

**Playing 'Femball': Conservative Women's Organizations and Political
Representation in the United States**

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Introduction

In 1979, Beverly LaHaye mobilized a small group of conservative women and organized them into the Concerned Women for America (CWA). Twenty-three years later, the CWA is a national grassroots women's organization that claims 500,000 members.¹ In 1991, another group of conservative women challenged feminist organizations and offered its support for the nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court. That ad hoc group is now institutionalized as the Independent Women's Forum (IWF). Both of these organizations present a substantial threat to the feminist movement.² Like feminists, they are well-organized, politically active, and seek access to government institutions, political parties and national media. And, like feminists, they claim to represent women's interests. As these organizations vie with feminists over what women need and desire, they publicly contest definitions of women's interests and influence political debates and policy outcomes.

While a sizeable volume of literature exists on conservative and right-wing politics in the U.S. (Diamond 1995; Guth, et al. 1995; Moen 1992; Hertzke 1988; Conover and Gray 1983; Crawford 1980; Lipset and Raab 1970), comparatively little of it addresses the specific participation of women and women's organizations (for

¹ According to the CWA, this figure represents the number of people who have contributed money to the organization within the past twenty-four months (Interview with Schwartz, 2001).

² The feminist movement in the United States is far-reaching, and includes national organizations, community groups, direct service providers, campus-based groups and list servers (Brownmiller 1999; Blee 1998; Echols 1998; Cohen, Jones and Tronto 1997; Ferree and Martin 1995; Martin 1990; Bookman and Morgen 1988; Katzenstein and Mueller 1987). When the CWA and IWF talk about the feminist movement, however, they are mostly referring to nationally organized interest groups, especially the National Organization for Women (NOW), National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL), the Planned Parenthood Federation of American (PPFA), the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF). Both the IWF and CWA consider such feminist groups to be their opponents and name these feminist organizations as proxies for the entire feminist movement. To be consistent with the organizations under study, when I talk about the "feminist movement" and/or "feminists" in this chapter, I too, am referring to these institutionalized political actors unless otherwise stated.

exceptions see Klatch 1987; Marshall 1995; Blee 1992). Furthermore, most research on national women's organizations (Ferree and Martin 1995; Costain 1988; Gelb and Palley 1987) puts feminist or liberal women's organizations at the center of its analyses, offering a narrow assessment of women's policy activism. Although some scholars have examined conservative women's efforts to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment (Mansbridge 1986) and abortion (Ginsburg 1989; Luker 1984), few address the role of conservative women organized as a countermovement³ to challenge the myriad goals of the feminist movement (see Marshall 1995, for an exception). My analysis of two conservative women's organizations -- the Concerned Women for America (CWA) and the Independent Women's Forum (IWF) -- fills this empirical gap.

As organizations competing with feminists over the right to make representational claims about women, the CWA and IWF must engage in activities that position them as the more credible (as compared with feminists) arbiters of women's interests. Thus, as women opposed to the goals of feminist organizations,⁴ it seems reasonable that conservative women leaders should respond by establishing *women's* groups to oppose feminist activism. But the IWF often speaks critically of politics based on group identity claims. It generally considers appeals to group-based claims as antithetical to individual self-sufficiency and progress (Klatch 1987; Hardisty 1999).⁵ And, while evangelical Protestant women like those of the CWA, have a history of activism based on their

³ "Countermovement" organizations "make contrary claims simultaneously to those of the original movement" (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, 1631). The original movement in this case is the feminist movement as defined in Endnote Two.

⁴ For example, the CWA opposes legalized abortion and rights for gays and lesbians. The IWF opposes gender-integrated basic training in the military and argues against government funding of day care.

⁵ While this is generally true of the IWF, it sometimes advocates for policies that based on attention to gender-based differences. For example, it argues against gender-integrated military training because of women's physical differences from men and the potential for sexual tension.

identities as women, mothers and/or evangelical Protestants (Marshall 1995; Ginsburg 1989; Luker 1984), their organizing into a professional, well-staffed, national women's organization, belies their call for women to prioritize their traditional roles as stay-at-home mothers and wives. In addition, both organizations repeatedly criticize feminists for making identity-based representational claims as and for women. So why have these women organized into national *women's* organizations? And how do being *women's* organizations influence their organizational goals and strategies?

