

The Tea Party and Angry White Women

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When the Tea Party emerged in 2009, most progressive critics characterized it as a sprawling movement of “angry white men.” But it is also a party of angry white women. Everyone in the Tea Party shares an ideology that calls for freedom from government, very low taxes, and an inchoate desire to “take back America,” both from the state and, for many, the changing racial composition of our society. But, according to several national polls and research done by sociologists Devin Burghart and Leonard Zeskind, unlike most such groups, between a third and a half of Tea Party activists are female. So, why have so many women been attracted to the Tea Party?

To put it bluntly, one reason is that some women love men who love guns, love men who hate the government and loathe taxes, or love men who are not afraid to voice racist and xenophobic feelings. In short, they are the intimate partners of Tea Party men.

A second reason is the role religion plays in attracting women. Sociologist Kathleen Blee suggests that there are probably more religious women than men in the Tea Party. Some of them are conservative Christians who promote fundamentalist views on abortion and homosexuality. But even those evangelical women who are not religious fundamentalists tend to see themselves as part of a “Christian Nation.”

However, a critical reason neglected by journalists and political analysts is that many women in the Tea Party have long harbored resentment against their marginalization in the Republican Party. Or they view the movement as a way to gain entry into political life. Sometimes their goal is to protect their families from perceived dangers, but often it is a way to become a leader, to be heard, and, through a new kind of conservative or evan-

gelical feminism, to become active in the public arena or even to begin a new career. As one member put it, “In the Tea Party, women have finally found their voice.”

The current conservative movement has created many opportunities for such resentful or ambitious right-wing women. Take, for example, Darla Dawald, who joined the conservative group Resist.net in 2009. Within months, she was rewarded with a hefty monthly salary and was organizing local Tea Parties in every state capital.

A year later, in 2010, Dawald became national director of ResistNet.org, which then morphed into the National Patriot Network, of which she is now the director and which she describes on her Facebook page as a “grass-roots social action network of Grassfire Nation.” (The number of Tea Party groups and their interlocking partnerships is staggering.)

Surprisingly, most of the local leaders of the original ResistNet.org were women, although 56 percent of the members were men. However, the owner of the project was Steve Elliot, a self-described communications expert, now president of Grassfire.org, who set the group’s policy by himself. He may be an example of how men in the Tea Party propel women to center stage, because women seem less menacing when they advocate slashing the safety net for other women and their families.

Women are leaders of several of the six largest Tea Party organizations. Two of the original founders of the Tea Party Patriots, the fastest growing group, were women. One of them, Jenny Beth Martin, rebounded quickly from failure in business. Martin, a thirty-nine-year-old from Atlanta, once helped run a Republican consulting firm with her husband. But in 2009, the couple owed over \$680,000 in taxes and had to file for bankruptcy. Now, as

CEO of Tea Party Patriots—and co-chair of the Tea Party in Atlanta, Martin earns \$6,000 a month. Rising fast in the Tea Party movement may seem mysterious, but with money from wealthy conservative groups, women have had an unusual opportunity to climb the political ladder of right-wing politics.

Another woman who started Tea Party Patriots is Amy Kremer of Roswell, Georgia. Kremer writes a blog, “Southern Belle Politics,” in which she continues to insist that Barack Obama was not born in the United States. She was quick to defend a racist caricature of Obama sent to fellow Tea Partiers by an unknown member.

Some leading women in the Tea Party movement seem motivated as much by ethnic hostility as by a zeal for small government. For example, Pamela Geller had a career in conservative politics before the recent movement began, but has emerged into prominence only since the 2008 election. According to the Burghart and Zeskind report, Geller “runs an interlocking network of groups with such names as Atlas Shrugs, Stop Islamization of America and the Freedom Defense Initiative.” All are listed as official “partner” organizations of the ResistNet.org Tea Party faction. In addition to being a birther, Geller repeatedly refers to Obama as “The Muslim President.”

Some local Tea Party women have even achieved a degree of political influence in state politics. “Jacqueline Smith,” reported the *New York Times* in March 2011, “fits no one’s stereotype of a political kingmaker. A Mormon mother who home schools her five children, Smith lives in a modest ranch-style house here in the mountains outside Salt Lake City with her husband, Cleve, a plumbing contractor.” Yet Smith has managed to force Senator Orrin Hatch, a six-term Republican, to come begging for the Tea Party’s endorsement out of fear of losing his seat to a more ideologically conservative politician. Through the Tea Party, Smith has achieved more power than many political operatives gain after a lifetime of political engagement or huge infusions of money. “I don’t think he’s winning over anyone,” Smith told the *Times* reporter,

“smiling sweetly on a couch in their living room decorated with patriotic bunting and a giant engraved plaque of the Declaration of Independence.”

