

“I’m No Lady, I’m a Member of Congress”

WOMEN PIONEERS ON CAPITOL HILL, 1917–1934



The official program for the March 3, 1913, National American Woman Suffrage Association's procession in Washington, D.C. The cover features a woman seated on a horse and blowing a long horn, from which is draped a "votes for women" banner. The U.S. Capitol is in background.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Alice Paul (second from left), chairwoman of the militant National Woman's Party, and officers of the group in front of their Washington headquarters, circa 1920s. They are holding a banner emblazoned with a quote from suffragist Susan B. Anthony: "No self-respecting woman should wish or work for the success of a party that ignores her sex."

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Great triumphs and historic firsts highlight women's initial foray into national political office. Four years after Jeannette Rankin was elected to the House of Representatives in 1916, women won the right to vote nationally, with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Rebecca Felton of Georgia became the first woman to serve in the U.S. Senate in 1922. That same year, Alice Robertson of Oklahoma became the first woman to preside over the House of Representatives. In 1923, Representative Mae Ella Nolan of California became the first woman to chair a congressional committee. Two other women followed her lead, including Mary Norton of New Jersey, the first woman elected from the East Coast, who would chair four House committees during her quarter-century career. In 1932, Hattie Caraway became the first woman elected to the Senate. Several other women attained prominent committee positions, including Representative Florence Prag Kahn of California, the first woman to serve on the powerful Appropriations Committee.

Nevertheless, women were still a distinct minority of the 435 House Members; at their peak during this period, nine served in the 71st Congress (1929–1931). They lacked the power to focus congressional attention on the issues that were important to them.

Without seniority, and facing institutional prejudices, the early Congresswomen viewed leadership positions as an elusive quest. These adversities raise several questions: What routes did these pioneer women take to be elected to Congress? How did they relate to the women's rights movement in America?



Once they arrived in Congress, what agendas did they pursue? What were their legislative interests and committee assignments? What changes did they effect on Capitol Hill? And finally, were they able, or even inclined, to craft a unique identity for themselves?

THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1848–1920

The beginning of the fight for women's suffrage in the United States, which predates Jeannette Rankin's entry into Congress by nearly 70 years, grew out of a larger women's rights movement. That reform effort evolved during the 19th century, initially emphasizing a broad spectrum of goals before focusing solely on securing the franchise for women. Women's suffrage leaders, moreover, often disagreed about the tactics for and the emphasis (federal versus state) of their reform efforts. Ultimately, the suffrage movement provided political training for some of the early women pioneers in Congress, but its internal divisions foreshadowed the persistent disagreements among women in Congress and among women's rights activists after the passage of the 19th Amendment.

The first gathering devoted to women's rights in the United States was held July 19–20, 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York. The principal organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention were Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a mother of four from upstate New York, and the Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott.¹ About 100 people attended the convention; two-thirds were women. Stanton drafted a "Declaration of Sentiments, Grievances, and Resolutions," that echoed the preamble of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal." Among the 13 resolutions set forth in Stanton's "Declaration" was the goal of achieving the "sacred right of franchise."²

The sometimes-fractious suffrage movement that grew out of the Seneca Falls meeting proceeded in successive waves. Initially, women reformers addressed social and institutional barriers that limited women's rights; including family responsibilities, a lack of educational and economic opportunities, and the absence of a voice in political debates. Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, a Massachusetts teacher, met in 1850 and forged a lifetime alliance as women's rights activists. For much of the 1850s they agitated against the denial of basic economic freedoms to women. Later, they unsuccessfully lobbied Congress to include women in the provisions of the 14th and 15th Amendments (extending citizenship rights and granting voting rights to freedmen, respectively).

In the wake of the Civil War, however, reformers sought to avoid marginalization as "social issues" zealots by focusing their message exclusively on the right to vote.³ In 1869 two distinct factions of the suffrage movement emerged. Stanton and Anthony created the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which directed its efforts toward changing federal law and opposed the 15th Amendment because it excluded women. Lucy Stone, a one time Massachusetts antislavery advocate and a prominent lobbyist for women's rights, formed the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA).⁴ Leaders of the AWSA rejected the NWSA's agenda as being racially divisive and organized with the aim to continue a national reform effort at the state level. Although California Senator Aaron Sargent introduced in Congress a women's suffrage amendment in 1878, the overall campaign stalled. Eventually, the NWSA also shifted its efforts to the



Suffragists parade in New York City in 1916 with a banner that reads "President Wilson favors votes for women." Woodrow Wilson, a reluctant convert to the cause, eventually supported the 19th Amendment which passed the House in 1918 and was ratified by the states in 1920.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Rebecca Latimer Felton of Georgia, the first woman to serve in the U.S. Senate, poses at her desk in the Senate Office Building. Felton's appointment to an unexpired term in 1922 lasted a day.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

individual states where reformers hoped to start a ripple effect to win voting rights at the federal level.

During the 1880s, the two wings of the women's rights movement struggled to maintain momentum. The AWSA was better funded and the larger of the two groups, but it had only a regional reach. The NWSA, which was based in New York, relied on its statewide network but also drew recruits from around the nation, largely on the basis of the extensive speaking circuit of Stanton and Anthony. Neither group attracted broad support from women, or persuaded male politicians or voters to adopt its cause. Susan B. Anthony and Ida H. Harper cowrote, "In the indifference, the inertia, the apathy of women, lies the greatest obstacle to their enfranchisement." Historian Nancy Woloch described early suffragists' efforts as "a crusade in political education by women and for women, and for most of its existence, a crusade in search of a constituency."⁵

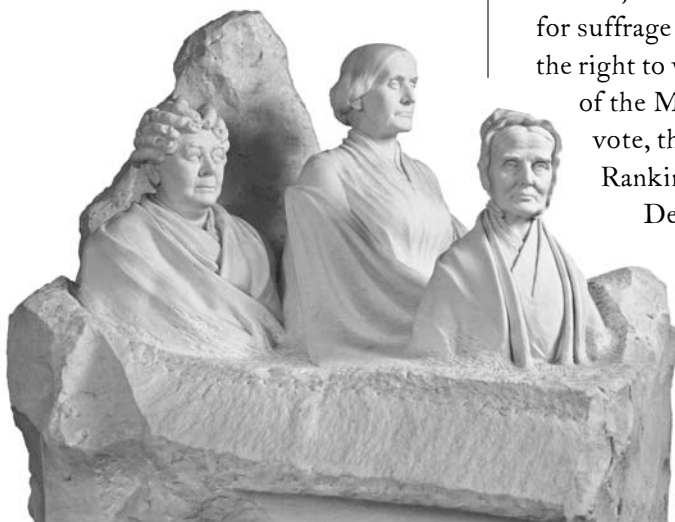
The turning point came in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when the nation experienced a surge of volunteerism among middle-class women—activists in progressive causes, members of women's clubs and professional societies, temperance advocates, and participants in local civic and charity organizations. The determination of these women to expand their sphere of activities further outside the home helped legitimate the suffrage movement and provided new momentum for the NWSA and the AWSA. By 1890, seeking to capitalize on their newfound "constituency," the two groups united to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).⁶ Led initially by Stanton and then by Anthony, the NAWSA began to draw on the support of women activists in organizations as diverse as the Women's Trade Union League, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), and the National Consumer's League.