Using data from interviews with leaders of both organizations (including their Presidents, board members and legislative staff),⁶ textual analyses and participant observation,⁷ this chapter explores the extent to which conservative women's organizations rely on the relationship between gender identity and representation to further their goals.⁸ I argue that being *countermovement women's* organizations influences the representational strategies of these two organizations. In particular, I show that consistent with other countermovement actors, both of these organizations adopt the successful strategies of their opponents, in this case, feminists (Zald and Useem 1987). Specifically, as countermovement women's organizations rivaling

⁶ All of the women interviewed for this study are white.

⁷ I examined organizational periodicals from 1993-1998 and website pages from 1997-2000. Both organizations publish their own periodicals. The CWA puts out the *Family Voice* on a monthly basis and the IWF publishes a quarterly journal entitled *The Women's Quarterly* and a quarterly newsletter called *Ex Femina*. In addition, I attended two national CWA conventions -- September 19-21, 1996 at the Sheraton Washington Hotel in Washington, D.C. and September 24-27, 1998 at the Radisson Plaza Hotel in Alexandria, VA. I also attended a day-long IWF conference entitled "Scared Sick?" at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. on February 17, 1999. Finally, I was an invited participant at the "Core Connections: Women, Religion and Public Policy" symposium, held October 8-9, 1999 at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University; associates from both organizations were present and participated in this conference.

⁸ This research was supported by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) Educational Foundation.

feminists over who legitimately represents women, the CWA and IWF co-opt feminist strategies of acting collectively as women and positioning women in leadership roles to contest feminist claims to speak as and for women. As such, I find that *gender identity* is salient to these organizations and influences their representational strategies.

While gender identity does matter to these organizations, as *countermovement* women's organizations they also encounter competing influences that mediate the extent to which, and form in which, gender identity is invoked (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Zald and Useem 1987). Although these groups adopt the feminist strategy of invoking gender identity, they must appeal to their conservative constituencies and allies and bridge women to conservative causes (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Marshall 1995; Zald and Useem 1987). As I show, the need as countermovement women's organizations to engage in feminist strategies *and* appeal to conservative constituencies often conflicts and results in a number of paradoxes and contradictions.

Finally, while both of these organizations decidedly oppose the contemporary feminist movement, each promotes a specific worldview consistent with Klatch's distinction among conservative women (1987), as discussed in the following section. Thus, I assess not only the influence of factors associated with being countermovement women's organizations on their representational strategies, but also attend to how variations in their conservative ideologies affect their efforts.

The Organizations

While the feminist movement in the U.S. is disparate and reflected in a range of local and national efforts, parts of it have also become institutionalized into interest groups (Ferree and Martin 1995). It is frequently these national organizations (e.g. the National Organization for Women (NOW), the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), and the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARRAL)) who, in the minds of the media (Huddy 1995), Congress and the public, encapsulate feminist political activity. The CWA and the IWF envision themselves as antidotes to these

national feminist organizations.

Like feminists, however, conservative women are not monolithic. Klatch categorizes them as either "social conservatives" or "laissez-faire conservatives," each representing a different worldview with regard to gender, religion, economics and the role of government (1987). "Social conservatives" claim to be deeply religious,⁹ see the "traditional" family¹⁰ as the center of society and root social problems in the moral realm. "Laissez-faire" conservatives point to the economic realm as the source of problems and emphasize individuality and the desire for freedom from government intrusion (Klatch 1987).

Klatch also argues that socially conservative women tend to be gender identified, while laissez-faire conservative women do not recognize their "collective interests as women" (1987, 10) and are not necessarily antifeminist. While the organizations I have chosen generally represent women from these perspectives, with the CWA being comprised of socially conservative women and the IWF of laissez-faire conservatives, I do find that the laissez-faire conservatives of the IWF also express the need to act collectively as women. Indeed, this group of laissez-faire conservatives does believe that feminism is, at least, partly to blame for many social and economic problems. As I show, its reasons for turning to collective action are mostly strategic, but it does cite gender identity as an important factor in its potential for success. Despite some variations from Klatch's ideal types, these two organizations do represent the range of institutionalized conservative women activists in the United States.

⁹ Most of the members of the CWA identify as Evangelical or fundamentalist Protestants (Guth, et al. 1995).

