

## Episode\_23\_\_The\_Highest\_Glass\_Ceiling

[00:00:00] **Avi Green:** Hi, I'm Avi Green. Thanks for joining us on the Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each week we discuss important social problems and policy issues with one of the nation's top scholars, with no jargon. Today we're going to talk about three women who sought the presidency long before Hillary Clinton and what their experiences show us as we go into the 2016 election. Here to tell us more is Ellen Fitzpatrick. She is a professor of history at the University of New Hampshire, and she's author of the newly released book, which we're going to discuss today, *The Highest Glass Ceiling: Women's Quest for the American Presidency*.

Ellen, thanks so much for being with us.

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Oh, it's my pleasure. Thanks for inviting me.

**Avi Green:** Professor Fitzpatrick, we frequently hear, um, about Hillary's 2008 run and her run now as marking kind [00:01:00] of the, the first real chances for America to have a female US president. But in your book, you tell the story of three women who previously set their sights on the American presidency.

First of all, what, what brought your attention to these stories?

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Well, it occurred to me that the whole subject of women running for president had not really been a subject of a inquiry by historians in any great detail. So it seems to me of an opportunity to bring these two, uh, areas of interest of mine together around a really interesting question, which is, you know, who had run prior to Clinton's 2008 run? Of course, I knew who some of those people were and what happened to them, and more particularly, how had we come from widespread resistance among the apparent American people to the, even [00:02:00] the idea of a woman president to a situation where a woman was very likely to have a very prominent role in an upcoming campaign.

**Avi Green:** Well, let's start at the beginning. Tell me a bit about the, the first woman to run for president in a significant way in the United States, Victoria Woodhall. When did she run and what was that race all about?

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Victoria Woodhall is really a remarkable figure in American political history, in American presidential history. She decided to run for president. She wanted to compete in the 1872 race, but she began her bid for office two years earlier than that in 1870. Um, and of course, this is during reconstruction. It's also a time when, uh, obviously women cannot vote. And, uh, that was in some ways of the least of the obstacles facing Victoria Woodhall. It's a [00:03:00] period in American history, of course, when there's a great deal of upheaval around the constitutional amendments that are being passed during reconstruction to really, uh, address the, uh, legacy of the civil war and slavery and what had happened to African Americans. And so feminists were, uh, women's suffrage advocates were very much engaged in these issues because they were hoping to enfranchise women at the same time. So Victoria Woodhall enters the picture at that moment.

Uh, she goes to a suffrage meeting in 1869 where all this is being debated. And by that time it's becoming clear that women are not going to be enfranchised under the 15th amendment and the leading suffragists of the era, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B, Anthony and others are advocating for a 16th amendment being passed. Woodhall attends one [00:04:00] of these meetings and becomes very engaged in this and out of this comes her bid for the presidency. She. Uh, had the notion that in fact, the whole cause of women's advancement might be quickened if a woman actually attempted to run for the highest electoral office in the land, and she had the temerity to think that she had the skills to do this.

**Avi Green:** What was her background before she ran?

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Okay. She had a very interesting history. She had grown up in a very poor family in Homer, Ohio, but she, her mother, who I think really had some very serious mental problems, was also very engaged in spiritualism and had conveyed to her daughter the notion that the spirits came to [00:05:00] visit you. And so at a young age, Victoria Woodhall reported that she had been visited by angels who told her that she was destined to play an important role in, uh, in her, not only in her own life, but the world. Yeah. So, and she would sort of, she and her mother both had kind of visions and this sort of thing.

So, um, she was married off at a very young age to a physician, and he turned out to be an alcoholic and a philanderer and, you know, highly problematic. She had a child, uh, at a very young age. And, uh, she left him and began to, uh, she went out West and she was an actress. And a seamstress, and then she wound up, um, becoming a spiritualist and a clairvoyant and a healer.

And in the course of this [00:06:00] career, she made the acquaintance of Cornelius Vanderbilt who, of course, was one of the wealthiest men in the country, but Vanderbilt was also a spiritualist. And apparently he claimed that Victoria Woodhall, was offering him remarkably precious stock tips. And so he decides that he will stake Woodhall and her sister and they begin dabbling in the stock market.

They opened the first brokerage firm led by women on wall street, and, uh, Victoria Woodhall becomes extremely wealthy very quickly. And that of course, as she becomes interested in women's suffrage, draws the suffrage leaders to her. Kind of remarkable, given all the conversation about wall street these days.

Yes, the first woman to run for president was a wall street broker [00:07:00] and a very successful one. But it is true that the leading suffragist Susan B. Anthony. Uh, made a comment at one point when Victoria Woodhall came into their circles that, you know, women's suffrage had really arrived because wall street had, was coming now to them, to their meetings and, uh, that, that had elevated their cause in this way.

