

Hansen Clarke

1957–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2011–2013

DEMOCRAT FROM MICHIGAN

In 2010 Hansen Clarke unseated a seven-term incumbent in the Democratic primary before going on to represent the city of Detroit in the U.S. House of Representatives for one term. His path to the House was as unique as it was unconventional. Clarke had a casual, approachable way about him, and he asked people to refer to him simply as “Hansen.”¹ In 2005 the *Detroit Free Press* called his life an “underdog story ... a classic,” an “up-from-the-east-side hard-luck tale.”² Indeed, the struggle of his childhood shaped his political philosophy and oriented him toward policies that he hoped would help both Michigan’s disadvantaged citizens and its businesses.

Hansen Clarke was born Molik Hashim in Detroit, Michigan, on March 2, 1957, the son of an African-American mother and a Bangladeshi father.³ His father, Mozaffar Ali Hashim, worked at a Detroit automobile factory, but he died when Clarke was only eight years old, leaving his mother, Thelma Clarke, to raise him on a school crossing guard’s salary.⁴ His neighbors stepped in to help, and when he was 14 years old Clarke moved east to New Hampshire to attend Phillips Exeter Academy, one of the country’s elite high schools. Surrounded by wealth and prestige, Clarke felt out of place and, after two years, returned home to Detroit. “All I knew was this block,” he said years later, standing outside his childhood house in what one national magazine called “one of the toughest neighborhoods on the east side.”⁵ Phillips Exeter might as well have been a world away. “I couldn’t handle it,” he recalled.⁶

Clarke eventually accepted a scholarship to Cornell University and moved back east to study art.⁷ Tragedy struck when his mother died in 1976. As he grieved, Clarke returned to Detroit and scraped by, eventually going on government assistance. In 1978 he changed his name to Hansen Clarke to honor his mother. Ultimately, he made it back to Cornell with the help of his godmother

and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in fine arts in 1984. Three years later Clarke earned a law degree from Georgetown University in Washington, DC.⁸

After law school, Clarke began practicing as an attorney. He cemented his local public service credentials while running the Detroit district office of U.S. Representative John Conyers of Michigan and working for Wayne County Executive Edward H. McNamara.⁹ Clarke made the jump to elective office in the early 1990s, serving in the Michigan state house of representatives from 1991 to 1992 and again from 1999 to 2002. In 2003 he began an eight-year stint in the state senate.

In 2005 Clarke ran a very personal race for mayor of Detroit, filling his campaign with vignettes from his childhood and reflecting on the example set by his mother. As a candidate, Clarke promised to clean up Detroit and hoped to convince people to stay in the city rather than move to the suburbs. He ran as a reform candidate, pledging to dismantle the patronage system in city hall and “change the political culture of the city.”¹⁰ Despite his populist message, Clarke finished fourth in the city primary.¹¹

After the election, Clarke returned to the state senate and his seat on the appropriations committee, where he protected funding for his beleaguered city.¹² In 2008, as Michigan reeled from the housing crisis, he introduced a popular bill to protect homeowners in foreclosure from being evicted.¹³ Later that year, he pushed the governor to overhaul the Detroit public schools as the city system struggled financially.¹⁴

By 2010, as term limits were about to force Clarke out of the state senate, he flirted with a run for governor before deciding to challenge Congresswoman Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, who had represented Detroit in the U.S. House since 1997.¹⁵ In the race for the 13th District, Clarke had an early advantage over Kilpatrick, whose son





had previously been mayor of Detroit and faced a slew of federal corruption charges.¹⁶

Clarke's campaign for the House harkened back to his earlier run for mayor, focusing on the emotion and power of his life story. At the heart of the 13th District was his old neighborhood, which had been plagued by violence and loss over the years.¹⁷ It was a struggle Clarke knew intimately.¹⁸ "All my life I've been afraid that I'm going to wind up on the streets," he said in 2010.¹⁹ Despite having a law degree from one of the country's leading schools, Clarke held on to his taxi license for two decades just in case things went south again.²⁰ "I still hate that I had to leave," Clarke confessed during his earlier mayoral campaign. "I wanted to make it here, to show what could be done in Detroit."²¹

