

The New Conservative Feminist Movement

Sarah Palin inspires new generation of fiscal conservative feminists

By *Mary Kate Cary*

Posted June 23, 2010

Betty Friedan's 1963 bestseller, *The Feminine Mystique*, opens with these words: "The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the 20th century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—'Is this all?'"

And so the "problem that has no name," as she put it, was born and with it, modern feminism. Fast-forward 46 years to the beginning of the 21st century in the United States. There's a new generation of women my age who, while chauffeuring the Cub Scouts and Brownies, have silently watched out-of-control government spending, massive deficits left for our children, bailout after bailout of bankrupt industries, shady deals to win healthcare votes, and ethical and moral lapses from all types of politicians. Those women have asked the question, "Is this all?" and, not liking the answer, are running for office.

And voters, also not liking the answer, are voting for them.

In Friedan's day, to be "feminist" meant you were in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment and were pro-choice. You were proud to be called "a women's libber" (and maybe even a "bra-burner"!) and probably were in that minority of workers who were women, comprising less than a third of the workforce in the mid-1960s. But that's changed. The 2009 Shriver Report, "A Woman's Nation Changes Everything," found that half of all U.S. workers now are women. Mothers today are the primary breadwinners or co-breadwinners in nearly two-thirds of American families.

We've entered a sort of post-feminist politics, in which nearly 10 million more women than men voted in 2008, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. Not only are more women voting and running for office, but most of the new female candidates are Republican. This year, 201 Republican women are running for Senate, House, or statewide offices, more than ever before, according to the Center. In the Senate races, 14 Republican women are running, up from just three in 2008; in the House, 94 are Republican candidates, compared with 46 at about the same point in the election cycle two years ago. Sixty percent of the women challenging incumbents in the House are Republicans. All of this points to [GOP](#) women being more likely than ever before to "throw their hat in the ring," the Center's Debbie Walsh told NPR.

[\[See the women of the Senate.\]](#)

And they're running not on gender, but on work experience: Meg Whitman as former CEO of eBay; Carly Fiorina as former CEO of Hewlett-Packard; Nikki Haley as an accountant. Many are pro-life moms, rather than pro-choice activists. These women are no more likely to burn their bras than burn the flag, but they aren't so much social conservatives as limited-government fiscal conservatives, worried about the scope and reach of the [federal government](#) into the daily lives of their families. They speak for the majority of American women who make the healthcare decisions, pay the bills, worry about the retirement accounts, and, yes, eat peanut butter sandwiches with their children. As [Rep. Jo Ann Emerson](#), a moderate Republican from Missouri, [told the Boston Globe last week](#), they saw [Sarah Palin](#) run on the national ticket with five young kids, and said to themselves, "If she can do it, I can."

[\[See who supports Emerson.\]](#)

[Palin](#) calls them "mama grizzlies" and recently said this transformation is an "emerging, conservative, feminist identity," provoking an immediate reaction on the left because many still equate "feminist" with pro-choice, which Palin is not. But she is on to something; these conservative candidates are agents of change not only in the electorate but inside the women's movement.

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Gone are the days when women only entered politics because their politician spouse died. Now we see women entering public office on their own after becoming moms, PTA presidents, breast cancer survivors, small-business leaders, CEOs, heads of nonprofits, you name it. Tina Brown, editor of the Daily Beast, recently said, "It almost feels as if all these women winning are kind of a blow to feminism." It may be a blow to old-school liberal feminism, or to the National Organization for Women's political agenda, but I don't see how electing highly competent women with real-world experiences as business leaders, educators, or caregivers is a blow to women.

Haley, likely the next governor of South Carolina, put it well. "We are long past the day of electing someone because they look good in a picture or they hold a baby well," she said. "If they are not going to fight for the taxpayers ... then we don't need to have them. It is time that we look at what it means to be conservatives. And that's not bailouts, that's not stimulus packages. It's not Washington."

We've moved past having women in the workplace or in politics as tokens. Women are now the biggest voting bloc and the biggest economic power in the United States and are increasingly limited-government conservatives on the center right, not on either the far left or right. They're leading the way to a new, post-feminist world.

No matter what your political views, you have to agree we've moved past Friedan's "problem with no name." And win or lose, this election cycle is a great thing for women everywhere.

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