Uh, Woodhall however, uh, had a lot of baggage with her and she was carrying a lot of baggage, I should say. And there were a lot of suspicions that she was not a virtuous woman. After all, she was divorced. She, um, had a kind of salon in her Murray Hill mansion, and she

would have these dinner parties and events where she would invite anarchists and corporate leaders that she moved in a very diverse, shall we [00:08:00] say circles.

**Avi Green:** When she came forward and and ran, what was the, what was the reception for that? Was she just taken as a joke or was it as...

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** On the contrary. And this is one of the things I find most fascinating about Woodhall that immediately there's this discussion in the newspapers and across the country about this whole notion of a woman running for president.

And because as I said, it was occurring during reconstruction when all these new rights were being debated and discussed for the newly enfranchised slaves and for African Americans. There's this sense during reconstruction that on that everything is, uh, in an uproar and that, uh, it is, uh, it's an unsettled moment where new demands for freedom and equality are being made. And so in that context, uh, [00:09:00] some of the, the news accounts and the commentators would say things like, well, we live in an unsettled age. Who knows what's gonna happen next?

And they actually had a discussion about it and, and some, some were of the opinion that well surely, you know, this petticoat government that Victoria Woodhall might establish if she became president couldn't possibly be any worse than the Grant administration, which, uh, had been considered, you know, a very corrupt one. And so they, there was a very interesting discussion and, uh, not the kind of ridicule that ironically Margaret Shane Smith would face in 1964

**Avi Green:** Let's go forward to Margaret Chase Smith. So she ran, um, in 1964 in the Republican primary that was ultimately won by Barry Goldwater. And then he went on [00:10:00] to lose to Lyndon Johnson in an, you know, an, an Epic,

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Landslide,

**Avi Green:** Right. Tell me about where Margaret Chase came from and what brought her to run.

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Margaret Chase Smith came into the United States Congress through the route that most women who were in national politics and her generation travel. She came in through something that we know as the widow's mandate. That is her husband was a Congressman from Maine. And she actually ran his office and he was a great deal older than she was. He was a man about town. And, um, uh, quite a philanderer I might add. I must say that, that some of these women had, uh, at least a two out of three, had very difficult marriages with extremely problematic husbands.

**Avi Green:** Right, and it's interesting, of course, that as we look back and think of, [00:11:00] um, their, their marriages, um, of course, even today, I, there's, you know, endless prognostication on Hillary Clinton's, um, marriage as there has been for decades.

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** And the interesting thing about Margaret Chase Smith's marriage was that very little was known about this because these sorts of things weren't discussed. There were

rumors when her husband ran for office that he was a philanderer and that he had fathered a child out of wedlock, which in fact he had, he actually died of syphilis and that was never revealed in his or his wife's lifetime. But in any case, she had been very involved as he became more ill. Um, and running his, she ran his congressional office as his secretary, but then she would travel around and speak on his behalf and he died shortly before he was up for reelection in [00:12:00] 1940. And so the widow's mandate worked this way, which is that, you know, we're familiar with this. =It still happens today. The wife or sometimes daughter of an elected official would be appointed to fill out the term.

**Avi Green:** And that's how she got into Congress

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** And so she, she filled out his term and then she ran on her own and won handily. And so that's how she began her career in national politics.

She came in through her husband, and then, um, they kept sending her back over and over again in Maine. And, uh, in 1948, she was the first woman to be elected on her own, uh, to the United States Senate. And she had a very illustrious career on this greatly admire.

**Avi Green:** So 1964 comes around. How does she make the [00:13:00] decision to, to run for president?

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Well, she is, I think in some ways of the three really, um, I'd found her among the most interesting because she probably, and you know, using those traditional measures that we would use in evaluating presidential candidates, was really the most credible as a candidate. She was greatly admired. She had been a very effective Senator. She had been in the Senate for a long time. Uh, she had seniority. Uh, she was quite independent of the Republican party, and that was probably a minus. But in some ways, what she said, um, when she was asked about this later in life, was it was the next logical move.

**Avi Green:** Right, just as she'd been in the Senate for three terms

Yeah just like

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** any other, you know, very prominent politician. She was year after year, she would be picked in the Gallup [00:14:00] poll as among the most admired women in the world, and, um, very solid support in Maine, very prominent in Congress. And why not run for president with that kind of background.

