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How Studying Ideological Diversity among Women Transforms Political Knowledge

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In a recent text detailing the alleged wrongs of feminism, conservatives Suzanne Venker and Phyllis Schlafly pronounced,

> It is our sincere hope that this book helps support Americans who don't believe women in this country are oppressed, who know government is not the solution to women's problems, who don't believe marriage and motherhood are outdated institutions, who think men are as important as women, who think gender roles are good and exist for a reason, and who see the mainstream media for who they are (Venker and Schlafly 2011, 11).

While it may be tempting for feminists to dismiss these ideas as old-fashioned and even detrimental to women, doing so restricts how we comprehend the full range of women's political participation. In my work on conservative women, I argue that we must take such comments, and their messengers, seriously. Failing to do so means that political science broadly, and the field of women and politics more specifically, is limited in what it can tell us about ideology, identity, and political practice.

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Feminists have long challenged the field of political science by using gender as an analytic category. In so doing, feminists have taken "mainstream" political science as their starting point and challenged canonical orthodoxy that omits or misrepresents women. This impressive body of scholarship significantly broadens disciplinary knowledge and creates richer insights into politics. Scholars have also justifiably argued for recognizing differences among women based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, abilities, and class and have urged against making universal claims about women's activism and interests. Notwithstanding the critical importance of attending to diversity among women, my interest in conservative women came about as a reaction to this body of work. As we thoughtfully learned to debate theoretical questions of gender identity and political organizing in women and politics classes at Rutgers, I also recognized a tendency to conflate women's interests with feminist ones. As a result, conservative women's activism was often sidelined or disregarded, leaving a gap in knowledge about the implications and effects of ideological diversity among women.[1] As someone who had once worked in feminist politics in Washington, DC, and at the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers, I know that conservative women are important political players in their own right. By centering my research on conservative women, I navigate among feminist theory, mainstream political science, and the practice of politics. Specifically, I examine how conservative women challenge our conventional understandings of identity, representation, and conservative movement politics.

IDENTITY POLITICS

Conservative women are gender-conscious political actors. They frequently organize as, and speak for, women. Their gendered organizing presents a significant challenge to feminists who have long argued that they represent women (Schreiber 2008). This contest among ideologically diverse groups of women gives credence to the ideas expressed by feminist theorists who caution against organizing around identity (see, e.g., Butler 1992; Fuss 1989), reminding us that doing so can be essentializing. Theorists like Butler have argued that when "the category of women is invoked . . . an internal debate invariably begins over what the descriptive content of that term will be" (1992, 15), as identity

1. See Klatch 1987, Marshall 1997, and Rymph 2006 for some notable exceptions.

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categories are never merely descriptive, but normative and potentially exclusionary. When conservative women challenge feminist claims of representation, they are reminding us of the fragility of identity politics. Nonetheless, they also organize collectively as women, engaging in the very process they criticize. To examine how conservative women negotiate among these tensions, I turn to Spivak's (1993) discussion of "strategic essentialism." Conceptually, strategic essentialism takes as a given that we should contest and deconstruct identity categories but simultaneously recognizes and explains why and how women act collectively toward political goals. Thus, Spivak helps us bridge theory and practice and reminds us that "a strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory" (1993, 4).

As strategic essentialists, conservative female activists challenge feminist identity claims by playing "femball." That is, they contest feminist interpretations of women's interests by invoking their own. And they act collectively as women to do so. For example, the socially conservative Concerned Women for America (CWA) argues against the legality of abortion on the grounds that it harms women's health. It contends that abortion is a women's interest, as do pro-choice groups, but to different ends (Schreiber 2008). When CWA frames abortion as a women's issue, it has political significance and generates debates about what is at stake for women in the policymaking process. Of course, by both contesting and invoking identity politics, conservative female activists risk being criticized. Many conservative female leaders recognize, however, that they are strategically invoking gender and are willing to take the risks this entails (Schreiber 2008). Analyzing how women are deployed by conservative women's organizations helps us build and/or contest theories, as well generate insights into the successes and challenges of identity-based organizing. I credit the Rutgers Women and Politics program for introducing me to interdisciplinary material and debates that shaped my understanding of these important political questions.

