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**Covering the 1972 Chisholm Campaign:  
Shaping Perceptions and Postponing Progress**



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Chisholm (1973, 3) said, "I ran because someone had 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 the country is not ready for a black candidate, not ready for a woman candidate. Someday...It was time in 1972 to make that someday come and, partly through a series of accidents that might never recur, it seemed to me that I was the best fitted to try."

## Abstract

In order to get their voices heard, groups with different interests and needs, often racially, socially, and economically marginalized groups, must take an active role in developing policies. Political representation is essential in articulating the need for change and then creating that change. Both women and African Americans have different significant problems gaining political office that their White male counterparts do not. African American women are especially disadvantaged because of their challenges with the interlocking oppressions of both racism and sexism. A specific woman and candidacy that this study examines more closely was for the presidency. In 1972, Shirley Chisholm was the first Black female to run for the Democratic Party nomination for president. Although she was also the only Black and only female candidate competing in the primaries, both the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Congressional Black Caucus did not endorse her. This content analysis looked specifically at the *New York Times* article coverage of her during her 1972 campaign. Questions that were sought to be answered included: How did the *New York Times* present Shirley Chisholm's candidacy during her campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972? What would the reading audience be able to gather about her and her candidacy based on the information offered? Was she portrayed as a non-serious contender based on her race and/or gender? A content analysis was conducted to investigate these questions in order to identify areas that change needs to be made in order to increase the number of Black women elected to political office.

## Introduction

People who hold elected political positions in the United States have traditionally been White men. The country was founded at a time when discrimination based on gender as well as race certainly extended to the political arena. While improvements have been made, American government is still nowhere near representative of the American public. Looking at the historical challenges that women face in gaining political office can provide insight into how things can be further improved for the future. It is equally important to evaluate the historical struggles that people faced based on their race in political campaigns and once they were in political positions of power. This research project evaluated both racism and sexism that one specific Black woman experienced in the news media during an important American election. In 1968, the first Black Congresswoman, Shirley Chisholm was elected to office. She then went on to be the first Black woman to seriously run for the Democratic presidential nomination. She remained in the primary

competition all the way up to the 1972 Democratic National Convention. Evaluating Chisholm's campaign provides great insight into the struggle a Black woman faced in the early 1970s at being taken seriously with her White male competitors.

### Background Information

As mentioned by Myra Marx Ferree in her 1974 article in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, "the role of conformity to what is perceived as the dominant or correct attitude toward a real candidate, as displayed by the media at the time, should not be underestimated" (391). According to the dominant point of view, a "real" candidate in 1972 was White and male. Ferree used the media's failure to take Chisholm's campaign seriously and compared it with the treatment of those running against her in newspapers across the country (1974, 391). Not only did the media conform to dominant expectations of a "correct" political figure in Chisholm's case, but also so did the key organizations that would be expected to support her.

Ironically, although Chisholm was the only woman and only Black candidate, and her main base of support came from Blacks and women, the major women and Black-run organizations did not endorse her candidacy; the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) being the two major ones. They focused their support elsewhere because they saw her attempt at the bid as inevitably doomed. Ultimately these groups did not want to lose their ability to bargain for a platform representative of the stances on issues that concerned them (McClain 2005, 57). At a time so closely following the Civil Rights Movement and the second-wave of feminism, these politically active organizations chose to support White male candidates because they seemed more likely to win.

Black women have had to worry about sexism within the male-dominated Black community in addition to discrimination from the larger society (McClain 2005, 53). The Congressional Black Caucus treatment of Chisholm is one such example of that. As one Black politician publically said, “In this first serious effort of blacks for high political office, it would be better if it were a man” (Haskins 1975, 158). This blatant disapproval of Chisholm as an acceptable Black candidate because of her gender undoubtedly hurt a potential opportunity for presenting a unified front against racial discrimination through political change. As McClain et al pointed out, “discussions about greater equality for Black women were seen as a challenge to male authority within and as divisive to the broader Black community” (2005, 53).

### Goals of Project

There were several goals for this research project. First, how did the *New York Times* present Shirley Chisholm’s candidacy during her campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972? What would the reading audience be able to gather about her and her candidacy based on the information offered from mainstream print media outlets? Was she portrayed as a non-serious contender based on her race and/or gender?

