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Gender Politics in the United States: A Paradox

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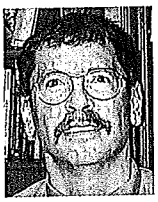


I. Introduction

When seen in comparative perspective, gender politics in the U.S. presents an interesting paradox. On the one hand, women's political groups are larger and better funded than in most other countries. EMILY's List, a PAC that seeks to recruit and help elect Democratic pro-choice women, is the largest political action committee in the country. Women hold important positions of political power. Sandra Day O'Connor is the most influential member of the U.S. Supreme Court, Nancy Pelosi is minority leader of the House of Representatives, and if the Democrats win a few seats in a future election could hold the most powerful position in the Congress. Women are strong leaders in state and local governments as well.

Women constitute a growing share of the paid labor force, and major companies are altering their benefit packages to attract and keep women employees. Women constitute a majority of entering students in the nation's law schools and medical schools. Public support for equal opportunities in education and employment has become so widespread that the National Election Studies have discontinued a survey question about this that it has asked since 1972.

Finally, women constitute a majority of voters, a prime target for all candidates and parties. Women are more likely than men to vote for Democratic candidates, creating a "gender gap" that benefits neither party but that alters the political landscape. Democratic candidates cannot win without a solid advantage among women voters, and this means that both parties seek to persuade women voters. The parties have poured millions of dollars into research on themes and issues to attract women voters.

And yet women in the U.S. lag behind those in many other countries in their share of

elected offices. Women hold just 14% of the seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, and just 26% of state executive elected offices, and 23% of state legislative seats. No woman has yet launched a competitive campaign for the presidency. The U.S. now ranks 59th in the world in the percentage of women in its national legislature, and has slipped some 17 places in the rankings in the past 7 years as other countries advance and increase the number of women, and we do not.

Moreover, the U.S. lags behind many other industrialized societies in key policies relating to women. A woman is guaranteed her job for only 12 weeks of unpaid leave after childbirth, and there is limited provision for allowing women (and men) to stay home to care for sick children. The U.S. does not provide or nationally regulate childcare for working women and men, nor does it fully subsidize the cost for poor families. Poor women are forced to take jobs or lose their welfare benefits, but these jobs often come with no health care for the woman or her children, nor subsidies for childcare. In many states abortion services are difficult or impossible to obtain, for while the government does not ban abortions, it also does not guarantee reproductive choice.

Even in areas where women have achieved a kind of parity of opportunity, institutional barriers make real equality more difficult to achieve. Women may constitute more than half of the 2004 entering classes in many of the nation's leading law schools, but to make a partner at a law firm many young lawyers must work 15 hours per day 7 days per week for several years, leaving little time to start or nurture a family. Studies show that even in the most egalitarian households, women do far more than half of the housework and childcare. Many women take time off from their careers to stay home with children or to care for a sick parent, and there is little societal or institutional support for them to reclaim their career when they reenter the labor force.

In this paper we attempt to explain this seeming paradox. The low numbers of women in elected office come primarily from a combination of socialization and structural factors. Although voters, donors, parties, and interest groups support women for public office when they run, women are less likely to consider running for office because they are less likely to men to believe that they are highly qualified. Social structures also contribute to the reluctance of women to run for office. Women still do most of the private-sphere work of raising/caring for children, tending the sick, elderly, or disabled, and doing the unpaid household work such as cooking and cleaning. These tasks often leave women with less time for public-sphere activities such as politics. Moreover, American electoral and political structures make it less likely that women can make rapid gains in elected office.

Yet the under-representation of women in elected office does not entirely explain the

lack of pro-feminist policies in the U.S., because many women who win elected office are non-feminist and even anti-feminist. Two competing social movements —— the feminist movement and the Christian Right —— both seek to mobilize women into politics and to change policies in mostly opposite ways. The mobilization of religiously conservative women who support traditional gender roles has effectively blocked many progressive policies that have been adopted in other countries.

II. Why are there so few women in elected office in the US?

The US helps train women in many developing countries to run for elected office, but it lags far behind many countries in electing women to national, state, and local office. The percentage of women in elected office has increased over time, but progress has been slow and appears to have stalled in recent years. Figure 1 shows the percentage of women in the U.S. House, Senate, and in state legislatures and governorships over time. Note that women made substantial gains in the late 1980s and especially in 1992, when women candidates, donors, and activists were mobilized by the televised image of Anita Hill being grilled by an all male Senate Judiciary Committee about her charges of sexual harassment against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.

The portion of elected officials who are women in each country is the result of an interaction between the demand for women candidates, the supply of women candidates, and the electoral institutions that regulate the interaction of supply and demand. Any of the three could lead to fewer women in office, for the public might not support women candidates, women might not run in large numbers for public office, or the political institutions may disadvantage women.