REPRESENTATION

The predominant scholarship on representation in American politics examines whether elected officials can/should/do represent their constituents. Although this is an important line of inquiry, it is limited in what it can tell us about political representation more broadly, especially as theories of representation encounter how representation is actually

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practiced. A more dynamic assessment of representation considers the process from the point of view of the represented and investigates how interests are articulated and debated in the public sphere. To this end, several scholars have encouraged us to analyze "the multiple possible actors, sites, goals and means that inform processes of substantive representation" (Celis et al. 2008, 99) and argue for "seeing representation in terms of *claims to be representative* by a variety of political actors, rather than (as is normally the case) seeing it as an achieved, or potentially achievable, state of affairs as a result of election" (Saward 2006, 298).

Evaluating national conservative women's organizations provides insights into how, and to what ends, representative claims can be deployed, as well as the effects of this process. When Sarah Palin ran for vice president, for example, conservative women's groups used the opportunity to project to the public ideas about who they are and how they represent women. For them, having Palin on the Republican presidential ticket gave them an opportunity to chastise feminist groups for not supporting a woman's bid for the nation's second-highest office. Conversely, feminist organizations were put on the defensive, having to respond to opponents and the public as to why Palin did not fit within their agenda to elect more women to office. That there was a public conflict among ideologically distinct women's organizations over whether Palin promotes women's interests requires understanding representation in more dynamic ways. Palin's case demonstrates that representative claims have political effects and consequences that require careful and critical analysis. If we merely focus on theoretical questions about whether a candidate for elective office supports feminist issues, for example, then we miss the bigger picture about what is at stake in debates over representation in other contexts and among a variety of political actors.[2]

CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENTS

Conservative movements and politics cannot adequately be understood without attention to the role of women within them. Conservative

2. Parts of this section on representation appear in Kathleen Blee and Sandra Deutsch's (eds.) 2012 "Dilemmas of Representation: Conservative and Feminist Women's Organizations React to Sarah Palin," in *Women of the Right: Comparisons and Interplay Across Borders*, published by The Pennsylvania State University Press.

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female activists give conservative causes legitimacy, bridge women to other conservative causes, and forge important political alignments and partnerships that broaden and strengthen the appeal of conservative politics (Schreiber 2008, 119). As one conservative activist told me, "You can't have white guys saying you don't need affirmative action. We feel we have credibility to say 'not all women think the way you may expect'" (Schreiber 2008, 47). When conservative women directly challenge feminists, they demonstrate the centrality of women to conservative movement politics. This allows conservatives to argue that feminists do not necessarily speak for all women and that conservative politics can welcome women.

Since Palin's nomination, an already burgeoning conservative women's movement has gained in status and momentum. From the Internet-based Smart Girl Politics that was formed in 2008, to the women-led Tea Party Patriots, a new crop of conservative women are energized and eager to take on feminists. Given their prominence and potential for impact, we must be continuously attentive to ideological diversity among women and do so in ways that are both critical and constructive. As Phelan astutely suggests, "Rather than arguing with one another about which story is true, [we] must look instead at what is at stake in our different stories; we must examine the consequences of our stories in terms of power and change" (1993, 773).

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Crossings and Correspondences: Rethinking Intersectionality and the Category "Latino"

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My first course in women's studies was Gloria Anzaldúa's "Women of Color in the U.S." I took the course with a group of women with whom I shared a house in Santa Cruz. We were Chicana and Filipina, all of us activists in MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) and APISA (Asian/Pacific Island Student Association). That spring quarter, we worked our way through Anzaldúa's recently published *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* while also reading essays by Audre Lorde, Norma Alarcón, Janice Mirikitani, and Chela Sandoval. We read lesbian erotica by Azucena Coronel and listened to Cherríe Moraga read poetry. Along with my housemates and activist friends, I spent the quarter reading and talking and learning about how to think more deeply about questions of gender, race, and sexuality and about how these categories helped to shape my personal, intellectual, and political identity.

I share this anecdote to highlight one particular instance of how intellectual, personal, and political crossings can shape one's research trajectory in powerful ways. In my case, it was my interest in Latino studies and Third World organizing that led me to women's studies and to the study of feminism. Later, as a graduate student in political theory at Rutgers University, it was my coursework in feminist theory through the Women and Politics program that gave me new ways to think about the study of Latino politics. More specifically, my Santa Cruz experience underscores how my own passion for Latino politics initially brought me to feminism. In graduate school, it was feminist and queer theory that profoundly came to shape my understanding and approach to the study of Latino politics.

Of course, my anecdote breaks no new ground in arguing for the importance of racialized sexuality and the need to theorize "the race of

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