

EDWARD M. KENNEDY INSTITUTE

FOR THE UNITED STATES SENATE

Your Seat at the Table Project Guide

When you visit the office of Senator Ted Kennedy as it is recreated at the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate, you see a reflection of who he was as a person and how his personal story influenced who he was and a legislator. Visitors are encouraged to think about their own stories, what's important to them, and how they might make a difference. At this particular time in our political history we are inspired by the words of another important legislator brought her life experience to congress to benefit others—Shirley Chisholm.

The Kennedy Institute is launching a collaborative art project called Your Seat at the Table Project to invite individuals, schools, and community organizations to think about why diversity of representation is vital and what necessary contribution we each bring to the table when we pull up a chair.

SHIRLEY CHISHOLM

Fifty years ago, Shirley Chisholm became the first African American woman elected to Congress. In 1972, she became the first African American candidate for the presidential nominee of a major party, and the first woman to seek the Democratic nomination. Towards the end of her life Chisholm said of these historic firsts:

“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.”

Over the course of her 14 years in Congress, Chisholm was able to be a force for change and a champion of legislation that would improve the quality of life for women, children, people of color, and the poor. She fought for the the people in her life—for domestic workers like her mother; for immigrants like her parents who had come to New York from the Caribbean; for children like those she's worked with as childcare provider and expert in early childhood education and child welfare. Having her voice at the table where discussions are had and decisions are made made a difference for the underrepresented. She stepped up and claimed her seat at the table of public discourse and made the difference, and that was her advice to us.

"If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

With those words, Chisholm encouraged us not to wait for an invitation, but to pull up a chair, with all that we bring to the table, and make our own space in the conversation. Today, we see an unprecedented number of people doing just that. Record numbers of women, people of color, and native Americans are running for office. Inspired by Chisholm words, and seeing the spirit of her call to action come to life in American politics, we at the Edward M. Kennedy Institute are exploring what this can mean for all of us. We ask you to consider your seat at the table.

The Project

Individuals, schools, and community organizations are invitation to participate. We ask you to think about what your seat at the table represents, what it looks like, and why it is important that you bring that seat to the table. Create a physical object that represents your seat at the table. Shirley Chisholm recommended a folding. You could start there, or conceive of another form that conveys the necessity of your particular seat at the table.

Submit your Seat at the Table along with your statement about your work. Selected submissions will be displayed at the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate.



Questions for Discussion

1. When Shirley Chisholm refers to “the table” in her famous quote, she is talking about places where important conversations are being had, and where decisions are being made that affect us all. Consider the tables that you are a part of, or wish to be a part of. These spaces may include government, school and education, the arts, business, technology, design, television, film, athletics, fashion, comedy, science, news media, literary circles, theater, advocacy, the food industry, or your local community. What other spaces can you think of?
2. What people make up the tables in these spaces, and who sits at the head of the table? Do they represent the broad diversity of the communities they serve?
3. Think about your own identity. What experiences influence your perspective? What do you stand for? What changes do you want to see in the world?
4. Who had a seat at the original table when our country was founded? How has that history impacted the table today?
5. What does it mean that the chair is folding, light, mobile, and an addition to the original design? Is a folding chair meant to be comfortable?

6. Can a folding chair eventually morph into something more permanent (like a heavy leather recliner)? What does that process look like? How long might it take?
7. If you come from a group that already has a seat at the table, how can you use your privilege to invite new voices to the table?

New Seats at the Table

Throughout history, we've seen examples of historically underrepresented groups demand their seat at the table. Consider how each of these people overcame obstacles to bring folding chairs to their chosen tables, and what they continue to achieve.

1. **Shirley Chisholm (1924-2005)**, a politician, educator and author who was the first black woman elected to United States Congress, representing New York's 12th Congressional District, and the first black woman to run for President of the United States.
2. **Elaine Noble (1944-present)**, a politician and LGBT activist who was the first openly gay state representative, representing Massachusetts' 6th Suffolk district.
3. **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (1989-present)**, a politician, community organizer and activist who won an upset victory in the Democratic primary in New York's 14th congressional district.
4. **Emma González (1999-present)**, an activist and advocate for gun control, who survived the February 2018 Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, and co-founded a gun control advocacy group.
5. **Frances Perkins (1880-1965)**, a sociologist and workers-rights advocate who was the first woman and longest-serving U.S. Secretary of Labor under, Franklin Roosevelt.
6. **Danica Roem (1984-today)**, journalist and politician who was the first openly transgender person to be elected to any U.S. state legislature. She represents Virginia's 13th district.
7. **Malala Yousafzai (1997-today)**, Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest Nobel Prize laureate.

Designing Your Chair

Your folding chair will represent your group's addition to the conversation about identity, challenge, and the future. You may choose to focus on one of these themes, or create a combination of each in your chair's design. As a collaborative work, all of the chairs together represent a space that is welcoming to diverse backgrounds: a challenge to the status quo, and a hope for the tables of our future.

1. **Identity** What pictures, objects, and words represent your group's unique identity? You may choose to use color, attach objects to your chair, or re-imagine what the chair looks like.
2. **Challenge** How have the members of your group been left out of the conversation in the past? What have others done to demand their seat at the table? Think about how it feels to sit in your chair, and how you'd like to represent that in the design.

3. **Future** How does your seat at the table change the table itself? What does your legacy represent? You may choose to add to your chair with physical objects or messages that you'd share at the table.

An Artist's Statement

Please include with your chair an accompanying statement. You may reflect on your design choices, explain your messaging or object selection, or share the inspiration for your idea. You may choose to share a non-traditional artist statement, such as a poem, personal narrative, or spoken word to be displayed alongside your chair. Include a reflection on how you define "the table", the conversations being had there and why you are pulling up a chair.

Continued Reading and Resources

Shirley Chisholm, The Good Fight (Harper Collins, 1975) – Chisholm's autobiography, including her goals for and reflections on her presidential bid

She Dared to Be Herself: Shirley Chisholm's Legacy (The Nib) - a graphic novel about the life of Shirley Chisholm. <https://thenib.com/she-dared-to-be-herself-shirley-chisholm-s-legacy>

Pod Save The People This podcast hosted by DeRay Mckesson explores identity and impact through news, social justice and politics.