¹⁰ I employ this phrase here to reflect the CWA's use of it. It is important to note, however, that while the CWA invokes the term "traditional family" to refer to a heterosexual unit comprised of married individuals likely to have children, its use of the phrase belies the social and cultural constructions that have helped create the fiction of static and ahistorical understandings of both "traditional" and "family" (see Thorne 1982 and Shorter 1977 for more discussion).

The Concerned Women for America (CWA), founded in 1979, boasts 500,000 members. Its founding and subsequent growth coincided with the politicization of the Christian Right in the late 1970's and early 1980's (Green, et al. 1996). Originally located in San Diego, CA, the organization started locally to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and legalized abortion.

In 1985, the CWA relocated to Washington, D.C. establishing a national office and a national presence. Founder Beverly LaHaye, a white middle class woman, has close ties to the broader Christian Right movement (her husband, Tim LaHaye, was on the Moral Majority's first Board of Directors). Given her ability to mobilize women through churches, mass mailings and radio, she has successfully made a name for herself and her large grassroots women's organization.

Today the CWA has a professionally staffed office in Washington, D.C., members in all fifty states and claims to be the largest women's organization in the United States.¹¹ Locally, its mostly white female membership¹² gather in prayer chapters (about 500 throughout the U.S.) to take action on CWA's political agenda. Through advocacy on its issues, the CWA works in coalition with such conservative organizations as the Christian Coalition, the American Family Association, the Family Research Council and several pro-life groups.

Its multi-issue, socially conservative, policy agenda is delineated by the following: "Definition of the Family," which includes opposition to homosexuality and support for heterosexual marriage; "Sanctity of Human Life," a platform mostly dedicated to

¹¹ On its website, www.now.org, NOW also claims to have 500,000 members, but the CWA argues that NOW actually has less than 100,000.

¹² While the organization does not keep data on the race and class composition of its membership, I was told that most members are white (no information on class could be given). My experiences at their national conferences confirm that most of the organization's national and local leaders are white women. In addition, all of my interviewees were white, as is the majority of the CWA's staff.

opposing legalized abortion; “Education,” including supporting prayer in schools; “Pornography,” which it opposes; support for “Religious Liberty,” and “National Sovereignty” -- which includes opposition to supporting and funding the United Nations. While the organization often speaks broadly to “women’s issues,” it occasionally specifies that its policies impact poor women and women of color. This is particularly evident in the case of welfare reform, which it supports, and the funding of international family planning programs, which it opposes (Schreiber 2000).

By comparison, the IWF is a much younger and smaller organization,¹³ but one that has garnered considerable attention and clout since its founding. Established in 1992, it grew out of a network of women who worked for President George Bush’s Administration. These conservative women leaders are well-connected to, or are in themselves, key policy and opinion makers.¹⁴ Resembling more of a think tank than a grassroots organization, it was founded to take on the “old feminist establishment” (Independent Women’s Forum 1996). In the classical liberal¹⁵ conservative tradition, it describes itself as an organization that promotes “common sense” and provides “a voice for American women who believe in individual freedom and personal responsibility” (Independent Women’s Forum 1996). Unlike the CWA, it does not have a grassroots membership, but does employ professional staff most of whom are white professional

¹³ Though interviewees did not give me specifics as to how many people subscribe to the organization’s publications, Hardisty claims that the IWF has a membership smaller than 1500 (Hardisty 1990).

¹⁴ For example, founding Board member Wendy Gramm is married to U.S. Senator Phil Gramm (R-TX) and Board President Ricky Silberman, worked for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas when he directed the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. I note these connections not to downplay the success and political agency of these conservative women, but to note some of their political contacts and help situate them within the conservative movement.

¹⁵ I use this term as defined by Hardisty: “classical liberalism, as distinct from New Deal liberalism, believes first and foremost in individual freedom. Like libertarianism, it is opposed to ‘big government’ and supports the economic and political freedom of the individual above all” (1999, 90).

women.¹⁶

The IWF delights in caricaturing feminists and “debunking” feminist policy claims.¹⁷ Over the years, it has collaborated with other conservative organizations such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for Equal Opportunity and the Foundation for Academic Standards and Tradition. Its policy program, which reflects its laissez-faire ideology and explicit desire to challenge feminists, generally falls into one of the following categories: a “Women’s Economic Project,” which challenges feminist claims about women’s pay differentials from men and other workplace issues; the “Campus Guild,” which is touted as a project that provides college women with an alternative to “rigid feminist orthodoxy;”¹⁸ “Gender Equity and Title IX,” a program designed to halt the allegedly unjust diversion of resources from men’s college sports to women’s; “Women’s Health and Junk Science,” that works to challenge such “myths” as the correlation between breast implants and connective tissues diseases and “Women in the Military,” whereby it advocates for gender segregation in basic military training.

