

Anh (Joseph) Cao

1967–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2009–2011
REPUBLICAN FROM LOUISIANA

Anh (Joseph) Cao, a refugee of the Vietnam War and one-time Jesuit seminarian, pulled off an improbable election victory to serve in the House of Representatives in the 111th Congress (2009–2011). Running as a Republican in a historically Democratic-leaning district, Cao (pronounced “gow”) dispatched a nine-term incumbent to represent much of the city of New Orleans. As the first Vietnamese American to serve in Congress, his win highlighted the new political activism of the Vietnamese community in post-Katrina New Orleans. Cao’s idealism, notion of service to the indigent, and willingness to cross party lines to support measures he felt best met the needs of his largely poor, minority constituency often put him at odds with his party’s leaders on health care and economic stimulus during the Great Recession. “I don’t want to conform to any ideology, to be put into a little corner,” Cao said shortly after his election.¹ A longtime political associate observed, “It’s hard to categorize him as a Republican or Democrat. In his heart, Anh is a Jesuit.”²

Anh (Joseph) Cao was born on March 13, 1967, in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), Vietnam. Cao was the fifth of eight children. His father served as an officer in the South Vietnamese Army and was later imprisoned by North Vietnamese officials during the Vietnam War. At age eight, Cao immigrated to the United States with two siblings, older sister Thanh and younger brother Khanh. During the Fall of Saigon in 1975, as North Vietnamese troops overran South Vietnam’s capital, Cao’s mother took the three children to a nearby airfield and, while she remained behind, spirited them onto a military transport with their aunt. The younger brother lived in Guam with the aunt; the sister went to Florida to live with a foster family; and Anh lived for the first several years in the United States with an uncle in Goshen, Indiana, before

they relocated to Texas. Cao learned English from his elementary school classmates in Goshen.³ He graduated from Jersey Village High School in Jersey Village, Texas, in the northwestern suburbs of Houston. He earned a bachelor of science degree in physics from Baylor University in Waco, Texas, in 1990.

Cao’s Catholic faith had a profound influence on him as he came of age and later shaped his views on social policy. After college, he entered the seminary with the Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuit order. His first assignment was at Grand Coteau, Louisiana, to begin training for the priesthood. For the next two years, the Jesuits sent Cao to Brownsville, Texas; Montgomery, Alabama; Tijuana, Mexico; and Hong Kong, China, to help the poor. To further his religious studies, he earned a master’s degree in philosophy from the Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York City in 1995. He was then sent to the Jesuit-founded Loyola University in New Orleans to study law.⁴

During his outreach to the poor, Cao had an experience that altered his path to the priesthood. “In life’s journey, you sometimes reach a level of uncertainty that you have to make such a leap,” he once explained. “I was working in extremely poor conditions, and I wanted to promote social change. I came to believe, over the course of two or three years, that the best way to do that would be to enter public office. It would also allow me to have a family—the celibate life can be quite lonely. So I drafted a course of action for myself to enter politics. But it was a quite painful discernment. It implied I would have to leave the seminary. I would have to start life over again. I would have to make that leap of faith.”⁵ In 1996 he left the Jesuits and, while reestablishing himself, lived with his sister Thanh in Northern Virginia. A year later, Cao returned to Loyola and earned his law degree in 2000. He worked as an immigration lawyer and personal injury lawyer. While





studying law, he met a pharmacy student, Hieu (Kate) Hoang, who had once been one of his catechism students at the local Catholic church. They married in 2001 and later had two daughters, Sophia and Betsy.

Cao's initial experience with politics came at the local level as a community advocate for the approximately 15,000 Vietnamese who lived in suburbs east of New Orleans. In 2005 Hurricane Katrina devastated the city and large swaths of southern Louisiana, flooded Cao's home, and left his neighborhood in tatters. Afterwards, many of the city's 460,000 residents fled. By some estimates, only 190,000 remained. But the Vietnamese community stayed virtually intact and rebuilt. The storm and its aftermath also forced that small community of fishermen and business owners to become, according to one observer, more vocal in asserting its interests.⁶

Cao's first run for political office was inspired when, in early 2006, the city announced plans to place a waste landfill in their community. Cao led the opposition and provided legal advice to fight the move. At one meeting between city residents and federal officials, Congressman Mike Honda of California, head of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, urged the Vietnamese community in New Orleans to become more politically active.⁷ In 2007 Cao heeded that call. The city scrapped its plan for the landfill because of the protests. That success propelled Cao to run for a seat in the Louisiana state house of representatives. With no organized support, he ran as an independent and finished fifth in a six-candidate field. The *Times-Picayune* later described it as an "inauspicious" political start.⁸ But Cao's effort won the notice of Bryan Wagner, a Republican and former city councilman in the 1980s—reportedly, the first to be elected to the council since Reconstruction. He persuaded Cao, a lifelong independent, to join the Republican Party.