Nor has the Tea Party ignored these women’s political value. In October 2010, documentarian Stephen Bannon released a film titled *Fire from the Heartland*, which chronicles the stories of important women in the Tea Party movement. Not bad for those women who have felt estranged or excluded from Republican Party politics. They could never have achieved such visibility without the Tea Party.

Some women come to the party from groups organized specifically to recruit or elect women to political office. Consider Smart Girl Politics, a main sponsor of the Tax Day protests in 2009 that took place in 850 cities and gained visibility for the movement as a whole. Smart Girl Politics began as a “mommy blog” in 2008, started by Stacy Mott, a disgruntled housewife who explains, “In June of 2008, my husband told me he was tired of hearing me complain about politics, so I started sharing my frustrations on the Internet with my own blog. In November of 2008, after McCain lost, I asked my readers if anyone would be interested in starting a new conservative women’s group. I received 60 e-mails the first week. A week later, this site was born.” At first, the site was just a small cooperative, run by three stay-at-home mothers who helped take care of their children and respond to e-mails and phone calls. Take away the Internet and you have a description of how the modern women’s movement began in the 1960s within the New Left and antiwar movements.

In its mission statement, Smart Girl Politics explains that its goal is to empower women “to stand up for their conservative beliefs. We will defend the right of conservative women to share their voice, their opinions, and their right to serve their country in any capacity they so choose. We will give conservative women a voice in the party system which allows their beliefs and principles to be heard.” The group’s motto is “Engage, Educate, Empower.” If it weren’t for the word

“conservative,” you might think this had been written by a liberal feminist group tired of being ignored by Democrats.

Of course, some Tea Party women have already run for office, with the aid of the organizations they founded and continue to direct. But they often face resistance from what one Tea Party woman calls the “good-ol’-boy, male-run institutions.” Even Sarah Palin frequently criticizes men who have stood in the way of her political career and tells audiences “we need new ideas, new faces, new energy in the political process.”

During Nikki Haley’s successful run for governor of South Carolina in 2010, she encountered misogyny and racism from men in her own state’s Republican Party. State Senator Jake Knotts revealed to Hanna Rosin of the *Atlantic* his disgust at the candidacy of an Indian-American woman:

Let me say this: people going into politics these days are different than the people I always served with. Strom Thurmond, Fritz Hollings—one Democrat, one Republican, but they had mutual respect for one another....You had to be *one of us* to get elected. Now we’ve gone so far down the ladder and backwards. We don’t know who it is, or *what* it is. As long as it’s got an R in front of its name, we vote for it. (Italics in original.)

Actually, conservative women have long been preparing to challenge male dominance in the Republican Party. In the postwar era, they licked envelopes, ran for school boards, rang doorbells, canvassed for candidates, organized other conservative women, were serious activists in the John Birch Society, but they were denied positions of leadership.

To blunt the impact of liberal feminists, Concerned Women for America, a deeply religious group founded in 1978, has supported women’s efforts to seek leadership positions within the Tea Party. Even when elected to Congress, conservative women have remained largely invisible. During the Gingrich revolution in 1994, for example, seven extremely conservative women found themselves ignored by the media, as well as a conservative movement to which they could have added greater political power. To counter

EMILY’s List, which has supported liberal women in electoral politics, they founded what became known as the Susan B. Anthony List (SBAL) in 1992. The list turned into a PAC for antiabortion female congressional candidates and has successfully supported right-wing women who run for office.

Still, they achieved little recognition. More than forty years ago, Phyllis Schlafly was an important exception to the Republican disdain for women activists: she played a leading role in helping to get Barry Goldwater nominated for president in 1964. In order to achieve prominence, however, she had to stop writing on foreign policy and turn herself into a fierce opponent of the women’s movement.

For decades, conservative women have emphasized social issues and organized religious and “traditional values” organizations. But the Independent Women’s Forum (IWF), a secular organization, often described as “a virtual ‘Who’s Who’ of Washington’s Republican establishment,” takes no positions on abortion or same-sex marriage. Instead, the IWF seeks to “combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom.” Their ideal woman is an Ayn Rand-type individual who can take care of herself and never needs the protection of the government.

Rather than focusing on social issues, Tea Party women tend to emphasize that women and children require no government assistance. For them, motherhood is necessary; the government is not. Michele Bachmann has raised her own five children, in addition to fostering twenty-three more. Testing the waters for a presidential candidacy, Sarah Palin declared, “Nobody is more qualified to multitasking and doing all the things that you need to do as president than a woman, a mom.”

