

# WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

## A Civics In Real Life Series

### FEMALE FIRSTS

### Margaret Chase Smith



For much of American history, women were largely excluded from leadership roles in government and politics. That began to change in important ways during the mid-20th century through the groundbreaking career of [Margaret Chase Smith](#). Known for her independence, courage, and trailblazing achievements, Smith became one of the most influential women in Congress and achieved multiple historic “firsts” that reshaped expectations for women in public office. [Margaret Chase Smith](#) was born in Skowhegan, Maine, in 1897. She began her career as a teacher, journalist, and office worker before entering politics through her involvement in civic organizations and local Republican Party activities. In 1930, she married Clyde Smith, a prominent local politician and businessman. In 1936, when Clyde Smith was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Maine’s 2nd district, she joined him in D.C. and worked as his secretary and political advisor, gaining firsthand experience of the legislative process. After Clyde Smith’s death in 1940, Margaret Chase Smith ran for his vacant seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. She won the election, becoming one of the few women serving in Congress at the time. During her service in the House, Smith quickly gained respect for her strong work ethic and attention to detail, especially on military and defense issues—fields that were rarely associated with female lawmakers during that era. In 1948, Smith made history again when she was elected to the United States Senate, becoming the first woman to serve in both the [U.S. House of Representatives](#) and the [U.S. Senate](#). She represented Maine in the Senate for 24 years, making her one of the longest-serving women in congressional history at the time. Her presence in the Senate helped normalize female leadership in one of the nation’s most powerful political institutions. On June 1, 1950, Smith delivered her now-famous “[Declaration of Conscience](#)” speech on the Senate floor, publicly criticizing the fear-based tactics of [McCarthyism](#). At a time when few were willing to speak out, especially women, her speech demonstrated remarkable political courage and reinforced her reputation as an independent thinker who placed democratic principles above party pressure. Smith continued to break barriers throughout her career. She became the first woman to serve on both the House and Senate Armed Services [Committees](#), playing a key role in shaping national defense policy. In 1964, she made history once more when she announced her candidacy for President of the United States. Even though she lost, she became the first woman to be seriously considered for the presidential nomination of a major political party, receiving delegate votes at the [Republican National Convention](#). Margaret Chase Smith’s career demonstrated that women could lead with independence, courage, and principle at the highest levels of government. Reflecting her commitment to integrity over party loyalty, Smith once stated, “*I don’t speak as a Republican. I speak as a woman,*” a statement that captures her lasting influence on American politics and women’s leadership in government.

### Civics Challenge: Search & Learn

Number of Females To Represent Your State in the U.S. House of Representatives:

Number of Females To Represent Your State in the U.S. Senate:



Lou Frey  
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