Demand for Women Candidates

In some societies, there is relatively little support for women in elected office, with many male and female voters preferring male candidates (Wilcox, Thomas, and Stark, 2003). If voters do not support women candidates, political parties are unlikely to choose them as candidates. In other countries, voters demand that parties provide a slate of candidates balanced by gender. When voters actively seek to support women, parties will respond.

In the U.S., surveys show that voters are willing to support women candidates, and in recent years that majorities think that American politics would be better if more women were in public office. Although in the 1930s only a third of voters said that they would support a woman for president if nominated by their party "and otherwise qualified," by

the late 1990s nearly all Americans said that they would support a woman for president. Figure 2 shows the change since the early 1970s. As willingness to vote for a woman for president has increased, believe that women are not suited for politics has declined. Yet it is worth noting that in recent years 1/4 of all Americans say that women are not well suited for politics, and four in ten say that women should tend home while men work. These attitudes are much more common among older Americans: in the past decade respondents over 61 years old have been twice as likely as those under 30 to say that women are not suited for politics (for a discussion, see Cook, 1998).

Demand for women candidates is more than simple willingness to vote for them. Many surveys show that substantial numbers of Americans would prefer to see more women in elected office. In 1992, exit polls showed that between 1/3 and 1/2 of voters in five states where women were running for Senate seats said that it was "very important" to elect more women the U.S. Senate. Women were substantially more likely to say this than men, but substantial minorities of men agreed as well (Cook, 1994). Gallup surveys have asked several times whether the country would be governed better or worse if more women were in office. In 1975, 33% said better and 18% worse (the rest said it would make no difference). By 2000, fully 57% of all Americans said that the nation would be governed better - 64% of women agreed as did 50% of men (Dolan, 2004).

Statistical analyses of the success of women candidates reveal that voters do support women candidates. When compared to men with similar levels of political experience and similar ideological fits to their districts, women are able to raise at least as much money as men, and attract at least as many votes (Newman, 1994). This is especially true among Democratic candidates (Burrell, 1998). This does not mean that gender is irrelevant to political campaigns, for there is amble evidence that women are treated differently by the media, and must run different types of campaigns to help overcome gender stereotypes with voters. But the overall conclusion of these studies is that when good women candidates run, they win as often as men. Thus demand for women candidates is not an explanation for their rarity in elected office.

It is worth noting that men and women do not appear to choose between candidates based primarily on gender, but rather based on ideology and partisanship. Although popular accounts exaggerate the magnitude of the gender gap, women support Democratic candidates more than men. This has meant at times that Democratic men running against Republican women have carried a majority of women's votes, while the Republican woman candidate has carried a majority of the votes of men (Cook, 1994).

Supply of Women Candidates

Because voters do not in the aggregate discriminate against women candidates, researchers in the early and mid 1990s expected the share of women in public office to increase steadily over time. The main barrier to electing women was thought to be incumbency, for few men or women defeat incumbent lawmakers (Darcy, Welch, and Clark, 1994; Carroll, 1994). As incumbents retired however, open seats create the opportunities to win seats. The pipeline was thought to contain significant numbers of women with the skills and inclination to run, but incumbency provided the "bottleneck" that prevented women from entering public office in large numbers (Duerst-Lahti, 1998).

For this reason, many advocates of women in elected office welcomed efforts in the early 1990s to limit the terms of state legislators. Many states adopted limits of six years, thereby creating an "open seat" in every state legislative district over a relatively short period. By ridding the system of incumbents, it was reasoned, more women could win more state legislative seats (Thompson and Moncrief, 1998; Carey, Niemi, and Powell, 2000). State legislatures make important policy affecting education, health care, and social welfare, and state legislators are the best candidates for the U.S. Congress. If the pipeline was at least partially full, term limits were expected to bring more women to public office. The model was thought to be the 1992 congressional elections, when a wave of retirements created many open seats which women contested and won (Wilcox, 1994).

Yet early studies of term limits in state legislatures suggest that this has not occurred.[1] When term limits forced women to retire from state legislatures, in many cases no woman sought to replace them (Carroll, 2001b). Indeed, some now suggest that incumbency protected women who already held public office, allowing women to accumulate in legislative office where many sought to influence legislation rather than to run for higher office. The problem was not the bottleneck in the pipe, but the number of women in the pipeline. Scholars have long known that women were less willing to run for office than men, but the failure of term limits to increase the number of women in state legislatures brought home just how substantial the problem was.

Why are women less likely to run for office? A recent study by Lawless and Fox (2004) identified a pool of potential candidates by identifying large numbers of men and women with jobs in law, business, education, and politics. Their survey showed that women were less likely than men to consider running for public office: 59% of men but only 43% of women had thought of running for office. Moreover, women were more likely than men to consider running for limited local offices such as school boards. Women are no less likely than men to welcome the tasks of campaigning, and are even more eager to meet voters.

But women with the same qualifications as men were **more than twice as likely** to think of themselves as not at all qualified, and only half as likely to think that they were very qualified. The study confirmed that women are more influenced than men by political socialization factors, such as encouragement from friends, neighbors, family members, interest groups, and party leaders.

