

Patricia Schroeder, Feminist Force in Congress, Dies at 82

In a long career in the House and armed with a barbed wit, she helped win legislation on family leave, pregnancy discrimination and other progressive causes.



Representative Patricia Schroeder in Denver in 1994. She spent 24 years in the House. Credit...Joe Mahoney/Associated Press

By [Katharine O. Seelye](#)

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Patricia Schroeder, a former leading feminist legislator who helped redefine the role of women in American politics and used her wit to combat sexism in Congress, died on Monday in Celebration, Fla. She was 82.

Her death, in a hospital, was attributed to complications of a stroke, her daughter, Jamie Cornish, said.

Ms. Schroeder, who was a pilot and a Harvard-trained lawyer, had a long and distinguished career in the House of Representatives. She was a driving force behind the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, which guarantees women and men up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to care for a family member.

She helped pass the 1978 Pregnancy Discrimination Act, which barred employers from dismissing women because they were pregnant and from denying them maternity benefits. And she championed laws that helped reform spousal pensions, opened military jobs to women, and forced federally funded medical researchers to include women in their studies.

Elected in 1972 as an opponent of the Vietnam War, Ms. Schroeder served on the Armed Services Committee for all 24 years she was in Congress. From that perch, she called for arms control and reduced military spending.

She worked to improve benefits for military personnel and persuaded the committee to recommend that women be allowed to fly combat missions; Defense Secretary [Les Aspin](#) ordered it so in 1993, and [by 1995](#) the first female fighter pilot was flying in combat. That only further outraged Ms. Schroeder's critics on the right, like Lt. Col. Oliver North, who called her one of the nation's 25 most dangerous politicians.

One of the most enduring public images of Ms. Schroeder is of her crying when she announced in 1987 that she would not run for president, as her supporters had hoped. At an outdoor event in Denver, she [choked up with emotion](#), pressed a tissue to her eyes and at one point leaned her head on her husband's shoulder. The episode dismayed some feminists, who said her tears had reinforced stereotypes and set back the cause of women seeking office.



Ms. Schroeder wrote that “it was my tears, not my words, that got the headlines” when she announced in 1987 that she would not run for president. Credit...Aron E. Tomlinson/Associated Press

It was an ironic charge against a woman who had done so much to promote that cause. Ms. Schroeder was the first woman elected to Congress from Colorado and the first to serve on the Armed Services Committee. She had to fight blatant discrimination from the start, facing questions about how, as the mother of two young children, she could function as both a mother and a lawmaker.

“I have a brain and a uterus and I use both,” she responded.

When she arrived on Capitol Hill, she was one of just 14 women in the House, an institution she called a “guy gulag,” where she was sometimes dismissed as “Little Patsy” even though she was relatively tall.

Ms. Schroeder was fully aware that women seemed to make many congressmen antsy. “It’s really funny if two women stand on the House floor,” she said. “There are usually at least two men who go by and say, ‘What is this, a coup?’ They’re almost afraid to see us in public together.”

In her book “24 Years of House Work ... and the Place Is Still a Mess” (1998), she wrote of being engaged in battles on every front, “whether we were fighting for female pages (there were none) or a place where we could pee.”

The antagonism toward women was particularly pointed from Representative [F. Edward Hebert](#), a conservative Louisiana Democrat who was the powerful chairman of what had been the all-male Armed Services Committee. At their first committee meeting in 1973, he made Ms. Schroeder sit in the same chair with Representative Ron Dellums, an African American. As she recounted it in her book, she and Mr. Dellums had to sit “cheek to cheek” because the chairman “said that women and blacks were worth only half of one ‘regular’ member.”

It is not clear that he actually uttered those words — other accounts, including Mr. Dellums’s, do not contain that quotation — but Ms. Schroeder was a sharp rhetorical speaker with a tart tongue, and she was not afraid to use it.

She was the one who branded Ronald Reagan the “Teflon president,” against whom bad news, like the Iran-contra scandal, did not stick. Of Vice President Dan Quayle, she said, “He thinks that Roe versus Wade are two ways to cross the Potomac.”



Ms. Schroeder on the Capitol steps in Washington in 1977, addressing a rally against a ban on the use of federal funds for abortion. Credit...Bettmann, via Getty Images

Her analysis of her opponents' strength carried the sting of truth: "The genius of the Republicans has been how they figured out how to so polarize the middle class that we vote against our own best interests." During her brief flirtation with running for president, she said the question she was trying to answer was this: "Is America man enough to back a woman?"

Ms. Schroeder had been co-chair of Gary Hart's [promising 1987 presidential campaign](#), until he quit after being exposed as an adulterer. His sudden absence prompted Ms. Schroeder to consider running herself.

Had she pursued the White House, she would have been the first woman from a major party to do so since Representative Shirley Chisholm of Brooklyn, who sought the Democratic nomination in 1972.

