

The Roads to Congress 2018

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Editors

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American Elections in the Trump Era

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This work is dedicated to those who continue to raise and examine intriguing questions about election dynamics and trends, and to enduring democracy in America.

FOREWORD

Like most institutions, Congress has changed over the course of the past few decades. In the almost three decades that I walked those halls—voting, meeting with constituents, and representing the voice of my South Florida community—I was, and will always be, in awe of this great nation and the privilege it afforded me to be a part of this enduring body.

On September 3, 1989, I was sworn in as the first Hispanic woman and first Cuban American in Congress. My background was in education. I had been a public and private school teacher, as well as principal, of a small private bilingual school in Hialeah, a working-class area of South Florida. I had served in the Florida House of Representatives and Florida Senate. I was one of only 32 women, 18 Democrat and 14 Republican, in the US Congress when I arrived. The current Congress now boasts 131 women, the largest female delegation to serve in the institution, including 25 in the Senate and 102 members plus 3 Delegates and the Resident Commissioner in the House.

The make-up of Congress has changed and will continue to change. The framers of the Constitution created the People's House and, in order to represent the diversity of our country, so must those who are elected to represent the people be diverse. I always say I was glad to have been the first Latina elected to Congress but even more joyful that I was not the last. It is important to maintain that diversity because it brings new perspectives, new points of view, and new ways in which to tackle the nation's problems.

As a freshman and a Hispanic woman, I faced challenges in securing a seat at the table where some of the most crucial and important decisions

regarding our country are made. My goal was to be on the Foreign Affairs Committee because in my home and my community, foreign affairs were domestic affairs. The fight for a free and democratic Cuba, my native homeland, and the importance of human rights around the globe were daily issues where I came from.

Congressman Dante Fascell, a respected long-serving Democratic member from South Florida who was the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, helped me and persuaded his majority party to increase the number of members from the minority to add me to the committee. They added a small desk that looked like it was for an intern, but that did not dissuade me and I knew that being a part of this committee would allow me to represent the most important issues of my constituency.

In time, I became Ranking Member and then became the first woman to chair the Foreign Affairs Committee. That opportunity, originally facilitated by a member of the opposite party, allowed me to craft crucial legislation to protect the United States and our interests.

When I arrived in Congress, bipartisanship and compromise were not only the practice but the pursuit. Unfortunately, and sadly, much has changed. The partisan polarization of our elected leaders has eroded the public's faith in Congress. Today, working in a bipartisan manner and seeking compromise are scarce traits. With 435 members from diverse backgrounds, educational and socioeconomic status, the collegiality that I enjoyed for many years is lacking and should be brought back to the People's House.

However, one shared objective remains: constituent service. This should be the top priority for any Member of Congress. It is important to write and vote for meaningful legislation that impacts the lives of many but, at home in the district, constituents and their case should be a priority. By helping that grandmother with her Social Security benefits, or that veteran to recuperate lost service medals or obtain services at the VA (US Department of Veterans Affairs), or simply helping constituents to navigate the complex federal system, representatives make a difference that voters often most remember. This aspect of public service is the one factor that every Member, Republican or Democrat, can agree on and can excel at during their time in office.

Running for elected office always requires raising money to ensure that candidates can get their message out to the voters. Campaign rallies, mail pieces, media announcements, and so many components of a successful campaign are dependent on a candidate's ability to raise money. I ran 15

congressional campaigns and was blessed that the voters saw fit to continue to allow me to represent them in Congress. The past few years have witnessed the skyrocketing costs of congressional campaigns. Millions of dollars are spent by candidates, as well as outside groups, in any given race. Unfortunately, due to the cost, campaigning and fundraising have become a constant for any member who seeks reelection.

Campaigns have evolved from traditional mail and media to utilize every modern communication tool, such as social media and text messages. This immediacy of information helps a candidate or incumbent to quickly and efficiently communicate with the voters and the community as a whole. Voters who are engaged in the process have access to not only receive information on what their candidate or Member is doing, but also to communicate to each one their needs, opinions, and views on any given subject. This two-way communication between voter and candidate or constituent and Member has served to make that relationship closer.

Every congressional district has its nuances and they cannot be swept together. A strategy that may work in one district may not be successful in another. For example, the South Florida district which I represented for nearly three decades went through several redistricting changes but always maintained a diverse community and voter registration numbers that were more favorable to Democrats. The large number of independents registered in my district also tended to vote for more Democrats. I was not dissuaded. I worked hard for the people of my community, both in Washington and in the district, and this, time and again, proved to be a winning strategy for me.

My experience, however, is not commonplace. As districts have been drawn and redrawn, gerrymandering has afforded secure seats on either side of the aisle. This makes many congressional races less competitive. Both parties become entrenched in certain districts where the lines are drawn to favor one party. Complacency, however, is the enemy of any incumbent. Many, as recent as 2018, lost primary elections as new and fringe voices came into play in both political parties.

When I was first elected nearly three decades ago, the GOP was very much viewed as a minority party. The Democratic Party had controlled the House for over four decades. Many were therefore surprised in 1995 when the GOP became the majority party. In 2007, a comparatively short 12 years later, the House flipped back to Democratic control. Four years later, the GOP was back in control. Fluctuating numbers for several years maintained a GOP majority in the House, but in 2018, it flipped again to Democratic control.¹ The balance of power can truly shift in one election cycle.

An individual contemplating a run for Congress may be dismayed by the financial cost to run, as well as the pressure of performing efficiently and effectively in DC and in the district, but I can tell you: do not hesitate if your heart is in it and you are willing to work hard for your community. If serving the needs of your community is important, then elected office will allow you to help one case at a time and also help pass legislation that impacts around the nation.

I encourage more women, more Hispanics and, more individuals of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities to consider representing their communities, promoting their diversity of thought and contributing to the fabric of our nation by serving in this esteemed body. Though Congress as a whole may struggle to keep the faith and support of the American public, each member can cultivate their own legacy of service for their congressional district.

The road to becoming a member of Congress may have potholes and obstacles, but with tenacity and a desire to serve our communities and our nation, a candidate can be successful. The *Roads to Congress 2018* provides an in-depth look at the midterm elections that, once again, flipped control of the U.S. House, while maintaining a majority for the GOP in the Senate. Many Members were unseated in primaries and general elections across the country. Despite the challenges that both parties continue to face, I have faith in our democratic system and hope, for the sake of my grandchildren and for generations to come, that this current atmosphere of polarization, extremism, and lack of cooperation comes to an end. Instead, I hope for the return of collegiality, bipartisanship, negotiation, and compromise to this legislative body, that it can be as it once was, many years ago.

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NOTE

1. US House of Representatives, *Party Divisions of the House of Representatives, 1789 to Present*, House.gov. <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Party-Divisions/Party-Divisions/>

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