Clarke ran perhaps the most unique race of the 2010 election cycle. "I'm from the neighborhood," he reminded his local paper. "So I don't think we're going to need a lot of money for commercials."²² Instead, as reported by the *Detroit Free Press*, he "used an unconventional campaign strategy, enlisting homeless people and panhandlers to spread his message, going to soup kitchens and shelters to tell people they could, in small and large ways, control their own fate."²³ Clarke's empowerment narrative allowed him to reach voters everywhere and seemed to blur conventional party divisions, never more directly during the election than when he described his brand of politics as equal parts "Newt Gingrich and Malcolm X."²⁴

Clarke's House campaign received a boost shortly before the primary when Detroit's major newspaper, the *Detroit Free Press*, endorsed him. Clarke cast himself as the city's best shot to replace Kilpatrick in the House and a few days later won with 47 percent of the vote, which, in the heavily Democratic 13th District, was tantamount to winning the general election. "This was bigger than an opponent and not about the incumbent or a family," Clarke said the night he won. "You must be mindful that elected officials come and go, but people, not politicians, always have the power."²⁵ In the general election, Clarke buried his Republican opponent, John Hauler, with 79 percent of the vote.²⁶

Clarke's message to Detroit had always been resilience. Even after his victory he continued to appeal directly to people who struggled to get by but who time and again rebounded from setback. Clarke promised to represent every part of his constituency, from rich to poor, but he was not afraid to cast his story in stark relief to the wealthier Detroit suburbs which had been devastated by the housing market collapse. "The people out there were making six figures a year and now a lot of them are in foreclosure," he said to a homeless audience shortly after the November elections. "They think this is the end of the world for them, but you and I know better. People like us are strong, not despite what we have been through, but because of it."²⁷

Although Democrats had lost their House majority in the 2010 elections, Clarke had a full legislative agenda when he arrived in Washington: job creation, foreclosure relief, and insurance premium reform.²⁸ For Clarke, the act of legislating was about people and "knowing what they're going through." But Clarke also pointed out that he was not in Washington merely to represent the interests of the underserved. "I've got to work for the employers as well," he observed, "because that's the only way my folks are going to get employed."²⁹

In the House, Democratic leaders appointed Clarke to two committees, the Committee on Homeland Security and the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology.³⁰ On the Homeland Security Committee, Clarke served on the Border and Maritime Security Subcommittee and the Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications Subcommittee. On the Science, Space, and Technology Committee, Clarke served only on the Subcommittee on Research and Science Education.

That Clarke was not appointed to one of the powerful money committees did not stop him from trying to pump federal tax dollars directly to Detroit. Shortly before he took office, Clarke told *Newsweek* magazine, "I'm a Democrat because I believe tax dollars can be used for the common good, but between Milton Friedman and John Maynard Keynes I come right down the middle. As a progressive I want to pay down the debt. I think it can be done by cutting some taxes, and by putting people back to work."³¹



By the fall of his first term, Clarke had sketched out a revolutionary plan using a similar principle to rescue his hometown: the federal government would return to the city every single tax dollar it collected from Detroit for five years. Clarke estimated his program would be worth \$2 billion a year and believed it would balance the city's budget, cover many of Detroit's pension plans, and help pay down its debt. Detroit would also continue to receive the same Medicare and Social Security grants it had always received. To encourage people to move back into the city, Clarke wanted Detroit to slash its property taxes and abolish its personal income tax. Clarke figured Detroit could be the country's pilot program which, if it succeeded, Congress could apply to other cities.³²

Clarke's rescue plan never made it beyond the idea stage, but he was active on a number of legislative fronts. During the 112th Congress (2011–2013), he introduced 26 bills, four House Resolutions, and 12 floor amendments. Some were broad, ambitious pieces of legislation, like his Detroit Growth and Sustainability Act, which authorized \$500 million in loans to his hometown. Others were more itemized efforts, like his push to suspend the import fees on products used by the auto industry. Clarke spoke passionately on the floor about reducing America's debt burden, improving America's educational system, and protecting America's labor unions.³³ He also offered floor amendments to appropriations bills to boost funding for certain programs, including \$5 million for the Women, Infants, and Children Farmers Market Nutrition Program, which the House approved as part of the consolidated funding bill in late 2011. In the summer of 2011, he teamed up with Republican Representative Dan Benishek of northern Michigan to tour each other's district and encourage job creation across the state.³⁴

