**Chisholm Pitch**

**THE INTRODUCTION**

Erased from history books, politically dismissed and, until very recently, all but forgotten, there has never been a better candidate to be immortalized on film than the unbossed and unbought Shirley Chisholm.

**INTRODUCE "THE SPECS"**

**FORMAT:** Film

**GENRE/SUBGENRE:** Drama

**NUTSHELL:**

**LOGLINE:** In 1972, Shirley Chisholm, a black woman from Brooklyn ran for the office of President of the United States, and actually came close to getting the democratic nomination.

**SETTING:**

Brooklyn, NY and DC, late 60’s-70’s.

**DIVE INTO STORY**

Act 1

A graffitied train knives it’s way out of Manhattan into Brooklyn on an unusually hot September Sunday. We burst into a church filled with the Black and Latino women of Brooklyn as the music makes you rise. The teachers of Brooklyn have been on strike for three months. That didn’t bother **John Lindsay** (40’s the Kennedy-esque mayor of New York) when it was July, but now it’s September and the kids are going un-educated. The teachers’ singing is not rapturous, it is rage-full and so are the mothers singing next to them. John Lindsay rises from a pew in front to introduce Shirley’s opponent in the congressional race who gives a speech urging the teachers to go back to work and let the men handle the politics.

Unbeknownst to John, the pastor has invited Shirley Chisholm to address the churchgoers on the issue of the strike. **Shirley Chisholm** (African American, mid-40s, a school teacher by profession, bold, strong willed, eloquent) approaches the podium. Only days out of the hospital from surgery to remove a ruptured tumor, Shirley sees a slim chance to regain ground. Addressing the women, she tells them that, as a teacher in this community, she knows the situation they are in is bullshit, but the reason that she is here today is because this is her community, and in order to turn things around they have to work together, register to vote, and send one of their own to congress to change things. On cue, **Conrad Chisholm** (Shirley’s husband, African American), moves through the crowd handing out voter registration forms.

Morning at the United States capitol, sinners pour into the church of America. As the doors burst open, Shirley is pushed through a wave of white men. Inside Shirley’s new office, **Carolyn Smith** (33, African American, a plucky, down to earth staffer) overseeing the move out of the office’s previous occupant. Seeing Shirley without a staff, Carolyn angles for a job as her assistant, offering her expertise as a congressional insider. As the first order of business, Carolyn gets Shirley in to see **Speaker McCormack** about her committee assignment, forestry, but he is unwilling to consider a change in assignments.

In the House chamber, Speaker McCormack moves to vote on committee assignments. Shirley shoots up, immediately, several other members shoot up around her. Speaker McCormack recognizes the senior member. As everyone settles back down, Shirley shifts her weight slightly and a few more surrounding congressman jump up. Sensing that she is being silenced, Shirley makes her way down the aisle into the well. Speaker McCormack reluctantly recognizes her and she tells him that she rejects her forestry committee assignment, quipping that it seems the only thing the assignment committee has heard about Brooklyn is that a tree grows there. Her pluck catches the attention of **Ron Dellums** (African American, smooth, handsome, California Congressman) who catches her as she leaves, offering her a spot on the Veteran’s Affairs committee.

In the congressional cafeteria, Shirley siting alone, is approached by **Patsy Mink** (Japanese American, congresswoman for Hawaii) who asks for her support for an abortion bill that she is struggling to garner any support for among her male colleagues. Shirley promises to consider it, admitting with a sly smile that she sits everyday at the Georgia table, challenging her Georgia colleagues to sit with her.

In an elevator full of white congressmen, Shirley asks a senior Republican congressman to accept her input on his head start bill. A senior democratic congressman rebukes her, telling her to wait until she’s on the education committee. Shirley replies that as an educator first, she will continue to advocate for change and steps off the elevator. Before the door closes Shirley feels spit hit the back of her neck, turning to catch the culprit as the door closes.

