

Marjorie Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values that Polarized American Politics* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2017)

EPILOGUE

*A Nation Divided*

The real significance of Houston was to bury the idea that so-called "women's issues" are a sideshow to the center-ring concerns of American politics.

—DAVID BRODER, *WASHINGTON POST*, 1977

What a difference a decade had made. In the early 1970s both Democrats and Republicans supported feminist goals, encouraged by the vociferousness of the women's rights movement and the quiescence of conservative women. By 1980 the two parties were lined up on opposite sides of a fierce battle between advocates of women's rights and family values, a battle that continues to divide the nation.

In the 1970s, from beachheads within Republican and Democratic administrations and in Congress, feminists urged politicians to revise laws and policies in keeping with changed circumstances and remove barriers to women's full and equal participation in American life. The strength of the antifeminist backlash that emerged by mid-decade was a testament to their success. The conservative women's movement was relatively small and composed largely of political novices. Yet it had an impact that belied its size, largely due to the experience and acumen of its leaders—most of them Republican activists who had been fighting, and losing, battles against moderates and liberals in their own party.

The 1977 International Women's Year conferences marked an important turning point in the history of these two women's movements and in the evolution of American political culture. IWY succeeded as feminists had

hoped in diversifying and uniting the women's rights movement, ending historic conflicts that had divided white and minority women, straight women and lesbians. It also affirmed the primacy of reproductive freedom; demonstrated the widespread, bipartisan support for feminism; and inspired more women to become politically active.<sup>1</sup>

IWY also empowered the conservative women's movement as a rival for political power. The fight against feminists to control these federally funded conferences allowed conservative women activists to expand their numbers and attract allies from a wide range of religious groups and political organizations angered by federal support for social change and eager to "take back their country." As advocates of women's rights, minority rights, gay rights, reproductive rights, and federal programs from child care to a national health system united behind the National Plan of Action, those who opposed them on any or all of these issues came together in an enduring pro-family coalition.<sup>2</sup>

After the National Women's Conference and the Pro-Family Rally in Houston, women's rights leaders and conservatives alike spoke of IWY as a watershed event and both claimed victory in the conflict. The IWY conferences were indeed transformative, but they produced no clear victory for either side. Instead, they ushered in a new era in American politics—the beginning rather than the end of a protracted struggle over women's rights and family values.

For the rest of the 1970s, feminists fought to realize the goals formulated in Houston. The public fallout between feminist leaders and President Jimmy Carter was a blow to the women's rights movement as well as to his candidacy for reelection. But the platform adopted at the 1980 Democratic National Convention—heavily influenced by Bella Abzug—demonstrated the party's continued support for the women's movement.

In sharp contrast, the platform adopted at the 1980 Republican National Convention—heavily influenced by Phyllis Schlafly—demonstrated the power of the rapidly expanding pro-family movement. The opposition of these social conservatives to federal programs to aid women and promote gender equality dovetailed with the desire of fiscal conservatives to curb government spending and regulation; all agreed that an overreaching federal government was the cause of the nation's problems. New Right strategists, intent on building a powerful conservative movement through the Republican Party, embraced as allies the pro-family activists and worked with them to mobilize Christian conservatives before the 1980 election.

Pro-family forces avidly supported Ronald Reagan, who claimed their

values as his own. More surprising, the staunchly antifeminist platform they demanded as the price for their support was accepted by moderate party leaders such as George H. W. Bush, whom Republican feminists regarded as allies. Embracing the pro-family movement, with its strong support from Catholics, blue-collar workers, and white southerners—key elements of the Democrats' New Deal coalition—seemed to them to be a winning strategy.