For the next two decades, the NAWSA worked as a nonpartisan organization focused on gaining the vote in states, though managerial problems and a lack of coordination initially limited its success. The first state to grant women complete voting rights was Wyoming in 1869. Three other western states—Colorado (1893), Utah (1896), and Idaho (1896)—followed shortly after NAWSA was founded. But prior to 1910, only these four states allowed women to vote. Between 1910 and 1914, the NAWSA intensified its lobbying efforts and additional states extended the franchise to women: Washington, California, Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon. In Illinois, future Congresswoman Ruth Hanna McCormick helped lead the fight for suffrage as a lobbyist in Springfield, when the state legislature granted women the right to vote in 1913; this marked the first such victory for women in a state east of the Mississippi River. A year later, Montana granted women the right to vote, thanks in part to the efforts of another future Congresswoman, Jeannette Rankin.

Despite the new momentum, however, some reformers were impatient with the pace of change. In 1913, Alice Paul, a young Quaker activist who had experience in the English suffrage movement, formed the rival Congressional Union (later named the National Woman's Party).⁷ Paul's group freely adopted the more militant tactics of its English counterparts, picketing and conducting mass rallies and marches to raise public awareness and support. Embracing a more confrontational style, Paul drew a younger generation of women to her movement, helped resuscitate the push for a federal equal rights

Sculptor Adelaide Johnson's Portrait Monument to Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, honors three of the suffrage movement's leaders. Unveiled in 1921, the monument is featured prominently in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL





Women crowd a voting poll in New York City during elections in 1922. After passage of the 19th Amendment two years earlier, the major political parties scrambled to register women. But a potent voting bloc of women voters, which some observers predicted, never materialized.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

amendment, and relentlessly attacked the Democratic administration of President Woodrow Wilson for obstructing the extension of the vote to women.

In 1915, Carrie Chapman Catt, a veteran suffragist since the mid-1880s and a former president of the NAWSA, again secured the organization's top leadership post. Catt proved an adept administrator and organizer, whose "Winning Plan" strategy called for disciplined and relentless efforts to achieve state referenda on the vote, especially in non-Western states.⁸ Key victories—the first in the South and East—followed in 1917 when Arkansas and New York granted partial and full voting rights, respectively. Beginning in 1917, President Wilson (a convert to the suffrage cause) urged Congress to pass a voting rights amendment. Another crowning achievement also occurred that year when Montana's Jeannette Rankin (elected two years after her state enfranchised women) was sworn into the 65th Congress on April 2, as the first woman to serve in the national legislature.

Catt's steady strategy of securing voting rights state by state and Paul's vocal and partisan protest campaign coincided with the Wilson administration's decision to intervene in the First World War—a development that provided powerful rhetoric for and a measure of expediency for granting the vote.⁹ The NAWSA publicly embraced the war cause, despite the fact that many women suffragists, including Rankin, were pacifists. Suffrage leaders suggested that the effort to "make the world safe for democracy" ought to begin at home, by extending the franchise. Moreover, they insisted, the failure to extend the vote to women might impede their participation in the war effort just when they were most needed to play a greater role as workers and volunteers outside the home. Responding to these overtures, the House of Representatives initially passed a voting rights amendment on January 10, 1918, but the Senate did not follow suit before the end of the 65th Congress. It was not until after the war, however, that the measure finally cleared Congress with the House again voting its approval by a wide margin on May 21, 1919, and the Senate concurring on June 14, 1919. A year later, on August 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment,



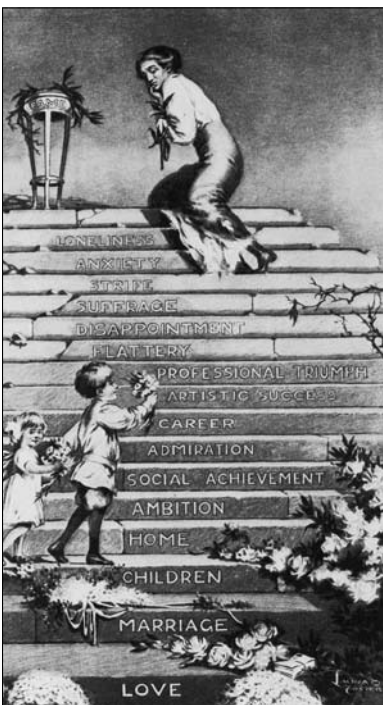
American-born Nancy Langhorne Astor (Lady Astor), left, and Alice Robertson make an appearance at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., in 1922. In 1919, Lady Astor became the first woman to serve as a Member of the British Parliament. Robertson, elected from an Oklahoma district to the U.S. House in 1920, was the second woman to serve in Congress.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Cartoons from the early 20th century illustrate contrasting views on women's roles in American society. Above, a cartoon published in 1920, shortly after passage of the 19th Amendment, is titled "The Sky Is Now Her Limit." It depicts a woman carrying buckets on a yoke, looking up a ladder with rungs that ascend from "Slavery" and "House Drudgery" to "Highest Elective Offices" including Congress and the presidency. Below, a cartoon published in 1912 suggests an opposite outcome for women who leave the home and familial duties for careers and a greater role in public life.

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



providing full voting rights for women nationally, was ratified when Tennessee became the 36th state to approve it.

Continued Challenges

But achieving the right to vote, while ending one phase of the women's rights movement, set the stage for the equally arduous process of securing women a measure of power in local and national political office. Scholars have debated whether the women's movement underwent fundamental change or sustained continuity in the years before and after 1920.¹⁰ However, most agree that Rankin and those who followed her into Congress during the 1920s faced a Herculean task in consolidating their power and in sustaining legislation that was important to women. Several factors contributed to these conditions.

The Progressive Era, in which several waves of activists, moving from the local to national level, pursued democratic reforms within political, social, and cultural contexts, had helped sustain the women's rights movement. But the Progressive Era waned after the U.S. entered World War I. With its passing, the public enthusiasm for further efforts decreased, contributing to women's difficulty in the early 1920s to use their new political gain as an instrument for social change.

