



POWERFUL WOMEN

The 25 Most Influential Women in Congress



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AND CQ ROLL CALL STAFF



Chapter 1

THE LONG ROAD

Men had a 128-year head start on women in Congress, and in an institution that rewards seniority and tenure, women are still playing catch-up.

As the longest-serving woman on Capitol Hill, Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski knows well what female lawmakers face. “But the challenges have changed because when we came, there were so few of us and we were considered a novelty,” the Maryland Democrat, first elected in 1976, has said.

Although women have expanded their ranks – a record 104 serve in the 114th Congress – Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., remains the only woman elected Speaker, and no woman has been Senate majority leader. Many committees have never been led by a woman. And with a few notable exceptions, female lawmakers as a group aren’t as prominent on major issues such as defense, immigration and taxes.

Still, along with their growing ranks, women have increased their influence on the legislative agenda over their nearly 100 years in Congress.

In their first few decades of service, women often became lawmakers through the so-called widow’s mandate, an unofficial tradition to appoint or elect a widow to directly succeed her husband in office. Of the 20 women who served in Congress from 1917 to 1934, eight were widows who replaced their husbands. The longest-serving woman in the House, Edith Nourse Rogers, began her 35-year career in 1925 after filling the vacancy left by her husband’s death. Others came from political families or had husbands who served years before they ran for office.

Women then had individual projects, and a few became sought-after speakers, but they rarely had the opportunity to set the legislative agenda or be power players. Part of this was due to a lack of seniority. Nearly half of the 36 women elected or appointed from 1935 to 1954 served one term or less, according to the House historian’s office. It was not until the 1970s that women began coming to Congress in larger numbers, with more advanced education and professional experience, giving their presence added heft.

They began to breach the top ranks the same way men did — by logging hours, building alliances, developing areas of expertise and being forceful when necessary.

They also were more likely than men to forge bipartisan alliances and at times worked together to set an agenda on so-called women’s issues.



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Sen. Susan Collins (R)

Maine

Elected 1996; 4th term

Committees: Appropriations (Transportation-HUD-chairwoman);
Select Intelligence; Special Aging — chairwoman; Health,
Education, Labor & Pensions

Residence: Bangor

Born: Dec. 7, 1952; Caribou, Maine

Religion: Roman Catholic

Family: Husband, Thomas Daffron

Education: St. Lawrence University, B.A. 1975 (government)

Career: Business center director; congressional aide

Political Highlights: Maine Department of Professional and Financial
Regulation commissioner, 1987-1991; Small Business
Administration official, 1992-1993; Maine deputy treasurer, 1993;
Republican nominee for governor, 1994

Collins is one of the last Republican moderates remaining in Congress.

That status makes her a fascinating political study. It gives her power as a deal maker (or deal breaker) in a Senate where neither party has been able to secure a 60-vote super-majority to overcome dilatory tactics.

As a result, on numerous issues, Senate party leaders must plan their whipping strategies with Collins' view on the matter in mind. And typically her position earns her the enmity of party faithful on one side or the other — and often on both sides.

"We have vigorous debates and think that's how you get best public policy and how you attract people to your party and your cause," Collins said in 2013 "So, I think it's healthy that we are not in lock step on every issue."

Never was Collins' role as a bridge across the partisan divide more apparent than during the late 2013 government shutdown. At that time, she led a bipartisan "Common Sense Coalition" of senators to forge a budget compromise that ultimately formed the basis of a deal to reopen federal offices.

In Maine, this independent streak is catnip for voters, who rewarded Collins in November 2014 with her fourth term in the Senate. She "has become a political rock star in Maine," one GOP consultant told Roll Call.

Republican conservatives in the state haven't been able to muster a formidable primary challenger, and Democrats find themselves undercut in the general elections because she has coopted so many of their issues.

But to be clear, Collins is no liberal. She has been a critic of the 2010 health care overhaul; she opposed a minimum wage increase in 2014; and she's a defense hawk.

Collins weighs in on national security matters as a member of the Select Intelligence Committee. She also has previous experience as a senior member of the Armed Services panel and as the former ranking member of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

Her accomplishments in defense, intelligence and homeland security include helping to rewrite intelligence laws in 2004 to create a more centralized spy infrastructure.

She also led probes of the federal response in 2005 to Hurricane Katrina; of the 2009 shooting at Fort Hood; and of the 2012 attack on U.S. government facilities in Benghazi, Libya. And she helped write a cybersecurity bill that would set standards for critical computer systems, but she was unable to overcome opposition to it from business interests and most of her GOP colleagues.

Collins is a fiscal conservative — but only to a point. As the top Republican on the transportation-HUD Appropriations Subcommittee, she has not hesitated to look out for her state, in particular for Navy spending on destroyers, which are built at the Bath Iron Works shipyard.

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And Collins broke from many in her party on the spending levels in the 2013 transportation appropriations bill.

Voting against the party current is, in fact, more the norm than the exception for Collins. In 2012 and 2013, for example, she voted against her fellow Republicans slightly more often than she backed them, a record of ideological deviance unmatched in the GOP caucus.

It is on social and environmental issues that she is most discordant with the GOP tune. She supported in 2010 a bill that enabled the Pentagon to allow openly gay men and women to serve in the military.

In 2014, she announced her support for gay marriage. She had voted the year before in favor of a measure that would bar discrimination against people because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In 2010, she worked with Washington Democrat Maria Cantwell on a “cap and dividend” proposal, whereby fossil fuel producers must buy “carbon shares” and the proceeds go to both clean-energy research and taxpayers’ pockets.

She also refused to toe the GOP line on another hot-button domestic issue when she supported in 2013 a requirement for background checks prior to the purchase of firearms, though the measure did not pass.

Collins will be able to pursue her domestic priorities in the 114th Congress (2014-15) not only from the Appropriations Committee, but as chairwoman of the Special Aging Committee and as a new member of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

Collins hails from a political family; each of her parents served as Caribou’s mayor. Her father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather served as Maine legislators.

Collins visited the U.S. Capitol as a high school senior and spent two hours talking with a Republican woman trailblazer, late Maine Sen. Margaret Chase Smith. “It really was in some ways a transformational experience,” Collins has said. Inspired by Smith, who showed up for every Senate vote for more than 20 years, Collins has maintained a perfect voting attendance record.

After graduating from St. Lawrence University in 1975, she moved to Washington to work as an aide to William S. Cohen, another moderate Republican senator from Maine who became her mentor. She then returned to Maine to serve as commissioner of the state’s Department of Professional and Financial Regulation.

In 1994, Collins won the Republican nomination for governor but finished as a disappointing third behind Democratic nominee Joseph E. Brennan and independent Angus King, who won the contest. (King is now the state’s junior senator.)

In 1996, when Cohen announced his retirement, Collins regrouped and took that

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race by 5 percentage points. She won handily in 2002, beating Democratic challenger Chellie Pingree (who is now a House member).

In 2008, Collins faced an experienced opponent in Democratic Rep. Tom Allen, with Barack Obama on the ticket. She still won by more than 22 points. She sailed to her fourth term in 2014.

Collins got married in 2012 to Thomas Daffron, a consultant in his 70s who worked most of his career as a Senate aide. He met Collins four decades earlier when they both worked for Cohen.