

## The Woman Who Diversified Congress

From the founding of the United States Senate to the modern-day, over ten-thousand government officials have served in Congress. Of those members, four hundred were women, and seventeen were Asian-American bureaucrats. Compared to the makeup of Congress decades ago, the demographics of today's government appear rather diverse and inclusive. Due to the cultural flourishing of modern politics, many constituents of America may find it difficult to imagine a one-dimensional legislative body. This faith in our government's racial diversity is primarily thanks to Patsy Mink's contributions and overall presence in Congress. The blatant racial discrimination that she faced and observed in the law and justice world ignited the flames of her racial equality fire, and she spread her voice to the highest government sector of the United States. Her actions have sent shockwaves still resonating throughout the nation.

At her core, Patsy Mink was a maverick, dedicating her nonconformity to advancing justice. Mink was born in Paia, Hawaiian Territory, to Mitama Takemoto and Suemitsu Takemoto ("Patsy Mink"). Spending her childhood on the island of Maui, she witnessed daily the segregation white plantation owners inflicted on mistreated Japanese and Hawaiian workers. Her responsibilities to defend victims of racism emerged from a young age. During her enrollment in college, Mink successfully challenged blatant racial segregation within student housing via the leading of a student coalition. Later on, she graduated from the University of Chicago as a law student. For Mink, searching for occupation in Illinois was fruitless, for her interracial marriage resulted in rejections from hiring firms (PBS). In response to failure, she stood her ground. Like Minoru Yasui, she took matters into her own hands in the face of hardship, starting her own private practice and aligning herself with America's Democratic party. A few years later,

Hawaii's declaration of statehood marked Mink's road to Congress. She set her eyes on the single-seat designated for Hawaii in the House of Representatives (Gates). However, due to her frequent deviation from Democratic party legislatures, Mink was unwelcome by existing Congressional incumbents. She lost her first candidate election to Congressman Daniel Ken Inouye. This was yet another roadblock in Mink's pursuit of legal justice, though it did very little to deter her. In 1964, Patsy Mink campaigned once again for the newly introduced second Hawaiian chair within the House of Representatives, where she received a staggering 27 percent of voter ballots in a four-way race (Ruth). Her swearing into office changed the course of history— Patsy Mink became the first Asian-American woman to hold Congressional authority.

In Congress, Mink served as a symbol of equity. Her agendas and initiatives advanced the rights of marginalized populations, and her early years within Congress saw her resisting fiercely against anti-Black institutions (“Patsy T. Mink Chronology”). Immediately upon being sworn into office in 1965, Mink was at the forefront of disputing the all-white Mississippi congressional delegation (PBS). She demanded Congress postpone the swearing-in of new candidates until the House Administration Committee could investigate the state's 1964 elections, which were contested for discrimination, intimidation, and violence against African American voters. Five years later, Mink testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee, opposing the Supreme Court confirmation of Judge Harrold Carswell, who was an active advocate for white supremacy and segregation.

What can be pinpointed as Mink's most impactful contributions to the House of Representatives was her focus on national issues surrounding racist policies. One of her earliest proposed bills involved expanding bilingual education within the education system, though she was met with great resistance from her fellow incumbents (“Patsy Mink”). Further into her

career, she fought to preserve family reunification provisions in several proposed immigration reform bills. For instance, Mink worked with Black politician Shirley Chisholm to recognize immigration as part of American society (Ruth). Via legislative action, Mink curbed legally-legitimate racism that she faced in horrific dosages as a Japanese and Hawaiian woman. Additionally, Mink focused much of her agenda towards abolishing prejudice affecting Asian Americans and the Pacific region. She worked alongside Representative Matsunaga to educate Americans about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II (Fonte). This was in response to the horrors of the Executive Order of 9066, an initiative that Minoru Yasui himself was infamous for defying.