### Literature Review

Literature related to the struggles Black women face in gaining political office is sparse. Many sources discussed American electoral sexism; however, they did not touch on racism. There is also literature available on the disadvantages racial minorities face, but little is aimed specifically at the experiences of women. For example an article titled, “The Congressional Black Caucus” (1975), describes the new, short history of the group, which Chisholm helped

found in 1971. However, the article barely mentions Chisholm's 1972 candidacy and the disunity that occurred within the group as a result of their not formally endorsing her. This internal conflict, which seemed to have caused a great deal of turmoil, is surprisingly left out of the article. The dual absence of scholarship in the area of politically active Black women, specifically about Chisholm, speaks to the need for this research in order to begin filling a void for their experiences in politics. Research on White women and Black men does not explain Black women who are in a unique position all their own, which is "not simply additive, but multiplicative" (McClain 2005, 55). As McClain explains, "There has been virtually nothing done on Black women's political involvement and much less on Black women as candidates" (McClain 2005, 55). When it comes to national campaigns, the research and studies are even scarcer.

Literature that does exist is loosely investigated and short in length. Kimberly Springer's *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism* focuses on Black women's struggle with political activism. A section in the text, *The Double Disadvantage Hypothesis: Issues of Racism and Sexism*, relates particularly well to this research topic. This portion of text provides information on political groups, as well as prominent individuals, who did and did not support Chisholm's candidacy. Springer lays out specific issues and facts on sexism and racism that Black women face in office. The book also provides statistics about and names of other Black, female federally elected officials. A problem with this text is that it is quite brief, slightly dated (1999) and may not be reflective of changes due to current events or new research findings.

On the other hand, a much more current source that discussed Chisholm's candidacy exists from 2008. *Women for President: Media Bias in Eight Presidential Campaigns* by Erika

Falk was the most useful source in relation to this research project. Eight specific female candidacies are evaluated throughout the text, one of which is Chisholm's. The book also provides a number of other sources through individual chapter reference pages. A problem with Falk's text is that it focuses solely on the effect gender had in holding back female candidates and does not thoroughly investigate the effect of race, let alone the intersectionality of both.

Generally, historical information and research attempting to provide insight into the challenges Black women face as political candidates is lacking. More specifically, sources that were critical of the treatment Chisholm received from the press as an insignificant and dismissive candidate in bid for president are virtually non-existent. Only one existing source specifically examines Chisholm's treatment, even though it does so juxtaposed with the more recent candidate Carol Moseley Braun. Unlike Chisholm though, Braun dropped out of the race before reaching the end of the primaries.

## Methodology

For this research project, I engaged in content analysis, examining news articles published in the *New York Times* during Shirley Chisholm's run for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972. This included reviewing articles published from the time she announced her candidacy in January 1972, to the end of June 1972 after the state primaries were complete, leading up to the Democratic National Convention. The *New York Times* was chosen for the project for two reasons. Along with the *Times* being a historically reputable news source, it was also the widest circulating newspaper in the state in which Chisholm resided (Falk 2008, 13). The Minnesota State University-Mankato library database was used to access ProQuest. ProQuest has direct online access to the *New York Times*, holding a complete selection of past

articles from 1972, the appropriate year for study. There were thirty articles during this time period that specifically addressed Chisholm's candidacy. Articles that merely mentioned her name or that had the main purpose of referencing her Congressional activities at the time were left out of the analysis. Each article was assessed based on five criteria: mention of Chisholm's potential voters as African Americans and/or women, mention of potential voters as White, reporting of Chisholm's stance on political issues (other than racial or gender equality), reference to the term "delegate", and lastly, explanation of the potential power candidates with delegates hold.

## Results

These newspaper articles were evaluated and the results were grouped into numerical categories. Eighteen out of thirty, or 60 percent of the articles, described Chisholm's prospective voters as Black people, women, or both. On the other hand, only four articles asserted Whites as potential supporters. Interestingly, the same journalist, Alfonso A. Narvaez, wrote three out of these four articles.

In relation to reporting Chisholm's stance on specific issues, only two articles mentioned issues unrelated to racial and/ or gender equality. The first of the two issues mentioned was on post-secondary education and the second was on tax reformation. Both of her stances on these issues were in connection to affordability and life improvement for the financially underprivileged.

A very important finding from this content analysis had to do with the mention and explanation of the term "delegate" in the *New York Times* newspaper articles concerning Chisholm's candidacy. In 1972 most states did not have winner-take-all systems in the national



Democratic primaries. Because of this there was an opportunity for a candidate to have strength by gaining delegates, even if they did not obtain the highest percentage of votes. The more people that voted for a candidate in a certain state, the larger amount of delegates they got in that state. Whatever amount of delegates a candidate won throughout the different state primaries they participated in, were totaled together and brought to the national convention in their honor. Three main things are decided at the Democratic National Convention: who the presidential nominee will be, who the vice presidential candidate will be, and what the party platform will look like. The party platform contains negotiated positions on all of the different important issues at that time. Having delegates provides the candidates and those that voted for them with a bargaining chip in creating the Democratic Party platform. Especially for Chisholm, having delegates at the convention gave her an opportunity to bargain for positions of women and racial minorities in the possible Democratic administration, and also attempt to eliminate sexist or racist stances within the platform.