Women often believe that they will find it difficult to raise enough money to compete, although research shows that women can raise as much as men. More importantly, women and men both worry about the impact of running for and holding office on their families, but women with children spend more time on family responsibilities than do men. US political institutions are not structured in ways to facilitate women's participation —— the U.S. Congress is often in session for long hours, for example, and has no child care facilities.

Political Structures

We have seen thus far that there is significant demand for women in elected office, but a limited supply of women candidates. Political and social structures help to mediate the interaction between supply and demand, and contribute to the low numbers of women in elected office. In the U.S., single member districts lead to fewer women in office: states that elect some of their legislators through multimember districts end up with more women in office as voters seek to balance their votes by gender. If all American elections were in multimember districts, there would be significantly more women in public office.

More importantly, parties nominate their candidates primarily through primary elections, where the party is usually neutral among men and women running for the nomination. This contrasts sharply with party list systems such as in Sweden, where parties choose the candidates and place them high or low on party lists, thereby assuring their victory. Studies have shown that gender-balanced party lists (often referred as zippered lists because of the alternation of men and women on the list) result in parity or near parity between men and women. Such lists are impossible in the US given current party practices, but there is no constitutional barrier to party lists nor to multimember districts.

Political parties do some recruiting of candidates, and have sought in recent years to encourage women to run (Herrnson, etc). Moreover, at times parties discourage candidates —— in 2000 the New York Democratic party "cleared the field" for Hillary Clinton to win the nomination with no opposition. But the most important institutional actors in the US are civil society organizations that seek to recruit and fund women candidates. EMILY's List is the largest PAC in the US. The group recruits and encourages pro-choice Democratic women to run for office, and offers them early money to help their campaigns

gather momentum. EMILY is not the name of the group's founder, but an acronym: "Early Money is Like Yeast." Much as yeast helps bread dough rise, so early contributions to women candidates help them raise campaign "dough." (Biersack, Herrnson, and Wilcox, 1994).

Most observers credit Emily's List with evening out the playing field, thereby allowing women to compete without financial disadvantages that had before proved fatal to their campaigns. Other groups, both liberal and conservative, have emulated the very successful Emily's List Model, including: The Women's Campaign Fund (WCF) and the Wish List (for Republican women). Still other groups work to bring women into politics by addressing societal rather than structural barriers, such as The White House Project, which works to enhance public perceptions of women's leadership potential, or NOW, which for nearly four decades has promoted feminist alternatives to socialized gender roles.

Thus the explanation for the low numbers of women in elected office in the US does not lie in hostility from voters, but from socialization, and structural barriers. It is unclear at this point what types of interventions can break the current stalemate. It may be that institutional reforms will be needed to lead to more progress for women in elected office in the United States, as has been necessary in many other industrialized democracies, such as France, Spain, New Zealand, Great Britain, and the Scandinavian countries.

Does under-representation of women in policymaking positions explain the US deficit in women-friendly public policies? A variety of studies have shown that women legislators are more likely to advance policies that benefit women. Thomas has shown that in states where there are at least 15% women in state legislatures (a level described as a "critical mass" in Kanter's classic 1977 study of gender and tokenism within large institutions), women find their unique voice and advocate for pro-women policies (Thomas, 1994; Carroll, 2001a). Women overall are more active in supporting feminist legislation in Congress, and in sponsoring legislation on issues of concern to families and children (Swers and Larson, 2005).

Yet electing more women to public office will not automatically lead to more pro-feminist policies. Over the past two decades, the activist wings of the two political parties have staked opposite positions on many issues of concern to women. The 1992 Congressional elections brought to the House of Representatives many new liberal, feminist women, but the 1994 elections brought in several conservative, anti-feminist women. This entering group of Republican women gave an award to conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh soon after the election, claiming that none of them were "feminazis." In office, these women voted against the policies that the liberal Democratic women supported.

Even more moderate GOP women have opposed policies that most feminists support: GOP Senator Nancy Kassenbaum was the critical vote that helped to defeat a law that would have required that employers keep open a worker's job for 12 weeks after a baby is born, at no pay. Kassenbaum supported instead a bill that would have encouraged companies to offer such leave voluntarily. Family leave was eventually enacted when the Democrate controlled the Senate and the presidency. It is clear from this example that having a critical mass of women is not in itself sufficient to guarantee feminist legislation; rather, having a critical mass of feminist policymakers (usually Democrats) becomes the issue.

On a number of key but narrow issues, Republican and Democratic women have come together to promote policies that clearly benefit women. And some have argued that although Republican women in Congress usually vote with their male colleagues for tax cuts for the wealthy and cuts in programs that help poor families, they work to moderate those policies behind the scenes. Nevertheless, the current political arrangements in the US suggest that the feminist agenda would be more advanced by the election of Democratic men than of Republican women. In other words, it is not the gender of the policy maker that matters, but the political party.

