

10-2009

(Review) Political Women and American Democracy

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Recommended Citation

Political Women and American Democracy, ed. Christina Wolbrecht, Karen Beckwith, and Lisa Baldez. *Journal of Politics* 71.4 (October 2009): 1607-1608.

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Comments

Initially published in *Journal of Politics*, October 2009, volume 71, number 4, p.1607-1608.

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DOI: 10.1017/S0022381609990399

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0022381609990399>

their call for women to prioritize traditional gender roles” (39), Schreiber explains that both organizations strategically use essentialism or their gender identity as a political tactic. She argues that the CWA and IWF use their identity as strategy, but when they do so they are self-critical and self-conscious about their identity claims as they work to legitimate conservative values.

Chapter 3 further explains that when women’s conservative groups use “strategic essentialism,” they are playing “femball.” Referencing the term coined by the leader of IWF, Anita Blair, Schreiber shows that conservative women’s groups play “femball” to produce a narrative to strategically counter feminism. “She {Blair} argues that feminists are playing “femball,” and in order for IWF to compete, it has to act according to the terms established by the team that got there first—feminists” (42–43). By explaining how CWA and the IWF play femball, Schreiber prepares the reader for an analysis of the issue frames used by these groups to influence public policy outcomes.

In the second part of the book, the “organizational narratives” on several women’s policy issues are evaluated using the “three frames” outlined in the first part of the book. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, Schreiber looks at violence against women, mother’s interests, and women’s health by systematically uncovering the antifeminist, women’s interest, and social/economic conservative narrative framing. In this section, for example, gender policy specialists will see the mechanisms by which conservative women’s groups reframe issues to claim that certain reproductive technologies are detrimental to women’s health; how feminists are cast as liars when citing domestic violence or health statistics; and how feminism and liberal economic policy have ruined motherhood.

Still, *Righting Feminism*, does more than make sense of the strategies, power, and success of the conservative women’s movement that has developed over the past 30 years. Schreiber argues that the book provides “strategic lessons for feminists—revealing the success and limits of feminist theory, activism and identity politics” (125). However, the book also shows that there are many men and women who would prefer to hear about women’s issues through a conservative ideological lens. Instead of upending feminism, this reality might also illustrate that feminism has been successful because both the CWA and IWF have adopted feminist representational strategies “by acting collectively as women, promoting women’s issues, and framing issues in terms of women’s

interests” (125). In other words, this book requires us to think about feminism and feminist success more broadly as we observe the enhanced political participation of conservative women.

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Political Women and American Democracy. Edited by Christina Wolbrecht, Karen Beckwith, and Lisa Baldez. (Cambridge University Press, 2008.)
doi:10.1017/S0022381609990399

“What does existing research tell us about political women in the United States, and what do we need to understand better? What does and should our scholarship reveal about the opportunities and challenges women face as political actors in the American political system? What do we know, and what more do we need to know, about how American democracy is affected by the presence—and absence—of political women?” (ix) Posed on the first page of *Political Women and American Democracy*, these questions are carried throughout the volume, their mix of the empirical and the normative obliging readers to consider what our learning reveals about our ideologies and priorities as scholars: “[W]hat did we—that is, political scientists—see at the revolution? And how has the experience and study of political women challenged our understandings of politics and political science?” (3) This blending of analysis and reflection, with its attentiveness to theory and application, ensures that this volume will be useful to a wide range of scholars, from advanced undergraduates to senior members of the profession.

Each chapter sets out the questions driving research in a particular arena, critically examines the literature, and concludes with research questions for future investigation. In essence, the authors provide an intellectual history of the study of women in United States politics. Separate chapters are devoted to American political development (Gretchen Ritter), public opinion (Leonie Huddy, Erin Cassese, and Mary-Kate Lizotte), women’s movements (Lee Ann Banaszak), political parties (Kira Sanbonmatsu), women as legislators (Kathleen Dolan); and to research design (Nancy Burns), race and intersectionality (Jane Junn and Nadia Brown), policy connections between (Beth Reingold), and the societal and institutional consequences of (Suzanne Dovi), women’s descriptive and substantive representation. A comparative chapter (Lisa Baldez) places the political women in the United States in an international and

a transnational context. Introductory (Christina Wolbrecht) and concluding (Karen Beckwith) chapters, and a strong bibliography, round off the volume. The collection is not comprehensive. As the editors acknowledge, neither the executive nor the judicial branches are discussed. Critical facets of intersectionality, most notably sexuality and class, receive minimal consideration, although references are made to religion and political ideology.

Though each chapter has its distinctive elements, three lines of enquiry run through the entire volume. These knit the individual presentations into a tight and well-integrated presentation.

The first enquiry relates to the mix of subjectivity and objectivity in political scientists' investigations of political women in the United States. The contributions of one generation of scholars to the next, and the cross-fertilization of theoretical and empirical analyses are delineated. How research design relates to researchers' findings is assessed, with readers invited to see how their own studies have been similarly influenced.

The second enquiry relates to sex and gender, as distinct and yet related. Beyond the data provided by sex-differences studies and the societal awareness secured through gender analysis, the authors demonstrate how a close examination of sex and gender reveals the workings of power in the society, government, and political system. This investigation also mandates a critical reassessment of the extent and distribution of political change, insofar as "change" signifies a shift in access to and possession of power. The extent to which the United States democracy, as a political system, government, and state, has kept or betrayed its promises of equality, consent, and individualism undergirds each author's judgments about women's political circumstances. This is also a query that shows the close connection between study and

advocacy for many who work in the subfield of women and politics, adding emphasis to the creative tensions associated with this subfield.

The third and final enquiry relates to the contradictions that endure between democratic and republican government in the United States, especially for women. As the authors show, change favorable to women has been greater in mass-based politics than in representative politics: The mobilization of women throughout the society has had positive effects for many women, both individually and organizationally; in elections and within legislative chambers, however, representation is far from assured. And researching the consequences of democratic, republican, and democratic-republican politics for women in the United States is no easy task, if one seriously commits to intersectionality in evaluating the power of the state.

The United States political system favors incremental change. It is slow to redistribute power or to correct injustice. Its constitution has been more exclusive than inclusive in its provisions and protections; and individuals, localities, states, and nations have paid a correspondingly great price in opportunities missed and dreams deferred. *Political Women and American Democracy* sets out the empirical evidence of these losses, yet maintains that there has also been notable and constructive change . . . there have been more opportunities claimed, more dreams realized in recent decades. Even so, this is a book that advocates on behalf of research agendas that will hold the constitutional order accountable for its promises, transparent in its processes, and just in its practices. These editors and authors issue an insistent call to action, treating the reader as a colleague rather than as a consumer. It is a powerful statement, sure to engender creative dialogue.

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