Women in Congress
1917–2006

Prepared under the direction of
The Committee on House Administration of the
U.S. House of Representatives
Vernon J. Ehlers, Chairman
Juanita Millender-McDonald, Ranking Member

By the
Office of History and Preservation,
Office of the Clerk,
U.S. House of Representatives

HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 66
ONE HUNDRED SEVENTH CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION
SUBMITTED BY THE HON. MARCY KAPTUR

Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring),


SECTION 2. NUMBER OF COPIES. In addition to the usual number, there shall be printed 30,700 copies of the document referred to in section 1, of which—(1) 25,000 shall be for the use of the Committee on House Administration of the House of Representatives; and (2) 5,700 shall be for the use of the Committee on Rules and Administration of the Senate.

Approved by the House April 4, 2001
Approved by the Senate April 24, 2001
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A Changing of the Guard

traditionalists, feminists, and the new face of women in congress, 1955-1976


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Julia Butler Hansen
1907–1988

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ DEMOCRAT FROM WASHINGTON
1960–1974

Julia Butler Hansen’s seven terms in the House capped a 43-year career in elective office on the city, state, and federal level. Her legislative interests focused on issues affecting western states, such as transportation infrastructure, resource management, and improving the quality of life of Native Americans. As the first woman to chair an Appropriations subcommittee, Hansen thoroughly enjoyed the workings of Congress, once commenting, “I have a knack for legislation, and I like the rough and tumble of legislation.” Admired by her House colleagues, Congresswoman Hansen chaired a Democratic Caucus committee in 1974 which recommended procedural reforms that reined in committee powers and made exclusive committees more accessible to junior Members.

Julia Caroline Butler was born in Portland, Oregon, on June 14, 1907. Her father was a carpenter and her mother a schoolteacher. “I was raised by my mother and my New England grandmother, who believed that idle hands were the devil’s workshop and I was always raised to keep busy,” she recalled. Julia Butler attended Oregon State College from 1924 to 1926, and while working as a dietician and swimming instructor eventually graduated from the University of Washington in 1930 with a degree in home economics. A year before marrying lumberman Henry Hansen in July 1939, she was elected to the city council of Cathlamet, Washington, where she served until 1946. The lack of a transportation infrastructure in Washington state brought Hansen into politics: “You couldn’t help but be interested in transportation when you came from this area because we did not have a road in or out of here until 1930,” she recalled. Between 1939 and 1960, Julia Hansen served in the Washington state house of representatives, eventually rising to speaker pro tempore from 1955 to 1960 and chairing several committees: education, highways, and elections and privileges. One of the major transportation projects that Hansen helped develop was the state’s extensive ferry system. She also chaired the Eleven Western States Highway Policy Committee from 1951 to 1960, managed a title and casualty insurance business from 1958 to 1961, and, all the while, helped to raise her only child, David.

In 1960, Hansen won the Democratic primary for the special election to fill the southwestern Washington seat held by Representative Russell V. Mack, who had died in office. On November 8, 1960, Hansen defeated Republican Dale M. Nordquist, 53 to 47 percent, to fill Mack’s unexpired term in the 86th Congress (1959–1961). On the same November 8 ballot, Hansen prevailed by the same margin against Nordquist for the full term to the 87th Congress (1961–1963). Hansen’s election was impressive, considering that she was one of just two Democrats from Washington who won election to the House in the 87th Congress. Representative Don Magnuson had won by fewer than 200 votes in his Seattle district and, in the presidential balloting, Richard M. Nixon led John F. Kennedy by about 30,000 votes statewide. In Congresswoman Hansen’s six subsequent bids for re-election, she was never seriously challenged, winning a range from 57 to 70 percent of the vote, including a 66–34 percent win in her final campaign in 1972.

