

On the (Shirley) Chisholm Trail: The Legacy of Suffrage and Citizenship Engagement

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The daughter of working-class Barbadian and Guyanese immigrants, Shirley Chisholm was the first African American woman elected to Congress and, in 1972, the first African American woman to run for the Democratic Party nomination for president.¹ Born in Brooklyn, in 1924, Chisholm broke barriers that continue to confront individuals who push back against narrow ideas of what leadership looks like.

Chisholm's political life and trajectory offer a window into a period in U.S. history when women and marginalized groups—African Americans, Latinx, Asian Americans, and others—emerged in increasing numbers in public life. Her youthful experiences in Barbados and her life in Brooklyn, shaped her racial, gender, and political consciousness. Chisholm's run for the presidency opened the country's eyes to the reality that women or persons of color could be political leaders. Born just four years after women won the right to vote, Chisholm's political activism followed in the tradition of African American suffragists such as Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Nannie Helen Burroughs.

African American women have always been in the forefront in the struggle for the vote. In the Northern states in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in certain areas, African American women voted alongside white women in local school board elections; women of color also voted in general elections after some Western states granted women suffrage. During the second half of the nineteenth and early twen-

tieth century, African American women worked primarily in the Northern states to organize support for the vote. After ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, they worked to elect black candidates. Once women became voters, African American women involved themselves energetically in the political arena, lobbying, organizing voter education groups in their neighborhoods, and supporting political candidates, several of whom were women.²

The waves of migration and immigration in the early twentieth century that resulted in the growth of urban areas, especially in the North, hastened the demand for universal suffrage. Immigrants arriving to what they believed was a "promised land," wanted the same rights as their native-born neighbors. By the twentieth century, working immigrant women played a major role in the campaign for woman suffrage. During a similar period, from 1910 to 1930, two million African Americans traveled from the Southern United States to cities in the Midwest, Northeast and West. Among the immigrants to the United States during this period were the 300,000 people from the English-speaking Caribbean, the majority of whom were Barbadians.

Among those arrivals were Chisholm's parents, who began their journey settling in Eastern seaboard cities. Like other immigrants, these newcomers had been attracted by an expanding economy and job opportunities; but they did not find a promised land. Instead, they encountered racial discrimination in housing, jobs, and schools.

Together, these migrations contributed to significant African American population growth, political activism, and institution building, especially in urban areas such as Brooklyn. For example, in 1905 the National Urban League was founded, along with the Association for the Protection of Colored Women and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Along with the recently revitalized Brooklyn Negro YMCA and YWCA, these organizations formed the backbone of black institutional life in Brooklyn, enabling the black populace to participate in a wide range of social, cultural, political and religious organizations.

Part of the changing landscape in New York City at this time was the growing involvement of women in the public sphere, in particular, the struggle for suffrage. The successful 1917 New York State referendums on women's suffrage galvanized African American women. When the 1917 women's suffrage referendum passed, 75,000 African American women were added to the voter rolls in the state.³ The passage of the Nineteenth



Poster from Shirley Chisholm's 1972 presidential campaign (Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gifted with pride from Ellen Brooks)

Amendment encouraged the continued participation of African American women voters in political engagement.

African American women in the North did not face the same degree of gendered or racist hurdles as their sisters in the apartheid South, but the persistence of gendered racism in all political parties made it difficult for women to participate fully in city and state political parties. After 1920, they engaged in a wide range of political involvement such as voter registration, joining political, religious, immigrant, community, or school clubs and associations, supporting candidates for political office, or lobbying municipal, state and federal officials.

Chisholm was born during this period

of rapid demographic change and institutional ferment. Her parents, struggling financially like many recent immigrants, sent young Shirley in 1929 to live with her grandmother and aunt in Barbados. The seven years she spent in Barbados shaped her political, racial, and gender consciousness. Shirley found daily role models in the black teachers, police officers, tradespeople, ministers, newspaper editors, and politicians in Barbados. This gave her a strong sense of racial pride and identity.

