

BILL NELSON (D-FL)**IN OFFICE**

Up for re-election in 2018

3rd Term

Re-elected in 2012

SENIORITY RANK

23

Out of 100


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BGOV BIOGRAPHY

By Steve Walsh, Bloomberg News

Bill Nelson, Florida's senior senator, flew on a space shuttle mission while a House member and calls himself "the leading congressional expert on NASA."

The nation's space program, while playing a diminishing role in Florida's economy, remains a top priority for Nelson, along with the nation's elderly and the military.

His committee assignments have given him a role in each of those topics.

Nelson was chairman from 2007 through 2014 of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee's Science and Space Subcommittee that has jurisdiction over NASA. He held a comparable post when he served in the House, which helped him cadge a ride on the space shuttle Columbia in 1986, spending six days in orbit.

In recent years, Nelson urged decision-makers on and off Capitol Hill to plan for a post-shuttle space program. The shuttle's final mission returned to Earth in July 2011, and Nelson said he hoped the push for frugality by Congress wouldn't doom America's space efforts.

The Commerce panel in 2013 approved a two-year reauthorization bill for NASA that would give the agency flexibility to determine how best to plan for a manned mission to Mars while at the same time authorizing continued emphasis on "earth sciences," including research about climate change and improving weather forecasting.

Nelson supports development of a commercial space flight program, including privately launched manned flights to the International Space Station, with the Kennedy Space Center the site of many launches, both private and by NASA. Nelson has favored building a new "heavy-lift" rocket capable of launching manned spacecraft beyond Earth orbit to destinations such as Mars. The committee's approval of the bill was narrow in the face of Republican objections to the authorized funding level. The measure didn't make it to the Senate floor.

Nelson acknowledged that whatever transpires, Florida's Space Coast won't reach previous levels of activity or employment.

He had been in line to assume the chairmanship of the Commerce panel in the 114th Congress had Democrats retained control of the chamber, which they didn't.

In late 2014 Nelson was a leading critic of the automobile industry after revelations that millions of vehicles had potentially faulty air bags. He pressured the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to expand recalls of automobiles to replace the air bags.

In addition to the attention he has given the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Nelson has focused on health care and consumer protection for senior citizens, preservation of the state's coastline and the Everglades, and relations with Cuba.

Nelson has worked to obtain more federal funding for Everglades restoration efforts, and he has voiced strong opposition to any move to permit exploratory oil and gas drilling off Florida's Atlantic Coast.

A long-standing goal is the creation of a national or regional catastrophe fund to spread the risk and cost of dealing with major disasters. Drawing on his background as state insurance commissioner, Nelson's plan would provide inexpensive reinsurance to private insurance companies and work to keep rates low for insurance against hurricanes and other major disasters.

In 2012, Nelson helped win enactment of legislation to aid Gulf Coast states in recovering from the 2010 BP Plc oil spill. The measure requires 80 percent of the payments from BP and other responsible parties to go into a trust fund for environmental restoration, economic recovery and tourism promotion.

Nelson was the chairman of the Senate's Special Committee on Aging in the 113th Congress, and while the committee has no legislative authority, Nelson used his leadership of it as a platform to seek to educate seniors about fraud and urge more attention to Alzheimer's Disease.

Nelson is a middle-of-the-road Democrat, occasionally siding with Republicans on matters such as voting to outlaw desecration of the flag. Harking back to his six days aboard the space shuttle, Nelson said the view of earth from space didn't have political, religious, or racial divides. "From that perspective, you can see how we're all in this together," he said. "If we could just remember that, we'd sure get a lot more done."

He voted in 2001 against a measure to restrain the CIA's use of harsh interrogation techniques on terrorism suspects, becoming the only Democrat on the Select Intelligence Committee to back Republican members of the panel. He opposed the 2008 bailout of the financial industry.

His demeanor is folksy and low-key; he generally eschews pointed partisan rhetoric. For example, early in 2011 when Florida's Republican Governor Rick Scott rejected \$2.5 billion from the federal government for work on a high-speed passenger rail project, other Sunshine State Democrats lambasted Scott. Nelson was more restrained, expressing his disagreement with Scott's move and talking to Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood to see if a regional Florida entity, rather than the state, could compete for the grant money.

