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**Sex for Jesus and the “New Republican Woman”:
The Clash of Feminism and Moral Conservatism in American Politics**

When Sarah Palin was selected as John McCain’s running mate for the 2008 Republican presidential ticket, Americans were stunned: not only was she a virtual unknown—the first-term governor of a distant and sparsely-populated state—but her combination of beauty, sexual allure, and anti-intellectualism flew in the face of what had been well-established rules for women in American politics. Since Palin’s ascent onto the national scene, the Republican Party and the Tea Party movement have presented voters with a procession of candidates cut from similar cloth: anti-choice women who often flaunt their attractiveness while simultaneously condemning any sexual expression—be it premarital intercourse, homosexuality, or R-rated film—that falls outside the strictures of Christian conservative thought.

These candidates include the now-infamous Christine O’Donnell, the failed would-be Senator from Delaware whose public declarations against masturbation as “sinful” came back to haunt her; South Carolina governor Nikki Haley, who fended off accusations of having engaged in extramarital affairs with two colleagues; and Minnesota House of Representatives member Michele Bachmann, who was re-elected in her heavily conservative district in the face of declining support among women, who were turned off by her anti-choice, anti-universal healthcare views.

Palin, O’Donnell, Haley, and Bachmann have been hailed as the “new Republican women.” In actuality, they represent the distillation of a cultural war that has been brewing within the GOP since the 1950s. At its heart is the conflict between conservatives whose belief in limited government extends to the realm of private life, and those who posit that, while government should not interfere with the free market, it should certainly exercise moral authority over its subjects. For nearly half a century, Phyllis Schlafly has been one of the most powerful and ruthlessly effective spokespeople for the latter view. Schlafly—who came to national prominence in 1964, following the publication of *A Choice Not An Echo* and her involvement in

Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign—is the godmother of the “new Republican women.” Her ideas have long influenced a host of conservative politicians, activists and commentators, including right-wing darlings Ann Coulter and Michelle Malkin.

In her foreword to *Feminist Fantasies*, a 2003 collection of Schlafly's work, Coulter writes that *A Choice Not An Echo* “changed the Republican party forever” (xiv). Brilliant and articulate, Schlafly is arguably the deepest thorn in the side of American feminism: a well-educated woman who insists, despite her many professional accomplishments, that “most women don't want to be liberated from home, husband, family, and children” (31, 1994). Her views on women's roles, abortion rights, and same-sex marriage reflect the Puritanism at the heart of the American soul—a Puritanism that has deeply affected American government and fundamentally shaped the role of women in American politics. Ironically, its vestiges are alive in not only the modern Republican Party, where religious fervor has reached a high pitch, but in the Democratic Party as well, where appeasement to the right has resulted in a diluted form of feminism that denies female candidates their sexuality at the same time that their most vocal Republican counterparts openly wield theirs—albeit for political and religious, rather than personal, reasons.

The Role of Religion

“Fundamentalist patriarchal religion has been and remains a barrier preventing the spread of feminist thought and practice,” feminist academic bell hooks wrote in 2000 (107). Indeed, women have been as powerful a voice in support of patriarchy as men: the daughter of devout Catholics, Schlafly roused an army of Christian conservatives for her ultimately successful campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment. As Donald Critchlow noted in *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, “A remarkable 98 percent of E.R.A. opponents claimed church membership, while only 31 to 48 percent of pro-E.R.A. supporters did” (221). Conservative Christianity was at the heart of the most recent party realignment that both shifted the solidly Democratic South into Republican voting states and changed the party registration of many Catholic voters as well.