In addition, during her years on her grandmother's farm, black Barbadians (or Bajans) were beginning to challenge both the planter class and British imperialism. Political disturbances swept

through the countryside. Socialists, trade unionists, former Marcus Garveyites, and anti-colonial activists organized in the towns and countryside. Along with demands for independence from Great Britain and trade union rights for workers came the call for women's suffrage. Living through these early years of the struggle for modern Barbadian independence inspired Chisholm to stand up and fight for her principles and for liberation from gendered and racial oppressions.⁴

In 1933, with little memory of her birthplace, Chisholm returned to Brooklyn. Immediately she was transported from a nurturing sheltered rural way of life to an urban world dominated by hierarchies of class, ethnicity, gender, and race. These subsequent years shaped her political philosophy and electoral ambitions.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, Chisholm became involved in the struggle for greater black representation in New York City and New York State. New York City was as racially segregated as Birmingham, Alabama—not legally, but structurally. The city's major institutions, the schools, police, firefighters, transit and sanitation workers were administered by whites and employed very few people of color. Racist practices of redlining and restrictive covenants prevented African Americans from moving into white neighborhoods. African Americans in New York City suffered all the injustices of racism—de facto segregation, inadequate housing, lack of police protection, social services, access to jobs and decent food.

Chisholm's political journey followed in the footsteps of her activist foremothers. She first became involved while a student at Brooklyn College, joining such organizations as the Harriet Tubman Society, the Debating Society, the Brooklyn chapter of the NAACP, the Brooklyn Urban League and the Brooklyn League of Women Voters. She joined her neighborhood Seventeenth Assembly District (17AD) Democratic Club in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. In addition, since there were

no sororities at Brooklyn College that admitted African American women, she organized a women's club called In Pursuit of the Highest in All (IPOTHIA).

After Chisholm's graduation in 1946, she married Conrad Chisholm, and went on to earn an MA in Early Childhood Education from Columbia University's Teachers College. Her education career began as a teacher's aide at Mt. Calvary Child Care center in Harlem, continued at the Madison Child Care Center, and then as a consultant for the New York City Division of Day Care, overseeing 10 childcare centers. Even though Chisholm is remembered as a path-breaking politician, she always saw herself first and foremost as a teacher.

Shirley Chisholm played a central role in the insurgency that successfully challenged and overthrew the white male control of a central Brooklyn Democratic Party Club. Her initial experience in Brooklyn party politics contained lessons that were invaluable for the rest of her political career. One, she understood intersectionality and inclusion because she lived it. Her Brooklyn neighborhood was a demographically diverse district populated by U.S.-born African

Americans, whites, Syrians, Jews, Puerto Ricans, and people from the Spanish, English, French and Dutch Caribbean. Two, she understood that established political parties existed to keep the powerful in power. The rank and file were expected to keep quiet, and not to "rock the boat." In these political parties, women were given the gendered tasks of cooking and raising money for the men's activities, but were expected to be invisible at party meetings. Chisholm had no intention of remaining in this restricted role.

In 1964, Chisholm notified the Brooklyn Democrats that she wanted to run for state representative in Albany. As a candidate, she played to her strengths. Years before the concept of the "gender gap" was coined, Chisholm discovered how gender could work for her in her campaigns. As president of Brooklyn's Key Women of America, a civic organization committed to the protection of children, family services and community needs, she called upon its members to elect her "to dramatize the problems of black women." She won the election handily. The Key Women celebrated Chisholm's victory, "This is a year for

dreams to come true. Dr. Martin Luther King receives the Nobel Peace Prize and Shirley becomes our representative in Albany New York."⁵ While Chisholm had not yet publicly identified as a supporter of women's rights, this first campaign planted the seeds of her later feminism.

She was an effective legislator while in Albany. She was most proud of the legislation that created the Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) Program that sought out African American and Latinx high school students to give them state scholarships so that they could attend either the City University (CUNY) or State University (SUNY) systems of New York. Today, SEEK programs are an integral component of the academic life of these institutions. Chisholm also became involved in the women's movement. In 1967, she served as vice-president of the New York City chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and pushed for a New York State Equal Rights Amendment.⁶

In 1968, she announced her candidacy for the U.S. House of Representatives. She faced a demanding primary race and

Further Resources

Shola Lynch film, *Chisholm 72: Unbought and Unbossed*

Chisholmproject.com. This website for the Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism contains over 20 interviews with people who worked with Chisholm.

Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 2003.

Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, Berkeley Calif., University of California Press, 2012.

Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, expanded 40th anniversary, Scott Simpson (ed) Washington, D.C., Take Root Media, 2010.

Shirley Chisholm, *The Good Fight*, New York, Harper and Row 1973.

Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*, New York, Little Brown and Co. 2009.

Julie Gallagher, *Black Women in New York City Politics*, Urbana Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 2012.

Joshua Guild, "To Make that Someday Come: Shirley Chisholm's Radical Politics of Possibility," in *Want to Start a Revolution: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, eds. Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodward, New York, New York University Press, 2009.

Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, New York, Random House 1959.

Brian Purnell, "Drive Awhile for Freedom: Brooklyn CORE's Stall-in and Public Discourse on Protest Violence," in *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movement in America*, edited Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, New York, New York University Press, 2005.

Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2013.

Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color, Race and Social Power in Brooklyn*, New York, Columbia University Press 2000.

then a grueling campaign against James Farmer, former president of the Congress of Racial Equality, who was running as a Republican. Capitalizing on her reputation as an independent, she came up with the slogan “Fighting Shirley Chisholm: Unbought and Unbossed.”

Chisholm felt that her slogan “said it all.” It demonstrated that she was fiercely independent; that she would never be the pawn of political operatives. Her vote was not for sale, and she was not going to be dominated by any political faction. She would not obey orders at home, work, or in political organizations. Her slogan stayed with her throughout her life.

Shirley Chisholm won the election handily. She became the first African American woman elected to Congress, although she was not the first woman of color. That distinction went to Patsy Mink of Hawai'i. Chisholm followed most prominently in the footsteps of another congressional first: Jeannette Rankin, elected in 1916 from Montana, who was a suffragist, feminist, pacifist and socialist.

Chisholm's election and arrival in Washington stirred sensation after sensation. She hired an all-woman staff, something that had never been done before. Not only did she arrive late to her congressional swearing in, she was wearing all white and a hat! Up to that time, congressional protocol barred representatives from wearing hats and coats on the House floor. After being sworn in, she broke another unwritten rule—that junior legislators not speak to senior House members. Furthermore, she dared protest her first committee assignment. She argued that since there were so few African Americans in Congress, they should be put on committees where they could best represent constituents. She won her battle and was reassigned to the Veterans Affairs Committee, stating, “there are more veterans in my district than there are trees.”⁷

She did not stop with this victory. Delivering her first congressional speech, she vowed to vote against every bill that

provided money for the Department of Defense. This was both a stand against the Vietnam War as well as a protest of the war's devastating impact on her constituents. However, her work was not all confrontational protest. She was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), which pushed for legislation that would further civil rights for people of color. On August 10, 1970, Chisholm reintroduced into the House of Representative the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which had first been brought to Congress by former suffragist and National Women's Party president Alice Paul in 1923.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Shirley Chisholm was a feminist. What were the pressing issues facing women in 1960? 1970? To what extent have women made progress in the twenty-first century?

How did Chisholm connect issues of class, race, gender and poverty?

Chisholm's political campaign has been described as pathbreaking and quixotic. Did she (or how did she) pave the way for the candidacies of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton?

In what ways did Chisholm follow in the paths of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Anna Julia Cooper, and Fannie Lou Hamer?

Chisholm faced many challenges running for the Democratic presidential nomination. What challenges do women of color face while running for elective office? What has changed? What has not?

