

# Is There a Conservative Feminism? An Empirical Account

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During an onstage appearance at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2017, Kellyanne Conway, who serves as White House counselor to President Donald Trump, shared that “[i]t’s difficult for me to call myself a feminist in a classic sense because it seems to be very anti-male, and it certainly is very pro-abortion, and I’m neither anti-male or pro-abortion” (Wagner 2017). Leaving aside the veracity of the claim that feminism is anti-male and/or pro-abortion, Conway’s provocative comment refers to questions that have been swirling around in public discourse in recent years: do conservative women leaders consider themselves to be feminists? And if so, might the growing political movement of conservative women in the United States point to the existence of a “conservative feminism”?

These questions rarely arose in the United States before the 2008 elections; most politically active conservative women leaders did not refer to themselves as feminists, nor did people wonder whether they did. There have been some exceptions (see, e.g., Sommers 1995; Stacey 1983), but, like the general public, which shuns the label (Huddy, Nelly, and La Fay 2000; Schreiber 2012), conservative women activists have rarely embraced the terminology, and few would have even thought to organize around the concept. Sarah Palin’s vice presidential bid, however, prompted a shift. On a couple of well-publicized occasions,

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Palin called herself a feminist,<sup>1</sup> generating considerable discussion and criticism over whether conservative women can be feminists and what “conservative feminism” really means (see, e.g., DiBanco 2015; Gardner 2010; Holmes and Traister 2010; Marcotte 2010; McCarver 2011; Rodino-Colocino 2012; Valenti 2010a, 2010b). Subsequently, presidential candidate Carly Fiorina’s claims to be a feminist (Fiorina 2015) and, more recently, first daughter Ivanka Trump’s use of the term (DePaulo 2016)<sup>2</sup> have kept the question of whether conservative women identify with feminism in the public sphere.

The idea that conservatives could identify as feminists is not entirely far-fetched given the growing institutionalization of conservative women’s organizations that claim to represent women and/or the growing number of women prominent in conservative politics (Blee and Deutsch 2012; Celis and Childs 2014a; Deckman 2016; Schreiber 2014). Both appear to validate the public declarations of high-profile women like Palin and Fiorina when they align themselves with feminism. However, scholars have also urged us to differentiate between gender-conscious and feminist political actors and interests, in part based on empirical accounts of conservative women’s activism in the United States as well as other countries (Celis and Childs 2014a; Schreiber 2012). These studies have shown that conservative women tend to be gender-conscious political actors who may organize as, and speak for, women, but shun feminism. In so acting, their gendered organizing presents a significant challenge to feminists who have long argued that they represent women, but such activism does not necessarily mean they identify as feminists. That a few contemporary conservative women are making claims to be feminist actors whose political work aligns with feminism also belies the history of conservative women’s activism and, notably, how they have historically viewed feminism. In addition, it obscures the impact of women who have demonized feminism and enables conservative movements to appear more open to women’s issues and interests.

From the perspective of conservative women, framing their identities and efforts in terms of feminism may also yield negative electoral outcomes. Republicans are less likely to vote for Republican women as they perceive them as being too liberal, lacking in party fit (Bucchianeri 2017; King and Matland 2003; Thomsen 2015) and/or less emotionally

1. One such example can be viewed at <http://www.c-span.org/video/?293509-1/sarah-palin-remarks-prolife-agenda>.

2. Several journalists have been critical of the idea that Ivanka Trump is a feminist (see, e.g., Filipovic 2017; Graves 2017).

suited for political leadership positions (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009). Compared with their Democratic female counterparts, for example, Republican women did not fare as well in the 2010 and 2012 primaries, in which, in most cases, they had male Republican opponents.<sup>3</sup> Given feminism's negative image among conservatives, promulgating the idea that conservative women can be, or are, really feminists could hurt Republican women when they seek elective office. Accordingly, one might expect few conservative women leaders to identify as feminists or promote a conservative feminism.

While high-profile women like Palin have generated questions about feminism, do conservative women policy activists and leaders really identify as feminists? Are they trying through their political work to reshape and reclaim feminism for conservatives, as some fear? Are conservative women leaders intent on organizing as feminists by "making a greedy grab at claiming feminism" (Holmes and Traister 2010), or are women like Palin and Fiorina garnering attention for a general phenomenon that has little history or substance?

Based on in-depth interviews with women leaders in conservative movement politics (see Appendices A and B for list of interviewees and organizations), this study moves beyond dissecting quips from a few high-profile conservative women and delves more deeply into the views of women active in national movement politics. In some ways, this is a preliminary account — not all politically active conservative women are represented — but almost all national conservative women's organizations are included. Thus, these in-depth interviews offer important insights into how conservative women understand their relationship to feminism and how they situate their activist work ideologically. As opinion leaders, policy advocates, and institutional representatives of women, how they talk about their work vis-à-vis feminism has implications for conservative and gender politics. Indeed, some of the women and/or organizations represented here have close ties to the Trump administration and have the potential to directly influence national policy — Charmaine Yoest is the assistant secretary of health and human services for public affairs, Marjorie Dannenfelser chaired Trump's pro-life coalition when he was a presidential candidate, and Kellyanne Conway, Trump's counselor, is on the board of the Independent Women's Forum (temporarily on leave during her White House stint). Of course Ivanka Trump is close to her father, but the

3. See [http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/elections/past\\_candidates](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/elections/past_candidates).

president also relies heavily on his interactions with conservative movement actors (Peters 2017).

