

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

A Civics In Real Life Series

FEMALE FIRSTS

JEANNETTE RANKIN

In the history of the United States, of the 12,421 individuals who have served in the United States Congress, only 397 have been women. The woman who first broke this barrier was [Jeannette Rankin](#) of Montana. Elected as Congress' first female member, Rankin was one of hundreds of women running for office in 1916, which is notable because her election comes four years before the passage of the [19th Amendment](#) and women's [suffrage](#). She would be elected to two non-consecutive terms in the U.S. House of Representatives (1917-1919; 1941-1943). Born the oldest of seven to a prosperous rancher and builder in the Montana Territory in 1880, Rankin attended Montana State University and Columbia University in New York City. In 1904, she traveled to visit family in San Francisco and began volunteering at a [settlement house](#). There she discovered her passion for social reform work, especially women's suffrage. As the field secretary for the [National American Woman Suffrage Association](#) (NAWSA), Rankin traveled all over the country leading organizational support efforts for women's rights and suffrage legislation. In February 1911, while attempting to garner support for a voting rights bill, she became the first woman to ever [address the Montana state legislature](#). On July 13, 1916, Jeannette Rankin announced she would run as a Republican candidate for one of Montana's [two At-Large House seats](#). Rankin excelled at listening to [constituents](#), speaking to small groups, and organizing people to get out and vote. Consequently, on November 7, 1916, Rankin defeated Frank Bird Linderman to [become](#) one of Montana's representatives. During her time in Congress, Rankin focused on issues including nationwide suffrage, child welfare improvements, and [prohibition](#). While she successfully worked on multiple pieces of legislation and initiatives to benefit her Montana constituents, Rankin's legacy is often defined by her votes opposing both World War I and World War II. On December 8, 1941 when President Franklin Delano [Roosevelt](#) asked Congress to declare war on Japan, Rankin, a long-time and well-known [pacifist](#), was the only "no" vote, stating "As a woman I can't go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else". After her time in Congress, Rankin continued her work as a feminist and an activist until her death in 1973. Her status as a "female first" made way for the nation's second female member of the U.S. Congress, [Alice May Robertson](#) in 1921 and by the time Rankin was elected to her second term in 1940, she would serve alongside six other women.



Civics Challenge: Search & Learn

First Woman Elected To Your State Legislature:	
Years Served:	
Party:	
Platform:	
Has Your State Ever Had A Female U.S House Member or U.S. Senator? Elaborate.	



Lou Frey
Institute