Providing this information to readers of major newspapers, like the *New York Times*, is essential so that potential voters understand the democratic process. In this research, nearly 50 percent of the articles mentioned the term “delegate”. However, only four articles explained the potential power that these delegates had at the Democratic National Convention, even if they were not representing the delegate winner. Keeping this information away from voters is especially harmful to non-leading candidates and can marginalize their voter base.

## Conclusions

Several things were discovered from reading and analyzing the *New York Times* articles. First, the delegate power was not explained to readers as often, or as thoroughly, as would be

necessary for voters to recognize the value in voting for a candidate that would not “win” the most delegates. This potentially hurt Chisholm’s candidacy because people that may have voted for her could easily have thought that supporting such a candidate would be a “waste” of their votes.

Second, Chisholm was clearly specifically represented as a candidate for women and Black people. By using so much space repeatedly in their valuable newspaper pages to convey that she was a “minority” candidate, the *New York Times* failed to report her stance on issues other than racial or gender equality. By being presented through this form of mass media as a particular type of candidate for a particular type of voter, Chisholm’s base was certainly marginalized and arguably depleted. However, it is important to note that Chisholm also promoted herself as a candidate for those who were underrepresented in politics. She was proud that she was a Black woman running for the highest office in the nation and wanted those non-traditionally active in the political sphere to see her as a catalyst for change. This is certainly not to say however, that she was not an ideal representative for men or White people as well, at least those who stood for what she believed in.

It is important to look at how newspapers present things to their audience. According to Falk, by articulating ideas through particular words, categories, and labels, the conclusions that the reader draws are certainly being affected (2008, 21). As with all socialization, what we say and how we say it has a deeper meaning and effect than what may be noticeable on the surface. The way that the media frames a story is more important than the story’s content as far as the effect it will have on the readers (Falk 2008, 26). By framing Chisholm as a “first”, it gives the perception that someone like her is unnatural in politics (Falk 2008, 35). By doing this, the *New York Times* hurt Chisholm’s candidacy and gave a skewed perception of her to the public.

One source highlighted some interesting information about the readership of the *New York Times* during the 1970s. Martin explains that in 1970 an advertising series was run that reflected an image of socially and financially elite readers (2008, 181). Particular ads within the series pointed out that the *Times* readers were much more likely to have obtained post-graduate degrees, purchased immensely expensive jewelry, traveled across the world, own multiple lavish automobiles and work in upper-level or professional occupations (2008, 181). It is safe to say that “the *New York Times* moved from merely being concentrated among higher-income families in 1940 to focusing solely on them by 1970” (Martin 2008, 181). Because the target audience for readership at this time was upper class, it can also be inferred that the newspaper assumed most of the readers would be White. By choosing to repeatedly point out Chisholm as a Black candidate for Black voters, the *Times* led White readers to assume that she was not a candidate who could represent them, and therefore, was not to be considered as a legitimate choice. In addition, the writers on staff were also overwhelmingly White men at that time, which was in great conflict with the demographics of New York City. In fact, Chisholm herself had a study conducted in 1972 to evaluate how many racial minorities and women the *Times* had on staff. It was found that New York City had 23.4% non-White citizens and about a half-million more women than men, yet out of the 557 professional employees at the *New York Times*, 22 were minorities and 64 were women (*Times*, 2/20/1972). These mainly White male reporters framed Chisholm as a non-serious contender to the mass voters, which possibly undermined and regressed her progress in gaining votes. Thinking critically about how stories are told and evaluating who is doing the telling provides a better-rounded experience of history.

More particularly, it is extremely important to understand women’s, as well as an individual woman’s history. It is helpful for readers to gain a deeper understanding of the

struggles Chisholm faced with the media during her attempted path to the presidential candidacy. Because there is little research on Chisholm's candidacy, and next to none aimed at politically active Black women in general, this project highlights a problem of unequal social value. In a society where all citizens are supposed to have equal protection of rights and participation in the democratic process, more people should be concerned about researching this problem. It is also an interesting insight to the prevalence of racism in the post-Civil Rights Era and sexism during the second-wave feminist movement. Exploring the coverage of a Black woman's presidential campaign through a newspaper that has been historically credible gives insight to the racial and gender-based hostility that took place during the early 1970s. More specifically, this research provides a window into the resistance that women and racial minorities faced in the political arena at this time.

An idea for future research would be to look into how things have changed for Black women in political campaigns today. Has there been an improvement in media coverage and message framing of these women as individuals and as serious contenders? Have the numbers grown of Black women holding political office since 1972?

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