Just when women gained the vote, voter participation declined nationally. Fewer men and women were attuned to national political issues which, increasingly, were defined by special-interest groups and lobbies.

As Carrie Chapman Catt pointed out, in winning the vote reformers lost the single unifying cause that appealed to a broad constituency of women. The amalgam of the other reform causes tended to splinter the women's rights movement, because smaller communities of women were investing their energies across a larger field of competing programs.

Women, contrary to the expectations of many on both sides of the suffrage debate, did not vote as a single, unified bloc. They split over party affiliation, key issues, and the vagaries of parochial politics. They also voted in far lower percentages than predicted. Finally, to the consternation of feminist reformers, they did not vote independently; instead, their voting preferences tended to mirror those of the men in their families.

Complicating these factors was the overarching reality that the political culture would take decades to adjust to the enfranchisement of women. The expectation was that women would be loyal followers under the banner of one or the other major party, with men charting the course. Emily N. Blair, a Missouri suffragist and the vice president of the Democratic National Committee (beginning in 1924) observed: "Women were welcome to come in as workers but not as co-makers of the world. For all their numbers, they seldom rose to positions of responsibility or power. The few who did fitted into the system as they found it. All standards, all methods, all values, continued to be set by men."¹¹ Carrie Chapman Catt made a similar assessment, noting that there was, at least in one sense, continuity between the suffrage struggle and the 1920s: women's marginalization. She noted that "the unwillingness to give women even a small share of the political positions which would enable them to score advantage to their ideals," was a condition all too familiar for "any old time suffragist."¹²

In Congress, particularly, the pioneer Congresswomen, with several notable exceptions, were far outside the party power structure. Not only did they face

institutional prejudices, but many of them (nearly three-quarters of the first generation) were dependent on their husbands or their fathers for their positions. Moreover, these first women in Congress would not agree among themselves which form the political participation of American women should take: as public officeholders or as participants in nonpartisan reform groups?

Nevertheless, fortified by the constitutional victory of suffrage reformers in 1920, the handful of new women in Congress embarked on what would become a century-long odyssey to broaden women's role in government, so that in Catt's words, they might "score advantage to their ideals." The profiles in this book about these pioneer women Members and their successors relate the story of that odyssey during the course of the 20th century and into the 21st century.

EARLY CONGRESSWOMEN'S BACKGROUNDS

A majority of the early congressional women were born in the 1880s and 1890s and came of age during the Progressive Era. Culturally, the first generation of women in Congress had several commonalities. They were all white; the first non-Caucasian woman would not be elected until nearly half a century after Jeannette Rankin entered Congress. Most were raised Protestant, although there were several notable exceptions: including the first Catholic and the first Jewish women in Congress (Mae Nolan and Florence Kahn, respectively), who represented neighboring districts in San Francisco. Moreover, these women pioneers were exceedingly well-educated, partly because many came from well-to-do families that could afford private schooling and postsecondary education. Many were sent to elite finishing schools. More than half (13) attended university or college and several others graduated from trade schools. Before coming to Congress, many participated as volunteers and organizers in civic organizations and the social welfare endeavors typical of Progressive Era reformers. These activities included suffrage and electoral reform, missionary and education work, public health, nursing, veterans' affairs issues, legal aid, and childcare. Rankin, at age 36, was the youngest woman elected to Congress during this pioneer generation. Two other women, Mae Nolan of California and Katherine Langley of Kentucky, were in their late 30s as well. At the opposite end of the spectrum was 87-year-old Senator Rebecca Felton. The median age of the women elected to Congress through the mid-1930s was 50. (By contrast, the median age of the men entering Congress during the same period was about 46.)¹³

Few women could draw on previous electoral experience. Mary Norton (a New Jersey County freeholder), Ruth Baker Pratt (a New York City alderman), and Kathryn O'Loughlin McCarthy (a Kansas State representative), were the only women in this era who had held public office before they came to Congress. Several other women had prominent careers as lobbyists, activists, or party officials. Rankin was widely known as an advocate for suffrage reform and Edith Nourse Rogers was a national spokesperson for World War I veterans before she came to Congress. Perhaps the most qualified candidate was Ruth Hanna McCormick, a suffrage lobbyist and GOP official and the daughter of former Ohio Senator and Republican kingmaker Mark Hanna. In 1918, McCormick was appointed head of the newly created Republican Women's National Executive Committee (RWNEC). Initially she assured GOP men that women "do not want jobs, but want good men



Left to right: Alice Robertson of Oklahoma, Mae Ella Nolan of California, and Winnifred Mason Huck of Illinois pose on the House entrance steps of the U.S. Capitol, February 15, 1923.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Winnifred Mason Huck of Illinois practices her golf game at the Potomac Park Links in Washington, D.C., in November 1922 with the Washington Monument in the background. Golf was an increasingly popular sport—driven partly by the success of its first bona fide U.S. superstar, Bobby Jones. Huck and later women in Congress took up the sport, in part, to interact with male colleagues who often used the links as an informal forum for transacting legislative business.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



In this January 1926 photo, Congresswomen Florence Kahn of California (left) and Mary Norton of New Jersey flank Representative John P. Hill of Maryland. The three Members sought to modify the Volstead Act which enforced the 18th Amendment (ratified in 1919) that prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol inside the United States, as well as its importation into the country. Prohibition ended with the repeal of the 18th Amendment in late 1933.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

in office. They have come into politics with their knitting to stay.” Subsequently McCormick worked to remove male oversight by the Republican National Executive Committee (RNEC) and secured the power for the RWNEC to make its own appointments. In 1919 she admonished male RNEC colleagues, saying “I marvel at the apprehension of some of you regarding our citizenship. . . . This is our country no less than yours, gentlemen.”¹⁴ However, extensive precongressional experience in politics or public affairs was the exception rather than the rule among this group of pioneers.

THE WIDOW AND FAMILIAL CONNECTIONS

More often than not, the pioneer women in Congress gained experience in public affairs as political confidantes and campaign surrogates for the Congressmen to whom they were married or otherwise related. Ironically, it was personal tragedy rather than a shared interest in reform that provided political entrée for most early women in Congress. Beginning with Representative Mae Nolan in 1923, eight of the women who followed Rankin into Congress between 1917 and 1934 were widows who succeeded their late husbands. None had held political office. Several, however, were among their husbands’ most trusted political advisors, particularly Edith Nourse Rogers and Florence Prag Kahn.

