

Shirley Chisholm: Catalyst for Change by Stephen Marble

Imagine the scene: The first-term U.S. Representative steps up to the House podium and promises to vote “No” on any new spending. Sound familiar? Well, it might, except that it was March, 1969, and the speaker was the newly elected member from the Twelfth District of New York, the first African-American woman elected to Congress, Shirley Chisholm. Chisholm had come to Congress to “focus attention on the nation’s problems,” and her promise to vote “No” on additional spending did just that: she would not vote to support any new money for the Defense Department and its ongoing war in Vietnam.¹

The war was at its peak, with over 500,000 U.S. troops deployed in Vietnam, and growing tensions between supporters and opponents of the war had sparked violent confrontation in the streets of American cities. The position taken by the new Congresswoman from Bedford-Stuyvesant in Queens, NY, was not a popular one; in essence, she stood alone. But she had stood alone before. After all, she was not interested in popularity, but in solving problems like the war, poverty, equality for women and racial minorities, and poor housing.²

Unbought and Unbossed

Born in New York to immigrant Caribbean parents in 1924, Shirley Anita St. Hill was sent at the age of three with several sisters to Barbados to live with their maternal grandmother while her parents struggled to survive the Depression. Returning a decade later with a signature accent and British education, Chisholm went on to Brooklyn College and graduated in 1946 with a B.A. in sociology. While working as a teacher and director of nursery schools in New York, she married Conrad Q. Chisholm in 1949. In 1952, Chisholm earned her M.A. in early childhood education from Columbia University and soon after began working as a consultant to New York City’s Division of Day Care.²

Long interested in politics and particularly in expanding women’s roles in political life, Chisholm ran for and was elected to the New York State Assembly in 1964. Her political activities were focused on her constituency, and she introduced bills to support poor students with scholarships, protect domestic workers, and preserve tenure for women who left their teaching positions while on maternity leave.³

In 1968, redistricting opened an opportunity for Chisholm to run for the U.S. House of Representatives in her home district. Using the political slogan “Unbought and Unbossed,” she fought hard against three male competitors in the Democratic Party primary and then faced James Farmer, the well known civil rights leader, in the general election. Farmer was well known for organizing the Freedom Riders movement and the Congress for Racial Equality in the early 1960s. Fluent in Spanish and able to use her knowledge of the district and its people, Shirley Chisholm prevailed and became the first Black woman elected to Congress, a seat she would hold until 1983.³

Representative Chisholm lived up to her reputation for independent thinking early in her congressional career. As a very junior member of Congress, she was assigned a seat on the Agricultural Committee, specifically on a subcommittee for forestry and rural development. The seniority system had been developed to protect senior members from the total control of the party leadership. Few junior members objected to their assignments because survival in the institution often meant pleasing the leadership who made these assignments. But Chisholm was not happy. “I guess they heard a tree grew in Brooklyn,” she remarked as she raised her objections to this appointment with John McCormack, the Speaker of the House. Her request to change committees was rebuffed, and when she rose to protest, more senior male members were constantly recognized before her. But she was persistent, and eventually gained the floor, pointing out the great discrepancy between the number of Blacks in the population of the nation and the number representing them in Congress, noting that there were far too few Black representatives for them to be placed anywhere but where they might do the most good. She introduced a resolution calling for the Committee on Committees to find a more appropriate place for her, one where she would be able to represent the interests of her constituency. Risking the goodwill and support of her new colleagues, Shirley Chisholm eventually persevered and was appointed to the Veterans’ Affairs Committee.⁴



Her anti-war and women's liberation positions quickly made her a popular speaker on college campuses. She was a founding member of the National Organization for Women and the Black Congressional Caucus. In her essay "Women Must Rebel," she implores women to question the status quo:

Women must rebel; they must react to the traditional stereotyped education mapped out for them by society. Their education and training is programmed and planned for them from the moment the doctor says, "Mr. Jones, it's a beautiful baby girl!" and Mr. Jones begins deleting mentally the things she might have been and adds the things that society says she must be.⁵

But her national reputation grew most from her campaign for president launched in 1972.

