

“I’M NO LADY, I’M A MEMBER OF CONGRESS”: WOMEN PIONEERS ON CAPITOL HILL, 1917–1934

LESSON PLAN ONE



RECOMMENDED GRADE LEVEL: Grades 7 to 12



OVERVIEW

This activity is designed to accompany the contextual essay “I’m No Lady, I’m a Member of Congress’: Women Pioneers on Capitol Hill, 1917–1934,” from the *Women in Congress* website, history.house.gov/exhibition-and-publications/wic/women-in-congress/. Students have the opportunity to learn more about the women who served in Congress from 1917 to 1934. Students are encouraged to analyze the role women Representatives and Senators played in Congress during this era, as well as the ways in which they may have changed the institution.



CURRICULUM CONNECTION

- U.S. History, American Government, Social Studies, Women’s History
- World War I, Women’s Rights Movement, Women’s Suffrage, Great Depression, Prohibition



OBJECTIVES

1. Students should be able to identify the women who served in Congress from 1917 to 1934.
2. Students should be able to recognize the ways in which women won national elective office from 1917 to 1934.
3. Students should be able to identify important issues and trends surrounding the women who served in Congress from 1917 to 1934.



LESSON PLAN

1. To help introduce students to the upcoming activity, lead a brief discussion using the questions below:
 - a. What were some of the important issues and events in America from 1917 to 1934?
 - b. If asked to describe an average Member of Congress (House or Senate) during this time period, how would you answer?
 - c. Have there been many women who have served in Congress? (Ask students to compile a quick list.)
2. Ask students to read the contextual essay “I’m No Lady, I’m a Member of Congress’: Women Pioneers on Capitol Hill, 1917–1934,” either independently or in groups. Encourage students to take notes and to write down any unanswered questions they encounter during the reading.
3. Once students have completed the reading, have them answer the **Comprehension Questions**. Review the answers as a class.
4. Next have students answer the **Critical Thinking Questions**. Review the answers as a class.
5. Choose one of the options listed under the category **Main Exercise** (Cooperative or Hypothetical). If necessary, students can use the online resources listed at the end of the activity to complete the **Main Exercise**.
6. Time permitting, conduct one of the **Suggested Extended Activities**.



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS ON THE SURFACE

1. Who was the first woman elected to Congress? In what years did she serve?
2. Who was the first woman elected to the Senate? In what years did she serve? Was she the first woman to serve in the Senate?
3. Explain the concept of “widow’s mandate.” What were some of the other common ways in which women of the period began their congressional career?
4. What were some of the major legislative issues affecting women Members during this era?
5. What were the educational backgrounds of these Congresswomen? Was this typical for the time?
6. Describe one instance in which Congresswomen differed over a bill or major national issue debated in Congress.



CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS DIGGING DEEPER

1. How do you think the Progressive Era changed the role of women in politics?
2. What were some of the significant similarities between the women who served during this period? What were some of the major differences?
3. Did women Members of this era typically work within the prescribed traditions of Congress or did they challenge the system? Use evidence to support your answer.
4. Compare and contrast the congressional careers of any two women who served during this period. (Make sure to discuss tenure, legislation, committees, and basic background such as the district or the state in which each woman served.)
5. Why do you think that the Congresswomen of this period were often viewed as media curiosities by the press?
6. Many people assumed that women elected to Congress would hold similar beliefs and values—in other words, they would vote as a bloc. How did the women of the era disprove this theory?
7. Congresswoman Ruth Baker Pratt of New York once stated, “[S]ex had no place whatever in politics.” Did this sentiment ring true for the women who served in Congress during this period? Explain your answer.



MAIN EXERCISE OPTION 1: COOPERATIVE

Students will be working in groups of 2–4 (depending upon class size). Each group will choose or be assigned a Congresswoman for the activity.

- a. Read the profile for the Congresswoman.
- b. Write down any important notes.
- c. Scenario: Students have been assigned the task of designing a museum exhibit to describe the life of Congresswoman _____. The exhibit will include information on all aspects of her life, but will focus on her congressional service.

What should be included:

- Original title of exhibit that helps explain her legacy
- 50-word exhibit label that summarizes congressional career
- Three artifacts chosen by you that best represent her legacy
- A creative teaching tool for museum visitors that covers the highlights of her career in Congress (committees, key legislation, state or district she represented, etc.)

OPTION 2: HYPOTHETICAL

1. You are a campaign manager for a woman candidate for Congress in the 1920s, running against a Congressman who has served five terms in the House of Representatives and who has opposed voting rights for women. Your candidate has political experience on the city council of a large city. How will you get her elected? What is your campaign slogan? What are the local/national issues on which you will campaign?
2. You are a Congresswoman during the early years of the Great Depression. Your district is rural and has a lot of farming families and an agricultural economy. What are the issues that you will likely address in Congress? What programs might you support to help farmers who are contending with bad weather and a poor economy?
3. You are a Congresswoman in the 1920s who has been asked by the congressional leadership to make a five-minute floor speech in which you must appeal to women to take a greater role in political life. How might you encourage women to participate? Draft a speech and deliver it to your class.

**SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES**

1. Design a timeline of significant events for the women of Congress who served during this era.
2. Track voting records of women Members on key issues of the period.
3. Write a 100-word obituary for one of the women Members.
4. Design a campaign poster for a woman candidate for Congress during this period.
5. Draft language for a resolution sponsored by a Congresswoman in the 1920s on one of three fictional topics:
 - a. Changing the start and end times of the school day to allow high school students to sleep late
 - b. Creating a national program that requires all high school students to devote one year to civilian volunteer work prior to their graduation
 - c. Reducing the voting age to 15



ONLINE RESOURCES

History, Art & Archives | U.S. House of Representatives

A collaborative project between the Office of the Historian and the Clerk of the House's Office of Art and Archives. Together, the offices serve as the House's institutional memory, and a resource for Members, staff, and the general public.

history.house.gov

Online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*

Searchable database that contains biographical information on every person who served in Congress.

bioguide.congress.gov

Senate Historical Office

Includes information on the history and art of the U.S. Senate such as facts and milestones, historical statistics, featured biographies, and a photographic collection.

senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Senate_Historical_Office.htm

Congress.gov | Library of Congress

Searchable database of congressional legislation from 1973 to present (bill text and roll call votes are available from 1989 to present).

congress.gov

GPO Federal Digital System

Includes links for searchable databases of the *Congressional Record* and *House Journal* (1994 to present) as well as information on how to find the nearest federal depository library.

gpo.gov/fdsys