In 2008 Cao challenged nine-term, Democrat incumbent William Jefferson. Jefferson, an Ivy League-trained lawyer, had been a force in local politics for two decades and was immensely popular with the city's majority black population in no small measure because he was the first African American ever to represent the city

and the first since Reconstruction to represent Louisiana in Congress.⁹ His district took in almost all of the city of New Orleans, including the French Quarter, sweeping out far to the east to encompass the less populous portions of Orleans Parish. It also swung across the Mississippi River to take in several West Bank towns and then west through Jefferson Parish and into portions of the towns of Metairie and Kenner, the largely white suburbs west of the city. The total population of the heavily Democratic district was 60 percent African American.

Recent scandals hobbled Jefferson's re-election bid. In 2006 the Federal Bureau of Investigation raided his House office and his home, where agents found more than \$90,000 in cash stuffed into his freezer, part of a larger amount of \$400,000 that the government claimed was bribe money from contractors seeking his help to secure federal government work in Africa. The Democratic Caucus stripped him of his seat on the Ways and Means Committee in May 2006, and a little more than a year later, the Justice Department indicted Jefferson on bribery charges.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he did not resign from the House and while his case worked its way through the courts, Jefferson eventually prevailed in a competitive 2008 Democratic primary.¹¹

Meanwhile, Cao ran a quiet campaign and won the Republican primary unopposed. His under-the-radar approach was strategic, he later recalled, meant to lull Democrats into a false sense of security. "We sat there and waited, we didn't do any hoopla," Cao noted. "We stayed low profile."¹² His areas of local focus were coastal restoration, levee protection, and redevelopment of New Orleans after Katrina. Education and health care policy were two other areas of interest for Cao.

After Jefferson won his primary, Cao's campaign went into high gear. "We started sprinting," Cao recalled, buying advertising time to highlight Cao's character and honesty and stressing the need for open government. Cao won the backing of several high-profile politicians and received a helping hand from Mother Nature. When Hurricane Gustav forced the postponement of the Louisiana primary elections in early September, it set the entire process back

a month. This separated the 2nd District election from the presidential election in early November, where the African-American Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, won by large margins on his way to his historic election as President, a trend which likely would have helped Jefferson in the House race.

As it was, Jefferson's campaign ran out of resources, and the postponement complicated his task by dampening voter turnout. Additionally, white Democrats largely repulsed by Jefferson's ethics problems either did not vote or defected to Cao. Turnout in the postponed general election on December 6, 2008, was light, with little more than 65,000 voters casting ballots. Cao carried the more conservative Jefferson Parish outside the city with 60 percent of the vote. Jefferson won Orleans Parish, but only with 51 percent. Just a month earlier in the presidential election, Obama won Orleans Parish with nearly 80 percent of the vote.¹³ Cao won the overall with 49.5 percent to Jefferson's 46.8 percent. Green Party and Progressive Party candidates split the remainder.¹⁴ Observers hailed it as the biggest upset of the 2008 election cycle and dubbed Cao the "dragon slayer."¹⁵

Cao's election also garnered headlines because it made him the first Vietnamese American ever to serve in Congress. At a post-election celebration, Cao told a crowd, "Never in my life did I think I could be a future congressman. The American dream is well and alive."¹⁶ A point of pride for Vietnamese Americans nationally, his victory also was touted by congressional Republicans as the future of their party. "As House Republicans look ahead to the next two years, the Cao victory is a symbol of what can be achieved when we think big, present a positive alternative, and work aggressively to earn the trust of the American people," House GOP Leader John Boehner of Ohio told his colleagues shortly after the election.¹⁷ He titled that memo to House Republicans "The Future is Cao."¹⁸

Others saw that future as being quite delimited, judging Cao's victory to be a one-off event: a Republican elected in an overwhelmingly Democratic district against a damaged, weakened opponent. Just the day after his election Cao was pegged as a "short-timer," an "aberration," a "one-term

wonder," and Democrats instantly targeted him for the next election cycle.¹⁹

Shortly after the opening of the 111th Congress (2009–2011), Cao won assignments to three committees that had direct bearing on his port city district: Homeland Security; Transportation and Infrastructure; and Oversight and Government Reform. Yet, despite the GOP's promotion of his historic election and his strong set of committee assignments, Cao was an uncertain ally for party leaders from the start. They may have claimed him as their future, but he soon proved to be a difficult vote, sometimes flirting with and at other times joining Democrats on some of the 111th Congress's landmark legislation.

