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**Department of Arts and English Language**



**From Shirley Chisholm to Kamala Harris: Black Women in the US  
Presidential Race - Historical Study**

**Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
Master's Degree in Literature and Civilization**

**Submitted by:**

Ben Amor Samar

Zid Noura

**Supervised by:**

Dr. MEHELLOU Zohra

**Board of Examiners:**

**Dr. HEZBRI Mouna**

**President**

University of El-Oued

**Dr. MEHELLOU Zohra**

**Supervisor**

University of El-Oued

**Dr. DJEGHOUBBI Mouna**

**Examiner**

University of El-Oued

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## **Abstract**

Throughout history, Black Americans, in particular women, have been fighting for their rights to vote and have political representation in the United States political system. Even after gaining the right to vote in 1965, Black women remained underrepresented and had limited access to the American political system. Despite their legal right to participate in presidential races, only in 1972, Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman, was able to run for a major party's nomination for presidency. Decades later, Kamala Harris made history by becoming the first woman of color to be elected as a Vice President and later run for the presidency. Thus, the current study aims to investigate the challenges faced by both candidates, Chisholm and Harris in their bid for the presidential seat in the United States. For this, qualitative research is conducted in hand depending on the comparative historical analysis method. Through comparing the presidential campaigns of Chisholm and Harris, the study reveals that Chisholm faced dismissive public and limited support even from Black politicians, which led to her exclusion. On the other hand, Harris benefited from greater political support and fundraising. However, both candidates have faced double discrimination due to their gender and race which influenced their campaigns in their political journeys.

**Key words:** Black women, Gender, Kamala Harris, Presidential race, Shirley Chisholm.

## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

<b>AFSCME</b>	The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
<b>NAACP</b>	The National Association for the Advancement for Colored People
<b>SNCC</b>	the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
<b>U.S.</b>	United States
<b>USA</b>	The United States of America
<b>VRA</b>	The Voting Rights Act

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# General Introduction

## 1. Background of the Study

Black women running for president of the United States represent a bold challenge to the status quo since it tackles two forms of discrimination, race and gender. Black women have been underrepresented in politics and presidential campaigns, despite having a long history of social and civil rights movements seeking political involvement and leadership. This underrepresentation is due to institutional barriers, including low party support, limited campaign finance, biased media coverage, and persistent stereotypes that shape the public's perception of leadership, particularly about women of marginalized races. Black women continue to be excluded from the highest positions of politics even though they have continuously been essential in influencing public opinion, voter mobilization, and election results as voters. In addition to carrying a heavy political weight, a Black woman's presidential campaign has strong symbolic meaning since it elevates racial justice and gender equality concerns to the fore of the national political conversation. Nevertheless, this underrepresentation and structural barriers became more tangible when examining the real-life stories of Black women who have challenged the history of United States politics.

Outstanding figures such as Shirley Chisholm who made history in 1972 as the first Black woman to run for president under a major political party. In addition to her identification, her candidacy was historic due to her fearless and unreserved platform, which tackled issues of economic, gender, and racial inequality. By challenging political conventions and cultural expectations, Chisholm's campaign demonstrated that gender and color are not barriers to leadership. Thus, her entry into the presidential contest was a moment that set an example of bravery for future generations. Following on her steps, Kamala Harris, who broke three historical barriers in 2020 to become the first Black person, the first woman, and the first South Asian, of Black identity

as she identifies, to be elected Vice President of the United States, continued this tradition of pioneering leadership. Harris's ascent to one of the most important positions in the nation is a sign of both progress and the continued inequities Black women still experience in American politics. Her story serves as a reminder of the combined pressures of racial and gendered norms, as well as the heightened public scrutiny that women of color face.

Collectively, these significant figures demonstrate the challenges and possibilities faced by Black women in political leadership, and their stories are crucial case studies for understanding the evolution of power, identity, and representation in the United States. In light of these opinions, this research seeks to assess the validity that intersectionality, systematic racism and media bias have contributed in one way or another to hindering Black women's access to politics.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Black individuals, particularly women, continue to be ignored in the U.S. even after many years of struggle for political representation and numerous obstacles of race and gender equality. From Shirley Chisholm's 1972 campaign to Kamala Harris's vice presidency in the third decade of the twenty-first century, this study examines the journeys that reshaped Black women's representation in the American political system and presidential races.

## **3. Research Questions**

This study seeks to fundamentally provide conclusive answers to the following questions:

1. What specific obstacles and challenges have the Black people, especially females, faced in their path to political representation?

2. How did the campaigns of Shirley Chisholm reflect broader attitudes towards race and gender in the USA?

3. To what extent did these campaigns reshape the political landscape for Black women in leadership, from the time of Chisholm to that of Kamala Harris?

#### **4. Aims of the Study**

On the ground of what is stated above, the current study aims to investigate the evolution of Black women's roles in U.S. politics and presidential races, including the challenges they faced, as well as interpreting the impact of race and gender in the American political landscape and uncovering the structural and societal transformations that have influenced the political trajectory of Black women. Moreover, it provides a historical overview of the contextual significance of Shirley Chisholm and Kamala Harris's journeys by listing the forms of racial discrimination social and systematic challenges they faced in the presidential elections.

#### **5. The Significance of the Research**

The significance of this study stems from several points from different angles. Firstly, it highlights the impact of racial background and gender on political representation in the United States. Secondly, while numerous have examined Black women's role in American politics, this study offers a comparative prescriptive by analyzing the political journeys of Shirley Chisholm and Kamala Harris who struggled on their way toward the presidency of the United States. Thus, throughout this comparison and by shedding light on the never changing stereotypes in the U.S. politics, this research work opens the door to enhancing the understanding of the evolution of Black women's political representation and supporting efforts toward social justice and equitable representation.

## **6. Research Methodology**

The method used to conduct this research is comparative historical analysis. In this respect, it is considered a qualitative research where the necessary data relevant to the research theme is gathered via reviewing reliable books and articles and analyzing historical documents relevant to the Black community within the U.S. politics. Through reviewing the data gathered from different sources such as government documents, newspaper articles, memoirs and tertiary sources, the study concludes with comparison and analysis to generate the common and distinctive features between Shirley Chisholm and Kamala Harris presidential experience.

## **7. Structure of the Study**

To achieve the study's aims by answering the research questions, the layout of the dissertation is divided into two chapters. The first chapter is about tracing the history of the Black community in the U.S. politics moving to Black women's struggles in particular. This section focuses on the evolution of Black people's entry into the political arena, starting from their status as enslaved individuals subjected to exploitation, leading to their attainment of full civil rights. The second chapter is devoted to comparing Chisholm's and Harris's experiences in the U.S. presidential race by covering all the common and different points, struggles, experiences and presidential campaigns.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

# **A History of Hardships: Black Women and Their Path to the U.S. Presidency**

# **Chapter One: A History of Hardships: Black Women and Their Path to the U.S.**

## **Presidency**

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Conclusion.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

## **Introduction**

To better comprehend the context of the journey of African Americans, in particular women, in their struggle to gain the right to vote and have political representation in the US political system, the current chapter attempts to track the history of Black Americans since their forced migration and enslavement to the country to their first steps towards presidency. First, this chapter opens with an account of early Black history, enslavement, and their struggles during the Civil War. Second, it traces the history of Black women's contribution to the Civil Rights Movement and their impact in empowering their political representation by winning the right to vote. Finally, the chapter narrows the emphasis to elaborate on Black women's victory in winning crucial leadership roles at the highest levels of government.