Like the CWA, it frequently references “women” in universal terms, but there are times when the organization specifies that its advocacy will help poor women and women and men of color. For example, it claims that tax breaks for businesses that offer flexible work hours will help working class women and that Title IX harms minority men because they lose scholarships to women (Schreiber 2000).

¹⁶ At the time I conducted my interviews, all but one of the staff members was white. Like the CWA, the IWF does not keep data on the racial and class composition of its associates.

¹⁷ For example, it published *Women’s Figures: An Illustrated Guide to the Economic Progress of Women in America* to “debunk” the “familiar feminist tropes about women in the workplace -- the glass ceiling, the wage gap, [and] the pink ghetto” (Furchtgott-Roth and Stolba 1999, ix).

¹⁸ This description, as well as descriptions of all of their programs can be found at: “www.iwf.org/issues/”.

Countermovements, Gender Identity and Political Representation

Countermovement Strategies

As organizations explicitly formed to challenge the feminist movement, I consider the CWA and the IWF to be “countermovement” organizations. Scholarship that regards countermovements as dynamic and interactive (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Marshall 1995; Lo 1982) offers a valuable framework for assessing the goals and strategies of these two groups. This literature argues against the conceptualization of countermovement organizations as purely reactionary and static (Marshall 1995) and focuses instead on countermovement organizations’ engagement and interaction with both opponents and supporters (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). In this way, scholars draw attention to how these relationships affect organizational actions (Lo 1982). Thus, to best understand the CWA and IWF, I consider that they operate in a political context rife with competing values and audiences and show how both groups negotiate this tension through their representational strategies.

Gender Identity and Political Activism

In focusing on “gender identity” as a variable that influences representational strategies, I am concerned with the relationship between identity and activism, or when and how conservative women’s organizations see their identities as *women’s* groups to be central to their political actions. That is, I am interested in their attempts to engage in identity politics; in politics based on “a sense of personal identity -- as gay, as Jewish, as Black, as female” (Fuss, 1989, 97). For *interest groups* like the CWA and IWF, engaging in identity politics also means making claims on behalf of a particular group; that is, it means *representing* them.

The strategy of invoking gender identity to make representational claims is not without its critics. Butler (1992) argues that identity categories are never merely descriptive but always normative, and as such exclusionary. While she concedes that representational politics in the U.S. creates the necessity for feminists to speak “as and

for *women*" (1992, 15, emphasis in original), she cautions that:

The minute that the category of women is invoked as describing the constituency for which feminism speaks, an internal debate invariably begins over what the descriptive content of that term will be (1992, 15).

Indeed, women of color, poor and working class women and lesbians have longed criticized national women's organizations for their inattention to diversity and for deploying the category "woman" to make universal claims without regard to the differences that exist among women (see e.g. Phelan, 1994; Mohanty, 1991; hooks, 1990; Collins; 1990; Lefkowitz and Withorn; 1986). Identity politics, these critics contend, runs the risk of assuming all women have a "true essence -- that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing" (Fuss 1989, 2); that is, that such politics is "essentialist."

There are scholars, however, who want to retain some version of identity politics, but call for more careful attention to its effects, purposes and processes (Phelan, 1993; Spivak 1993; Fuss 1989). Spivak's ideas have often been consolidated under the phrase "strategic use of essentialism" (Spivak 1993, ix). Spivak calls for deconstructing identity categories, but adds that deconstruction should be a critique that acknowledges "the dangerousness of something one cannot not use" (1993, 5), not the rejection of identity politics that relies on potentially essentializing categories. She clarifies that "[a] strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory" (4) and thus argues for attention to how particular identity categories are deployed in specific political situations.

As I show, Spivak's emphasis on the *strategic* use of essentialism provides important insights that help explain why the CWA and IWF have opted to engage in some level of identity politics, even though they criticize feminists for doing the same. Both organizations, but especially the IWF, invoke gender identity critically and self-consciously to contest feminist political activism. Nonetheless, these conservative

women's organizations can suffer from the same essentializing tendencies as feminists when they make claims as and for women. For example, rarely does either organization talk about racial or class differences among women in general, or within its own membership. However, as I discuss, its strategic use of gender identity provides them legitimacy to contest feminists claims to representing women's interests.

