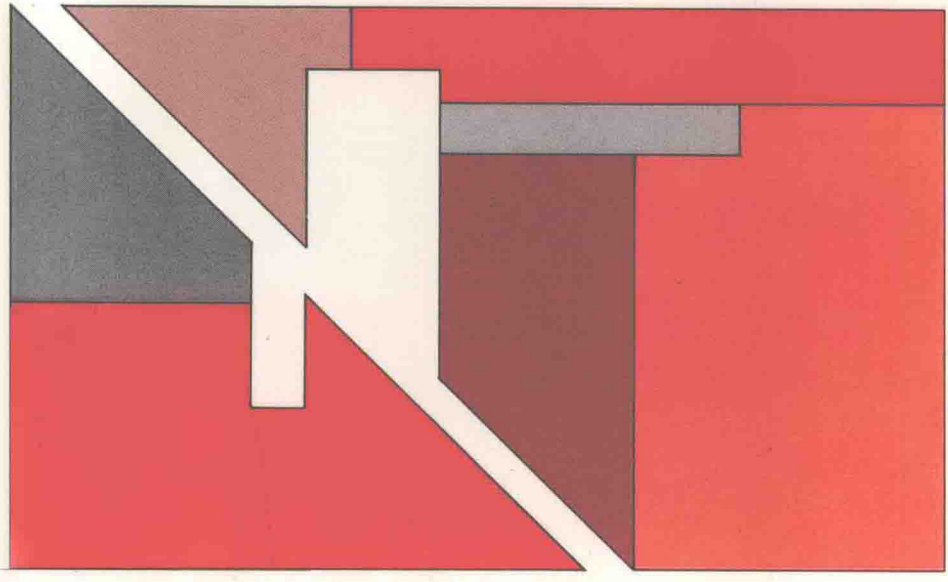
Women Leaders in Contemporary U.S. Politics

edited by
Frank P. Le Veness and
Jane P. Sweeney



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While in the final stages of getting this book together we neglected our families. Nevertheless, they were patient and supportive as they always are, and we are grateful to them. The understanding support of Kristin A. Le Veness is particularly acknowledged.

Lastly, we wish to acknowledge all the women who have run for political office in this country. We both believe their presence has been of great value to our society.

Frank P. Le Veness
Jane P. Sweeney

Contents

C·H·A·P·T·E·R O·N·E

Women in the Political Arena

FRANK P. Le VENESS and JANE P. SWEENEY

As U.S. political pundits discuss possible 1988 candidates for national office, it is clear that perceptions of women as viable candidates for the vice presidency were changed forever by Walter Mondale's selection of running mate and by Geraldine Ferraro's feisty campaign. Prominent political women of both parties now view themselves as potential candidates for that office and are not shy about seeking it. Although our society does not yet consider a woman in the vice presidential slot a necessity for balancing the ticket, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Nancy Kassebaum, and Elizabeth Dole all have been mentioned as potential Republican party candidates. The Democrats have several prominent women, such as Dianne Feinstein, Patricia Schroeder, and Barbara Mikulski, who are seasoned and nationally recognized politicians.

Although women remain a marginal group in high elected office in this nation (for example, they make up only 2 percent of the members of the U.S. Senate and 4 percent of the U.S. House of Representatives) and, indeed, worldwide, they have become much more visible and have been viewed with steadily increasing respect in recent years. In addition, the present generation of political women provides role models for today's young women, who can now think realistically about being the mayor of a major U.S. city, a justice of the Supreme Court, or, conceivably, president of the United States.

In this brief volume, we study the careers of nine U.S. political women, believing that a biographical approach will lead to insights about how women achieve elite status in politics and what obstacles peculiar to their sex they are forced to confront. In addition, our final chapter examines the vital role of the "unnamed" political women who contribute through their political activism to the quality of life in their local communities.

Obviously, there are many more than nine prominent women in U.S. politics, so a word is in order about our choice of subjects. We believe that two women—Geraldine A. Ferraro and Sandra Day O'Connor—have such

historical importance as "firsts" that inclusion of chapters on their lives and accomplishments is vital. Beyond that, we looked for women from both major political parties (and chose four Republicans and five Democrats) who have held or at present hold a variety of public offices, ranging from local to national in scope: Ambassador Margaret Heckler, a former congresswoman and cabinet member; Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, former U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations; Mayor Dianne Feinstein of San Francisco; Senator Nancy Landon Kassebaum of Kansas; Kings County District Attorney Elizabeth Holtzman of Brooklyn, New York, a former member of Congress; former congresswoman Shirley Chisholm; and former member of Congress Barbara Mikulski, who was elected to the U.S. Senate from the State of Maryland in 1986. We truly hope that prominent women not discussed in this volume, and their many supporters, will understand that we were confronted with limitations of space and were forced to make some very difficult choices.

