

WHEN REPUBLICANS WERE FEMINISTS

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I chose this topic because I thought it could demonstrate the ways in which much of my work has been connected to two significant developments in the study of history in the United States. First, I have had the opportunity to make modest contributions to the history of women and gender—a field which developed in the 1970s, shortly after the beginning of my own life as a historian. And, second, my work has been part of a move to a more expansive and creative definition of political history: a political history that sees women—and other under-represented groups—as political actors even when they don't hold formal power; and a political history that explores the connections between social movements and policy-making. Examining feminist policymaking during the Nixon administration, I believe, provides a better understanding of his presidency as a whole and a glimpse of how women's movements interacted with institutions of power.

At first glance, timing did not seem to be on the side of liberal feminism in the United States. A mass women's movement did not begin to take shape and claim public attention until near the end of the 1960s. By then many had tired of social reform, and Richard Nixon had won the presidency on an antigovernment platform, appealing to "the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators."¹

Yet, after the path breaking bans on employment discrimination in the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—which came *before* the rise of a women's movement--feminists realized their greatest policy gains during the years of the Nixon administration. In other words, the

¹ Nixon quoted in Robert Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 29-30.

zenith of feminist policy-making in the United States occurred during an administration filled by men indifferent or even hostile to women's issues.²

Explaining that incongruence requires us to do four things: reconsider the nature of Nixon's domestic policies in general; appreciate the crucial role of congresswomen in women's rights policymaking, even when they held a tiny number of seats; observe how professional women were converted to the feminist cause; and understand the particular nature of Republican feminism.

Considering the entire range of Nixon's domestic policy, feminist laws and regulations were not an anomaly but constituted one of several reform initiatives taken during his presidency. The man who hated liberals and was equally detested by them issued executive orders or signed legislation implementing affirmative action, expanding food stamps, protecting the environment, guaranteeing disability rights, strengthening social security, recognizing native American rights, and more. One could make the argument that the Nixon presidency delivered more liberal reform than any administration that came after, Republican or Democrat.

A number of circumstances led to this result. Nixon had an eye on re-election when 1960s social movements continued to be strong. He was much more dedicated to foreign policy and his relative disinterest in domestic issues left a vacuum to be filled. Civil rights activism and policy had set powerful precedents that other groups, such as Native Americans, people with

² John D. Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002) stresses the relative ease with which feminist policy was adopted in contrast to civil rights legislation which depended on a massive grass roots movement. The fullest treatments of women's policy in the Nixon administration are in Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960-1972* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); and Dean J. Kotlowski, *Nixon's Civil Rights: Politics, Principle and Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). The earliest, and still useful, account of feminist policy-making in the Nixon administration is Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: David McKay, 1975), chapter 6. See Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) for the best study of feminist efforts to reform the party itself.

disabilities, and women, exploited to their advantage. Democrats continued to control Congress and moderate Republicans still constituted a strong bloc within the party (After all, when Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, just four years before Nixon's election, larger percentages of Republicans voted for it than did Democrats). And finally, some advisers were able to get Nixon's ear for issues that mattered to them, such as John Ehrlichman who pushed Nixon on the environment and Native American rights.

These circumstances that promoted the Nixon administration's liberal initiatives also contributed to women's rights policies. But here I am going to focus on the Republican women who were essential to those achievements and consider the sources and nature of their feminism. In Congress, in the executive branch, in their party organizations, and in non-partisan women's organizations, these women took up the women's rights banner, though more often than not they did not call themselves feminists. And they worked closely with women across party lines in what one called "a non-partisan or bi-partisan kind of operation."³

Republican feminists confronted an administration ambivalent about the need for or the benefits of addressing sex discrimination. Like his predecessor, Nixon had very traditional ideas about women and harbored deep sexist instincts, though he did not share Lyndon Johnson's womanizing. Both men had agendas full of what they considered much more important priorities.⁴ Yet, in the 1968 election, Nixon had won only 43.4 percent of the popular vote in a three-way race, and women's votes would be essential to achieving a victory in 1972 that would deliver a permanent Republican majority to national politics.

