

Shirley Chisholm: Political Pioneer

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When I found out that the theme this year for NHD was “frontier,” I was thrilled and immediately started thinking of topics. I wanted to do something with women in politics. As I started researching, I discovered Shirley Chisholm. She’s a fascinating person to me because she seemed so brave, entering a world of politics dominated by white men as a Black woman. Chisholm fit the topic of frontier perfectly because of how she was such a pioneer of civil and women’s rights and because of the fact that she fought for equal rights and what she believed in her entire life.

I started my research by going to the library and finding biographies about Shirley Chisholm. It was in the library where I discovered that Shirley Chisholm had written two autobiographies about her life, both published around the time of her presidential campaign, *Unbought and Unbossed* and *The Good Fight*. Naturally, I checked out all the books that were available about her and written by her. I utilized technology and the available online databases to the best of my ability. While I was conducting my research, I found a page about Chisholm on the Library of Congress’s website, with many links to external sources. I also obtained access to more recent interviews conducted by news sources such as NBC News. I found primary sources, such as her campaign announcement, which I obtained access to from numerous news sources.

Before this project, I had never written a research paper before. Throughout the course of writing the paper, I had to learn how to make an appendix, how to use parenthetical citations, and how to correctly format my paper. Recently, I won a writing contest, and I asked myself why I’d never written a paper for NHD before. After all, writing is one of my strengths in school. There were times that I struggled, especially in making sure that I organized the paper correctly. But

perhaps my biggest struggle was keeping my focus narrowed; as I was researching I found myself getting distracted, adding more information because of my strong interest in the topic.

I focused on Shirley Chisholm's bravery and intelligence, and how we wouldn't be where we are today in our everyday lives and in American politics without her pioneer spirit. As the first African-American woman to run for president, she paved the way for many of the people making change in the world today.

There are many ways that Shirley Chisholm broke frontiers as a pioneer. She opened up the door for those who came after her. The people that came before her started the frontier to allow her to run in the first place, like Victoria Woodhull, but she can be awarded full credit for her trailblazing run for president and the effort she put into it. When we talk about people like Condoleezza Rice and Kamala Harris, we have to give Shirley Chisholm credit for helping lift them up to make an impact on the world.

“I ran because someone had to do it first.”

– Shirley Chisholm (Chisholm 17)

Shirley Chisholm was not only the first female African American to run for president in 1972, she was a civil rights activist who fought for women’s rights and re-shaped how we define politics today (Onion). Chisholm started as a schoolteacher born to immigrant parents, and managed to secure a legacy and make change in society, breaking frontiers and doing what no one else thought she could do (see Appendix A). In an interview after she announced her run for president, she said, “If I can help to bring about the change and move in that direction, I will have made my contribution” (“Shirley Chisholm Biography”). Indeed, she brought about change. Today, we have more women and people of color in Congress than ever before from all sides of the political spectrum (Desilver). Chisholm’s bravery and personal sacrifices are what led us to this point.

Many people of color talked about running for president in 1972, but Chisholm was the only one who actually ran, which is an enormous testament to her bravery and organizational skills. Her presidential campaign cost more than \$300,000, and due to the fact that she had a limited amount of funding, she had to pull some of that from her own pocket. Overall, Shirley Chisholm is an important political pioneer and trailblazer who opened doors and changed the landscape of American politics. (Chisholm)

Personal Life

Shirley Chisholm was born on November 30, 1924 in New York (Onion). Chisholm’s parents were both immigrants: her mother, Ruby Seale St. Hill, from Barbados and her father,

Charles St. Hill, from Guyana. She was the oldest of her four sisters, and grew up in a mostly Black neighborhood in Brooklyn. Her parents believed in education and equal opportunities. Chisholm graduated from Brooklyn Girls' High, winning prizes on the debate team, foreshadowing her future political career. (Michals)

When she was young, Chisholm had a passion for the arts. When she was an adult, she said, “I come alive on the dance floor. I’m very creative.” (Bolden 31). Her parents wanted her to pursue a more dependable career. Becoming a teacher was one of the few available jobs for an educated Black woman in the 1960s, so Chisholm went to college to pursue a career in education. (Bolden)

