

The Controversy of Conservative feminism: How a Conservative Ideology Hinders Republican Women's Electability and What This Means for Women's Issues

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Inquiry: In the face of two record-breaking Congressional elections in 2018 and 2020, why is there still such a large gap between the Democratic women and Republican women getting elected? Can the controversial conservative feminist theory overcome these obstacles? What is the importance of women's representation in Congress from both parties, despite not having fully common ground between them?

Introduction

The core of women's issues in America are deeply rooted in long-standing political barriers. Despite advancements that have narrowed the gap between men and women in terms of voting rights, reproductive rights, and workplace and education rights, we still see significant discrepancies between the number of men and women who hold important positions in politics. There is a particularly large gap when comparing the number of Republican women vs Democratic women who are elected. When women are prevented from holding these positions of power, their ability to develop adequate representation for women's issues becomes severely obstructed. This paper will analyze the historical trends of congressional elections, with particular focus on the influence of the 2018-2020 elections, to demonstrate how a conservative ideology creates a barrier of its own for women's electability. By framing these facts around the "paradox controversy" of conservative feminism, this data will illustrate how the rejection of identity politics – specifically gender politics – and lack of emphasis on women's issues in the Republican party has contributed heavily to preventing Republican women from getting elected, or even running in the first place. To conclude this research, the feminist discussion section will explore how conservative feminism tends to be in opposition with non-conservative contemporary feminism¹, and how a reanalysis of this relationship through political representation can benefit women's equality.

Background

Since the first woman elected to congress in 1917, a total of 366 women have been elected to congressional positions. This number means that even after the record-breaking 2018 and 2020 congressional elections, only about 3% of the individuals that have served in the United States Congress have been women. When taking a closer look at the timeline, it is clear that progress has certainly not been linear. Despite the first woman being elected to the House of Representatives back in 1917, [63%](#) of the women to follow have been elected since 1992, with almost 50% being elected since 1998. Senate elections have been the same, with 51% of women who have held positions taking office in 2000 or later. If broken down by party, Democrats have

¹ For the purposes of this research paper, "contemporary feminism" will refer largely to the fourth-wave feminist movement that embodies the largest current stereotypes for being liberal-dominated. This idea that each wave of feminism has a different focus and association contributes greatly to the controversy of conservative feminism, more information on the different waves of feminism can be found [here](#).

outnumbered Republican women in every Congress, with the number of Democratic women growing in almost every Congress while the number of Republican women has remained relatively [stagnant](#) in comparison. This trend became unavoidable in the minds of some Republican women after the 2018 Midterm Congressional elections, which was a record-breaking year for women and minorities. A total of [117](#) women were elected to Congress in 2018; 100 Democrats and only 17 Republicans. Following this upset that gave Democrats a substantial lead in the House, New York Rep. Elise Stefanik decided to invest heavily in getting Republican women elected through [Elevate-PAC](#). This investment paid off for the 2020 election where Republican women took 35 seats in the 118th Congress, setting a new record to their previous 30, though still significantly lacking in comparison to Democratic women. Even with this record, women currently make up 40% of the Democratic party in Congress, a staggering difference to the less than [15%](#) in the Republican party.

Analysis

This background knowledge creates the foundation for asking the question: why is it so hard for the Republican party to elect women? Many theories have been debated. One of these theories takes a very foundational stance, arguing that more women in the United States identify as Democrats than they do Republican, so there will naturally be more women running in the democratic party. In addition to ideological identity, another debate recognizes that only [33%](#) of Republicans said they believe there are too few women in politics, compared to 79% of Democrats, meaning most Republicans don't even believe there is an issue with the disproportionate numbers of men and women in politics. While these fundamental arguments create a good foundation for beginning to understand the issue of electability of women in conservative politics, they only scratch the surface without getting to the root of the real issue. The real question that is going unanswered is – *why* do Republicans not see a representation issue? Answering this question is the only way to sufficiently address the core problem. In light of an analysis of the positions of the Republican party historically, it is clear that the answer lies in the Republican party's persistent denial of "identity politics". Identity politics is not a new concept in American politics – considering most of our social issues revolve around it. It has shown up in many political discussions, including being one of the [most debated arguments](#) following the results of the 2016 election. Simply put, "identity politics" refers to the discussion of issues surrounding people's identities (gender, race, sexuality, etc.). While it is usually discussed in the context of the issues politicians are asked to address, it can also help us understand the issues politicians face with regards to electability – particularly for women.

For scholars of feminist studies, the term "identity politics" is widely understood in the context of earlier feminist theory. The term was [originally coined](#) by the Combahee River Collective, a radical Black feminist group of the 1960's and 70's, when they outlined it in their famous manifesto as their means of becoming politically active as Black women. This original use of the term recognized that the oppression on the basis on identity made Black women disproportionately vulnerable to issues like poverty, violence, inadequate healthcare and housing, and other social issues due to the intersectionality of their identity. This idea embodied the broader feminist slogan, coined by [feminist Carol Hanisch](#), that "the personal is the political" which became the synonymous with the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970's. By

defining identity politics, the Combahee River Collective wanted to demonstrate that their intersectional identities gave them the right to define political theory under the scope of their identities. An analysis of their [statement](#) shows direct support for the idea that The Combahee River Collective viewed identity politics as a way to strengthen political coalitions, not dismiss those groups whose identities did not fit into the category of oppressed groups. This is in staunch opposition to what the term has been reconfigured to mean in present day politics.