In order to provide some basis for comparison of the careers of these women, we asked the contributors to focus their chapters on three aspects of each subject's life and contributions: such biographical material as is pertinent to the woman's subsequent career path; those issues in which each woman most interested and involved herself during her public career; and the position each woman took on issues of particular importance to women.

Although each of these women is unique, all nine are intelligent, well educated, life-long achievers, and all, even those who did not consider themselves feminists, found themselves being drawn into the debates on women's issues. By "women's issues" we mean public policy decisions which impact more strongly on women than on men. We would include such diverse issues as funding of day care, equal employment opportunities, equality in insurance premiums, financial problems of older women living alone, job training for displaced homemakers, the legality of abortion, and the Equal Rights Amendment. A feminist, as we employ the term, is a woman or man who wants these policy questions decided in a manner that gives women the maximum opportunity to participate fully in our society without discrimination. We might add, as we are dealing here with women politicians, that a feminist politician is one (female or male) who devotes substantial career time to furthering women's issues.

Studying the characteristics these women share may shed some light on what types of women can rise to elite status in U.S. politics.

These women tend to come from families that gave them both support and strong values. Our nine subjects do not share the same economic histories. Some come from affluent families, some from families that struggled quite hard to make ends meet, but all were encouraged toward a self-reliance considered unladylike when they were young. Chisholm's immigrant family from Barbados had to go so far as to send her back to the Carib-

bean to weather the Great Depression (however, she still credits her family with instilling in her strong community and religious values). Ferraro had some relatives who did not understand why a "nice" girl needed to accept a college scholarship; nevertheless, her mother and grandmother stood firmly by her side. Jeane Kirkpatrick's family weathered the Depression in the Midwest, and her mother, in particular, encouraged Jeane to be anything she desired.

Much of the literature on women in politics cites childhood socialization as a reason women avoid the confrontational world of politics. The parents of these nine women did not particularly guide them into exceptional careers, but it does seem they all were nurtured in environments that engendered a sense of personal efficacy. All nine came into adulthood secure in the knowledge that they could achieve.

Several of the women studied here attribute their current political values to strong religious upbringings. Barbara Mikulski praises the role of the Catholic ethnic parish of her youth. Elizabeth Holtzman was influenced by the social thought of Rabbi Hillel and the atmosphere of the Brooklyn Ethical Culture School. Shirley Chisholm's family were devout members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), and Geraldine Ferraro was deeply influenced by the Catholicism which she and her mother still devoutly practice.

The educational achievements of these women parallel those of men with comparable levels of political success. Every one of these women was a bright student, and each attained a high level of education, especially for women born in the 1920s and 1930s. Many were straight-A students in secondary school as well as editors of newspapers and class officers at a time when women were not expected to do such things, except in all-women educational institutions. College scholarships and *magna cum laude* degrees abound in their records. Every one of them undertook graduate work.

Four of the women—Heckler, Holtzman, Ferraro, and, of course, O'Connor—became lawyers when it was still a rarity for women to be accepted for admission to law schools and to compete successfully in that profession. Holtzman, after graduating from Radcliffe College in 1962, entered Harvard Law as one of fifteen women in a class of five hundred. O'Connor earned her law degree with distinction at Stanford. Heckler, the only woman in her class at Boston College's School of Law, edited the law review and won the moot court competition three times. Ferraro's route through law school was not as straightforward as these others. She first earned her degree in education at Marymount Manhattan, a Catholic women's college, and then attended Fordham University Law School at night while teaching during the day at a New York City public school. (Schools such as Marymount Manhattan and Fordham were—and still are—avenues forward for the upwardly mobile ethnic community of New York.)

Whereas law is a typical route into politics for men, five of these women

moved into the public arena along other paths. Kirkpatrick—after a break in her education while she raised her children—earned a doctorate in political science and commenced a successful academic career. Feinstein did graduate work in criminal justice, which led to a career in public service and, finally, public office. Chisholm and Mikulski moved into careers typical of aspiring women of working-class origins. Chisholm, who had turned down scholarships to several prestigious schools because her family could not afford the overhead of a boarding school, graduated from Brooklyn College and did graduate work in education and administration. Mikulski attended a small Catholic women's college in Maryland and then attained a graduate degree in social work. For them and for Feinstein, involvement in the community led to political careers.

