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Laurel Lux
llux@unomaha.edu

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A Study of Young American Women, Conservatism, and Feminism

A Study of Young American Women, Conservatism, and Feminism

University of Nebraska Omaha Honors Program Thesis

Submitted by:

Laurel Lux

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University of Nebraska Omaha Department of Political Science

Advisor: Dr. Jody Neathery-Castro, Ph.D.

Abstract

As of June 2020, only 31% of self-identified conservatives in the United States were women. Modern political conservatism is known for rejecting modern feminism as well, which is often stereotyped as a women's issue. With such a small percentage of women identifying as conservative, the question arises as to why young American women reject modern feminism and identify with modern political conservatism. In this study I examined the literature comparing modern conservatism, conservative women's movements, and modern feminism, and conducted a small questionnaire of conservative women 18-24. I concluded by describing three generalized schools of thought regarding conservative women's views towards feminism and society.

Keywords: Feminism, Conservatism, Liberalism, Conservative Feminism

Introduction

Feminism has been intertwined with women's politics in the United States since before women even gained the right to vote in 1920 and has persisted into the 21st century. Interpreted through different waves as new women's issues have been emphasized, all women have been assumed to benefit from feminist goals and ideals. However, not all women identify as feminists, and many are unhappy with the feminist movement, the connotations it has created, and the alienation from women's groups it can bring with it. In an age of #MeToo, we might expect that women would be more inclined to identify as feminists than in the past, due to media coverage of the prevalent inequality of the sexes even in 2021. However, 31% of women in a June 2020 poll (Saad, 2020) still identified as conservative in America, suggesting some satisfaction with the status quo inequality between the sexes.

Conservative women exist, and they are content to exist in the "other" that our polarized society has created. Although it is entirely possible for a woman to be heavily involved in politics without identifying as feminist, western culture holds two stereotypes of women: either as feminists or antifeminists. With feminist movements and gender inequalities highly publicized, why do a marked number of women continue to choose conservatism and therefore supposedly reject feminism?

From the Root

The reasoning behind what may cause a young woman to choose conservatism over liberalism (and often feminism) can start quite literally from their roots. Conservatism, like any political ideology, is often instilled in a young person's mindset from a young age. Political socialization can be defined as individual's learning of social patterns as mediated through various agents of society (Neundorf & Smets, 2017). Regarded as a type of informal learning

process, socialization agents such as family, school, religion, and peers can play a role in forming a child's future political ideology.

Family plays a substantial role as a variable of a child's ideological socialization. Parents act as role models for their children, who often grow up with a desire to emulate as a result. Through a desire to emulate one's own parents, a child's political ideology and civic engagement can often result from how politically active their parents are observed as being as they develop. Likewise, a parent's socioeconomic status, or SES, can also directly affect how their child may in turn develop ideologically. The higher an SES the parents have, the more likely their child receives a higher education. As a result, that child's political ideology may be influenced by their access to greater education (Neundorf & Smets 2017).

Conservatism, specifically, as an aspect of political socialization, has a stronger effect on daughters than on sons. Daughters are found to be more similar in their level of conservatism to their parents than sons, although children overall are likely to be less conservative than their parents. Females in conservative families were found to be more conservative than males. In a family with low SES, young women are found to be less similar in their level of conservatism than their fathers (Feather, 1978). Conversely, it can be concluded that women in high SES families may be more inclined to be just as conservative as their fathers.

Although all children are influenced politically by multiple social agents, family life can have a stronger influence on women than on their male counterparts or siblings. When it comes to conservatism and just how conservative children are relative to their parents, young women can also be influenced by their socioeconomic status while they grow and develop.

Modern Conservatism

Political socialization can play a very influential role on young women from an early age, encouraging them to embrace a certain ideology that would be more in line with the beliefs and standards that were set before them. However, conservatism as a political movement is prone to change and development with each new generation and cultural shift.

Conservatism is used as a broad term, covering several sub-ideologies and groups. As a blanket term, conservatism covers traditionalists, economic liberals, libertarians, neoconservatives, and Tea Party members (Fishman, 2012). The use of the term conservatism so broadly allows a spectrum of philosophies and opinions to be nestled beneath it as long as they fall under the line of thinking that values traditional institutions and practices (Ball, 2020). Young women who may support only a small handful of conservative values may choose to identify as conservative. The inclination to box all conservatives into one stereotypical line of thinking would be denying that conservatism, like any other ideology, lies on a spectrum of beliefs. Not all conservatives uphold the same values as another, even if they identify themselves under the same umbrella ideology.