So prevalent was the practice of wives succeeding husbands in this and later generations that the term “widow’s mandate,” or “widow’s succession” was coined to explain it.¹⁵ The prevailing expectation was that the women would serve briefly and provide a seamless transition by carrying forward the legislative business and district interests of their deceased husbands. Local party officials, especially in the one-party South, recruited widow candidates for reasons of political expediency: to hold the seat while awaiting a male successor or to avoid a protracted intraparty fight for an open seat. Media stereotypes reinforced this limited role. Marking the retirement of congressional widow Effiegene Wingo of Arkansas, the *New York Sun* reflected on the phenomenon of widow’s succession. “Some of the women who have inherited a seat in Congress have demonstrated their individual ability,” the *Sun* observed, “but of most of them it can be said that they submitted with dignity and good taste to a false code of chivalry, served unostentatiously and departed the Capitol quietly, wondering what the men who invented the term-by-inheritance thought they were doing.”¹⁶

While most widows left Capitol Hill after filling out a brief, unexpired term, some, like Rogers, whose 35 years in the House make her the longest-serving congressional woman, enjoyed public careers that far eclipsed those of their male predecessors. Hattie Wyatt Caraway of Arkansas, too, rejected the convention that widows were mere placeholders. As the second woman appointed to the Senate and later elected to fill out the remaining 10 months of her husband’s term, Caraway shocked the Arkansas political establishment in May 1932 when she announced her candidacy for a full term. “The time has passed when a woman should be placed in a position and kept there only while someone else is being groomed for the job,” she told reporters en route to an election victory and a 12-year Senate career.¹⁷

Another dimension to this phenomenon, may be described more properly as the familial connection. Four women from this era drew upon the experience of fathers who were established politicians (Winnifred Huck, Ruth Bryan Owen,

McCormick, and McCarthy). Huck directly succeeded her late father with no experience in elective politics. In still another twist on the familial connection, Katherine Langley won a special election to succeed her husband, Kentucky Representative John Wesley Langley, after he was convicted and sent to prison for violating Prohibition. All told, 14 of these 20 pioneers drew upon precongressional experience as the wives or daughters of officeholders.

MEDIA CURIOSITIES

By virtue of their gender, the earliest women in Congress were media celebrities: chronicled, quoted, and scrutinized. Perhaps none received more attention than Rankin, whose 1916 election catapulted her into the national spotlight. Manufacturing companies sought her endorsement; cranks sent offers of marriage. She received an unusually large amount of visitors and mail—by one account, 300 letters daily.¹⁸ These demands required her to hire three secretaries to join her in her one-room office.¹⁹ Rankin agreed to write a monthly column for Chicago's *Sunday Herald*, and she signed a lucrative contract (\$500 per lecture) with a New York speakers bureau. "To be suddenly thrown into so much limelight was a great shock," Rankin recalled. "It was very hard for me to understand, to realize that it made a difference what I did and didn't do from then on."²⁰

An eager press corps soon pegged Alice Mary Robertson of Oklahoma, the second woman in Congress, as a font of colorful quotes. Shortly before assuming office in 1921, Robertson told a reporter that she intended to be a model House freshman: fastidious and silent. "I would rather be like a humble little light that shines a long distance across the prairies than a brilliant sky rocket that flashes in midair for a few seconds and then falls to the earth with a dull thud," Robertson said. "If people think that I am going to do something sensational they are mistaken. I am a conservative. The platform upon which I was elected is: 'I am a Christian. I am an American. I am a Republican.'" But her propensity to speak her mind made "Miss Alice" the object of intense press coverage. The matronly Congresswoman later declared that Members who wasted taxpayers' money with verbose speeches and parliamentary stalling tactics ought to be "spanked good and plenty."²¹

Other women were thrust into the spotlight as the offspring of prominent political families. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran lengthy feature stories on two famous daughters whose fathers were avowed political enemies: Ruth Bryan Owen (a daughter of Democratic giant William Jennings Bryan) and Ruth McCormick (the daughter of Mark Hanna). During her 1928 campaign, McCormick became the first woman featured on the cover of *Time* magazine.²² Before an adoring press gallery, Owen and McCormick entered the House arm in arm on April 15, 1929, the first day of the 71st Congress (1929–1931), and were sworn in as new Representatives.²³

Those uncomfortable with Washington social circles or reticent about the media glare received less charitable press coverage, which often focused on a Member's mannerisms, attire, and physical attributes rather than on substantive legislative issues. Katherine Langley was singled out for her flamboyance. "She offends the squeamish by her unstinted display of gypsy colors on the floor and the conspicuousness with which she dresses her bushy blue-black hair," wrote one reporter.²⁴ Representative Mae Nolan complained that she was regularly



Margaret Speaks, daughter of Representative John C. Speaks of Ohio, sells peanuts to Representative Edith N. Rogers of Massachusetts and Massachusetts Senator Frederick H. Gillett (former Speaker of the House) at the 1926 baseball game between congressional Democrats and Republicans.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Kathryn O'Loughlin McCarthy of Kansas and her husband, Daniel McCarthy, wed shortly after Kathryn was sworn into Congress in early 1933. She met Daniel, a newly elected Kansas state senator, on the campaign trail in 1932. He had initially opposed women holding public office. "I want it understood that I am not out of politics," Congresswoman McCarthy declared on her wedding day. "I consider marriage an asset and not a liability in the political field."

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ELLIS COUNTY (KS) HISTORICAL SOCIETY

“There are hundreds of men to care for the nation’s tariff and foreign policy and irrigation projects. But there isn’t a single woman to look after the nation’s greatest asset: its children.”

—JEANNETTE RANKIN

misquoted and misrepresented. The press took unmerciful delight in noting that she had taken up golf in her quest for a slimmer figure. Gradually, Congresswoman Nolan withdrew from the spotlight, eventually shunning floor speeches, lobbyists, and especially, journalists. When she retired after a brief House career, the *Washington Post* declared “in Congress 2 years, she did no ‘talking.’”²⁵

LEGISLATIVE INTERESTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The majority of the early women Members legislated in areas deemed by their society to be gender-appropriate; women were viewed as caregivers, educators, and consumers. The pioneer women in Congress were scattered across more than 30 committees, most of which ranked as lower-tier panels. Not surprisingly, the largest number of House women (five) served on the Committee on Woman Suffrage before it was disbanded in December 1927. Other assignments given to women Members included seats on committees like Education (four); World War Veterans’ Legislation (four); Civil Service (four); Public Buildings and Grounds (four); and Indian Affairs (three).

There were exceptions to this trend. Several women obtained posts on upper-tier committees like Appropriations (Kahn), Naval Affairs (McCormick), Banking and Currency (Pratt), Irrigation and Reclamation (Greenway), and Foreign Affairs (Owen, Rogers, and Wingo).²⁶ Two women, Mae Ella Nolan and Mary Norton, chaired House committees during this period—Expenditures in the Post Office and District of Columbia, respectively. In the Senate, Hattie Caraway served on two important panels, Agriculture and Forestry and Commerce (eventually rising to second-ranking majority Member on the latter). From the 73rd Congress (1933–1935) through the 78th Congress (1943–1945), Caraway also chaired the Enrolled Bills Committee, a minor panel that ensured that the text of bills passed by the House and Senate was identical and was delivered to the White House for the President’s signature.

