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**WHAT'S UP WITH WHITE WOMEN?:  
ANTI-FEMINIST RESISTANCE TO SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM AND  
THE RISE OF THE CONSERVATIVE WOMAN**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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The whore, in defending the pimp, finds her own worth  
in the light reflected from his gaudy baubles.

- Andrea Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women*

## Introduction

The 2016 presidential election marked a virulent turning point in American political history. Since the election of Donald Trump into office, the United States has seen, instead of the promised return to “great”-ness, atrocious attacks on civil liberties, massive setbacks in the fight for women’s liberation, and the undermining of the democratic system itself. In the months leading up to election night, political scholars and Democratic voters alike confidently expected Hillary Clinton to be a shoo-in for president. Clinton was endorsed by Obama; she had White House experience as Secretary of State. But the energies of misogyny and madness began to manifest in ways that seemed unusual in American political history, as phenomena like Pizzagate, the email server, and “Grab them by the pussy” pulled the election off the rails, into a kind of terra incognita from which the nation may never recover. The promise of the first female president of the United States may have dazzled liberals into political optimism, but overall attitudes toward women remained as misogynistic as ever, and progressive hopes for a resurgence of mainstream feminist politics were defeated alongside Clinton’s bid for the presidency.

A staggering number of White women voted for Trump in 2016: an estimated 52% of White women voted Republican while 54% of *all* women voted Democrat (Junn, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018). These numbers led non-Republicans all over the country to wonder, what happened with White women? Why did this demographic, whose racial and gender identity so closely resembled that of the Democratic candidate, deny themselves descriptive

representation in the Oval Office? Why did they instead choose to support a candidate who joked about sexual harassment of women? A closer look at the political history of feminism and anti-feminism reveals that these results should not have been surprising; as Jane Junn aptly puts it, Democrats' collective surprise "belies a willful turn of a blind eye to longstanding patterns of political behavior among White voters in the U.S" (Junn, 2017, p. 344). In other words, we should have seen it coming.

The 2016 election was a symptom. What was the disease? An understanding of system justification theory is essential to explain the political behavior of White women who vote against the interests of their gender. System justification theory describes the psychological process by which individuals legitimize existing social arrangements (Jost & Banaji, 1994); for example, women's acceptance and promotion of the gender hierarchy. Gender theorists might refer to this phenomenon as internalized misogyny. System justification explains participation in negative self-stereotyping, such as antifeminist claims that women are unfit for employment, and out-group favoritism, such as the anti-feminist belief that men are superior to women. System justification theory posits that individuals embrace such negative beliefs about themselves in order to make sense of reality (Jost & Banaji, 1994). People observe conditions that are in opposition to an egalitarian ideal, and it is simpler to psychologically adjust the ideal to align with reality than to physically adjust reality to align with the ideal. Women may observe their status as subordinate to men, and it is a much simpler process to accept that this status is justified than to change the dynamics of gendered power. Stereotypes that arise from system justification serve ideological functions, legitimizing existing power structures and methods of governance. Political systems that seek to preserve the status quo have a stake in this process, as it is in their interest to produce minds that embrace the ideology of the state; individuals exhibiting system

justification are often associated with politically conservative ideology (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, 2019).

System justification theory is closely tied to the Marxist concept of false consciousness, or the “holding of beliefs that are contrary to one’s personal or group interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self for the group” (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p. 3). When Marx referred to religion as the “opiate of the masses” (Marx & Jolin, 1970), he drew attention to its system-justifying nature. Organized religion is a mechanism of system justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994); religion is essentially a framework that helps individuals make sense of reality. This function is evident in many conservative arguments against same-sex marriage and abortion rights that are rooted in religious scripture. The success of religion, specifically Christianity, in upholding the American political system cannot be overstated (Denker, 2019).

While system justification theory offers a social psychological explanation for the behavior of women who vote with the Republican party and for the maintenance of the status quo, it is worthwhile to identify a political explanation as well. This paper will examine the social, cultural, and political factors that influence the party affiliation of White women in American electoral politics. Of the existing theories that tackle this question, Jane Junn’s velvet glove theory presents a satisfactory assessment of the political motivations of White women. This paper will consider Junn’s theory in the context of conservative resistance to second-wave feminism. The theoretical foundations of second-wave feminism, loosely defined as the era of the women’s rights and women’s liberation movements between the 1960s and 1980s, came from the minds of some of today’s most revered feminist writers and activists such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. These women questioned fundamental societal structures and

in response, traditionalists like Phyllis Schlafly embarked on a political crusade to squash the policy goals of the feminist movement.