The strongly anti-feminist women elected to the House in 1994 are part of a larger societal and political debate about gender politics. This is a wide-ranging debate on the nature of gender, of the optimal family arrangements and the policies that might promote those arrangements, and on what policies in the end are best for women.

III. The Contested Politics of Gender

In many countries gender politics is contested between women seeking access to political power and men fighting to deny them that access. Feminist groups may encounter cultural resistance from men and women with conventional gender role attitudes, but this resistance will not be organized. In the U.S., however, the principal conflict over gender politics is between social movement organizations that offer competing visions of gender roles and policies. There are large organizations that represent feminist women (and men), but there are also large social movement organization representing anti-feminist women (and men). These two sets of groups agree on a few policies, but do battle on many more.

Today large women's organizations with substantial budgets contend to define what policies are best for women, and to advocate for those policies. Feminist and anti-feminist groups compete to frame gender politics in the US. They battle to define American gender

politics in international agencies (Buss and Hermann, 2003). Anti-feminist groups have close ties to Republican politicians, and when the GOP controls government they are often chosen to represent the US in foreign interactions. For example, the State Department recently selected an anti-feminist women's group to train Iraqi women in participation and democracy.[2]

To understand the contested nature of gender politics in the U.S., it is useful to briefly review the history of the mobilization of feminist and anti-feminist women. Like all social movements in the U.S., both are characterized by competing leaders and organizations that differ in their definition of problems and solutions. Both movements seek to convince women that they share a common fate and must work together to affect public policy, but they define different complaints and policy solutions.

Feminist Mobilization

Although both the feminist and anti-feminist movements have been characterized by overlapping waves of mobilization and competing social movement organizations and leaders, it is useful to think of feminism in the U.S. as mobilizing in two distinct waves. From the mid 1800s through the early years of the 20th century, women's rights advocates organized and rallied for a number of policies, including the right to control their own property and earnings, equal access to education, guardianship of their children, rights to divorce, and the right to vote. Although suffrage became the center of the movement's agenda over time, some women activists rejected suffrage as an idea too radical to succeed, and likely to blunt their efforts for other, more concrete policies.

The coalition that ultimately achieved suffrage for women was composed of feminists and social reformers. Many feminists believed in true equality between the sexes, and saw voting as one of many rights women deserved. The social reformers believed women were a positive moral influence on society, and that society would improve as a result of allowing women to vote. These two groups shared the goal of female suffrage, but did not share other goals. The feminists wanted an Equal Rights Amendment as the next step, but the social reformers did not share this goal.

First-wave feminism was a diverse social movement with many contending definitions of grievance and many competing ideologies. But over time suffragists joined with social reformers to argue that women had unique values that could improve politics, instead of arguing that women deserved the vote as an equal right. Thus many first-wave feminists saw men and women as having different values and interests, and in many cases as having different roles and capabilities as well. Women and men therefore might have different

needs, and policies to promote equality would not necessarily deal with men and women in the same way. For example, Carrie Chapman Catt, who served as President of the National Women's Suffrage Association in the critical period 1900-1920, often focused more on the benefits that would arise from women's votes than the inherent justice of providing votes to all citizens. Some suffragists, such as Ellen Swallow Richards, stressed women's supposedly greater moral values and skill in caring and cleaning work. One pamphlet suggested the idea of "municipal housekeeping," reading in part: "Women are by nature housekeepers, let them have a hand in cleaning the city 'house'." (Scott, 1993). Women, these arguments assumed, are different from men in ways that would benefit the political realm. This line of reasoning proved more tractable politically than a strict "equality feminism" that demanded equality for its own sake.

Although a number of states responded to suffragist pressure and amended their constitutions to allow women to vote, it took a national constitutional amendment to guarantee the vote for all women. After the passage of the 19th amendment in 1920 which forced all states to allow women to vote, feminists in the National Women's Party drafted an Equal Rights Amendment, which was introduced to Congress in 1923. But many women who had worked to win the franchise opposed the ERA. Ethel Klein (1984) notes that "Many former suffragists responded antagonistically and actively thwarted efforts to get the amendment passed before Congress. Their opposition centered around the belief that women are fundamentally different from men and therefore have to serve different social and economic roles." (p 17).

The 19th Amendment was thus a major political accomplishment, but soon after the "group consciousness" among women began to dissipate. Women began voting in large numbers, but soon proved to be just as diverse in their opinions as men; no earthshaking change emerged from women's new access to the ballotbox. The shared sense of purpose and group camaraderie of women, built painstakingly during the long campaign for suffrage, collapsed or transformed into new pursuits, such as labor unions. (Cobble, 2004; Eisenstein, 1983). Very few women ran for or held political office between 1920 and the mid-1960s — and when they did, it was usually through the "widow's route" (i.e. taking the seat of a husband or father who died while holding office).

