already made it clear that he intended to challenge Honda again.<sup>25</sup> In late July, however, the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct announced that it would look into the 2014 complaint made by Khanna because of findings made by the Office of Congressional Ethics, its independent investigatory arm.<sup>26</sup> After edging out Honda in the June 2016 primary, Khanna beat Honda in the fall general election with 61 percent of the vote.<sup>27</sup>





## NOTES

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AN ADVOCATE OF  
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AND HELPED FOUND THE  
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