As a conservative activist, author, and lawyer, Schlafly was a leading figure in movements such as the anti-feminist, anti-communist, pro-family, and STOP ERA movements. Schlafly held leadership roles in conservative organizations such as Daughters of the American Revolution, the National Federation of Republican Women, and her own Eagle Forum (Bill of Rights Institute, n.d.). A Right-wing powerhouse, Schlafly was a loud and widely influential voice throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sexual liberation movement in the 1960s, the battle over the ERA in the 1970s, and the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s made the Republican party attractive to White women like Schlafly. This paper conducts a dialogue analysis of a sample of Schlafly's written work to show that Schlafly's rhetoric and agenda bear a substantial resemblance to the contemporary political disposition of White women in the United States. I argue that anti-feminist resistance to second-wave feminism primed White women as a social group to align with the Republican party in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Literature Review**

The scholarly quest to understand and predict the political preferences of White women enjoyed a greater sense of urgency following the 2016 election and subsequent liberal confusion. However, political scientists have observed patterns in women's voting behavior since the 1980s. Literature on the political behavior of women primarily examines how gender influences voting, but can neglect crucial factors like race and class.

The partisan gender gap theory attempts to generalize voter preferences by gender, but significant Republican support from White women voters refutes this theory. In American

electoral politics, the gender gap refers to the difference in voting preferences between women and men. The gender gap has been a consistent trend in presidential elections since the 1980s, with the majority of women favoring the Democratic candidate in the past seven presidential elections. (Hawley, 2015) Exit poll data shows that overall, women supported Biden and men supported Trump in the 2020 election (Center for American Women and Politics, 2023). Even in the 2016 election, women generally favored the Democratic candidate and there existed a partisan gap among white voters (Junn, 2017). The 2012 election resulted in the largest gender gap in history, with women voters clinching Obama's victory (Winfrey, 2019). This binary alignment of gender and partisanship was cemented into the political narrative of the US in the late '90s and early 2000s when the concept of a Republican "war on women" gained traction among Democrats and feminists alike (Finlay, 2006; Melich, 1996; Hawley, 2015). The affinity between the women's movement and the Democratic Party is unsurprising in consideration of its greater tolerance for maternal public policies that reflect social and biological maternal traits, such as welfare provisions and gender quotas (McDonagh, 2009). ANES and GSS data demonstrate that more women than men consistently favor maternal public policies (CAWP, 2023). However, a closer look at the demographic breakdown of voter preferences reveals a more complex picture of gendered differences in voting. When it comes to predicting the voting preferences of women, marital status is proven to be a better indicator of party preference than gender alone.

The partisan marriage gap is a more accurate framing of how gender-related factors influence voter preferences but does not account for racial factors. Polling data shows that married women are more likely to vote Republican than their unmarried counterparts (Newport, 2023). A helpful paradigm for understanding the marriage gap is to conceptualize marriage as an

economic or financial matter. Marriage is an economic proposition. Many heterosexual women aspire to marry into a wealthy family to ensure that their basic needs are met; the “gold digger” trope is a short-sighted, male-centric understanding of the material conditions that women are subject to under patriarchy. As a result of gendered segregation in the workforce, the wage gap, and expectations of motherhood (among other factors), men earn higher incomes on average than women. Given that marriage generally represents a redistribution of wealth from men to women, married women who reap the financial benefits of marriage are more likely than their unmarried counterparts to experience financial security and less likely to favor liberal redistributive policies (Hawley, 2015). It is also possible that women who previously identified as Democrats adopt the political preferences of their Republican-identifying husbands following marriage; women adjust their careers, their relationships, and their bodies to accommodate marriage— why not their political views as well? Perhaps Republicans are more likely to marry to begin with because of the Republican party’s emphasis on family values. Voters who do not adhere to traditional family values and relationship norms, whether they are single, divorced, or part of a domestic partnership, are more likely to be Democrats (Newport, 2023). One flaw of the marriage gap theory that has become increasingly relevant is its heteronormativity. The economic and social explanations for the marriage gap exclude same-sex couples, rendering the theory limited in its application. Furthermore, while the marriage gap in politics can be partially attributed to the marriage gap in race (as Whites are more likely to marry than African Americans and Latinos (Hawley, 2015)), the marriage gap does not explicitly consider race as a factor in voting behavior.

Jane Junn’s velvet glove theory offers an explanation for White women’s voting behavior that considers gendered and racial motivations without adhering to a heterosexual norm. Junn is



an accomplished political scientist who has conducted critical research on the results of the 2016 presidential election. Since 2016, she has published two studies that aim to explain the voting behaviors of women voters in the US, putting under a microscope those of White women voters. *The Gender Gap Is a Race Gap: Women Voters in US Presidential Elections* demonstrates that White women are the only group of women voters who consistently support the Republican party in presidential elections, providing evidence that adds nuance to the previously accepted theory of the gender gap— more specifically, that race factors heavily into both the gender gap and the marriage gap. In fact, White women have voted for Republican presidential candidates since the 1950s, a pattern that predates the observed gender gap (Junn, 2020). *The Trump Majority: White Womanhood and the Making of Female Voters in the U.S.* presents one theory that addresses the political motivations of White women: the velvet glove. Junn postulates that White women, being “second” in sex but “first” in race, vote against the interests of their sex group to protect the interests of their race group and maintain the status quo (Junn, 2017). The velvet glove engages two long-standing structures of power in American political history, patriarchy and White supremacy. White womanhood is constructed at the intersection of these ideologies, degraded by the former and empowered by the latter. Assuming that the positive associations of being “first” in race outweigh the negative associations of being “second” in sex (seeing that women benefit from paternalistic attitudes and laws whereas racial minorities do not), White women vote with White supremacy to protect the privileges they already possess, even if it affirms the subordination of their sex.