As will be discussed, most of the conservative women leaders interviewed do not identify as feminist, nor do they consider “conservative feminism” a way to define their movement. The specific term is more likely to be invoked by some journalists and a few scholars reporting on conservative women’s gender-conscious activism (DiBanco 2015; Dillard 2005; Griffith 2011; Stacey 1983) than it is by the women about whom they are writing. Conservative women in the United States are seemingly less concerned about creating their own feminist movement than they are about challenging organized feminist activism on issues and the right to represent women. Nonetheless, their responses are not unanimous — some do invoke feminism, but they do so in ways that align it with conservative ideals. In either case, their activism demonstrates that gendered interpretations of conservatism exist and that conservative women’s activism makes it harder for feminists to lay sole claim to women’s interests and representation.

## WHY DOES AN ASSESSMENT OF CONSERVATIVE FEMINISM MATTER?

In addressing questions as to whether, in the United States, conservative women leaders identify as feminists and, if so, what that means for understanding both conservatism and feminism, it is important to also ask why and how it matters. Correctly identifying how conservative women leaders conceive of their identities and their political work provides an accurate assessment of the nature of conservative women’s contributions. Claiming to be a feminist (or not) might also have strategic value for political actors and informs this analysis.

First, how conservative women interpret and articulate their gendered actions shapes representational politics. If those who claim to represent women are making such claims as conservative feminists, then they directly challenge the meaning of feminism and feminist interests. If, however, they are gender-conscious actors, then their activism prompts different questions (see Celis and Childs 2014b for a thorough discussion and clear differentiation between gender-conscious and feminist interests). Keeping this in mind, this study is not just an examination of whether conservative women consider themselves to be feminists but also a consideration of the “various points in political processes to identify the claims made in support

of the substantive representation of women” (Celis and Childs 2012, 215). How do conservative women envision their own work in terms of political representation? Insights generated in this study, then, should be considered intensely political because they direct “our attention to describing and explaining how some issues/interests come to be associated with women while others do not; how some are associated with some women and others with other women” (Reingold and Swers 2011, 434).

In addition, if conservative women claim to be feminists, they sharply challenge how we understand feminism and call into question feminist movements, both historically and in contemporary politics. Of course, conservative women cannot erase feminist activism, but they can weaken or confuse the meaning of feminism by diluting it of its ideological commitments and specific policy goals (Rodino-Colocino 2012) and redefine “feminism in a way that undermines its radical potential” (Stacey 1983, 578). Since feminism has a documented, concrete, material history, however, much of which is inconsistent with conservative ideals and goals, it may be easier to take conservative women to task for feminist claims. This is why, in part, criticism of Ivanka Trump was swift. If, however, conservative women act as gender-conscious representatives of women’s interests, it becomes incumbent upon both sides to pay closer attention to how they define and advocate for women’s interests — gender-conscious activism is much broader and more ideologically contestable (Celis and Childs 2014). Such political considerations are relevant in asking how conservative women’s leaders consider themselves in relation to the identity of being feminists.

## DEFINITIONS

### Conservatism

Broadly, conservatism as discussed here references political movements conducted by political actors in public and institutional settings (Diamond 1995; Hardisty 1999). Within these movements, conservative women activists and organizations tend to identify as either (or sometimes both) social or economic conservatives (Hardisty 1999; Klatch 1987; Schreiber 2012). Social conservatives in the United States are usually Protestant evangelicals who lobby for policies that prohibit abortion, same-sex marriage, and pornography but promote prayer in public schools and a strong and well-funded U.S. military. They believe in biologically based differences between men and women and value the

expression of traditional codes of femininity among women (Klatch 1987; Schreiber 2016; Stacey 1983). Politically active social conservative women consider their advocacy to be a mission dedicated to living out their religious commitments. In contrast, economic conservatives favor free-market capitalism, decreased regulations on businesses, and low taxes. Their tendency toward libertarianism means they generally shy away from supporting laws that ban abortion or same-sex marriage. They also contest the existence of intentional or institutional discrimination and specifically challenge the goals and successes of the feminist movement (Hardisty 1999; Klatch 1987; Schreiber 2012). While some economic conservative women's groups contest the need for identity-based politics, they engage in it to counter feminist organizing around gender (Schreiber 2012). As Diamond documents, conservative movements and the Republican Party have been relatively successful in navigating and "fusing" inconsistencies between social and economic conservatives demonstrating the sometimes conflicted nature of conservatism broadly and movement politics specifically (Diamond 1995). Such success with ambiguity also leaves open the possibility that women can embrace feminism and still fit within conservative movement politics.

