

Pushing the Glass Ceiling: Shirley Chisholm & the Democratic Party

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Abstract: In 1972 US Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm decided to run for president, becoming the first African American woman to do so. Beyond the symbolic significance of her campaign, Shirley Chisholm paved the way for other minority leaders such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton by having the tenacity to challenge societal expectations and persevere in the face of adversity. A liberal and outspoken politician from working class Brooklyn, Chisholm based her presidential campaign on serving the country's marginalized populations. She was popular with college students, women, ethnic minorities, and seemed to be the people's candidate. However, the primaries were an uphill battle for Chisholm; her opponents were significantly more experienced with better resources and influential connections. In addition, due to the grassroots nature of her campaign, Chisholm was plagued with internal issues such as underfunding and understaffing, as well as external issues like racism and misogyny. Thus, she would have to maximize her use of limited resources and devote herself to key primaries, opting to have rallies and an active campaign presence only in certain states. In March of 1972, Chisholm would have to choose between campaigning in two crucial states: Florida and New Hampshire, with hopes of winning enough delegates to secure her party's nomination and become the Democratic Party's candidate.

Taking up the Mantle

The year was 1972. America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) were in the middle of a tense Cold War that had manifested in the Vietnam War. Richard Nixon was seeking re-election. He had won the 1968 presidential election in a landslide and because the Republican Party had successfully rallied behind him again, this year looked to be more of the same. The Democratic Party needed a nominee that could challenge Nixon and get the Democrats back in the White House.

On January 25, 1972, Shirley Chisholm, an African-American Congresswoman from Brooklyn, stood in the auditorium of a Baptist church and publicly announced her candidacy for the Democratic Party's nomination. At that moment, Congress's first African American woman reached another milestone by becoming the first black woman to run for presidential candidacy for the Democratic Party¹ (Fitzpatrick 2016). The first and lasting reaction to Chisholm's campaign was incredulity. Many people, especially in her own party, did not believe that she could win the nomination and either supported other candidates or stayed silent about her campaign. Undeterred, Chisholm began her campaign.

¹The first woman to ever run for president was Victoria Woodhull in 1872. In 1964, Margaret Chase-Smith was the first woman to run for nomination for the Republican party.

To become the Democratic nominee, Chisholm would first have to win a majority of the delegates through primaries, preliminary elections that narrow down the number of candidates running for each party (Putnam 2015). Winning primaries requires a significant financial investment including traveling, hosting rallies, and other ventures, funded by both large and small-scale donors. Chisholm was running a grassroots campaign and she had to be selective in where she focused her efforts; she could not afford to run and participate in primaries for every single state (Fitzpatrick 2016). Because of her restricted finances, Chisholm was forced to choose between two crucial primaries: New Hampshire and Florida. Chisholm would have to pick the state that would offer her the best chance at winning delegates. But nothing was guaranteed in either. How would she choose?

Political Climate in the USA

The 1960s were a period of radical political change in the United States. There was a dramatic uptick in civil activism; civil rights, women's liberation, and anti-war protests were among the largest of these movements. College students and other young people were the primary participants, creating the decade-defining counterculture (Anderson 1996). However, the large social strides left many white Americans feeling apprehensive of the changing cultural landscape. These movements were associated with deviant sex, illicit drug use, and a rejection of traditional American values, which fostered a growing backlash to the "hippie" counterculture (Rolland-Diamond 2016, 39). An increasing sense of disillusionment also began to build at the end of the 1960s. President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. His brother Robert Kennedy, another well-loved influential liberal senator, was assassinated a mere five years later. President Kennedy's successor Lyndon B Johnson became deeply unpopular due to the ongoing Vietnam War (Coleman and Selverstone, 2014). Thus Richard Nixon, the tough conservative from California, was able to win the 1968 election by winning the "silent majority" who craved the stability of the 1950s golden era. Using what has been coined "the Southern strategy" Nixon ran a highly racialized campaign, appealing to the racist values of white southern voters against African Americans (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 2008).

The Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights movement reached a crescendo in the 1960s. African Americans and their allies were marching, protesting and demonstrating all over the country. Political activists such as Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Hampton, and Dorothy Height were speaking out against segregation and racial injustice. The movement made great progress: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned public segregation and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 empowered more African Americans to vote (History.com 2017). However, circumstances began to change towards the end of the decade. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, followed by Fred Hampton in 1969. As a result of the violent pushback, the 1970s brought about more radical and separatist factions like the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army (Haines 1988). New leaders such as Stokely Carmichael and Huey P. Newton were not opposed to using radical and confrontational means to achieve their goals. For example, Huey P. Newton, who had previously subscribed to the passive non-violent resistance that Martin Luther King Jr. had favored, believed in self-defense in the face of violence and had members of the Black Panther Party armed with guns, which immensely intimidated both the government and law enforcement (Morgan 2018).

Women's Liberation

Taking their cues from the Civil Rights movement, the Women's Liberation movement also flourished in the 1960s. After the first wave of feminism in the early 20th century focused on suffrage, second wave feminists fought for workplace equality, access to legal birth control, and freedom from domestic abuse and sexual violence. Women pushed for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Much like the Civil Rights movement, second wave feminists got increasingly radical at the end of the 1960s, creating an ideological divide between the two groups. Liberal feminists believe that gender is a social construct and that men and women should be equally represented in society through legal reforms. Radical feminists believe that patriarchy is imbedded in men's consciousness and could be eliminated by creating women-only spaces (Lorber 2010). This is not to say that liberal feminism ceased to exist, but there was an increase in radical groups, starting in larger cities such as Washington D.C. and Los Angeles and then spreading across the country. Radical feminist organizations such as Redstockings, the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, and Seattle Radical Women all came into existence in the late sixties but became more prominent in the later decade (Willis 1984).

Shirley Chisholm

Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1924, Shirley Chisholm, born Shirley Anita St. Hill, was the oldest daughter of Charles Christopher and Ruby St. Hill (Fitzpatrick 2016). Her parents were immigrants from the West Indies and they struggled to make ends meet. When Chisholm was four, her parents sent her to live in Barbados with her grandmother. She credits her time there with giving her more confidence as a black woman² (Fitzpatrick 2016). The St. Hills lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a predominantly black and working-class neighborhood. Upon returning to the United States, Chisholm attended public school and later Brooklyn College, partially because it was close to home and thus more convenient, but mostly because of the free tuition. In 1946 Chisholm graduated, fluent in Spanish, with the intention of being a teacher. However, to her frustration, she failed to find work for a couple of months. To one prospective employer who had rejected her she allegedly said, "You are not looking for someone with more administrative experience, you didn't know I was black" (Fitzpatrick 2016, 163). This experience inspired her to advocate for minorities throughout her political career. Eventually, she found employment at a day care in Harlem and worked as a teacher for about a decade. She married Conrad Chisholm in 1949.

At college, her success in debate prompted her political science professor to encourage her to get into politics. Chisholm joined the 17th Assembly District Democratic Club to serve her local community. Mostly white Irish-American leaders ran the club, despite the fact the majority of the region's population was black (Gallagher 2007). A member of the NAACP, the Key Women of America, and National Assembly, Chisholm was involved in many civic organizations. She worked her way from leadership positions in these organizations to the New York State Assembly. Many of her female colleagues supported her and she actively sought out other female leaders of clubs to create a network of solidarity amongst women activists. As president of the Brooklyn Chapter of the Key Women of America she was able to garner the support she needed for her congressional campaign (Gallagher 2007).

However, Chisholm's ascent to power was not without its challenges; she faced significant opposition from men and women, both black and white. James Farmer, notable civil

² Her father was also influential on her perceptions of race as he was a follower of Marcus Garvey, a black nationalist whose activism flourished in the 1920's.

rights leader and former director of the Congress of Racial Equality, ran against Chisholm for Congress. He received glowing endorsements from Bronx Borough president Herman Badillo and New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller (Fitzpatrick 2016). This gave him even more standing against Chisholm's long career in politics and four years in the Assembly. As a result of both intense media coverage and his endorsements, Farmer received hefty donations for his campaign. Feeling slighted by the media, Chisholm called one of the television networks to protest and was told "Who are you? A little schoolteacher who happened to go to the Assembly" (Fitzpatrick 2016, 188). Farmer's campaign propagated the image of Chisholm as a homely, black matriarch figure and emphasized the importance of strong masculine leadership. These tactics infuriated Chisholm and she responded:

It was not my original strategy to organize womanpower to elect me; it was forced on me by the time, place, and circumstances... There were Negro men in office here before I came five years ago, but they didn't deliver... Black women don't emasculate black men. The black men didn't deliver. I'm here because of the vacuum (Chisholm 1970, 75).