The GOP's embrace of the pro-family movement was seen by many Republican feminists as a shocking betrayal. Tanya Melich called the alliance with the Religious Right a "Faustian bargain": in return for their support, Republicans would allow pro-family movement leaders to dictate party policy on social issues. Over the years, as it became clear this arrangement would continue, Melich became even more angry with the party she loved. In what she called "an insider's report from behind the lines," she charged that in 1980, the party betrayed its heritage as the party of liberty and, in a cynical attempt to become the majority party, launched "The Republican War Against Women."<sup>3</sup>

After 1980, women would remain highly politicized and deeply divided in their views on policy issues. The presidential election that year revealed two new trends that proved to be enduring. Women voted at a higher rate than men for the first time in American history, and there was a "gender gap" favoring the Democratic Party. Though women split their votes almost equally between Reagan (46 percent) and Carter (45 percent), exit polls showed that men gave 54 percent of their votes for Reagan, creating an eight-percentage-point difference between women's and men's choices.<sup>4</sup>

Analysts attributed the gender gap—which reflected women's stronger support for spending on domestic programs than on defense—to the women's movement, which had taught women to see their own values in political terms. Feminists, led by NOW's Eleanor Smeal, were quick to identify and publicize the gender gap in a last-ditch effort to ratify the ERA and generally enhance their political clout. In the early 1980s, both Smeal and Bella Abzug, who declared Carter's defeat a lesson for Democrats, published books predicting the gap would lead to major advances for women and feminist goals, and warned that politicians ignored it at their peril.<sup>5</sup>

The discovery of the gender gap put Republicans on the defensive. In 1982, Reagan advisor Lee Atwater warned of a potential "sex-based political realignment" that "could lock the GOP into permanent minority status" if Republicans did not take action. They needed to be very careful in their

"public expressions" on economic issues, war and peace, and social issues, as well as show working women the party was not against them and was "sensitive to their needs." At the same time, he suggested—as have many political scientists—that the gender gap could be read as an indicator of men's declining support for Democrats, the result of men's preference for a "man's man" like Reagan. Some GOP strategists also took comfort in the idea that this was more of a "marriage gap" and a "racial gap," pointing out that most white married women tended to vote for Republicans. Thus, while GOP leaders understood the enhanced importance of women's votes, they would try to win them, not by changing their policy positions but through symbolic appointments and gestures and by embracing policies that appealed to their pro-family base.<sup>6</sup>

For the rest of the twentieth century, the Republican Party would continue to court these voters, becoming increasingly reliant upon them, and alienating many moderate voters in the process. As disaffected Democrats, especially white southerners, signed on with the GOP, the Republican Party became more uniformly conservative and the Democratic Party became more uniformly liberal.<sup>7</sup> Democrats continued to support women's rights, along with civil rights for African Americans and Hispanics, and to be increasingly supportive of what became known as the LGBT community. The Republican Party became more racially and ethnically homogeneous as well as more socially conservative as it doubled down in its defense of the traditional family.

The pro-family movement focused heavily on the abortion issue, and their efforts to restrict it met with considerable success despite the fact that the majority of Americans continued to support *Roe v. Wade*. Conservatives also succeeded in popularizing a negative image of feminism that led many to eschew the label, even as they supported its goals. But in other battles to roll back feminist gains, they faced disappointment. Just as advocates of a "Reagan Revolution" found it impossible to abolish popular social programs, such as Social Security or Medicare, that Americans had come to count on, there was no going back to the days before Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned gender discrimination in employment, and Title IX of the Education Acts of 1972 banned gender discrimination in education. When the women's movement broke down barriers to education and jobs, it created openings that women of all political persuasions poured through.