## Feminism

Generally, feminist movements have supported women's equal rights under the law and/or the belief that women's oppression relative to men cannot be understood without attention to institutional discrimination. Of course, feminism has a long, rich history with both agreed-upon and sometimes dissonant goals among different groups of women and among organizations and actors (see, e.g., Banaszak 2010; Collins 1990; McCammon et al. 2017; Reger 2012; Rosen 2000; Roth 2004). For the purposes of this article, it is critical to note that despite differences among women who identify as feminists, there are documented histories of women acting politically and in coalition *as feminists* to achieve specific policy goals. These include legal abortion, support for government protected educational and employment rights and benefits such as Title IX and family leave, and policies that protect women from sexual assault and abuse (see, e.g., McBride and Parry 2016 for an overview of feminist policy activism).

Even when conservative women claim to be feminists, they distinguish themselves from this history and from alleged "radical" feminists who

claim that women's status is predominantly shaped by the processes of institutional and structural inequality<sup>4</sup> (Barakso 2004; Klatch 1987; Schreiber 2012). Groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Feminist Majority Foundation are among those targeted by conservative women's ire. Their doing so is in part premised on the idea that they are in contestation with national feminist organizations over definitions of women's interests and issues — a context that is critical to understanding conservative women's self-identification (see Reger 2012 on the importance of providing context in examining identity politics). In cases in which conservative women do identify as feminists and/or argue that their advocacy is feminist, they still distance themselves from groups such as NOW, but they argue that their feminism is the one most appealing to women and thus they better represent women. Therefore, they may add to ambiguities over the meaning of feminism and for what issues and goals its adherents stand.

## CONSERVATIVE WOMEN IN CONTEXT: A BRIEF HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

Although Palin's bid for office generated heightened media attention to conservative women in politics, women have always been active in conservative movements. Throughout much of their political work, women organized as antifeminist or conservative — in other words, as countermovement actors. Rarely have they identified as feminists, but often they have claimed to be representing women and women's interests (Celis and Childs 2014a; Deckman 2016). Antifeminism in the United States has been well documented as a countermovement in response to feminist movement activities and policy successes and campaigns, suggesting that current incarnations of conservative women's activism fit this pattern (see, e.g., Banaszak and Ondercin 2016; Deckman 2016; Klatch 1987; Mansbridge 1986, Marshall 1985, 1991; Schreiber 2012).

Historically, conservative women have organized to oppose issues such as women's suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Groups such as the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage and STOP-ERA offered gendered counternarratives to block feminist efforts. In the early 1960s, as conservative organizations and movements were starting to take hold in the United States, women were well represented among these political actors (Critchlow 2005; Diamond 1995; Klatch

4. For a good discussion of liberal feminism versus conservatism, see Baehr (2009).

1987; McGirr 2001; Perlstein 2001). Conservative icon Phyllis Schlafly rose to prominence during this time and eventually formed Eagle Forum and STOP-ERA in 1972 (Critchlow 2005; Felsenthal 1981). Klatch (1999, 266) documents that Schlafly played an important role in training and encouraging other “traditionalist” women to be politically aware and effective. Indeed, in 1979, on the heels of Schlafly’s organizing against the ERA, conservative Beverly LaHaye founded the still-standing Concerned Women for America (CWA) in part to also battle feminists over the ERA. Through their involvement in right-wing electoral and mobilization efforts, these women gained important organizing and political skills, enlisted other women, and developed substantial conservative political and social networks.

Since the 1990s, other conservative women’s groups such as the Independent Women’s Forum (IWF) and Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute (CBLPI) have sprung up and have worked with Eagle Forum and CWA, creating a solid network of conservative women that spans generations and views about issues. Acting in conjunction with them have been a number of prominent women who have made names for themselves as spokespeople and pundits (e.g., Ann Coulter, Michelle Malkin, and Laura Ingraham; see Schreiber 2012; Spindel 2003 for more discussion). Some have also run in high-profile national campaigns for office (e.g., Sarah Palin, Elizabeth Dole, Carly Fiorina, and Michele Bachman). Throughout, rarely have these activists claimed to be conservatives promoting an alternative feminism; instead, their goals have been to undermine and demonize feminism while bringing female-friendly faces to conservative causes (Deckman 2016; Gutgold 2001; Powers 2011; Schreiber 2012; Vavrus 2000).

Historically, then, the advocacy of conservative women has been premised on the idea that what we understand to be feminism is too radical and threatens a preferred gendered order of social relations. Current conversations with conservative women leaders demonstrate that while most still align with this reasoning, there has been a shift for others who claim their values and policy goals can be classified as feminist.

