

University of Dayton

eCommons

Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and
Gender Studies

Women's and Gender Studies Program

2017

Feminist Futures

Julia Nicole Court

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/wgs_essay



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Court, Julia Nicole, "Feminist Futures" (2017). *Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies*. 10.

https://ecommons.udayton.edu/wgs_essay/10

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Women's and Gender Studies Program at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Feminist Futures

by
Julia Nicole Court

Winner

2017 Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies

Feminist Futures

Political leadership in the United States has been dominated by men throughout history. The representation of women in government, especially in positions of leadership, is far less than the actual proportion of women in the population. Approximately twenty percent of current members of Congress are women. Twenty out of 100 women make up the Senate while 84 out of 435 women make up the House of Representatives, as of January 2015. This gender gap should concern feminists because without female holders of political offices on all levels of government operations, half of the U.S population is not being represented. Drawing on Susan J. Carroll's book *Women and American Politics: New Questions, New Directions* and Susan Faludi's book *Backlash: the Undeclared War against Women*, feminist perspectives on the issue have been asserted but not accepted. The future of feminist movements, despite institutionalized backlash of the United States political system, should focus on recruitment of women in politics and commit to eradicating the norm of "maleness" in U.S politics.

Identifying as a woman in the political realm can be equated with negative stereotypes of feminism in the mind of the general community where there may be important consequences for both voluntary and involuntary association that affect their political recruitment (Carroll 2003, 42). Explicit resistance of women's entrance into politics may act as a direct deterrent to their involvement while underlying societal messages about gender roles and expectations may subtly influence women's perceptions of their capability to be politicians. Women in politics enter into a group where men dominate in number and in culture, making maleness the norm for which women are judged against in their behavior and effectiveness (Carroll 2003, 43). The political realm accepts "male values and behavior as universal," while "male behavior is considered inappropriate for a woman and female behavior typified as caring, compassionate, sensitive, and

non-aggressive is inappropriate for a politician” (Carroll 2003, 43). This puts women in a double bind where any way in which they choose to conduct their political career results in criticism and rejection. Additionally, studies show that women who feel isolated in the political arena may be less likely to take risks, which may make them feel more “uncomfortable in assuming leadership roles. It might also make their peers in the political arena and their constituents less likely to view them as leaders, thus discouraging their recruitment to electoral politics or inhibiting their ambition to seek higher office” (Carroll 2003, 46).

Keeping in mind that studies focusing on women’s political leadership and participation is limited due to the lack of their presence in U.S politics, women do really make a difference in U.S politics. Women are far more likely than their male counterparts to focus on issues of women, children, and the family (Carroll 2003, 93). While female politicians do not only concentrate on these issues, they are far more likely to prioritize these issues than men. Women are also more likely to conceptualize public policy issues more broadly and they are more likely to lead through a consensus style rather than a “command and control” style like men (Carroll 2003, 93-94). According to Carroll, “one consequence of this wider perspective is that women's legislation is more likely than men's to address the roots of the problem rather than its most recent symptoms. Hence, it is often comprehensive and non-incremental in nature” (Carroll 2003, 94). Despite having an apparent positive influence on legislation for certain issues and bringing a different perspective to political leadership, women face backlash institutionalized into the American political system.

Women have faced backlash in their political participation especially during Ronald Reagan’s Presidency and throughout the 1980s. Fewer women were in federal office during Reagan’s presidency while women also made up fewer appointees, making Reagan’s presidency

the first to decrease women's inclusion since his predecessor's record (Faludi 1991, 269).

Through the Reagan administration's Paperwork Reduction Act, the government stopped collecting statistics on the recruitment of women. This way Reagan could stop recruiting women and no one would know (Faludi 1991, 270).

Furthermore, "the Federal Women's program, established in 1967 to recruit women to government agencies, was essentially disbanded: its recruitment coordinators at the various federal agencies were either assigned other duties, stripped of their budgets, or quietly laid off" (Faludi 1991, 269). In other words, the women that did work in the federal government were also being refused participation and some were forced out. Another shortcoming of political movements during Reagan's presidency included the rejection of feminist ideas and already-enacted federal legislation to increase gender equality in education: "when the Heritage Foundation's 1981 *Mandate for Leadership* itemized the federal programs it wanted cut or eliminated,...the Women's Educational Equity Act program was singled out...[because it] represented an 'important resource for the practice of feminist policies and politics'" (Faludi 1991, 271). The Women's Educational Equity Act was attacked because it was seen as a proponent of feminist ideals and that alone was enough to eliminate its support from conservatives.

Outside of Reagan's presidency, however, female appointments have increased overtime with President Carter having 16 percent of his appointments female, President G. H. W. Bush with 19 percent, and President Clinton with 28.5 percent. Reagan's percentage of female appointments, chronologically between presidents Carter and Bush, respectively, was .08 percent, far less than the already dismal numbers of politicians of his time (Carroll 2003, 95). This small amount of women holding political offices included "padded" numbers of women

serving in top level leadership, where women working in administrative or assistant positions were counted as high-level political leadership appointments (Faludi 1991, 269).

