



Governor Ella T. Grasso's official portrait on display
in the Museum of Connecticut History.

Governor Ella T. Grasso: The First of Her Kind

Ella Rosa Giovanna Tambussi was born in Windsor Locks on May 10, 1919 to Italian immigrants Giacomo and Maria Olivia Tambussi. When she was not quite a month old, on June 4, 1919, Congress passed the 19th amendment, guaranteeing women the right to vote in the United States of America. No one in her family could have known how the passage of women's suffrage would shape her future and that of the State of Connecticut.

As a young student in a local Catholic school, Ella Tambussi won a scholarship to Chaffee, an exclusive college preparatory academy that paved the way for her acceptance to Mount Holyoke College. The juxtaposition of her working-class immigrant family background with the high-minded intellectual pursuits of her later education and the advanced social connections of her classmates perhaps explains the sometimes opposing political stands she would take later in her career. Someone who sought social justice while frugally working toward fiscal responsibility was bound to have difficulty striking that balance in policy.

In 1942, after completing her master's degree in economics, Ella Tambussi married Thomas Grasso, whom she had known since the summer before she entered Chaffee. Ten years later in 1952, after some years of volunteering on the campaigns of others, Ella Grasso's first campaign for public office was to represent Windsor Locks in the Connecticut House of Representatives. She won and became the first woman to represent Windsor Locks in Hartford. Issues of importance to her included services for those with disabilities, funding for education and consumer protection.

While serving in the House of Representatives, Grasso became a mentee of Democratic Party Chairman John Bailey. She was a quick study in Hartford—by 1954, a group of Capitol reporters known as the Laurel Club voted her the most hard-working legislator as well as best statewide ticket material. Also, in 1954, Grasso first showed her fortitude in handling natural disasters: When a hurricane struck Windsor Locks with severe flood damage, Grasso utilized the press to show the devastation in her town.

After serving two terms in the legislature, Ella Grasso did not seek a third term. She stayed active in state politics and in 1958 successfully ran for Secretary of the State—the established next step for a woman politician of that era. In her role as Secretary, Grasso called local election

officials together more often than in the past. She also made a point to visit every municipality to meet with local registrars of voters, town clerks and chief elected officials. This was a significant change from her predecessors, who had held such meetings in Hartford.

When Grasso ran for reelection in 1962, she received the most votes on the ballot. As her party's floor leader during the 1965 Constitutional convention, she worked with the other floor leader and delegates to create a new redistricting plan that would comply with a recent Connecticut Supreme Court decision. Grasso also helped draft amendments on issues including desegregation and free public education.

In her role as Secretary of the State, she continued outreach to local election officials as well as her work in voter education. Grasso easily won reelection to a third term as Secretary of the State in 1966. In 1967, she introduced campaign finance legislation in reaction to public outcry over a scandal involving Senator Thomas Dodd's conversion of campaign funds for personal use. She supported expanded rights for those with intellectual disabilities, and as co-chair of the platform committee at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, she lobbied hard for an anti-Vietnam war plank.

In 1970, Grasso did not seek reelection as Secretary of the State. Instead, she won election to Connecticut's sixth Congressional District, representing cities and towns in Hartford and Litchfield Counties. She was part of a very small minority of women in Congress—one of only fifteen among 435 representatives. She served two terms in the United States House of Representatives, focusing on education, labor and veterans' affairs. However, Grasso found Washington, DC, to be a very different environment from Hartford with little room for her to rise through the ranks.

As Connecticut's 1974 gubernatorial election approached, Ella Grasso decided to run for the position. She faced two internal challengers for her party's nomination, Attorney General Robert Killian and Frank Zullo. Grasso secured the nomination by winning the support of the major cities, including Killian's hometown of Hartford. To bring the party together, Grasso offered, and Killian accepted the nomination for Lieutenant Governor.

The race drew national attention: If she won, Ella Grasso would become the first woman governor and the first Italian-American governor of Connecticut. She would also become the first woman in the United States to be



This portrait of Ella Grasso was taken during her time as Secretary of the State of Connecticut. It remains on display in the agency today.