From their earliest days in Congress, women’s legislative interests were not monolithic. Members’ agendas derived from unique political beliefs, personal ideologies, and constituencies, all of which shaped the contours of their legislative efforts. From her Appropriations seat, Florence Kahn won funding for two major Bay Area projects—the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge and helped build up local military installations. Edith Rogers, as chair of the hospitals subcommittee of the World War Veterans’ Legislation Committee, procured millions in funding for a national network of veterans’ hospitals. Ruth Owen authored legislation to combat the fruit fly, which threatened agricultural interests in her Florida district. From her seat on the Foreign Relations Committee, Owen promoted American participation in international conferences; at the outset of the Great Depression, she advocated the creation of a Cabinet-level department to oversee the health and welfare of families and children—a “Department of Home and Child.” Even Rankin, while focusing in her first term on woman suffrage, tended to the needs of miners in her district from her seat on Public Lands.

Congressional women did not vote as a bloc or always agree on the viability of legislation and programs that directly affected their gender as illustrated by the stark differences between the first and second women in Congress (Rankin and Robertson). Rankin, former secretary of the NAWSA, focused on issues affecting

women and children. “There are hundreds of men to care for the nation’s tariff and foreign policy and irrigation projects,” she told voters on the campaign trail. “But there isn’t a single woman to look after the nation’s greatest asset: its children.”²⁷ Once in the House, she worked to pass a constitutional amendment for the vote in Congress and also sponsored a bill to create an education program on women’s health. That legislation came before the House several years later as part of the Sheppard–Towner Maternal and Infancy Act, which allocated \$1.25 million annually in federal money for prenatal, maternal, and infant health care education through public health nurses supervised by the Children’s Bureau. This marked one of the earliest efforts in U.S. history to secure federal funding social welfare.²⁸

Robertson was the only woman in Congress when the Sheppard–Towner legislation was introduced in May 1921. A disciple of limited federal government, she refused to endorse it. She was also an avowed foe of the powerful lobbying groups that backed the measure, namely the League of Women Voters (the NAWSA’s incarnation after 1920) and the National Woman’s Party (NWP). Congresswoman Robertson denounced the bill as an intrusion into women’s private lives. Nevertheless, Sheppard–Towner was signed into law on November 23, 1921, demonstrating the lobbying power and public relations savvy of women’s groups while highlighting the glaring lack of women’s power within Congress. “If Members could have voted in the cloakroom it would have been killed,” recalled a male Representative.²⁹

In fact, the legislation that most affected women in the 1920s was won primarily by the organized lobbying of voluntary associations when very few women were in Congress. The Cable Act of 1922 granted married women U.S. citizenship independent of their husband’s status, and provided citizenship protection for women who married aliens or who gained U.S. citizenship by marrying an American citizen. The Lehlbach Act of 1923 improved the merit system of the civil service, making it easier for women to secure federal jobs. After intense lobbying by women’s groups, Congress passed the Child Labor Amendment to the Constitution



The women of the 71st Congress (1929–1931) pose on the Capitol steps. From left to right they are: (front row) Pearl Oldfield of Arkansas, Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts, Ruth Baker Pratt of New York, and Ruth Hanna McCormick of Illinois; (back row) Ruth Bryan Owen of Florida, Mary Norton of New Jersey, and Florence Kahn of California.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

on June 2, 1924, which sought to achieve national uniformity for child labor standards. This amendment would have given Congress the power “to limit, regulate, and prohibit the labor of persons under 18 years of age,” had it been subsequently ratified by the states. Finally, in 1923, the NWP pushed for and won the introduction of the Equal Rights Amendment on the 75th Anniversary of the Seneca Falls (NY) Convention of women reformers. The measure was reintroduced scores of times in subsequent Congresses but it languished in committee for nearly 50 years. In the interwar years, no woman Member publicly aligned herself with it both because it was perceived as a threat to existing labor protections for women and because of mistrust of the NWP and its militant tactics.³⁰

Several major public policy issues recur in these profiles. One was the debate about Prohibition, the federal ban on alcohol. Congress passed the 18th Amendment in December 1917, prohibiting the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquor within or into the United States. The states ratified the amendment in January 1919. The passage of the Volstead Act later that October over a presidential veto provided the mechanism that enforced the amendment. Lauded by “dry” temperance advocates and derided by “wet” opponents, Prohibition proved a divisive and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to regulate morality through federal legislation. It was eventually repealed in 1933 by the 21st Amendment.

For the women in Congress during this initial period, Prohibition was a significant issue. Women had played a prominent role as temperance reformers and agitators, since the early part of the 19th century. Among the best-known was the leader of the WCTU, Frances Willard, who wielded tremendous influence in the late 1800s as a key congressional lobbyist for Prohibition.³¹ None of the early women in Congress were as strident. Most addressed Prohibition in one of two arenas, either on the campaign trail or in legislative initiatives. They were evenly divided over the issue. Among its supporters were Rogers, Owen, Oldfield, and McCormick. Rogers’s “dry” position was an important factor in her initial special election. Owen’s Florida constituents turned her out of office in 1932 when she was reluctant to support legislation repealing Prohibition. Opposition to Prohibition became politically more expedient in the early 1930s, when the focus on the debate shifted from morality to economics. Mary Norton offered the first bill to repeal Prohibition laws. Congresswomen Pratt, Jenckes, and McCarthy also supported efforts to repeal the Volstead Act, arguing that this action might help revive the

flagging economy. Jenckes and McCarthy, who hailed from agricultural districts, argued that renewed production of grain-based spirits would benefit farmers.

Another issue that affected women Members during this era was the decade-long argument concerning the payment of a bonus to World War I veterans. The American Legion lobbied Congress shortly after the First World War to fund a bonus for servicemen to compensate them for the wages they lost when they left higher-paying civilian jobs to serve in uniform. Congress approved a bonus in 1922, but the bill was vetoed by President Warren Harding. In May 1924, over the veto of President Calvin Coolidge, Congress passed the Soldiers Bonus Act, which provided veterans a bonus of \$1.25 for each day of overseas duty and \$1 for each day of domestic service—payable in 1945. Veterans could borrow up to 25 percent of their total bonus amount from a fund created by the bill.³² By the early 1930s, with the country mired in a devastating depression, veterans organized a march on Washington, D.C., to demand immediate payment of the bonus. The Bonus March on the capital in 1932 involved thousands of protesters and their families who set up camp in the Anacostia Flats, a short distance from the U.S. Capitol. In June 1932, the House approved the bonus bill but the Senate rejected it. Protesters who remained afterward were forcibly ejected by army troops, who used tanks and tear gas to disperse them.