The strong allegiance Christian conservative women give to the status quo is a painful subject for feminists. Back in 1983, radical feminist Andrea Dworkin offered a devastating assessment of the political right in the United States, describing it as a movement that convinced women to betray their own interests by misdirecting their rage:

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. The quality of this fear and the pervasiveness of this ignorance are consequences of male sexual domination over women. Every accommodation that women make to this domination, however apparently stupid, self-defeating, or dangerous, is rooted in the urgent need to survive somehow on male terms. 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, those far away, foreign, or different. ... Because women so displace their rage, they are easily controlled and manipulated haters. Having good reason to hate, but not the courage to rebel, women require symbols of danger that justify their fear. (34)

Among these “symbols of danger” are homosexuals, who undoubtedly fall under the category of “different.” In the 1970s, singer Anita Bryant waged a national campaign against legislation that would have extended legal protections to homosexuals. Like Schlafly, who battles feminists on Christian principle and fought the E.R.A. on constitutional grounds, Bryant invoked religion and the nation’s highest law in her crusade as well: “At first, I did not want to become involved,” she writes on her website, “but forged ahead since many encouraged me in my public stance for a Christian view of home and family and protection of our children. I was asked to lead a referendum, so we formed ‘Save Our Children’ [a coalition expressly organized to oppose legislation banning anti-gay discrimination] to change that unconstitutionally [sic] unnecessary law.”

An even greater “symbol of danger” for many women is the fear of their own sexuality—one of the cornerstones of the Judeo-Christian tradition. “Sexist thinking taught to females from birth on had made it clear that the domain of sexual desire and sexual pleasure was always and only male, that only a female of little or no virtue would lay claim to sexual need or sexual hunger,” hooks writes (85). Schlafly confirms this self-limiting view: “Men may want, or think they want, a cafeteria selection of lunch-counter sex,” she asserts. “But most women continue to want what the old popular song calls ‘a Sunday kind of love.’ Marriage and motherhood give a woman new identity and the opportunity for all-round fulfillment as a woman” (196, 1977). Such “fulfillment,” Schlafly makes clear, should only follow a courtship marked by “modesty, virginity, and the traditional withholding of sexual favors until marriage” (238, 1998).

In the present day, one of the strange twists this conservative ideal has taken is that once married, a woman is expected to fulfill the role of fantasy sex object—a giant leap for a virgin to make, in this writer’s estimation. Yet, this is precisely what some modern evangelical movements espouse: taking sexual practices once considered taboo among many Christian

denominations, and using them not to upend, but rather to strengthen, the patriarchy. This trend actually dates to the 1970s, when Tim LaHaye (best known as the co-author of the *Left Behind* series of Christian apocalyptic novels) and his wife Beverly released *The Act of Marriage*, a Christian sex manual that still sells briskly. But the “sex-positive” evangelical movement really exploded with the development of the Internet, which has given rise to online Christian sex shops, sex advice columns, and sex blogs. “I’ll tell you what the Bible says about oral, anal, and other ‘non-standard’ sex acts in a Christian marriage,” self-described “sex expert” Susan Irwin, who has co-authored two books with her husband, promises her readers. “You’ll get an accurate interpretation of the scripture with verses cited, and it may be different from what your ministers have told you!” On the cheekily named Christian Nymphs, three female bloggers—identified only as “cumingirl,” “spicynutmeg,” and “cinnamonsticks”—“welcome all married women to enter our community,” breathlessly telling them that married sex should be “spicy, the way God intended it to be!”

Virtually all these sites assure their users that they will not be exposed to pornographic images, a uniquely Christian approach to sex “education.” Perhaps predictably, though, even the most female-oriented among them paints a picture of the ideal Christian marriage as one where the wife is ultimately submissive to her husband and his desires; her satisfaction is promoted as vital to a healthy marriage, but not as important as his. In turn, this old-fashioned machismo has taken center stage in politics as practiced by evangelists. As author and political commentator David Rosen astutely observed in the October 2010 issue of *CounterPunch*,

These advocates seek to harness the tools of secular sex to fortify traditional marriage. While insisting on abstinence and opposing masturbation among non-married people, almost nothing is off-limits when sex serves Jesus in marriage. ... For these advocates, [women are] charged with the task of sexualizing themselves so that they can please and empower their husbands.

For the Christian right, and one can assume for the Tea Party movement as well, the role of sex, like that of the “sexy sisters” in politics, is to help restore old-style masculinity to marriage and the nation.

