

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

A Civics In Real Life Series

FEMALE FIRSTS

Jean Westwood & Mary Louise Smith



Since the nation's founding, women have worked tirelessly to be recognized as equal citizens. After [winning the right to vote](#) in 1920, women slowly began to find success in the field of politics. This includes serving in leadership positions within America's political parties. Parties, and their respective national committees, oversee nominations and elections, contribute resources to political campaigns, and shape party messages. The [Democratic National Committee](#) (DNC) and [Republican National Committee](#) (RNC) were founded in 1848 and 1854, respectively. At the head of each national committee is a chairperson, elected by committee members. As the leader of their party, sitting presidents, president-elects, or presidential candidates often endorse or nominate committee chairs for members to approve. While the role and responsibilities of the chairperson vary according to the bylaws of each political party, typically, the person in this position serves as the chief executive officer of the party and oversees party operations, election strategy, candidate recruitment, and fundraising. The first female to ever serve as chairperson of a major party's national committee was [Jean Westwood](#). Elected as chair of the DNC in July 1972, Westwood labeled herself as an "unintentional pioneer." Living in Utah, she began working in local and county politics when her children were young while also maintaining and running a mink farm with her husband. Eventually, Westwood began working more closely with Utah's Democratic Party and then moved into national politics. She served as a close advisor and leader on the campaign of presidential candidate [George McGovern](#) in 1972. It would be McGovern who endorsed Westwood for DNC Chair, setting up her election to the position right in the midst of [Watergate](#). Under Westwood's leadership, the DNC adopted anti-discrimination committee guidelines. The rights of women were an integral part of the [1972 Democratic Party Platform](#). Two years later, in 1974, the RNC elected its first female chair, [Mary Louise Smith](#), who became the second-ever female chair of a major political party. Smith was involved in politics throughout her home state of Iowa and served two terms on her local school board. In 1964, she transitioned to national politics after she was elected a Republican national committeewoman for Iowa. Nominated by President Ford, Smith was elected RNC Chair in 1974 and served in the position until 1977. Smith's staunch support for women's rights, particularly the [Equal Rights Amendment](#), was reflected in the [1976 Republican Party Platform](#). After her time as RNC Chair, Smith worked on several other presidential campaigns throughout the 1980s and 1990s. President Reagan appointed her vice-chairwoman of the [U.S. Commission on Civil Rights](#) in 1991. President George H.W. Bush appointed her to the board of directors of the [U.S. Institute of Peace](#). Since Westwood and Smith, four women have served as chair of the DNC, and one for the RNC. Both parties have also had historic opportunities to formally nominate more women to the offices of president and vice president. While a woman has yet to win the presidency, in the words of [Constance Baker Motley](#), "Something which we think is impossible now is not impossible in another decade."

Civics Challenge: Search & Learn

Number Of Women Who Have Chaired The Republican Party For Your State:

Number Of Women Who Have Chaired The Democratic Party For Your State:



Lou Frey
Institute