The Good Fight

On January 25, 1972, Representative Chisholm made the following announcement:

I stand before you today as a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency of the United States of America. 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 political bosses or fat cats or special interests. I stand here now without endorsements from many big name politicians or celebrities or any other kind of prop. I do not intend to offer to you the tired and glib clichés, which for too long have been an accepted part of our political life. I am the candidate of the people of America. And my presence before you now symbolizes a new era in American political history.⁶

Thus, Shirley Chisholm began one of the most remarkable campaigns in history. As the first Black candidate for president and as the first woman candidate to seek that office through a major party, she had a steep climb ahead. Her campaign is well documented through a Point Of View documentary film released in 2004, Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed.⁷

Up to and through the Democratic Convention in Miami that July, Chisholm dogmatically pursued her quest for votes and delegates. The political ambitions of leading Democrats focused intensely on two issues: beating the incumbent Richard Nixon and ending the conflict in Vietnam. Many wrote Shirley Chisholm's efforts off as a futile exercise in self-promotion, while others marginalized her candidacy as trivial and doomed. The most serious came to see her campaign as a potential spoiler, taking away critical votes and eroding their candidacy. Yet she continued to assert her right to run, pointing out repeatedly that the dozen other Democratic candidates represented one small segment of the population—white males.

There are many remarkable stories that came out of these campaign months, but three clearly illustrate the true character of the candidate Shirley Chisholm. The first took place soon after Governor George Wallace was shot campaigning in Michigan on May 15. Famous for his pro-segregation policies, George Wallace was amazed to be visited by Shirley Chisholm in the hospital soon after the assassination attempt:

Wallace was shocked when Chisholm arrived in his hospital room to express her sympathy and concern. "He said, 'What are your people going to say?' I said, 'I know what they are going to say. But I wouldn't want what happened to you to happen to anyone.' He cried and cried," she recalled.⁸

A second incident grew from the endorsement of Chisholm for President by the Black Panthers. Many politicians would have shunned their support, but Shirley Chisholm wondered what the problem was, because, after all, didn't people prefer that the Panthers participate in the political process rather than fight against it?

And yet a third story comes from the race in California. A televised debate between major candidates invited only Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern, the two leaders in the race, to participate, leaving out the other candidates, including Shirley Chisholm. She went to court and won the right to participate. When asked which leading candidate she planned to support, she deferred, saying she could not support anyone at that point on principle but would want to know who the team would be, who might be the second person on the ticket. One of the moderators asked her if she was suggesting she was qualified and interested in serving as the vice presidential candidate, and she shot back, "I could serve as the President of this country. Believe it or not; that's why I am running."⁹

But many were unsatisfied and continued to wonder exactly why Shirley Chisholm was running. From the outset, and certainly by the eve of the convention in Miami, she had little hope of actually winning the nomination. She had supporters, to be sure, but not nearly enough to dislodge McGovern's solid lead. But Shirley Chisholm never wavered from her strategy to build a coalition of women, Blacks, and the working class and bring their voices to the convention through a solid bloc of delegates that could influence the platform. She was fond of quoting Frederick Douglass: "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." It was to give a voice to the demands of those typically excluded from the halls of power that Shirley Chisholm was running.

It was a gutsy and forward-thinking strategy, one that served Democrats well in a similar bid to wrest the White House from the Republicans nearly four decades later. As a known leader in the fight for women's rights, Shirley Chisholm could be expected to receive support from the women's liberation movement led by her good friends from New York, Betty Friedan and Bella Abzug—and she did, right up to the convention. As a strong advocate for racial equality, she could have been expected to have the support of the growing numbers of politically active Black men, especially those who served with her in Congress as members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Both groups felt strongly that they were on the verge of an historical moment.

Chisholm addressed each group at the convention, outlining her strategy for strength through a block of votes that could be brokered for representation, but ultimately they chose to support the candidate they felt could win, throwing their votes behind McGovern. When Humphrey and Muskie released their delegates to vote for McGovern before the first ballot, the leverage strategy Shirley Chisholm had worked so hard to develop collapsed. Richard Nixon overwhelmed McGovern in the general election, only to resign in disgrace over the Watergate scandal two years later.

Legacy

Shirley Chisholm continued to represent her district for another eleven years before retiring to teach and finally moving to Florida, where she died in 2005. When she was asked how she would like to be remembered, she said, "I'd like them to say that I was a Black woman in the 20th Century who dared to be herself. I want to be remembered as a catalyst for change in America." Someone has to go first to show change is possible, as she wrote in her autobiography, *The Good Fight*:

All the odds had been against it, right up to the end. I never blamed anyone for doubting. The Presidency is for white males. No one was ready to take a black woman seriously as a candidate. It was not time for a black to run, let alone a woman, and certainly nor for someone who was both.... I ran because someone has to do it first. In this country everybody is supposed to be able to run for President, but that's never really been true. I ran because most people think that the country is not ready for a black candidate, not ready for a woman candidate. Someday ...¹⁰

Now, forty years later, another long and difficult presidential election campaign is getting underway. The solutions to the challenges that face the nation and the people—war, education, civil rights, and the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities—continue to float seemingly just beyond our reach. If we need any help figuring out the next steps we should take, we can simply ask ourselves, "Well, what would Shirley do?"