The second wave of feminist efforts began in the early 1960s. Early in the decade, President Kennedy reversed directives barring women from top civil service slots, and established a National Commission on the Status of Women. State level commissions were also formed; by 1965 some 35 states had such bodies. In 1964, the debate over a civil rights law that would bar discrimination against African Americans in the workplace took a

surprising twist when Rep. Howard Smith (D, VA) offered an amendment that would add sex to the bill. Smith opposed the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and hoped that the inclusion of this amendment would help to kill the bill. Instead, the bill passed in amended form, giving women a powerful tool to fight employment discrimination (Hole and Levine, 1971).

Subsequent acts by Congress and a series of Supreme Court decisions also greatly expanded women's access to the public sphere. In Congress, the expansion process included the passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974, and in 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments, banning sex discrimination in schools. As a result of Title IX, the enrollment of women in athletics programs and professional schools dramatically increased. During the same time period, the Supreme Court greatly increased women's rights to privacy, bodily integrity, workplace rights, education, and reproductive freedom, in a series of important decisions including *Griswold v. Connecticut (1965), Roe v. Wade (1973)*, and *Schultz v. Wheaton Glass Co. (1970), Corning Glass Works v. Brennan (1974), and Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson (1986)* among others. The combination of the expanding feminist movement and the declining economy led a growing number of women to seek paid work outside the home, including political office. And with this new access to public life, women again began to organize to confront sex-based discrimination.

In 1966, 28 members of state commissions formed the National Organization for Women (NOW), which became the largest and most active feminist organization in the U.S. Many other feminist organizations were also formed in the 1960s, including some with striking names such as the Women's International Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH). Women had played an active role in both the civil rights movements and the anti-war movements, but men had dominated the leadership of social movement organizations. Women active in these movements had organizational skills and had been radicalized by their battles against racism and the war. By the end of the 1960s there were many competing social movement organizations with different philosophies and tactics. National level organizations drew the most attention, but there were many state and local organizations as well.

The second wave feminist movement was called initially the Women's Liberation Movement, and there were again many ideologies and leaders who competed to define the movement. It included some who urged women to withdraw from patriarchal institutions and create separate women's institutions. One political button from the era argued that "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle." But over time the dominant push was for an integrated society with equal opportunities for men and women. Instead of the 1st wave

feminist argument that women had special skills and abilities and needs, 2nd wave feminists argued that women and men were essentially equal. All that was needed was to remove the barriers to equal access to politics, to education, and to professional occupations.

This American form of "equity" feminism differed from feminist movements in continental Europe, which frequently sought to alter institutions to make them friendlier to women who might have different values and roles than men (Wilcox, 1991). Thus while second wave American feminists bragged that they were back at work within two weeks of having a baby, European women pushed instead for long periods of family leave during which an employer was required to keep her job open. Perhaps inadvertently, some American feminists described the role of housewife and mother as menial and secondary, whereas European feminists pushed for family subsidies to allow women to spend more time with their children, and for job sharing where women and men could share jobs and both spend more time with their families (for a discussion of social feminism and equity feminism, see Black, 1989).

The feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s sought to build a feminist consciousness among women through consciousness raising sessions. The National Organization of Women (NOW) helped to organize sessions across the country, especially on college campuses. Although NOW sought to raise the consciousness of women and men alike, they urged that women meet without men, so that "the anger, pain, and frustration of being a woman must be seen as a common experience, an experience which can be transformed into action, action which produces change, change which gives hope." (NOW 1983, p2). The purpose of these sessions was to share personal stories of sex discrimination that would collectively "help raise consciousness and awareness of female oppression in a sexist society." The basic slogan of the feminist movement as a whole was the oft-repeated phrase, "The personal is political," an intentional collapsing of the "separate spheres" of public and private. It is precisely these personal experiences, the consciousness-raising group leaders argued, that connect women and reveal hidden sexism within the society. After women came to recognize common problems, they were encouraged to think of collective solutions. NOW's consciousness raising manual noted that "There are no personal solutions to social problems... Changing society into a nonsexist community of women and men working equitably together is the only real solution to the basic problems women face".

These sessions helped to create a feminist consciousness among many women. Feminist consciousness entailed the recognition of discrimination against women, blaming the social and political system for this discrimination, acceptance of the need for collective

action to remedy this discrimination, and the acceptance of a political ideology to help frame that collective action (Klein, 1984). Studies showed that between 17% and 24% of women had a feminist consciousness in various years from the 1970s through the 1990s (Cook, 1993a). This feminist consciousness was most common among women who came of age during the mobilization of the feminist movement; younger women were significantly less likely to adopt a feminist identity, although they were generally supportive of gender equality (Cook, 1993b). Only slightly smaller numbers of men identified as feminists, and they were equally supportive of feminist legislation (Cook and Wilcox, 1994).

Anti-Feminist Mobilization

In most societies, feminist movements meet substantial unorganized resistance from men and women who value traditional gender roles. In the U.S., however, the feminist movement sparked a countermobilization by Christian conservative women who opposed feminist values on religious grounds. This mobilization was concentrated primarily among white evangelical Protestants, whose belief in the inerrancy of the Christian Bible led them to reject gender equality as contrary to God's will (Wilcox, 1989; Cook and Wilcox, 1989).