**Avi Green:** And so, so she runs for president. And how does a Barry Goldwater overcome her?

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** I suppose it's a cautionary tale. One of the things that had distinguished Margaret Chase Smith was her incredible independence. All of these women suffered from a lack of support from the party elite. Um, and, and in Woodhall's case, she was really an independent. She started her own political party. And so none of these women could really count on having the party elders support a bid for president. She at a moment when American politics is changing, presidential politics is changing dramatically. Mass media is becoming extremely [00:15:00] important. The primaries became much more important

after Kennedy used them in 1960 to show that a Roman Catholic could actually get votes from people who weren't Catholics.

She decides that, um, she will run in the primary, but that she would not spend, she would not accept any campaign donations. She was not going to have any kind of media campaign. She would never miss a vote in. She was very proud of the fact that she never missed any votes in the Senate. She was always there to do her first, what she considered her first job. Her job as a Senator. She wasn't going to have an elaborate campaign. She wasn't going to make any promises. Does this sound like a winning approach?

**Avi Green:** Yeah it sounds like she is. She was someone who wanted to be elected to be chosen, um, by [00:16:00] a bunch of knowledgeable voters all doing their their homework, but she wasn't going to, she wasn't going to campaign for it.

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Well, the thing about it that's interesting Avi is that this approach worked in Maine. She, she took the approach that had worked in Maine, which was to show that she wasn't on the take, that, you know, she was fiercely independent. Um, the one Republican party leader said, you know, if she votes with, uh, with us, it's a coincidence. And the New York times referred to her as a party, you know, in and of herself. And so, um, that kind of racing independence, the freedom from any, you know, taint of corruption. Um, her, you know, forthrightness, all of this served her brilliantly in Maine. And so she basically said, I'm going to take this on the road [00:17:00] and see if this works nationally. Well, we found out that it didn't.

**Avi Green:** Right. And, and ultimately she was, she was unable to prevail. I think there's a lot of lessons to be learned there about, uh. How, when, and whether politicians can scale, can move from one league, um, up to the next,

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Particularly, particularly for women politicians who you know, again, money is becoming much more important in these races. The primaries are proliferating, um, professionally organized and managed campaigns are the way of the future. Millions of dollars are at stake in the Illinois primary, I think she spent under a hundred dollars the price of around trip, airplane ticket to go to Illinois.

So. Um, you know, she wasn't competing in, this wasn't competing in this league. The other thing is that the party. You [00:18:00] know, nobody took her seriously in the Republican party.

**Avi Green:** Right. And maybe the two things are to some extent related?

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Of course.

**Avi Green:** I want to ask about that. And, and about the, the role of money and Hillary Clinton now is taking tremendous flack from her primary opponent, Bernie Sanders, about the money that she's taken, money that she's taken from donors on wall street speaking fees.

All of that sort of thing. Uh, and the notion of course is that wall street has too much influence over her, that she is to some extent, um, bought. And so in contrast to that, I want to ask you about the, the third major presidential candidate that you looked at. Shirley Chisholm.

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Yes. Well, you know, pausing on this point for a moment, this is a really interesting point that you're making, which is causes me to reflect on the fact that.

What the Achilles heel for two, uh, for, for both, uh, Smith and Chisholm. [00:19:00] And in fact, for every woman who ran for president in the 20th century, Elizabeth Dole, uh, Pat Schroeder, Carol Moseley Braun was the money. They couldn't because they weren't taken seriously. The whole idea, the party's position was, and they had reason to think, so that public opinion polls until relatively recently showed that most Americans were not all that enthusiastic about the idea of electing a woman president. Even when Margaret Chase Smith ran in 1964 40% of Americans said they would not vote for a woman president. Even if she was nominated by their own party.

**Avi Green:** And to some extent, doesn't that sort of imply that if you're a woman running for president in those situations, you need even more money.

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Right. One could make that argument and you're not going to get it. Why would donors [00:20:00] and the party establishment pour money into a surefire loser when there, there's clearly, and this is people that are willing to say it, you know, a fair amount of resistance to the idea of voting for a woman for president.

Now, in our own time, that's gone, at least according to the public opinion polls now, almost everyone who's polled says, sure, I'd vote for a qualified woman for president if I liked her politics. And, uh, in fact, a lot of people express enthusiasm, they'd like to be part of that process of electing the first woman president if you know, they thought that the candidate was a worthy one. But for most of American history, that resistance, um, to the, the, the fact that it just seemed, it even seemed that outlandish. Even then in [00:21:00] '64. And in Shirley Chisholm's case, she was not only a woman, she was African-American. These are two disqualifying characteristics of her.

**Avi Green:** They were disqualifying, um, basically because, uh, there were large numbers of Americans who are just willing to say, I'm not going to vote for someone who is black, or I'm, I'm not going to vote for a woman.