Night, Carolyn Smith and Shirley are pulled over by police driving in Brooklyn. The officer approaches and tells Shirley that Mayor Lindsay would like a word. At mayor Lindsay’s house, he apologies for the surprise summons, and asks if the Congressional Black Congress is preparing a candidate to run against Nixon. Mayor Lindsay asks Shirley for her support, should he run and reveals rumors that segregationist, George Wallace will run as a democrat. Shirley leaves, the seed of a plan, taking root. The democrats are scrambling to find a candidate who can stand up to Nixon. George Wallace’s candidacy will embolden racists, tearing down the progress made by the civil rights movement. What can she, a fearless teacher from Brooklyn, do?

Arriving home late at night, Shirley finds her DC home ransacked, racial slurs graffitied on her walls. Walking into her bedroom, the mattresses slashed, clothes cut apart, she freezes when she hears a noise behind her. She slams the bedroom door, hearing the thud of a body hitting the other side. She screams out the window and sees a shadowy figure run out of her house. Turning, she sees her framed photograph of Frederick Douglas hanging in it’s place on the wall, strangely untouched. ‘If there is no struggle there is no progress.’

Act 2

Shirley, dressed in a powder blue suit, stands at a podium and announces her candidacy for president of the United States. She asks her people, everyone who feels left out or ignored, to join her to make a new America in 1972, one where there is freedom from violence at home and abroad, where there is freedom from poverty and discrimination.

Following her announcement, Ron and **Bella Abzug** (a Jewish congresswoman from Brooklyn who worked together with Shirley on the Equal Rights Amendment) confront Shirley for not consulting them before announcing. Ron and Bella support Shirley, but at the same time, are envious of her for staking her claim in this election while their political organizations (the National Organization of Women and the Congressional Black Caucus) have been too timid to take this momentous step. They know is a finite amount of influence available to women and minorities and are reluctant to give away any of their political capital.

In the kitchen, Conrad is cooking dinner for Shirley’s presidential team, but the kind gesture quickly devolves into an argument about how Shirley’s career has impacted their relationship. The crowd of people surrounding Shirley, advising her has become filled with celebrities and powerful people. He can’t compete with that and misses the days when he was her team.

Shirley rallies her troops, bringing on **Thaddeus Garrett** (20s, African American, idealistic, with an ‘ask for forgiveness not permission’ attitude) and transforming a donated garage into her campaign headquarters. Shirley’s campaign bus, bearing the slogan ‘Shirley Chisholm, Unbossed and Unbought’ rolls across the country. At each stop Shirley and her team find a vindictive George Wallace one step ahead of them, rescheduling or preempting Shirley’s speaking engagements. Furious, Shirley gathers her staff to strategize on boosting her pathetic poll numbers. Ron promises to speak to the CBC about endorsing Shirley and Shirley gives a speech on the floor, endorsing the ERA to widen her base of support among women.

4am, Shirley is asleep in a California hotel room, the phone rings persistently until she relents and picks it up. Bella is on the line. The ERA has passed and has moved on to the states for ratification, Bella is calling to coordinate Shirley ending her campaign to support the leading democratic candidate. This was not the quid pro quo Shirley was expecting.

In a church in Berkley California, Shirley Chisholm searches for guidance. A group of flamboyant men, dressed as women, make their way down the aisle and scoot into a pew next to several Black Panther members. Feeling the tension in the room, Shirley compliments the young man’s cape and tells the men that she sees the fear in their eyes but that we have a chance to confront that fear and become a nation where all kinds of people can coexist in peace. The young man smiles, draping his cape around Shirley’s shoulders. Suddenly a white man emerges from the crowd running at her with a knife drawn. **Bobby Seale** (African American, co-founder of the Black Panther Party) pulls her aside as the knife catches her cape. The black panthers jump up and point their rifles.