We can appreciate the tug-of-war between Nixon's struggles to reconcile his indifference to women's issues with his political aspirations in the

³ Patricia Hutar Oral History Interview, *A Few Good Women: Advancing the Cause of Women in Government, 1969-74*, Pennsylvania State University Libraries, pp. 11-12.

⁴ See Susan M. Hartmann, "Women's Issues and the Johnson Administration," 53-81 in Robert A. Divine, ed., *The Johnson Years, vol. 3, LBJ at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994).

administration's deliberations over filling a Supreme Court vacancy in 1971.⁵ Feminists pressured the president to appoint a woman, and Patricia Nixon told reporters that she was urging her husband to do likewise. The President revealed to his aides (in conversations that always provoked guffaws) his profound discomfort at the notion of a woman in such a position. "I don't want any of them around," he said. "Thank God we don't have any in the Cabinet." Women were more "erratic" and "emotional" than men, he believed.⁶

Nonetheless, Nixon the politician concluded that nominating a woman for the Court would deliver a net gain in votes. He decided on Mildred Lillie, a conservative federal court of appeals judge from California. When the American Bar Association committee, in its usual practice of vetting judicial nominees, gave her a "not qualified" rating, Nixon was elated: "And she's the best qualified woman but she's not qualified for the Supreme Court," he exulted. "Jesus, that's great."⁷

If the ABA committee's decision allowed Nixon to have his cake and eat it too, dealing with other feminist demands was not so easy. In his first year in office Republican women forced him to appoint a President's Task Force on Women's Rights and Responsibilities. The pressure began at Nixon's second press conference in February 1969, when a journalist questioned the near absence of women among his high level appointments. Vera Glaser was the Washington bureau chief for the North American Newspaper Alliance and had previously worked for the Republican National Committee and for two Republican Senators. She not only challenged Nixon at the press conference, but she also wrote a five-part series on women's issues that ran in papers

⁵ For other examples of Nixon's and his male associates' attitudes about women, see Kotlowski, *Nixon's Civil Rights*, chapter 8.

⁶ Nixon quoted in John W. Dean, *The Rehnquist Choice: The Untold Story of the Nixon Appointment that Redefined the Supreme Court* (NY: Free Press, 2001), 61, 63.

Quotations are from the White House tapes.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 104, 113-16, 128.

across the country in March 1969. It was the first sustained media attention to liberal feminism.⁸

Glaser got much of her data from Catherine East, who had been promoting women's rights since the early 1960s. A civil service employee in the Labor Department, East staffed Commissions on the Status of Women that began in the Kennedy administration and continued under Johnson. Working behind the scenes, she collected information, connected policymakers with activists, and served as the center of feminist bipartisanship. Even before Nixon took office, East had written to him about women's issues, playing to his political interests by highlighting "the best possibilities for exploiting the women's vote for the Republican Party."⁹

Catherine East also worked with women legislators. The senior Republican congresswoman was Florence Dwyer (New Jersey), who immediately placed Glaser's newspaper series in the *Congressional Record*. Dwyer also appended a letter that she herself had written to Nixon in February calling for action on sex discrimination.¹⁰ Failing to get a satisfactory response from the White House, Dwyer and the three other Republican Congresswomen persisted until they secured a meeting with Nixon in July.¹¹

These four Republicans were among just eleven women in Congress in 1969 (even fewer than the high of twenty in 1961). Yet they were indispensable to the feminist policy transformation. As a group they had

⁸ Patricia Sullivan, "Journalist an Effective Voice for Women," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2008, C7; Lee Stout, *A Matter of Simple Justice: The Untold Story of Barbara Hackman Franklin and A Few Good Women* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 14-16.

⁹ Catherine East, "Background Paper on Interdepartmental Committee on the Status of Women and Citizens' Advisory Council on the Status of Women," December 1968, box 39, Charles Clapp files, White House Central Files (hereafter WHCF), Staff Members and Office Files (hereafter SMOF), Nixon Presidential Library, (hereafter NPL).