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** So the legacies of, uh, racism. And, uh, you know, we're, we're still very much there. And add to that this long history where, uh, you know, there were very few women, even in national politics, uh. So you've got two, uh, you know, sort of parallel and overlapping in her case histories of, you know, pretty outright prejudice.

Uh. And here functionally Chisholm into the mix and says, I don't care. You know, I think I'm qualified. [00:22:00] I can do it. And how are we ever going to know unless people get up there and challenge these assumptions? And that was what she tried to do.

**Avi Green:** So Shirley Chisholm runs, she's a black woman, a democratic Congress woman. And, um, her race now. I think her slogan that she was unbought and unbossed is kind of iconic, uh, looking back at American history and, and, uh, ironically it's actually, um, both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are trying to make the same argument that they are unbought and unbossed.

I mean, neither of them are black women, but they're, they're, they're proudly trying to make almost that, that, uh, variations on that, that argument.

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** And the irony of Trump being a billionaire is as well. In other words, he claims, it gives him this kind of freedom. In the case of, uh, Shirley Chisholm, she was saying, [00:23:00] nobody's bankrolling me. You know, I'm not the product of this corrupt political system. I'm independent. So both she and Smith tried to use, they tried to turn their marginalization into an advantage.

**Avi Green:** So I want to ask about Shirley Chisholm's race. Um, obviously for all of these, these, uh, three women, they didn't win. So, um, their campaigns started as ideas, they grew and grew, and then they peaked. Um, and, and ultimately, uh, did not succeed. How far did she get? How much did she achieve?

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Shirley Chisholm had a very disorganized campaign and was really, she was financing this on her American express card. If you can imagine this, you know, she was putting a few thousand dollars of her own money in, but she has in that sense, like Bernie Sanders had really energized young people and was, you know, really a [00:24:00] lot of college students were quite taken with her and 18 year olds now were going to be able to vote for the first time in 1972. So she competed in several primaries. And she actually amassed the largest number of delegates of any female candidate before Hillary Clinton's 2008. Um, the number, you know, she had about 140, I think, coming into the democratic convention.

So she didn't do terribly well in any of these primaries, but she, um, you know, she was indefatigable and she stayed in it right through the convention.

**Avi Green:** As my last question, I want to ask you to bring us up to to the present. As we observe and get ready to vote, or I suppose some of our listeners may have already voted in the primaries in their States. What things should we be watching for as we look at at Hillary Clinton as the sole female left, left running this year?

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Well, [00:25:00] you know, I want to go back to a point, uh, that's sort of sticking in my head as a point that you actually made earlier, which is that the criticism of her for amassing this war chest, which is considerable, stands, obviously in marked contradistinction to all of her female predecessors, Clinton in a way has brought together, the strands of the story of women's quest for the presidency and its various dimensions in a very unusual way. I don't know whether she will win or not, but there's no question that she has the best chance of, uh, any woman who has ever run. She, the public came to know her in, essentially resembles Margaret Shane Smith who came to public attention through the political career of her husband.

A fairly traditional role. First lady, even though she was not a traditional [00:26:00] first lady because she was involved in policy making, but the public got to know her for two terms as the wife of a president. Now, we came to know more than anybody ever perhaps wanted to about the Clintons and their marriage, but I think she became a very familiar figure. Um, she then ran for the Senate on her own, was quite successful there as it did, uh, for the presidency in 2008, came very, very close, and then joined her rivals administration. So she in, in a position that has led several previous secretaries of state to the presidency.

So there's no question that no one before her has ever come as close. And as I listened to the debate that's around sort of her presidency, her campaign for the presidency, it's remarkable how many people think, as they said in 2008, well, we'd love to see a woman [00:27:00] president. We just don't want this woman. And somebody else will come along soon.

Uh, one should not underestimate what it has taken to put these pieces together, the money, the, power within the democratic party establishment, the experience, the public knowledge of, uh, the campaign that she has put together. In no way am I saying that these are reasons to vote for her, but no one should underestimate, uh, what, uh, it has involved. Why not these pieces, whether she'll be successful or not, nobody knows.

Ellen Fitzpatrick,

**Avi Green:** thank you so much for being with us today.

**Ellen Fitzpatrick:** Oh, it was my pleasure. I enjoyed it.

**Avi Green:** Thanks for listening. Ellen's book, the highest glass ceiling came out yesterday. The scholars strategy network is a nationwide, nonpartisan [00:28:00] network of over 600 civically engaged scholars.

We do not endorse any parties or candidates. If you liked the show, please subscribe and rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. You can give us feedback on Twitter at no jargon podcast. Or an email at no jargon at scholar strategy network dot org. For more than what you heard today please check out our show notes at www dot scholar strategy network slash no jargon.