In the early and middle 1970s, these religious conservatives organized to fight the Equal Rights Amendment. Organizations like Eagle Forum and Stop ERA mobilized a core of activists with an unusual demographic profile. Feminist activists resembled most other activists in the U.S. —— they had college degrees, professional jobs, and substantial incomes. In contrast, these anti-feminist activists typically had high school educations, were housewives, and had never been politically active. Yet the ERA was defeated, and some states even repealed their original ratification of the amendment.

By the late 1970s, broader Christian Right groups like the Moral Majority, Christian Voice, and Concerned Women for America were formed. Most had a heavily female donor base but male leadership, but Concerned Women for America styled itself the "Christian alternative to NOW," and was led and organized primarily by women. Although Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority grabbed most of the headlines, CWA organized quietly and effectively. But all of these organizations, and groups that formed later like the Christian Coalition, opposed the feminist agenda and attacked feminism as anti-family.

CWA built its organization along an unorthodox but quite effective structure. Its principle unit is not the national or state chapters, but instead the local prayer group. These local groups were often inter-denominational, something that most Christian Right groups were unable to achieve. The women in these groups would gather in someone's kitchen to pray and perhaps to study the Bible, and then afterward to do some politics. This made the

group especially effective at lobbying state legislatures, for the organization had a genuine grassroots presence. In 1985, the organization moved its headquarters to Washington and in the late 1990s it formed two new research foundations. But it remains a decentralized organization with significant grassroots support.

Scholars of gender politics have largely ignored the Christian Right and anti-feminist groups. When scholars write of gender consciousness, it is almost always operationalized as a feminist consciousness (Gurin, 1985; Tolleson-Rinehart, 1992). Yet anti-feminist groups also build gender consciousness. They try to instill in their potential members a sense of a common complaint, to create a common identity as Christian conservative women, and to build support for collective action. Although some organizational leaders deny that women have common interests (Schreiber, 2004), others argue that women are all disadvantaged by feminist policies, and should unite to resist them.

Thus feminist and anti-feminist women share a gender consciousness, but for feminist women the complaint is against a patriarchical society that continues to deny women equality, with institutions designed by men that advantage men. For anti-feminist women in contrast, the problem is not traditional gender roles or institutional structures, but feminist organizations and their policies. In this sense, the Christian Right agenda on gender is truly anti-feminist, rather than pro-traditional values.

Feminist and Anti-Feminist Politics in the U.S.

At the heart of the dispute between feminist and anti-feminist women's organizations is a fundamentally different view of ideal social organization. Feminists believe that *individual* men and women have different interests and strengths, and that there should be no barriers that constrain men and women to particular roles. This means that women must be able to control their fertility through easy access to contraception and abortion. It means that society should not discriminate between heterosexuals on the one hand, and gays and lesbians on the other. Legal, organizational, and social barriers to gender equality should be eliminated.

Anti-feminist women believe that men and women as *groups* have unique talents and roles given by God. The best family arrangement is for a man to work for wages outside the home, and for a woman to stay home and tend the house and raise the children. Abortion and homosexuality are sinful, and contraception is discouraged because it may upset the balance between men and women (Luker, 1984).

This conflict was most concrete in the struggle over the Equal Rights Amendment. Anti-feminists argued that the amendment would bar women from collecting retirement

benefits from a deceased spouse, would bar child support from a deserting husband, would force women into the military along with men, and would even bar single-sex toilets. Most fundamentally, however, they argued that it would encourage women to enter the laborforce in large numbers, creating strains on families and leaving children unsupervised.

Ironically, anti-feminist women activists crisscrossed the country in highly organized and effective political action to urge women to reject equality in favor of staying home with their children. In many cases, anti-feminist activism served the same personal functions as feminist activism —— it enabled women to enter the political sphere, to acquire organizational skills, and to gain political influence.

Today the leading feminist organization in the U.S. is the National Organization for Women. The organization claims some 500,000 dues-paying members, an annual budget of $5 million, and active chapters in all 50 states and in Washington DC. NOW has a national political action committee and several state level PACs. The organization's leading priorities are securing the ERA, protecting abortion rights and expanding access to legal abortion, employment equity, fighting violence against women, opposing racism and supporting equality for gays and lesbians.

Concerned Women for America is the largest anti-feminist organization. CWA also claims a membership of more than 500,000, and has a budget of nearly 12 million dollars (more than double that of NOW). CWA has a new PAC and several foundations devoted to the study and promotion of various issues. Its core issues include promoting "traditional" families with a husband, wife, and children, opposing abortion, supporting conservative education policies that include substantial parental vetoes over curriculum, bans on pornography, religious freedom, and opposition to various international treaties and conventions.