Political scientists’ understanding of White women’s political behavior in the United States has evolved drastically since the observance of the partisan gender gap. From a simplistic assessment of the gendered patterns in voter preferences to a nuanced theory that incorporates

the complex history of gender and race in America, the variance of perspectives on the issue of White women voters demonstrates the need for further research on this topic. The velvet glove theory contends that White women are willing to sacrifice the rights of their sex to protect the status of their race. This paper seeks to provide a more thorough understanding of this sacrifice by examining political events of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century through a feminist lens.

### **Feminist Perspectives on Conservative Women**

Before the gender gap, marriage gap, and the velvet glove, there was Andrea Dworkin's *Right-Wing Women*. Dworkin's analysis of conservative women's behavior is refreshingly humanizing given the tendencies of the Left to villainize the Right and vice versa. As a feminist writer first and foremost, Dworkin draws attention to the similarities among women across the ideological spectrum and expertly pinpoints where they diverge without framing those on either end as irrational or unintelligent. *Right-Wing Women* argues that the political behavior of conservative women, just like that of liberal women, is a response to the conditions of female subjugation under patriarchal rule. In Dworkin's view, the political behavior of Right-wing women is a function of self-preservation: she writes, "The Right in the United States today is a social and political movement controlled almost totally by men but built largely on the fear and ignorance of women. ... Every accommodation that women make to this dominion, however apparently stupid, self-defeating, or dangerous, is rooted in the urgent need to survive somehow on male terms" (Dworkin, 1983, p. 34). In this sense, Right-wing ideology is a means of controlling women— it is at once a threat and a safe haven, leaving them with little choice but to acquiesce. Just as American Leftists often refer to a Democratic presidential candidate as the

“lesser of two evils,” Dworkin (1983) theorizes that Right-wing women may view conservatism as the lesser of two evils:

Right-wing women have surveyed the world: they find it a dangerous place. ... They fear that the Left, in stressing impersonal sex and promiscuity as values, will make them more vulnerable to male sexual aggression, and that they will be despised for not liking it. They are not wrong. Right-wing women see that within the system in which they live they cannot make their bodies their own, but they can agree to privatized male ownership: keep it one-on-one, as it were. ... They see the world they live in and they are not wrong. They use sex and babies to stay valuable because they need a home, food, clothing. They use the traditional intelligence of the female—animal, not human: they do what they have to to survive. (pp. 68-69)

Faced with the same conditions—insufficient incomes, the expectations of motherhood, and the threat of sexual violence—Right- and Left-wing women opt for different strategies of survival. The Right-wing woman chooses to give in while the Left-wing woman chooses to resist. Resisting does not mean that Leftist women escape the binds of patriarchy; political ideology, even when enlightened, cannot provide such a thing for women. Right- and Left-wing women are subject to the same fate of female subordination.

Dworkin’s humanist analysis does not absolve Right-wing women of the bigotry that the Right perpetuates but rather provides an explanation for it. In reference to the abuse that women face at the hands of men, Dworkin writes, “Inevitably this causes women to take the rage and contempt they feel for the men who actually abuse them, those close to them, and project it onto others... Because women so displace their rage, they are easily controlled and manipulated haters” (Dworkin, 1983, p. 34). This assessment traces women’s bigotry to women’s pain and explains why White, Right-wing women are such a political force to be reckoned with. Dworkin sees Right-wing women as a function through which gendered violence becomes racial, misogynist, xenophobic, homophobic, and political hate.

Dworkin's assessment of abortion as the greatest dividing policy issue among women holds true almost half a century later. Indeed, women's long-standing opposition to reproductive rights is, to many pro-choice women, one of the most baffling political phenomena of the last century. Dworkin dedicates an entire chapter of *Right-Wing Women* to the issue of abortion in culture and politics. She accounts for differences between pro-choice and pro-life women by pointing out that women on both ends of the political spectrum are insidiously misled by masculinist politics. Dworkin (1983) writes,

The hope of the male Left is that the loss of abortion Rights will drive women back into the ranks- even fear of losing might do that; and the male Left has done what it can to assure the loss. The Left has created a vacuum that the Right has expanded to fill- this the Left did by abandoning a just cause, by its decade of quietism, by its decade of sulking. But the Left has not just been an absence; it has been a presence, outraged at women's controlling their own bodies, outraged at women's organizing against sexual exploitation, which by definition means women also organizing against the sexual values of the Left. When feminist women have lost legal abortion altogether, Leftist men expect them back- begging for help, properly chastened, ready to make a deal, ready to spread their legs again. On the Left, women will have abortion on male terms, as part of sexual liberation, or women will not have abortion except at risk of death. (p. 100)