Care for the welfare of servicemen was another arena in which women were widely recognized as experts, because of the development of a large female nursing corps in the years during and after the Civil War.³³ Women Members used that authority to weigh in on both sides of this debate. Congresswoman Robertson, an ally of servicemen during World War I, voted against the first Bonus Bill in 1922, angering so many constituents that they turned her out of office the following year. Congresswoman Nolan was an early advocate of a bonus and challenged the Coolidge administration to make it a higher priority than tax cuts for the wealthy. Willa Eslick of Tennessee was watching from the House Gallery in June 1932 when her husband, Edward, collapsed and died of a heart attack in an impassioned speech supporting the Bonus Bill. At the urging of local servicemen, Eslick ran for her late husband’s seat and won election to a brief term, which she dedicated to his legislative agenda. Isabella Greenway of Arizona, long a patron of veterans, helped renew the debate for a bonus payment after she was elected to Congress in 1933. Greenway was an ally of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, but her relations with the administration eventually cooled when the President’s



New Yorkers queue up in a bread line near the intersection of Sixth Avenue and 42nd Street in New York City in 1932 during the depths of the Great Depression. One in four American workers were unemployed as a result of the prolonged economic crisis.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE FDR LIBRARY/
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and Virginia Jenckes were elected from traditionally Republican districts in 1932 by agricultural constituencies desperate for federal relief. Isabella Greenway of Arizona campaigned partly on her cachet as a friend of the Roosevelt family and partly on her ability to translate that influence into public works jobs for Arizonans. But even for Democratic supporters of the New Deal there were perils and disagreements. Kansas farmers revolted against the Agricultural Adjustment Act, a cornerstone of the early New Deal, and voted McCarthy out of office after only one term. While Congresswomen Jenckes and Greenway supported emergency government programs to prime the economic pump, they were much more skeptical about later New Deal programs that sought to establish a social welfare system including unemployment insurance and old-age pensions.

CRAFTING AN IDENTITY

The passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 marked a great divide in the women's rights movement in America. A central "paradox of change" for newly enfranchised women was embedded in the suffrage movement itself. Some reformers had sought to liberate women by making them politically equal to men, whereas others fought for the vote believing that women's interests were inherently different from men's, requiring special advocacy that could not be co-opted by

Economy Act of 1933 called for cuts to servicemen's pensions and denied a proposed \$2 billion bonus.

The debates over Prohibition and the soldiers' bonus ultimately culminated with the onset of yet another challenge confronting women in Congress during this period, the Great Depression. The stock market crash in October 1929, preceded by years of rampant stock speculation and ineffectual federal regulatory policies spread economic ruin throughout the country. Investors' mounting losses, sharply lower consumer spending, plummeting agricultural prices, and widespread runs on banks sent the economy into a three-year skid. By the winter of 1932–1933, more than 5,500 banks had been shut down, nearly one in four Americans was unemployed, and the gross national product had declined by nearly a third.³⁴

The Great Depression decisively influenced the careers of congressional women. For Republicans, it proved disastrous. In 1930, Ruth McCormick's bid for the U.S. Senate was undercut by growing disillusionment with the Herbert Hoover administration's policies for economic recovery. Two years later, Ruth Pratt fell victim to a similar trend when she lost her Manhattan House seat. A trio of Democratic Arkansas widows—Oldfield, Wingo, and Caraway—focused on relief for their agricultural constituencies through a variety of federal measures. Democrats Kathryn O'Loughlin McCarthy

existing institutions.³⁵ This central question, in one form or another, remained unresolved through much of the 20th century and has persisted throughout the history of women in Congress. Did women's historical underrepresentation give these pioneer Congresswomen the responsibility to advocate for all women, even for those beyond the prescribed borders of their districts or states, or could they best promote women's political advancement by eschewing a narrow set of "women's issues"?

Congresswomen in this era favored the latter choice and tended to limit their support to legislation that addressed issues affecting women within the context of their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and dependents.³⁶ Ruth Baker Pratt of New York refused to champion women's special interests in Congress and, on one occasion, proclaimed that "sex had no place whatever in politics."³⁷ Nevertheless, she used her profile to urge women to participate in local politics. Pearl Oldfield, the widow of a powerful Arkansas Congressman, agreed with Pratt's assessment. After serving two years in the House, she retired, telling the *New York Times*, "No one should seek or expect public office simply because of her

sex, but she has an equal right to appeal to the voters for support on the basis of her comparative ability to render public service."³⁸ The press reinforced these views. The *Washington Post* celebrated Ruth McCormick's 1930 Senate bid because the Congresswoman "made a straightforward fight for the nomination without appealing for support on the ground that women are entitled to representation. If she wins, it will be on her own merit. If she should lose, she would nevertheless be credited with the most remarkable campaign ever conducted by a woman."³⁹

Mary Norton, adept at navigating toward power within the institution, captured that spirit most succinctly when she rebuffed a male colleague who deferred to her as a "lady" during a debate. "I'm no lady, I'm a Member of Congress," Norton replied, "and I'll proceed on that basis." Her remark encapsulated the belief shared by most of her female contemporaries on the Hill—Democrat and Republican—that the surest way for women to attain power and influence in Congress was to work within the prescribed system to mitigate gender differences. That belief would be subsequently reevaluated and challenged.

NOTES

- Standard biographies of these two women include Lois W. Banner, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: A Radical for Women's Rights* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980); and Margaret Hope Bacon, *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott* (New York: Walker Publishing, 1980).
- For more on the convention at Seneca Falls, its participants, and the larger movement it spawned, see Ellen DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in the U.S., 1848-1869* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978). For an overview of the period from the Civil War through 1920, see Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994): especially 326–363.
- See, for example, DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage*: 21–52; Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*: 327.
- For more on Lucy Stone, see Andrea Moore Kerr, *Lucy Stone: Speaking Out for Equality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
- Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*: quotes from 328; see also 329–336.
- Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*: 334–335.
- For more on Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party, see Inez Haynes Gillmore, *Up Hill with Banners Flying* (Penobscott, ME: Traversity Press, 1964).
- For a biography of Catt, see Robert Booth Fowler, *Carrie Catt: Feminist Politician* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986).
- Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*: 353.
- Historians debate this point vigorously. William L. O'Neill, in his *Feminism in America: A History* 2nd revised ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), argues that feminists themselves were responsible for the failure to mobilize women voters in the 1920s. O'Neill believes that the decision taken in the 20th century to focus on the vote to the exclusion of other "social" issues ultimately undermined feminist reform efforts 1) prolonging the suffrage struggle and 2) depriving the movement of cohesiveness after the ratification of the 20th Amendment in 1920. Nancy

