US Rep. Schakowsky announces she will not seek another term

Has represented a Far North Side and north and northwest suburban district since 1999

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, center, weeps with staffers Leslie Combs, right, and Taina Rodriguez while standing for photos at the Sheraton Grand Chicago Riverwalk on Monday after she announced she will not run for reelection next year. Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune

BY OLIVIA OLANDER CHICAGO TRIBUNE

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, who represented a Far North Side and north and northwest suburban district in Congress for more than 2½ decades, announced Monday that she will not seek a 15th term next year.

“This is the official — that I’m not going to run again for Congress,” Schakowsky said to a crowd of about 1,000 people attending an Ultimate Women’s Power Luncheon event she hosted at the Sheraton Grand Chicago Hotel. “As much as I love and have loved being in the Congress of the United States, such an incredible, incredible privilege to work with the people of the district, to learn from them, to be an organizer, to be a fighter — well, that will never end. But I have made the decision that I am not going to seek reelection this time.”

The move marks the end of an era for a reliably Democratic district that Schakowsky, 80, of Evanston, has represented since 1999 after soundly defeating two opponents, including JB Pritzker, in an open-seat primary. Before her, Sidney Yates held the seat for 24 terms, almost 50 years.

Her retirement will undoubtedly set off a series of political maneuvers. Even before Schakowsky’s announcement, a social media content creator had declared candidacy for the seat: 26-year-old Kat Abughazaleh, a progressive critic of the far right who moved to Illinois last year [JUMP]and outraised Schakowsky in the first quarter.

Abughazaleh will almost certainly be joined by a field of Democratic hopefuls that could include Evanston Mayor Daniel Biss, state Sen. Laura Fine, state Rep. Hoan Huynh and others.

Schakowsky declined to say Monday whether she’d support any particular candidate to succeed her.

Biss and Fine, who were at the luncheon, both declined to discuss whether they were interested in the seat.

“This is a day to talk about Jan’s remarkable legacy,” Biss said. “I just feel really fortunate to have a leader like her in this role, and I feel excited to think about that and thank her.”

Schakowsky’s retirement announcement came less than two weeks after U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, also 80, declared that he would not seek another term.

Speaking with reporters after the luncheon, Schakowsky said making the decision to retire was “not as tough as you might think.”

“It’s been a long time that I’ve been in the Congress,” she said.

Schakowsky wore a true red suit, as she had throughout her first campaign and when she first declared victory for the seat. The same bright color was reflected in many of the blazers, cardigans and blouses of her supporters at the more than 100 tables in the ballroom.

Schakowsky was a state representative when she first ran for Congress on her record as a lawmaker and activist, offering a "message of equal rights for women, minorities and gays, protection for union workers, and affordable national health care," the Tribune wrote.

She was seen as more progressive than her two Democratic primary opponents, state Sen. Howard Carroll and Pritzker, who finished third. The primary was one of the most expensive in the nation at the time, as Pritzker, heir to the Hyatt Hotels fortune, spent nearly $1 million of his own money. In his two bids for governor, Pritzker has spent $350 million.

When she won in 1998, Schakowsky said voters' desire to have a woman representative may have put her over the edge, as she was elected at a time when all of the state's then 20 members in the House were men.

"Now the men's club delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives will have a woman's voice," she said then.

At the time of her first win, the 9th Congressional District ran along Lake Michigan from Diversey Avenue to Evanston's northern border before shifting west to take in some of the city's Northwest Side, as well as north suburban Skokie, Golf, Morton Grove, Lincolnwood and much of Niles. Today, the district is still heavily Democratic but stretches from the Far North Side of Chicago to include all or part of Buffalo Grove, Tower Lake and Hawthorn Woods as well as other parts of Cook and McHenry counties.

Even as her district's borders changed, Schakowsky has not had a serious primary challenger since she was first elected to Congress and has easily defeated Republican opponents in the general election.

Over the years, she rose to become a member of the House Democratic leadership team under former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and was an ardent voice of women's rights and increasing the number of women elected to Congress. She twice backed Marie Newman in her challenges to incumbent conservative Democrat U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, with Newman defeating Lipinski in 2020. Schakowsky has also been a vocal opponent of President Donald Trump, skipping his joint address to Congress this year as she did in 2018.

Speaking on Monday, Schakowsky asked her supporters — who had name tags and signs declaring "I'M A JAN FAN!" — to continue to resist Trump's policies and believe they could win.

She told reporters that she planned to continue her activism and support for candidates to elected office.

"You know, I can still be a badass," she said onstage to raucous applause.

Throughout her time in Washington, Schakowsky was an advocate for stricter gun laws, health care reform and the consumer issues that helped buoy her to the national stage. She was an early critic of the Iraq war and a supporter of abortion rights.

Schakowsky, who is Jewish and has been a staunch supporter of Israel, more recently was criticized by some on the left who thought she should more forcefully advocate for Palestinians in the ongoing war in Gaza.

The daughter of Jewish immigrants, Schakowsky grew up in Chicago and was active in public interest groups before running for the state legislature. Her husband, Robert Creamer, was the founder of one of those groups, Illinois Public Action. Creamer, a political consultant, was sentenced to five months in prison in 2006 for using bad checks to prop up his struggling consumer group and for a tax charge.

At the luncheon, Schakowsky's announcement came after speeches from American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, former U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland and Pritzker.

"Jan taught me the first and most important lesson in politics: how to accept defeat when the best woman for the job wins," Pritzker said. "Decades of service since, she continues to teach me."

Last week, addressing the potential of a primary field shaping up to replace Durbin, Pritzker recalled the 1997 campaign and encouraged new leadership in the Senate race.

"Remember, I ran for Congress when I was 31 years old, and there were an awful lot of people who said to me that it's not your turn. I ran anyway. I think that in fact we need more young people, we need the new generation," he said.

Schakowsky herself once represented a generational change, as she took over her seat from someone who held it for nearly 50 years.As she announced she would become the first declared candidate for Yates' post in April 1997, Schakowsky traced her career to one of her first and most famous political fights: getting freshness dates on groceries.

“A date on cottage cheese did not change the world, but it’s changed my life forever,” she said. “It convinced me that a few committed individuals could make their world better.”