*Right-Wing Women* is more than a condemnation of its namesake. It is a bird's-eye-view of an entire political landscape, offering crucial insight for everyone, regardless of gender or political ideology. In all fairness, Dworkin is an upsetting read, and to a skeptical eye, a rather disempowering one. Dworkin is a highly informed cynic. She understands relationships, both personal and political, to be shaped by the expectations of male domination and female submission. She refers to women as "the pussy" and sex as "the fuck" to expose the grotesque truth of gendered power dynamics but her words can be easily misread as a demeaning damnation of women. It is not difficult to understand why some women may not be receptive to, and even outright reject, this kind of rhetoric. Even for Left-wing women, *Right-Wing Women* shines an uncomfortable spotlight on the hard truths of the political playing field. Dworkin's tone

is cautionary; to the women on the Left, she says: your comrades are men before they are political beings. Feminists condemn Right-wing men for treating women as property. Dworkin points out that this is true of Left-wing men as well; Leftist men, too, view women as objects, as things, but while the Right treats women as private property, the Left treats them as public property. According to Dworkin, feminists give the Left too much credit. An important extension of this argument is that women should not blindly trust the Democratic party to protect women's rights, either. So long as men have a monopoly over political offices, the promise of reproductive freedom on women's terms is wholly unrealistic.

Catharine MacKinnon offers a Marxist-feminist framework that can help political scientists understand the political behavior of women who appear to act against their own interests. MacKinnon draws parallels between the exploitation of the worker and the woman, stating, "Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism" (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 515). Marxist thought posits that the ideas of the dominant tend to become the ideas of the dominated, leading disadvantaged groups to justify the status quo at all costs. Extending this concept from class hierarchy to gender hierarchy, MacKinnon argues that women internalize the ideas and values of men, allowing themselves the stability that comes with complicity: "...exploitation and degradation produce grateful complicity in exchange for survival. They produce self-loathing to the point of extinction of self, and it is respect for self that makes resistance conceivable. The issue is not why women acquiesce but why we ever do anything but" (MacKinnon, 1983, p. 61). Both Dworkin and MacKinnon trace conservative women's political ideology to the basic human instinct of survival. Their feminist analyses reveal that conservative women side with power because they value safety and security.

Feminist movement activity tends to galvanize the anti-feminist movement, while feminists' responses to anti-feminist activism are not as strong (Banaszak & Oндерсin, 2016). In other words, anti-feminist action is more often a response to feminist success than vice versa. Much of Phyllis Schlafly's messaging originates from staunch opposition to the feminist movement, and much of the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* concerns itself with rejecting feminist concepts and policies such as gender neutrality in the law and the Equal Rights Amendment. Conservative, anti-feminist attitudes did not appear independently but in direct opposition to feminism entering mainstream US politics. Schlafly's unrelenting rhetorical attacks on feminist ideas and individuals amid her praise of conservative values and policies support the notion that conservatism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century cannot be separated from the historical context of second-wave feminism.

### **Historical Context**

The sexual liberation movement of the 1960s, the fight over the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s, and the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s cultivated an environment that made political conservatism attractive to White women of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, priming White women of the 21<sup>st</sup> to support the Republican party. The sexual liberation movement, as Andrea Dworkin presents it, gave women serious, legitimate, self-preserving motivations to oppose reproductive Rights and state-sanctioned access to abortion. For Dworkin (1983), the sexual liberation movement, or the sexual revolution, aimed to separate sex from reproduction. Liberal women and men were united on this front, with women desiring sex that was different and men desiring sex that was more—more frequently, and with more women. The result of the movement was, unsurprisingly, more aligned with the goals of liberal men than those of liberal

women. Women were treated the same, if not more violently, during sex, and without sufficient access to birth control, men were wantonly impregnating women at higher rates. In the aftermath, Dworkin reported, “As [Right-wing women] see it, legal abortion makes them accessible fucks without consequence to men. In their view, pregnancy is the only consequence of sex that makes men accountable to women for what men do to women. Deprived of pregnancy as an inevitability, a woman is deprived of her strongest reason not to have intercourse” (Dworkin, 1983, p. 103). Of course, not all women who are anti-abortion rationalize their views in this way; the influence of religion, especially Christianity, in anti-abortion rhetoric must not be understated (Denker, 2019). Regardless, the sexual revolution polarized societal attitudes toward sex and disrupted the universality of the atomic family, leaving the liberal/conservative divide amongst women more defined and the political stakes of reproductive rights higher than ever.