## DATA, METHODS, AND FINDINGS

### Interviewees

This research is part of a larger project examining how conservative women leaders who are active in movement politics navigate between their



personal views about motherhood, women's rights, and feminism and their political activism.<sup>5</sup> For balance, two student leaders who participated in these groups were also interviewed, as was a Republican woman who founded a bipartisan organization (Kerry Healey). The analyses that follow specifically assess how interviewees responded when asked about the term "conservative feminism" and provide an entrée into how conservative women leaders consider their political identities. While a survey of women who classify as conservative might yield different results, as noted, this high-profile group is important because they are actively involved in national politics, including running conservative women's organizations and representing other conservative women (see Online Appendix A). In their capacities they directly affect policy making, engage in public debates, media framing, constituent mobilization (including student mobilization). And, as detailed earlier, some of them have close ties to the Trump administration. These activists consider themselves to be representatives of women's interests, as well as political actors who define and advocate for women's issues. Thus, their views matter greatly in terms of gender politics.

As the following discussion details, the women fall into two categories in terms of feminist identification. In the first group ("certainty"), women express explicit antifeminist sentiments,<sup>6</sup> and in the latter ("ambivalence"), leaders take the opportunity to talk about feminism through the lens of two conservative values: being pro-life (authentic feminism) or supporting liberal individualism (choice feminism). Most fall into the former. Interviewees were also keen to say that feminism matters historically, in that it created opportunities for women to participate and be taken seriously in the workplace and political life. These nods to feminism's past were often framed in nostalgic tones, followed by a chiding of current-day feminism as being extreme and/or out of touch. Such discourse serves two purposes — to affirm the need for women's political participation (regardless of ideology) and to position conservative women as those best suited to represent women.

5. The study was approved by San Diego State University's Institutional Review Board process, and all interviewees were made aware of their rights.

6. McCarver found that among online readers and writers, some do invoke the term "conservative feminist" (McCarver 2012, 35), thus suggesting that there may be a disconnect between conservative women leaders and those they claim to represent. There are no explicit survey data to suggest how conservative women identify as feminists or as conservative feminists, however.

## How Do Conservative Women Conceptualize “Conservative Feminism”?

### *Certainty: Feminism Does Not Resonate*

When asked what they thought of “conservative feminism,” interviewees were direct and firm in their responses. The most decisive among my interviewees was Phyllis Schlafly. As noted earlier, Schlafly was a conservative icon and the founder of the conservative Eagle Forum, and she was well known for leading organized (and successful) opposition to the ERA in the 1970s. Schlafly, who passed away in 2016 at the age of 92, was always explicitly antifeminist and never backed down or modified her views. Not surprisingly, then, Schlafly expressed that her activism stemmed in part from a desire to damage and oppose feminism, not to reclaim it for conservatives:

Well I’m trying to make feminism a bad word . . . And I think feminism is beyond reclaiming and . . . nobody who has any sense should call herself a feminist and a matter of fact the majority of American women do not want to be called feminist. So I would not accept any type of feminism.

She added, “I think their whole movement is destructive and anti-marriage and particularly anti-motherhood,” meaning that the policies which feminists advocate promote divorce and “broken” families.

At first blush, it might seem that Schlafly represents a generational divide; Eagle Forum was founded in 1972 and reflects a different time in conservative movement politics. Many other organizations referenced here were founded after 1990 (see Online Appendix B). A lot have grown since Palin’s bid for office and are in part a reaction to conservative women wanting greater publicity and more legitimacy as policy advocates and leaders within conservative movement politics. In so doing, they build on the concept of women’s empowerment and the idea of women’s “rights” and might be tempted to explicitly reframe feminism to fit within conservative movement goals. Overall, this was not the case for many of the women interviewed here.

Gabriella Hoffman, who got her start as a college student activist working with a local chapter of the Eagle Forum and later as an organizer for the conservative Leadership Institute, replied to the inquiry about conservative feminism by laughing: “Oh, really . . . ha ha ha OK. It’s kind of oxymoronic.” When asked whether she personally embraced the term, she said she was “indifferent.” The rest of her response reflects an

attempt to make sense of Palin's declaration, for example, but also demonstrates that Hoffman herself is not ready to embrace a feminism:

I know that some people write that you know the emerging conservative movement is the new face of feminism . . . I'm not too entirely certain but I can see some merit into that because there are some women who were formerly with NOW or with Planned Parenthood who have emerged as, who have maybe seen the light and decided to switch. A lot of them say that the feminists that have emerged now kind of abandoned their ideals so they see that the conservative movement outreaching to women, or people like Sarah Palin kind of epitomize feminist ideals. I don't know if that's entirely true but it's interesting that some people make the comparison that you know this new breed of feminism is molded through conservative women.

Vinciane Ngomsî, another college student leader who worked with the CBLPI, a national conservative women's organization, and is now employed by the conservative Charles Koch Institute, affirmed her opposition with more certainty:

I probably wouldn't associate with anything that has to do with feminism, because I have a different viewpoint, I have a different opinion of feminism, and that's why I became involved with Luce because I don't believe that feminism is having things like the Vagina Monologues or having things like, doing things where we go everything against what men say and try to have our own sort of outtake on that.