Notes:

1. "Shirley A. Chisholm," Office of History and Preservation, Office of the Clerk, Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007, accessed September 22, 2011, <http://baic.house.gov/member-profiles/profile.html?intID=24>.

2. "Shirley Chisholm," The Harlem Project: New York Perspectives, accessed September 23, 2011, <http://www.albany.edu/history/HIS530/HarlemProject/Chisholm.html>.

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

4. Maia Gottlieb, "Shirley Chisholm: Challenging the System," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed September 23, 2011, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Education/Profile-in-Courage-Essay-Contest/Past-Winning-Essays.aspx>.

5. Shirley Chisholm, "Women Must Rebel," in *Voices of the New Feminism*, ed. Mary Lou Thompson (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 207-216.

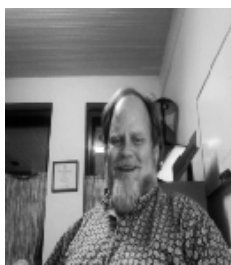
6. "Chisholm '72: Announcement Speech," accessed September 23, 2011, <http://www.chisholm72.net/campaign.html>.

7. Shola Lynch, *Chisholm '72—Unbought and Unbossed* (20th Century Fox, 2005).

8. "Shirley Chisholm Leaves a Legacy of Compassion and Commitment," United University Professions, accessed September 11, 2011, <http://www.uupinfo.org/voice/mar/05/0305p19.pdf>

9. Lynch, *Chisholm '72—Unbought and Unbossed*.

10. Shirley Chisholm, *The Good Fight* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).



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Lesson Plan

Conventional Wisdom

(Lesson Plan to Accompany Shirley Chisholm: Catalyst for Change)

By Stephen Marble

Connections to Middle School and/or High School

Middle and high school students will have a wonderful opportunity to watch the political process at work in the coming months of the 2012 presidential campaign. Polls show many Americans are disillusioned with the government and politicians and are frustrated that their voices are not being heard. One way to better understand the political decision-making process is to have some experience participating in the negotiating and deal-making that go on behind the scenes. This lesson provides a structure for doing just that.

Goals of Lesson Plan

During the 1972 presidential campaign, Representative Shirley Chisholm worked hard to create a coalition to break the lock that white males had on the presidential nomination process. She hoped to have enough candidate votes at the convention in Miami to have leverage over the platform and perhaps become the vice presidential choice, bringing the voices of many unrepresented Americans to the table for the first time. During this lesson, students role-play candidates and delegates to a national party presidential convention, exploring the pressures and processes involved in selecting a national candidate. Each candidate begins with too few delegates to seal the nomination, requiring candidates and managers to negotiate with a block of “uncommitted delegates” to secure enough votes to win 50%, go over the top, and secure the nomination.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify important social issues that affect their lives
- Compare and contrast social and political issues
- Evaluate the personal importance of a set of social issues

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards:

History

- Enable learners to develop historical understanding through the avenues of social, political, economic, and cultural history and the history of science and technology

Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

- Help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings
- Assist learners in identifying and analyzing examples of tensions between expressions of individuality and efforts used to promote social conformity by groups and institutions
- Challenge learners to evaluate the role of institutions in furthering both continuity and change
- Guide learner analysis of the extent to which groups and institutions meet individual needs and promote the common good in contemporary and historical settings

Civics and Government

- Assist learners in developing an understanding of citizenship, its rights and responsibilities, and in developing their abilities and dispositions to participate effectively in civic life
- Insure that learners are made aware of the full range of opportunities to participate as citizens in the American democracy and of their responsibilities for doing so

Warm-Up: If I were running for president ...

Ask students to think about and write down two issues they feel strongly enough about to support if they were running for president. Ask them to report out in a brainstorming mode, not valuing but simply recording their ideas, until the class has generated a list of ten to twelve important issues on the board or poster paper. Combine any issues that are similar while working with students to be sure you have not changed the issues by combining them. Give each student three stick-on dots and tell them to vote for issues by posting their dots next to those that matter most to them. They can distribute their dots any way they like: one on each of three issues or all three on one issue. The top five issues selected will be used in the political simulation activity that follows.

