

Betsy Wright Hawkings

Chief of Staff, Representative Christopher Shays of Connecticut

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Congressional Accountability Act

Betsy Wright Hawkings remembers the origins of the Congressional Accountability Act, which extended most federal labor protections to congressional employees.

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But anyway, so, so he had that policy and he also co-sponsored a bill along the way that had been written by former Congressman Dannemeyer of California, who was a much more conservative Member than Chris was—and I think did it for slightly different reasons, i.e. to show that these regulations were onerous. But, but it was to apply all the laws to Congress from which Congress had exempted itself, which included by that point the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Civil Rights laws, the OSHA requirements, the Veterans Re-Employment Act, et cetera, et cetera. And Congress has exempted itself under the theory that the, the, the regulatory body, the EEOC, due to separation of powers, could not have jurisdiction over Congress. And Chris co-sponsored that bill and when Mr. Dannemeyer retired at the end of I think '92, Chris said, "Can I introduce this?" and Dannemeyer said, "Sure, take it." So, we re-drafted it, built a little bit more legislative language into it and not just, "Congress shall abide by these laws," and listing them, but beginning to think about how that would happen and could we, how would we, how would we address the valid concern of separation of powers through an, through some sort of enforcement mechanism within the legislative branch. And you know, how could that work and what would be meaningful enforcement that wouldn't be completely subject to political pressure and would have some teeth or some credibility—understanding that everything everywhere is political and that you know, certainly an agency within the legislative branch could be subject to that type of, could be subject to that type of pressure. And that bill then became—I mean, again, the reasons that some Members supported it were different. Some wanted to show that the regulations were onerous. Others felt that they needed to live by the laws they wrote.