These women have learned that the behavioral rules imposed on female politicians are stricter than those imposed on male politicians. One of the women those opposed to the presence of women in the corridors of political power love to hate is Bella Abzug, former congresswoman from New York City, who ran again for office in 1986, but lost. Abzug is a brash and outspoken feminist with a certain ability to go for the jugular, which is often the norm in New York City, but not necessarily in Congress. Feminist supporters of Abzug and lovers of the rough-and-tumble of big city politics may relish her approach, but many political women have learned gradually that political success requires that men not be unnecessarily threatened. Chisholm began her career in the House with a feisty speech against the Vietnam conflict and found that her outspoken views did not serve her well among her party's leadership. Others—Ferraro and Mikulski are good examples—developed personal styles reminiscent of Sam Rayburn's old adage, "To get along, go along." The less abrasive style of many contemporary political women does not mean they have sacrificed their interest in women's issues, simply that they have learned that politics is a game of strategy which men have long known how to play.

Women in public life are still scrutinized for defects that would not be noticed in a male. Their wardrobes must be neither too feminine nor too masculine. Their waistlines and hairstyles are the object of frequent comment. Strength is dubbed shrillness, tenacity is bad temper. And who can forget the ridiculous commentary attending the question of whether Ferraro and Mondale should kiss in public during the 1984 presidential campaign?

The fact that political women must endure prying and criticism to which their male colleagues are not subject is, of course, not fair, but it is a reality women in politics have learned to accept. Possibly, as more women empower themselves at the local level and as men become more accustomed to women's participation across the spectrum of professions, close scrutiny of the personal lives and personalities of political women will decline.

An interesting example of campaign tactics directed against political women but not men is the case of former congresswoman Martha Keyes of Kansas. Keyes divorced her husband while in Congress and married another member of the House. In her next campaign (1978), she was attacked on this point by her opponent, James Jeffries. Jeffries defeated her, and two years later her ex-husband, Sam Keyes, ran against Jeffries. Although Sam Keyes did not win, the divorce was never mentioned during his campaign.[1]

Political women are expected to defer to their roles as mothers and homemakers. During the 1960 presidential campaign Jacqueline Kennedy was pregnant and the mother of a small child. She took on the demanding role of first lady and fulfilled it in an activist style. No one during the campaign or the Kennedy presidency thought it inappropriate that the mother of small children was politically active for the sake of *her husband's* career. Rosalynn Carter was the mother of a young child while she worked as an ambitious first lady and the political confidante of the president. Scores of other political wives have separated themselves from young children to campaign for their husbands. This society does not disapprove in these cases. However, if women run for office themselves, the question of whether they are fulfilling their responsibilities as parents immediately arises. The wife of a governor does not have to be home with her baby, it seems. The wife who aspires to be a governor does!

The result of this attitude is that women tend to get a later start in politics than do men. Mikulski and Holtzman did not face this problem because neither married nor had children. Kirkpatrick did not go back to school to earn her Ph.D. until all her children were in school, and so the career in academic publishing that led to her appointment as ambassador to the United Nations was delayed. Ferraro did not practice law full-time until her children were raised. (Please note, however, that neither of these women has publicly complained about this limitation.) Heckler and O'Connor balanced careers in law with childrearing. Kassebaum assumed no career at all until her children were raised and she and her husband were separated.

The result of the gaps between the time many women finish their formal education and are able to take on political careers without public criticism is critical to women's success in politics. There are women like O'Connor and Kirkpatrick who literally start at the top in politics, but they are exceptions—not unlike senators Bill Bradley and Ted Kennedy. Most political careers begin in local or state office and advance slowly. Mikulski was first elected to the Baltimore City Council at age thirty-five and is now running for the U.S. Senate at age fifty, a time frame typical of a successful male politician. For women who must first raise children, a local political career commences late and the chances of reaching high elected office are thereby diminished.

