

UNITED STATES SENATOR ★ 1993–1999
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

The first African-American woman Senator, Carol Moseley-Braun was also only the second black Senator since the Reconstruction Era.¹ “I cannot escape the fact that I come to the Senate as a symbol of hope and change,” Moseley-Braun said shortly after being sworn in to office in 1993. “Nor would I want to, because my presence in and of itself will change the U.S. Senate.”² During her single term in office, Senator Moseley-Braun advocated for civil rights issues and for legislation on crime, education, and families.

Carol Moseley was born in Chicago, Illinois, on August 16, 1947. Her parents, Joseph Moseley, a policeman, and her mother, Edna (Davie) Moseley, a medical technician, divorced in 1963. The oldest of the four Moseley children in a middle-class family, Carol graduated from Parker High School in Chicago and earned a B.A. in political science from the University of Illinois in 1969.³ Possessing an early interest in politics, she worked on the campaign of Harold Washington—an Illinois state representative, a U.S. Representative, and the first African-American mayor of Chicago—and the campaign of Illinois State Senator Richard Newhouse.⁴ In 1972, Carol Moseley graduated from the University of Chicago School of Law. In Chicago she met and later married Michael Braun. Moseley-Braun hyphenated her maiden and married names. The couple raised a son, Matthew, but their marriage ended in divorce in 1986. Moseley-Braun worked as a prosecutor in the office of the U.S. Attorney in Chicago from 1973 until 1977. In 1978, she won election to the Illinois state house of representatives, a position she held for a decade. After an unsuccessful bid for Illinois lieutenant governor in 1986, she was elected the Cook County, Illinois, recorder of deeds in 1988, becoming the first African American to hold an executive position in Cook County.⁵

Not satisfied with her position as recorder of deeds, and

believing politicians were out of touch with the average American, Moseley-Braun contemplated running for Congress. Her resolve to seek national office strengthened after she witnessed Senators' questioning of Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas's controversial confirmation hearing for the Supreme Court in 1991. "The Senate absolutely needed a healthy dose of democracy," she observed. "It wasn't enough to have millionaire white males over the age of 50 representing all the people in the country."⁶ Officially entering the race for the Senate in November 1991, Moseley-Braun focused in her Democratic primary campaign on two-term incumbent Alan Dixon's support of Clarence Thomas's appointment and the need for diversity in the Senate. Despite organizational problems and paltry fundraising, Moseley-Braun stunned the experts, defeating her two opponents, Dixon and Alfred Hofeld, an affluent Chicago lawyer, and capturing 38 percent of the primary vote.⁷ "This democracy is alive and well, and ordinary people can have a voice with no money," Moseley-Braun remarked shortly afterward.⁸ In the general election, she faced Republican candidate Richard Williamson, a lawyer and a former official in the Ronald W. Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations.⁹ Focusing on a message of change and diversity encapsulated by slogans such as, "We don't need another arrogant rich guy in the Senate," Moseley-Braun ultimately defeated Williamson with 53 percent of the vote.¹⁰ In the "Year of the Woman," Carol Moseley-Braun became a national symbol of change, reform, and equality. Soon after her election to the Senate, she commented, "my job is emphatically not to be a celebrity or a full time symbol. Symbols will not create jobs and economic growth. They do not do the hard work of solving the health care crisis. They will not save the children of our cities from drugs and guns and murder."¹¹



In the Senate, Moseley-Braun became the first woman to serve on the powerful Finance Committee when a top-ranking Democrat, Tom Daschle of South Dakota, gave up his seat to create a spot for her. Also, Moseley-Braun and Senator Dianne Feinstein of California became just the second and third women ever to serve on the prestigious Senate Judiciary Committee. In addition, Moseley-Braun served on the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee and on the Small Business Committee. In 1993, the Illinois Senator made headlines when she convinced the Senate Judiciary Committee not to renew a design patent for the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) because it contained the Confederate flag. The patent had been routinely renewed for nearly a century, and despite the Judiciary Committee's disapproval, the Senate was poised to pass a resolution sponsored by Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina that included a provision to authorize the extension of the federal patent. Moseley-Braun threatened to filibuster the legislation "until this room freezes over." She also made an impassioned and eloquent plea to her colleagues about the symbolism of the Confederate flag, declaring, "It has no place in our modern times, place in this body, place in our society."¹² Swayed by Moseley-Braun's argument, the Senate rejected the UDC's application to renew its patent.¹³

Moseley-Braun sparred with Senator Helms once again while managing her first bill on the Senate Floor. As a cosponsor of a measure providing federal funding for the Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday Commission—an organization established in 1984 to promote national recognition of the holiday—Moseley-Braun helped thwart a Helms amendment to the legislation that would have replaced government money with private donations. The Illinois Senator invoked memories of her participation in a civil rights march with King in the 1960s in an attempt to win support for the legislation.¹⁴ The Senate eventually approved the bill. Among Moseley-Braun's other triumphs involving social legislation were her prominent roles in the passage of the Child Support Orders Act, the 1994 William J. (Bill) Clinton administration crime bill, the

Multiethnic Placement Act, and the Improving America's School Act.¹⁵

During her term in the Senate, Moseley-Braun addressed an array of issues affecting women and African Americans. She helped create legislation to assist divorced and widowed women, arguing, "Pension laws were never written for women . . . no wonder the vast majority of the elderly poor are women."¹⁶ She also sponsored the creation of the Sacagawea coin to recognize "women of color" and a National Park Service initiative to fund historic preservation of the Underground Railroad.¹⁷ A consistent supporter of equal opportunity and affirmative action, Moseley-Braun also spoke out against sexual harassment. In 1995 she joined five of her women colleagues in the Senate to call for public hearings on alleged sexual misconduct by Senator Bob Packwood of Oregon.¹⁸