By 1972, Chisholm had become a leading spokesperson on women's rights and one of the very few at that time who looked at the intersection of class and race in women's lives. She constantly tried to build coalitions between mainstream and radical feminists and women of color. A longtime member of the National Council of Negro Women, she joined the 100 Black Women and the National Black Feminist Organization, organizations supporting and promoting the activism and political aspirations of African American women. Along with other feminists of the day such as Bella Abzug, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem, she founded the National Women's Political Caucus. In 1969, she had become the honorary president of the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws. By 1972, Chisholm had gone from a little known Brooklyn Democratic Party activist to one of the most important, admired, and influential women in the United States.

Chisholm is perhaps best known for being the first woman and the first African American to make a serious run for the Democratic Party nomination for the presidency. “I ran because someone had to do it first,” she said.⁸ Her intention was to shake up the political system, hoping to engage people of color, young people, the poor, the elderly and women—the very people U.S. society had marginalized in its quest for a more just society, then and now.

She won support from a wide range of community and grassroots activists such as the Black Panther Party, Gloria Steinem, Rosa Parks, the California chapter of the National Organization for Women, the Reverend Al Sharpton (her youth organizer), and civil rights legends Fannie Lou Hamer, Ossie Davis, and Harry Belafonte. In her presidential nomination campaign, she clearly understood her place in history. When she was campaigning in Michigan, she journeyed to Battle Creek to the grave of Sojourner Truth, abolitionist, feminist, and suffragist, and laid down a wreath. Although she did not win the nomina-

tion, she never regretted her presidential run. “I ran *because* most people think the country is not ready for a black candidate, not ready for a woman candidate. Someday.”⁹

After 1972, Chisholm became in some sense a more conventional politician. She divorced, remarried, and gave up her seat in Congress in 1982. After her husband’s death, she taught at Mt. Holyoke and gave lectures across the country. When she retired, she moved to Florida and stayed out of public life.

The 2018 congressional election, in which 107 women were elected to Congress, including women of color, brought Chisholm’s legacy front and center. Many, like Chisholm in 1968, are “firsts.” In many respects, the excitement, if not furor, around the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the youngest woman elected to Congress, is reminiscent of Chisholm’s first days in Congress. Both made a huge splash, defied certain protocols, are politically and proudly left of center, challenged congressional elders, and enjoyed a devoted fan base. Ayanna Pressley, the first African American woman elected to Congress from Massachusetts, sits in Chisholm’s original congressional office. Rashida Tlaib of Michigan and Ilhan Omar of Minnesota are the first Muslim women elected to Congress. Sharice Davids of Kansas and Debra Haaland of New Mexico are the first indigenous women in Congress. These newly elected Democratic Party women have all posed under Chisholm’s portrait. Most of them also wore white at their swearing in and at the 2018 and 2019 State of the Union address, referencing Chisholm as well as the struggle of suffragists.

In 2020, the centennial of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, granddaughters, daughters, mothers, aunts and sisters of suffragists, civil rights activists and supporters of women candidates will all be involved in work on the election and the marking of the suffrage amendment’s anniversary. Those engaged will no doubt honor Chisholm’s legacy as a “catalyst for change” as well

as her hopes in the American story. In her words: “We can become a dynamic equilibrium, a harmony of different elements, in which the whole will be greater than all its parts and greater than any society the world has seen before. It can still happen. I am going to keep trying to make it happen as long as I am able.”¹⁰

Notes

1. In this paper, I am using the term “Black” and “African American” interchangeably, recognizing that there are immigrants from the African diasporic Caribbean, including Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish individuals.
2. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1848–1920* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 1998); Lisa Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women’s Suffrage Movement, 1848–1898* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Martha Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Antebellum America* (Boston, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
3. Julie Gallagher, *Black Women and Politics in New York City* (Urbana, Ill., University of Illinois Press, 2012), 121.
4. Barbados granted universal suffrage in 1950.
5. Gallagher, *Black Women and Politics in New York City*, 121.

6. Much of this information comes from Barbara Winslow, *Shirley Chisholm: Catalyst for Change* (New York, Westview Press, 2013).
7. Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, expanded 40th anniversary edition, ed. Scott Simpson (Washington D.C.: Take Root Media, 2010), 103.
8. Shirley Chisholm, *The Good Fight* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 3.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 151-2.

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