

The Honorable Lois Capps
U.S. Representative of California (1998–2017)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

“Learning from our Mistakes”

Representative Capps recounts the tour she gave to visiting eighth graders.
Interview recorded July 16, 2019

Particularly in eighth grade, when, in California at least, students study American history. And so there's this kind of a tradition, it's almost a rite of passage in some schools, where they raise the money, they have bake sales and whatnot, and they go back—the class raises the funds. Parents offer to chaperone or volunteer and get support from the community, or from somewhere, and come back to Washington, DC. They go to Williamsburg, they go to various places. But one of the places they come to is the Capitol, and they want to meet with the Member of Congress. And we generally, if it's a nice day, we stand on the Capitol steps, this little group of students, their chaperones, and me. And they want to ask me some questions. And of course, the first question is always...have you seen—have you met the President? Doesn't matter who he is. And then we go on from there. And I tell them, it became a habit of mine to tell them, you know, I say, “Look down there at these Capitol steps. See, they're kind of worn in the middle. Many, many people have gone up these steps. In our country, you can have access to the Capitol. You can walk in. But you, if you're elected, these, this is the way you go in and represent your district, in the House of Representatives.” And then I say to them, “We are the world's oldest democracy, and that just means that we've made more mistakes than any other democracy, and we've had time to learn from them. Because it's based, our democracy is based on learning from our mistakes, I believe, as much as from any achievement that anyone ever comes to.” So if we have someone in the White House that not everybody's excited about, or if we pass a law, the very next Congress, some of the bad laws were undone and will continue to be. That's what it is, it's messy. The process is messy, but it's transparent, fairly transparent. In some ways it could be more so. And you can tell, I'm a firm believer not in my party particularly, but in, in the process.