The fight over the ERA gave rise to the pro-family movement and gave anti-feminist activists like Phyllis Schlafly the opportunity to define femininity and empowerment on male terms. Schlafly emerged as a loud and proud voice of the pro-family movement, taking issue with the “women’s libbers” and the very concept of equal rights for women. In Schlafly’s view, American women were already amongst the most privileged in the world—who could dare to ask for more (Schlafly, 1972)? The ERA was first conceptualized in 1920, the same year that the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment wrote White women’s suffrage into law. In 1923, the ERA was proposed as a constitutional amendment that read: “Men and women shall have equal Rights throughout the United States and in every place subject to its jurisdiction. Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation” (Mansbridge, 1986, p. 1). ERA supporters and opponents were not, despite the expectations of many, divided by gender; men and women supported the ERA equally. Moreover, support for the ERA could not be reliably predicted by

race nor class. Factors that did determine support included religious affiliation, age, number of children, and geographical location. Support for the ERA was not initially partisan—both the Republican and Democratic parties placed the ERA on their respective platforms in the 1940s—but became a partisan issue in the 1970's. By March 1972, the ERA had finally passed in the House and the Senate but could not achieve ratification in 38 states by the 1982 deadline (Mansbridge, 1986). The heated battle over the ERA among women was confounded in part due to the misconstruction of “equal rights” and “protections” under the law. Paternalistic policies that applied solely to women (or to women and children) were thought of as “special benefits,” or “privileges,” that the ERA sought to end. One such benefit, and the one most utilized in anti-ERA rhetoric, was that which prevented women from being drafted. The ERA would have granted women negative rights – protection from discrimination by the law. Opponents of the ERA feared that the amendment would remove protections from the threat of gendered violence in the workplace. Supporters of the ERA hoped that the amendment would remove gendered, paternalistic, restrictive exclusions that were predicated upon the inferiority of women (Mansbridge, 1986). Both sought to resist the conditions of subordination because of their sex, in one way or another.

Neoliberalism's emphasis on policing and devaluation of welfare initiatives tapped into the racialized fears of White women. The organized abandonment of and organized violence toward people of color through the shift of government efforts from maternal public policy to law enforcement characterized neoliberal policies that the Reagan administration pushed in the 1980s (Gilmore & Gilmore, 2007). Conservatives of the late 1960s and 1970s embraced individualistic attributions for poverty, specifically attributes that were supposedly prominent in Black culture; the image of the Black “welfare cheat” first emerged in political discourse during



this period. Reagan embraced similar racial stereotypes (including “welfare queens” and “criminal predators”) in his presidential campaign, making a strong appeal to Whites who were bitter over the success of the Civil Rights Movement (Alexander, 2010). This racially coded rhetoric proved so powerful that these harmful stereotypes are still culturally prevalent and influence contemporary attitudes toward welfare policy. Reagan’s War on Drugs derived support from racially resentful Whites (Alexander, 2010). The racialized motivations of White voters were not limited to resentment of successful African Americans; they also included White mothers’ racist fears for the safety of children that could be quelled through the mass incarceration of Black men. The Reagan Administration, riding on the carceral momentum of Nixon’s emphasis on law and order, used the War on Drugs to incarcerate African Americans and Latinos at unprecedented rates. When Reagan initiated his War on Drugs, the United States saw a dramatic increase in incarceration rates for African Americans; in 2000, the rate was more than twenty-six times that in 1983 (Alexander, 2010). Notably, the partisan gender gap in voting behavior emerged around this period. With incarcerated people unable to vote in presidential elections, mass incarceration in the 1980s cost Democrats measurable support from a male population (likely to be lower-class and of minority race) who would otherwise vote Democratic. Schlafly, alongside many members of STOP ERA, gave their full support to the Reagan administration during this era of peak conservatism and rising neoliberalism (Bill of Rights Institute, n.d.).

### **Phyllis Schlafly: A Case Study for the Rise of Conservative Women**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century can be bisected around the end of the 1950s into eras before and after conservatism became a self-conscious movement (Nickerson, 2012). The rise of American conservatism is often associated with Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign, a bid that

Schlaflly enthusiastically endorsed in her book, *A Choice Not an Echo* (Schreiber, 2008). Given Schlaflly's prominence and involvement around this crucial period of American politics, this paper presents Schlaflly's activism as a case study for the rise of conservative women.

Throughout her political career, Phyllis Schlaflly functioned as a Right-wing strategic party actor, engaging in feminized party strategies to appeal to women on the Right; Schlaflly's embrace of traditional gender roles not only upheld the gendered status quo but also fueled her political agenda (Wineinger & Nugent, 2020). Her emphasis on the value of motherhood in particular served as the basis for her opposition to progressive feminist aims like the gendered desegregation of the workforce and government-assisted childcare. In emphasizing the virtues of femininity, Schlaflly manipulated her gender identity as a means to pursue her political ends, namely women's support of the Republican party.