### **1.1. Early African American Women History during Slavery (1776-1865)**

Even the broadest construction of the matriarch concept would not render it applicable to the Black enslaved women. Therefore, it should not be assumed that she had no important function in the enslaved community. It is difficult to dispute her vital efforts to guarantee her people's existence. Her actions would have been notable even if she had not done anything more. Although significant, her worries and battles for physical survival did not make up her most notable contributions. The Black woman was tasked with spreading awareness and encouraging resistance due to the harsh intensity of the situation. There has been a lot of discussion about Black males and resistance, but not much about the special bond that Black women had with the resistance. It is necessary to examine the larger meaning of slavery, and American slavery specifically, to comprehend the role she had in fostering and intensifying the movement for freedom. Because the master needs the slave far more than the slave needs the master, she could gain a practical understanding of the oppressor's complete reliance on her by providing invaluable labor for his

enrichment. Black women could also see that, even though their productive activity was completely controlled by the master, it was evidence of their capacity to change things (Davis, 2010).

Black women played a pivotal role in the struggle against slavery, not only as victims of its brutality but as fierce resisters and strategic leaders. One of the most trailblazing figures in this fight was Harriet Tubman. She was an American abolitionist and social activist. After escaping slavery, Tubman made around 13 missions to rescue approximately 70 enslaved people, including her family and friends. She was the head of the Intelligence Service in the Department of the South during the Civil War and the only American woman to lead Black and white troops on the battlefield. She was a co-planner with Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, Wendell Phillips, Gerrit Smith, and other antislavery movement leaders (National Park Service, 2025).

In her work, Davis (2010) provides several examples where Black women faced severe punishments for defying and resisting their status as oppressed people. In 1730, a French soldier in New Orleans beat an enslaved female for defying him, leading to her execution along with eight men. In 1740, Charleston, South Carolina, sentenced a Black woman to death for arson. In 1776, an enslaved woman in Maryland was executed for setting fire to her master's home. In 1774, rebellious slaves in Saint Andrew's Parish, Georgia, executed several owners before being apprehended. Moreover, in their article, Elliott and Hughes (2019) highlight the specific and gendered forms of violence that enslaved Black women endured, particularly sexual abuse, as a tool of domination deeply embedded in Southern patriarchal culture. The Black woman was subjected to sexual abuse, which has been widely reported. It is typically explained because of Southern culture's masculine dominance, which held that the violent sexual behavior that white men craved could not compromise the purity of white women. Interactions with his possessions would be a manifestation

of his innate desires. The white man's brutal actions would represent the attempt to overcome the resistance that the Black woman was able to impose. The master would be exposing the Black enslaved woman to the extreme kind of terrorism that is specifically tailored for women: rape if he confronted her as an adversary in such an action. The female slave would be particularly vulnerable to rape because of the already abusive nature of plantation life. Additionally, she might be easiest to control if the master devised a kind of ransom system that required her to use her body as payment for food, less severe punishment, and her children's safety.

The enslaved community had been greatly impacted by the widespread rape of enslaved women. However, it was unable to achieve its fundamental goal of suppressing the urge to fight. Since slaves generally refused to accept their bondage, countless Black women did not passively submit to these injustices. Enslaved women's confrontations with sexual struggles were an extension of the resistance that pervaded their everyday lives. This was therefore another instance of insurgency, a reaction to sexual repression with a political undertone (Davis, 2010).

## **1.2. The Civil War (1861-1865)**

The Civil War was viewed by the majority of African Americans as a chance to abolish African enslavement in the United States and to establish the fundamental truth that African Americans alone would be responsible for their independence. Because it marked the end of years of one kind of struggle and the beginning of another, the war itself was a crucial and defining chapter in African American history, despite its brief duration. The antebellum and post-bellum actions of African Americans, their pre-Civil War activities, and their post-war experiences are still used to describe African American history (Forbes, 1998).

Every Black woman who was alive at the time had a story to tell. Many of these stories were marked by hardship, loss, hunger, and illness. Others reflected the complexity of newfound

freedom, filled with both hope and anxiety about the future. Approximately half a million free and four million enslaved African-American women found themselves living in a dramatically different United States by the end of the Civil War. Building on this historical moment, Black women assumed critical roles during the war. As historian Ella Forbes (1998) outlines, they served as nurses, cooks, seamstresses, recruiters, teachers, and activists. They also contributed indirectly as entrepreneurs and caretakers, while resisting oppression through acts of sabotage, strikes, and defiance. Their efforts not only supported the war but also refined a longstanding tradition of Black women's activism, resistance, and community leadership.

Davis's diary is one example among many that reveal how Black women used personal writing to assert their presence in the historical narrative. At a time when Black voices, especially those of women, were often excluded from public discourse, diaries, letters, and memoirs served as acts of self-definition and resistance. These personal accounts not only preserved the emotional and spiritual lives of Black women but also offered firsthand documentation of pivotal moments in American history. To describe her celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Emilie Frances Davis wrote in her diaries,

Today has bin a memorable day. I thank God I have bin here to see it. The day was religiously observed, all the churches were open. We had quite a Jubilee in the evening, I went to Jones to a party, had a very blessest time. (as cited in Whitehead, 2014, p. 81)

The passage highlights Davis's happiness at the Emancipation Proclamation announcement and the church's role as a social hub during the Civil War. Davis's handwritten diaries provide a unique perspective on being a Black woman during the war, highlighting significant social and political events and the importance of Black women's participation in American history.

### **1.3. The Reconstruction Era (1865-1877/ 1900)**

The Thirteenth Amendment released all slaves in the United States, regardless of where they lived, following the Civil War, and the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 freed African Americans in states that were in rebellion. The bulk of Southern Blacks thus had to deal with the same challenge that Northern Blacks had faced: that of a free people encircled by a large number of antagonistic whites. After the Emancipation Proclamation, two more years of war, African American troops serving, and the Confederacy's collapse, the country was still ill-equipped to handle the issue of full citizenship for its newly emancipated black residents. To restructure the Southern states following the Civil War, provide the means for their readmission into the Union, and establish the parameters for coexistence between whites and blacks in a society free from slavery, Congress instituted Reconstruction between 1866 and 1877 (Library of Congress, n.d.).

However, the South saw Reconstruction as a humiliating, even vengeful imposition. Many white Southerners resented the presence of federal troops enforcing new laws, the political participation of formerly enslaved people, and the loss of the antebellum social hierarchy. They viewed the changes as punishment rather than progress and as an infringement on their traditional way of life. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, also referred to as the "Reconstruction Amendments," were ratified between 1865 and 1870. They guaranteed birthright citizenship, due process, and "equal protection of the laws" under the federal and state governments, abolished slavery in the United States, and increased voting rights by outlawing discrimination on the basis of race, color, or prior condition of servitude (Historical Society of the New York Courts, n.d.).

Although the Reconstruction Amendments granted African Americans formal legal rights, the reality on the ground was far more complex. During Reconstruction, Black Americans

made significant political gains when thousands voted many were elected to local and state offices, and a few even served in Congress. Freedmen's schools were established, and African Americans began building independent churches and communities. However, according to History.com (2025), these advancements triggered a fierce backlash from many white Southerners. White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan emerged, using violence and intimidation to suppress Black political participation. As Reconstruction ended and federal troops withdrew from the South in 1877, many of the gains made by African Americans were rolled back. The rise of Jim Crow laws and disenfranchisement tactics led to nearly a century of institutionalized racial segregation and inequality.

