

The Honorable Eva M. Clayton
U.S. Representative of North Carolina (1992–2003)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Answering the Call to Run for Congress

Representative Clayton describes her reasons for running for Congress in 1968.
Interview recorded May 15, 2015

So, early on he had the opportunity, along with some other leaders, and I think there might have been 12 people in a, in a region of about 10 to 12 counties. We were invited to, to consider running for Congress because the registration was very low. In the particular county in which we lived, which is a rural county, the registration was like 15 percent for Afro Americans, and probably lower than that in terms of actual voter participation. So the invite was not to me, but to him, and I just went along—and in the discussion about the desire and the need to find a candidate who would be willing to run for Congress because we needed to have this opportunity. Also, as you know, in 1968 there was a great movement for the civil rights. Martin Luther King had motivated people, and we were ourselves motivated that indeed this was our time—particularly Afro Americans to be seen as equal. And, I guess I got the spirit, and, and I raised my hand, and, and my husband didn't, and, nor did anyone else, really. And so on my way back I said, "Why didn't you volunteer?" And he said to me, "Tell me who would take care of our three children and ourselves if I stopped my law practice and ran," you know. So we knew it was a sacrifice, I mean no doubt about that. And there was no deception on the part of the people who invited this. He said that, now, you know, "we can't give you monies. You're going to have to raise some of the monies, and you're going to have to, you're going to often knock on doors and beg at the same time." But we ran early on, and as I will tell people now, I was defeated royally. I mean, big time. Big time. But, in that defeat, not only did I learn and appreciate what this position could do, but also in that I learned and appreciated the needs of people. For the very same reason I wanted to be a doctor, a missionary, I also find that I'm responding to policies based on people articulating their needs. So, that was the reason that drew me at that time.