Chisholm worked her grassroots campaign, calling on many of her colleagues for support and taking advantage of the higher number of registered women voters compared to male voters. Her strategy was to personally engage with as many potential constituents as possible: making phone calls, going from door to door, and talking to people on the streets (Winslow 2014). Her up close and personal approach worked: Chisholm beat Farmer 2 to 1 and became the first black woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Chisholm's politics were liberal, but not radical. She had faith in the established democratic system and believed that democracy had the tools to provide lasting and meaningful change for all people. Serving marginalized populations, especially women, people of color, and the poor was her primary goal in Congress. She initiated and supported many social projects like the "extended jobs program, increased affordable housing, protection for the rights of organized labor, welfare reform, [and] an increase in the minimum wage" (Fitzpatrick 2016, 192). Chisholm was a staunch feminist and supported the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. She was also pro-choice, which inspired criticism from many African Americans who saw abortion as thinly veiled genocide³ (Ross 2016). While in Congress, Chisholm and twelve other black lawmakers formalized the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) in March of 1971. That July, she also founded the National Women's Political Caucus with key activists such as Bella Abzug, Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. Chisholm also worked to empower other African American women, hiring them to compose half of her staff (Fitzpatrick 2016).

Decision to run for President

Chisholm's politics made her popular on college campuses, and she often travelled to give lectures. By 1971, students were asking her to run for president in Q&A sessions. She deliberated over the matter until the end of the year. Chisholm was unimpressed by the men who had thrown their hats into the ring. In the Democratic Party, all the candidates were white men who, in Chisholm's opinion, made performative gestures of inclusion for minorities and women but were ultimately "insulated by arrogance" (Chisholm 1970, 43). She believed that her

³ The concept of abortion as racial genocide was not new then and still persists to this day. It is frequently used by anti-abortion activists.

campaign would be an important milestone in the history of American politics and she wanted American leadership to include representation beyond that of white male elites and to provide a model for marginalized populations in the future.

Many African American leaders were ambivalent towards Chisholm's proposed candidacy, mainly concerned that she would place her allegiance to her gender over that of her race. The CBC as a unit did not support Chisholm, despite the fact that she was the only African American candidate. Many individual members avoided "either supporting or opposing her" (Fitzpatrick 2016, 208). However, a few members of the CBC fervently endorsed Chisholm, such as Representatives Ron Dellums and Parren Mitchell. Gwendolyn Cherry, a black Congresswoman from Miami, told Chisholm that "Chisholm for President organizations were ready to swing into action if [Chisholm] said the word" (Chisholm 1970, 55). Additionally, feminist leaders such as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Bella Abzug vocally advocated for Chisholm. Betty Friedan even stood with Chisholm in the auditorium when she announced her campaign. With their support and that of her district, Chisholm announced her bid for candidacy (Chisholm 1970).

Elections and primaries

Primaries are used to narrow down the number of candidates for each party for an upcoming presidential election. There are three types of primaries and the two most common forms are closed and open primaries (Putnam 2015). In a closed primary, a voter can only vote for the party they are registered with, i.e. a registered Democrat can only vote in the Democratic primary. Closed primaries are meant to encourage party unity and keep non-party members from influencing the nominations. Open primaries allow voters to participate in any primary, regardless of their party affiliation (Putnam 2015). The candidates' goal is to receive the most delegates of the state. Delegates can be awarded by proportion or by winner-takes-all, depending on the party and state (Putnam 2015). Using the proportional method, if a state has 100 delegates and a candidate wins 70% of the vote in the primary, the candidate wins 70 delegates. With the winner-take-all method, the candidate who wins the majority vote would win all 100 delegates (Putnam 2015). In 1972, both the New Hampshire and Florida primaries were proportional.