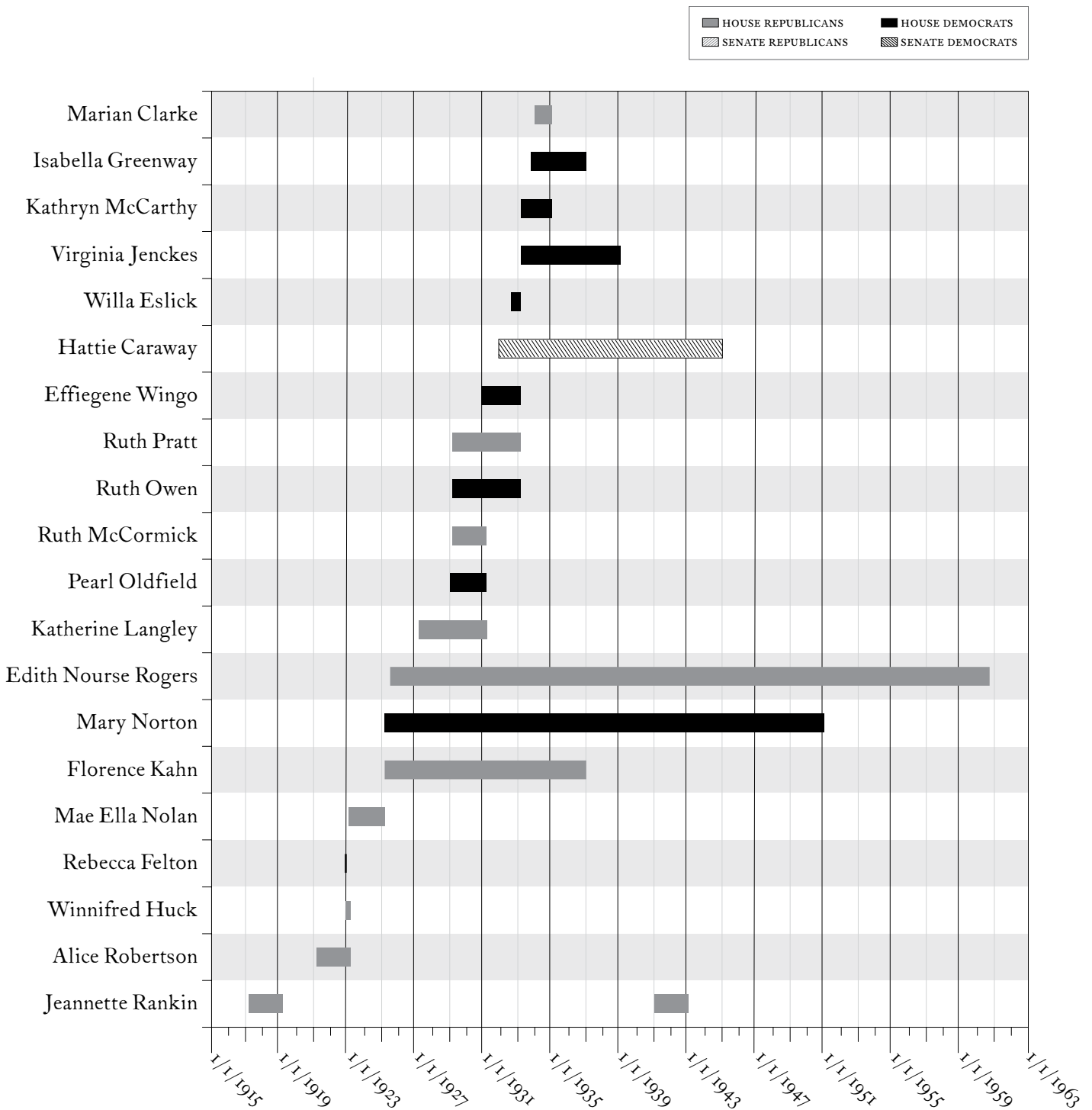
- Cott, in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), challenged O'Neill's assertions about the shortcomings of the feminist movement, insisting in part that though the movement struggled in the arena of electoral politics after 1920, it flourished among a host of new volunteer and civic women's organizations. In this regard, Cott sees more continuity between the pre- and post-1920 eras than does either O'Neill or William Chafe, in *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Both O'Neill and Chafe stress discontinuity, particularly Chafe, who suggests that women "were caught in a no-win situation" because a shift away from mass political participation had devalued the importance of the ballot. "It appears that the entire political culture was shifting, and even though supposed progress had been made in democratizing the electoral process during the 1910s through direct election of senators, the initiative, referendum and reform, direct primaries, and woman suffrage, the actual value of casting votes at the ballot box had diminished substantially." See Chafe's discussion, *The Paradox of Change*: 31.
- Quoted in Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*: 357.
- Quoted in Melanie Gustafson, *Women and the Republican Party, 1854–1924* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003): 194.
- Allan G. Borgue, Jerome M. Clubb, Carroll R. McKibbin, and Santa A. Traugott, "Members of the House of Representatives and the Processes of Modernization, 1789–1960," *Journal of American History*, 63 (September 1976): 275–302; figures on 291. Roughly 30 percent of men, however, were elected in their 30s.
- Gustafson, *Women and the Republican Party, 1854–1924*: 179–180; see also Kristie Miller, *Ruth Hanna McCormick: A Life in Politics, 1880–1944* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).
- The importance of the widow's mandate is discussed in the introduction to this book. For a full treatment of this phenomenon, see Irwin N. Gertzog, *Congressional Women: Their Recruitment, Integration, and Behavior* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995): 17–36.