Governor-elect Grasso arriving at the Capitol on Inauguration Day, January 8, 1975, with her family. At the far left is her son James next to her husband Thomas. On the right is her daughter Susanne.

Photograph by Harry Batz Copyright © 2019, Hartford Courant. Used with permission.

elected governor in her own right—two women had previously won governorships by running for the office their husbands had vacated. Women and girls across the country saw her as a role model.

Grasso's opponent in the general election, Robert Steele, attempted to use her sex against her, calling her Spenderella and issuing a bumper sticker that read, "Connecticut can't afford a governess." In the end, though, Ella Grasso beat Robert Steele by over 200,000 votes. In the era of Watergate, being a Democrat and a woman worked to set her apart from what was seen as an old boys' club. Still, it was Grasso's personable style, shrewd political acumen and history of advocating on behalf of the people of Connecticut that ensured such a decisive victory.

Governor Grasso did not have long to enjoy her success before outgoing Governor Meskill revealed the severity of the budget crisis that would become her responsibility to solve. Having run on promises to increase funding for education and social services, instead she would have to lead the state through times of harsh fiscal austerity. Her inaugural address mentioned finding efficiency in government and belt-tightening, along with a pledge to balance the budget without creating an income tax. There was no mention of programs for women and minorities nor of assistance for urban areas.

The governor's failure to follow through on campaign promises along with unpopular fiscal proposals fed a developing rift between Grasso, the legislature, the liberal wing of the party and state party leadership. In September of 1975, after a long legislative session, she and her husband took a trip to Italy. When a storm threatened severe flood damage to Connecticut, she cut her trip short. She had not forgotten when in December of 1973, her predecessor, Governor Meskill, chose to take a family ski trip to Vermont during the worst ice storm Connecticut had seen in decades. At the time, many felt his poor handling of that storm was a large part of why he bowed out of the 1974 gubernatorial race. Though the 1975 storm blew through without major damage, Grasso's immediate return home was well received by the public.

Still, her difficulties with her own party continued. The new legislative session brought increased difficulty in communication between her office, party leadership and the General Assembly. By the second half of 1976, Governor Grasso realized the need to resolve her differences with her party. A careful truce was established. However, as Susan Bysiewicz

noted in the biography *Ella*, “She did not, however, forgive and forget... Ella, whose vindictiveness impelled her to keep a clear mental record of every colleague who crossed her...refused to forget ... or to forgive him for causing her political trouble. She would get even later.”

Some of the hard budgetary decisions Governor Grasso and the legislature made paid off, resulting in a modest surplus at the end of the fiscal year. In 1977, the governor was finally able to revisit her commitment to social issues. She made inroads with state workers who had been laid off under her tenure and was able to fund programs for urban areas. She also fulfilled her promise for greater efficiency in state government by reorganizing over two hundred state agencies into twenty-two. At the same time, she worked tirelessly to strengthen the state’s business climate, successfully luring several national and international companies to Connecticut. However, this new business-friendly environment was not without its consequences. When she sided with the Connecticut Business and Industry Association on a key unemployment compensation bill, many in the labor community saw this as a betrayal.

As 1977 drew to a close and the next gubernatorial election approached, the governor was proving unpopular in the polls. Members of the left wing



This statue of Governor Grasso is located on the west side of the south portico of the Connecticut State Capitol. It was the first statue of a woman displayed at the building.

of her party actively sought a more liberal challenge candidate; despite the governor’s announcement of her intention to seek reelection, her own lieutenant governor, Robert Killian, decided to challenge her for the nomination. By the start of 1978, Governor Grasso faced both, a Republican and a Democratic challenger but she was undaunted.

On February 6, a severe blizzard struck

New England. Governor Grasso was on her way to the Capitol when her driver got stuck in the snow. Upon being informed that he could not get her any further, she exited the car and walked the remaining blocks to the state armory. After arriving, she took full command of the situation, declaring a state of emergency and closing state roads. She gave frequent news briefings and storm updates that were carried on radios in homes throughout the state. Her command of the situation was precisely the opposite of what residents had seen from Governor Meskill just a few short years before.