<u>1976 Republican platform</u>	<u>1980 Republican platform</u>
<p>The question of abortion is one of the most difficult and controversial of our time. It is undoubtedly a moral and personal issue but it also involves complex questions relating to medical science and criminal justice. There are those in our Party who favor complete support for the Supreme Court decision which permits abortion on demand. There are others who share sincere convictions that the Supreme Court's decision must be changed by a constitutional amendment prohibiting all abortions. Others have yet to take a position, or they have assumed a stance somewhere in between polar positions.</p> <p>We protest the Supreme Court's intrusion into the family structure through its denial of the parents' obligation and right to guide their minor children. The Republican Party favors a continuance of the public dialogue on abortion and supports the efforts of those who seek enactment of a constitutional amendment to restore protection of the right to life for unborn children.</p>	<p>There can be no doubt that the question of abortion, despite the complex nature of its various issues, is ultimately concerned with equality of rights under the law. While we recognize differing views on this question among Americans in general—and in our own Party—we affirm our support of a constitutional amendment to restore protection of the right to life for unborn children. We also support the Congressional efforts to restrict the use of taxpayers' dollars for abortion.</p> <p>We protest the Supreme Court's intrusion into the family structure through its denial of the parent's obligation and right to guide their minor children.</p>
<p>Women, who comprise a numerical majority of the population, have been denied a just portion of our nation's rights and opportunities. We reaffirm our pledge to work to eliminate discrimination in all areas for reasons of race, color, national origin, age, creed or sex and to enforce vigorously laws guaranteeing women equal rights.</p> <p>The Republican Party reaffirms its support for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Our Party was the first national party to endorse the E.R.A. in 1940. We continue to believe its ratification is essential to insure equal rights for all Americans. In our 1972 Platform, the Republican Party recognized the great contributions women have made to society as homemakers and mothers, as contributors to the community through volunteer work, and as members of the labor force in careers. The Platform stated then, and repeats now, that the Republican Party "fully endorses the principle of equal rights, equal</p>	<p>We acknowledge the legitimate efforts of those who support or oppose ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.</p> <p>We reaffirm our Party's historic commitment to equal rights and equality for women.</p> <p>We support equal rights and equal opportunities for women, without taking away traditional rights of women such as exemption from the military draft. We support the enforcement of all equal opportunity laws and urge the elimination of discrimination against women. We oppose any move which would give the federal government more power over families.</p> <p>Ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment is now in the hands of state legislatures, and the issues of the time</p>

<p>opportunities and equal responsibilities for women." The Equal Rights Amendment is the embodiment of this principle and therefore we support its swift ratification.</p>	<p>extension and rescission are in the courts. The states have a constitutional right to accept or reject a constitutional amendment without federal interference or pressure. At the direction of the White House, federal departments launched pressure against states which refused to ratify ERA. Regardless of one's position on ERA, we demand that this practice cease....</p> <p>Total integration of the work force (not separate but equal) is necessary to bring women equality in pay.... Women's worth in the society and in the jobs they hold, at home or in the workplace, must be re-evaluated to improve the conditions of women workers concentrated in low-status, low-paying jobs; equal opportunity for credit and other assistance must be assured to women in small businesses.... One of the most critical problems in our nation today is that of inadequate child care for the working mother. As champions of the free enterprise system, of the individual, and of the idea that the best solutions to most problems rest at the community level, Republicans must find ways to meet this, the working woman's need.</p>
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<u>1976 Democratic platform</u>	<u>1980 Democratic platform</u>
<p>We seek ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, to insure that sex discrimination in all its forms will be ended, implementation of Title IX, and elimination of discrimination against women in all federal programs.</p>	<p>In the 1980s, the Democratic Party commits itself to a Constitution, economy, and society open to women on an equal basis with men.</p> <p>The primary route to that new horizon is fabrication of the Equal Rights Amendment. A Democratic Congress, working with women's leaders, labor, civil and religious organizations, first enacted ERA in Congress and later extended the deadline for ratification. Now, the Democratic Party must ensure that ERA at last becomes the 27th Amendment to the Constitution. We</p>

	<p>oppose efforts to rescind ERA in states which have already ratified the amendment, and we shall insist that at past recessions are invalid.</p> <p>In view of the high priority which the Democratic Party places on ratification of the ERA, the Democratic National Committee renews its commitment not to hold national or multi-state meetings, conferences, or conventions in states which have not yet ratified the ERA. The Democratic Party shall withhold financial support and technical campaign assistance from candidates who do not support the ERA. The Democratic Party further urges all national organizations to support the boycott of the unratified states by not holding national meetings, conferences, or conventions in those states.</p>
<p>We fully recognize the religious and ethical nature of the concerns which many Americans have on the subject of abortion. We feel, however, that it is undesirable to attempt to amend the U.S. Constitution to overturn the Supreme Court decision in this area.</p>	<p>Reproductive Rights—We fully recognize the religious and ethical concerns which many Americans have about abortion. We also recognize the belief of many Americans that a woman has a right to choose whether and when to have a child. The Democratic Party supports the 1973 Supreme Court decision on abortion rights as the law of the land and opposes any constitutional amendment to restrict or overturn that decision.</p> <p>We must affirm the dignity of all people and the right of each individual to have equal access to and participation in the institutions and services of our society. All groups must be protected from discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin, language, age, sex or sexual orientation.</p>