At Thaddeus’s urging and against the advice of Ron and Carolyn, Shirley visits Bobby Seale at his home in the projects. The poverty is overwhelming. A little girl, unkempt, sits on the floor playing with a blond Barbie doll. Bobby tells her the reason he wanted her to visit is for the children raised in the ghetto, the people in power want to keep them here, but something needs to be done to get them out. Leaving the apartment Bobby steps up to a microphone and gives her her first endorsement, from the Black Panther Party.

**Lawrence O’Brien** (Democratic Chairman, a gruff alcoholic with thick glasses) meets with Shirley to convince her to drop out when Thaddeus bursts through the door with news, “George Wallace has been shot.” Shirley sends her staff home, fearing retribution against them if the attacker is black. Upon learning that Wallace is in a hospital in Silver Springs, Shirley makes a decision to go see him, canceling an appearance with the NAACP. Carolyn resists this decision. Shirley takes stock. Her campaign has no momentum, her allies have held back official endorsements. Thaddeus urges her to use this as an opportunity to pivot, to get in the papers. Shirley asks Carolyn if she thinks she can win. Carolyn replies, ‘No, people aren’t ready. I believe in you, but this is as much progress as you are going to make’. Realizing, she has to make a change, Shirley tells Carolyn to return to DC and asks Thaddeus to take the reigns as campaign manager.

A hospital room, Shirley sits at George Wallace’s bedside. He jokes that she must have had a very nice photo op outside. Shirley laughs it off, countering that it’s doing wonders for his poll numbers as well. ‘Must be what every N-word wants to see.’ he replies. Silence. And then Shirley launches into a dead on impression, reciting his ‘segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever’ speech. These words, coming from her, send a chill down his spine. ‘What do we want?’ she continues, ‘What does any human want? Take away pigmentation and there is no difference between you and me. All we want is for that trivial difference to make no difference.’

Act 3

The Democratic National Convention main hall, crowds of women, men, students young and old swarm around delegate tables covered in gold cloth as if for a very tacky prom. Shirley bursts in to raucous cheers and chants from a pocket of women in the crowd.

*In a meeting room, Lawrence O’Brien, DNC chairman, lays out the convention schedule for the candidates, when the nominee will give the acceptance speech and when the other candidates will drop out. Taken aback, Shirley says that the reform rules were created for a reason, to increase transparency and equity. We don’t have a nominee yet and the only path to true unity among candidates and the base is to follow the rules. Sensing that the other candidates are in agreement with Shirley,* ***George McGovern*** *(the democratic front runner, handsome, inoffensive, but a bit of an empty suit) chimes in to say that following the rules is a reasonable course of action. Lawrence O’Brien agrees to hear arguments on the disputed delegates in Chicago, California, and South Carolina.*

In the DNC main hall, Shirley and Bella argue about Gloria Steinem’s non-endorsement of Shirley’s candidacy. Ron tells Shirley that McGovern is planning to make an argument to apply the ‘old rules’ to the California race, meaning that he would take all of the delegates (winner take all), despite only winning a narrow majority. Furthermore, Ron suspects that **Willie Brown** (California Assemblyman) is in McGovern’s pocket and feels snubbed because she visited Bobby Seale instead of him in California.

*In the McGovern war room,* ***Gary Hart*** *(campaign manager for McGovern, ruthless, intelligent. Gary is the brains behind the operation, and everyone knows it) and McGovern strategize. An aid,* ***William Clinton*** *(a young Bill Clinton) reveals that Humphrey, Muskie, Chisholm, labor, Southerners are working together to stop McGovern from claiming all the California delegates. Gary has a plan in motion to pressure Shirley to drop out. He asked Shirley McClain to ask Gloria Steinem to ask Bella Abzug to convince Shirley to drop out by the end of the first day. Gary believes that Ted Kennedy is playing coy about accepting the VP slot on a McGovern ticket. Gary plans to use Willie Brown to do the dirty work on delivering all of the California delegates, allowing the McGovern campaign to stay clean and avoid blowback from breaking the newly established rules.*

In the DNC credentials room, Lawrence O’Brien presides over a hearing on the Chicago delegation. Shirley and Thaddeus slip in to hear **Mayor Daley** and **Jesse Jackson** wrap up their arguments. As Jesse leaves, Shirley urges him to tell his black delegates to vote their conscience, and Jesse reveals that his delegates will largely go for McGovern. At the same time, Thaddeus approaches Mayor Daley, who reveals that his delegates will be distributed between every candidate except McGovern.