Speaking on behalf of the CBLPI, as well as talking about her own beliefs as a relatively young conservative woman, Alyssa Cordova, told me,

We do not call ourselves feminists here at all. Because that word has very strong connotations to left-wing feminism and when you hear feminist, most people think of a certain thing and that's like radical 1960s feminism. So we as an institute do not call ourselves that. However we have speakers that do<sup>7</sup> and so we're not against it in the sense that we would not align with somebody who called themselves a conservative feminist . . . But I just wouldn't choose to label myself that way.

To emphasize the decision to eschew the terminology, she added, "[a]nd our president Michelle Easton, she feels the same way."

7. Cordova mentioned Christina Hoff Sommers as one such speaker and also talked about a piece she wrote for the CBLPI which can be found at [http://www.cblpi.org/sites/default/files/10-1\\_Sommers\\_TakeBackFeminism.pdf](http://www.cblpi.org/sites/default/files/10-1_Sommers_TakeBackFeminism.pdf). In this writing, Sommers urges young women to take "take back feminism now. Make it inclusive, fair, and reality based. Make the movement attractive again to the majority of American women who want their rights but do not wish to be liberated from the traditions of femininity."

Some interviewees did acknowledge the successes of feminism in terms of opening up opportunities for women, but they roundly distanced themselves from being called feminists. Tea Party activist Dawn Wildman told me,

I've never understood the whole feminist thing to begin with. I guess because I would probably say I benefited from whatever that fight was to make sure that women were quote unquote equal. So I don't know, I've never considered myself a feminist or a traditionalist in any sense of the imagination because every decision I've made in my life as a woman has been done for myself and family . . . To me, I see women changing things in leaps and bounds in ways that probably wouldn't have happened 20 years ago. Thank God for Geraldine Ferraro. Where would Sarah Palin have been? All those other women who stepped up and said you know we should be counted just as important as you are.

Following these comments, I explicitly asked, "so the phrase is not something you would use to define yourself." Wildman's response: "No."

Kerry Healey, former Republican Massachusetts lieutenant governor and former co-chair of the bipartisan group Political Parity, told me that she had not actually heard the term "conservative feminism." Elaborating on her response, she articulated a rejection of labeling and of personally identifying as a feminist:

Well I am both of those things. I don't know that you have to put them together. I haven't heard that phrase, but I don't get out necessarily and talk about these things with people who are classifying you so I don't know. I don't think that there is any contradiction to being able to be conservative and also to believe firmly that women have an important contribution to make in public. Whether you call that feminism or whether you simply call that a belief that women have just as much to contribute as anyone else, I don't know . . . I don't know that I need to be labeled. I don't really feel like encouraging or enabling people to label me.

Smart Girl Politics founder Stacey Mott responded to my inquiry about "conservative feminism" with "I do not consider myself a feminist." Upon my noting her strong reaction, Mott replied by condemning identity politics, which is consistent with conservative critiques of group-based claims and federal government commitments to solving social problems on their behalf. Although Mott represents an organization that makes claims on behalf of an identity group, she offered this assessment of feminism:

I'm an individualist. I think you rise or succeed or fail on your own. I don't think you have to rely on a gender-base to make your destiny in this country.

Mott did reflect on how other conservative women might react to feminism by acknowledging the successes of feminists from the past, but like other interviewees distanced herself and Smart Girl Politics from these "historical" actors:

We had, I can tell you right after Summit, we were attacked by the Left, that basically we're riding the coattails of the Left and the women who fought before us, and our success is due to Democratic women leading, and there are specific women in history who have made things easier on women. I'm not going to disagree with that. But the fact certain women out there feel that my success is based on not my own individual hard work, not what I've done to better myself, but because other women who came before me, I think is a load of baloney.

Finally, longtime conservative women's activist Charmaine Yoest, who, until she was appointed by President Trump to be Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services for Public Affairs, was the president of the anti-abortion Americans United for Life, initially talked about feminism in response to a different set of questions. During this exchange she revealed,

I could very definitely see myself calling myself a feminist. I mean, like you said, look at my life. But there's an awful lot of radical ideology associated with the movement that is not very pretty.

Yoest's response prompted this exchange, however, suggesting that, upon reflection, she ultimately rejects a feminist identity and any relationship to her political activism:

Interviewer: What do you think about the term "conservative feminism?"

Yoest: I don't know. It doesn't strike me one way or the other. I don't know that it has a whole lot of content to it.

Interviewer: So you wouldn't call yourself a feminist? Or you would?

Yoest: No, I wouldn't. I mean I definitely went through phases in my life when I was willing to do that, but it's like ... I suppose there's kind of a garden variety feminism, but if you look at the movement and the leadership and the people who are involved in it is all very radical abortion — for any reason, through all nine months of pregnancy, no compromise, no discussion — and that is the foundational building block. Like I said it's like they define abortion as reproductive health care, you know, female empowerment. And when you start there there's nowhere for that conversation to go.