Women's paths into politics are varied. These nine women achieved

political prominence in a variety of ways. It is easy to say that Ronald Reagan needed a women for the U.S. Supreme Court, that Walter Mondale desperately needed a spark for his campaign, that Nancy Landon Kassebaum has a magic name in Kansas—that women who achieve success in politics do so because of luck. It is true that O'Connor and Ferraro and Kirkpatrick were at the right places at the right times, but it is equally true that they bucked the odds to arrive at those places. As for Kassebaum's use of the Landon name, contemporary U.S. politics is replete with males named Rockefeller, Roosevelt, Stevenson, and Kennedy—none hurt by association with famous relatives. Kassebaum, whose famous father at first was ambivalent about her candidacy, had to rely on her own political savvy and connections once she began her race.

Chisholm, Ferraro, and Holtzman all became successes in electoral politics in essentially the same way. They entered Democratic primaries for the House of Representatives in which they challenged the anointed candidates of the local party leaders. They each staged skillful uphill battles—Holtzman unseated an incumbent who was considered invincible by many, Chisholm proved that a black woman could beat the local leaders, and Ferraro soundly defeated the candidate of the Queens County Democratic chairman. (It is interesting to note that Ferraro's former opponent succeeded her as representative of the Queens County Ninth Congressional District.) None of these women got to the U.S. House of Representatives because anyone had paved the way for her.

Feinstein, Mikulski, and Heckler began their careers in local office. True, Feinstein inherited the office of mayor of San Francisco through a tragic assassination, but only because she was already the president of the Board of Supervisors. Heckler began political life as a volunteer in the local Republican club in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and she defied her state party leadership when she entered the Republican primary for the House. Mikulski was the leader of a successful community group who became a popular city council member and then representative.

Once at the elite level, being a women can be advantageous to one's career. Geraldine Ferraro and Sandra Day O'Connor were both refreshingly candid when contributors to this volume asked them how being women affected them when the big opportunities finally came their way. Ferraro thinks that the fact that she was one of a handful of Democratic women in the House and was willing to cooperate with the party's leadership gave her entrance into positions not open to men as junior as she. It was, of course, those leadership positions that led to national prominence as chair of the 1984 Democratic Platform Committee and her eventual selection as Walter Mondale's running mate. O'Connor, when asked if she would be on the Supreme Court today if she were a male, said she did not think so. She pointed out that there were very few Republican women on the federal bench when

Ronald Reagan was searching for a woman suitable to serve as associate justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.

However, lest the reader think this means it is easy for women to advance in the political world, it must be emphasized that women have a very difficult time gaining entrance to circles where the number of women is so small that being one of them might mean opportunity. Even at that level, Jeane Kirkpatrick found the problem of sexism at the United Nations quite difficult. (Even today there are very few female permanent representatives in that august body.) Nancy Kassebaum was first called "nice little Nancy" by other senators. Shirley Chisholm dealt with both racism and sexism during her first campaign, when she arrived in the House, and when she ran for the presidency in 1972.

Positions on women's issues and activity on behalf of women differ considerably in this group. The women discussed in this book are very much individuals, and they cannot be pigeonholed into neat feminist and antifeminist categories. For example, one might try to classify Kassebaum and Heckler as "moderate feminists." What does that mean? Kassebaum favors legalized abortion and voted against extending the deadline for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, while Heckler took diametrically opposite stances. Mikulski and Chisholm often have had women's issues high on their political agendas; Feinstein and Kirkpatrick have kept a relatively low profile on women's issues.

However, the positions these women have taken on women's issues—particularly the ERA and the *Roe v. Wade* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court legalizing abortion—arouse intense emotions among those defending both sides of each controversy. Ferraro, a Roman Catholic, has taken the position that as a matter of personal conscience she cannot dictate to others as a legislator. Basically, she assumed a "pro-choice" position in her lawmaking role while continuing to personally oppose abortion. Throughout her legislative career she has had to continually explain and defend her position, and she has been opposed by members of her church's hierarchy (during the post–Labor Day period of her vice presidential campaign) and by various groups of "pro-life" advocates (some of whom have been vociferous in their denunciation of her positions). On other women's issues she has joined the ranks of Mikulski and Chisholm and has placed a high legislative priority on these questions. One of her outstanding achievements in the House was the passage of the private pension bill she had introduced, a bill designed to offer far more equitable treatment to women in the labor force upon their retirement than did many of the programs then in effect.