The hearing for the South Carolina delegation is called. Shirley and Thaddeus filter back in to the DNC credentials room, as a confident Bella Abzug strides in and sits at the table. Bella argues that the South Carolina delegation is in violation of the new rules for failing to include women in the delegate selection process. In fact, she alleges that the few women delegates are actually sex workers hired by the party officials. Gary steps in, adding his support for equal representation in the South Carolina delegation. The hearing disbands, and Lawrence O’Brien asks Shirley to stay behind. He asks for her thoughts on the Chicago decision. *Knowing that it will cost her delegates, Shirley advises Lawrence O’Brien to affirm Jesse Jackson’s delegation because Mayor Daley’s delegation underrepresents the black population. What matter most is that every vote is counted. Every voice is heard.*

Shirley turns a corner and walks into a crowd of people gathered around a bulky Zenith television in the hallway. An interview with Ted Kennedy on ABC. Ted has just said ‘Under no circumstance will I be Vice President of the United States.’

Ron tries to talk Willie into supporting Shirley, telling him that the white politicians are using him and have no intention to deliver on their promises.

*Since we now have the scene with all the candidates at the beginning, this could be cut and the conversation between Lawrence and Shirley could follow the SC hearing (which is currently included in italics above): The delegates sit down with Lawrence O’Brien to go over the rules and the speaking order. Lawrence tells them to attack Nixon policy, not each other. When the camera’s go on, we let the American people know that this is the right party to lead them. Shirley stays behind and Lawrence asks her for advice on deciding on Chicago. Shirley, knowing that Jackson’s delegation will swing McGovern, still says she wants to see Jackson’s delegation because of the equal representation (Daley’s delegation underrepresented the black community), what matter most is every vote was counted. Every voice was heard.*

In the DNC credentials room, Ron argues with Willie over the distribution of the California delegates, pointing out the hypocrisy of Gary Hart supporting the women’s efforts in South Carolina to uphold the new rules, while, at the same time, demanding that the new rules be disregarded for California. In the hall, Gary Hart tells Willie that, due to his poor performance, he is no longer needed, adding that McGovern is considering Ron for Vice President. Furious, Willie confronts Ron, believing that he went to McGovern behind his back.

Bella tries to convince Shirley to drop out. McGovern has supported the Women’s Caucus in South Carolina, and now it’s Bella’s turn to deliver Shirley’s delegates to McGovern. McGovern is considering nominating a woman for Vice President. Shirley is unmoved, the women’s movement is being traded back and forth like a pawn. The only path to real change, to real power is to be uncompromising, to demand it.

**Charles Coulson**, Nixon’s unscrupulous aid, approaches Shirley in the DNC main hall. He tells her that he was hoping she would win because it would be so much fun to tear her down. Power is stolen silently in the dead of night, it’s not out in the open at the convention.

Shirley, is on the floor surrounded by supporters as hears takes the stage and endorses McGovern. Shirley is shocked by this implausible betrayal. On stage, Lawrence O’Brien announces his decision to keep Jesse Jackson’s delegation. At the last moment, Gary withdraws support for the South Carolina women’s delegation. Bella Abzug and the women are in shock as Lawrence O’Brien announces that the original South Carolina delegation will be affirmed.

Ron visits the McGovern office, impressed by the buzzing activity in the hotel room. Settling on a leather couch to wait, he overhears a staffer on a phone call discussing the VP list. He’s not on it. Shocked, Ron stands and calmly walks out.

