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Debating Family Values: Women & Politics in New York and the Nation, 1970-1992

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Debating Family Values: Women and Grassroots Conservatism

One day in 1970, shortly after Governor Nelson Rockefeller signed New York's leading abortion liberalization law, a group of housewives in Merrick, Long Island vowed to overturn it. The women began studying state election laws and eventually formed the nation's most robust Right to Life Party. A decade later in New York, conservative anti-abortion Republican Al D'Amato won a U.S. Senate seat previously occupied by liberal pro-choice Republican Jacob Javits, and Ronald Reagan carried the state in his victory over President Carter. The liberal wing of the Republican Party (the so-called "Rockefeller Republicans"), with its stronghold in New York, had been routed, both locally and nationally. The women from Long Island—and countless others who self-identified with the growing "family values movement" sweeping the state and nation in the 1970s and 80s—had played a crucial role in shifting the political culture of New York to the right by re-framing politics around issues of family and women.¹

Recently, several works have analyzed the rise of political conservatism in postwar America. This scholarship disproportionately examines how race and geopolitics influenced this trend, particularly in the Sunbelt; comparatively few works consider gender or locales outside of the Sunbelt region. Yet, when describing the rise of family values activism and rhetoric—as few have done outside of books about Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and Phyllis Schlafly's crusade against the ERA—these broader national trends are arguably best illustrated by examining gender fault lines in New York. The rise of family values campaigns moderated the national political culture and constructed feminism as "anti-family." As a key geographic and intellectual center of radical and liberal feminism, New York was also home to a fierce backlash against women's rights, making the state ideal ground to assess how the conservative family values movement shifted the politics of the major political parties and the nation to the right.

To illustrate this point, my paper focuses on the particularly rich debates in New York over government-funded childcare, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and abortion. Scholars typically reduce such debates to the culture wars of the 1970-80s—“wars” allegedly between two polarized camps that did not listen to each other. Doing so, however, overlooks the dialectic nature of many of these debates, especially on the local level. Conservative women activists in New York painted these issues as direct assaults to the family, while women’s rights activists and more left-leaning politicians presented an alternate vision of family values—one that promoted government-funded daycare, greater gender equality before the law, and reproductive choice. In other words, they disagreed over the extent to which policy related to women should link women’s citizenship to the traditional female roles of wife and mother. The two differing sides never agreed upon an answer to this fundamental question, but, as I will describe, these so-called “culture wars” often involved heated discussions that, while not leading to a fully agreed-upon consensus, at least moved the two opposing sides closer together on the political spectrum.

Taking a look now at some of these debates, I highlight the case of government-funded childcare because it was one of the first big “family values battles” in New York—one that questioned the role government should play in childcare, which had traditionally been a familial responsibility of women. As women entered politics in greater numbers in the early 1970s, many, especially the more progressive ones, fought for government-funded daycare. With increasingly more women entering the work force, either by choice or by necessity as the American economy plunged in the early 1970s, these politicians hoped to address the childcare needs of *all* working mothers, regardless of income. My research indicates that this goal was also proposed by virtually every feminist group—particularly liberal feminist groups with political goals such as

NOW—and at government-funded forums such as the 1977 National Women’s Conference in Houston and the 1980 White House Conference on Families.²

Childcare advocacy was especially prolific in New York because of the strength of feminism there, and because in 1971 two of the state’s U.S. Representatives, Shirley Chisholm and Bella Abzug, introduced the most wide-reaching daycare bill in the history of Congress.³ Chisholm and Abzug called for federal subsidies for high-quality childcare for families of *all* income levels, more local control over the money to tailor solutions to each community’s specific needs, and twenty-four hour coverage for parents who worked at night.⁴ In particular, by helping women of *all* income levels manage work and motherhood, they aimed to undermine the so-called “biology is destiny” argument that confined women to the home. Not surprisingly, then, women’s organizations such as NOW came out in support of the Abzug-Chisholm bill.⁵

On the other hand, conservatives essentially argued that biology *was* destiny and worked to defeat government-funded daycare proposals. Conservative Phyllis Schlafly—who used her popular publications and national Eagle Forum organization to spread ideas to the local level in places like New York—claimed that feminists sought to eliminate the homemaking role by “offer[ing] financial inducements to promote an exodus of mothers and babies from the home.” Allegations like this led one New York woman to contend that “Women’s Lib” supporters “put you down if you want to be married and raise kids, [making you feel] like there’s something the matter with you.”⁶ Politicians on the Right—notably New York’s most conservative U.S. Senator, James Buckley⁷—echoed Schlafly’s sentiments and pressured President Nixon into vetoing proposals like the Chisholm-Abzug bill.