New Hampshire is a significant state because it hosts the first primary of the election and thus receives extensive media coverage; therefore, even if a candidate does not win, the media exposure may lead to an increase in the attention of potential supporters (Morton and Williams 2001). This primary is open, and the state sets a strong precedent for the rest of the primaries as the results there give the winning candidate significant momentum and legitimizes their campaign. New Hampshire is controversial with Democrats because its ethnic demographics do not reflect the diversity of the country (Smith and Springer 2009). In 1970, 99.47% of New Hampshire's population was white with African Americans making up only 0.35% (Gibson and Kay 2002). Despite these criticisms, the state has not been challenged successfully and still holds the first primary by law.

Florida is another crucial primary for many reasons. In 1972, Florida offered eighty-one delegates in contrast to New Hampshire's twenty. It is a closed primary, meaning that only voters that are registered to a certain party can participate. Also, unlike New Hampshire, Florida is a huge state that is demographically more similar to the rest of the United States, with an African American population of 15.34% in 1970 (Gibson and Kay 2002). Thus, the results from Florida may be more indicative of the attitudes of the country as a whole.

On the Chisholm Trail

Chisholm was one of two women to run for candidacy in 1972⁴. George Wallace, a governor from Alabama, would be one of her fiercest competitors for the Florida primary. There was a strong base for Wallace in Florida and while the two of them had vastly different political stances, he and Chisholm agreed on a number of issues. For example, desegregating busing⁵ was a major talking point in the election build up. While many Democrats favored the busing plans, Wallace and Chisholm had both opposed the idea. Wallace was an ardent segregationist, famously saying “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” in his 1963 Inaugural Address (Wallace 1963). Chisholm, on the other hand, opposed the desegregated busing system because she believed it was a band aid solution for a deeply complex issue, and would cause African American students more harm than good. Despite their differences, Wallace was highly impressed by Chisholm, praising her for “saying the same thing in Chicago that she says in Florida. I respect people...[who] don’t talk out of both sides of their mouths” (Chisholm 1970, 160).

Running for president is an incredibly expensive venture. Candidates can often spend \$1 million in the primaries alone. Before Chisholm formally declared her candidacy, she estimated that she would need a modest sum of \$300, 000 to cover the costs of her campaign. Chisholm was used to grassroots campaigns, going door to door and speaking to people face to face to get funding. This would not be effective on the national level. Chisholm decided that she would run for president if she could raise \$100,000 by the end of the year. However, she soon realized that she would not be able to raise the required money without a formal declaration of candidacy, which would legitimize her campaign. Indeed, after her announcement, fundraising committees began to flourish and send in donations. By the time she was ready to formally begin her campaign, she had raised \$95,000 (Chisholm 1970, 45). Due to her limited resources, Chisholm could not afford to hire professional staff to manage her campaign. She decided to let the local groups handle fundraising while her campaign headquarters staff worked on a volunteer basis. Another source of income would be doing lectures tours, which would pay well but take time away from the campaign.

While Chisholm was running her campaign, she was also still an active member of Congress, which required consistent attention. Chisholm’s precursor Margaret Chase Smith, the first woman to run for President for the Republican Party, had faced a similar issue. She was a senator at the time and she prioritized her senate obligations over her campaign, which cost her the New Hampshire primary in 1964 (Fitzpatrick 2016). Chisholm was expected to run her campaign without shirking her Congressional responsibilities.

Her limited budget meant that Chisholm’s campaign was often understaffed. Many of the members of her campaign worked on a volunteer basis. Her supporters were a diverse group of people: black women, white feminists, Latinos, Puerto Ricans. Infighting and rivalries were common amongst the staff as each group tried to outperform the others. Chisholm was forced to devote energy into defusing tensions and getting them to see the bigger picture of the campaign. In one instance, Betty Friedan volunteered as a Chisholm delegate in the Harlem/Westside 19th Congressional District and insisted on campaigning there, labelling the event as a “Travelling Watermelon Feast” because she planned on distributing watermelons (Fitzpatrick 2016, 217). Many of Chisholm’s African American delegates were insulted by this gesture, and although

⁴ Japanese-American US Representative Patsy Mink of Hawaii also declared interest but withdrew on May 24, 1972.