But when she announced in Denver that she had decided against it, the crowd groaned. Her supporters had expected her to run. At that moment, her tears spilled forth.

"I had underestimated how much I wanted to pursue the presidency," she wrote in her book, in a chapter titled "The Presidential Weep-Stakes."

"I went on with my speech, but it was my tears, not my words, that got the headlines," she added. "Those 17 seconds were treated like a total breakdown."

Indeed, they created a media frenzy. Female columnists said she had ruined the chance for any woman to run for president for the rest of the century, while her conservative critics said she had displayed a dangerous emotionalism.

The harsh reaction, she said, only underscored the double standard for men versus women in American politics.

"I think it's amazing," she [said](#), "that no one ever said that Joe Biden had ruined the future of men forever because people would think that they all [plagiarized](#) or that Gary Hart ruined the future of men forever because they all played around."

Image



Senator Joe Biden, flanked by Ms. Schroeder and Attorney General Janet Reno, at a 1994 Capitol Hill news conference about the Violence Against Women Act. Credit...John Duricka/Associated Press

After her death, President Biden released a statement of condolence, saying in part: “On issue after issue, Pat stood up for basic fairness, sensible policy, and women’s equal humanity. The result was a legislative record that changed millions of women’s lives — and men’s lives — for the better.”

Patricia Nell Scott was born on July 30, 1940, in Portland, Ore. Her father, Lee Combs Scott, was a pilot who owned an aviation insurance company. Her mother, Bernice, taught first grade. The family moved often, ending up in Des Moines, where Ms. Schroeder graduated from high school.

She earned her pilot’s license at 15 and attended the University of Minnesota, where she was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and majored in philosophy, history and political science.

From there she went to Harvard Law School, where she was one of 15 women in a class of more than 500. She married a classmate, James Schroeder, in 1962. In addition to her daughter, she is survived by her husband, along with their son, Scott; Ms. Schroeder’s brother, Mike Scott; and four grandchildren.

After Ms. Schroeder graduated from Harvard Law in 1964, she and her family settled in Denver, where she worked for the National Labor Relations Board, volunteered as counsel for Planned Parenthood and taught at the University of Colorado and Regis College.

In 1972, when President Richard M. Nixon appeared to be headed for re-election in a landslide, the Democratic Party fielded only a conservative candidate for Congress in Ms. Schroeder’s Denver district. Other liberals, including her husband, encouraged her

to challenge him in a primary. They did not think she could necessarily win, but they thought it was important that someone give voice to their views — antiwar, pro-environment and pro-women’s rights.

She had almost no money and no backing, but her message and enthusiasm caught on. Gloria Steinem campaigned for her. And she won both the primary and the general election against a Republican incumbent, despite the Nixon landslide. Years later, when she requested her F.B.I. file, Ms. Schroeder found out that the bureau had placed her under surveillance during that race, breaking into her home and even recruiting her husband’s barber as an informant.



Ms. Schroeder watching election returns with her family in November 1972. She won, becoming Colorado’s first congresswoman. Credit...Bettmann, via Getty Images She was re-elected 11 more times with only token Republican opposition. After the Democrats lost the House in 1994 and she had served in the minority for two years, she decided to retire. She would be 56 and the longest-serving woman in the House, and her decision upset many Democrats.

“She was the coach, the leader, the strategist,” Representative Carolyn Maloney, a Democrat from New York, told The Washington Post. “She was, by far, the greatest feminist of my time.”

Even some foes bore her grudging respect. Tony Blankley, press secretary to her nemesis, the Republican speaker Newt Gingrich, said, “I sense her legacy will be effectiveness in political rhetoric,” which he called “an honorable part of this business.”

As she left the House, she remained discouraged by the lack of gender equality in Congress. [She told](#) The Los Angeles Times, “I think women still should never kid themselves that they’re going to come here and be part of the team.”

She taught briefly at Princeton before becoming president and chief operating officer of the [Association of American Publishers](#), the trade association for the book publishing industry, where she served for 11 years.

There, she fiercely [opposed Google’s plan to digitize copyrighted books](#), declaring that Google was “seeking to make millions of dollars by freeloading on the talent and property of authors and publishers.” The dispute eventually ended in a [settlement](#) in 2008 in which writers and publishers would be compensated and, in some cases, users would be allowed to see up to 20 percent of the content of a book.

Afterward, she and her husband retired to Florida, specifically [Celebration](#), a master-planned community built (and sold) by the Walt Disney Company. She remained an activist, continuing to advocate for the causes that had always animated her, like improving family life and caring for the planet, just as she had imagined doing in her book decades earlier.

“In my dotage, rocking on my porch,” she wrote, “I will probably be faxing or emailing or communicating by whatever 21st-century method I cannot even fathom about social wrongs that need to be righted.”