After high school, she attended Brooklyn College, graduating in 1946. After she got her Bachelor’s degree at Brooklyn, she went to school at Columbia University for a Master’s degree in education. Both of the schools she attended were located in New York, so she could receive in-state tuition. Throughout her years in college, many of her professors encouraged her to pursue a career in politics, but she would reply that she couldn’t because she had a “double handicap”; she was both Black and female. (Michals)

Career

Shirley Chisholm had a long and interesting career that led her down many paths. In the 1950s, right after she graduated from college, she was the director of the Hamilton-Madison Child Care Center. After this, in 1960, Chisholm became the educational consultant for New York City’s Bureau of Child Welfare. (Onion)

She saw injustices in her community, as she was educated and highly aware of the inequalities she experienced every day, and decided to become more involved in the politics

where she lived, in New York. That's when she became a part of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ("Shirley Chisholm Biography"). Not only was she a member of the NAACP, she became a part of the New York chapter of the League of Women's Voters, a non-partisan, grassroots organization that helped provide equal voting opportunities for everyone, but focused on providing women with the opportunities to vote. In addition to these organizations, Chisholm was a part of the Democratic Party club in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. (Michals)

Chisholm was fighting for better daycare as an educator. She had seen a problem and was going to do what she had the power to do to make it right. In 1959, the majority of children whose mothers were employed had to be watched by relatives, and 400,000 children had to take care of themselves after school. Chisholm wasn't just trying to get more daycare centers, but better quality ones. She started to become more open to the idea of running for representative of her district in New York. (Bolden)

Being a Black Congresswoman

Before Chisholm was elected to Congress, she ran for and became the second African American in the New York State Legislature. Electing a Black woman to Congress broke through the barrier of gender and racial norms at the time that said that women weren't supposed to have power, let alone a Black woman. In 1968, in New York, there was a court-ordered redistricting that created a largely Democratic district right where Shirley Chisholm lived. The new redistricting was the key to her win because most of the Democratic voters agreed with her outspoken opinions (Michals). When she won the seat in Congress, she beat James Farmer, who

was a civil rights leader, and she became the first African-American Congresswoman. She served in the same seat from 1968 to 1983 (“Shirley Chisholm”).

In interviews, Chisholm discussed her experience as a Black woman in Congress. She faced racism and sexism every day. Chisholm said, “For the first two to three months, I was miserable. The gentleman did not pay me any mind at all. When I would go to the lunchroom to eat, they wouldn’t sit at the same table as I did because I’m a Black woman. It was horrible.” (“Shirley Chisholm: The First Black Congresswoman”)

Shirley Chisholm had to defend herself, have courage, and face blatant racism and sexism from, not just the voters and critics, but her peers in Congress. In her own words, “If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair”, she summarizes her experience in Congress (Joiner). Her perseverance helped people have seats at the table today.

The 1972 Election

Shirley Chisholm didn’t want to run for president. She knew that she wasn’t going to win, and she didn’t think that she could afford the financial consequences. Chisholm was encouraged, not only by her political allies, but by some of the younger people who admired her. She was a frequent guest speaker at many colleges. (Michals)

In her autobiography, *The Good Fight*, Chisholm discusses one particular interaction. She had just been a guest speaker at a southern school, and a young man asked her why she wasn’t running for president. Chisholm replied with the same answer she gave everyone who had asked her that same question in the previous three years, “You don’t know what you’re asking me to do. You must understand, whatever my ability to handle the job, and regardless of your belief in me, I am Black and I am a woman.” The student replied, “When are we going to break this tradition?”

We've had a lot of speakers here, and none of them has dealt with the issues the same way you have. We need somebody who will do that. We will be voting soon, and we will support you if you run." The youngest generation was one of the biggest factors in Chisholm's decision to run.. (Chisholm 16-18)

After this conversation, she started to feel as though she should do something. With the mounting pressure, Chisholm announced her run for president (Onion). Even though Chisholm was a pioneer and broke frontiers by being the first African-American woman to run for president, she wasn't the first woman to run for president and she wasn't the first woman of color in Congress. The first woman to run for president was Victoria Woodhull, back in 1872, before women could even vote ("Victoria Woodhull"). The first woman of color to be in Congress was Patsy Mink in the 1960s, elected just three years before Chisholm was. They set the scene for Chisholm's work.