⁵ After the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the Supreme Court declared racial segregation in schools as unlawful. Thus, mandatory school busing plans became a tool for racial integration, with mixed results.

Friedan cancelled the event, tension persisted between the two groups throughout the campaign. Conflicts like this were common and Chisholm found them exhausting (Fitzpatrick 2016).

Chisholm believed that minority groups would provide her strongest fan base and wanted to appeal to people of color and feminists. In the week before Chisholm made her announcement, many feminists openly and publicly supported her. However, once the race began, to Chisholm's dismay, many of her previously vocal supporters became reluctant to commit themselves to Chisholm. This was especially true of Bella Abzug, another New York politician and cofounder of the National Women's Political Caucus, who never campaigned for Chisholm, but referred to her campaign as "an idea whose time had come" (Chisholm 1970, 74). Betty Friedan wavered between campaigning for Chisholm and campaigning for Eugene McCarthy before she committed to Chisholm. Steinem also supported two candidates: Chisholm and George McGovern, claiming, "I don't think that's a conflict of interests. I feel he's the best white male candidate (Fitzpatrick 2016, 215)." This infuriated Chisholm who stated: "I don't want half-baked endorsements, I want wholehearted people. If you are going to be with me in a halfhearted fashion, don't come with me at all" she said (Fitzpatrick 2016, 215).

Although Chisholm had been one of the founding members of the CBC, she never felt fully accepted by the male members of the group. In September 1972, cofounder of the CBC and colleague John Conyers promoted Carl Stokes, then mayor of Cleveland, for the Democratic candidacy, despite the fact that Stokes repeatedly stated that he had no interest in participating (Curwood 2015). Other members did not give her support, with many choosing instead to endorse George McGovern. Much like Chisholm, McGovern was a liberal appealing to the same demographics as she was. A senator from South Dakota, he was not an initial favorite for the Democratic nominee, but his guerilla-style tactics soon made him popular in the media. This endorsement also may have been a strategic alliance for the CBC, as McGovern had publicly championed the creation of the Black Caucus in 1971, and if he won, it was believed it would "maximize the effect blacks would have on the platform and programs of the Democratic Party" (Chisholm 1970, 29).

With all of these factors to consider, Chisholm evaluated her options. The New Hampshire and Florida primaries were only a week apart. Her finances and lack of staffing limited her campaign efforts to only one. The New Hampshire primary may have been able to provide media coverage and publicity that Chisholm would not have been able to afford otherwise. However, the diversity of Florida could prove more beneficial to Chisholm's campaign and win her more delegates. Which state would she choose?

Epilogue

Chisholm decided to focus her efforts on the Florida primary. Despite the importance of the New Hampshire primary, Chisholm believed that Florida's diversity would work to her advantage and that if she won there, she would gain meaningful support. However, George Wallace was incredibly popular in Florida and he won every single county, gaining seventy-five delegates and leaving Chisholm in seventh place. His campaign was effectively terminated on May 15 when he was shot five times in a failed assassination attempt, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life. Wallace withdrew from the race to recover and was deeply moved when Chisholm came to visit him in the hospital. Chisholm persevered all the way through to the Democratic National Convention. She managed to win in New Jersey and collect some delegates in New York. Hubert Humphrey, at the end of his campaign, released his African American delegates to her as well. Overall, she won just over one hundred and fifty-one

delegates, setting the record the highest number of delegates pledged for a female candidate until Hillary Clinton in 2008.

Ultimately, George McGovern secured his position as the Democratic Party nominee, with Chisholm in overall fourth place. McGovern was later defeated in the Presidential elections by Richard Nixon. Although its symbolism is highly significant, Chisholm's presidential campaign was much more than a symbolic gesture. Like many influential leaders, she recognized the importance of challenging the status quo, building communities, and looking towards the future. Despite her loss, Shirley Chisholm considered her bid for candidacy as one of her greatest achievements. She has been credited with paving the way for presidential candidates like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, who posthumously awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015. Before her death in 2005, Chisholm said that she did not want to be remembered as the first black woman to try to run for president but as "a black woman who lived in the twentieth century and who dared to be herself. I want to be remembered as a catalyst for change in America" (Chisholm 1970, 163).

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