¹⁰ *Congressional Record*, April 3, 1969, 8764-68; Florence P. Dwyer to the President, February 26, 1969, box 22, WHC, Subject Files, HU 2-5, NPL; Florence P. Dwyer et al to the President, June 9, 1969, *Ibid.*, box 21.

¹¹ Barbara Tomlinson, "Making Her Way: The Career of Congresswoman Florence P. Dwyer," *New Jersey History* 112 (Fall/Winter 1994): 60-61.

relative longevity: Florence Dwyer was elected in 1956, Catherine May (Washington) in 1958, Charlotte Reid (Illinois) in 1962, and Margaret Heckler (Massachusetts) in 1966. Reid was a conservative, May a middle-of-the-roader, and Dwyer and Heckler moderate or progressive Republicans. Three represented the new breed of female legislators—they had entered electoral politics after years of party activism and/or service in the state legislature; only Reid followed the earlier pattern of entering politics to replace her dead husband.¹²

None of the four Republicans would call themselves feminists, yet each one had already challenged gender limitations. As early as 1952, Florence Dwyer had spearheaded an equal pay law for women in the New Jersey statehouse. Dwyer and May had championed the national Equal Pay Act of 1963, and they along with Reid had supported the addition of sex discrimination to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Margaret Heckler had defied male party leaders in Massachusetts to take on long-time incumbent and former Speaker of the House, Joseph Martin, who she beat in the Republican primary.

In a challenge to the male exclusiveness of Congress itself, in 1967, Charlotte Reid and Catherine May, along with Democratic Representative Patsy Mink, went down to the Congressional gym, knowing they would be refused admittance. So, it was in part a symbolic gesture, but they made sure to get press coverage and a photo of them standing outside a closed door with the sign “Members Only.”¹³ Their action reflected what other professional women often felt—they had the sense of being “outsiders” even though their membership in Congress was as legitimate as the men who could use the gym whenever they wanted to.

¹² See biographies of these Congresswomen in *Women in Congress, 1917-2006* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2006), 374-83, 416-19, 435-39.

¹³ Tomlinson, “Making Her Way,” 46-47; *Women in Congress*, 382, 418, 435; “3 Find Gym in House Only for Him, Not Her,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1967. Subsequently the House Gym Committee set aside two hours on Monday evening for Congresswomen.

In addition to their own personal experiences, Congresswomen heard about feminist issues from women's organizations which paid particular attention to female legislators in their lobbying efforts. Individual women, too, often sent their grievances to Congresswomen, whether or not they lived in those legislators' districts. Women on both sides of the aisle, in fact, played the role of "surrogate representative," acting for women's interests generally.¹⁴ Catherine May did not come to Congress as a feminist, but she listened to other Congresswomen and got behind feminist policy "as soon as I stopped being so naïve and so uninformed about what discrimination against women existed throughout the United States."¹⁵

In addition to these four Republican congresswomen, women who had campaigned for Nixon pressed the White House for action on women's rights. For example, Rita Hauser, a New York attorney specializing in international law, had led Nixon's 1968 campaign in her state. Rewarded with the position of U.S. representative to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, in May 1969 Hauser joined the criticism over the dearth of women's appointments and called for action against sex discrimination in jobs and other areas.¹⁶ Californian Patricia Reilly Hitt had worked in every Nixon campaign since 1946, co-chaired his 1968 national campaign, and then served as assistant secretary in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. She warned that the administration was sitting on a "powder-keg" because Nixon's staff were not taking women's grievances seriously.¹⁷

¹⁴ Jane Mansbridge, "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes'," *Journal of Politics* 61, no. 3 (Aug., 1999): 628-657; Susan J. Carroll, "Are Women Legislators Accountable to Women? The Complementary Roles of Feminist Identity and Women's Organizations," in Brenda O'Neill and Elisabeth Gidengil, *Gender and Social Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 375.