In the wake of the 2008 recession, the first major bill considered by the Democratic-controlled Congress and backed vigorously by the White House was an economic stimulus bill widely seen as the public-focused companion to the large lifeline (Troubled Asset Relief Program) that Congress threw to the big financial institutions in the fall of 2008. Believing they had been cut out of the drafting process, House Republicans, led by GOP Whip Eric Cantor of Virginia, declared that no Republican would vote for the bill.

By the eve of the vote, Cao, ever watchful for federal money to help his district continue its Katrina recovery, was the lone Republican still offering his support. The White House, eager to say that the measure had bipartisan support, lobbied Cao intensely. He later recalled that White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel "insinuated" that Cao's vote might translate into re-election support. But on the day of the vote, when Cao realized that New Orleans would get only 20 percent of the average amount that other congressional districts would receive from the bill (\$330 million as opposed to \$1.7 billion), he joined every other Republican in voting no.²⁰

Philosophically, Cao also seemed to diverge from his party on one of the defining political issues of the decade. Whereas Republicans uniformly rejected a major health care reform law backed by Democrats, Cao believed such legislation was necessary and would benefit his constituents. "I listened to the countless stories of Orleans



and Jefferson parish citizens whose health care costs are exploding—if they are able to obtain health care at all,” Cao explained. “Louisianans need real options for primary care, for mental health care, and for expanded health care for seniors and children.”²¹ Years of tending to the poor and participating in the post-Katrina recovery in New Orleans informed that viewpoint, but Cao’s vigorous anti-abortion position also shaped his vision of health care reform. The caveat was that he would never support a bill which allowed federal money to be used to conduct abortions.

Political calculations weighed heavily on Cao, too. In August 2009, he candidly stated, “I know that voting against the health care bill will probably be the death of my political career, but I have to live with myself.” He later had to walk back that statement because supporters and donors perceived that he was throwing in the towel on his re-election chances.²² Moreover, Republican leaders placed intense pressure on him to maintain uniform GOP solidarity against the measure. With Whip Cantor at his side on the House Floor seeking to convince him to vote no, Cao nevertheless cast a yes vote and was the only Republican who voted for the bill that passed the House in the fall of 2009. Afterward he explained that he voted in the best interests of his constituents: “Today, I obtained a commitment from President Obama that he and I will work together to address the critical health care issues of Louisiana including the FMAP [Federal Medical Assistance Percentage] crisis and community disaster loan forgiveness, as well as issues related to Charity and Methodist Hospitals. And, I call on my constituents to support me as I work with him on these issues. . . . I have always said that I would put aside partisan wrangling to do the business of the people. My vote tonight was based on my priority of doing what is best for my constituents.”²³

Senate revisions to the health care bill eventually forced Cao to reconsider his support. While he applauded President Obama “for his strength and determination in pushing for health care reform in the face of great adversity,” he balked at the latest version of the bill that had removed Hyde Amendment language banning the use of federal dollars for abortions and also stripped

protections for medical providers who refused to assist in abortion procedures because of personal conscience. He called the changes “devastating in their effects” and pulled his support.²⁴

On the day before the vote, Cao expressed empathy with those priced out of the health care market, but stressed the moral imperatives that drove his opposition. “I understand the crushing costs of health care. I understand that we have to fight the insurance companies. But I also understand that abortion is wrong,” he said on the floor. Ultimately, Cao voted no.²⁵

Nevertheless, the House passed the Affordable Care Act and President Obama signed it into law in March 2010. The net effect of Cao’s waffling was to enrage at one point or another both conservatives and progressives in his district.

On other hot-button social issues, Cao was far out of step with social conservatives. He cosponsored and voted for the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 (Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Law) that provided federal and local law enforcement with more resources to investigate and prevent hate crimes and stiffened federal criminal penalties for individuals convicted of carrying out hate crimes. He also supported legislation to repeal the U.S. military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that prevented gay men and women from serving openly.

Cao was an ardent advocate for his constituents—never more so than in the wake of the single most salient event to affect them during the 111th Congress: the massive, slow-motion disaster that unfolded when the British Petroleum (BP) Deepwater Horizon wellhead spewed millions of gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico over the course of a month in the late spring of 2010. In June, when Members of Congress grilled BP America President Lamar McKay over his company’s handling of the massive spill disaster, Cao noted that, while some Members of Congress were calling for McKay to resign, “in the Asian culture we do things differently. During the Samurai days, we just give you a knife and ask you to commit hara-kiri.”²⁶