For Republicans in modern discussions, avoiding identity politics just means they are looking at things from an “objective” scope. However, this scope denies consideration for how one’s identity could alter the outcome. This belief, held by many in the Republican party, that one’s identity does not play a role in the issues they face is obvious in ongoing social issues, such as the events that trigger [Black Lives Matter protests](#), which became the target of the opposing “All Lives Matter” movement, but it is also playing a significant role in the lack of attention to women’s underrepresentation in the Republican party. When it comes to bringing special attention to diversity and representation, many Understanding that a history of women being seen as second-class citizens has shaped present-day societal norms and inequalities is fundamental to understanding the feminist movement. Therefore, by denying that a woman’s identity affects how she is perceived to be able to handle political positions, conservative ideology strips away the most essential argument for why women’s presence in Congress is necessary.

This claim that identity does not impact opportunities is also a painfully false denial; while women at their historical *peak* now make up roughly [20% of Congress members and 34.5% of lawyers in the United States](#), this pales in comparison to the representation they hold in jobs that are stereotypically feminized – with women making up 96.8% of kindergarten teachers or 89.4% of registered nurses. These statistics reinforce the idea that women face little to no barriers when pursuing careers as caretakers (a historically hyper-feminized role), while still making up a significant minority in occupations that hold power. While Democrats have invested time and money into ensuring women gain equal representation in their party, the conservative ideology of avoiding identity politics significantly downplays the need for Republicans to make the same investments. If they can avoid addressing how a woman’s identity can impact her electability, they can simply blame the issue on qualification. This argument is, again, statistically false; on a general level, studies have shown that women are actually *more* effective than men in Congress - passing, on average, [twice](#) as many bills as their male counterparts. Women’s presence in congressional matters can completely shift the conversation. All of these facts directly support the impact that identity can have in politics, despite many Republican’s believing that identity cannot influence one’s life. Without acknowledging the history of women’s inequalities that has shaped women’s perceived qualifications, overcoming the gap in the political party disparities will continue to be a feminist struggle.

Importance

Obtaining the power to influence law and policy is a crucial step for dealing with women’s issues on a larger and longer-lasting scale. Understanding that women are just as effective in political positions as men are, paired with the fact that female legislators are [shown](#) to sponsor more bills related to women’s health, it becomes clear that the only effective way to

adequately address these issues is to continue to address the discrepancy in women's elections in Congress. While most of these female legislators were liberal, it has further been [proven](#) that women in Congress, particularly Republican women, are more likely to work across party lines for issues regarding health, education, or social welfare, which are directly related to many women's issues. This bipartisanship is vital to increasing the amount of legislation being passed that targets feminist issues, representing the necessity of closing the gap between Republican and Democratic women being elected in Congress. Despite Republican's and Democrat's disagreeing drastically on specific issues, such as abortion, understanding that women's health on a broad quality level is an important subject to both parties offers a common ground in which women can work to achieve shared goals. Increasing women's representation in the Republican party can have dramatically positive impacts on addressing women's oppression in the United States.

In addition to the *positive* impacts we would have with women's representation in politics, when we look at the detrimental possibilities that can occur with a lack thereof, we see everything that is truly at stake. In a [study](#) that assessed factors contributing to rape-myth acceptance, it was shown that conservative political beliefs indicated a positive relationship with rape acceptance. Another [study](#) attempted to gauge how various characteristics associated with conservative ideology correlated to ambivalent sexism (hostile sexism and benevolent sexism). The results showed that social dominance orientation and Protestant work ethic strongly predicted hostile sexism², while right-wing authoritarianism predicted benevolent sexism³. In addition to studies, we also have concrete insight into the regression that can occur under a male-dominated conservative administration. The Trump administration subtly [changed the definition of domestic violence](#) in 2019 with no explanation. The shift seemed to emphasize physical abuse in the context of a felony or misdemeanor, while the previous definition made a point to address a critical aspect of domestic violence, which includes displays of patterns of behaviors which could encompass the non-physical aspect of domestic violence dynamics. These kinds of changes can be destructive to the progress that has been made in the United States, leading to a substantially higher number of injustices for women in terms of sexual and domestic violence.

Without a matched effort from the Republican party to increase women's presence in Congress, women's rights will continue to take one step forward and two steps back as administration changes shift from Democrat to Republican. By addressing the root of the issue and promoting party parity for women in Congress, some key feminist issues can steadily become less minimized and avoid the implications of polarization.

