

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
U.S. Representative of Florida (1989–2019)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Divisive Campaign

Representative Ros-Lehtinen recalls the challenges she faced in her first congressional campaign.
Interview recorded April 16, 2018

And I'm envious, when I ever, whenever I read that somebody was actually recruited to run, because I think, "Wow!" I mean here we had to get rid of a lot of people. You can't have a hundred people—that would make a very interesting ballot for the, for the race. But finally, they winnowed it down and it was a pretty hard-fought race. I had many opponents in the primary and the Democrats had many opponents as well. I think that there were maybe 14 of us running for the Claude Pepper seat—Republicans and Democrats. And I just worked very hard, again went to my roots of "campaigning 101," and was just the, the better candidate because I knew how to campaign and I knew the issues. And it was a, it was a bitter campaign. I would not want to relive a moment of that one, as exhilarating as it was to finally win. It turned into a very divisive, ethnically-oriented campaign. My opponent used the logo, the theme was, "This is an American seat." So, he didn't say what he meant by that, but I guess I wasn't as American as he was. I, I don't know what he meant like that, but it seemed pretty insulting, "This is an American seat." What am I, chopped liver? I'm a naturalized American and happily so, but I'm as American as anybody else.