Chisholm didn't have a lot of money or people putting their faith in her because they thought she wouldn't win due to the fact that she was a Black woman. Many people believed that the country wasn't ready for her, but she managed to spin her lack of campaign donations into a positive thing. She wasn't bought by corporations and big businesses; she was running solely for the people. (Onion)

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 I am equally proud of that. I am not the candidate of any [special interests]. I stand here now without endorsement from many big-name politicians or celebrities or any other prop.... I am the candidate of the people of America. ("1972 Shirley Chisholm") (see Appendix B)

When asked if she thought America was ready for a president that was both Black and a woman she said, “I think what is even more important than whether or not America is ready for me as president, is to begin to prepare America for the fact that it is time that other peoples in America besides white males run for the highest office. Someday, a Black will lead this country. Someday a woman will lead this country. That’s what this is all about” (Onion). Shirley Chisholm’s trailblazing efforts really did pave the way for others, and she knew what she was doing.

Chisholm ran against Democrats George McGovern, Hubert Humphrey, Edmund Muskie, Henry M. Jackson and George Wallace in the primary. Many minorities and women didn’t put their support behind Shirley Chisholm. Black male voters didn’t rally around her. Since MLK had died four years beforehand, an organized entity of “the Black vote” didn’t exist and Black political leaders endorsed white candidates. (Landers)

Even though she didn’t have any notable endorsements from minorities and women, at a surprise turn of events, George Wallace endorsed her. He was the Governor of Alabama and was a candidate for president, but he was almost killed in an assassination attempt. He ran openly racist campaign advertisements, but, despite this, Shirley Chisholm went to visit him when he was in the hospital. “I couldn't stay long, because he was very ill,” Chisholm said in an interview late in her life, “and the doctors told me, ‘Congresswoman, you have to leave him.’ And he held on to my hand so tightly, he didn't want me to go.” (Landers)

“George Wallace for some strange unknown reason, he liked me,” Chisholm said. “George Wallace came down to Florida and he went all over Florida and he said to the people, ‘If you all can’t vote for me... Vote for Shirley Chisholm!’ And that crashed my votes, because they thought that I was in league with him to get votes.” Chisholm received only 4 percent of the

Florida vote. George Wallace ended his campaign after he was shot. (Landers) Shirley Chisholm visiting Wallace in the hospital and putting aside all of their past disputes and opposing political beliefs, really hurt her in the election. Chisholm's ability to reach out to Wallace is a testament to her humanity and kindness, something that we should all take away from her life and stories. She was a pioneer for everyone, and even though she was very opinionated and strongly believed in her politics, when it came down to it, she cared about everyone's well-being.

After she lost, with 152 delegates, she tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with the Democratic nominee McGovern to have a Black running mate, a woman to serve in the Cabinet and a Native American as Secretary of the Interior. McGovern had 1,729 delegates, so he didn't want to make any deals. After the election, she went back to Congress and became the Secretary of the House Democratic Caucus. Chisholm said, "I want history to remember me ... not as the first Black woman to have made a bid for the presidency of the United States, but as a Black woman who lived in the 20th century and who dared to be herself. I want to be remembered as a catalyst for change in America." (Landers)

Accomplishments

Shirley Chisholm was given many awards for her hard work in politics. Among those include the Woman of the Year Award and the Clairol Award in 1973, for outstanding achievement in public affairs. She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993, was a recipient of many honorary degrees, and she was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015 by President Obama. ("Shirley Chisholm")

While she was in Congress, she strongly opposed the Vietnam War draft, supported minority education, and advocated for employment opportunities (Onion). She was one of only

19 representatives who were willing to hold hearings on the Vietnam War (Landers). She supported the Equal Rights Amendment. Chisholm co-founded the National Women's Political Caucus with Gloria Stienam. When she was a Congresswoman, she only hired women to work on her staff and half were Black women (Onion). President Bill Clinton met with her and asked her to be the Ambassador to Jamaica in 1993, but she turned it down because of her poor health. ("Shirley Chisholm Biography") (See Appendix C)

Shirley Chisholm's Influence Today

If Shirley Chisholm could see the world today, she would be proud. In an interview right before her death in 2005, she said she thought we would have a female president within the next 25 years, but before that we would need to have a female vice president ("Shirley Chisholm: The First Black Congresswoman"). So far we are on track to complete her prediction, with Kamala Harris currently holding the office of Vice President. On January 16, 2020, Vice President Kamala Harris tweeted, "Shirley Chisholm created a path for me and for so many others. Today, I'm thinking about her inspirational words: 'I am and always will be a catalyst for change.'" ("Shirley Chisholm: A Trailblazing Politician").