### ***The Phyllis Schlaflly Report***

From her emergence in the national political arena in the 1960s to her death in the 2010s, Schlaflly authored a monthly newsletter entitled *The Phyllis Schlaflly Report*. The *Report* enjoyed a sizeable but still relatively small circulation in the early 1970's with around 35,000 subscribers. Despite the limited circulation of the *Report*, Schlaflly's messages were disseminated throughout the country via frequent radio commentaries, televised debates, and rallies (Bill of Rights Institute, n.d.). Trusting that Schlaflly's views did not differ much between media, The *Phyllis Schlaflly Report* was chosen as the primary material for analysis as a matter of accessibility. Through a content analysis of a sample of ten issues of the *Report* that pertain to feminist concerns ranging from February 1972 to December 1996, my research strives to answer the question: how did anti-feminist opposition to second-wave feminism prime 21<sup>st</sup>-century White women to support the Republican party? In these editions of the *Report*, I identify sections,

phrases, and themes that fall into three categories: 1) anti-feminist framing of the feminist movement 2) policy issues that concern conservative women, and 3) alignment with existing theories regarding the political behavior of conservative women.

In “What’s Wrong With ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?” (February 1972) and “The Right To Be A Woman” (November 1972) Phyllis Schlafly details the ways in which American women are uniquely privileged, even relative to American men, and urges women to maintain this privilege. She specifically condemned the feminists who backed ERA for invalidating the women who wished to be homemakers and housewives, the women who enjoyed “the right not take a job outside the home” (Schlafly, 1972, p. 1). Schlafly (1972) opens “What’s Wrong With ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?” with a bold statement that would become a foundational motto for her ideology: “Of all the classes of people who ever lived, the American woman is the most privileged” (p. 1). These two editions of the *Report* establish the acceptance of benevolent sexism as a central theme of Schlafly’s anti-feminist messaging. Benevolent sexism is the deceptive complement of hostile sexism, an adversarial attitude toward gender relations wherein women are seen as attempting to usurp male power and control men (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Hostile sexism represents a normative understanding of sexism as gender discrimination, gendered violence, and explicit degradation. Schlafly weaponizes hostile sexism, specifically with respect to the perception of women as seeking to control men through feminist ideology. Benevolent sexism, in contrast, is more difficult to identify, as it is rewarding in nature. Benevolent sexism is a subjectively favorable chivalrous ideology that offers protection and affection to women who embrace conventional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Benevolent sexism is integral in pacifying women’s resistance to gender inequality, and Schlafly offers evidence that supports this claim. With her emphasis on women’s “special privilege because of

the high rank that is placed on motherhood in our society” (Schlafly, 1972, p. 3) and “special respect for women which dates from the Christian Age of Chivalry” (Schlafly, 1972, p. 1), Schlafly deters women from supporting gender equality by highlighting the surface-level “benefits” of public policies that in fact stem from the societal subordination of the female sex.

In the late 1970s, with the extended ERA ratification deadline just a couple of years away, *The Phyllis Schlafly Report* focused on educating readers on the dangers of progressive legislation such as the ERA and Social Security reform and promoting conservative legislation such as the Family Protection Act. Since Schlafly had already warned women of the practical repercussions of the ERA (including gender-blind conscription and the loss of child support and alimony obligations), her critique of the ERA in the late 1970s relies more heavily on rhetorical strategies. In “Women’s Magazines Promote ERA—But Deny Equal Rights,” (December 1979) Schlafly employs ad hominem attacks on ERA proponents in an attempt to invalidate their support. She smartly conflates ERA support with support for abortion, lesbians, and pornography to cement ERA opposition in the religious Right (Schlafly, 1979). “Changing Social Security to Hurt the Homemaker” (June 1979), as the title suggests, condemns proposed Social Security reforms for targeting the Homemaker, whom Schlafly (1979) defines as “the traditional wife/mother who spends all or the majority of her married life in homemaking duties instead of paid employment” (p. 1). Schlafly’s definition of the Homemaker implies that she is White; while White women’s liberationists of this era felt unfairly confined to the home, Black women sought the privilege of leaving the world of alienated work to spend time with children and family (hooks, 1984). Schlafly frames the proposed reforms in such a way that identifies Homemakers as victims of the new policy; she describes the reforms which aim to increase women’s representation in the workforce as a “plan to drive all wives and mothers out of the

home by placing financial penalties on the traditional family unit” (Schlafly, 1979, p. 1). In “The Family Protection Act” (November 1979) Schlafly outlines the proposed bill and gives the bill her full endorsement. The provisions of the Family Protection Act, despite being introduced over forty years ago, bear a striking resemblance to the conservative agenda of the 2020s. From textbook censorship to abortion Rights (Schlafly, 1979), conservative politicians are still fighting for the pro-family values of the Family Protection Act despite its defeat in 1979—just as liberals are still fighting for the principles of the ERA despite its death in 1982.

