

WOMEN'S HISTORY SPOTLIGHT

A Civics In Real Life Series

FEMALE FIRSTS

PATRICIA SCHROEDER



On March 13, 2023, former [U.S. Representative Patricia Schroeder](#) passed away in Celebration, Florida. While her passing received little attention in the national news, and many of us may not recognize the name, she was once one of the most recognizable faces in Congress, and an individual described as a “maverick, pioneer, feminist, champion, trailblazer, and role model”.

In 1972, Patricia Schroeder was [elected](#) to the U.S. House of Representatives for the First Congressional district of Colorado, which encompassed most of Denver. A lawyer, private pilot, wife, and mother, she triumphed in her election despite lacking the endorsement of the Democratic Party of Colorado and the Democratic National Committee. Propelled by voter support for her platform on women’s rights and antiwar messages, Schroeder became the first woman elected to Congress from the state of Colorado. At the age of 32, she was also the second-youngest female ever elected to Congress.

Joining only 13 other women in the U.S. House of Representatives at the time, Schroeder faced an uphill battle asserting her place in Congress. Immediately, she faced sharp criticism from congressional colleagues over her decision to serve in Congress and actively parent two young children. She was known to respond with quips such as “I have a brain and a uterus and I use both” while never hiding things like diapers in her work bag or crayons on her office table.

Coming from a military family, the topic of defense, particularly defense spending, was a priority for Schroeder. Thrilled to earn a spot on the all-male [Armed Services Committee](#), Schroeder was once again faced with pushback. The committee chair, [Felix Edward Hébert](#), objected to both Schroeder and a Black congressman, [Ronald Dellums](#) of California, serving on his committee. In response, Hébert used his power to determine the number of seats at the meeting table, and removed one, stating “since these two people are only worth half of the rest of my Members, they’re getting one chair”. Refusing to give any attention to this attempt to make them feel as if they didn’t belong, Schroeder and Dellums both sat down and shared the chair “like it was the most normal thing in the world.”

During her 24-year tenure representing the First District of Colorado, Patricia Schroeder stayed true to the issues most important to her. She made notable legislative achievements in the areas of women’s health care, expansion of Social Security benefits, and gender equity in the workplace. Her biggest legislative success came in 1993 when after 10 years of working on it, she helped pass the [Family and Medical Leave Act](#). She successfully pushed for cutbacks and changes to defense spending, worked to achieve better living conditions for military families, and convinced the Armed Services Committee to recommend that women be allowed to fly combat missions. In 1977, Schroeder helped found the [Congressional Women’s Caucus](#) and served as co-chair for the next 10 years. Schroeder retired from the U.S. House of Representatives in 1997, deciding not to seek re-election. At the time of her retirement, she was the longest-serving woman in the U.S. House.

Civics Challenge: Search & Learn

Number of women in the U.S. House today:	
Number of women in the U.S. Senate today:	
Youngest woman in Congress today:	
Longest serving woman in Congress:	