Although Hansen’s House service commenced on the date of her special election, she was not sworn in to office until January 1961 at the start of the 87th Congress. She received assignments on three committees: Veterans’ Affairs, Education and Labor, and Interior and Insular Affairs. Within a month, she left Veterans’ Affairs, at the request of
of Speaker Sam Rayburn of Texas, who planned to place her on the influential Ways and Means Committee. That position never developed but, when a spot opened in the following Congress on the powerful Appropriations Committee, Hansen was on the short list of potential candidates for the exclusive post. Only one other woman, Representative Florence Kahn of California in the 1930s, had served on the committee. Representative Hansen used the political prowess she had developed during three decades in state and local politics to lobby for the assignment. Appropriations Committee Chairman Clarence Cannon of Missouri had told her in a letter, “I’d love to have a woman on my committee.” Hansen’s chief competitor, Representative Arnold Olsen of Montana, lobbied Cannon by saying, “You don’t want a woman on your committee.” From Hansen’s perspective, Chairman Cannon wavered and appeared ready to deny her the post. An intense competition developed, with Hansen threatening Cannon through an emissary, “You wouldn’t want your opposition to women and your letter to me to appear in the press, would you?” To Olsen she said directly, “If you want to run versus me on the basis of knowledge, experience, and what votes we can get, fine. But if you are going to run versus me on grounds that I’m a woman, I’ll go out to Montana where I often go to make speeches to Democratic women, and I’ll cut you to pieces out there.” The next day Olsen conceded, and Hansen secured the post that she held for the duration of her time in Congress.

In 1965, Hansen became the first woman in House history to chair one of the Appropriations Committee’s 13 subcommittees—and the only one until Barbara Vucanovich of Nevada in 1995. When she was under consideration for the chairmanship of the Interior and Related Agencies Subcommittee on Appropriations, Chairman George Mahon of Texas, who succeeded Cannon, privately polled other committee members as to whether or not a woman was an appropriate candidate for the position. Hansen cornered him: “Mr. Chairman, have you ever run around and asked the members of the committee if a man would make a good chairman?” She recollected years later that Mahon “looked kind of sheepish” and quit his surveying.

As one of the 13 Appropriations “cardinals,” Hansen relied on her legislative experience to master floor procedure and to navigate the deal making that went on behind committee doors. An allusion to the “College of Cardinals,” who elect and advise the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, the cardinal title was meant to convey the power and authority vested in the handful of Appropriations members who shaped federal appropriations. As the Interior and Related Agencies chair, Hansen thoroughly grounded herself in floor procedure. “If you know your parliamentary procedures you’ve got no problems,” she observed. “The parliamentarian said to me after I handled my bill for the first time, ‘Julia, I’m going to quit worrying about you.’” Martha Griffiths of Michigan later recalled that Hansen “probably understood more of how to deal with power than any other woman who was ever in Congress.” When she brought her first bill as subcommittee chair to the full committee, Chairman Mahon decided to test her. “Oh, Julie, you’re going to have to cut at least $2 million out of that bill,” Mahon said. Hansen complied. The next morning, after conferring with her subcommittee, she reported to Mahon that she had cut $2.5 million from the bill. “Julie, that’s wonderful,” Mahon said. “Where did you take it out of the bill?” She replied, “Right out of your district, Mr. Chairman.” The episode only enhanced Hansen’s popularity and stature on the Appropriations Committee.

From her Appropriations seat, Hansen helped parcel out federal funds for government-owned land for each of the annual budgets for a decade. Her subcommittee, which Hansen claimed “had a deep interest in the environment long before it was fashionable” was the first to appropriate funds for the development of the Alaska Pipeline and helped pass the stipulation that oil companies pay for the cost of any environmental cleanup—a requirement that she said was responsible for the careful construction and development of the project. In addition, she used her position to promote and protect federal forests and national parks. Hansen’s interest in protecting the environment often caused friction with developers from her home state, especially in her timber-rich district.
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Hansen did not share the focus on women’s issues of the younger feminists who came to serve in Congress during the 1970s. Hard work and determination shaped her career and her outlook. “Women of my generation who entered public office had a very different kind of experience than those who come in today,” she recalled. “There was little women’s movement . . . and one had to work one’s way up the political ladder without too much assistance from either men or women. When I was one of four women in the Washington state house of representatives, in 1939, the other 95 members could not have cared less whether we were there or not.” In 1972, however, she did vote for the Equal Rights Amendment. Though sympathetic to efforts in the early to mid-1970s to create a formal caucus for women’s issues, Hansen ultimately did not support the proposal.

