

Obituaries

Marjorie Holt, Maryland's first Republican congresswoman, dies at 97

By **Matt Schudel** January 9 at 8:57 PM

Marjorie S. Holt, a conservative Republican who was the first woman elected to Congress from Maryland and whose signature issues over seven terms included reducing government spending and opposition to forced busing to desegregate public schools, died Jan. 6 at her home in Severna Park, Md. She was 97.

Her son, Edward S. Holt, confirmed the death but did not cite a specific cause.

Mrs. Holt was a lawyer who had been clerk of the Anne Arundel Circuit Court before winning election in Maryland's 4th District in 1972. (Maryland's first female member of Congress, Katharine Edgar Bryon (D), finished out the term of her husband after he died in an airplane crash in 1941.)

Democrats outnumbered Republicans by more than 2-to-1 in Mrs. Holt's district, which included Anne Arundel and southern Prince George's County. But she won her congressional seat by appealing to conservative voters near the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis and what is now Joint Base Andrews in Prince George's. At times, she was the only GOP member of Maryland's House delegation.

In her first campaign, Mrs. Holt highlighted the recurring themes of her career, most notably the divisive issue of forced busing. "The thing I'm really going to hop on is this busing thing," she said in 1972. She called busing "the new racism."

In 1974, Mrs. Holt sponsored a bill that would prohibit the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare from distributing federal funding to schools based on racial quotas. The measure passed the House but failed in the Senate.

She later led a congressional floor fight for a constitutional amendment that would have outlawed busing to achieve racial balance. The proposal was rejected in 1979.

Mrs. Holt, who served on the House budget and armed services committees, was one of only 16 women in Congress when she took office in 1973, but she was reluctant to join the congressional women's caucus and later resigned from the organization.

"I've always thought of myself as a person and I certainly haven't been discriminated against," she said in 1972.

She consistently opposed measures to expand access to abortion and in 1976 voted against providing federal funds for day-care centers.

Throughout her political career, Mrs. Holt was a staunch advocate of reducing the size and scope of government, except for the military. She was the editor of a 1976 book, “The Case Against the Reckless Congress,” which promoted themes that have remained at the forefront of Republican ideology for decades.

The book portrayed Democratic congressional leaders as spendthrifts and charged that U.S. democracy was “dissolving into a new tyranny, in which omnipotent government engulfs us all in a smothering embrace with ceaseless murmurs about what is good for us.”

Mrs. Holt’s political reputation was damaged during her 1984 reelection campaign when she said many urban youths were unemployed because they lacked meaningful skills. At a meeting with editors of the Baltimore Herald-American, she said people called her office, saying, “Hey, man, got any jobs?”

She won her campaign, but the comment was widely condemned and seen as racially insensitive. She did not seek reelection in 1986.

Marjorie Sewell was born Sept. 17, 1920, in Birmingham, Ala., and moved as a child to Jacksonville, Fla. Her father sold farm equipment.

“I didn’t have a brother, and I’ve always felt my father raised me as he would a son,” she told the Wave, a Jacksonville University publication, in 2017. “He taught me to drive early and took me hunting, things like that. So I started thinking I was as good as anybody else.”

She attended what is now Jacksonville University before graduating in 1949 from the University of Florida law school — one of three women in her class. She and her husband, Duncan Holt, an electrical engineer, moved to Maryland in 1950.

Mrs. Holt served as supervisor of elections in Anne Arundel County before defeating a Democratic incumbent for clerk of the circuit court in 1966.

After retiring from Congress, Mrs. Holt practiced law with the Baltimore firm of Smith, Somerville & Case. She was an elder and Sunday school teacher at Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church in Severna Park, where she lived for decades.

Her husband of 67 years died in 2014. Survivors include three children, Edward S. Holt of Annapolis and Victoria Perry and Rachel Tschanter, both of Severna Park; 10 grandchildren; 16 great-grandchildren; and a great-great-grandson.

In 1984, Mrs. Holt was indirectly responsible for a memorable quip on the floor of the House. During an all-night debate on school prayer, she described the United States as a “Christian nation.”

“Well, if this is a Christian nation,” said speaker pro tem Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), “how come some poor Jew has to get up at 5:30 in the morning to preside over the House of Representatives?”

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Matt Schudel has been an obituary writer at The Washington Post since 2004.  Follow @MattSchudel