Clarke's time on Capitol Hill was cut short, however, after Michigan lost a seat in the House following the 2010 Census. When the state redrew its district boundaries, the mapmakers moved much of Clarke's core support to the newly redrawn 14th District. In August 2011, Clarke announced he would seek the seat in the new 14th District. By fall he faced a tough primary contest against

multiple candidates, including another Democratic House incumbent, Gary Peters, who had formerly represented the 9th District.³⁵ During the campaign, Clarke refused to participate in any of the primary debates after reports surfaced claiming that his mother's death certificate recorded her race as white. Clarke's campaign released a statement in late June 2012 criticizing "the use of racist rhetoric and race-baiting" during the campaign, and a few days later came out with even stronger language accusing his opponents of going "after my dead parents" because "they can't attack my record."³⁶ By early August, however, polls showed Clarke trailing by a wide margin, and he was never able to make up the difference. Clarke did well among voters in the city, but he could not match Peters's support in the adjacent suburbs.³⁷

After losing in the Democratic primary, Clarke finished out the 112th Congress. Two years later, when Peters announced he would run for the Senate, Clarke announced his candidacy for Michigan's 14th District.³⁸ Over the summer of 2014, polls showed him with a comfortable lead and wide name recognition.³⁹ Clarke ran on a plan to help lower America's student-loan debt, but after national women's organizations threw their support behind his main opponent in the primary, Southfield mayor Brenda Lawrence, Clarke saw his numbers slip.⁴⁰ On August 5, he lost in the Democratic primary.⁴¹

NOTES

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- 3 Dawson Bell, "Clarke Runs His Campaign Like He Lives, from the Heart," 20 July 2005, *Detroit Free Press*: 1.
- 4 "Rep. Kilpatrick Vanquisher, Hansen Clarke, Has Some Story," 4 August 2010, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2010/08/04/128978167/rep-kilpatrick-vanquisher-hansen-clarke-has-some-story> (accessed 20 March 2015); Aziz Haniffa, "Hansen Hashim Clarke," 25 February 2011, *India Abroad* (New York): A17-A18.
- 5 Zev Chafets, "Rep. Hansen Clarke and Detroit's New Renaissance," 29 December 2010, *Newsweek*, <http://www.newsweek.com/rep->



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 - 7 Bell, “Clarke Runs His Campaign Like He Lives, from the Heart.” See also “Media Center: Biography,” on Hansen Clarke’s official campaign website, accessed 21 August 2015, <http://www.hansenclarkeforcongress.com/media-center/>.
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 - 12 “Free Press Endorsements,” 6 August 2006, *Detroit Free Press*: 2; “Questions & Answers: State Sen. Hansen Clarke, Find the Waste, Serve the Citizens.”
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 - 16 Chris Christoff, “Clarke Quits 1 Race, Weighs Another,” 16 January 2010, *Detroit Free Press*: A3; Kathleen Gray, “Clarke Is Challenging Rep. Kilpatrick For Seat,” 9 March 2010, *Detroit Free Press*: A3; Todd Spangler, “Rep. Kilpatrick Has Smaller War Chest Than ‘08,” 16 July 2010, *Detroit Free Press*: A6.
 - 17 Bell, “Clarke Runs His Campaign Like He Lives, from the Heart”; Campbell, “Yes, Politicos Really Do Have a Heart.”
 - 18 Kathleen Gray, “Tough Past Fueled Clarke’s Victory,” 5 August 2010, *Detroit Free Press*: A10.
 - 19 Chafets, “Rep. Hansen Clarke and Detroit’s New Renaissance.”
 - 20 Bell, “Clarke Runs His Campaign Like He Lives, from the Heart.”
 - 21 Christian, “Clarke Has Done His Neighborhood Proud.”
 - 22 Gray, “Clarke Is Challenging Rep. Kilpatrick.”
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 - 26 Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>. Clarke won 100,885 out of 127,076 votes. Four other candidates took a combined two percent of the overall vote.
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 - 29 Todd Spangler, “Mr. Clarke Goes to Washington,” 21 November 2010, *Detroit Free Press*: A25.
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 - 31 Chafets, “Rep. Hansen Clarke and Detroit’s New Renaissance.”
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- 39 Kathleen Gray, “Clarke Surges Ahead in 14th District House Race,” 16 July 2014, *Detroit Free Press*: A6.
- 40 Kathleen Gray, “Money, Endorsements, Voter Outreach Key as Race Reaches Final Days,” 31 July 2014, *Detroit Free Press*: A9; Kathleen Gray, “Hobbs, Lawrence In Tough U.S. House Battle,” 6 August 2014, *Detroit Free Press*: A10.
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