#### **1.4. Jim Crow Era. (1877-mid 1960s)**

Racial segregation was made lawful by several state and municipal laws known as "Jim Crow laws." The laws, which were in place from the post-Civil War era until 1968 and were named after a Black minstrel show figure, were designed to disenfranchise African Americans by preventing them from voting, obtaining employment, receiving an education, and having access to other civil rights. Attempts to violate Jim Crow laws were frequently met with violence, arrest, fines, jail time, and sometimes death. The principle of "separate but equal," which was upheld by the Supreme Court's 1896 decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, served as the legal basis for these laws, but in reality, Black people were given far fewer facilities and opportunities than whites. Also, schools and neighborhoods were segregated, businesses posted "Whites Only" signs, and several states forced Black people to purchase property before they could vote. Suburban developments in the North and South were constructed with legal covenants that prohibited Black families following World War II. Thus, Black people frequently had trouble or were unable to get mortgages for homes in specific "red-lined" districts. Despite these obstacles, Blacks established powerful institutions like schools,

churches, and mutual assistance organizations, setting the stage for further resistance (History, 2018).

Despite the efforts made by Black women advocates for women's rights to address the inequalities enforced during the oppressive Jim Crow era, their contributions have been overlooked. They played a key role in civil rights activism, community organization, and child education. Many worked in church organizations, women's clubs, and civil rights actions to improve their communities while also holding jobs as teachers, nurses, and domestic helpers. In the 1880s, Black reformers began organizing groups like the National Association of Colored Women. Leaders like Mary Church Terrell battled for both racial and gender equality, while others like Ida B. Wells bravely chronicled and campaigned against lynching (Lange, 2015).

### **1.5. The Impact of the Great Migration on Black American's Political Power**

The first and second Great Migrations, which took place between 1910 and 1970, saw over six million African Americans migrating from the South to the North of the United States. During this time, the Civil Rights Movement was successfully prevailing to fight for eradicating systematic racial segregation. Factors to abandon the South, including racial discrimination, sharecropping, inequality and racial violence prompted many African Americans to migrate. African Americans in the North gradually gained access to industrial jobs, gained the right to vote and even won elected office, and saw the growth of thriving, culturally diverse neighborhoods in northern cities. Black Southerners started to establish communities in the North despite severe prejudice, especially in housing and occupation, which led to a chain migration of acquaintances and relatives (Calderon et al., 2021). Calderon et al. (2021) added that many of the migrants in the first ten years were urban, educated individuals with the means and abilities to go to northern states and find work. However, the number of migrants rose sharply during World War I as the United States prepared for

war and northern industry workers enlisted in the military. A few decades later, millions of Black voters who had been denied the right to vote in the South were resettled in the North, and the Great Migration drastically altered Northern electorates. In several cases, political parties and politicians thought that African American voters held the key to winning elections, so they often changed their strategies and targeted Black voters with special appeals to gain their support and votes (Grant, 2020).

The Black community in the North played a crucial role in forming organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People. Many black leaders were educated, active and even a part of the middle classes which gave them the skills to fight against racism, violence and injustice happening in the South.

#### **1.6. The NAACP: Foundation and Mission of the Movement**

The NAACP is a civil rights group in the United States. It was founded in 1909 as an interracial effort to promote justice for African Americans (NAACP, n.d.). Following the lynching of hundreds of Black men in southern states in the early 1900s and the violent race riots in Springfield, Illinois, in August 1908, White and African American civil rights activists met in New York City, NY, to discuss ways to address the growing racism and violence against people of color in the US (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

A number of white liberals, including Mary White Ovington and Oswald Garrison Villard, who were both descended from abolitionists William English Walling and Dr. Henry Moscowitz, expressed their outrage at the violence against Black people and called for a meeting to address racial fairness. The call was issued on the centennial of Lincoln's birth and was signed by over 60 people, seven of whom were African Americans, including intellectuals, labor reformers, social workers, suffragists, and journalists like W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida Wells-Barnett, Mary Church

Terrell, Mary White Ovington, Henry Moskowitz, and others. Du Bois was the only Black person on the founding executive team, serving as director of publishing and research (Raleigh-Apex NAACP, n.d.).

The NAACP was instrumental in the legal battle against voting restrictions within a few years of its establishment. The NAACP played a key role in advocating for the enactment of the historic Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 under President Lyndon B. Johnson (District 300.n.d.).

### **1.6.1. Black Women in NAACP**

Black women's contributions are deeply ingrained in the history of the NAACP and have been crucial in the organization's struggle for racial justice. Although they are sometimes overlooked, Mary Eliza Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells-Barnett's leadership, activity, and strategic vision impacted significant initiatives and furthered the objectives of the NAACP.

### **1.6.2. Ida B. Wells-Barnett**

Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931), a fierce journalist, civil rights activist, and supporter of women's rights, is renowned for her efforts to prevent lynching. She influenced public opinion against lynching through her writings, lectures, and newspaper articles in the northern United States and Great Britain. She oversaw the African American Council's anti-lynching division while serving as its secretary. The foundation for the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign was established by her actions. Even though she also assisted in founding the NAACP, she stopped being active after 1912 because she did not trust the organization's moderate stance and white leadership. She persisted in her autonomous pursuit of social justice, concentrating on municipal improvements and women's suffrage (Library of Congress, n.d.).

### **1.6.3. Mary Eliza Church Terrell**

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, renowned African American activist Mary Eliza Church Terrell fought for women's suffrage and racial equality. She was a strong advocate for civil rights and women's rights as well. She later helped establish the College Alumnae Club in 1910, which subsequently became the National Association of University Women (National Women's History Museum, n.d.).

## **1.7. The Civil Rights Movement**

After decades of slavery, racial injustice, and discrimination, a plethora of African Americans, both men and women, started to protest against legal segregation, injustice, and racism by advocating the abolition of white supremacy, which separated Black people from the rest of American society and stigmatized them as inferiors. These demands were realized as part of the Civil Rights Movement, which spanned from 1940s to 1960s, exhibiting the resilience and determination of African Americans to face both racial and gender inequality (Glennon, 1991). Women's contribution to the Civil Rights Movement was both profound and indispensable, where the names of several African American female activists, who later became icons in the civil rights protests, sparked in the arena of the peaceful protests, advocating their rights as people of color and as females, these names include: Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer.

### **1.7.1. Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott**

Preceding the Montgomery bus boycott, Jim Crow laws enacted the racial segregation of the Montgomery Bus Line which mandated that African-Americans were denied the right to be employed as drivers. They were obliged to ride in the back of the bus, and were regularly asked to give up their seats to white people, though black passengers represented 75% of the bus system's

users. In addition, the majority of the bus drivers and white passengers treated Black passengers inadequately outside of the lines of law, assaulting and degrading them (Berkhalter, 2006).

A long time active member of NAACP and a rigid Black civil rights activist, Rosa Parks was arrested and imprisoned on December 1, 1955, for her defiant act in Montgomery, Alabama. The reason behind her imprisonments is that she refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger as required by the city's segregation laws. Parks quickly rose to prominence as a civil rights icon, and her arrest was interpreted as a chance to protest and challenge the segregation laws. This sparked a year-long bus boycott against the public transportation system, spearheaded by NAACP members Martin Luther King and E. D. Nixon (The Martin Luther King Research and Education Institute, n.d.). On June 5, 1956, a federal appeals court in Montgomery declared that any legislation mandating racially discriminatory bus seating was unconstitutional due to its violation of the U.S. Constitution's 14th Amendment, which guarantees equal rights and protection under state and federal laws for all Americans, regardless of race. When Montgomery appealed the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld the lower court's decision on December 20, 1956, the city's buses were integrated ending by that the 382-day Montgomery Bus Boycott (The U.S. Civil Rights Movement, 2024).