NOW and CWA have worked together on a limited number of issues, especially in recent years human trafficking. But on most issues, these two large and effective women's organizations are on opposite sides. And as American partisan politics have polarized, they have sided with different parties and thus ended up supporting opposite (and sometimes surprising) positions. Since the early 1970s, feminists had been primarily active in the Democratic party, supporting George McGovern with enthusiasm in 1972 and Jimmy Carter with some reluctance in 1976. But throughout the 1970s, feminists were active in both parties, and in 1976 the two parties took very similar positions on key gender issues.

In 1980, Christian conservatives who supported the candidacy of Ronald Reagan influenced the Republican party platform in important ways. Although the GOP had long endorsed the ERA, the new platform opposed it, and called for a ban on abortions. It

proposed policies to help housewives and mothers, but not to aid all women (Melich, 1996). Meanwhile, NOW voted to oppose the reelection of Jimmy Carter, and only reluctantly reversed that decision in October, 1980 —— without issuing an endorsement. This decision split the feminist community, many of whom saw Ronald Reagan as significant threat to feminism and vastly preferred Carter. Reagan won the election in the final days of the campaign. NOW also worked closely within the Democratic party to influence the party's platform (Wolbrecht, 2000).

Today, anti-feminist groups are active in GOP politics, and key supporters of President Bush, whereas feminist groups remain a key Democratic constituency and are actively supporting John Kerry. The 2004 election may well decide which president replaces several Supreme Court justices (only one of whom is under 70 years old, and several of whom face health crises). The Court will face key decisions on gender equality, on abortion rights, and on gay and lesbian rights. The politics of gender are more polarized in 2004 than ever before.

IV. Conclusion

Today a majority of women are neither feminist nor anti-feminist. They reject negative (and false) stereotypes of feminists as angry women who dislike men and who are too focused on grievance to participate fully in life. Socialist feminist Emma Goldman is widely cited as stating in the early years of the 20th century "if I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." The feminist label is especially uncommon among young woman in the U.S. today.

Most women also take for granted the progress brought about by the feminist movement. They expect equal access to education, to jobs, and to politics. Few accept the anti-feminist argument that women are better off as housewives and mothers —— indeed a majority of mothers of young children are now in the labor force. Many women correctly perceive that the most overt forms of gender discrimination have ended. When Sandra Day O'Connor graduated from law school, third in her class with experience on the law journal and taking only two years to complete her study, she was unable to find a job as a lawyer in any private firm in California. One offered her a job as a legal secretary. Later, after she took time off to spend with young children, she again found it impossible to find a job in a law firm, and thus was forced to open her own. Today she is the most influential justice on the Supreme Court. Young women today find her story almost impossible to believe.

Yet there are problems with a non-ideological approach to gender politics, not the least

of which is that more women seek and enter public life (and especially political office) when a feminist ideology is on the upswing. Over the past several years, the media has written many stories of young women on the partner track at law firms who have quit their jobs to work part time in a less demanding and less rewarding job in order to spend more time with their children. Many women who expected to work always are interrupting their careers to take time off while their children are young. Many will earn less for the rest of their lives, and never have the opportunities again to achieve high position.

Without an ideology to interpret the world, many women accept this as an individual and inevitable choice. The requirement that young attorneys work 80 hour weeks in order to achieve partner applies equally to men and women, and thus seems to many to be fair. Few consider the influence of societal family roles, which provide many men on the partner track with wives who do far more than half of domestic tasks, and who sacrifice for their husband's careers, but do not provide this support for women on the partner track. Few consider that men and women could both take times from their careers to spend with children, and that economic institutions could be structured in a way that would permit them to restart their careers with minimal interruption. And even fewer pause to consider how the legal profession might be restructured to allow women and men more time with families.

Of course, anti-feminist groups would oppose these kind of changes, because they would encourage women to work outside the home. Yet even among white evangelicals, the core constituency of the Christian Right, there has been a steady increase in female labor-force participation over the past decade. And although anti-feminist groups have blamed this on high taxes, the substantial tax cuts enacted by President Bush and the Republican Congress have not reversed this trend. There is in fact substantial support among evangelical women for many elements of the feminist program, although many strongly oppose abortion and lesbian rights (Wilcox, 1989, Cook and Wilcox, 1989).

Implications for Women in Politics in the U.S.