When her lieutenant governor and primary challenger showed up at the armory, according to the biography *Ella*, “when a reporter asked what Mr. Killian could do to help, she answered: ‘Oh, is he here? Well, he could make some coffee.’”

After the storm had passed, Governor Grasso enjoyed a surge in popularity as a result of her strong leadership in a crisis. Over the years, she had earned the nickname Mother Ella, and her handling of the storm seemed to cement this public image. Still, Robert Killian was able to force a primary—in which Grasso received over twice as many votes as Killian. The budget continued to show a surplus, which the governor reinvested in social programs as well as in increased salaries for state employees. In November, Governor Grasso won reelection handily.

The summer of 1979 was a peak in the national gasoline shortage. Once again, the governor found herself in the middle of a crisis. As in the past, Grasso weathered this storm with foresight and fortitude. Within the state, she established a rationing system. Nationally, her close relationship with President Carter meant she had his ear about the situation in Connecticut. In October of that year, a tornado touched ground in Windsor, Windsor Locks and Suffield. Governor Grasso was on the ground touring the damage and overseeing recovery efforts.

In early 1980, the governor was working with the General Assembly to address a growing fiscal crisis. Determined not to enact an income tax, she sought alternative methods to address a potential deficit, including tax incentives to lure new businesses to the state. At the same time, Governor Grasso faced a personal health crisis when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Initially, surgery and preventative chemotherapy were thought to be successful in eradicating the tumor. Though the treatments had costly side effects, she continued to maintain her obligations as governor.

By November, doctors announced that the cancer had spread. Bedridden, Governor Grasso continued to run the state for several weeks but soon announced that she would resign her position effective December 31, 1980. On February 5, 1981, Governor Ella T. Grasso passed away. She laid in state in the state Capitol, receiving over 5,000 mourners. The loss of Governor Grasso was felt throughout our state and the nation. President Carter remarked, "Ella Grasso represented all that is good and promising about politics and public service. As one of the most prominent women in this country, she had great strength, skill and, when required, toughness. At the same time, she was as loving and compassionate a person as I have known."

On March 5, 1978, 12-year-old Leslie Steckel of Carmel, New York, wrote to Governor Grasso. Ms. Steckel requested a response explaining "exactly how you got involved in politics."

On March 15, 1978, the governor responded, "Women are a powerful component of society, and they should use their power to secure legislation, programs and employment opportunities that are responsive to the needs of women. Women have an abundance of talent, experience and judgment, and it is vital that these rich resources are fully utilized in government and our political system."

The 1981 *Connecticut State Register and Manual* was dedicated to former Secretary of the State Ella T. Grasso. Then-Secretary of the State Barbara Kennelly referenced a quote by Grasso that reveals her wholehearted determination to have a positive impact on the world: "I think that is why I went into government, because I realized early on that if I was concerned with problems, the best way of getting them solved was to be a part of the decision-making process."

Ella Rosa Giovanna Tambussi Grasso was a complicated person. She did not neatly fit into categories but rather stretched herself to become more than any one thing. She did not confine herself to the traditional role of women in politics and also did not define herself by the feminist principles of the day. She was the first woman governor in Connecticut and she knew what it was like to be among the lonely three percent of women in Congress. Most of all, she cared about the people of our state.

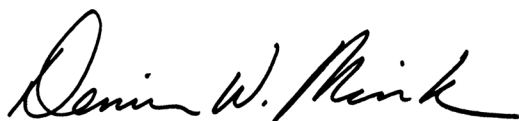
On the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Ella T. Grasso, we honor the first woman state representative from Windsor Locks, the first woman floor leader of the Connecticut House of Representatives, the first



This portrait of Governor Grasso depicts her at work behind her desk at the Capitol with her reading glasses pushed up on top of her head in her trademark style.

“Portrait of Ella Grasso” by Jude Schwendenwein, 1981, courtesy of the Connecticut River Museum.

woman governor in our nation elected in her own right. A woman who did not just survive but commanded many storms—political as well as natural—her legacy outlasts them all. It is my great privilege to dedicate the 2019 State Register and Manual to Governor Ella Tambussi Grasso.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Denise W. Merrill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a long, sweeping tail.

Denise W. Merrill
Secretary of the State

