



Florence P. Kahn

Succeeding her husband, Florence Prag Kahn used charisma and humor to carve out her own political accomplishments as a California Representative. Going well beyond her husband's service on the Hill, Kahn quickly earned the respect of her colleagues; according to one contemporary observer, "Congress treats her like a man, fears her, admires her, and listens to her."

After graduating from Girls' High School in 1883, Florence enrolled in the University of California at Berkeley, where she graduated with an A.B. in 1887. Unable to pursue a law degree because she needed to help support her family, Florence Prag taught for more than a decade at Lowell High School in San Francisco. On March 19, 1899, she married Julius Kahn, a former Broadway actor, state legislator, and, at the time, a first-term U.S. Representative from San Francisco.

For the next quarter century, Florence Kahn helped her husband manage his congressional workload. She acted as his aide and confidante, increasingly so as he fought a long illness late in his career while serving as chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs. Julius Kahn was re-elected in 1924 to the 69th Congress (1925–1927) but died on December 18, 1924. Local Republican Party leaders asked his widow to run for the vacant seat. Kahn won the special election on February 17, 1925, for the San Francisco district, earning 48 percent of the vote against three opponents: Raymond Burr, H.W. Hutton, and Henry Claude Huck. At age 58, she became the first Jewish woman elected to Congress, and was re-elected with little opposition five times. Kahn had prestigious committee assignments during her House career, positions she received because of her insider's knowledge of the institution. She also knew enough to avoid being assigned to a committee that pertained little to her district's needs. When first relegated to the Indian Affairs Committee (a fairly common committee for Congresswomen of the period), she protested publicly: "The only Indians in my district are in front of cigar stores." Republican leaders relented, and in the 71st and 72nd Congresses (1929–1933), Kahn succeeded her late husband on the Military Affairs Committee, becoming the first woman to serve on the panel. In her first term, she was on three committees: Census, Coinage, Weights, and Measures; Education; and Expenditures in the War Department. She also served on the War Claims Committee in the 70th Congress (1927–1929). Finally, Kahn earned the distinction of being the first woman appointed to the influential Appropriations Committee, one of the two most desired committees during that era, serving on the panel in the 73rd and 74th Congresses (1933–1937). As one of only a handful of women in Congress, Kahn once remarked that "the woman in political office must remember her responsibility toward other women." Heeding her own advice, Kahn worked to institute pensions for army nurses and establish a program honoring the mothers of fallen soldiers; she also publicly expressed concern about low wages for female government employees. Nonetheless, despite passionately believing that women should actively participate in politics, she never considered herself a feminist.

In 1937, Kahn retired to San Francisco and her Nob Hill home was a gathering place for the city's political elite. During the 1939 Golden Gate Exposition, she was named one of the 12 outstanding women in the state's history. She remained active in civic affairs after she left Congress as a member of the National Council of Jewish Women and co-chair of the northern California chapter of the American Women's Voluntary Service, a World War II citizen's organization. Kahn continued her efforts to involve women in the political process and to assert their rights as citizens. "Women," she argued, "must assume the responsibility of maintaining freedom of speech in this land. They must assume also the responsibility of the ballot through government study." Kahn died in San Francisco, on November 16, 1948.