Gender Identity and Political Representation

To articulate the *forms* in which gender identity is invoked by these countermovement women's organizations, I employ the concepts of "descriptive" and "substantive" representation. Pitkin argues that descriptive representation depends on a "representative's characteristics, on what he is or is like . . . The representative thus 'stands for' others" (1967, 61). In contrast, substantive representation is the notion that representatives need not share an identity with those they represent; instead representation is based on the content of a person's actions or what the representative "acts for" regardless of who s/he is (Pitkin 1967, 118). While Pitkin distinguishes between these conceptualizations, some scholars argue that there can be a direct relationship between the two and that "acting for" can follow from "standing for" (Dodson, et al. 1995; Thomas 1994; Dodson and Carroll 1991). This correlation is based on the assumption that a person who shares experiences and/or social locations with another is more likely to understand that person's interests and act accordingly. As I demonstrate, the degree to which any or all of these representational philosophies shape the CWA's and IWF's political strategies is influenced by their status as countermovement women's organizations.

Standing for Women: Descriptive Representation as an Organizational Strategy

Playing "Femball"

The success of a political movement can illustrate the value of collective action to opponents (Marshall 1995; Zald and Useem 1987). For the CWA and IWF, feminists have demonstrated not only the success of collective action, but the success of

organizing as women to achieve political goals. The CWA and IWF follow feminists' lead and argue that to successfully challenge feminists, they, too, must make claims as women.

Anita Blair, Vice President of the IWF, acknowledged this strategic use of gender identity (Spivak 1993) to counteract feminism with the ironic use of a sports metaphor: "we strongly believed and believe today that women are not a political interest group," but she also noted that "in this credentialist age . . . there's a game going on and the other side fielded a team and we didn't" (Interview with Blair, October 30, 1998, Arlington, VA). She argues that feminists are playing "femball" (Interview with Blair, October 30, 1998, Arlington, VA) and in order for the IWF to compete, it has to act according to the terms established by the team that got there first -- feminists. The IWF's Sally Satel summarized this sentiment most succinctly: "I see IWF as largely a reactive group. If it weren't for the feminists, it wouldn't exist" (Interview with Satel, February 17, 1999, Washington, D.C.).

Like the IWF's claims about countering feminist organizations, the CWA was born to compete with feminists generally, and the National Organization for Women (NOW) specifically. Seriah Rein, CWA's New Jersey Area Representative, argued that "it is in the public's interest to maintain our identity as a women's organization and as a counterpoint to what NOW is doing specifically" (Interview with Rein, August 6, 1998, Paramus NJ). Similarly, CWA's Kenda Bartlett related:

They hear the Patricia Irelands, the Eleanor Smeals, the Kate Michelmans, all of them saying we represent women in America, what American women think. And these women are saying this is not what I believe and not what I think . . . so they have looked for a place where they can get information that states their point of view, and they have found that in CWA (Phone Interview with Bartlett, November 4, 1998).¹⁹

¹⁹ The women Bartlett is referring to are the President of NOW, a founder of the FMF

As countermovement women's organizations formed to challenge feminism, making representative claims as women is critical for these groups. It enables them to directly contest feminist claims of representing women while seeking to establish themselves as legitimate representatives of women's interests. And, as *women's* organizations, they are not only able to fight feminists on their terms, but they may be better suited than male-led conservative organizations to appeal to other women who see their lives being represented by women like themselves. CWA founder Beverly LaHaye puts it this way:

We women need heroines. We want to see living examples of Christian women who stand against the immoral, godless, feminist teaching (LaHaye 1993, 80).

A Media Voice for Women

and the Executive Director of NARAL, respectively.