Despite this fact, it is not entirely accurate to say that anti-family charges from women on the right are the reason why America still does not have comprehensive childcare policies. This

is partially true, but the compromises hashed out at the 1980 White House Conference on Families (WHCF) reveal that intense debate also pushed the two sides closer together. To be sure, at the five regional meetings held in New York leading up to the national conference, conservative women activists felt excluded from the delegate selection process and dialogue. Nevertheless, some were selected to attend the national family conference, where they duly voiced their opinions.⁸

As a result, the childcare plank adopted at the WHCF reflected a balance between proposals like the Chisholm-Abzug bill on the left and the concerns voiced by self-proclaimed “pro-family” activists on the right. In characteristically concise language, one conference resolution called upon the government to “Promote and Support a Variety of Child Care Choices—home, community and center based, parental choice.” Here, the delegates seemingly compromised to support government funding for childcare, while still respecting the integrity of parental choice and traditional home-centered [maternal] care. As Evelyn Aquilla, a conservative New York delegate, reflected, “Did pro-life, pro-family people waste their time by going to the WHCF? Should we have walked out? The answer to both questions is no ... our presence there was important.”⁹

Similarly, in debating the ERA, the Liberal-Left struggled to make it clear that gains for women would not devastate the traditional family. The New York Assembly quickly ratified the federal ERA in 1972; by 1975, women’s activists and like-minded politicians succeeded in placing a referendum on the November ballot, allowing voters to decide if the state constitution should have its own ERA. This proposed state-level ERA contained the exact language as the federal one, and like its federal corollary, it was never ratified—largely due to the work of conservative women activists. Annette Stern, a suburban homemaker who got involved in

politics out of “a concern for the family,” notably ran Operation Wake-Up, a consortium of women’s and local civic groups that was arguably most responsible for defeating the New York state ERA.¹⁰

This particularly bruising state ERA battle underscored the strength of the conservative family values movement. One Operation Wake-Up flyer published in advance of the November 1975 election, and during the heyday of Steven Spielberg’s blockbuster film *Jaws*, contained a sketch of a shark’s menacing open mouth. The illustration was flanked by allegations that the state ERA would “make it illegal for any employer to give any job preference to a husband and father supporting a family” and force women to be “equally liable for financial responsibilities.” Operation Wakeup also targeted same-sex marriage, who they saw as even more potentially disruptive to their notion of “family,” by asserting that the state ERA would “invalidate present laws prohibiting homosexuality ... allow[ing] single sex couples to marry and adopt children.”¹¹

Feminists and left-leaning politicians, especially those who were women, argued, to no avail, that these and similar charges were false.¹² One NOW flyer maintained that greater equality for women would actually *strengthen* the family. It stated:

Throughout the history of our great country, every advance in women’s rights ... has been ... heralded as ‘the death of the family.’ It is as clear today as it was in the days when married women did not own their own clothes and were not legal guardians of their own children, that equal partners in marriage can best protect the interests of the family.¹³

As noted, the state ERA was never ratified—aided, no doubt, by these allegations that it was anti-family. In a post-mortem on the election, New York Senator Carol Bellamy, one of the original sponsors of the state ERA, recalled that “[i]t was maddening to debate with [Operation Wakeup’s Annette Stern]” as she “would tell the audience forty-seven terrible things the ERA would do, and when you answered them and proved her wrong, she’d say, ‘I’m just a housewife—how do I know?’”¹⁴ Such tactics led Lilly Newman, a 33-year-old suburban

housewife, to vote against the referendum in part based on faulty information that the state ERA would take away divorced women's alimony. Reported Newman, "Who am I to take somebody's alimony away, especially if I'm not giving them something better?"¹⁵ Such responses underscored that neither vague pronouncements nor simply addressing the specific charges of the right (often in long, complicated legal explanations), would not be enough.

