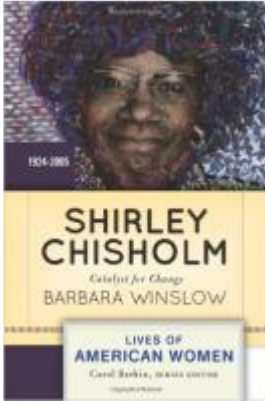


Mixed Legacy

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Shirley Chisholm: Catalyst for Change by Barbara Winslow brings back to our attention one of the most notable and esteemed African-American women of the 1960s and 1970s. Winslow reports that “a 1974 Gallup Poll listed her as one of the top-ten most admired women in America.” She was the first black woman elected to Congress. As a Democratic candidate for president in 1972, Chisholm was then at the height of her prominence and fame. But she had been a controversial and divisive figure since her entry into politics in the 1960s.

Chisholm was born in Brooklyn in 1915 but spent the first ten years of her life in Barbados. She always “identified herself as a Barbadian-American” whose characteristics, as Winslow notes, were “discipline, thrift, hard work, and ambition.” In Barbados, she was surrounded by black teachers and black administrators and began each day singing “God Save the King.” Upon returning to Brooklyn, she encountered a neighborhood that was Jewish, African-American, Caribbean, and poor. It took all of her discipline and hard work to enable her to thrive and succeed in Brooklyn, but she did.

With her background, Chisholm excelled in school, graduating from Girls High while earning a medal in French and being chosen vice-president of the honor society. She graduated *cum laude* from Brooklyn College and earned an MA from Columbia Teachers College.

In 1954 Chisholm worked as director of the Hamilton Madison Child Care Center in Manhattan with a staff of 24 caring for 130 children. Many of the children were from Puerto Rico, and Chisholm learned their language in order to be more helpful to them. This Spanish-language facility turned out to be extremely helpful in her later political endeavors.

Chisholm’s career in politics began while she was still in college. She joined the Seventeenth Assembly District (17AD) Democratic Club. The club’s primary function was to support the party’s candidate at election time. Although the district was majority black, the candidate was usually white. At club meetings, blacks sat on one side of the room, and whites sat on the other. No women were present. Chisholm was appalled. She provided leadership to the women in the club, spoke out against discrepancies in support of the black community, and forced the white men to treat her with respect. She was elected to the club’s board of directors—a feat for a twenty-year-old black woman.

The year 1960 was a momentous one for the nation. The sit-in movement began in Greensboro, North Carolina. The 1954 Supreme Court decision declaring school segregation unconstitutional was being implemented, and a preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr. was beginning to be heard.

In 1963 Chisholm placed her name in nomination for New York State Assembly. Winslow says, “Chisholm’s greatest hurdle was the hostility she encountered because of her sex—hostility she would face for the rest of her political life.” But she had the support of Brooklyn’s black women and their organizations, such as Key Women of America, which was the backbone of Brooklyn’s church, community, and political circles. Chisholm won the election easily, getting 18,151 votes to the Republican’s 1,893.

In her four years in the State Assembly she worked closely with powerful African Americans such as David Dinkins, later mayor of New York City; Charles Rangel, later member of Congress; and Percy Sutton, later Manhattan borough president. Her first piece of successful legislation was a bill to provide unemployment insurance for domestic workers. This was a key goal of the civil rights and labor movements. Her work in the State Assembly well prepared her for her next challenge in the United States Congress.

Her most formidable opponent for a seat in Congress was James Farmer—nationally known hero of the southern civil rights movement, former chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality, and an outstanding speaker. But these advantages were offset by his negatives: he was not a resident of Brooklyn (though residence was not required), and he had to run as a Republican in an overwhelmingly Democratic Brooklyn, which was governed by the clubs and women's organizations that were the source of Chisholm's strength. Moreover, she spoke Spanish, which endeared her to the Puerto Rican community.

The *New York Times* and the *Village Voice* were totally devoted to Farmer's candidacy despite Chisholm's plea for coverage. Yet she won by almost 2.5 to 1, with 34,855 votes to 13,777, becoming the first African-American woman to serve in Congress.

Shirley Chisholm had a strong and formidable record in Congress, but I want to spend the rest of my review devoted to two major decisions in Chisholm's life: one, her decision to run for president of the United States, and two, her turn to retrograde politics later in her congressional life.

Shirley Chisholm took the oath of office for a second term in Congress in 1971. She had just published her autobiography, *Unbought and Unbossed*. Chisholm was making a national name for herself with such actions as supporting the movement against the Vietnam War, raising bail for Black Power prisoners such as Joan Bird and Angela Davis, and joining the picket lines of the United Farm Workers.

She was considering a run for the U.S. presidency. Yet, she "took a slightly less confrontational stance in her second term in office," according to Winslow. "Why, we may never know; she never explained her shift in tactics." For example, she did not support John Conyers, a liberal member of the Congressional Black Caucus, but instead supported Hale Boggs of Louisiana and conservative southerner Joe D. Wagonner for the House Rules Committee, both of which endorsements angered her black supporters.

Perhaps she thought, foolishly, this would make her more attractive as a potential presidential candidate. In contrast, Margaret Chase Smith, a Republican from Maine who had her name placed in nomination for president at the 1964 Republican Convention, had no illusions about winning the nomination. She was making a statement as a woman and did not campaign or compromise her principles with the hope of winning something illusory.