Despite the high expectations following Moseley-Braun's upset victory in 1992, her term in the Senate was marked by controversy. Moseley-Braun drew criticism for alleged campaign finance violations, which eventually led to an investigation by the Federal Election Commission.¹⁹ In 1996, the Congressional Black Caucus and human rights organizations chastised Moseley-Braun for taking a private trip to Nigeria to attend the funeral of General Sani Abacha's son despite objections by the State Department. Previously an outspoken critic of human rights violations in the African nation, Moseley-Braun reversed her position and defended the Nigerian government.²⁰

Closely scrutinized, Moseley-Braun faced a difficult challenge in her 1998 bid for re-election to the Senate against Republican Peter Fitzgerald, an Illinois state senator.²¹ Capturing just 47 percent of the vote, Moseley-Braun lost to her opponent, who spent nearly \$12 million of his own money.²² President Clinton appointed Moseley-Braun the U.S. Ambassador to New Zealand; she served from 1999 until 2001. Attempting to revive her political career, Moseley-Braun entered the race for the Democratic nomination for President in 2000, but she was unsuccessful. It was the second time an African-American woman had sought the nomination (Shirley Chisholm

became the first in 1972). Since 2001, Moseley-Braun has taught political science at Morris Brown College (Atlanta) and DePaul University (Chicago) and managed a business consulting company in Chicago.²³ In 2004, Moseley-Braun made another unsuccessful bid for the Democratic presidential nomination.

FOR FURTHER READING

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Chicago Historical Society (Chicago, IL). *Papers*: 1992–1999. Senatorial papers.

University of Oklahoma (Norman, OK), The Julian P. Kanter Commercial Archive, Department of Communication. *Video reels*: 1992, eight video reels. Includes nine commercials used during Carol Moseley-Braun’s campaign for the 1992 U.S. senatorial election in Illinois, Democratic Party.

NOTES

- 1 Senator Moseley-Braun hyphenated her name during her U.S. Senate term but stopped using the hyphen when she left Congress.
- 2 *Current Biography*, 1994 (New York: H. W. Wilson and Company, 1994): 378.
- 3 Steve Johnson, “Braun’s Win Turns Around a Once-Stagnant Career,” 4 November 1992, *Chicago Tribune*: 19.
- 4 Johnson, “Braun’s Win Turns Around a Once-Stagnant Career”; Sarah Nordgren, “Carol Moseley-Braun: The Unique Candidate,” 26 July 1992, Associated Press.

- 5 *Current Biography*, 1994: 379.
- 6 Ibid., 380.
- 7 Nordgren, “Carol Moseley-Braun: The Unique Candidate”; Frank James, “Welcome to the Club: Carol Moseley-Braun’s Campaign for the Senate Was Her Own Excellent Adventure,” 6 December 1992, *Chicago Tribune*: 14.
- 8 Lynn Sweet, “A Braun Upset; First Defeat for Dixon in 42 Years,” 18 March 1992, *Chicago Sun-Times*: 1.
- 9 Edward Walsh, “Carol Braun’s Rocky Road to History; After the Upset, It’s Still a Long Way to the Senate,” 28 April 1992, *Washington Post*: C1.
- 10 James, “Welcome to the Club”; Sharon Cohen, “Carol Moseley-Braun: From Face in the Crowd to National Spotlight,” 4 November 1992, Associated Press; *Current Biography*, 1994: 381.
- 11 *Current Biography*, 1994: 378–379; Thomas Hardy, “Clinton Elected President: Carol Moseley-Braun Sweeps to Historic Senate Victory,” 4 November 1992, *Chicago Tribune*: 1.
- 12 Helen Dewar, “Senate Bows to Braun on Symbol of Confederacy,” 23 July 1993, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 13 Dewar, “Senate Bows to Braun on Symbol of Confederacy”; Steve Neal, “Moseley-Braun Record Is Inconsistent,” 28 July 1993, *Chicago Sun-Times*: 31.
- 14 Mitchell Locin, “Moseley-Braun Tangles Anew With Helms,” 25 May 1994, *Chicago Tribune*: 4.
- 15 *Current Biography*, 1994: 381.
- 16 Lynn Sweet, “Bill Seeks Fair Pension Shake for Women,” 12 May 1996, *Chicago Sun-Times*: 28.
- 17 Alaina Sue Potrikus, “Braun Has Something to Prove in Her Bid for President,” 14 January 2004, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*: 12A.
- 18 Dori Meinert and Toby Eckert, “Moseley-Braun Assailed for Backing Clinton,” 27 February 1998, *State Journal-Register* (Springfield, IL): 11.
- 19 Darryl Fears, “On a Mission in a Political Second Act; Bush’s Record Forced Her to Run, Braun Says,” 13 July 2003, *Washington Post*: A6.
- 20 Fears, “On a Mission in a Political Second Act”; *Politics in America*, 1998 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1997): 441–442.
- 21 Nordgren, “Carol Moseley-Braun: The Unique Candidate”; Jennifer Loven, “Peter Fitzgerald: He’s Heading for Capitol Hill But What Will He Do There?” 7 November 1998, Associated Press.
- 22 “Carol Moseley-Braun Says She Won’t Run for Office Again,” 5 November 1998, Associated Press.
- 23 “Ambassador Carol Moseley-Braun to Keynote SLDN National Dinner,” 7 March 2005, U.S. Newswire.