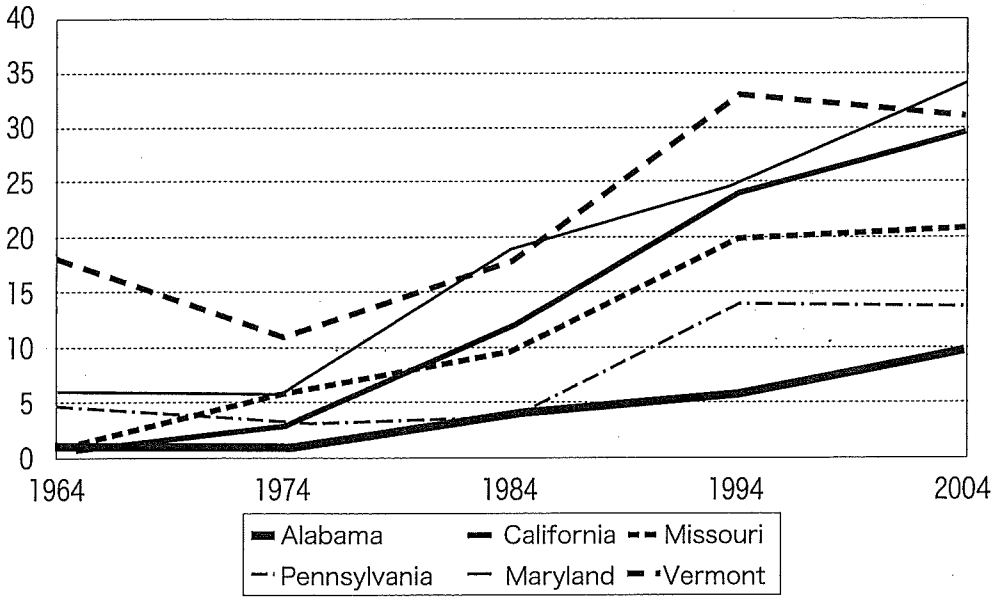
Gender politics in the U.S. is therefore a case with successful lessons for other countries, and also with lingering problems. What has worked well in the U.S. is the development of large feminist organizations that have helped women to understand their common interests and the need for collective action. The consciousness raising by feminist groups in the 1970s was useful in not only building a broad movement but in helping women to understand that problems that had previously been defined as personal were in fact political, and that social, economic, and legal structures could be changed. The U.S. has

also been a successful case of building a feminist movement that includes women and men. Many men support feminist organizations and policies, and have provided important support for women's organizations. These organizations have done important work to help to counter the problems that American electoral institutions impose on making rapid progress toward gender equality.

Yet women remain underrepresented in public office, and there remain important barriers in achieving true equality. Two things stand out as important for future progress toward gender equality. The U.S. needs to adopt policies that make it easier for women to combine private and public roles. Paid maternity and paternity leave, guaranteed health care for families, subsidized and regulated child care, and increased public support for caring for sick or disabled family members would allow women to devote more attention to careers.

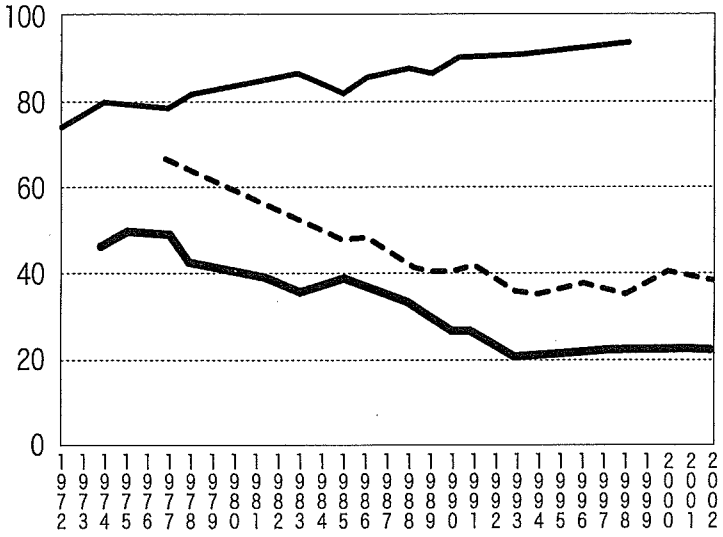
Although progress for women has recently appeared to have stalled, social scientists have recently begun to realize that social systems do not always proceed in linear fashion. Social change may appear to be essentially stalled, but seemingly stable systems can reach "tipping points" that lead to rapid change. Certainly 1992, the "Year of the Woman in Politics," was one such case of rapid change after a period of slow, incremental growth. Recent scholarship suggests the possibility of this sort of change in the U.S. again in the near future. At the end of a long and exhaustive study of the sources of women's lower rates of political participation, Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2003) concluded that women who live in states where women are candidates for statewide office are far more interested in politics than women who live in other states. This suggests that incremental progress in electing women to public office can lead to increase political participation by women in other ways —— contributing, campaigning, and organizing. And this increase in participation may well make it easier for women to win still more offices.

Figure1. Women in State Legislatures



1964-2004 by decade

Figure2. Gender Attitudes in the U.S. Over Time



Source: GSS 1972-2002

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1 There is some debate as to whether term limits have any affect on the number of women in state legislatures. Carroll and Jenkins (2004) suggest that term limits reduce the number of women in lower chambers while increasing it slightly in state Senates. But Norrander and Wilcox (2005) find no effect with a somewhat different set of controls.

2 http://us.oneworld.net/article/view/95420/1 accessed 10/12/04.