Issues of *The Phyllis Schlafly Report* published between 1989 and 1994 include more frequent and direct assaults on feminist activists and ideology. During this era, the women’s movement against sexual harassment gained momentum and national attention with Anita Hill’s testimony against Justice Clarence Thomas. Schlafly responded to these advances with strident attacks on the movements associated with them. In “Insights Into Feminist Ideology,” (December 1989) Schlafly exposes the misogyny of male Leftists and concludes, “So that’s why the feminists are so bitter!” (Schlafly, 1989, p. 1) while insisting that conservative men do not exhibit such behavior. While the truth of this assessment may be contested, Schlafly inadvertently identifies a difference in the type of sexism displayed by both ends of the political ideological spectrum; generally, men on the Left display hostile sexism while men on the Right display benevolent sexism. Interestingly, Schlafly’s criticism of the Left echoes Dworkin’s warning to Leftist women; in this rare instance, Schlafly is more aligned with than in opposition to radical feminist observations. “Time To Tell the Feminists Bye-Bye” (December 1990) and “The Feminists Have a Terrible Identity Crisis” (December 1994) concern themselves with a general dismissal of the feminist movement by characterizing it and its supporters as selfish, irrational, and immature. “Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s Feminist World View” (July 1993) takes a

more legislation- and law-oriented approach; Schlafly highlights specific feminist policy goals that are antithetical to the pro-family movement, such as sex-integration in schools and no-fault divorce, to convince readers of Ginsburg's inadequacy and political extremism (Schlafly, 1993).

The most recent edition of the *Report* that is analyzed, entitled "I'm Fed Up," (April 1999) is more explicitly partisan than previous editions. "I'm Fed Up" responds to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, a wonderfully opportune event for conservative Republicans such as Schlafly. The scandal offered Republicans the opportunity to capitalize on the moral failures of the Democrats, invoking the self-righteousness of those entrenched in purity culture and wives who felt sympathy for Hillary Clinton. Schlafly pounces on the opportunity to connect the concepts of morality and welfare, writing, "I'm fed up with the liberals saying it is our moral duty to spend our money for their pet projects (it's called taxes) in order to provide benefits to special constituencies that are expected to vote liberal" (Schlafly, 1999, p. 1). Schlafly's schadenfreude is nearly tangible in her condemnation of the moral values of the Democratic party: "Their values, like Clinton's Presidency, are just as stained as the famous blue dress" (Schlafly, 1999, p. 2).

## Results

The most commonly recurring rhetorical tactic that Schlafly utilizes in her attack on feminism is the framing of feminists as untrustworthy. Such framing of feminism manifests in a variety of phrases: "based on a myth," "incompatible with the truth," "feminist dishonesty," and "fraud on the public," among many others (Schlafly, 1994, pp. 1-3; Schlafly, 1979, p. 3).

Schlafly repeatedly embraces misogynistic stereotypes to frame feminists as self-victimizing and nonsensical as a means of delegitimizing the feminist movement. She consistently illustrates

feminists as childish by explicitly calling them so and referring to their calls for justice as “a nationwide tantrum,” further undermining their credibility and intelligence (Schlafly, 1990, p.1). Such framing has had dangerous, concrete repercussions in the political sphere. The credibility of Anita Hill (“Then came Anita Hill crying ‘poor little me’” (Schlafly, 1994, p.3)), Christine Blasey Ford, and the millions of women who participated in the #MeToo movement was undermined by this attitude of disbelief, resulting in the appointment of sexual abusers to positions of political and judicial power.

Taxation and welfare spending are among the policy issues most frequently referenced in the *Report*. Schlafly’s criticism of “big brother” government is strengthened by her commitment to traditional family values and responsibilities. A prevalent theme of Schlafly’s messaging is the positioning of government and family responsibilities in opposition to each other. “Children are a woman’s best social security;” “The family is the original and best department of health, education and welfare;” “Feminists Thrive on Your Tax Dollars;” “[Feminists] always turn to government to provide the economic comforts and security which husbands once provided” (Schlafly, 1972, p. 1; Schlafly, 1994, p. 4; Schlafly, 1994, p. 4; Schlafly, 1990, p. 2). In this way, the pro-family movement takes the conservative value of small government to an extreme; Schlafly not only promotes the reallocation of welfare responsibility from federal to state and local governments but takes this initiative a step further and idealizes a self-sufficient family unit that needs little to no government assistance. This resistance to progressive welfare policy is inextricably linked to racial prejudice. The negative stereotyping of African Americans as lazy is the strongest predictor of White opposition to welfare programs (Bullock, 2013). Schlafly avoids any discussion of race in the *Report*, but her staunch opposition to the welfare state betrays her implicit attitudes toward racial minorities.

Additional policy areas that appear most concerning to Schlafly include education and childcare, military conscription, and naturally, the ratification of the ERA (Schlafly, 1979; Schlafly, 1990; Schlafly, 1979). For each of these policy areas, Schlafly's stance can be traced back to a biologically conservative mindset, or the widespread belief that anatomy is destiny. Schlafly's advocacy for parental oversight of education and resistance to government-funded childcare aims to maintain the societal value of motherhood. Schlafly's opposition to the enlistment of women in the military boils down to her insistence that women, by nature of their physical capacities, are unable to perform in combat to the same extent as men. Most generally, Schlafly opposed the ERA on the principle that women and men are simply fundamentally different and should be treated under the law as such.