In September 1971, Richard Hatcher, black mayor of Gary, Indiana, called a meeting with the purpose of "translating the ideas of Black Power into an effective strategy." Every leader of the black struggle was there, including members of Congress, state legislators, and leaders of the major civil rights organizations. The one thing they unanimously agreed to was that African Americans should "stand aloof from the entire list of candidates for the Presidency of the United States," and that included Shirley Chisholm. Chisholm, however, did not attend the conference, sending her aide, Thaddeus Garrett. Garrett reported back that Chisholm was thought to be "a black woman of the black experience and from one of the blackest districts in the country." Yet, at best she was considered a black woman's candidate and not representative of the entire black experience.

On January 25, 1972, at Concord Baptist Church in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, Shirley Chisholm announced that she was running for the presidency of the United States. Unlike Margaret Chase Smith, she did not submit her name symbolically, but spoke as an actual candidate. She said, "I am not the candidate of black America, although I am black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement of this country, although I am a woman and equally proud of that." She spoke as a candidate of the people. Two of her staff people, Garrett and Shirley Downs, "thought she was out of her ever-loving mind." Garrett asked incredulously, "Mrs. Chisholm! Do you know the work that's in that?"

Winslow writes, "[Chisholm] was under no illusions that she had a chance of winning the presidency, let alone even the Democratic nomination." Lacking a national staff, having no fundraising skills or major support, Chisholm was acting as an actual candidate. But she had almost no national political people in her camp. Most of the black politicians opposed her candidacy. There was constant conflict between white women of the National Organization for Women and campaign workers from the black community. "They did not know how to connect the issues of abortion ... and the Equal Rights Amendment ... to the concerns of the black civil rights and liberation movement." Although she had the support of prominent blacks such as Ossie Davis and Harry Belafonte, who raised money and spoke for her, the support of the majority of black politicians and mainstream feminists was "problematic" and "lukewarm." Bella Abzug appeared at Chisholm's second announcement of her candidacy but would not endorse her. Gloria Steinem said, "I'm for Shirley Chisholm, but I think George McGovern is the best of the male candidates." Chisholm criticized her for her equivocation.

In the Florida primary, which George Wallace won, Chisholm got 3 percent of the vote. In Chicago, Richard J. Daley's machine won all of the delegates. In Massachusetts, Chisholm came in fifth but did win seven delegates. In Michigan, which Wallace also won, Chisholm came in eighth with 3 percent of the vote. In California, she came in third with 157,455 votes, but California was a winner-take-all state, so all delegates went to McGovern.

Chisholm experienced triumphs and betrayals, disappointments and broken promises, during all of those campaigns. She said at the end, "I ran because somebody had to do it first. ... I ran because most people think the country is not ready for a black candidate, not ready for a woman candidate." Chisholm did not say the country was perhaps ready for a better-prepared candidate, one who gathered a national staff and had serious fundraising mechanisms in place—for one who wooed black politicians, admittedly chauvinistic and male-focused, but who might have modified the tone of their objection. She raised some of these criticisms in her post-candidacy book *The Good Fight*, but expressed no regrets for having run as she did.

Following her presidential run, Chisholm was in demand as a now nationally recognized figure. She used her new fame to influence national legislation and to "consolidate her power in Brooklyn," by gaining projects and money for her constituents. But she would ultimately become diminished as a fighter for liberal causes and a speaker for progressive issues.

Her speaking fees at the time totaled over \$30,000. This, in combination with her salary of \$42,500, enabled her and her husband, Conrad, to build a "lavish" home in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Her trips to speak at colleges and to women's groups inevitably resulted in her compiling the lowest voting-attendance record of the entire New York State delegation. Still, Chisholm managed to score some progressive victories. With three more African-American women elected to Congress, making nineteen women in all, she became a founding member of the congressional women's caucus. She also fought for minimum wage laws for domestic workers, who were overwhelmingly African-American women. It had been one of her main causes in the New York Assembly.

But in her political actions she was becoming more often a machine politician as opposed to a fighter

for liberal causes. She endorsed machine candidates against liberal and progressive African-American and feminist candidates. She did not support Bella Abzug in her two primary campaigns and did not support her "long-time ally Percy Sutton in his failed campaign for mayor." She campaigned against Arthur Eve, a liberal African American who was running for mayor of Buffalo. Instead she supported a white conservative Democrat who was close to Meade Esposito, the Democratic machine leader. In 1982 she announced that she would not seek re-election.

Barbara Winslow, her biographer, points out these faults marking Chisholm's fall from being an icon of liberalism to a machine apparatchik. She tries to explain that Chisholm "had to battle politically in a white man's political world where daggers were out at all times." But she does not say that Chisholm, in an overwhelmingly black district, could have continued speaking out strongly for liberal and progressive causes and would have garnered the continued support and love of her constituents. Instead of burnishing her national credentials, she could have solidified her stature with her Brooklyn constituents. She could then have retired with an overwhelmingly positive record, instead of leaving with a mixed legacy including compromise of her principles. For example, she would like to have been named the first president of the newly established Medgar Evers College, but "she had made opponents during her political life who opposed the notion," and she was not chosen. Winslow concludes that, "Like her life, Chisholm's legacy remains confused and contentious." And that seems to be a fitting conclusion to her story. Chisholm died in 2005.