However, Mink's heavy presence in racial politics came with a price. Heavy bigotry and Eurocentrism in Congress meant that Mink was alienated from her peers and challenged by a lack of allyship. Instead, her pillars came in the form of her "supportive family" and volunteers that helped to mount grassroots campaigns for her campaigns (Ruth). After emerging as the victor during six re-election cycles, Mink lost to House Member Spark Matsunaga ("Patsy Mink"). Yet, Mink never faltered and questioned her progress through the ups and downs. To quote Mink, "Life is not based on being an elected politician. Politics is a constant involvement in the day-to-day working of society as a whole."

Another great contribution that Patsy Mink made to the Asian-American community was her co-founding of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, or the CAPAC, in 1994 alongside politician Norman Mineta. The CAPAC was created for House members to coordinate efforts advancing legislation on the interests of the Asian Pacific American community. Since its formation, it has educated congressional colleagues on the history of the growing Asian Pacific American community in the United States and continues to build recognition in Congress. Today,

this Caucus plays a critical role in protecting the human rights of Asian Americans. In the spirit of Mink and Mineta, the CAPAC has issued multiple initiatives for Congress to “avoid xenophobic rhetoric that exacerbates the bigotry facing Asian” amid the COVID-19 pandemic (CAPAC). Following her death, Mink was recognized as a hero for Congressional justice. In 2014, Patsy Mink received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the same award Minoru Yasui was given for challenging Japanese-American incarceration within World War II concentration camps (ACLU). Although Patsy Mink no longer has a seat in Congress, she sits on a throne, bearing a hope for justice.

While they took different routes in combating discrimination, the award shared between Patsy Mink and Minoru Yasui is a golden symbol of the passion shared between the two. They stood strong to their pursuits of social equity through hostility. Both Yasui and Mink participated and organized masses of people to overthrow racism within American systems. Minoru fought for Black Americans by founding the Urban League of Metropolitan Denver and participated in groups such as the JACL (ACLU). Organizations such as Yasui’s and Mink’s have laid a blueprint for racial minorities to follow. Where I live in California, 16 percent of our population is Asian, and almost 7 percent identify as African American. With such a rich integration of different cultures, it has become more critical than ever to provide adequate support organizations for those suffering. To create an accepting society, a peaceful organization to empower the marginalized is critical. For instance, Stop AAPI Hate has advocated for ethnic studies curricula to curtail bullying, as well as community-based violence protection programs for the elderly and the expansion of civil rights protections to end business harassment.

Participation in the government is another fundamental duty of ours to combat racism. An avid advocate for justice, Yasui wrote multiple letter campaigns to Japanese associations and

General DeWitt of the United States Army to protest racism (Yasui). Likewise, Patsy Mink directly condemned Congress for discriminatory policies during her terms (“Patsy Mink”). By petitioning to establish awareness and sending urgent requests to office members, we would be elevating racial justice to its highest degree. Cultivating diversity and curbing discrimination within those that dictate our lives and societal norms is equally as important as protecting the vulnerable. For instance, in the climax of the Black Lives Matter movement, pushes for the government to address the disproportionate incarceration of Black Americans saw the topic of white supremacy even take the stage in the 2020 Presidential Debate.

In the spirit of Minoru Yasui, we citizens of the United States must do all that we can to preserve the spirit in which our country was founded— equal opportunity, where people of all races can thrive unperturbed. Minoru Yasui and Patsy Mink have helped lay a strong foundation for a world of equity, and the responsibility now lies on our shoulders to build a resilient society. While it is easy to brush off racism as a permanent belief system, it is important to take action in times of social crisis. By organizing and resisting peacefully for racial minorities, we can be one step closer to disbanding the racism that plagues America. Not taking an ounce of action means standing in support of white supremacy and racism. In a dearth of resistance, we see further empowerment of racist ideals. Without Yasui and Mink’s action, we would be living in a backward world, where concentration camps are justified, and ignorance is an inherited trait. Thus, we must chant the mantra that Minoru Yasui has championed: “We are born in this world for a purpose, and that purpose is to make it a better place.”

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