Palin’s “Mama Grizzly” is the perfect image for a furry but dangerous creature who will instinctively destroy anyone to protect her innocent cubs. Like Palin, many Tea Party women use their children as props to enhance the gentler side of their otherwise



Sarah Palin at the Americans for Prosperity-run Wisconsin 2011 Tax Day Tea Party Rally. Photo: WisPolitics.com

tough and aggressive image.

Some of these new female politicians have drawn national attention because they have embraced what is sometimes called “evangelical feminism” or “conservative feminism.” Although they give lip service to woman’s traditional role as submissive wife or traditional mother, they base their political aspirations on the fact that God has called them into politics and that motherhood has given them the credentials to lead the American people. They also avoid pant suits, wear dresses, and emphasize their femininity by wearing their hair long.

These new politicians have galvanized many conservative women. They admire Palin’s proud self-presentation. She struts like a beauty queen, yet appears bold and strong minded, and claims to know how to hunt moose, raft, and do whatever Alaskan outdoorsmen do. They like that she is both a mother and a seemingly self-sufficient woman who doesn’t hesitate to tell people what’s on her mind.

Palin and many other women in the movement embrace what they view as a new kind of conservative feminism. Raised in the wake of the modern feminist movement, such women don’t seem to mind that Palin uses “Ms.” instead of “Mrs.” Nor are they bothered by her crediting Title IX (the legislation

passed in 1972 that enforced gender equality in education) for her athletic opportunities in college.

Palin has embraced the belief that women should participate in the public sphere as much as in family life. Compared with the “traditional values” coalitions of past decades, some of her fans know that they have to work, so the old belief in women’s subservient role at home has become more rhetoric than reality. Palin understands that women have to earn an income to support a middle-class standard of living.

Nor is she afraid to use the “F” word. During the 2008 campaign, Palin proudly displayed her membership in Feminists for Life, whose slogan is “Refuse to Choose.” The organization is led by Serrin Foster, who has made a successful career on the lecture circuit by telling young women that they are acting as feminists when they choose not to have an abortion. Many prominent women in the Tea Party who identify as Christian or conservative feminists are members of this organization.

Here is a great irony. Since the late 1970s, when a powerful backlash began against the women’s movement, most young American women have resisted calling themselves feminists. Right-wing activists successfully portrayed the “typical” feminist as a hairy, man-hating lesbian who spouted equality but really wanted to harm men and kill unborn babies. What young woman would want to identify with such a negative image? Now, Palin and others have forced liberal feminists to debate whether conservative women are “diluting” or “appropriating” feminism or legitimizing it by making it possible for any woman to say she is a feminist.

When the media and political analysts write about the Tea Party movement, they tend to ignore the unique role women are playing in these grassroots organizations. Men and women may join the Tea Party for similar reasons, but the gender differences are not inconsequential. Without its grassroots female supporters, and especially its female celebrity leaders, the Tea Party would have far less glamour, and appeal far less to voters who are

frightened by economic security, threats to moral purity, and the gradual disappearance of a national white Christian culture. Typically, women voters have desired the protection and services of the state. In fact, for the past fifty years, the gender gap has been a boon to Democrats in elections. The Tea Party's success may well lie in peeling away the white women who originally contributed to the gender gap.

The Tea Party also attracts women who understand their families' vulnerability to all kinds of external dangers. As one female activist explains, "Women control the household accounts and we know when spending is unsustainable." A sign at a rally against big government put it succinctly: "My kid isn't your ATM."

This argument echoes what female reformers said more than a century ago. The Women's Christian Temperance Union, for example, encouraged its members to enter the public sphere in order to protect the family from such "worldly dangers" as prostitution and hazardous workplaces, as well as the growth of saloons. Although the WCTU was led by the Christian socialist Frances Willard, many women in the Tea Party have analogous motivations. They have become active in order to eliminate abortion, protect heterosexual marriage and oppose gay marriage, clean up the "mess" made by the women's movement and the sexual revolution as well as to eliminate most government spending and slash

taxes. Although they tend to emphasize the danger of the government, these fears appear throughout their speeches and writings.

For good or ill, conservative women have moved mountains in America's past. The prohibition of liquor is just one example. So is the banning of books in schools. Now they have helped organize the Tea Party, and their new political engagement may change American political culture in unpredictable ways. Their assault on the misogyny in the Republican Party, for example, may repeat some of the changes that occurred when feminists challenged the Democratic Party in the 1970s. Perhaps they will build a large base in the Tea Party and elect their own leaders. It is also conceivable, as in the past, that they may disappear into their homes and churches and become a footnote in the history of American politics. Given the current economy, however, that is unlikely.

That the Tea Party panders to fear and resentment is well known. One of the dirty little secrets of the movement, however, is that the conservative movement is, in part, fueled by female members who are angry and resentful at being excluded from Republican and conservative politics.

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