"If it can't be done, then we're done," Nelson said. "Meantime, there's an old proverb: fall seven times, stand up eight."

Early Years

Nelson spent most of his youth in Melbourne, not far from Cape Canaveral, and he watched some rocket launches. His senior thesis at Yale University was titled, "The Impact of Cape Kennedy on Brevard County Politics."

After law school at the University of Virginia, a stint in the Army and a brief tenure as an aide to Democratic Governor Reubin Askew, Nelson won a seat in the Florida House in 1972. After six years, he ran for Congress when Republican Representative Louis Frey didn't seek re-election from a district that included the Space Coast and inland toward Orlando. Nelson won that race with 61 percent of the vote, and had no trouble holding the seat for six terms.

In 1990 Nelson ran for governor, losing in the primary to the late-entering Lawton Chiles, whom Nelson had regarded as a friend. After four years out of office, Nelson ran for state treasurer and insurance commissioner and served six years in that post, winning a name for himself by pressuring insurance companies to make good on claims for hurricane damages and to lower auto insurance rates for drivers with good records.

In 2000 Nelson decided to make a bid to return to Congress, this time to the Senate where two-term Republican Senator Connie Mack was retiring. Nelson beat 10-term House member Bill McCollum by 5 percentage points. He won an easy re-election in 2006 against Representative Katherine Harris, and was re-elected again in 2012 by overcoming a challenge from the former Senator Mack's son, also known as Connie. Nelson won by 13 percentage points over Mack, who had served eight years in the House.

Updated Nov. 28, 2014

BIO FROM REPRESENTATIVE'S WEBSITE

From the Senator's Website

Bill Nelson is a true son of Florida, his family coming to the Panhandle in 1829; and, his grandparents homesteading in the early 20th Century on land that today is the Kennedy Space Center.

From a spot near there Bill would launch into space in 1986 and spend six days orbiting the Earth aboard the space shuttle Columbia.

Nearly three decades later he still vividly recalls looking back at our planet from the window of the shuttle, and not seeing any political, religious or racial divides.

"From that perspective, you can see how we're all in this together," he says. "If we could just remember that, we'd sure get a lot more done."

It's that kind of perspective that has earned Bill a reputation as a thoughtful, moderate voice in an increasingly partisan political world.

Nelson's public service career began in 1972, with his election to the Florida Legislature. He then served six terms in the U.S. Congress representing Orlando and the Space Coast, becoming an early champion of the environment.

In 1994, Nelson was elected to the Florida Cabinet as state Treasurer, Insurance Commissioner and Fire Marshal. During his six years in the post, he showed he was a common-sense problem solver and strong consumer advocate.

Nelson was first elected to the U.S. Senate in November 2000. He's stood up to the insurance companies, Wall Street banks and Big Oil. He's exposed the lies of BP about the Gulf spill. And he's created a blueprint forward for our nation's space agency. Now in his third term, he's continuing to fight for lower taxes, better education, Medicare and Social Security.

He's someone who thinks public service is a noble calling - which is why he's devoted his life to serving his community, his state and his country.

PERSONAL PROFILE

COMMITTEES

[Senate Committee on Finance](#)

[Senate Committee on Armed Services](#)

[Senate Special Committee on Aging](#)

[Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation](#)
Ranking Member

CAUCUSES

[Senate New Democrat Coalition](#)

[USO Congressional Caucus](#)

[Senate Army Caucus](#)

Birthdate

09/29/1942

Birthplace

Miami, FL

Political Party

Democratic Party

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

1965 - 1971 United States Army Reserve
1968 - 1970 Captain, United States Army
1972 - 1978 State Representative,
(FL)House of Representatives 01-03-1979 -
01-03-1991 Representative:Florida,
(US)House of Representatives 1995 - 2000
Treasurer, State of Florida FL 01-03-2001 -
Present Senator:Florida, (US)Senate