

...The Day Rebecca Morgan Made Sartorial History in the Senate

The temperature was a bone-chilling 30 degrees in Los Altos Hills in the Silicon Valley on the morning of February 6, 1989. Rebecca Morgan, a Republican in her second term as a member of the California state senate, was preparing to make the 125-mile Monday morning commute to Sacramento at the start of a new legislative work week. As she surveyed her wardrobe, she wanted to wear something warm, and she felt uncomfortable with the new style of women's skirts.

"A conservative, well-tailored pants suit is far more professional than a mini-skirt, which is practically what they are this year," she recalled. "Besides, she noted, "It was cold. I had a very nice new wool pantsuit and put it on...I didn't even think about it."

When Morgan walked onto the senate floor a few hours later, she created quite a stir. The staid senate, which considers itself much more decorous and traditional than the assembly, had a formal dress code requiring "appropriate attire" for members. For men, that meant coats and ties. It was understood that women would wear dresses and skirts -- until Morgan became a curiosity by breaking the clothing barrier. Off to the side, a small knot of senators took notice. "Hey, Becky's got pants on," one senator said.

At a public forum in 2018, Morgan said she wasn't trying to make a point or protest. She just wanted to be practical and comfortable. "I can't tell you how many women have come up to me since that time and have said, "Thank you for freeing us from pantyhose."

Sources: United Press International, February 6, 1989, Public Policy Institute of California (<http://www.ppic.org/event/women-californias-legislature/>)