A Widening Gap Between Male and Female Voters

In American politics, Palin is the most powerful incarnation of this contradictory fantasy, an evangelical beauty queen who espouses abstinence before marriage while wearing form-fitting leather. That the “sexy sisters” are more popular among men than women is almost indisputable: “Palin has a much larger gender gap than her ideological persuasion would

predict,” Betsy Reed wrote in *The Nation* in September 2010. “Men are split 44 to 45 percent between those who hold favorable and unfavorable views of her; for women, the split is 35 to 58 percent, according to a *National Journal* poll.” In Nevada, where Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid defeated Tea Party darling Sharron Angle in the November midterm election, the difference between male and female voters was even more pronounced: “Angle’s unfavorables among women, at 64 percent, surpass even Palin’s,” Reed added. “This trend is not lost on Reid’s campaign, which has been targeting women with ads featuring Angle’s positions on women’s issues and others, like Social Security, that are especially important to female voters.”

The Republican Party was not always hostile to women and women’s issues. As political scientist Jo Freeman explained in 1996, the triumph of Schlafly, the New Right, and Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority over the old Republican guard was astonishing:

The GOP endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment four years earlier than the Democrats [and] the first three Presidents to support the ERA were Republicans—Eisenhower, Nixon and Ford. During the 1970-72 campaign for Congressional passage of the ERA two of the most active supporters were the President of the National Federation of Republican Women and the female co-chair of the Republican National Committee. By 1980 all this had changed.

At their convention that year the Republican Party removed the ERA from its platform a second time—only eight years after both parties resumed support. It actively opposed legalized abortion and generally shunned those few Republican women still willing to call themselves feminists.

That November a “gender gap” in Presidential voting appeared, with women voting more Democratic than men. Since then Republican members of Congress have voted increasingly against bills supported by feminist groups, and women have voted increasingly for Democrats over Republicans.

Indeed, in 1978 Nancy Landon Kassebaum, a pro-choice Republican from Kansas, became the first woman elected to the Senate in her own right—that is, was not first appointed to fill a husband’s seat. (Her father, Alfred Mossman Landon, had served two terms as governor of Kansas.) “In the ‘80s, Republican women actually outnumbered Democratic women in Congress,” Reed reports, “and many of them stood in the middle of the road ideologically. Over the succeeding three decades, however, Republican women in Congress have moved steadily to the right... to the point where in 2009 they were voting more conservatively than 77 percent of the House as a whole, a modern record.” Much of that “conservatism” is based on the issue of abortion, which—almost four decades after *Roe v. Wade*—remains one of the most divisive in American politics. Even though the right to privacy, the foundation of the Supreme Court’s

decision, is theoretically one of the cornerstones of Republican thought, on this matter Christian conservatives have the GOP firmly in their grip.

In 1994, Schlafly crowed that in that year's midterm elections, "feminist candidates of both parties were trounced while half a dozen *attractive, conservative, pro-life* Republican women were newly elected to Congress" (31, italics added). But in the long run, Republicans' strategy of endorsing ultra-conservative women has backfired. According to Reed, a record number of Republican women filed to run for office last year, but likewise, a record number lost: of the 145 who ran for Congress, 93 were defeated in the primaries—the highest rate of primary loss for Republican women in seven election cycles. Overall, the 2010 midterm election reversed a 30-year trend of women gaining seats in Congress, with three seats lost and female membership dropping from 17 to 16 percent.

Meanwhile, as Republican women have moved steadily to the right on the ideological spectrum, their numbers in Congress, once equal to Democrats', have decreased considerably in comparison. In 1963, of the 14 women elected to Congress, seven were Republicans and seven were Democrats. In 1985, 25 women took Congressional seats: 13 Republicans and 12 Democrats. Last November, 92 women were elected to Congress, of whom 29 are Republicans and 63 are Democrats. Despite being boosted by the 2010 Republican sweep and the retirement of several Democrats, Republican women remain far behind Democratic women in terms of Congressional representation.