Learning from this, with respect to abortion, in particular, the Liberal-Left became more skilled in placing women's traditional family roles at the center of their political rhetoric. Just as the ERA supposedly undermined the traditional division of labor within the home, abortion allegedly threatened the procreative focus of the family. Abortion became a decisive political issue, in no small part thanks to the New York Right to Life Party (NYRTLTP), which, as noted, became the strongest anti-abortion party the nation. Before the NYRTLTP qualified for a regular party line—which occurred in the 1978 when they registered more than the required 50,000 votes for governor—they even ran one of their founders, Ellen McCormack, for President of the United States on the 1976 Democratic ticket. As *LifeLetter*, a conservative bi-monthly newsletter with wide circulation on Capital Hill, intoned, although she did not win a single primary, "McCormick's candidacy had a great deal to do with making the big vote-getters take anti-abortion stands (which means she was, in effect, cutting into her own vote!)"¹⁶

This development filtered down to the local level, helping to shift both major parties to the right on the issue of abortion. As I mentioned, long-serving New York Senator Jacob Javits, a liberal Rockefeller Republican—from the faction of the party that, like Nelson Rockefeller himself, had long supported legal abortion—lost the 1980 GOP primary race to Al D'Amato, a previously unknown conservative Republican who was cross-endorsed by the NYRTLTP. Anti-choice "family values crusaders" also helped elect Ronald Reagan in New York—in a state that

had once been extremely “arid political terrain ... for his Right-of-center appeal.”¹⁷ In the Democratic Party, Bella Abzug—whose standard response letter to anti-choice constituents contained the line, “the real issue is not whether we can justify abortion, but whether we can justify compulsory pregnancy”—lost to Daniel Patrick Moynihan in a 1976 primary race for a U.S. Senate seat.¹⁸ Moynihan was a Roman Catholic who claimed to be personally opposed to abortion, but against imposing his own views upon the broader society. In making this more moderate claim, he gained support from voters, especially Catholic ones, who had conservative views on abortion but were also supportive of Democratic social welfare measures.

Other pro-choice Democrats, especially Catholic ones, followed Moynihan and also began linking abortion choice to family values. In 1981, for example, New York Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro, who was personally opposed to abortion, said:

As a supporter of free choice, I am quite often accused of being anti-family ... I am the mother of three children. My husband and I will celebrate our 21st anniversary this summer. We have a dog in the backyard and a station wagon in the driveway ... [a]nd yet, because I do not believe that I have a right to tell other women how to run their private lives, I am branded with the label of being anti-family.

In addition, by the 1980s, several Democrats moved away from Bella Abzug’s chosen language and repositioned abortion as a “difficult choice” women should make in conjunction with their doctors, family, and religious leaders—a more moderate line still used today by Democrats.¹⁹

Thus, gender—particularly female activism related to women’s role in the family—was a primary site of struggle in the political shift to the right. In the end, the GOP, at least on a rhetorical level, more successfully linked their politics to the somewhat reductive theme of “family values.” But, as this overview cautions, before we dismiss some of the above-mentioned debates as merely polarizing “culture wars,” we should consider that often these “wars” involved dialogue between both sides and ensuing movement closer together on the political spectrum.

¹ Maurice Carroll, “Reagan Confident in New York Area,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 1979; Tom Buckley, “After Javits, The GOP Turns Right With D’Amato,” *Ibid*, October 19, 1980.

² Among other documents, see letter from Vicki Lathom, Education Committee Member of N.O.W. New York, to N.O.W. Executive Committee, Board Members, and Florence Dickler, dated 12 April 1971, Box 10, Folder 15, NOW-NYC Records, 1966-1984, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University; 20 July 1970 Press Release, *Ibid*.

³ Their bill was more comprehensive than proposals put forth by male liberals, notably Democrats Walter Mondale (MN) and John Brademas (IN). This was largely the case because they provided more money for women of *all* income levels. Abzug and Chisholm argued that state-subsidized daycare would enable the government to address a tangible need many families faced—especially since by the early 1970s, less than 20% of American households featured a male breadwinner and stay-at-home mother. Equally important, by helping all women, they hoped to help reverse the notion that women, because of their gender, had to exclusively fulfill childcare responsibilities. In other words, Abzug and others like her believed that women’s citizenship should be linked to more than only the motherhood role.