In the DNC main hall, Humphrey takes the stage, releasing his delegates to Shirley. Following him, Willie delivers an impassioned plea to ‘Give me back my delegation’ in a last ditch effort to regain McGovern’s favor by delivering all 271 California delegates. The McGovern crowd cheers wildly.

Shirley gives her concession point, telling her supporters that ‘power concedes nothing’ without a demand and, so, we must demand, all of us, every day, for political, economic, social justice.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Stuff we talked about that is not included in this summary:**

Act 1/Act 2

-Opening with a scene where she is a teacher. her goal is to educate America. to teach America that we can be good.

- her office has a chalkboard where she’s been taking notes. talk to one of the secretaries. She is willing to teach, is she willing to learn? She thought America was ready to learn. (incorporating teaching throughout)

Act 3

* The 3am vote for the SC original delegation. Shirley sees this but is powerless to stop it. The cleaning crew is there.
* Shirley holding everyone’s hands onstage at the conclusion of the convention and then drops them immediately when they go backstage
* We talked about a scene between Ron and Shirley where it’s revealed that Ron thinks he’s in running for VP and Shirley’s like, they’re just playing you. This scene could also support this: when ron betrays her, she realizes that she lost the reason she was here. loses the teacher inside of her and becomes a politician.

SUMMING UP

There are different ways in which you'll want to sum up your pitch depending on the format of

the material you're pitching.

If you're pitching a TV show, you'll have just finished summarizing your pilot episode. What

you'll want to do next is give an overview of your series. Where does the story go from here?

What's the season arc? Give a brief (brief) overview on what season two looks like. The

executive will want to know that you've thought about this - it's a demonstration of a TV show's

story engine, it's a demonstration of what will make the show last 100 episodes.

If you're pitching a movie, you'll want to wrap up with the final themes and arcs of your story.

How does your lead character change over the course of the story? What's the overriding

theme? Don't just say "the theme is don't judge a book by it's cover" - SHOW us how that

message is delivered and why it's an important message relevant to a modern audience.

This should take up the last paragraph of your written pitch, or the last 30-45 seconds of your

verbal pitch.

IMPORTANT NOTES FROM AMAZON

Pitching is a first impression. You aren't just pitching your projects, but yourself and your company as well.  Will we want to come to your office on a weekly basis? Are we going to want to invite you to the Christmas party?  Great stories can now be found anywhere, but not great people.

Features and pilots can take years to get made – that's years of working together with an executive... you have to make yourself known as someone the executives want and are excited

to work with. A good attitude goes a long way and this is a business of relationships, so make your first impression count!

If you're submitting a written pitch, remember that this is, for all intents and purposes, a writing sample. If your written pitch is poorly written and riddled with grammatical, spelling

and contextual errors the executive will have no reason to believe you can properly execute a screenplay.

A written pitch should be easy to read. Use font, bold, italics, underlines, and spacing to your advantage to make sure your pitch is easy to read. An executive will NOT want to open your

pitch document and see a giant, unformatted wall of text. Do NOT use Courier Final Draft font in your pitch document. It's great for screenplays, but terrible for pitch documents.

Do not overly manipulate margins or font size to fit more content. An executive will NOT want to read two pages of 10 point font. They will know immediately why you chose that small size and it will serve as an example of you trying to circumvent the rules they very well

know you're supposed to follow.

Think Epic. Write Short.

REMEMBER: WRITTEN PITCHES ARE FIRST

IMPRESSIONS, TOO!

If you're pitching verbally, keep your pitch conversational. Try not to read off notecards, and try not to sound too rehearsed. An executive doesn't want to be talked at - pitch as though this

were something that happened to you over the weekend, and you're simply relaying that

story.

It can be tempting to pour out all your pitches in a room. Don't, get in a conversation with us, if we seem excited keep going, if we don't move on to the next pitch. DON'T!

Answer all the executives questions thoughtfully. this is INVALUABLE. Sometimes, a correctly answered question can mean the different between a PASS and REQUEST.