As a final note, the editors wish to emphasize that one of their primary goals in undertaking this project has been to enlighten readers as to the possibilities and problems facing women who enter the political arena. There are many potential entrants into this arena now that educational and career

opportunities have substantially widened for women in the United States. Nevertheless, sexism, like racism, dies slowly. Hurdles must be vaulted, and serious calculations must be undertaken by women who seek to reach political heights. We hope that this book will inspire young women to pursue careers in politics and women of all ages to participate actively in the political process. The opportunities are challenging and exciting, and the nation cannot afford to waste the wisdom, talent, and energy of its female citizens.

Note

1. Jane Sweeney lived in Kansas in 1980, participated in Sam Keyes's campaign, and learned the oral history of the 1978 race.

C·H·A·P·T·E·R T·W·O

Shirley Chisholm: Woman of Complexity, Conscience, and Compassion

REBA CARRUTH and VIVIAN JENKINS NELSEN

Life Forces and Personal Choices

Shirley St. Hill Chisholm's rise to national prominence in the U.S. political system was an astounding achievement for a woman and for a person of color. She was the first black woman to be elected to Congress. The national attention she received reached a peak in 1972 when she mounted a bid for the presidency. Indeed, her sex, her black skin, and foreign parentage caused the most progressive segments of society to question Chisholm's potential as a political leader in a traditionally white, male-dominated arena. However, her pioneering challenge to racist and sexist biases inherent in the U.S. political system led the way for other black women congressional leaders to begin remedying the underepresentation of black women in the policymaking process.

The unique personal and professional strengths that undergird Chisholm's impressive career as a public servant have their roots in her humble, strictly disciplined childhood. Born to parents who immigrated from Barbados and Guiana, Chisholm was endowed with a strong sense of ethnic pride, which was perhaps why she was able to violate the implicit and explicit behavior codes that had historically prevented many U.S.-born blacks from excelling. (In fact, Chisholm cites the early liberation of black slaves in Barbados and their strong commercial skills as determining factors in their success relative to blacks born in the United States.)

A strong family network in Barbados and in New York reinforced ideals inculcated by Chisholm's parents, who prized the British values of education, individual initiative, and entrepreneurship. Despite the shared values, Chisholm's father rejected "the divine right of kings" and scorned the inher-

ent racism of British colonialism. Instead, Chisholm said, her father chose to be "a follower of Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican who originated many of the ideas that characterize today's militant black separatists."[1] Garvey's 1920's declaration that "black is beautiful" was part of his attempt to unite U.S. blacks and return them to Africa where in independent isolation they would become the equals of any men and women. Chisholm wrote, "I think this appealed to my father because he too, was a very proud black man. He instilled pride in his children, a pride in ourselves and our race that was not as fashionable at that time as it is today."[2] Chisholm's parents emphasized education, professional success, and poise. The strong work ethic stressed by her extended family was reinforced by the teachings and ethics of the Quaker church in which she received religious and spiritual guidance during her youth in New York and during extended visits to Barbados. The impact of these forces is reflected in her choice of vocations and her indefatigable service for human rights, equal opportunity, and community development.

The racially changing Brooklyn community in which Chisholm was reared was also catalytic in forming her understanding of systemic racism. Blacks from the U.S. South were migrating northward to find jobs at the Brooklyn Navy Yard as well as in the Long Island aircraft plants and other growing defense industries.

> No one knew it then, but the present-day "inner city" (to use a white euphemism) was being created. Black workers had to crowd into neighborhoods that were already black or partly so, because they could not find homes anywhere else. Buildings that had four apartments suddenly had eight, and bathrooms that had been private were shared. White building inspectors winked at housing code violations and illegal rates of occupancy, white landlords doubled and trebled their incomes on slum buildings, and the white neighborhoods in other parts of town and in the suburbs stayed white. Today's urban ghettos were being born.[3]

During Chisholm's grade school years, though her parents lived and worked in the New York area, the Depression forced them to send their three girls back home to stay with relatives in Barbados. There, Chisholm and her two sisters spent four

> barefoot, winterless years. . . . When we came home, the first thing we had to do was take off our school clothes, which were issued clean on Monday and had to stay that way through Friday. Then we carried the water and helped with the other chores, feeding the chickens and ducks, gathering eggs, changing the straw bedding for the cattle and sheep.[4]

The girls were reunited with their parents in Brooklyn in 1934, and Chisholm faced a setback at Public School 84 on Glenmore Avenue. Just before she left Barbados, she had been promoted to the sixth form,

