



Mary Norton of New Jersey: Congressional Trailblazer

David L. Porter

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Mary Norton of New Jersey: Congressional Trailblazer tells the compelling story of Mary Norton, who served in the United States House of Representatives for 13 terms from 1925 to 1951, featuring her significant role as a congressional pioneer for women and American workers. The daughter of Irish immigrants, Norton grew up in a Roman Catholic, working-class family and was prodded to enter politics by Jersey City mayor Frank Hague. One of the first five women elected to the United States Congress, she cut a fresh path for women of ordinary means as the first female elected to the House from the Democratic Party, an eastern state, or urban center east of the Mississippi River.

Norton's political career paralleled mayor Hague's tight control of Jersey City and president Franklin Roosevelt's national leadership during the Depression and World War II. Norton's connection with Hague's Jersey City Democratic Party political machine clouded her career, but Hague seldom tried to influence her legislative behavior.

Norton, the first woman to chair four House committees including a major committee, consistently supported legislation helping economically disadvantaged Americans and encouraged women to enter politics. At the helm of the District of Columbia Committee from 1931 to 1937, she served as unofficial mayor of Washington, D.C. and helped enact long-needed political, economic, and social legislation for its citizens. Her most valuable work came as head of the powerful Labor Committee from 1937 to 1947. Norton helped secure House passage of the landmark Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, establishing a national minimum hourly wage and maximum workweek. She sought to improve working conditions for America's newly industrialized workers and defended the Wagner Act of 1935, allowing employees to bargain collectively for the value of their work.

Norton also helped secure federal funding for several Hudson County projects benefitting her Irish, Roman Catholic, working-class constituents. The expansion of mayor Hague's gargantuan Medical Center Complex and the construction of Roosevelt Stadium provided numerous jobs for unemployed Hudson County residents. Norton, who never lost an election and was reelected by decisive margins, was the first woman elected as a freeholder in New Jersey and to direct a state Democratic Party.

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