In conclusion, the entire force of civil rights was unleashed because of the Montgomery bus boycott, the ensuing rallies, and Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat. The Black community united and showed their capacity to resist segregation in a nonviolent manner as a result of Parks' defiance. In addition, the boycott's success cleared the way for important future social and political reforms and gave Black Americans their constitutional rights by sparking the civil rights movement, which allowed people of color to struggle for equality.

### **1.7.2. Ella Baker**

A pivotal figure in the Civil Rights Movement, Ella Baker is renowned for her steadfast support of grassroots organizing and participatory democracy, according to the SNCC Digital Gateway (n.d.). During the 1960 sit-in campaign, she saw firsthand the growing power and potential of student activists while serving as the Executive Secretary of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Baker wisely created an environment that allowed these young leaders to carve out their route rather than attempting to manage or guide this energy. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization that would play a crucial role in the struggle for civil rights, was founded as a result of the crucial conference that Baker arranged at Shaw University. Encouraging regular people to become change agents was at the heart of Baker's concept. Her vast experience with the NAACP, where she held the position of Director of Branches, allowed her to appreciate the strength of group effort and the effectiveness of decentralized leadership. "Strong people don't need strong leaders," her well-known phrase, sums up her philosophy of developing leadership from the ground up. Baker's legacy is found in the innumerable people she enabled to fight for justice as well as in the organizations she helped establish (SNCC Digital Gateway, n.d.).

### **1.7.3. Fannie Lou Hamer**

Fannie Lou Hamer was born into a sharecropper household and was the youngest of twenty children. For eighteen years of her life, she and her siblings were timekeepers and sharecroppers on the Dee Marlow plantation in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Later in 1962, she was fired from her job in a cotton plantation for attempting to register to vote. The following year, she became the field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. By the age of forty-four, Fannie Lou Hamer discovered she was eligible to vote. After attending a 1962 meeting of

the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), she realized that her vote could change American culture. Thus, along with 17 other activists, Hamer joined the voter registration drive and journeyed to Indianola, Mississippi and she rose to become the SNCC's oldest field secretary and one of the movement's most important activists. Ultimately, The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was made possible by Hamer's efforts, which attracted national notice during the 1964 Democratic National Convention (National Museum of African American History, 2023).

### **1.8. The Voting Rights Act (1965)**

Garrow (2015) confirms that only white men who owned property and were at least 21 years old were eligible to vote, and neither Black men nor women were permitted to do so until the middle of the 19th century. However, on February 3, 1870, African American men were granted the right to vote by the 15th Amendment to the US Constitution, which stated that no one could be refused the right to vote on the grounds of race, color, or history of slavery. However, in the South, African Americans faced significant barriers to voting, including poll taxes, literacy tests, and other bureaucratic regulations that denied them the opportunity to vote. Black people were also subjected to harassment, threats, economic repercussions, and emotional and physical assault when attempting to register or vote. Consequently, African-American voter registration was extremely limited, leaving them with very limited to almost zero political representation and power.

According to the National Archives and Records Administration (n.d.), key documents from the period reveal that in 1964 and in response, multiple nonviolent protests, led by Martin Luther King, were planned by Civil Rights activists demanding equality in the voting system. These protests were faced with serious brutality from the police which attracted increased attention to the issue of voting rights. Moreover, the murder of voting rights activists in Mississippi, as well as the violence imposed by white state police on nonviolent demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, drew

national attention to this issue. As a result, President Johnson and the Congress announced their intention to enact substantial and productive national voting rights legislation, ensuring that the local and federal government would not in any way prevent any citizen from voting regardless of his/her race, gender, or ethnicity. In the end, the combination of public outrage at police violence and President Johnson's political grant prompted Congress to adopt the voting rights legislation on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1965 (National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

## **1.9. Post-Civil Rights Movements Politics in the USA**

The post-Civil Rights Movement era in the United States, which began in the late 1960s and continues to this day, is a complex time that has seen both progress and continuous challenges for Black Americans, according to a significant study of the era by Wasow (2011). It witnessed a growth in the middle class, cultural progress and mainly an increased political representation while at the same time, there is still systematic racism, economic inequality and racial profiling challenging the Black community. Additionally, as detailed by Wasow (2011), Black women have consistently fought for representation and inclusion in American politics, despite structural obstacles from racism and sexism. They have made a name for themselves in a historically excluded system, from Reconstruction to modern campaigns. Their efforts focus on equity and social justice, highlighting their role in creating a more representative democracy and establishing their legitimate position in the political system.

### **1.9.1. Black Community in Politics**

Black Americans achieved significant strides in politics between World War II and the late 1960s. Black voters were starting to have a significant influence on elections in both major states and the federal government before the Voting Rights Act (VRA) was passed. Only seven

northern states, where 87% of the Black population lived, had three-quarters of the electoral votes required to win the presidency. Black voter registration increased from 3 percent in 1940 to 42 percent in 1964, particularly in the South, despite deliberate attempts to deny them the right to vote (Wasow, 2011). Black political dominance was further cemented after the VRA was passed in 1965 and Black registration increased, particularly in the South as explored by Wasow (2011).

### **1.9.2. Electoral Politics and the Voting Rights Act from 1965 to 2006**

As noted before, Southern black voters increased from 3% in 1940 to 62% in 1968 as a result of population changes, the civil rights movement, and the historic enactment of the Voting Rights Act (VRA). Even though many African Americans could now vote, very few of them were elected to public office. In 1982, not satisfied with the slow progress, lawmakers and activists effectively changed the VRA to concentrate minority votes in separate minority districts to combat black voter dilution. Consequently, the VRA's goal changed from its initial focus on removing barriers to African American suffrage to guarantee minority candidates' electoral success by establishing majority-minority districts. Some academics contend that while the new VRA significantly boosted the number of black elected officials, it also reduced the amount of black political influence in certain districts by grouping black voters into majority-minority districts (Wasow, 2011).

### **1.10. Progression of Black Women in the US Political Government**

Despite long-standing prejudice and systemic barriers, data patterns indicate a gradual but uneven rise in their power. From the halls of Congress to state legislatures and the highest echelons of the executive branch, black women are gradually leaving their mark and demonstrating their vital role in shaping American democracy. More than 200 women have run for president of the

United States since Victoria Woodhull's 1872 campaign, but the majority have received little support. Kamala Harris and Shirley Chisholm have entered the presidential race despite the underrepresentation of Black women. Chisholm's efforts to break down racial and gender barriers have benefited many others, particularly women of all races and minorities, and they have cleared the path for their future political success (Central State University, 2023).