¹⁵ Catherine May Bedell Oral History Interview, conducted by Fern S. Ingersoll for Former Members of Congress, Inc., March 1, 9, 20, 1979, Library of Congress, 149.

¹⁶ Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered*, 100.

¹⁷ Patricia Reilly Hitt to Herb Klein, July 8, 1969, box 22, WHCF, HU 2-5. When NOW leaders asked for a meeting with Nixon, his staff had shunted them off to Hitt. See NOW, "Demands to be presented to President Nixon in Meeting with Patricia Hitt, Assistant Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare," n.d., ca April, 1969, *Ibid.*

These women and others let Nixon know that he could not get by with his first gesture to women in the spring of 1969—when he invited wives of members to sit in on a Cabinet meeting. So, five months after Dwyer had asked for a meeting, Nixon finally met with the four Republican congresswomen in July 1969. The Representatives brought along and released to the press a sharply worded memo, calling the administration’s record on women’s rights “a retreat from the admittedly inadequate action of past Administrations” and labeling some administration officials “positively anti-women.”¹⁸ Three months later, on October 1, 1969, Nixon announced the appointment of a Task Force on Women’s Rights and Responsibilities, and by the end of the year it had submitted a report to the President.

Both Kennedy and Johnson had appointed presidential commissions to study women’s issues. So Nixon’s Task Force was not new, but it was important for a number of reasons. Its report put an official Republican stamp on an agenda for the women’s movement and lent legitimacy and respectability to feminist demands. One White House assistant said that he and his colleagues had to pay attention because the pressure was coming not from “those silly women up on the West Side of New York.’ It was now Republican women.”¹⁹ Both Republicans and Democrats used the report to advocate for particular legislation, and Democrats used it to gain political advantage by criticizing the administration.²⁰ The administration itself elevated attention to the report by sitting on it for six months and evoking protests from Florence Dwyer, Rita Hauser, Patricia Hitt, long-time party leader Elly Petersen, and many more Republican women.²¹

¹⁸ Rep. Dwyer to The President, July 8, 1969, box 39, Clapp files.

¹⁹ Stout, *A Matter of Simple Justice*, 56-71.

²⁰ See for example, Edmund Muskie press release, 11/29/71, Phineas Indritz Papers, Howard University School of Law, Washington, DC, box F15, folder 30. Aspiring Democratic presidential candidate Birch Bayh, for example, pointed to the recommendations of the Task Force to support his call for passage of Title IX. See Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 245, 248.

²¹ Florence P. Dwyer to John D. Ehrlichman, January 15, 1970, Florence P. Dwyer, Catherine May, Charlotte T. Reid, Margaret M. Heckler to The President, January 15, 1970, box 22, WHCF, HU 2-5; Florence P. Dwyer to The President, March 24, 1970,

Nixon's Task Force also had a significant impact on the Republican women who served on it. It deepened their feminist consciousness and encouraged them to re-evaluate their own experiences as professionals in a man's world. Although Vera Glaser headed a news bureau in the nation's capital, she was denied access to the information and contacts that male journalists routinely got through membership in the National Press Club and the Gridiron Club—as were all woman journalists before the 1970s.²² Serving on the task force allowed its members to see beyond their individual experiences and grasp the widespread patterns of discrimination. And the administration's foot-dragging raised their frustration with the presumably "reasonable" men who refused to see the injustice of sex discrimination. "Never would have thought a year ago I'd be so militant," Vera Glaser reported in 1970.²³ Another task force member, Ann Blackham, a real estate executive and a Republican National Committee member, wrote that she was "appalled at the seeming lack of regard and action with regard to women. . . . I cannot fathom ignoring such a vast segment of the voting public."²⁴

The Task Force report offered proposals very much like those that Republican congresswomen had handed to Nixon. Topped by a call for an equal rights amendment to the Constitution, the proposals advocated measures to end sex discrimination in employment, education, and government and social security benefits. Reflecting an individual rights approach, they generally avoided issues like reproduction or those involving social provision or redistribution. The heavily Republican Task Force refused to

box 39, Clapp files; *Congressional Record*, April 23, 1970, 12979; Alice L. Beeman to President Richard M. Nixon, February 26, 1970, box 39, Clapp files; Rita E. Hauser to Bill Safire, March 2, 1970, box 31, WHCF, HU-52; Charlie Clapp to Len Garment, April 10, 1979, box 39, Clapp files; Patricia Reilly Hitt to John Ehrlichman, April 15, 1970, box 21, WHCF, HU-2.