As noted, it is of considerable importance to conservative women leaders and especially conservative women's organizations to position themselves as the legitimate representatives of women's interests. One way they accomplish this is to explicitly diminish, not embrace, feminist history, values and the label itself. In asking her views about Palin and Bachman and their relationship to feminism, for example, Janice Shaw Crouse, director of the Beverly LaHaye Institute at CWA, emphatically denounced feminism for being exclusive and failing to account for "feminine" women with professional goals:

That just destroys the whole feminist argument that a woman can have the kind of values that those two women have and be able to accomplish what they have accomplished. Because the feminist whole philosophy has rested on the idea that women have to be accommodated, and that there has to be a certain disinterest in home and family and more of a hard-edged ambition than being fully feminine and reveling in your femininity and so forth.

Here, "femininity" serves as a proxy for conservatism and has been invoked by other conservative women as well to disparage those women (mostly feminists) who do not appear to conform to preferred social and cultural norms of womanhood (see Stacey 1983 for how this view is historically consistent and Schreiber 2016 for how conservative women consider Palin and Bachman's "femininity" to be a defining characteristic that positively distinguishes them from feminists).

According to these women leaders, embracing feminism is not a personal, strategic, or ideological goal. Reaffirming their opposition to feminism, they talk about their own successes as politically active women within conservative movements and what that means for women and politics more broadly. They acknowledge some of the successes of feminism, albeit sometimes in revisionist ways, and they often credit feminism for making women's place in politics matter. In so doing, they give themselves the legitimacy to make gendered political claims, as well as reframe conservative movement politics to include women's contributions. Ultimately, they advocate for gender-conscious, not feminist, interests and many are explicitly critical of feminism. While the majority of interviewees were adamantly opposed to feminism, a few linked their conservatism with feminism, doing so in ways to frame feminism as being consistent with specific conservative movement goals.

*Ambivalence: “Authentic” and “Choice” Feminism*

As discussed, most conservative women leaders under study here do not identify as feminists. Some, however, talk about reclaiming feminism for conservatives, although they do so with some hesitation and several caveats. Marjorie Dannenfelser, who heads the Susan B. Anthony List (SBA-List), a pro-life political action committee, exemplifies this perspective. SBA-List argues that our feminist foremothers, including U.S. suffragist Susan B. Anthony, opposed abortion. Using this logic, SBA-List contends that opposition to abortion is actually pro-woman and ultimately feminist. The argument is consistent with other conservative organizations that have strategically claimed that abortions emotionally and physically harm women, and thus opposition to abortion is in the interest of women’s health (Rose 2011; Schreiber 2002). From the perspective of conservative women, framing anti-abortion policies as being pro-woman serves as a counternarrative to feminist rhetoric about representing women’s interests when it comes to reproductive health. Such reasoning, and its supposed relationship to historical feminist efforts, is elucidated on SBA-List’s website:

Did you know that many of our nation’s most legendary women leaders were pro-life? The often untold truth of history is that the very women who fought to earn the right to vote also promoted a consistent respect for human life. Courageous women leaders like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton recognized that authentic women’s rights could never be built upon the broken rights of innocent unborn children. They believed that abortion was just a tool of oppression used against women.<sup>8</sup>

Dannenfelser built on this founding organizational principle by employing the phrase “authentic feminism” in our interview. She elaborated on its meaning this way:

Well I think authentic feminism is inclined to be more conservative. It can be a variety of things. An authentic feminism affirms who a woman truly is and affirms her, and by doing this it is inclusive of the other human beings in her life. Certainly the unborn child, certainly her children, certainly her husband. It is never an exclusive, it is never an exclusionary perspective. It is always inclusive of the people in her life ... What I always felt is that even growing up as a kid, as a girl, with Jane Fonda out there, I always understood on a very elementary level that this was a divisive, angry, unhappy approach to politics. And to living. And I think so many women

8. See <http://www.sba-list.org/movement/notable-women>. See also Rodino-Colocino (2012) for an excellent analysis of, and counterargument to, these claims.

have responded in the same way that they don't like the word feminism. And I don't really care about the word feminism that much. But if you're going to have one, let's make it real.

Dannenfelser's "authentic feminism" derives from Pope John Paul II's theological proclamations related to the Catholic Church's expectations of women's roles:

Thank you, *women who are mothers!* You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God's own smile upon the newborn child, the one who guides your child's first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life ... Thank you, *every woman*, for the simple fact of being *a woman!* Through the insight which is so much a part of your womanhood you enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic.<sup>9</sup>

Dannenfelser's construction of an "authentic feminism" reinforces her and her organization's close relationship with Catholicism and may help mobilize other Catholic women. It can also bridge women who are pro-life but might support some aspects of feminism (e.g., paid family leave) to the conservative group. Indeed, Dannenfelser was recruited to start SBA-List by a former leader of Feminists for Life, a group that supports some feminist economic policies but mostly works with conservatives to oppose legal abortion.<sup>10</sup> But Dannenfelser's rhetoric also rewrites feminist history in terms of the movement's support for legal abortion. Therefore, her claims to "authentic feminism" denigrates feminist activism aimed at keeping abortion legal and generates battles over the meanings of feminism specifically and women's interests more broadly.

