



Shirley A. Chisholm

1924–2005

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1969–1983
DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

The first African-American Congresswoman, Shirley Anita Chisholm represented a newly reapportioned U.S. House district centered in Brooklyn, New York. Elected in 1968 because of her roots in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, Chisholm was catapulted into the national limelight by virtue of her race, gender, and outspoken personality. In 1972, in a largely symbolic undertaking, she campaigned for the Democratic presidential nomination. But “Fighting Shirley” Chisholm’s frontal assault on many congressional traditions and her reputation as a crusader limited her influence as a legislator. “I am the people’s politician,” she once told the *New York Times*. “If the day should ever come when the people can’t save me, I’ll know I’m finished. That’s when I’ll go back to being a professional educator.”¹

Shirley Anita St. Hill was born on November 20, 1924, in Brooklyn, New York. She was the oldest of four daughters of Charles St. Hill, a factory laborer from Guyana, and Ruby Seale St. Hill, a seamstress from Barbados. For part of her childhood, Shirley St. Hill lived in Barbados on her maternal grandparents’ farm, receiving a British education while her parents worked during the Great Depression to settle the family in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The most apparent manifestation of her West Indies roots was the slight, clipped British accent she retained throughout her life. She attended public schools in Brooklyn and graduated with high marks. Accepted to Vassar and Oberlin colleges, Shirley St. Hill attended Brooklyn College on scholarship and graduated *cum laude* with a B.A. in sociology in 1946. From 1946 to 1953, Chisholm worked as a nursery school teacher and then as the director of two daycare centers. She married Conrad Q. Chisholm, a private investigator, in 1949. Three years later, Shirley Chisholm earned an M.A. in early childhood education from Columbia University. She served as an

educational consultant for New York City’s Division of Day Care from 1959 to 1964. In 1964, Chisholm was elected to the New York state legislature; she was the second African-American woman to serve in Albany.

A court-ordered redistricting that carved a new Brooklyn congressional district out of Chisholm’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood convinced her to run for Congress. The influential Democratic political machine, headed by Stanley Steingut, declared its intention to send an African American from the new district to the House.

The endorsement of the machine usually resulted in a primary victory, which was tantamount to election in the heavily Democratic area. In the primary, Chisholm faced three African-American challengers: civil court judge Thomas R. Jones, a former district leader and New York assemblyman; Dolly Robinson, a former district co-leader; and William C. Thompson, a well-financed state senator. Chisholm roamed the new district in a sound truck that pulled up outside housing projects while she announced: “Ladies and Gentlemen . . . this is fighting Shirley Chisholm coming through.” Chisholm capitalized on her personal campaign style. “I have a way of talking that does something to people,” she noted. “I have a theory about campaigning. You have to let them feel you.”² In the primary in mid-June 1968, Chisholm defeated Thompson, her nearest competitor, by about 800 votes in an election characterized by light voter turnout.

In the general election, Chisholm faced Republican-Liberal James Farmer, one of the principal figures of the civil rights movement, a cofounder of the Congress for Racial Equality, and an organizer of the Freedom Riders in the early 1960s. The two candidates held similar positions on housing, employment, and education issues, and both opposed the Vietnam War. Farmer charged that the Democratic Party “took [blacks] for granted and



thought they had us in their pockets. . . . We must be in a position to use our power as a swing vote.”³ But the election turned on the issue of gender. Farmer hammered away, arguing that “women have been in the driver’s seat” in black communities for too long and that the district needed “a man’s voice in Washington,” not that of a “little schoolteacher.”⁴ Chisholm, whose campaign motto was “unbought and unbossed,” met that charge head-on, using Farmer’s rhetoric to highlight discrimination against women and explain her unique qualifications. “There were Negro men in office here before I came in five years ago, but they didn’t deliver,” Chisholm countered. “People came and asked me to do something . . . I’m here because of the vacuum.” Chisholm portrayed Farmer as an outsider (he lived in Manhattan) and used her fluent Spanish to appeal to the growing Hispanic population in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. (Puerto Rican immigrants accounted for about 20 percent of the district vote.) The deciding factor, however, was the district’s overwhelming liberal tilt: More than 80 percent of the voters were registered Democrats. Chisholm won the general election by a resounding 67 percent of the vote.⁵

Chisholm’s freshman class included two African Americans of future prominence: Louis Stokes of Ohio and William L. (Bill) Clay, Sr., of Missouri—and boosted the number of African Americans in the House from six to nine, the largest total up to that time.⁶ Chisholm was the only new woman to enter Congress in 1969.

