

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

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee

Representative Ros-Lehtinen explains how Republicans select Members to chair House committees.
Interview recorded April 16, 2018

I still can't believe that I was chair of that wonderful committee, the chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. And to think that, you know, just a few years before, I had come, sitting in a little intern desk, not even part of the dais, but I was an afterthought, and, and I got to be the Dante Fascell. I still couldn't believe it. I had to pinch myself to think is this a great country or what? And what a weird, arcane process it is, to become chair, for the Republicans. We have a steering committee, and it's the committee of committees, and, and they are certain people that are picked by geography—you know, where they're from, or key committees, like somebody from Appropriations and someone from Ways and Means, someone from leadership. And anyway, these 20-some people, they're the ones who decide who will be the chair of the committee. And so you make a presentation to them. But what's interesting is that when I got to be, when I was chosen to be chair of the, of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I actually jumped over a few people. So it's not by seniority necessarily—although that's a big part of it—but, but I, I jumped over people to become chair. So, I'm really grateful to the Republican Leadership, for, for seeing something in me, and I hope that I did a good job, both as Ranking Member, under Tom Lantos, an incredible man who was also a mentor to me and who helped me. We worked on so many bipartisan pieces of legislation. He was a, was a, you would call him a liberal Democrat, from San Francisco, and I was more or less a conservative from—Cuban American from South Florida. And, but he was a Holocaust survivor, so he understood what it's like to lose your homeland, what it's like to flee from your homeland, to start up in this great country. And for those years, we had two naturalized Americans leading the Foreign Affairs Committee.