Some conservative women also express support for feminism when it is framed in terms of choices and individualism, indicating the rich and sometime ambiguous nature of defining feminist ideology. That is, conservative women leaders argue that the legacy of feminism means women should be free to make whatever choices feel appropriate for them regardless of whether their actions are "feminist." At times, and for some conservative women, then, aspects of liberal feminism resonate with tenets of conservatism; the individualized act of being able to

9. See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html) and [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf\\_jp-ii LET\\_29061995\\_women.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_29061995_women.html).

10. See <http://www.feministsforlife.org/>.



choose “freely” is equated with a palatable form of feminism. In her interviews with Tea Party women, for example, Deckman identifies conservative women who support feminism “if allowed to redefine in their own terms” (2016, 179). These terms are mostly framed in the language of “choice feminism,” (see, e.g., Ferguson 2010; Snyder-Hall 2010), which meshes well with economic conservatism. For example, the Independent Women’s Forum or IWF, an economic conservative organization, has argued that the wage gap between men and women derives from women opting in and out of the workplace in accordance with their maternal obligations. In other words, they are paid less, and less likely to be promoted, because they *choose* to be stay-at-home mothers. In this economic conservative explanation, women have agency and options — concepts that are consistent with feminism’s call for women’s freedom (McCarver 2011).

In previous research, IWF leaders rejected the term “feminism” (Schreiber 2012). IWF does not consider itself to be a feminist organization, but post-Palin, it started a program devoted to celebrating “modern feminists.” It is not clear, however, whether the honorees consider themselves to be feminists.<sup>11</sup> Its executive director, Sabrina Schaeffer, explained that IWF profiles “women who we think represent values of limited government and free markets and such” but did not explain why they referred to them as feminists. Responding to whether she personally identified as a feminist, Schaeffer referenced “choice feminism” and commented,

I don’t think that any reason that the left has to own the idea you know the term feminism although I think that a lot of people would like to see that person not be so tainted although is still a lot of reluctance by young women to embrace it . . . I would say I’m a feminist because I am making the choices that make sense for myself and my family.

Tea Party activist Keli Carender picked up on feminists’ anxiety over conservatives calling themselves feminists. Her response indicates she does not embrace the feminist movement nor identify as a conservative feminist, but it does suggest she is comfortable with “choice feminism”:

I think it’s one of those things where everyone needs to clear up what the definition of feminism is, because if a feminist is someone who thinks that women are equal to men and can have the same opportunities as men and shouldn’t be discriminated against, then yeah, I think all conservative

11. IWF’s “Modern Feminists” can be found at <http://iwf.org/modern-feminist>.

women are feminists. But if feminism means using government to mandate quotas or using government to intervene in various ways or somehow making women seem like they're victims or something, then no. The conservative female outlook is very much opposed to making women out to be victims. I think that's one reason why Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann are such enticing figures, because they're incredibly strong and outspoken and they don't say women are victimized . . . Nobody has stopped them from doing anything just because they're women. They pushed through succeeded because they had it in themselves. It's that whole self-governance thing. So I think it's fun to watch liberal feminists squirm when conservatives use the word feminism. But that's just my sense of humor.

Circling back to Kellyanne Conway's statement cited at the beginning of this article demonstrates that this high-level presidential staffer professes a similar "anti-victim/choice feminist" logic. Following up her critique of feminism, Conway shared with the audience that she thinks "there's an individual feminism, if you will, that you make your own choices. . . . I look at myself as a product of my choices, not a victim of my circumstances" (Wagner 2017). Given her close connections to conservative women movement leaders, such commentary should not be surprising.

Finally, Shelby Blakely of the Tea Party Patriots was the only interviewee in this study to explicitly use the term "conservative feminism"; she did so to connect gender consciousness and "choice" to her views on religious freedom (and Islamophobia). In other words, for her, feminism means the ability to defy theologically imposed limitations and make choices related to her own empowerment:

I'm very mindful of the burden that women bear in society raising children. And how large scale corporations, pharmaceutical lobbies directly affect those things. And those are actually some of my more passionate causes. Because I work for Tea Party Patriots I don't publicly advocate for social positions, but when it comes to things like to governmental Islam, or fanatical Islam, I have a deep and abiding hatred of those things, because I like to stand outside with my hair in the wind, and in some place in the world I could be killed because of that. Or I want my daughter to learn how to read. Educational freedom is extremely important to me and I'm a big fan of the conservative feminism.