Modern conservatism, for the college-age American woman, continues to hold traditional values and institutions. In contemporary literature encouraging conservative values, female protagonists are shamed for common cultural values such as premarital sex, suggesting that premarital motherhood was a level of deviancy. Young women who participate in casual sex are punished with pregnancy (Smith, 2019). Creating a fear of permanent consequence (pregnancy) and punishment (social stigma) can encourage young women to uphold traditional values or bear the consequences of their actions. These types of lessons in contemporary adult literature are the same as those conveyed in literature in the mid-twentieth century, suggesting a continuation of upholding traditional culture and values and remaining within the conservative ideology. Young

American women are encouraged to remain within conservative teachings, for embracing non-conservative notions such as premarital sex could result in being labeled as a deviant by their own conservative families and peers.

An opinion piece submitted to the Bowling Green State University provided a commentary on Gen Z conservatives by a Gen Z conservative. Modern conservatism, in the mind of a modern conservative, continues to embrace and uphold the U.S. Constitution as the upmost law, and the rights named within it are inalienable and should not be infringed upon, just as the founding fathers had intended. Modern conservatism, in the eye of a modern conservative, also supports women and children while continuing to abhor the feminist ideal of the right for a woman to choose (Cox, 2019). There is a feeling of oppression and silencing within the young conservative movement, and in turn they bring themselves together to fight against the supposed tyranny and discrimination they face in order to defend traditional values. The modern young conservative movement seems to have taken a specific stance by insisting on being pro-woman and feminine values as well, as a counter to modern feminism that might suggest otherwise.

Modern Feminism and #MeToo

Modern feminism has taken a more outspoken stance on supporting the victim and calling for harsh punishment on the perceived aggressor. There is controversy as to whether modern feminism exists in the space of a renewed vigor in the third wave or that a new fourth wave of feminism is just around the corner. It is becoming a part of the common vernacular once again, focusing on sexual abuse, rape, slut-shaming, and many gender inequalities that are still faced today (Rampton, 2020).

The rise of the #MeToo movement --a social media hashtag movement used as a way in which women can feel comfortable with speaking out about their experiences with sexual

harassment-- has not only aided in encouraging the growth of modern feminism but also created a larger rift between conservative and liberal ideologies. The movement has encouraged a heightened media culture where prominent figures who are accused are expected to lose their positions and effectively disappear from the spotlight all together. However, conservatives rated the seriousness of sexual assault allegations to be slightly above neutral (6.1 on a 10-point scale) and when comparing two prominent figures of both ideologies accused of harassment, 49% of self-proclaimed conservatives did not think either figure deserved to go to jail (Panagopoulos & Linden, 2018).

For an ideology that claims to support women as well as traditional values, modern conservatives appear to show a lack of empathy for victims accusing prominent figures and celebrities of sexual harassment, responses to survey questions show conservatives holding a low value to the seriousness of sexual harassment allegations as well as a very slight minority disagreeing that such accused figures should lose their jobs at all over an otherwise arrestable offence.

Conservative Feminism and the Rejection of Modern Feminism

Political ideologies, as well as the political parties that subscribe to them, have become more polarized than ever before. As a result, women are often considered (as well as considering themselves) to be either stark conservatives or extremely liberal feminists. Feminism has become likened to extreme political liberalism, and as a result, women who consider themselves feminists are forced to be stereotyped as liberal extremists instead of a conservative woman who supports feminist ideals. This notion of having to be completely one or the other may cause some women who feel as if they do not completely fit the mold of what they perceive a feminist to be

to identify as conservative. However, with modern conservatism's embrace of different platforms comes the notion of conservative feminism.

There is a fresh movement by conservative women to embrace some level of feminism. This effort to become a bit more inclusive and less rigid could be helpful in encouraging women who feel as if they do not completely identify with the feminist ideological movement as well as the stereotypical conservative movement to have a place that they feel like they can belong. In the 2008 presidential elections, Sarah Palin in her Republican vice-presidential bid actively and publicly self-identified as a feminist (Schreiber, 2018). Likewise, Ivanka Trump even more recently has identified herself as a conservative feminist.

Kellyanne Conway is quoted as describing modern feminism as "anti-male and pro-abortion" (Wagner, 2017). Conway states that since she does not agree with those two things, she cannot be feminist at all. This perception of modern feminists among conservative women, whether it be correct or incorrect, can be detrimental to women who may not fully identify as conservative but do not agree with abortion or the idea of being anti-male, thus choosing to identify as conservative rather than feminist because of their agreement with well-known conservative political actors on the subject and falls into the same ideology that women must be one or the other and never necessarily a blend of the two.

Conservative women who identify as feminists tend to not focus on the broad spectrum of feminism but rather on gender-conscious political actors (Schreiber, 2018). Not only may women be encouraged to identify as conservative and embrace a non-feminist mentality by conservative women actors, but they are also often ostracized by liberal women for not acting in a way that liberal political actors deem appropriate. Both Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton have been quoted criticizing women who did not vote for Clinton as "weak" and "voting against their own

voices” (Lips, 2017). The harsh criticism of women who may have chosen to vote against Clinton in the 2016 elections may continue to drive women away who may have thought that they were making the best-informed choice and otherwise had little issue with feminism and feminists.