Unfortunately, if she was alive today, she may also say that we still have a long way to come. Today, twenty-nine percent of the House of Representatives is female. Twenty-five percent of the Senate is female. Only thirty-four percent of the women in Congress are women of color. Someday, we'll have equal representation, but until then all we can do is continue the movement Shirley Chisholm started. (Desilver)

Conclusion

Shirley Chisholm's career left a unique legacy. As the first African-American woman to run for president ("Shirley Chisholm"), she paved the way for many of the people making change in the world, the modern activists and politicians, even the everyday doctors and lawyers. Nikki Haley, Barack Obama, Jeannette Rankin, Condoleezza Rice, and Kamala Harris are just a few examples of people who were only able to achieve their accomplishments because of Shirley Chisholm's long-lasting global effects that shaped the next generation of American politics.

Appendix A



Shirley Chisholm, 1972.

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (LC-U9- 25383-33)

Appendix B



Poster from Shirley Chisholm's 1972 U.S. presidential campaign.

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (reproduction no. LC-DIG-ppmsca-42048)

Appendix C



**President William J. Clinton greeting Shirley Chisholm,
Ambassador-Designate to Jamaica, in the Oval Office of the
White House**

National Archives Catalog, Washington, D.C. (reproduction no. 2842929)

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Chisholm, Shirley. *The Good Fight*. New York: Harper Collins, 1973. 206. Print.

Shirley Chisholm's autobiography was one of the first resources I used. This source provided me with an in-depth look at Shirley Chisholm's campaign and, in addition to this, I was able to learn about Shirley Chisholm and mainly her personality.

"Shirley Chisholm: A Trailblazing Politician." *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 Mar. 2021, p. 24. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=149456952&site=ehost-live.

This source helped fully comprehend the scale of Shirley Chisholm's impact on the world, especially through Kamala Harris's tweet right before the 2020 inauguration. For the purposes of my paper, I used this article to perpetuate some of my previously stated points.

"Shirley Chisholm". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1972, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shirley-Chisholm#/media/1/113270/267781>. February 25, 2023.

I used this picture for the appendix to give the reader a visual of Shirley Chisholm as a person. It may also contain an insight to her confidence. This photograph conveys the time period of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

"Shirley Chisholm (November 30, 1924 - January 1, 2005)." National Archives, 22 Mar. 2021, www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/individuals/shirley-chisholm.

I used this source for the picture of Bill Clinton and Shirley Chisholm that I put in my appendix. I thought it was a useful source that enhanced the quality of my project by showing the reader that Shirley Chisholm didn't stop her work, even as she aged.

"Shirley Chisholm : The First Black Congresswoman." *YouTube*, uploaded by Visionary Project, 27 April 2010, <https://youtu.be/ZjQrztHqyc>.

This source is an interview with Shirley Chisholm in her later years. She's talking mainly about her experience and what it was like to be a Black congresswoman in a male-dominated Congress. I used this interview to provide the reader with an idea on the challenges that Shirley Chisholm had to face.

"Shirley Chisholm: 1972 Presidential Campaign". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1972,

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shirley-Chisholm#/media/1/113270/267782>.
February 28, 2023.

This picture I used for the appendix because I wanted to provide the reader with a primary source, an insight on how Shirley Chisholm ran her campaign. This photograph gives the reader some perspective on how she was a candidate for everyone.

“The ‘Equal Rights’ Amendment. Hearings, Ninety-first Congress, Second Session, on S.J. Res. 61 ... May 5, 6, and 7, 1970.” HathiTrust,
[babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b643809&view=1up&seq=46](http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b643809&view=1up&seq=46).