Women in Congress, 1963 - Present

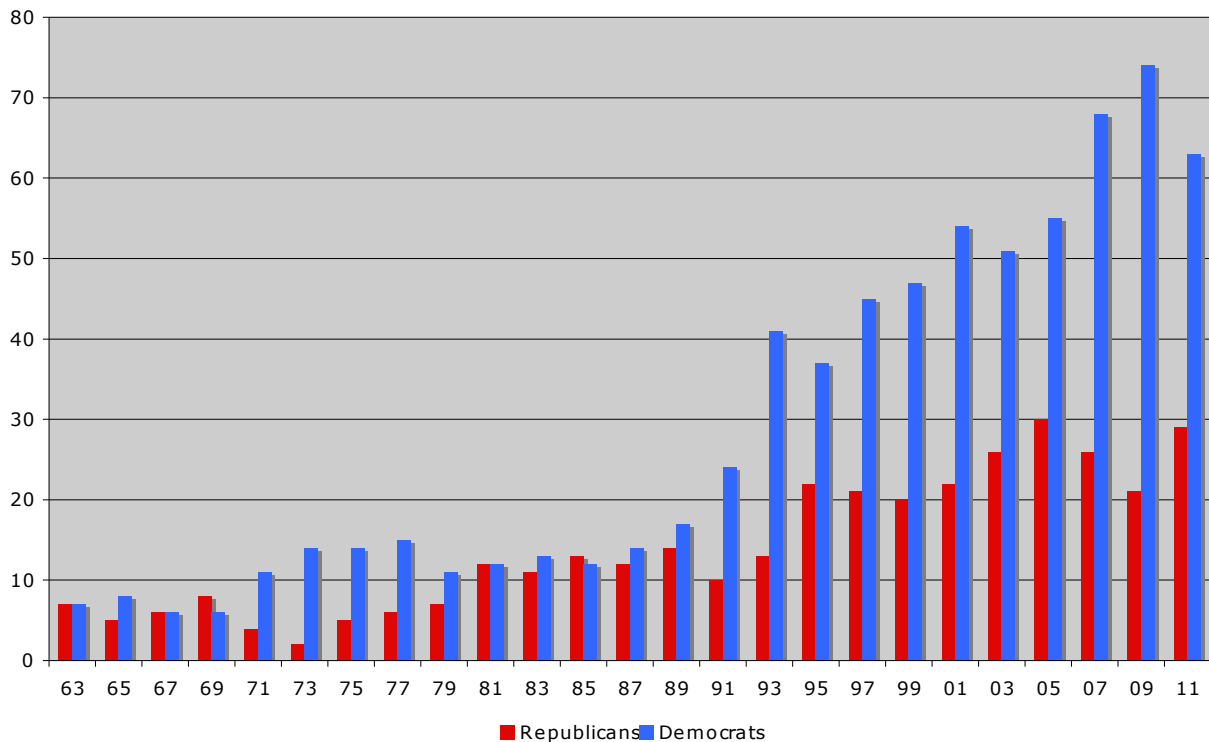


Fig. 1. Women in Congress. As the number of women elected to the U.S. Congress has increased, so has the disparity between the number of Democratic and Republican women in Congress. Graph compiled by author, based on data available from the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives.

The Generational Split Among Democrats

Given the declining support women have given Republicans as the party has moved to the right, a casual observer might think Democratic candidates would have embraced the sexual autonomy of women—and would not be afraid of being perceived as feminist or even sex-friendly. But a generational gap exists in the party, as was revealed during the Congressional candidacy of Krystal Ball, a C.P.A. and small-business owner who was the 2010 Democratic nominee in Virginia’s conservative First District. (She ultimately lost.) The 28-year-old came to national attention when six-year-old Christmas-party photos surfaced on the Internet, in which Ball is dressed as a sexy Mrs. Santa and her now ex-husband, being “walked” on a sparkly leash, sports fuzzy antlers and a red plastic penis for a nose. But even before the scandal erupted, Ball had already encountered a Puritanical streak in her own party, as she recounted in *The Huffington Post* on October 11:

I was very successful getting support from those who supported President Obama... But I wasn't that successful in getting support from the powerful women who formed the core of Hillary's Sisterhood of the Traveling Pantsuit. I wondered, was it because they felt I hadn't paid my dues? Was it because they were worried, that with my relative inexperience, men wouldn't take me seriously and I might enforce the stereotypes they had worked so hard to break down? I was often told to cut my hair, to wear shorter heels, to dress in drab colors. I realized it was actually because they wanted to protect me. They did this because, for their generation, female sexuality was dangerous to display in the workplace, especially in politics.

Why would a beautiful, accomplished young woman be told to mask her sexuality, at the same time that right-wing figures such as Palin and Haley were exploiting theirs? As hooks explained in 2000, a backlash against the celebration of women's sexuality had long been brewing in both the antifeminist *and* feminist movements:

Publicly the feminist women who continued to talk the most about sexuality tended to be conservative, at times puritanical and anti-sex. The movement had been radically changed, moving from being a site where female sexual liberation had been called for and celebrated to a site where public discussions of sexuality focused more on sexual violence and victimization. Mainstream aging feminist individual women who had once been the great champions of female sexual freedom for the most part began to talk about sexual pleasure as unimportant, valorizing celibacy. Increasingly women who speak and write openly about sexual desire and practice tend to dismiss or distance themselves from feminist sexual politics. And more than ever the feminist movement is seen primarily as anti-sex. Visionary feminist discourse on sexual passion and pleasure has been pushed into the background, ignored by almost everyone. In its place females and males continue to rely on patriarchal models of sexual freedom. (89)

This is decidedly not the "feminism" that women Ball's age wish to align themselves with; save for the focus on "sexual violence and victimization," it more closely resembles Schlafly's ideal. While Ball admitted to being "embarrassed" by the publication of the photos—she believes they were found and leaked by someone in her opponent's campaign—she refused to apologize. "Society has to accept that women of my generation have sexual lives that are going to leak into the public sphere," she told Liz Halloran of National Public Radio on October 12. "Sooner or later, this is a reality that has to be faced, or many young women in my generation will not be able to run for office." She did acknowledge that following the brouhaha,

my biggest support... has come from supporters of Hillary Clinton. In effect, they have been telling me that what happened to me could have happened to one of their daughters. They will not see their daughters called whores when they run for office just because of some college or post-college party. They will not watch the tide of everything they fought for washed away by the public exposure of female sexuality.

It is profoundly ironic that Clinton, whom Ball greatly admires, may be the ultimate example of a woman who has subverted her own sexuality and sexual fulfillment in order to gain entry into the halls of power. Many feminists remain bitter about Clinton's loss to Barack Obama in the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, and have professed a belief that the millions of women who voted for him betrayed the feminist cause—were seduced by his youth and charisma, and ultimately, by the fact of his race over that of her gender. Important as any of these factors might have been, though, the greatest reason for her loss might be the one that is most painful for feminists to consider: Clinton's public life is exemplary of the feminism she has always espoused, but her private life, despite her famous denial to the contrary, really *has* followed the trajectory of Tammy Wynette's signature song.

After all, for women (especially young women) who voted with their hearts rather than blind allegiance to their gender, which candidate best exemplified the ultimate lesson of the feminist movement—that “the personal is the political”? The one who chose to stay with a serial philanderer in a union widely considered to be a sham, or the one whose marriage to a brilliant, unapologetically attractive woman remains, by all appearances, strong and passionate?