If the ideology of feminism is meant to support women, the criticism of women who did not act as they were expected suggests that feminism is more exclusive than inclusive. Young women who may have been voting for the first time or were just shy of being old enough to vote, who were then college age for the 2020 elections could be driven to continue identifying as conservative for the feeling of exclusion they felt at the hands of Clinton and Obama.

Popular political actors and exclusionary tactics aside, young womens’ groups on university campuses also encourage a rejection of modern feminism, citing a perception of all feminism as being “radical feminism”. NeW, the Network for Enlightened Women, proclaims itself as an outlet for college students who do not identify with radical feminism (Tam, 2014). While feminism in itself lies on a spectrum like any other ideology, the branding of it as radical by on-campus conservative women’s groups suggests that one has to be very liberal-minded in order to consider themselves a feminist.

NeW, full of modern young conservative women, strives for gender equality just like liberal feminism. With the Republican party being filled with mostly men, young conservative women, often first-time voters, strive for gender equality in the party that best fits their values, rather than rejecting all of their own values in order to be able to identify themselves as feminist. Young conservative women who join NeW see this as a prime opportunity to change and diversify the conservative movement while still upholding their own values.

Just as some argue that feminists are considered anti-men, conservative women are considered anti-woman by their peers. Citing a culture of competition and victimization, a young conservative woman in Harvard states that she chose conservatism because of a lack of victimization, shaming of men, and the fact that conservatism upholds women without having to shame men at the same time (Lips, 2017). The common perception, even among young conservative women today, are that feminists are radicalized, live in a state of victimhood, ostracizing, and are anti-man and pro-abortion.

Georgetown students think that young conservative women simply need to be educated in order to change their mind (Lips, 2017). It is not a matter of a lack of education, however. Roberta Skinner of Florida University states that even though she may be a daughter of Republicans, she found her values in the conservative ideology all on her own, after reading and watching news from multiple news sources on different ends of the political spectrum (Tam, 2014).

Young women may choose conservatism on their own accord, without relying on political socialization or cues from their peers as to what their opinions should be. Rather there is a climate of one or the other. A young woman could choose to be a “radical” feminist, considered by conservative actors to be anti-man and pro-abortion, or she can choose to be conservative and not sacrifice her values, as well as joining young conservative women’s groups who advocate for change and gender equality without all of the stereotypes and stigma attached like there are with feminism.

Feminism has a negative stereotype, especially in conservative circles. While young liberal women insist that feminism has been stereotyped and mischaracterized by the media’s portrayal of it, modern feminism also fights for gender equality and isn’t radical and man-hating

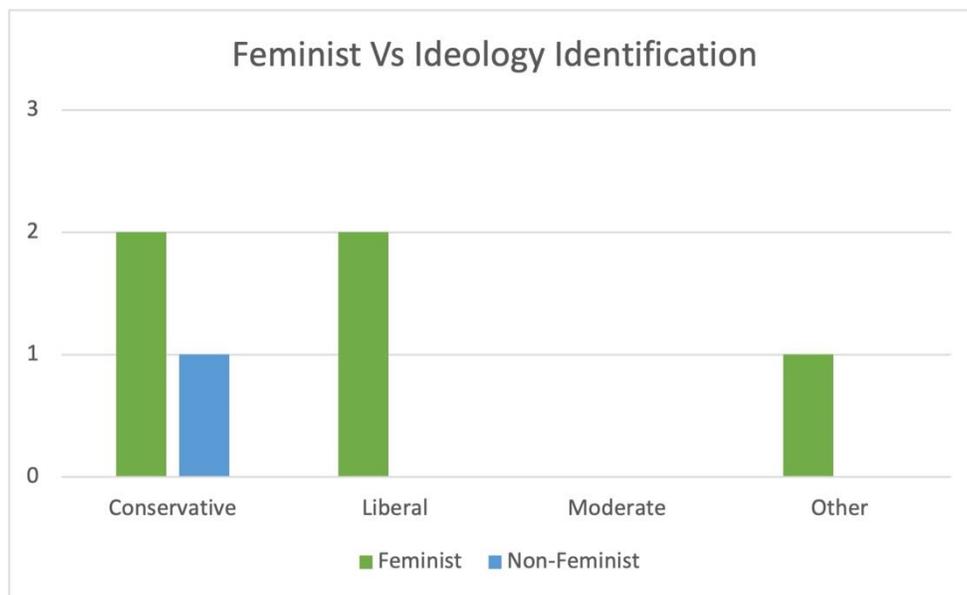
as the media and outside perceptions portray it to be (Tam, 2014). For young women in conservative circles, however, it may seem like just that. With the media portrayal of feminist stereotypes, and well-known liberal feminist leaders criticizing women who may have considered themselves somewhat feminist before but voted for non-liberal candidates, the choice may have become easier.

