

The Honorable Melissa A. Hart
U.S. Representative of Pennsylvania (2001–2007)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

“I Didn’t Plan to Run for Office”

Representative Hart explains how she came to run for public office.
Interview recorded September 30, 2019

I didn’t plan to run for office ever. I was a double major—business and German. I went to law school only after I had an internship with a judge in Washington, Pennsylvania, where I went to college. So it was just not on my track. I just thought as a responsible citizen this is what you do. And then you go to work, right? But ultimately, because I had been such a dedicated volunteer and met so many people in the party, that a couple of the young people that I was very close friends with who actually worked for the party had encouraged me to take a look at it. And so I did. Read all the demographics of the district which, again, every district I ever ran in was Democrat majority by a significant margin. But it wasn’t really the party then. At that point in time there really were just a lot of people who thought the Democratic Party was leaving them and were willing to cross the party lines. And I think you’ll find that that’s the case a lot in Pennsylvania because we don’t have an open primary. People will vote the way they’re registered and they have to, but then in the fall you see all kinds of crossing because there’s just no independent opportunity in a primary. So you judge really the voter behavior more than the voter registration and that’s—a couple of friends of mine were pretty good at doing that and they said to me, “I think you might be able to win this seat.” And I said, “I don’t know if I want to run.” So ultimately, I’m just so interested in public policy and I know that there’s so much good that can be done that I decided to take it on against an incumbent in a Democrat district. Thinking—I think the party thought I was just a young woman, sacrificial lamb. But ultimately in the end we were victorious on the first try.