

Introduction to Special Issue on Gender and Conservatism

Karen Celis

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Sarah Childs

Birkbeck, University of London

*P*olitics & Gender is pleased to present this Special Issue on Gender and Conservatism. The current geopolitical climate raises many questions about the complicated relationship between gender and conservatism, and the many ideological shifts, realignments, and de-alignments that we now witness around the world suggest that the topic will only increase in richness and complexity. Our editors, Karen Celis and Sarah Childs, have brought together four research articles that seek to explore the “dangerous liaison” between conservatism, feminism, representation, and politics.

Because so many of the Gender and Conservatism articles focus on national politics, we also include five Critical Perspectives essays that critique Hillary Rodham Clinton’s recent book, *What Happened* (Simon & Schuster, 2017). These five articles approach Clinton’s book from varying angles and thus engage the left-right polarization in American politics through an analysis of one woman’s historic bid for the presidency. This Critical Perspectives feature has been curated by Judith Grant of Ohio University and offers insightful analyses by Libby R. Anker, Meredith Conroy, Jocelyn M. Boryczka, Lilly Goren, and Judith Grant.

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As editors of this Special Issue, we note that many parts of the world are experiencing a “conservative moment.” Improvements in women’s status in society, rights, equal opportunities, and equality, gained over the last two generations in Western democracies, are frequently under rhetorical challenge and, in many instances, being reversed in practice. Conservative gender ideologies — adhered to by various rightist, extreme right, populist, and traditionalist religious political actors — foremost envision a private role for women, limiting their individual and collective access to the public sphere. Conservative actors frequently stress difference and complementarities between women and men rather than equality and privilege women’s roles as wives and mothers. Such a reassertion of traditional gender roles seemingly goes hand in hand with state retrenchment and a neoliberalism regarded by most feminists as detrimental to the material situation of, and equal opportunities for, women. Feminists across the globe — activist and academic — are rightly concerned by these developments.

At the same time, conservative women seem to have increased their presence in politics, formal and informal, whether as elected representatives, political leaders, or organized participants in civil society. And conservative political parties and organizations actively participate in contemporary political and policy debate, not least in respect of women’s rights and gender equality. Such developments are being noted in an emergent literature on conservatism, gender, and representation. Consciousness of a gendered political identity — what some might classify as feminist — and a conservative political ideology are, evidently, not mutually exclusive “on the ground.” In some instances, apparently nongendered conservative goals coincide with the gendered concerns of political actors; it might also be the case that such apparently nongendered conservative goals are — remarkably so for some feminists — seemingly compatible with feminist political goals. For critics, this results in a “dangerous liaison” between feminism, feminists, and conservative political actors, male and female. We contend that such a liaison, theoretical and empirical, requires greater considered attention from gender and politics scholars.

This Special Issue explores the intersections of conservatism, gender, and feminism in politics, meeting points that we consider to simultaneously consist of complementarities, conflicts, and contestation, as well as of mutual reconstitution. This undertaking is not about “adding in” conservatism to existing approaches to the study of gender and politics. Indeed, this Special Issue consciously queries a general and

à priori rejection of conservatism and feminism as oppositional theories and practices. Rather, it pinpoints and explores the nature of current congruencies and conflicts between conservatism, gender, and feminism. Collectively, the articles investigate how conservatism and feminism meet in co-constitutive ways: how conservatism might redefine feminist goals, and how feminism might remodel conservative political thought and practice.

In “‘Righting’ Conventional Wisdom: Women and Right Parties in Established Democracies,” Diana Z. O’Brien presents the first large-*N*, party-level study of women’s descriptive and substantive representation. Although conservative parties appear to have caught up with left parties, right parties continue to lag behind with respect to women’s presence in elected office and offer distinct issues in their party platforms. Left-right party ideology matters still. But variations in conservative party ideology matter, too. Attention to the specificities of the conservative parties is necessary to fully understand their role in representing women

This is confirmed by Rosie Campbell and Silvia Erzeel. In “Exploring Gender Differences in Support for Rightist Parties: The Role of Party and Gender Ideology,” they show that parties of the left generally espouse more feminist ideologies than parties of the right, but also that there are a significant number of rightist parties that combine *laissez-faire* economic values with liberal feminist ideals. Using expert and election surveys, they show that parties of the populist radical right predominantly adopt traditional or antifeminist gender ideologies. However, rightist parties that adopt a feminist gender ideology are able to attract more women voters than other parties of the right.

In “Is There a Conservative Feminism? An Empirical Account,” Ronnee Schreiber further explores the nexus between conservatism and feminism. Her article presents data from in-depth interviews with conservative women leaders in the United States about their self-identification as feminists. Her article asks whether conservative feminism has become a political movement since Sarah Palin identified herself as a feminist. On the whole, the female leaders interviewed did not identify as feminists, but conservative women are nonetheless found to be gender conscious political actors.

In “Conservatism and Women’s Political Representation,” Karen Celis and Sarah Childs develop a new conceptual framework for assessing the quality of women’s substantive representation by conservatives. Informed by contemporary representation theory and a critical rereading of the

empirical literature on conservative parties to women's representation, they contend that conservative representatives can further women's substantive representation as long as conservative claims meet the requirements of responsiveness, inclusiveness, and egalitarianism.