Chisholm’s welcome in the House was not warm, due to her immediate outspokenness. “I have no intention of just sitting quietly and observing,” she said. “I intend . . . to focus attention on the nation’s problems.” She did just that, lashing out against the Vietnam War in her first floor speech on March 26, 1969. Chisholm vowed to vote against any defense appropriation bill “until the time comes when our values and priorities have been turned right-side up again.”⁷ She was assigned to the Committee on Agriculture, a decision she appealed directly to House Speaker John McCormack of Massachusetts

(bypassing Ways and Means Committee Chairman Wilbur Mills of Arkansas, who oversaw Democratic committee appointments). McCormack told her to be a “good soldier,” at which point Chisholm brought her complaint to the House Floor. She was reassigned to the Veterans’ Affairs Committee which, though not one of her top choices, was more relevant to her district’s makeup. “There are a lot more veterans in my district than trees,” she quipped.⁸ From 1971 to 1977 she served on the Committee on Education and Labor, having won a place on that panel with the help of Hale Boggs of Louisiana, whom she had endorsed as Majority Leader.⁹ She also served on the Committee on Organization Study and Review (known as the Hansen Committee), whose recommended reforms for the selection of committee chairmen were adopted by the Democratic Caucus in 1971. From 1977 to 1981, Chisholm served as Secretary of the Democratic Caucus. She eventually left her Education Committee assignment to accept a seat on the Rules Committee in 1977, becoming the first black woman—and the second woman ever—to serve on that powerful panel. Chisholm also was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) in 1971 and the Congressional Women’s Caucus in 1977.

Chisholm continued to work for the causes she had espoused as a community activist. She sponsored increases in federal funding to extend the hours of daycare facilities and a guaranteed minimum annual income for families. She was a fierce defender of federal assistance for education, serving as a primary backer of a national school lunch bill and leading her colleagues in overriding President Gerald R. Ford’s veto on this measure. However, Chisholm did not view herself as a “lawmaker, an innovator in the field of legislation”; in her efforts to address the needs of the “have-nots,” she often chose to work outside the established system. At times she criticized the Democratic leadership in Congress as much as she did the Republicans in the White House. She was an explorer and a trailblazer rather than a legislative artisan.¹⁰

True to this approach, Chisholm declared her candidacy

for the 1972 Democratic nomination for President, charging that none of the other candidates represented the interests of blacks and the inner-city poor. She campaigned across the country and succeeded in getting her name on 12 primary ballots, becoming as well known outside her Brooklyn neighborhood as she was in it. At the Democratic National Convention she received 152 delegate votes, or 10 percent of the total, a respectable showing given her modest funding. A 1974 Gallup Poll listed her as one of the top 10 most-admired women in America—ahead of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Coretta Scott King and tied with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for sixth place.¹¹ But while the presidential bid enhanced Chisholm's national profile, it also stirred controversy among her House colleagues. Chisholm's candidacy split the CBC. Many black male colleagues felt she had not consulted them or that she had betrayed the group's interests by trying to create a coalition of women, Hispanics, white liberals, and welfare recipients.¹² Pervasive gender discrimination, Chisholm noted, cut across racial lines: "Black male politicians are no different from white male politicians. This 'woman thing' is so deep. I've found it out in this campaign if I never knew it before."¹³ Her presidential campaign also strained relations with other women Members of Congress, particularly Bella Abzug of New York, who endorsed George McGovern instead of Chisholm.

By 1976, Chisholm faced a stiff challenge from within her own party primary by a longtime political rival, New York City Councilman Samuel D. Wright. Born and raised in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Wright was a formidable opponent who had represented Brooklyn in the New York assembly for a number of years before winning a seat on the city council. He criticized Chisholm for her absenteeism in the House, brought on by the rigors of her presidential campaign, and for a lack of connection with the district. Chisholm countered by playing on her national credentials and her role as a reformer of Capitol Hill culture. "I think my role is to break new ground in Congress," Chisholm noted. She insisted that her strength was in bringing

legislative factions together. "I can talk with legislators from the South, the West, all over. They view me as a national figure and that makes me more acceptable."¹⁴ Two weeks later Chisholm turned back Wright and Hispanic political activist Luz Vega in the Democratic primary, winning 54 percent of the vote to Wright's 36 percent and Vega's 10 percent.¹⁵ She won the general election handily with 83 percent of the vote.¹⁶

From the late 1970s onward, Brooklyn Democrats speculated that Chisholm was losing interest in her House seat. Her name was widely floated as a possible candidate for several jobs related to education, including president of the City College of New York and chancellor of the New York City public school system.¹⁷ In 1982, Chisholm declined to seek re-election. "Shirley Chisholm would like to have a little life of her own," she told the *Christian Science Monitor*, citing personal reasons for her decision to leave the House; she wanted to spend more time with her second husband, Arthur Hardwick, Jr., a New York state legislator she had married about six months after divorcing Conrad Chisholm in 1977.¹⁸

Other reasons, too, factored into Chisholm's decision to leave the House. She had grown disillusioned over the conservative turn the country had taken with the election of President Ronald W. Reagan in 1980. Also, there were tensions with people on her side of the political fence, particularly African-American politicians who, she insisted, misunderstood her efforts to build alliances. While her rhetoric about racial inequality could be passionate at times, Chisholm's actions toward the white establishment in Congress were often conciliatory. Chisholm maintained that many members of the black community did not understand the need for negotiation with white politicians. "We still have to engage in compromise, the highest of all arts," Chisholm noted. "Blacks can't do things on their own, nor can whites. When you have black racists and white racists it is very difficult to build bridges between communities."¹⁹

After leaving Congress in January 1983, Chisholm

helped cofound the National Political Congress of Black Women and campaigned for Jesse Jackson's presidential bids in 1984 and 1988. She also taught at Mt. Holyoke College in 1983. Though nominated as U.S. Ambassador to Jamaica by President William J. Clinton, Chisholm declined due to ill health. She settled in Palm Coast, Florida, where she wrote and lectured, and died on January 1, 2005, in Ormond Beach, Florida.