Unlike the other interviewees, Blakely specifically identifies as a "conservative feminist," but, like some of the others, she does so in a way that links feminism to conservatism (here in terms of Islamophobic

content that corresponds to contemporary Republican Party and conservative movement political goals).

In these accounts, conservative feminism is equated with “choice feminism,” an ideology that resonates with some strands of conservatism. On its face, this version of feminism encourages women’s empowerment and agency. But when conservative women leaders talk about conservatism in language akin to choice feminism, they also link feminism to individualistic and libertarian views of behaviors and outcomes. In so doing, they dismiss the role of power, institutions, and resources, as well as the context in which choices are created and must be implemented. And they argue that any such claims of systematic discrimination reek of victimhood. As Hirschmann notes, this “simply ignores the fundamental realities of oppression” (2010, 272). Hirschmann is not alone in her critique of “choice feminism.” McCarver, for example, argues that “it reinforces individualism as a norm against collective struggle and systemic views of oppression. By locating feminist agency within the individual act of choosing, the preconditions for making certain choices and the outcomes of those choices are not only hidden, they are shielded from critique” (2011, 21). For conservative women, however, this is exactly the point. Within their notion of feminism lies no challenge to discriminatory policies and practices and/or institutional reification of constraining gender roles — a view consistent with economic conservatism and one that may resonate with women who find this framing of feminism more palatable.

## CONCLUSIONS

When conservative women make claims as gender-conscious actors, they prompt feminists to attend to differences among women. When they make claims as feminists, they require feminists to be more clear and specific in their own policy goals and to remind the public of feminism’s political history and policy triumphs. While only a few women in this study identify as feminists and link their political work to it, their views and rhetoric often contradict established feminist activism and policy goals (e.g., fighting for legal abortion, supporting government funded social programs and/or paid family leave). Accordingly, feminist leaders and activists need to better illuminate the distinction between advocating for feminist interests versus advocating on behalf of women by being clear about how they define feminism. This clarity will make identity

politics slightly less messy and help women understand the differences between conservative and feminist values and goals. This is especially true in the realm of electoral politics. When feminist groups dismiss Palin, for example, conservative women's groups can rightly challenge the organizations for turning their back on women candidates. Feminists have long called for the election of more women to elective office, often without stressing that ideology is part of the equation. For example, Jessica Valenti (2010a) argues that feminism's gender essentialism opened the door for the press and conservative women to claim they are feminists:

Is it any wonder, then, that everyone from Palin's supporters to the mainstream media was eager to paint the vice presidential candidate as a feminist? If all it took was being a woman, well, then Palin was it! The *Wall Street Journal* called it "Sarah Palin Feminism." The *New York Post* called her "a feminist dream," while the *Los Angeles Times* ran a piece headlined "Sarah Palin's 'New Feminism' Is Hailed" . . . If there was ever proof that the feminist movement needs to leave gender essentialism at the door — this is it. If powerful feminists continue to insist that gender matters above all else, the movement will become meaningless. If any woman can be a feminist simply because of her gender, then the right will continue to use this faux feminism to advance conservative values and roll back women's rights.

If feminist leaders and activists clarify that they are working on behalf of feminist and/or liberal candidates and policies, this will make the feminist mission clearer and less beyond reproach.

As gender-conscious actors, conservative women demonstrate the centrality of women to conservative movement politics. Rarely, however, do the leaders studied here criticize other conservative movement organizations or men for excluding women and/or promoting sexist policies (including a lack of denunciation of President Trump's explicitly sexist language and actions). Their doing so would improve all women's political status and opportunities. Nevertheless, conservative women open up debates over women's interests and the meaning of feminism. This allows conservatives — male and female — to argue that feminists do not speak for all women and that conservative politics can welcome and represent women. In sum, conservative women are ultimately advocating for conservative women's issues and interests which enables the broader conservative movement to fight its "war on women" image.

Finally and once again, noting that few conservative women publicly claim to be feminists, feminist leaders, organizations, and elected

officials should not capitulate and agonize over feminism losing its meaning. Just because Sarah Palin claims to be a feminist, that does not mean feminists have to agree. Doing so distorts and dilutes feminist activist history and organizational goals and successes. Feminists should also not stop short of judging the choices and policy goals of conservative women. A better approach, suggested by Hirschmann (2010), would be to apply feminist standards to evaluating the treatment of all women (e.g., is there media sexism toward Sarah Palin?). Scholars should also (as Celis and Childs suggest in this issue) undertake empirical studies to investigate whether conservative leaders' behavior affects how the broader base of conservative women think about gender politics and feminism. Based on the previous research discussed earlier regarding conservative women and movement politics, it seems unlikely that a few comments from women such as Palin or Fiorina will generate a swell of conservative identification with feminism. If the movement leaders and their sustained organized policy efforts relied on feminist-positive frames, however, a shift toward thinking differently about feminism might occur. To this end, future research could explore what the mass public thinks about conservative feminism, especially those who identify strongly with conservatism and/or the Republican Party.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X17000587>

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