African American women were heavily involved in politics with a huge impact throughout Barack Obama's presidency (2009–2017). They offered the then-unknown Obama and supported him by promising him an early win against Clinton in 2008 when a third of Democratic supporters were African American women. Despite serving in office for seven years, it is argued that President Obama's administration did not enact significant policies specifically designed to improve the lives of Black women although being among the worst impacted by the crisis, they have reaped the least benefits from the economic recovery (Haines, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

It has become clear that the issue of race and gender has been a persistent threat to Black women throughout the history of U.S. politics. For the past century, Black women fought for their rights to be present there in the governmental field. Nevertheless, in modern days, their actual equity in the U.S. government remains ongoing as it is restricted by structural obstacles and intersectional discrimination. Therefore, their unquestionable impact on policy discussions and voter mobilization highlights their crucial role in forming American democracy and gives the hope that their sustained leadership will open the door for a day when a Black woman to hold the presidency is not only feasible but also a reality. Decades apart, Shirley Chisholm and Kamala Harris, two outstanding black women rose to the national presidential race in the U.S. by challenging norms and inspiring generations through their journeys and historic campaigns.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Reaching the Summit: Shirley Chisholm and Kamala Harris in the US Presidential Race**

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## **Introduction**

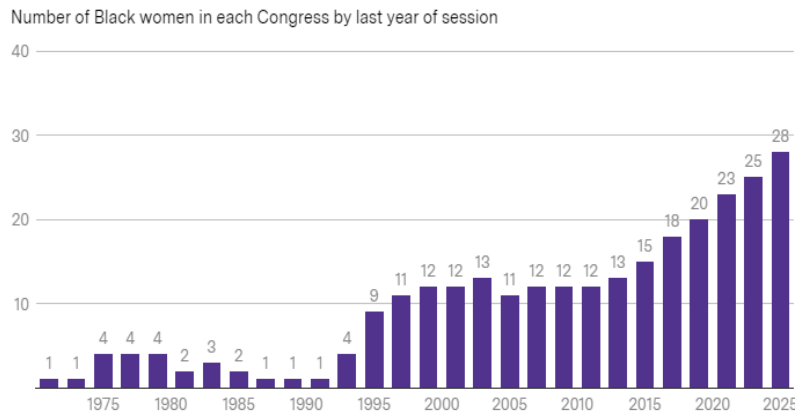
Race, gender, and power are just a few of the challenges that Black women in particular have had to overcome in order to become president of the United States. This chapter explores the challenges faced by two extraordinary people who defied expectations and altered the political landscape of the United States, as well as the experiences of Black woman in American politics: Kamala Harris and Shirley Chisholm. Chisholm was the first Black women to run for presidency in 1972 and the one who paved the way to others including Harris who walked upon Chisholm's legacy decades later in 2020. Additionally, this chapter highlights how their experiences mirror larger changes in the American politics by analyzing and contrasting the parallels, divergences, obstacles, and tactics that shaped their respective trajectories and campaigns.

### **2.1. From the Margin to the Center: Black Women's Journey in the U.S. Politics**

A closer examination of the American history of Congress and Black women who won seats there, Shirley Chisholm's name must be mentioned. She was the first African American woman elected to the House of Representatives. Chisholm first served in the state assembly before being voted to the House in 1968. Currently, Black women comprise more than 10 percent of all congresswomen who have ever served in the House of Representatives. Five Black women from the South received seats to the House of Representatives in 1992, most likely as a result of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Schreiber & Lawrence, 2006). States with a high Black population and municipal leaders were elected as a result of the region's massive increase in Black voter registration and turnout, positioning them to run for Congress. Even while there were still relatively few Black women in the House of Representatives, their percentage increased significantly during the 1990s. Thirteen new Black women representing non-South constituents in California, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio were elected between 1990 and 2000. Interestingly, after Shirley Chisholm's initial win in

1968, no other Black woman from the northeast has been elected (Schreiber & Lawrence, 2006). Black women's representation in the US Congress has gradually improved over the last 50 years, from 1975 to 2025, as depicted in the bar chart below (Figure 1). It highlights a significant and steadily increasing pattern that started at a relatively low starting base. The fact that there was just one Black woman in office in 1975 implies that the legislature was not diverse, claims Haines (2023). Over the years, the percentage of Black women in Congress has risen consistently. The progress is still slow since Black women continue to face challenges in the political system.

**Figure 2. 1** *The Congressional Representation of Black Women in the US. from 1975 to 2025*



*Note.* Data does not include non-voting delegates. Counts reflect end-of-session number of officeholders except for the 2025 count which reflects the numbers of June 2023.

*Note.* Adapted from Black Women in Politics 2023, 2023, Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University ([https://cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/2023-06/Black%20Women%20in%20Politics%202023\\_Final.pdf](https://cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/2023-06/Black%20Women%20in%20Politics%202023_Final.pdf)).

For Statewide Elective Executive Office, just 2.8% of all statewide elective leaders are women of color. The preconceptions and obstacles Black women encounter in electoral politics are

not the same as those experienced by white women or men from different races throughout American history; rather, race and gender interact to provide minority women with particular chances and difficulties. For instance, unfavorable stereotypes faced by Black women such as the sexuality and race features differ from those that affect others (Sanbonmatsu, 2017). As an illustration, the table below shows the list of Black women who have ever held statewide elective across the US. Even though over 40% of all executive posts are currently serving, Black women still only make up 3.2% of all statewide executive positions in the US. No Black woman has ever served as governor. It was not until 2018 that Stacey Abrams became the first Black woman to receive a major party nomination for governor of the United States (Center for American Women and Politics, 2023).

**Figure 2. 2** *Black Women Holding Statewide Elective Executive Office from 1979 to 2023*

Name	State	Office	Party	Dates of Service
Velvalea "Vel" Phillips	WI	Secretary of State	D	1979-1983
Pamela Carter	IN	Attorney General	D	1993-1997
Vikki Buckley	CO	Secretary of State	R	1995-1999
Denise Nappier	CT	Treasurer	D	1999-2019
Karen Freeman-Wilson	IN	Attorney General	D	2000-2001
Jennette Bradley	OH	Lieutenant Governor	R	2003-2005
		Treasurer	R	2005-2007
Velda Jones Potter	DE	Treasurer	D	2009-2011
Sandra D. Kennedy	AZ	Corporation Commissioner	D	2009-2013; 2019-2023
Jennifer Carroll	FL	Lieutenant Governor	R	2011-2013
Kamala Harris	CA	Attorney General	D	2011-2017
Jenean Hampton	KY	Lieutenant Governor	R	2015-2019
Sheila Oliver	NJ	Lieutenant Governor	D	2018-Present
Carolyn Stanford Taylor	WI	Sup. of Public Instruction	D	2019-2021
Juliana Stratton	IL	Lieutenant Governor	D	2019-Present
Letitia "Tish" James	NY	Attorney General	D	2019-Present
Natalie Braswell	CT	Comptroller	D	2021-2023
Shirley Weber	CA	Secretary of State	D	2021-Present
Sabina Matos	RI	Lieutenant Governor	D	2021-Present
Winsome Sears	VA	Lieutenant Governor	R	2022-Present
Malia Cohen	CA	Controllor	D	2023-Present
Stephanie Thomas	CT	Secretary of State	D	2023-Present
Lydia York	DE	Auditor	D	2023-Present
Andrea Campbell	MA	Attorney General	D	2023-Present

*Note.* Adapted from Black Women in Politics 2023, 2023, Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University ([https://cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/2023-06/Black%20Women%20in%20Politics%202023\\_Final.pdf](https://cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/2023-06/Black%20Women%20in%20Politics%202023_Final.pdf)).

In summary, Black women's entry into American politics has been marked by bravery and resolve. Black women have challenged and changed the American politics by modifying

legislation, redefining leadership, and obtaining representation despite decades of institutionalized racial and gender-based discrimination starting with Shirley Chisholm's valor moving to the historic choice of Kamala Harris as the Vice President.