During her final term, Hansen chaired the Democratic Caucus Committee on Organization, Study, and Review (also known as the Hansen Committee), which recommended the first changes in committee structure since passage of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946. It was a delicate task, and Hansen’s role in the project demonstrated her colleagues’ admiration for her work and her sense of fairness as a widely respected moderate. The “Hansen Committee” reviewed a controversial plan to change committee jurisdictions and to reform procedures proposed in 1974 by the Select Committee on Committees, headed by Richard Bolling of Missouri. Hansen’s alternative plan, which passed the House by a vote of 203 to 165 on October 8, 1974, included provisions to expand permanent committee staff, to prohibit voting by proxy in committee, to require committees of more than 15 Members to have at least four subcommittees, to empower the Speaker to refer bills to more than one committee (to resolve jurisdictional disputes), and to mandate that the House meet in December of election years to organize itself for the next Congress. The Hansen Committee, however, abandoned most of the far-reaching jurisdictional changes proposed by the Bolling Committee.

The episode pitted much of the House leadership and senior Members against the Bolling plan, while many junior Members, including half of the Democratic freshmen, were against the more conservative reforms enacted by the Hansen plan. Though Representative Hansen herself believed in the need to restrict the number of committees on which a Member could serve, she had reservations about radically altering the seniority system to more quickly advance younger Members. One reporter asked her if she supported an age limit for committee chairs. Hansen snapped, “Would [you] suggest that the Democratic Party should be the first group to go down to the office of discrimination and explain why, against the law, they have discriminated against anybody over 65?” Years later she observed, “They’ve got young people in Congress now to a large extent, and I don’t see that they’ve done a damn bit better than the old boys did. That’s where—you know, there is a great thing for experience. You know, with age comes some wisdom and some experience and some knowledge.”

Even before the Hansen Committee circulated its proposals, Congresswoman Hansen announced in February 1974 that she would not run for renomination to an eighth term and resigned her seat on the last day of the year. She cited overwork and the grind of being “pursued by an endless string of people who want everything from post offices to gasoline.” Hansen had been a prize-winning author long before entering politics, writing a work of juvenile fiction, Singing Paddles (1935). In retirement she continued her writing endeavors as an author and playwright. She also stayed active in government administration. In 1975 she was appointed to a six-year term on the Washington state toll bridge authority and state highway commission, which she had helped create during her years in the state legislature. She chaired the Washington state transportation commission from 1979 until her resignation in 1980. Julia Hansen resided in Cathlamet until her death on May 3, 1988.
FOR FURTHER READING


MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS


University of Washington Library (Seattle, WA), Manuscripts and University Archives Division. Papers: 1961–1974, 218 feet. Congressional office files, including correspondence, legislation and subject files, speeches, and material relating to committee work. An unpublished guide is available in the library.

NOTES

2 Hansen, Oral History Interview, USAFMOC: 21.
3 Ibid., 3.
6 Hansen, Oral History Interview, USAFMOC: 4.
7 Interview with Representative Julia Butler Hansen, May 1968, Research Interview Notes of Richard F. Fenno, Jr., with Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1959–1965, National Archives and Records Administration. Carl Albert recalls a different competition between Hansen and another Member, apparently when she was still being considered for the Ways and Means Committee.
9 Hansen, Oral History Interview, USAFMOC: 9.
10 Ibid.
11 See Martha W. Griffiths’s Oral History Interview with the USAFMOC, also at the Library of Congress.
17 Zelizer, On Capitol Hill: 150.
18 Hansen, Oral History Interview, USAFMOC: 15.