

Muriel Morisey

Senior Legislative Assistant, Representative Shirley Chisholm of New York

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

“Give Your Chair to a Lady”

Muriel Morisey recalls Representative Shirley Chisholm’s campaign to become Democratic Caucus chair.
Interview recorded April 19, 2017

She ran for House Caucus chair, and I think she had a pretty general idea that the House leadership could be improved and she would bring energy and visibility, and, you know, time for a black woman—a woman. I don’t think a woman had ever been caucus chair. So we had this little campaign, and she had this—her campaign was “Give your, give your chair to a lady.” And we, you know we all worked on that. I mean, it was an internal thing, so it wasn’t inappropriate for her, inappropriate at all for her House staff to be advocating within the House for her to be chair. Sometimes then, you know, I think about things like that, but that was just Mrs. Chisholm. I mean, that’s how she was. That’s who she was. That’s the kind of thing it would occur for her to do, and he wouldn’t need, you know, like the other men to tell her, “It’s okay if you run for House chair—caucus chair.” She, “Oh, well, I think I’ll do that. Let’s pull that together.” She probably talked with a few people who would go along with it, but I don’t think she ever actually asked anybody’s permission to do anything. And she was politically astute enough that she kind of, she kind of knew what was worth the fight. And maybe to—and she probably often calculated that she would—what she would and wouldn’t win.