Rather surprisingly, Schlafly makes little mention of abortion in the *Report*, even in issues published around the time of the *Roe* decision. She certainly opposes abortion, but only mentions the issue to prove the radicalism of the feminist agenda. Schlafly attacks certain justices of the Supreme Court (namely Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whom she detests)—not for their decisions in Supreme Court cases, but specifically and explicitly for their relation to the feminist movement (Schlafly, 1993). The lack of attention Schlafly granted to the issue of abortion may be explained by Weiniger and Nugent's (2020) theory that Republican women function as strategic party actors. In general, the *Report* concerns itself with legislative issues, not legal matters. Since the legalization of abortion was decided by the Supreme Court, Schlafly had little practical reason to convince her audience to oppose abortion, since affairs of the judicial branch are intended to be apolitical and therefore not subject to the will of the people. Instead, she uses the issue of abortion as a reason to condemn the feminists who oppose Republican policies. Perhaps Schlafly simply knew her audience; women who read the *Phyllis*



*Schlafly Report* were likely to be religious and Republican, like Schlafly, and anti-abortion for those reasons. In this case, Schlafly would not waste her words trying to convince readers to oppose abortion. Regardless, the general exclusion of abortion rights from the *Report* does not invalidate the centrality of abortion to the divide between Right- and Left-wing women; the grave impacts of *Roe* and *Dobbs* on their respective political climates evidence this fact.

An examination of Phyllis Schlafly's political ideology as communicated through the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* offers support for scholarly theories regarding the political behavior of conservative White women. Schlafly's display of out-group favoritism via negative self-stereotyping as a method for justifying a political system predicated upon social hierarchy provides support for system justification theory. Her frequent references to religion also support the notion that organized religion is a mechanism of system justification. Schlafly's resistance to welfare policy and eagerness to employ misogynist stereotypes easily fall into the framework of Junn's velvet glove theory. Viewing welfare as an equalizing mechanism in terms of race and socioeconomic status, Schlafly's opposition to progressive welfare policy sheds light on her desire to maintain the racial status quo. Her opinion that women should be homemakers and caregivers, despite her insistence that these traits translate to privilege, indicates her acceptance of women as "second" in sex. Together, these attitudes reflect precisely the disposition that leads women to vote Republican, according to Junn. Schlafly also exemplifies Dworkin and MacKinnons's assessments of the political motivations of Right-wing women. Schlafly was so invested in conservative and anti-feminist politics because it was a matter of survival. Because Schlafly's world was a dangerous place for women, she fought tooth and nail to preserve their value—even if that preservation required them to remain in the domestic sphere and was predicated on subservience to their husbands.

## Conclusion

Anti-feminist resistance to second-wave feminism established a political agenda for White women that remained pervasive as political parties became aligned with attitudes toward feminism leading into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The sexual liberation movement and consequent struggle against sexual harassment prompted many women to oppose abortion and embrace a culture of purity as a means of self-defense. The emergence of neoliberal policies appealed to the racial prejudices of White women, drawing them to the Republican party that enacted them. The bitter fight over the Equal Rights Amendment amplified the voices of those opposed to its passage, namely that of Phyllis Schlafly, who became a prominent spokesperson for Right-wing women in the following decades. Schlafly's messaging, specifically that which was published in *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, remains relevant to the political climate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century thus far. This continuity provides evidence that the responses of 20<sup>th</sup>-century conservative White women to second-wave feminism built the foundation upon which White women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century stand.

Phyllis Schlafly paved the way for White conservative women like Marjorie Taylor Greene and Amy Coney Barrett to enjoy political empowerment and governmental support. These women's ideological agendas, which include the banning of abortion and gender segregation in sports, are remarkably similar to the policies for which Schlafly advocated during her career. Further research might investigate the political motivations of conservative women of color such as Candace Owens and Nikki Haley. While there is probably some overlap between the political motivations of White conservative women and conservative women of color, the race of the latter certainly complicates their political existence, making the above analysis inadequate to understand their motivations and beliefs.

The staggering political polarization of the present age makes misogynist criticism of Right-wing women all too tempting to those on the Left, including Leftist women. A characterization of Republican women who seemingly vote against their interests as unintelligent or irrational distracts from dangerous gendered and racial dynamics that factor into White women's political behavior. Everyone in the United States, Democrat or Republican, feminist or anti-feminist, male, female, or, otherwise, is engaged in a collective struggle with gendered structures of power enforced by patriarchy. The political progress that the United States so desperately requires hinges on this understanding, and until this mindset is incorporated into the national cultural consciousness, we will continue to reproduce the antiquated political discourse of the last century.

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