

Shirley Chisholm

Chisholm, Shirley



Record Information

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Description:

Shirley Chisholm began her political career as a member of the New York Assembly, and later served in the House of Representatives from 1969 until 1982. During her seven terms in Congress, she authored a minimum wage bill, fought to save the Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO), worked for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and supported legislation to further the rights of women and minorities. Chisholm was a founding member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), and the National Political Congress of Black Women (NPCBW). In 1993 she was appointed U.S. ambassador to Jamaica—a post which she filled until her retirement in 2001.

Shirley Chisholm was the first African-American woman to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives. She was also the first African American and the first woman to receive at least 10 percent of the votes for president at a major political party's national convention.

Chisholm was born Shirley Anita St. Hill on November 30, 1924, in Brooklyn, New York. Her father, Charles, worked in a bakery, and her mother, Ruby, worked as a seamstress and housekeeper. From ages four to 10, she lived with her maternal grandmother on the Caribbean island of Barbados. After completing her secondary education in Brooklyn, she enrolled in Brooklyn College to study sociology and received a B.A. in 1946. In 1949, she married Conrad Chisholm; they had no children. After graduating from Brooklyn College, she continued her studies in early childhood education at Columbia University, while teaching during the day in a nursery school, and received an M.A. in 1953. Over the next six years, she worked successively as a teacher's aide, teacher, and director for three different child care facilities. In 1959, she became an educational consultant for the New York Department of Social Services' day care division, a position she held for five years.

While a student at Brooklyn College, Chisholm had joined the 17th Assembly District Democratic Club. During her senior year, she began working politically with fellow club member Wesley M. Holder. Holder was a Caribbean-born British subject

who could not run for office himself, so he did what he could to get other blacks elected to state and local offices from New York City's black-majority districts and wards. To this end, in 1953 Holder founded, with considerable help from Chisholm, the Bedford-Stuyvesant Political League. Unfortunately, Holder and Chisholm had a falling-out shortly thereafter, and the league folded within a few months.

Chisholm had little to do with politics for the next seven years. By 1960, however, she had become disgusted with the refusal of Democrats in her assembly district to run African Americans for office. That same year, she cofounded the Unity Democratic Club, which sought to exercise greater influence over the district's nomination process. In 1962, the Unity Club got one member elected to the state assembly and two more elected to the party's district committee. Two years later, when the assemblyman resigned to become a municipal judge, the club got Chisholm nominated to take his place. In 1964, after a long, hard campaign during which she received much support from women's social groups and civic clubs, she took her seat in the state legislature. During her four-year tenure as an assemblywoman, she won two major legislative victories. One created Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK), which provided financial and remedial assistance for college-bound students of African-American or Puerto Rican heritage, and the other established an unemployment insurance program for domestic workers.

Meanwhile, the New York legislature had reapportioned its congressional districts, thus creating the black-majority 12th District around Bedford-Stuyvesant, Chisholm's neighborhood in Brooklyn. Although she was denied the support of her party's leaders when she sought the nomination for this seat in 1968, her performance in the state assembly had gained her tremendous grassroots support. She also reconciled with Holder, who skillfully managed her low-budget, high-energy campaign featuring the slogan "Fighting Shirley Chisholm—Unbought and Unbossed." After edging out the leadership's anointed candidate in the primary, in the general election she faced James Farmer, the former national chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality. Farmer was well organized and well funded, but he made the critical mistake of making Chisholm's gender a campaign issue. Once again the women's social groups and civic clubs rallied to her support, and in 1969 she became the first African-American woman to take a seat in Congress. She wrote about her campaign experiences, as well as her first term in Congress, in *Unbought and Unbossed* (1970).

Chisholm was initially assigned to the committees on ways and means and on agriculture. She later served on the committees on veterans' affairs, education and labor, and rules. Most of her efforts, however, were focused on gaining federal funding for expanded social programs. Specifically, she sought to establish federal subsidies for day care centers, increase the minimum wage, refocus the War on Poverty to provide better job training, and implement a national version of SEEK. To pay for these initiatives, she advocated a reduction in the military budget, and to this end she opposed the war in Vietnam. She also opposed most environmental bills on the grounds that they cost many low-income people their jobs. In 1971, she became a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus.

In 1972, Chisholm ran for president of the United States. Although she professed to be a serious candidate for the post, in retrospect it seems more likely that her primary goal was to pave the way for another African American or woman to get elected to the White House later on. She campaigned heartily during the primary season, and even received 151 votes at the Democratic National Convention, but her fellow Democrats nominated peace candidate George McGovern instead. She wrote about her campaign experiences in *The Good Fight* (1973).

In 1978, Chisholm divorced her husband and married Arthur Hardwick. The following year he was involved in a near-fatal automobile accident, and several years after that he was diagnosed with cancer. Meanwhile, she found herself increasingly out of step with the new conservative mood in Congress resulting from the Reagan revolution. In 1982, after having been reelected six times, she announced her retirement from Congress, choosing instead to spend time with her ailing husband. After finishing her term in 1983, she taught political science and women's studies for four years at Mt. Holyoke College, then retired to her home in Williamsville, New York. She campaigned actively for Jesse Jackson in his 1984 and 1988 runs for the presidency, and in 1984 she cofounded the National Political Congress of Black Women. In 1993, President Bill Clinton offered to nominate her as ambassador to Jamaica, but she declined on the grounds of poor health. Moving to Florida in 1991, Chisholm spent her retirement writing, lecturing, and reading political biographies. After suffering a series of strokes, she died at her home on January 1, 2005.

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