Cao sought to protect the watermen in his district, many of them Vietnamese who were virtually put out of business. He called for swift disbursements from the \$20

billion fund that BP had agreed to set aside for victim compensation and environmental remediation efforts. Along with Mike Honda of California, the chairman of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, he called for better communication from BP and the federal government, including bilingual information where appropriate—important for many in the Vietnamese community—immediate financial assistance and job training, and the direct intervention of federal agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Health and Human Services to address public health concerns and long-term environmental damages. “This nation knows now how devastating the oil spill has become for the Gulf’s environmental ecosystem,” Cao and Honda wrote in an editorial. “What it has yet to realize, however, is the potential impending devastation to the other equally vital onshore ecosystems—social, economic, and cultural—the most vulnerable of which is the Southeast Asian and African-American fishing and seafood industry communities.”²⁷

Cao spoke on the floor on dozens of occasions during his single term in the House, but with few exceptions, his remarks were usually relegated to one-minute speeches. No significant piece of legislation bore his name or primary sponsorship. While he introduced 22 measures, from protesting Vietnamese human rights abuses to improving the Federal Emergency Management Agency and disaster response, to allowing states and local governments to revise disaster recovery and mitigation plans, none became law. A handful of his amendments to major bills were passed on the House Floor, including an amendment to the Small Business Jobs Act of 2010 that provided federal funding to organizations and institutions serving small businesses along the Gulf Coast that had suffered from the oil spill.²⁸

From his election night in 2008, Democrats marked Cao for the 2010 election cycle. Cedric Richmond, a longtime state representative, announced in September 2009 that he would seek the Democratic nomination to challenge Cao. Richmond had opposed Jefferson in the crowded 2008 Democratic primary, but had fallen short due to lack of name recognition. Even before Cao’s

turnabout on the health care legislation, Richmond argued that Cao’s vote against the 2009 stimulus, which included money for coastal restoration and flood prevention, threatened the well-being of New Orleans’s residents.²⁹

The electoral math for Cao to win re-election was complicated enough, but his position on hot-button issues also led social conservatives within his own party to target him. Conservative Christian interest groups ran ads during the campaign attacking his record of support for gay rights. One demanded, “Who is Rep. Joseph Cao representing in Washington?” before claiming that he sought “to advance the radical social agendas of homosexual activists” by placing voters’ “personal liberties at jeopardy.”³⁰

In an historic election that yielded Republicans a gain of 65 seats, sweeping them back into the House majority, Cao was one of the few GOP losses on the national map. Richmond prevailed handily, winning 65 percent of the vote to Cao’s 33 percent.³¹ Cao gave no farewell address in the House Chamber, nor were any made by colleagues on his behalf. After he left the House in January 2011, Cao returned to New Orleans, where he currently practices law. In 2016 he ran as an unsuccessful Republican candidate for a U.S. Senate seat from Louisiana.

NOTES

- 1 Adam Nossiter, “History and Amazement in House Race Outcome,” 8 December 2008, *New York Times*: A18.
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- 3 Neely Tucker, “The Possible Dream: Louisiana’s Historic New Congressman Seems to Surprise Everybody but Himself,” 30 December 2008, *Washington Post*: C1; Nossiter, “History and Amazement in House Race Outcome.” See also Gerard Shields, “Difficult Early Life Forged Cao’s Character,” 18 January 2009, *Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA): A12.
- 4 “History,” on Anh (Joseph) Cao’s campaign website, accessed 5 November 2008, <http://www.voteforanhcao.com/mission.html> (site discontinued).
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- 7 Tucker, "The Possible Dream."
- 8 Michelle Krupa, "Anh 'Joseph' Cao Beats Rep. William Jefferson in 2nd Congressional District," 6 December 2008, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*: n.p.
- 9 See Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, "Black-American Representatives and Senators by State and Territory, 1870–Present," <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Data/Black-American-Representatives-and-Senators-by-State-and-Territory/>. For more on Louisiana's only other black representative until Jefferson's election in 1990, see Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, "Charles Edmund Nash," *Black Americans in Congress*, <http://history.house.gov/People/Detail/18846>.
- 10 *Almanac of American Politics, 2010* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, Inc., 2009): 660.
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- 16 Rick Jervis, "Vietnamese Hail Cao's Win over Jefferson in La.," 8 December 2008, *USA Today*: n.p.
- 17 John McCardle, "Cao Pegged as Short-Timer Following Historic Win," 9 December 2008, *Roll Call*: n.p.
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- 20 Bob Woodward, *The Price of Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012): 16–18, 21.
- 21 "Health Care's LONE Republican Supporter Is Rep. Anh 'Joseph' Cao," 8 November 2009, *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/11/08/joseph-cao-health-cares-l_n_349779.html (accessed 24 February 2011).
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