## **2.2. Shirley Chisholm: A Legacy of Inspiration**

Anita Shirley St. Hill was born on November 30, 1924, in Brooklyn, New York. Chisholm was the eldest of four daughters born to West Indian immigrant parents Ruby Seale St. Hill, a Barbados seamstress, and Charles St. Hill, a Guyana factory worker. She earned awards on the debate team at Brooklyn College magna laude in 1946 after graduating from Brooklyn Girls' High in 1942. Chisholm began her career as a nursery school teacher. She wed private investigator Conrad Q. Chisholm in 1949; the two parted ways in 1977. Later in 1951, she graduated with a master's degree in early childhood education from Columbia University. Chisholm had joined the New York City Division of Day Care as a consultant by 1960. She also joined many local branches of the League of Women Voters, the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People (NAACP) since she was always conscious of racial and gender injustice (Michals, 2015).

After her graduation in 1946, Chisholm started out in education as a teacher's assistant at the Madison Child Care Center after working as a teacher's assistant at the Mount Calvary Child Care Center in Harlem. She later worked as a consultant for the New York City Division of Day Care, where she oversaw ten childcare facilities. Despite being known as a trailblazing politician, Chisholm always considered herself a teacher first. Following in her activist foremothers' footsteps, Chisholm pursued a career in politics. While attending Brooklyn College, she initially got involved in the local Civil Rights and different community organizations by joining groups including the Brooklyn Urban League, the Brooklyn chapter of the NAACP, the Harriet Tubman Society, the Debating Society, and the Brooklyn League of Women Voters (Winslow, 2020).

### **2.3. Kamala Harris: From Roots to Rise**

Kamala Devi Harris was born in 1964 in Oakland, California, into a well-educated immigrant family. Her father was Donald J. Harris, a professor of economics from Jamaica, and her mother, Shyamala Gopalan, was a breast cancer researcher from India. Harris's parents were both involved in the 1960s civil rights struggle. Growing up in such context, she was motivated to fight against injustice for the rest of her life by these early encounters. When Harris was seven years old, her parents' marriage ended. Harris and her sister relocated to Montreal after Gopalan secured research position in Canada five years later (Sinico & Gopalakrishnan, 2024). The former U.S. vice president went to Canadian high school. Harris then enrolled at Washington, D.C.'s Howard University, historically Black colleges and universities.

After graduating from the University of California Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco with a law degree, she started working at the district attorney's office in Alameda County. In 2003, Harris was chosen to serve as the City and County of San Francisco's district attorney. Later, Harris started shattering glass ceilings as soon as she became a lawyer and the first woman and the first African American to be elected Attorney General of California in 2010. Harris married attorney Doug Emhoff when she was Attorney General, and she became the stepmother of his two kids (Rothberg, 2020).

### **2.4. Two Eras, One Goal: Chisholm and Harris's Path towards the U.S. Politics**

Both Chisholm and Harris emerged onto the American politics stage through different yet similar paths. Chisholm began her journey in the 1960s, eventually running for presidency in 1972 by being the first of her race and gender to be nominated and decades later, Harris entered politics arena to smoothly become a Vice President. Both women's political beginnings reflect unique journeys of leadership among American Black women.

Chisholm became the second African American to serve in the New York State Legislature in 1964, defying hundreds of years of tradition that excluded Black people and women from politics and national leadership by running for the New York State Assembly. As a Democrat, she was elected to the New York State Assembly, where she remained until 1968. Chisholm championed the launch of the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) program and spearheaded the legislative push to enact a measure extending unemployment insurance to domestic workers. Underprivileged students would be able to enroll in college while undergoing rigorous remedial instruction thanks to this initiative (Friends of Brower Park, n.d.).

In comparison with Chisholm, Harris became just the second Black woman elected to the Senate in American history in 2016 when she was elected as a Senator for California. In her article, Rothberg (2020) explains how Kamala Harris emerged on the political scene stating that among other things, Harris started serving on the Judiciary Committee and the Select Committee on Intelligence. Republican senators criticized her and occasionally interrupted her hearings because of her prosecutorial approach to questioning witnesses.

In January 2019, Harris published her memoir *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey*, she declared shortly afterward that she would run for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination. Harris was seen as one of the front-runners from the beginning, and she became well-known after having a heated argument with fellow candidate Joe Biden during a primary discussion about Biden's opposition to school busing in the 1970s and 1980s, among other racial issues. Her campaign, however, failed because of criticism from more left-wing Democrats on her background as a prosecutor, worries about her plan, and her inconsistent campaigning performance. Her campaign was in major difficulty by September 2019, and Harris was the first of the leading contenders to withdraw from the race in December. Many Democrats urged Biden, the party's

presumed contender, to choose a Black woman as his running mate because they believed that she would be crucial to his chances of winning the presidency. This was in response to the growing problem of racial injustice in the United States. Harris became the first Black woman to appear on a major party's national ticket when Biden selected her in August 2020. In November, Kamala D. Harris became the first Black woman to be elected vice president of the United States in the presidential election of 2020. The U.S. Senate was evenly divided when Harris took office as vice President. More than any previous vice president, she cast 33 tie-breaking votes, including those that passed the Inflation Reduction Act and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (McNamee and Grant, 2025).

Despite the presence of a group opposing Ms. Harris, she enjoyed the support of a wide segment of society, especially from well-known elements in the political field, as each took the initiative to support her in his own way. Former President Barack Obama stated, via Twitter:

I've known Senator @KamalaHarris for a long time. She is more than prepared for the job. She's spent her career defending our Constitution and fighting for folks who need a fair shake. This is a good day for our country. Now let's go win this thing (2020, August 11)

In addition, Hillary Clinton, the 2016 Democratic presidential candidate stated, via Twitter:

I'm thrilled to welcome @KamalaHarris to a historic Democratic ticket. She's already proven herself to be an incredible public servant and leader. And I know she'll be a strong partner to @JoeBiden. Please join me in having her back and getting her elected. (World Economic Forum, 2020)

## **2.5. Beyond the Barriers: Comparing the Presidential Campaigns of Chisholm and Harris**

During a turbulent time marked by social movements, war, and an unpopular incumbent, Chisholm aimed to unite a broad coalition of women, people of color, young people, transgender individuals, and other underrepresented groups. Chisholm was the first Black woman to send delegates to a convention, despite campaigning in 11 states and receiving 2.7% of the national vote (Seidman, 2024). In her presidential campaign announcement speech, Chisholm stated that:

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 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 any big politicians or celebrities or any other prop. I am the candidate of the people of America. And my presence before you now symbolizes a new era in American political history. (C-SPAN, 2017)

Chisholm's speech and campaign announcement focused on her role as the "people's candidate," forging wide-ranging coalitions and alliances with women of all colors, ethnicities, students, new voters, and the working and low classes. Her attempts to organize a grassroots national campaign drew devoted supporters who wanted to change American politics from the top down, despite the campaign's lack of funding. A wide range of progressive voters and volunteers supported Chisholm's candidacy because of her progressive views on ending the Vietnam War, providing cheap education, reinvesting in programs that address poverty, women's rights, environmental change, and expanding civil rights laws. Despite their symbolic support for the first female president, many white feminists were unable to fully back Chisholm's candidacy over that of Democratic contender George McGovern because of the slim chances of her victory. The

Congressional Black Caucus and other Black male political leaders did not support her as well. Chisholm did not garner support from even Black women who were members of alliances with conventional Black political leadership. Thus, the Black political coalitions that were established to capitalize on the Black voter turnout in the 1972 elections were perceived as being disrupted by her campaign (Fraser, 2022).