In a hyper-polarized political culture and the choice of siding with one's core values or joining an ideology that they largely do not agree with, the decision to make seems relatively simple. Without being able to be a mix of both, young women can choose to be conservative and adopt a level of conservative feminism that supports women and insists on gender equality without the pro-abortion rights and anti-male aspects associated with modern liberal feminists.

Peer Questionnaire

While taking into account all of the push and pull factors that may draw a young woman towards choosing the ideology of conservatism and push them away from the notion of feminism, I sent out a very brief questionnaire among a concentrated number of female peers. All these women, between the ages of 18 and 24, grew up in varying geographical areas from small towns to mid-level cities in Nebraska. They were also varied in their educational background, as well as family life and current occupations. The survey targeted several demographic factors such as age, gender identity, political ideology that they subscribe to, as well as whether or not they self-identify as feminist.

The anonymous results of this survey showed a mixed result of answers that supported some of the previously mentioned studies. Of the six respondents in the questionnaire, three identified as conservative, two liberal, and one other. Five respondents identify themselves as feminists, and one stated that she did not. Of those that identified as conservative and as a feminist stated that their reasoning for becoming a feminist was for equal rights. Those who did not identify as a feminist struggled to identify with the modern feminist movement, that it had an anti-man ideology. They also supported gender equality.



Conservative respondents also had a mixed opinion about feminist movements such as #MeToo. While some did not know what the #MeToo movement was, others were cautiously supportive. They responded that they saw the merit and benefit of a platform for women's voices to be heard and find justice, but at the same time both respondents indicated that the movement gave far too much power to the victim without having reasonable suspicion, thus possibly jeopardizing the livelihoods of the falsely accused due to an overzealousness to support the victims.

It was surprising to find that a few of those who self-identified as conservative also identified as feminist, considering the negative connotations that are perceived to come along with feminism from a conservative standpoint. However, the only feminist ideologies mentioned in response as to why they identified as feminist were that of gender equality. The respondent who did identify as conservative, and feminist also supported the #MeToo movement for how it empowered women. This was also an important tenet of conservative feminism, which advocates women supporting other women. However, like other young conservatives, respondents showed caution in supporting such a movement, stating how the blind support to self-proclaimed victims could be dangerous for truly innocent but accused men.

Conclusion

After taking into consideration the causes and concerns of young conservative women towards societal standards as well as modern feminism, there appear to be three generalized approaches of thought within which young conservative women align themselves. Firstly, there is the group that considers feminism's goals to be won. Within this group, young conservative women have concluded that feminism in itself is an outdated concept, due to the fact that the rights that feminists have fought for have already been won. Women in this group think that women in the modern world do not face oppression any longer, and thus do not need the ideology of feminism to battle for their rights.

Secondly, there is the subgroup of young conservative women who do acknowledge that there is a sort of natural order within modern society. This category of thinking recognizes that women do, in fact, have an unequal status in western culture when comparing themselves to men, especially within the social hierarchy. However, this group is only a small subset of conservative women. Although conservatism tends to have mostly men, young women who hold

generally conservative values in this subcategory see this as an opportunity to promote gender equality and create growth within conservative parties.

Finally, there is the third school of thought of “Conservative Feminism.” This school of thought has come to the conclusion that modern feminism aligns itself too close with liberal values. This causes young women who have their own personal values to feel alienated from modern feminism and feel as if there is no ability for them to identify as one without having to remove themselves from the other. Young women who hold modern to conservative values thus feel as if they are not welcome within the feminist movement. They have deemed it as radical, as well as anti-man and pro-abortion, two values that can be the deciding factor for many moderate to conservative women who disagree with them. The liberal feminist movement has also alienated those who did not vote for liberal political candidates, further ostracizing conservative women who may wish to identify as feminist. The conservative feminist movement has found a way for young women to feel comfortable with identifying as feminist, encouraged by political actors to do so in order to uphold women as well as push for gender equality while likewise avoiding the oppression of men.

In conclusion, young conservative women may not necessarily outright reject feminism. Some may feel as if they do not belong and find a community within the conservative women’s movement. Young women may find comfort in conservatism, which upholds traditionalist values as well as support women whereas the media and liberal feminist actors have stereotyped feminism and alienated moderate to conservative feminists. Young women may choose conservatism out of comfort and agreement with its values, seeing an opportunity for growth and change within a female-minority ideology.

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