Instructional Activity (Time required: a minimum of 90 minutes)

1. Explain the activity to the students by telling them that they are going to role-play a presidential convention to nominate a candidate for president. In particular, stress that the goal of the party is to win the election and take the White House away from the incumbent who represents some other party. While the president in office may or may not be popular in the polls, he has won an election to the office and knows what it takes to win. It is important for an out-of-office party to nominate someone they feel is electable if they expect to win the election. You may use the 1972 Democratic Convention as context; the 2012 Republican Party campaign also faces this problem.
 2. (10 minutes) Divide the class into two groups. In one group, there will be five pairs of volunteers who will serve as presidential candidates and their managers. In the other group are the remaining students, who will serve as uncommitted delegates to the national party presidential convention. The candidates and managers will work discreetly together to identify two of the five campaign issues selected by the whole group that they support, and then each candidate will prepare a short speech (one to two minutes) to present his or her choices and arguments to the remaining delegates.
- Make a chart that distributes the total number of delegate votes as follows and randomly assign one of the amounts to each candidate and manager team. Fill in the names when you have them. You might need to adjust these numbers slightly if you have a large class (more than twenty uncommitted delegates).

Candidate	Committed delegates	Total needed for nomination based on 20 uncommitted to make 100 total
Candidate A	20	30
Candidate B	18	32
Candidate C	16	34
Candidate D	14	36
Candidate E	12	38

- In a separate conversation, the remaining students, acting as the Uncommitted Caucus, continue to discuss the five selected campaign issues and work themselves into interest groups based on their first choices. If everyone has the same first choice, use their second choice to subdivide the large group. There should be three or four interest groups when this process is complete.

3. (10 minutes) Candidates and their managers return to the Uncommitted Caucus and give brief speeches as to which two issues they support.
4. (5 minutes) Time for discussion inside the interest groups about who they will vote for. Managers listen in to get clues as to who supports what and which candidate.
5. (5 minutes) First ballot. These should be oral and reported by interest group (as if they were states at the convention). After each report from an interest group, the totals are updated. If any candidate secures enough delegate votes to win 50% and put them “over the top,” the balloting stops and the celebration begins.
6. (5 minutes) If one candidate wins the first ballot, move to the debriefing. If not, hold a brief consultation period where managers and candidates meet with selected interest groups.
7. (5 minutes) Second ballot. If someone does get 50% of the votes, move to the debriefing. If not, host yet another consultation period that has managers meeting together as well to strike a deal between candidates.
8. (5 minutes) Consultation period.
9. (5 minutes) Third ballot. If no one wins on the third ballot, open the debriefing by asking if anyone sees a way out of the deadlock.
10. (15-20 minutes) Debriefing.

Assessment

Students will write a brief news story about the convention from the perspective of a major television news channel, describing the major events of the convention and their version of why these things happened with some behind-the-scenes information. They should include quotes from themselves (or other participants) as sources for their story, and tell about their experience as a candidate, manager, or delegate. Remind them that news stories stress the five W’s and H: Who? What? When? Why? Where? How? Assess the story using the following criteria: How accurate is the story? In what ways does the story describe the challenges facing the conventioners in choosing a nominee? Is the story being told interesting? Have multiple perspectives on the events that took place been included? Is the story well organized and readable?

Teacher Resources:

Lesson Plans:

Two other lesson plans focus on the political life of Shirley Chisholm.

1. The first is connected with the film *Unbossed and Unbought*, produced in 2004 by Point of View. The lesson plan can be found at http://www.pbs.org/pov/chisholm/lesson_plan.php. This lesson focuses on the electoral process as well, and is linked to issues raised by the POV film about Shirley Chisholm’s bid for the presidency in 1972.
2. Another lesson plan developed by the Anti-Defamation League can be found at http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/lesson_chisholm.asp. This lesson focuses more on the life story of Shirley Chisholm and her experiences as a Black woman leader through the late part of the twentieth century.

Audio Files:

- 2005 interview with Gloria Steinem: http://www.pbs.org/pov/chisholm/special_ticket_02.php
- 1974 speech by Shirley Chisholm, “The Black Woman in Contemporary America”: http://soundlearning.publicradio.org/subjects/history_civics/say_it_plain/shirley_chisholm.shtml