Akin to Chisholm, on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024, Kamala Harris declared her intention to run for president in 2024 after Joe Biden withdrew from the contest. Harris was the first woman of color to head a major party's presidential ticket in the US, hence this declaration was historic. On August 2, 2024, she won the Democratic nomination in a virtual roll call vote. On August 6, 2024, Kamala announced her choice of Minnesota Governor Tim Walz as her running partner (Ballotpedia, 2024). In a video message presented during a joint conference with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Harris said:

We fight for the future — a future with affordable health care, affordable child care and paid leave, a future where we build a broad-based economy where every person, every American, has the opportunity to own a home, to start a business and to build wealth. And a future where we lower the cost of living for America's families, so that folks have a chance not just to get by but to get ahead. (AFSCME, 2024)

The main points of Kamala Harris's 2024 presidential campaign, which focused on social and economic justice as well as increasing opportunities for all Americans, especially middle-class and working-class families, are exactly reflected in this statement. Her political standing as someone who is working for a progressive agenda centered on raising people's standard of living is

highlighted by her statement, "We fight for the future." This is quite similar to what labor unions like AFSCME believe.

In the wake of President Joe Biden's declaration that he will not run for reelection in 2024 due to health issues and dwindling popularity, Kamala Harris made her official campaign debut in the pivotal battleground state of Wisconsin. Given its importance as a battleground state, Wisconsin was deliberately picked; Democrats lost it in 2016 and only just regained it back in 2020. With a focus on protecting democracy, particularly voting rights, and combating the increase of hate speech, Harris stressed a message of "national unity" in her speech in the face of what she saw as a significant political split endangering American democratic ideals. She also harshly criticized Donald Trump, her likely opponent, saying that he is running a divisive and dangerous campaign that is endangering the future of the nation. She cited Trump's prior attempts to incite supporters and overturn the results of the 2020 election, which were detailed in the committee's findings from January 6. Harris presented herself as a representation of steadiness and development. Due to its clarity and ability to appeal to both moderate and progressive voters, the speech garnered extensive media coverage and was viewed as a turning point in the Democratic contest (Witt, 2024).

Ultimately, both political campaigns of Chisholm and Harris in their pursuit of political office met with limited electoral success yet revolutionary in their messages sent: that Black women could stand as a serious contender for the highest office. Their journeys were not only about winning votes but more about transforming the political imagination of a nation.

## **2.6. Shared Struggles, Unique Perspectives: Chisholm, Harris, and the Power of Intersectional Advocacy**

The political ascent of Shirley Chisholm and Kamala Harris marks two pivotal challenges faced by Black women in the political arena, for being Black and women. Navigating the

dual oppressions of racism and sexism, Chisholm and Harris confronted those barriers that many of their white or male counterparts did not.

In Shirley Chisholm's account of her memoir (1970) entitled *Unbought and Unbossed*, Chisholm describes how she overcame a long-standing system, provided millions of people with a public voice, and laid the groundwork for her historic campaign to become the first African-American and female running for presidency of the United States. As she stated way before participating in the 1972 presidential race, "Sometimes the media makes me feel like a monkey in a cage. As soon as I was elected, the newspapers and networks started to besiege me" (Chisholm, 1970, p. 19). Later in 1972 and for the first time in American history, Chisholm, a Black woman ran for a major political party's presidential candidacy. There were other female candidates for the Democratic Party nomination besides her. Hawaii congresswoman Patsy T. Mink was on the ballot in a few states but she had pulled out of the race by May. Chisholm was aware that she had no chance of winning the Democratic Party's candidacy. However, she resisted being constrained by her sex and race. Chisholm thought she could create an alliance of women, Blacks, young people, and older whites who were fed up with the political system. For the financial support, about \$95,000 was donated to Chisholm's campaign by those who encouraged her to run and thought she could still have an impact even if she did not win. The entire cost of the campaign was \$300,000 (Jones, 2009).

In addition to this, Jones (2009) highlights another crucial aspect on the process of the Chisholm campaign. He further adds that Chisholm was not particularly supported by the national Black political convention, which took place in March 1972, the Congressional Black Caucus, or other female organizations even though Chisholm was a genuine contender. Chisholm was taken

aback by the lack of support and was disappointed by the early backers who first funded her campaign before withdrawing.

In Florida, devoted supporters who had more time than money, put in a lot of effort for Chisholm while others like Alcee Hastings, a Black lawyer with political aspirations, insulted her and prophesied her downfall saying “she would get the heck beaten out” (Jones, 2009, A Catalyst for Change section). Jones (2009) adds further that in Florida, the first state in which Chisholm heavily campaigned, she had twenty-eight committed delegates which is considered a remarkable number compared to Margaret Chas Smith who was white and ran for president in 1964 and had won only sixteen committed delegates. Because she was never able to persuade the American people to take her candidacy seriously, the Chisholm campaign encountered too many obstacles and difficulties. Even voters who supported Chisholm thought that supporting her would be an irrational use of their ballots. Unfortunately, her crusade led to power struggles between men and women, as well as between blacks and whites.

In her *Unbought and Unbossed*, Chisholm (1970) described her candidacy as “A competition to determine which group was going to own me and my candidacy” (p. 19). The Chisholm campaign faced obstacles from the start due to a lack of funding, a national strategy, and disarray. Black women have always had to choose between race and sex, but she was unable to gain the crucial support of the Black Caucus. Onwuachi-Willig (2024) highlights Chisholm’s presidential run that Chisholm succeeded in obtaining only 10% of the 1,509 delegates' votes required to win the nomination which led to her loss against George McGovern who won. Shirley Chisholm knew her 1972 presidential campaign was likely to fail, but she felt it was important to be the first to run for president “she ran because someone had to do it first” as Chisholm stated in her book *The Good Fight* (1973, p. 3).

On the other hand, a large number of Democratic Party officials endorsed Kamala Harris's 2024 presidential campaign. Harris was endorsed by Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, as well as most Democratic state governors. Former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, Barack Obama and his wife Michelle, publicly backed Harris. This united backing reinforced her legitimacy as the successor to President Joe Biden. In terms of fundraising, Harris's campaign set a record by raising over \$100 million within just 36 hours of her announcement. Thus, more than 1.1 million donors contributed—62% of who were first-time contributors in the 2024 election cycle. She received endorsements from LeBron James, Bruce Springsteen, Taylor Swift, and other celebrities, as well as support from influential businessmen like James Murdoch and Mark Cuban. Additionally, her reputation among young voters and various communities was enhanced by these endorsements (Quinn, 2024).

Even though Kamala Harris had widespread backing from the Democratic Party leadership, criticism of her campaign persisted, especially from the party's progressive edge. Many progressive activists, notably members of "The Squad" like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and followers of Senator Bernie Sanders, voiced concerns about what they perceived as Harris's unduly centrist stance, particularly about social justice and economic policy. Particularly during a period of mounting dissatisfaction with growing income inequality, Harris's policies were perceived as moderate measures that fell short of the aspirations of younger people and the working class. As reported by Saric (2024), this sentiment was echoed by many within the progressive base who felt that Harris's platform did not sufficiently address systemic inequality. Additionally, several independent and moderate voters doubted her ability to lead, particularly given her relatively subpar public performance as vice president. Republican opponents exploited these perceptions to portray her as insecure and lacking in clarity. Certain media appearances, such as hesitant or evasive interview responses and ambiguity on foreign policy, further reinforced these criticisms.