FOR FURTHER READING

Brownmiller, Susan. *Shirley Chisholm* (New York: Doubleday, 1970).

"Chisholm, Shirley Anita," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000371>.

Chisholm, Shirley. *The Good Fight* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

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MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Howard University (Washington, DC), Manuscript Division, Moorland–Spingarn Research Center. *Oral History*: In the Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, 1973, 30 pages. An interview with Shirley Chisholm conducted by Edward Thompson III on May 2, 1973. Congresswoman Chisholm comments on initial political involvement, failures of the National Black Political Convention and its leaders, Delegate Fauntroy's promise to deliver her candidacy delegate votes from the District of Columbia, support she received from the general public, retiring from politics, how her involvement with the women's liberation movement was misconstrued, and corruption permeating the American political system.

Rutgers University Library (New Brunswick, NJ), Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics. *Papers*: 1963–1994, approximately 3.7 cubic feet. The papers of Shirley Chisholm consist of speeches, 1971–1989, on a wide variety of topics; congressional files, 1965–1981, composed primarily of complimentary letters received and presidential campaign materials; general files, 1966–1986, consisting chiefly of biographical materials, including information on Chisholm's record in Congress; newspaper clippings, 1969–1990, in the form of editorials written by Chisholm, as well as coverage of her speeches, writings, and retirement; constituent newsletters, 1969–1982, complemented by selected press releases; photographs (including photocopies and other reproductions), 1969–1990, many of which depict Chisholm with other political figures; publications, 1969–1992, with additional coverage of Chisholm's political career and her retirement; and campaign miscellany, 1969 and 1972, including buttons from her presidential campaign and political posters.

NOTES

- 1 Susan Brownmiller, "This Is Fighting Shirley Chisholm," 13 April 1969, *New York Times*: SM32.
- 2 Brownmiller, "This Is Fighting Shirley Chisholm."
- 3 John Kifner, "G.O.P. Names James Farmer for Brooklyn Race for Congress," 20 May 1968, *New York Times*: 34; John Kifner, "Farmer and Woman in Lively Bedford-Stuyvesant Race," 26 October 1968, *New York Times*: 22.
- 4 Shirley Washington, *Outstanding Women in Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Capitol Historical Society, 1995): 17.
- 5 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 6 In November 1970, George W. Collins of Illinois won a special election to the remainder of the 91st Congress (1969–1971), bringing the House total to 10 black Members.
- 7 *Current Biography, 1969* (New York: H. W. Wilson and Company, 1969): 94; Hope Chamberlin, *A Minority of Members: Women in Congress* (New York: Praeger, 1973): 325.
- 8 Karen Foerstel, *Biographical Dictionary of Congressional Women* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999): 56.
- 9 Jane Perlez, "Rep. Chisholm's Angry Farewell," 12 October 1982, *New York Times*: A24.
- 10 Marcy Kaptur, *Women of Congress: A Twentieth-Century Odyssey* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1996): 150–151; see also Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970): 70, 112.
- 11 "The Gallup Poll: Meir, Betty Ford Are Most Admired," 2 January 1975, *Washington Post*: B3.
- 12 Kaptur, *Women of Congress*: 150; William L. Clay, Sr., *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad Press, 1993): 222.
- 13 Karen Foerstel and Herbert Foerstel, *Climbing the Hill: Gender Conflict in Congress* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996): 30.
- 14 Charlayne Hunter, "Chisholm-Wright Feud in Brooklyn Is Eroding Blacks' Political Power," 20 March 1976, *New York Times*: 24; Ronald Smothers, "Rep. Chisholm Battling Wright in Showdown Race in Brooklyn," 30 August 1976, *New York Times*: 26; Ronald Smothers, "Wright, Mrs. Chisholm Trade Charges in Face-to-Face Debate in Brooklyn," 3 September 1976, *New York Times*: A14.
- 15 "Voting in Primaries for U.S. House and State Legislature," 16 September 1976, *New York Times*: 34.
- 16 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 17 Marcia Chambers, "School Post Weighed for Mrs. Chisholm," 18 February 1978, *New York Times*: B13; Samuel Weiss, "Rep. Chisholm Is a Candidate for College Job," 19 February 1981, *New York Times*: B12.
- 18 Julia Malone, "Advice From Retiring Insiders on Shaping Better Congress," 3 November 1982, *Christian Science Monitor*: 1.
- 19 Malone, "Advice From Retiring Insiders on Shaping Better Congress."