- 16 “Pro and Con,” 18 June 1932, *Washington Post*: 6.
- 17 Susan M. Hartmann, “Caraway, Hattie Ophelia,” *American National Biography* Vol. 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 369–370.
- 18 Norma Smith, *Jeannette Rankin: America’s Conscience* (Helena: Montana Historical Society, 2002): 115.
- 19 Smith, *Jeannette Rankin*: 115. The House Office Building had been opened in 1908 and was meant to accommodate all House Members and committees. By and large, each Member was assigned a one-room office.
- 20 Quoted in Smith, *Jeannette Rankin*: 104; see also, Hannah Josephson, *Jeannette Rankin, First Lady In Congress—A Biography* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974): 57. A highly unusual feature of the lecture contract was that if she voted against a war resolution, the contract could be terminated. Josephson, *Jeannette Rankin*: 62–63; 67.
- 21 “‘Miss Alice’ To Be Meek in Congress,” 26 February 1921, *Washington Post*: 10; “Spankings to Silence Talkative In House Advocated by Miss Alice,” 5 March 1923, *Washington Post*: 4.
- 22 Miller, *Ruth Hanna McCormick: A Life in Politics*: 193. McCormick appeared in the 23 April 1928 edition, weeks after her Illinois primary victory. Senator Margaret Chase Smith appeared on a *Time* cover in 1959, marking the 40th anniversary of the suffrage amendment .
- 23 Winifred Mallon, “Another Hanna Looks to the Senate,” 9 June 1929, *New York Times*: SM4.
- 24 Hope Chamberlin, *A Minority of Members: Women in the U.S. Congress* (New York: Praeger, 1973): 64.
- 25 Constance Drexel, “Mrs. Nolan No ‘Crusader’; Mrs. Barrett Gains Note,” 24 February 1924, *Washington Post*: ES 3; “In Congress 2 Years, She Did No ‘Talking,’” 5 March 1925, *Washington Post*: 9.
- 26 For committee attractiveness during this period, see Charles Stewart III, “Committee Hierarchies in the Modernizing House, 1875–1947,” *American Journal of Political Science* 36 (No. 4, November 1992): 835–856.
- 27 Smith, *Jeannette Rankin*: 102.
- 28 Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992): especially 494–522.
- 29 Quoted in Chafe, *The Paradox of Change*: 27.
- 30 Gertzog, *Congressional Women*: 148–152.
- 31 For more on the temperance and Prohibition, see Ruth Bordin’s *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990) and Thomas R. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America, 1800–1933* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 1998).
- 32 Steven Stathis, *Landmark Legislation, 1774–2002* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2003): 185–186.
- 33 See, for example, Susan M. Reverby, *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma of American Nursing, 1850–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 34 For a thorough treatment of the Great Depression era, see David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear* (New York: Oxford, 2004).
- 35 Chafe, *The Paradox of Change*: 23.
- 36 Gertzog, *Congressional Women*: 148.
- 37 Chamberlin, *A Minority of Members*: 78.
- 38 “Mrs. Oldfield Decries Feminist in Politics,” 19 February 1931, *New York Times*: 3.
- 39 “Ruth McCormick,” 10 April 1930, *Washington Post*: 6.

VISUAL STATISTICS

Congressional Service

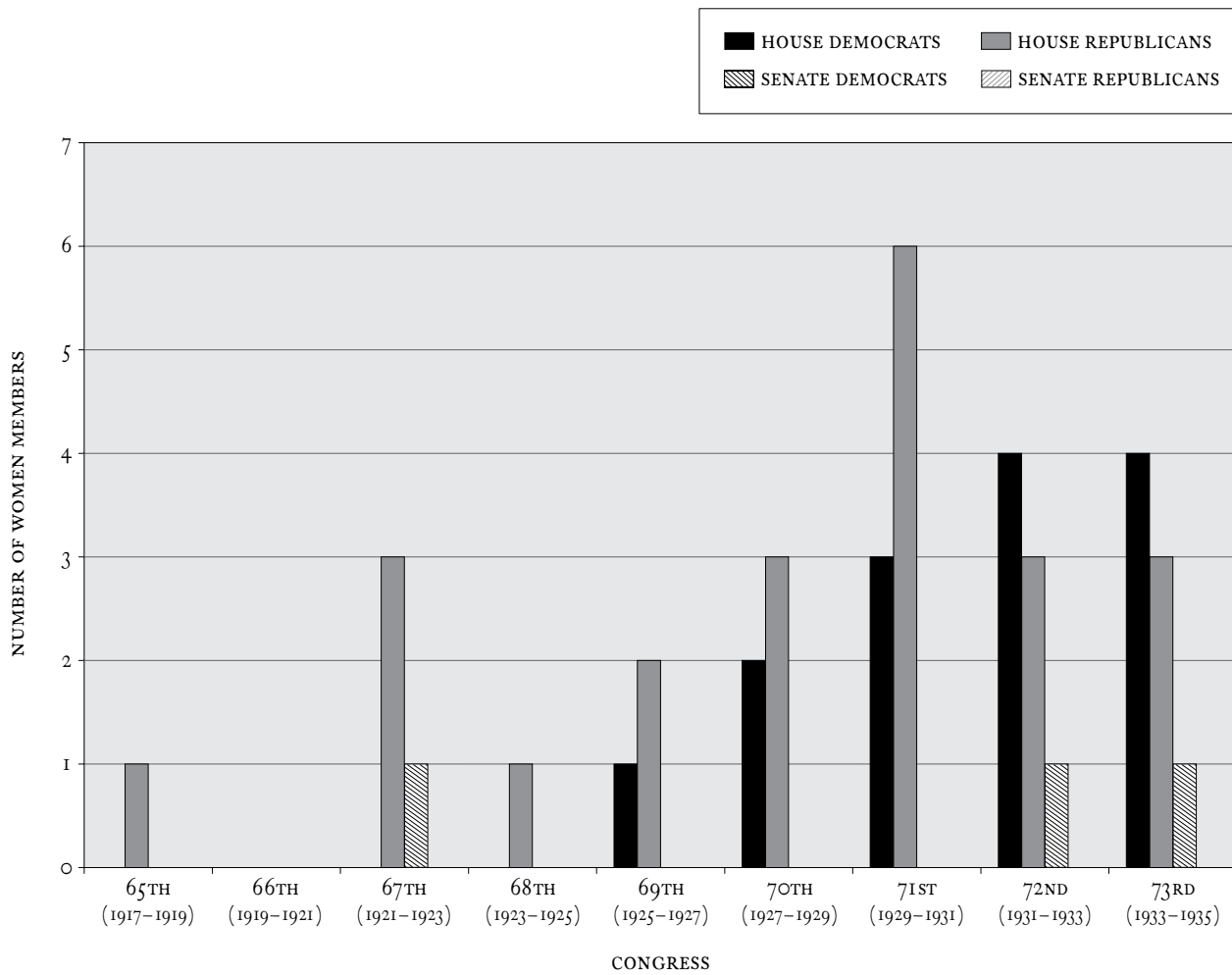
This timeline depicts the span of congressional service for women first sworn-in between 1917 and 1934.



Source: *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–2005* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2005); also available at <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

Party Affiliation: Women in Congress, 65th–73rd Congresses (1917–1935)

This chart depicts the party breakdown only for women Members during this time period.



Source: Appendix B, "Women Representatives and Senators by Congress: 1917–2007," *Women in Congress, 1917–2006*.