Kamala Harris's 2024 presidential campaign faced several complex challenges that ultimately led to her loss to Donald Trump, despite strong backing from the Democratic Party. One of the main obstacles was her close association with the Biden administration, which suffered from low approval ratings due to inflation and the rising cost of living, making it difficult for Harris to present herself as a candidate of change. She also struggled to connect with voters in swing states, where her campaign failed to deliver a compelling populist economic message. As a result, she lost support among working-class communities in key battlegrounds. In addition, her stance on the Gaza conflict negatively impacted her support among Arab and Muslim voters, particularly in Michigan, a state where Democrats had traditionally relied on strong support from those communities. The campaign also faced internal criticism for weak organization and for focusing on secondary issues, which further widened the gap between Harris and key voter blocs. Finally, former President Joe Biden suggested that sexism may have played a role in Harris's loss, arguing that voters did not give her a fair chance despite her qualifications. In summary, these factors combined to undermine Harris's chances, reflecting the complex barriers faced by female candidates, especially those from diverse backgrounds in American politics (Loewer & Abbott, 2024).

*The Washington Post* reported on Kamala Harris's talk about her identity in 2019 saying "I'm Black and I'm proud." This statement is considered as a clear confession of her Blackness despite the huge public discussion of her racial identity. Throughout her political career, Harris has always paid tribute to Black women who have paved the way for her success. She has often emphasized the career of Shirley Chisholm, in an interview in 2019, Harris spoke with admiration of Chisholm:

She reminds me of one of the many sayings of my mother had...: 'Don't you let anybody tell you who you are. You tell them who you are.' That was Shirley

Chisholm, unbought, unbossed. And I stand, as so many of us do, on her shoulders. (McNamee & Grant, 2025)

Although Shirley Chisholm passed away on January 1, 2005, she kept the door open for the applicant who would follow her guidelines as she said, prior to her passing, in an interview published in on YouTube:

I want history to remember me... not as the first black woman to have made a bid for the presidency of the United States, but as a Black woman who lived in the 20th century and who dared to be herself. I want to be remembered as a catalyst for change in America. (Democracy Now! 2010, 0:04)

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the trajectories of Shirley Chisholm and Kamala Harris highlight the complex interplay between race, gender, and power in American politics. Despite the different historical and political contexts they had to navigate, both women demonstrated unwavering determination in the face of systemic challenges. In addition to the continuous challenges Black women face in their pursuit of political leadership, their experiences show their resilience and potential for meaningful change. By setting the example, Chisholm and Harris have inspired future generations of Black women to envision themselves in leadership roles, signaling a gradual but significant shift in American politics. Their legacies serve as powerful reminders that advancement is possible when bravery and purpose are combined.

## **General Conclusion**

Racial discrimination against Black Americans, especially women in the U.S. from slavery passing through the Civil War and the Reconstruction era until the current moment extends not only to their daily lives but also to the realm of politics. This study introduces the historical background of Black people, particularly women, in securing their right to vote and achieving political representation. Additionally, it highlights the journeys of Shirley Chisholm and Kamala Harris, two Black women who were able to enter the presidential race and made history in powerful ways.

Following the Civil War and during the Reconstruction Era, Black people faced different kinds of violence and lynching by White people. Worth mentioning in this context that these kinds of segregations led to the launching of civil rights movements to seek civil rights including the right to vote. Furthermore, the study shed light on the impact of the Great Migration and the Civil Rights movement on Black Americans' political powers by gaining the right to vote. Nevertheless, Black women struggled for more years to be equal to Black men and be able to vote as well until their full access to vote came with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Moreover, Black women's persistence excelled to even be a part of the American political trajectory.

In the practical part of the study, and after shedding light on details about Black women's journey in U.S. politics from voting to winning seats at the two chambers of Congress to Statewide Executive and Elective positions, the study confirms that racial discrimination in the U.S. political system has significantly limited the presence of Black people, particularly women in political institutions. The study also revealed the systematic barriers and racial challenges faced by both Shirley Chisholm and Kamala Harris in their pursuit of the presidency.

Moreover, the comparison between the two candidates, Chisholm and Harris, in terms of their seeking for nomination and their presidential campaigns demonstrated the difficulty for a Black woman to run for elections. Findings from the study underscored the multifaceted challenges Black women endured whether financially, personally, socially, institutionally or strategic campaign difficulties. For Chisholm, she was often dismissed by the media as a symbolic candidate. She also had limited financial support which was an obstacle for continuing her campaign along with the lack of the Democratic Party support by not taking her seriously. Even worse, a large number of Black people did not endorse her. Thus, Shirley Chisholm's campaign ended without her winning the nomination but entered history for being the first Black woman to run for the President of the United States and paving the way for others to follow her pace.

In the same vein, despite strong backing from the Democratic Party, Kamala Harris faced intense criticism for her past as a prosecutor and for her complex identity. In addition, Harris experienced a financial struggle to maintain her part in the presidential race although she raised substantial funds at the beginning of her campaign, which led to the suspension of the campaign of 2020. On top of that, Harris ran again for the presidency after President Joe Biden's withdrawal from the re-election of 2024, but she met different kinds of challenges such as media attacks for her policy position, short campaign duration between her nomination and Election Day, and her struggles to maintain the political spectrum against her strong opponents, Donald Trump. Overall, though unsuccessful, Harris's campaign was historic as she was the first Black woman to be nominated for president by a major party in the United States.

As with the majority of studies, the design of the current study is subject to some limitations. Initially, we faced the challenges of lacking prior research on the topic due to its

novelty, particularly, Kamala Harris's. Another point is that we were unable to access some paid books or restricted access to governmental data.

In conclusion, the study in hand recommends further research to address and compare the political journeys of Black women with other women of color to explore intersectional differences and similarities in challenges and chances. Based on the study's conclusion, researchers should carry out a deeper analysis of how the media portray Black women candidates inside and outside the United States and how that affects elections' outcomes.

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## ملخص

كان الأمريكيون السود، وخاصة النساء، يناضلون من أجل حقوقهم في التصويت والحصول على تمثيل سياسي في النظام السياسي للولايات المتحدة على مر التاريخ. وحتى بعد حصولها على حق التصويت في عام 1965، ظلت المرأة السوداء ممثلة تمثيلاً ناقصاً مع الوصول المحدود إلى مناصب النظام السياسي الأمريكي. وعلى الرغم من حقهم القانوني في المشاركة في السباق الرئاسي، إلا أنه في عام 1972 فقط تمكنت شيرلي تشيزوم من الترشح للحصول على ترشيح حزب كبير للرئاسة كأول امرأة ذات بشرة سوداء. وبعد عقود من الزمان، حققت كامالا هاريس إنجازاً تاريخياً عندما أصبحت أول امرأة من عرق مختلف يتم انتخابها لمنصب نائب الرئيس ثم تترشح للرئاسة. وعليه، تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى دراسة التحديات التي واجهتها المترشحتين تشيزوم وهاريس في مسعاهما للحصول على مقعد رئيس الولايات المتحدة. ولتحقيق ذلك، تم إجراء بحث نوعي يعتمد بشكل أساسي منهج التحليل التاريخي المقارن للفصل الثاني. وتكشف النتائج الرئيسية عن دور حركات نشاط الحقوق المدنية في الحصول على حق التصويت والتمثيل السياسي بالإضافة إلى العقبات وكيف أثرت أشكال التمييز المتقاطعة على حملات تشيزوم وهاريس في رحلتهما السياسية.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** المرأة السوداء، الجنس، كامالا هاريس، السباق الرئاسي، تشيرلي تشيزوم