Despite the massive rejection of women in the political field during Reagan's presidency in the 1980s, Faludi argues that proportionately more women than men voted during that era. She also claims that women were more likely to vote Democrat while men were more likely to vote Republican (Faludi 1991, 148). This was first seen by political analysts as a short term reaction to Reagan's policies regarding abortion rights and welfare cutbacks, but it was not temporary (Faludi 1991, 148).

Women of the New Right, a conservative political view that is known for being antifeminist, also proved to be an obstacle to feminist ideas in politics at the time and continue today. These women reject feminist agendas to eradicate gender norms and expectations in politics and replace them with non-gendered characteristics. Instead, New Right women yearn to be accepted by the culture of "maleness" that dominated political culture. These women denounced feminism but could still benefit from it, as Faludi explains: "by divorcing their personal liberation from their public stands on sexual politics, they could privately take advantage of feminism while publicly deploring its influence. They could indeed 'have it all' – by working to prevent all other women from having that same opportunity" (Faludi 1991, 268). This obstacle in the form of New Right women is important and relevant for feminist activists to note because it illustrates the rationale for antifeminist women to take advantage of feminism by maintaining their position in politics while blaming or shaming other women for supporting it. These women avoid the double bind of being a women in politics by buying into the patriarchal system that the U.S government has institutionalized.

In order to combat these examples of backlash and institutionalized exclusions of women from politics, a course of action for future feminists may include improved recruitment of women as politicians and a deviation from the heavily gendered characteristics that emphasize “maleness” from political culture. Carroll’s research shows that politics in Europe have experienced an increase of participation by women and some studies have attributed this to outside recruitment of people with experience with women’s groups and women’s movements (Carroll 2003, 44). In the U.S, women are more present in grassroots organizations and church leadership, both of which can connect to and inspire political leadership (Carroll 2003, 96). The American political system might find a similar recruitment strategy to that in Europe useful in recruiting women from women’s movements and organizations, church leadership, and other grassroots organizations. Current mechanisms through which women become involved in politics are not yielding the same amount of participation that men have achieved. Carroll states that “women have tended to enter politics from a civic worker or community volunteer background [while] men, on the other hand, have tended to enter politics from a professional base, usually some sort of business career” (Carroll 2003, 92-93). In this assessment, women were more likely than men to fulfil their roles as wives and mother first, before entering politics. Men, however, could start their political careers earlier, with little or no societal expectations to pursue duties as husbands or fathers first. Future feminist activists, however, must keep in mind that the relationship between community involvement and the recruitment of women to electoral politics has not been fully explored and further studies of this can help determine better ways to address female political participation in leadership roles (Carroll 2003, 42).

Another course for future feminist action to address the issue of a lack of female leadership in U.S politics would be to change the norm of “maleness” of current political culture.

To achieve this, the current cultural views of women and their gendered roles need to be changed as well. Gender roles and expectations that assert that men are better political leaders because of their leadership style or personal traits need to be eradicated. Society as a whole needs to start viewing feminine characteristics as being compatible with political leadership; leadership needs to be defined in non-gendered terms. To aid in this radical shift from current norms and expectations, women need to be shown in a different light in popular media. Carroll states that “unflattering portraits of women's position in society may explain why girls have lower levels of political knowledge and political interest than boys” (Carroll 2003, 175). Similarly, Faludi states that “research suggests that the news media do not regard women as authoritative or newsworthy sources of political information” (Faludi 1991, 174). Visibility of women as political figures and as reliable sources of news and information will impact the gendered state of politics. Women need to be viewed as the professionals that they are, just like their male counterparts.

Overall, women in politics today face obstacles to their recruitment and acceptance into a governing space where they should have legitimate authority to advocate for their rights. Without the presence of female political leadership in this space, women, feminists, and feminist ideas cannot be fully addressed. Instead, the few women who are present in politics are either stuck in a double bind where not conforming to male standards of political leadership is seen as ineffective and actually conforming to these male traits is seen as inappropriate for women or they take on an identity of a New Right woman who takes advantage of feminism in order to put down those who support it. This conundrum coupled with the institutionalized denial of women into federal politics by the Reagan administration has established a culture of excluding women from political leadership. If future feminist activists attempt to overcome these setbacks, they may find success in improving the recruitment of women into politics and eliminating the

gendered norms of political roles that are born from accepted societal gender roles. Changing the perception of women in society while strategically recruiting women of specific backgrounds may improve the amount of female politicians in leadership roles in the U.S.

Works Cited

Carroll, Susan J. *Women and American Politics: New Questions, New Directions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: the Undeclared War against Women*. New York: Crown, 1991.