

Shirley Anita Chisholm



Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm was a woman who was known for her moral character and her relentless ability to stand up for her community and what she believed. A child to immigrant parents, she learned from an early age the importance of an education and the value of hard work, both of which she applied to her political career and her accomplishments while serving as a Congresswoman.

Chisholm attended Brooklyn College where a blind political science professor, Louis Warsoff, encouraged Chisholm to consider politics based on her “quick mind and debating skills.” She reminded him that she had a “double handicap” when it came to politics—she was black and a woman. Chisholm joined the debate team and after African-American students were denied admittance to a social club at the college, she started her own club called *Ipothia*—In Pursuit of the Highest In All.

Shirley graduated with honors in 1946 and worked as a nursery school aide and teacher while she attended evening classes at Columbia University’s Teachers College. She received her masters degree in early childhood education in 1951, and eventually became a consultant to the New York City Division of Day Care in 1960.

Chisholm joined a local Democratic club who worked to get rid of the white Democratic machine that held the power in her Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. The group challenged the white leaders on why the black neighborhoods were being ignored. The leaders tried to quiet Chisholm by placing her on the board of directors and when she continued to speak out, they removed her from the post. This was an early lesson for Chisholm that people in political power did not like to be questioned!

The group managed to elect a black man, Thomas R. Jones, to state assembly in 1962 and, when in 1964 he decided to run for a judgeship, the community replaced him with Chisholm. She served in the state legislature until 1968 when she decided to run for a seat in the U.S. Congress. The 12th Congressional District was created after the *Westberry v. Sanders* decision stated that election districts must be roughly equal in population. Chisholm won the seat with the use of her “independent spirit” and her campaign slogan, “Unbought and Unbossed.” Chisholm’s win made her the 1st African American woman in Congress.

Like Margaret Chase Smith, who had served in the Congress almost 30 years before her, Chisholm learned the politics of committees. She had asked to be on the

Education and Labor Committee, a natural selection for someone with a strong teaching background. She not only did not get placed on this committee, but did not get placed on *any* of the committees that she had requested. Instead they placed her on the Agriculture Committee, which was a rather odd choice for a city woman. Chisholm did not sit back and be quiet about it; instead, this strong-willed woman stated her case to the Democratic caucus. This eventually worked and they removed her from the Agriculture Committee and placed her on Veterans' Affairs. While this had not been one of her original choices, she responded by saying, "There are a lot more veterans in my district than trees."

It was during her 2nd term in the House that Chisholm ran for the US Presidency. She became the 1st black woman to run for president, but this is not what she wanted people to focus on during her campaign. The fact that her campaign was seen primarily as "symbolic" by many really hurt her. She did not run on the mere base of being a "first," but because she wanted to be seen as "a real, viable candidate."

Her bid for the presidency was referred to as the "Chisholm Trail," and she won a lot of support from students, women and minority groups. She entered 11 primaries and campaigned in several states, particularly Florida, but with little money she was challenged. Her campaign was "under-organized, under-financed and unprepared." It was calculated that she raised and spent only \$300,000 between July 1971 when she first thought of running, and July of 1972.

Overall, people in 14 states voted for Shirley Chisholm for president, in some fashion or the other. After six months of campaigning, she had 28 delegates committed to vote for her at the Democratic Convention. The 1972 Democratic Convention was in July in Miami, and it was the first major convention in which an African American woman was considered for the presidential nomination. Although she did not win the nomination, she received 151 of the delegates' votes.

Chisholm served a total of 14 years in the Congress and made numerous contributions before she made the decision to retire in 1982. During her time in office she was one of the four founders of the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971, was appointed to the "powerful" House Rules Committee in 1977 and introduced more than 50 pieces of legislation. President William J. Clinton nominated Chisholm to be the U.S. Ambassador to Jamaica, but she declined due to ill health.

Chisholm went on to teach college and co-founded the National Political Congress of Black Women, which represented black women's concerns. When asked how she wanted to be remembered, Chisholm said, "When I die, I want to be remembered as a woman who lived in the 20th century and who dared to be a catalyst of change. I don't want to be remembered as the first black woman who went to Congress. And I don't even want to be remembered as the first woman who happened to be black to make the bid for the presidency. I want to be remembered as a woman who fought for change in the 20th century. That's what I want."

Works Cited:

- Reprinted from NWHM Cyber Exhibit "Women Who Ran for President"