Feminist Discussion

When considering the approach to addressing women's underrepresentation in the Republican party, the controversy of conservative feminism is an unavoidable topic. contemporary Feminism consistently challenges the seemingly paradoxical idea of conservative feminism, accusing conservative feminists of [appropriating feminist rhetoric](#) with the sole

² Hostile sexism refers to overtly negative views and beliefs of a particular gender or promoting superiority of one sex. (See [here](#) for more information of forms of sexism and their impacts)

³ Benevolent sexism refers to a form of covert sexism that promotes gender roles, which has a tendency to appear positive on the surface but is nonetheless damaging to gender equality.

intention of trying to increase support from women voters. The argument that feminist rhetoric is appropriated by conservative feminists stems from the lack of advancement and attention to women's issues from members of the Republican party, including the concerns previously raised, such as the lack of belief that women's underrepresentation is even an issue. Conversely, conservative feminists argue that they have something to offer the feminist movement, and that feminism is not one size fits all. Contemporary Feminism tends to be associated with a wide variety of controversial issues, including abortion or welfare, and the disapproval of capitalism; all of which stand in direct contrast to the general beliefs of the Republican party. While conservative feminists may not share the same distinct goals as contemporary feminists, they believe that women's equality is necessary to continue striving for through a different approach – by [“building on the institutions of Western culture”](#) instead of rejecting them. This tense debate leaves feminism at a crossroads when it comes to addressing the discrepancy between women elected in the Democratic vs. Republican parties. However, the attention that was drawn to the 2020 Congressional elections offers hope that the successes of Democratic women can inspire Republican women to continue to strive for the same representation through investment in recruiting and running for Congressional positions. Though this relationship is not necessarily one that strives for collective collaboration between the opposing feminist theories, it demonstrates how varying feminist approaches may still create the necessary action for addressing the issue of garnering more attention to women's issues through minimalizing the gap between Democratic and Republican women getting elected.

Conclusion

There are a wide variety of feminist issues to be addressed and this analysis can only start the conversation. However, addressing women's representation in Congress provides a pivotal step to being able to address women's issues through legal and political intervention – perhaps the most powerful feminist approach in the United States. It is necessary to break down the basic barriers to gain a deeper insight into how a conservative ideology has rejected historical influence on present social issues. In order to combat political partisanship for women's rights, the Republican party must first recognize that underrepresentation in Congress *is* an issue, and that identity politics is in fact the root of that issue and abandon the belief that qualification plays a role. Only with this acceptance can there be an active effort to support the recruitment and election of Republican women to Congress in order to slowly eliminate the gap between Democratic and Republican women getting elected. While the competing approaches of contemporary feminism and conservative feminism may create limitations for collective action across the political aisle, the goals of each can continue to strive for equal representation and potentially inspire new feminist theories to develop solutions. The 2018 and 2020 Congressional elections offer an optimistic outlook for aspiring feminists of the future, and incorporating the assessment from this analysis into succeeding efforts could provide a new foundation for addressing hinderances in future elections.

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Methods Essay

During the process of writing my research paper, “The Controversy of Conservative feminism: How a Conservative Ideology Hinders Republican Women’s Electability and What This Means for Women’s Issues”, I used a variety of sources to present research data, explore competing feminist ideologies, and analyze contemporary debates that attempt to explain the issue of women’s electability in Congress and why there is such a large gap between Democratic and Republican women getting elected. These sources allowed me to generate my own theory that Republican women’s electability is severely hindered by the modern idea of “identity politics” and the persistent denial of this term in the Republican party.

Utilizing the IU library’s catalog (IU CAT), I was able to examine various publications relevant to my topic. The first and most important source I used was access to feminist studies journals, which allowed me to explore feminist theories on both a scientific and creative level. This allowed me to build on the foundation of my own understanding of feminist issues historically and how they have created the framework for my issue of focus in modern contemporary feminist issues. Perhaps one of the most important sources I utilized from IUCAT was access to the book “How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective”, which allowed me to speak on an academic level to scholars of feminist studies who already have association with the term “identity politics” under a feminist scope. This allowed me the opportunity turn my research of feminist studies into an inquiry of how “identity politics” was shifted from its original meaning to its contemporary interpretation as a highly debated and politicized idea, which now stands in direct opposition to its original meaning. I was then able to turn this into a conversation of how a scholarly discussion of this complex term plays into modern political feminist issues. Additionally, IU CAT allowed me access to political science journals and case studies that supported multiple discussion points in my paper, including the topics of rape-myth acceptance and sexism in political discussions. Given that my focus was on women’s representation in Congress, I found that it was just as important to incorporate the academic perspective of present and historical trends in American politics and how the issue of my focus is relevant to the process of legislation.

In addition to published books and academic journals, I also incorporated a variety of modern news sources and research studies that are relevant to the issue of women’s electability. These sources allowed me to demonstrate how the focus of my issues is presented through contemporary media broadcasting, which allows for the necessary awareness of media bias and opinion pieces in order to show the full spread of perspectives relevant to modern interpretation of the issues presented. Combining these sources with the academic journals accessed through the IU library, I am able to create a dynamic archive of sources for academics interested in the issue to utilize in the present and future.

For my bibliography I utilized MLA format, however my in-text citations follow a hyperlink citational practice in order to follow the digitally advanced approach of the International Feminist Journal of Politics. This practice of hybrid style citations is becoming increasingly popular at the academic level, as it will offer readers ease in exploring the ideas discussed in my paper as they come across them in order to better interpret the information being presented.