The Dilution of the Message

Women, and women in politics, are not the only ones who pay the price when the integrity of feminist thought is compromised by a muddled, watered-down philosophy designed to appease the right. Others also suffer when the national conversation about sex is reduced to antiquated ideas such as abstinence-only “education,” or cutesy paraphernalia including bumper stickers reading “Coldest State, Hottest Governor” and T-shirts stating “I’m With the Hot Chick” (sold at the 2008 Republican National Convention). American teens do not come of age in a society where it is widely accepted and understood that adolescent sexual experimentation is a natural part of human development; one can safely assume that is not what Bristol Palin was told. Instead, they often face a barrage of contradictory “information” that places sex solely within the context of morality, while they must simultaneously navigate a popular culture saturated in sexual imagery.

Even more importantly in the context of feminism and current political debate, the national conversation about gay rights is virtually devoid of any reference to sexuality. By its very nature, gay sex is undertaken primarily for pleasure; after all, it cannot be undertaken for

procreation. In that sense, it is intrinsically different from much (though not all) straight sex. But in twenty-first-century America, acceptance of homosexuality is not framed in terms of diversity. Instead, it focuses on the “they’re just like us” arguments: gays just want to get married, have children, and serve openly in the military. The images of gays currently presented to the public at large are virtually unrecognizable from those of the 1960s and 1970s, when the gay-rights movement paralleled the women’s liberation movement. Gay culture as it had flourished for decades—in a world where pleasure was not only openly pursued, but celebrated—has been subverted in the name of mainstream acceptance. In other words, it has been packed tightly away into a box, just like the notion that female politicians might actually have sex.

The dilution of feminism, as currently practiced by the American left, has resulted only in the splintering of the movement: left-wing women remain trapped in the same “patriarchal models of sexual freedom” that right-wing women embrace, while young women, generally speaking, have but a vague concept of what 1960s and 1970s feminism really was—a movement that recognized a woman’s essential right to reproductive freedom, in addition to fighting sexist oppression. Attempts to appease the right are foolish; social conservatives have no desire for compromise, and such attempts have resulted only in an overall shift to the right. For American women, this has not yielded favorable results. Access to not only abortion, but also contraception and regular healthcare, has been limited because of political considerations based on religion. Funding for programs that benefit poor women and single parents has been slashed. As the ideological divide between Democratic and Republican women has become deeper, American women are not only dissatisfied with the choices available to them, but as a whole have far fewer choices than women elsewhere in the world: according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the U.S. House of Representatives ranks sixty-seventh worldwide in the percentage of women elected to a lower or single house, far behind all the Scandinavian countries, New Zealand, and even Afghanistan.

When Bachmann tells the nation that “Obamacare is the crown jewel of socialism,” she not only insults women—many of whom would benefit immensely from healthcare reform, and whose quality-of-life index is far higher in the socialist countries of Western Europe than in the United States—but she also draws directly from Schlafly, a rabidly zealous anti-Communist activist who has repeatedly claimed, “The best friend women ever had is the American enterprise system” (118, 1985). When Palin supports abstinence-until-marriage education in schools, as she

did in 2006, she merely follows in the footsteps of Schlafly, who still supports “the traditional withholding of sexual favors until marriage.” When in response to a question from a Muslim student, Coulter tells her to “take a camel” as an alternative to flying—as she did at the University of Western Ontario last year—she only perpetuates the false image of a Muslim world that is frozen in time, as Schlafly did when she wrote, “The status of women in Muslim countries is so many centuries behind the modern world that it is hard for Americans to visualize” (119, 1985). Since Schlafly penned those words, at least six Muslim-majority nations, including the three most populous, have elected female heads of state. Meanwhile, Americans still debate whether a woman can be president.

Contrary to the moniker that she has been given, the “New Republican Woman” is anything but new. She has no new ideas, no fresh insights, nothing to offer that her predecessors, especially Schlafly, have not been espousing for nearly fifty years. Her hair and makeup might be more stylish, her fitted leather jacket with “zipples” much sexier than yesterday’s boxy blazer, but her message is no different from theirs. Like 1920s evangelist Aimee Semple MacPherson, who harnessed the power of modern conveniences such as radio and the automobile to rail against modernity, the “New Republican Woman” has simply harnessed the sexy imagery of contemporary, secular America to fight against sexual freedom and secularity.

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