⁴ Testimony of Rep. Bella S. Abzug (D-N.Y.) Before the Select Subcommittee on Education of the House Committee on Education and Labor on the Need for a National Day Care Program, May 17, 1971. Bella S. Abzug Papers, Box 140, Child Care Speeches, Statements, Testimony, & Congressional Record Folder, Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Columbia University.

⁵ Flyer entitled “Why Feminists Want Daycare,” Box 10, Folder 13, NOW-NYC Records, 1966-1984, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University; Memo dated 12 April 1971 from Vicki Lathom, NOW Education Committee Member, to NOW Executive Committee, Board Members, and Florence Dickler, Box 10, Fold 15, *Ibid*.

⁶ Schlafly, Phyllis, *Power of the Positive Woman* (New York, NY: Jove Publications, 1977), 206; Second quotation in *LifeLetter*, No. 15, October 31, 1978, page 4.

⁷ Senator James L. Buckley, the brother of a founding member of the postwar conservative movement, William F. Buckley, was elected in 1970. The race, somewhat a harbinger of what was to come in the 1980 Senate race I mentioned, featured Buckley on the Conservative Party ticket in a three-way race pitting him against a liberal Rockefeller Republican and a moderate-liberal Democrat. He was elected by taking the conservative, especially conservative Catholic, vote away from the Democratic and Republican Parties.

⁸ Conservative women typically voiced their opposition at the White House Conference on Families by submitting official “minority reports,” but also did so by speaking out in the plank selection process and even staging a few walkouts, especially related to the sensitive issue of abortion.

⁹ The White House Conference on Families, *Listening to America’s Families, Action for the 80’s: A Report to the President, Congress, and Families of the Nation* (Washington, DC: Superintendent of Documents, US Government Printing Office, 1980), 25 (first quote about childcare plank), 109 (Aquilla quote), 153.

¹⁰ Wohl, Lisa Cronin, “The ERA: What the Hell Happened in New York?” *Ms.* (March 1974), 65.

¹¹ Flyer entitled, “Warning! Warning!,” obtained by author in 2007 from Annette Stern.

¹² See, for example, New York State Senate floor debate, 21 May 1975, Elizabeth Holtzman Collection, Box 167, SI Women—ERA Press Conference Folder, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University; Statement by Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman (D-N.Y.) on New York, New Jersey Equal Rights Amendment Press Conference, October 11, 1975, *Ibid*.

¹³ Flyer entitled, “Homemakers and the Equal Rights Amendment,” Carton 209, Folder 18, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

¹⁴ Wohl, Lisa Cronin, “The ERA: What the Hell Happened in New York?” *Ms.* (March 1974), 65.

¹⁵ Van Gelder, Lindsay, “The 400,000 Vote Misunderstanding,” *Ms.* (March 1974), 67-68.

¹⁶ *LifeLetter*, Issue #4, 8 March 1976, page 2.

¹⁷ Maurice Carroll, “Reagan Confident in New York Area,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 1979; Tom Buckley, “After Javits, The GOP Turns Right With D’Amato,” *Ibid*, October 19, 1980; Frank Lynn, “Support for Reagan Is Increasing Among New York GOP Chiefs,” *Ibid*, August 19, 1979.

¹⁸ The 1976 Senate race eventually pitted Moynihan against the incumbent, Senator James Buckley (R-C). Moynihan’s moderate abortion stance therefore cut into the important anti-choice vote that ultra-conservative, anti-choice (and also Catholic) U.S. Senator James Buckley had received in 1970.

¹⁹ As based on trends evident in various media coverage, especially in *The New York Times*, throughout the 1976-1992 period. Quotation from a speech given by Geraldine Ferraro on June 22, 1981, most likely at a fundraiser at the Democratic Club hosted by Wyche Fowler (D-GA), Geraldine A. Ferraro’s Papers, Box 46, Speeches, May 30-June 25, 1981 Folder, Archives, Marymount Manhattan College. See also Saletan, William, *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).