²² Donald A. Ritchie, *Reporting from Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 174-79.

²³ Vera Glaser to Dr. Alan Stimpson, April 15, 1970, University of Wyoming American Heritage Center, Vera Glaser Papers, Accession Number 9826, Box 2, Folder 3. Accessed online 2/26/12.

²⁴ Ann Blackham to Charles L. Clapp, February 24, 1970, box 39, Clapp files.

support broadening the equal pay provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act to domestic and other low-paid workers, though it did so for administrative and professional employees. Where the recommendations *did* stray from traditional Republican doctrine was in asserting the need for federal funding to support the expansion of child care facilities.²⁵

That recommendation and the support of Republican Congresswomen was not enough to save the comprehensive childcare bill that Congress passed in 1971. Resisting feminist pressure, Nixon listened instead to conservative advisers like Pat Buchanan who crafted a veto message to appeal to anti-Communist sentiment and to the emerging religious right's emphasis on traditional family roles. That veto signaled both the diminished prospects for a universal childcare system in the United States and the rising influence of the right in the Republican Party.

Aside from the important issue of child care, Nixon—through executive orders, signing bills, or public statements—approved the entire agenda of his Task Force on Women: an Equal Rights Amendment passed by Congress and sent out to the states for ratification; a law strengthening the enforcement powers of Equal Employment Opportunity Office, the major federal weapon against sex discrimination; a law adding sex discrimination to the purview of the Civil Rights Commission; enactment of Title IX, which banned sex discrimination in all levels and aspects of education; and new regulations on affirmative action in companies with government contracts, dubbed by one historian “the Magna Carta of female employment.”²⁶ Nixon also advanced feminist policy that went beyond the Task Force recommendations and even beyond U.S. shores, when he signed a bill requiring that women be integrated into all foreign economic development

²⁵ *A Matter of Simple Justice: The Report of the President's Task Force on Women's Rights and Responsibilities* (Government Printing Office, 1970), iv-v, 10-11, 13-14, 30-32. The report did list abortion as a topic to be considered by a proposed White House Conference on Women and under “Problems Commended for Early Consideration” to the director of a proposed Office of Women's Rights and Responsibilities in the White House.

²⁶ Kotlowski, *Nixon's Civil Rights*, 243.

programs. Two additional measures, that were in Congress and supported by the administration before Nixon resigned, were signed by his successor Gerald Ford in 1974: a law banning discrimination in credit; and, an additional law to promote gender equity in education. These laws and regulations provided an essential foundation of legal equality and constituted the most intense period of feminist policymaking before or after. And they came about, to a large extent, because Republican women forced Nixon to act.

Republican support for a women's rights agenda and bipartisan cooperation to achieve it were possible because all advocates for women rights could agree on formal equality. But the women's movement agenda quickly moved beyond the goal of simply ending official discrimination. Increasingly feminists demanded measures that would address additional inequities faced by women because of their color, their poverty, their potential for motherhood, or their sexuality; and they called for programs, such as a universal childcare program, to alleviate women's dual burden of employment and traditional care-giving responsibilities. Such approaches were less compatible with Republican Party ideology of limited federal government and lower taxes; and they were anathema to a new right that viewed abortion as murder and changes in women's roles as a threat to the family. So, as the women's movement pushed for economic justice, as well as economic opportunity, and for reproductive freedom as well as freedom from discrimination, a wedge opened between Republicanism and feminism. Within a decade after the heyday of women's rights policymaking during the Nixon administration, Republican feminists were nearly extinct.