I used this source as a way to gain an understanding of how Shirley Chisholm operated while she was in Congress. This source was a nice way for me to let Chisholm’s voice shine through in my paper.

“1972 Shirley Chisholm Presidential Campaign Announcement.” *C-Span*, Uploaded by American History TV, 12 April, 2015,
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?325324-2/1972-shirley-chisholm-presidential-campaign-announcement>.

I used this source mainly to help me give the reader a full and developed picture of Shirley Chisholm’s campaign for president. It helped me convey the message of how Shirley Chisholm was a candidate for the people.

Secondary Sources

Biography, The Editors of Biography.com. “Shirley Chisholm Biography”. *Biography.com*, A&E; Television Networks, 2 April, 2015.
<https://www.biography.com/political-figures/shirley-chisholm>. Accessed 28 February 2023.

Biography always provides me with an in-depth look at whomever I’m researching when I complete projects about a historical figure, like Shirley Chisholm. I used this article to enhance my understanding and comprehension of Shirley Chisholm’s life and political strategy.

Bolden, Tonya. *Speak up and Speak Out!: The Extraordinary Life of Fighting Shirley Chisholm*. National Geographic Kids, 2022.

This book provided me with an in-depth understanding about the entirety of Shirley Chisholm's life. With a forward by Stacey Abrams, this book was able to get its point across well and clearly. I was very happy to have found this source.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Shirley Chisholm". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 8 Feb. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shirley-Chisholm>. Accessed 26 February 2023.

Most of the time, when I'm writing a research paper, the first source I'll use is Britannica because I know that it will provide me with details on the entire topic. This project was no different. I used this source to increase the insights I made throughout my entire paper.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Victoria Woodhull". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 19 Sep. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Victoria-Woodhull>. Accessed 10 February 2023.

I briefly used this source to do a small amount of research about Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for president. I used this article to talk about how other people set the stage for Shirley Chisholm to accomplish what she accomplished, like Victoria Woodhull.

DeSilver, Drew and Rebecca Leppert. "118th Congress Has a Record Number of Women." Pew Research Center, 1 Feb. 2023, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2023/01/03/118th-congress-has-a-record-number-of-women.

I used this source for the statistics on the number of women and women of color in Congress. The statistics are accurate and the webpage is unbiased. I found this to be a source that helped me convey my overall point about Shirley Chisholm's pioneering.

Joiner, Lottie L. "Courage Is a Verb." *Crisis* (15591573), vol. 125, no. 4, Fall 2018, p. 2. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=141816602&site=ehost-live.

This source was one I used for the quotes from Shirley Chisholm about not being provided the same privileges as others. While I was writing, I referred back to this source, especially when I was talking about Shirley Chisholm's impact today.

Landers, Jackson. "'Unbought and Unbossed': When a Black Woman Ran for the White House." *Smithsonian*. 25 April, 2016.

This article was interesting and gave me lots of information about Shirley Chisholm's run for the White House. The writer is a published writer and did a good job at providing the reader with a clear picture of Shirley Chisholm's campaign.

Michals, Debra. "Shirley Chisholm." National Women's History Museum, 2015.
<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/shirley-chisholm>.
23 February, 2023.

In my paper, I used this source to write about Shirley Chisholm's childhood, college, and career. This article was formatted well, with good statistics to support all of the claims it made.

Onion, Amanda, et al. "Shirley Chisholm." History, A&E; Television Networks, 18 Dec. 2009,
<https://www.history.com/topics/us-government-and-politics/shirley-chisholm>. Accessed
26 February 2023.

For the purposes of my paper, I mostly used this article to garner an understanding and knowledge of who Shirley Chisholm was, including information about her birth, run for Congress, personal life, and how she ran her presidential campaign. This was one of my main sources, and one of the first resources I used when researching.

Schaeffer, Katherine. "22 States Have Ever Elected a Black Woman to Congress." Pew Research Center, 21 Feb. 2023,
www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/02/16/22-states-have-ever-elected-a-black-woman-to-congress.

I discussed how Shirley Chisholm influenced modern politics very frequently in my paper. I used this source as evidence to back up my claims, especially the statistics of the various representation of people, mostly women of color, in Congress today.