

Pramila Jayapal



Pramila Jayapal is a Washington State senator, as well as an award-winning activist, author, and speaker. Born and raised in India, Indonesia, and Singapore, she has over twenty years of experience in international and domestic social justice.

In November 2014, Pramila was elected as a state senator for the 37th Legislative District in Washington. Her term will run from 2015 through 2018. She is the first South Asian American elected to the Washington State Legislature, and the only woman of color in the state senate. Pramila serves on the Healthcare and Transportation committees in the state senate, and she is ranking member on the Government Accountability and Reform committee.

Prior to being elected, Pramila was a Distinguished Taconic Fellow at the Center for Community Change, where she developed and implemented campaigns to influence public policy towards greater inclusion of immigrants, people of color, and low-income people. For two years, she also directed the We Belong Together: Women for Common-Sense Immigration Reform campaign, which organizes women across the country and within Congress for immigration reform that is inclusive of women. She was also a distinguished fellow at the University of Washington Law School.

Pramila is founder of OneAmerica, Washington State's largest immigrant organizing and advocacy organization, serving as the executive director for almost eleven years. Under Pramila's leadership, OneAmerica became known for its strong voice and successful efforts to fight discrimination against Muslims, immigrants, and people of color. In 2008, Pramila was named by Governor Christine Gregoire as vice chair of Washington State's New Americans Policy Council.

Before OneAmerica, she worked in international health and development, leading the Fund for Technology Transfer at Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) and living for two years in rural villages and towns in India as a fellow for the Institute of Current World Affairs. In her early career, she worked as a financial analyst on Wall Street before deciding to devote her life to social justice.

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BIRTHDATE
September 21st, 1965

BIRTHPLACE
Madras, India

CURRENT RESIDENCE
Seattle, WA, USA

PROFESSION
State senator, 37th Legislative District, Washington; immigrant, civil, and human rights activist; and author

“One man with courage makes a majority.” —Andrew Jackson

Reflections

On Success

I believe that my success is due to my passion for the issues involved in my job. I am not afraid to work tirelessly for what I believe in. Additionally, I am always thinking about what is possible and how (not whether) we can be successful. When people say, “we can't do that,” I like to say, “why not?” and then find a pathway to get there.

On Volunteering

I believe in making a difference in people's lives and helping to push the moral arc of the universe toward justice, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said.

On Her Career Path

I have just run for elected office for the first time. I do not know if this will be my long-term path, but I felt that after organizing on the outside for the past two decades, it was time to get into the system and see what change was possible as a legislator.

On Childhood

I was born in Madras, India, living with my family mainly in Bangalore and Bombay for the first five years of my life. We then moved to Jakarta, Indonesia where we spent about ten years—with two years in

between in Singapore. I graduated from the Jakarta International School in Jakarta, and I was privileged to go to school with children from all over the world. It made the world seem very small and it opened my eyes to the diversity of cultures, languages, and traditions that make our world such a beautiful place.

On Societal Issues

Today, unfortunately, I am deeply concerned with the growing income inequality and lack of opportunity for a larger and larger proportion of American society.

On Challenges

I came to the U.S. by myself when I was 16 years old. My father used most of his savings to send me here, because he and my mother believed that the U.S. was the place I would have the brightest future and best education. We had very little money for long-distance phone calls back then (and no Skype!), and I was a stranger in a brand new country.

On Role Model

My role models are often those “ordinary” people who display so much resilience and courage in speaking out and making change happen.

On Leadership

Leadership means both leading from the front and from behind.