> so I expected to be put in the sixth grade in Brooklyn . . . the teachers were satisfied with my reading and writing ability, but horrified by my ignorance of American history and geography. They put me in grade 3-B, with children two years younger than I was. Bored, I became a discipline problem. I carried rubber bands in the pocket of my middy blouse and snapped them at the other children; I became expert at making spitballs and flicking them when the teacher's back was turned. Luckily someone diagnosed the trouble and did something about it. The school provided me with a tutor in American geography and history for a year and a half, until I caught up with and passed my age-grade level.[5]

Throughout her high school years Shirley Chisholm excelled academically but the educational options available to her were constricted by the racial and sexual bias of the war years. She attended the highly regarded Girls' High School, one of Brooklyn's oldest schools, where she won a medal in French and was vice president of the honor society. Chisholm was offered scholarships to Oberlin and to Vassar, but her parents could not afford room and board at an out-of-town school, so she entered Brooklyn College. Although women had never been elected to campus office, Chisholm set about helping two young women make a run for the Student Council presidency (which was unsuccessful). Blacks were not welcome in campus social clubs, so she and some friends formed a black women's student's society which she named "Ipothia" an acronym for "in pursuit of the highest in all." Despite Chisholm's efforts, the harsh reality of racism in higher education and the systematic exclusion of blacks and women from vocations in medicine, science, and law severely limited her choice of professions—in fact, blacks were not even permitted to enter the social work professions as late as the 1940s. Chisholm chose early childhood education and school administration as her first profession. After graduating from Columbia University with a B.A. and an M.A. in education and a diploma in administration, she began her career as a school teacher and later assumed the directorship of a day care center. In 1959 she left the Hamilton-Madison Center to become a consultant to the City Division of Day Care; she was responsible for the supervision of ten day care centers as well as setting standards for child care in New York City.

Although women traditionally have chosen careers in education and nursing by default or for lack of other options, often their lives subsequently have shaped these choices in provocative, often fruitful ways. Chisholm's work in elementary education and school administration reinforced her intention to fight ignorance and poverty at all levels of society. Her increased awareness of the effects of poverty and inequality led her to become an active volunteer in the Twelfth Congressional District of Brooklyn. Chisholm's participation in local politics gave her a practical education in the working

process of the Democratic party and sharpened her ability to turn ideas and beliefs into votes. The turning point in her professional life came when Louis Warsoff, a blind political science professor, told her that given her strong debating skills and analytical mind she should go into politics. Chisholm reminded the professor that she was black and female, and therefore had no chance of being elected for campus offices, let alone public office, but Warsoff's encouragement gave her the "push" that was needed to enter the political arena.

Shirley Chisholm's successful early participation in voter registration drives, Democratic party fund raisers, and election campaigns quickly led to a test by fire when she challenged the white male political machine in the Twelfth Congressional District in Brooklyn. In the early phase of her political career, Shirley Chisholm fought diligently on behalf of working-class citizens in her district. Although many of her battles with the Democratic machine centered around the party's failure to serve as advocate for the majority of Puerto Rican and black voters in her district, the largest and most intense confrontations arose over the disenfranchisement of working-class people from the political process. Chisholm entered public office to make the system accessible to the entire U.S. population.

Chisholm's color, sex and foreign parentage worked against easy access to political power. At the time of her entry into local politics, the Democratic and Republican clubs were the focal points of party organization. In theory, the goal of these clubs was to provide community advocacy services for local constituents, such as legal services for the poor, selection of candidates to run for public office, and so on. But these clubs excluded women and minorities from decisionmaking positions and often barred them from serving as official representatives of their districts.

The 1960s and 1970s were critical years for Shirley Chisholm's political career. During this period, Chisholm gained a reputation as a maverick and troublemaker, qualities that later aided her in effectively challenging the inequities in the political system. With the support of progressive white and black voters, Chisholm formed the Unity Democratic Club as an alternative to the existing political machine in Brooklyn. The goal of this organization was to mobilize the predominately black and Puerto Rican district in order to facilitate political change and true community development. The first major victory of this "rainbow coalition" was the election of Thomas R. Jones as the first black assemblyman from the Twelfth Congressional District of Brooklyn. This political victory was overshadowed by Chisholm's own nomination and successful campaign for the position of state representative of the district—an achievement astonishing in light of the powerful resistance of males, both black and white, to her nomination for this position. In fact, racism within the Democratic party, from liberal as well as conservative groups, and sexism on the part of white and black men proved to be challenging life