Mass media are important outlets for movements and countermovements. Television, radio, print and the Internet enable organizations to reach members, potential participants and policymakers. But the media are also favorite targets of disdain for many conservatives, with critics claiming that liberals have a stronghold on this institution. Not surprisingly, then, the CWA and the IWF express concern and anger that conservative women's organizations are dismissed by the media (LaHaye 1993). Like their conservative counterparts, these conservative women's organizations use various media to get publicity and enable "fair" reporting; but they also interact with the media as women to challenge feminist organizations and the media's representation of women's identities and interests.²⁰

For example, Anita Blair says this of IWF's founding as a woman's organization: I think it was a reaction to particularly the media surrounding the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill and the Year of the Woman. At that time you couldn't pick up a newspaper or listen to a radio or television program without hearing women think this or women think that. And invariably, it was a left-wing women's perspective. And most of us . . . felt that it was not at all a woman's perspective, because we were women and we had a different take on these things (Interview with Blair, October 30, 1998, Arlington, VA).

Indeed, one of the IWF's first projects was to publish a Media Directory of Women Experts. The directory, according to the IWF's website, lists 300 "knowledgeable women who can provide *balanced* commentary on timely subjects ranging from "Aviation" to "Workplace Issues." As IWF Board member Wendy Gramm noted: I always think it's great to have women as spokesmen . . . Even though we believe that we are not crazy about having hyphenated

²⁰ While both organizations criticize the media for lack of representation, their claims are not necessarily well-founded. For example, the organization Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) cites that in 1995 "the *New York Times* published six opinion pieces by IWF leaders, the *Wall Street Journal* published five, the *Washington Post* three . . . [D]uring the same period those same papers chose to publish no commentary on any subject by anyone from NOW . . . or the Feminist Majority Foundation" (Flanders 1996).

Americans . . . But on the other hand we have found that for our organization that it has been helpful to have a woman going up there and saying something about this issue or that . . . people may be more receptive if they hear it from a woman (Phone interview with Gramm, January 20, 1999).

Gramm, herself a “hyphenated American” (Asian-American), sharply illustrates the tension felt by the IWF because of its decision to strategically invoke gender identity (Spivak 1993). Since attributions based on gender and/or race conflict with laissez-faire conservative ideology, the organization’s leaders profess discomfort with making identity-based claims. In a move that seems contradictory to this philosophy, however, the IWF does invoke gender identity by making claims as women in the media.

To garner more media attention, the CWA created a more public role for its former President, Carmen Pate. Several staff told me that the CWA decided to move Pate into the role of spokesperson to get a woman’s face in the media to represent them. “We are trying hard now with Carmen . . . to present that to the media, because we are not getting the media coverage that NOW gets. And we’ve got to stop that. We have 500,000 members, NOW has 60-70,000 and they get all the attention,” bemoaned CWA Board member Jan Roberto (Interview with Roberto, September 25, 1998, Alexandria, VA). CWA President Carmen Pate summed it up this way:

Who represents me out there, is there a voice for women? . . . We are that voice . . . I think that probably the niche that we have is the fact that yes, we are pro-family, but we are women speaking out on those issues (Interview with Pate, August 18, 1998, Washington, D.C.).

The CWA’s Rosaline Bush also noted that “[w]e feel that women need spokesmen. We do not believe that NOW speaks for us” (Interview with Bush, October 18, 1998, Washington, D.C.). Indeed, the IWF’s Gramm’s and the CWA’s Bush’s use of the term “spokesmen” here, points to the invocation of conservative ideology for these groups, even though they are making claims about the need for women to be active in the public sphere. For them, choosing the term “spokeswomen” would be a nod to

feminists who have long called for gender sensitive and inclusive language (Spender 1985; Lakoff 1976).

The CWA and IWF believe that having women publicly speak for them gives them the credibility, attention and legitimacy to challenge feminists and represent women's interests. And, because they are women challenging other women's political views, the media are eager to give them access; controversy generates interest and viewership (Huddy 1997).

Women as Policy Activists

Like the media, policymaking entities are important targets, as they are also institutions through which women's identities and interests get constructed and defined. Both organizations articulate that having women spokespeople and constituents lends legitimacy to the policies for which they advocate. It is more difficult for conservatives to be attacked as "anti-woman" if women are making the political claims. The CWA and the IWF are well-aware of the salience of gender identity in this context. When asked by a Washington Post reporter why "antifeminists" should form a women's organization, IWF's Executive Director Barbara Ledeen said

[Y]ou can't have white guys saying you don't need affirmative action. We feel we have credibility to say "not all women think the way you may expect" (Rosenfeld 1995).

She also noted in our interview:

It might help Republican men to wake up and smell the coffee. So yeah, we do provide political cover for them, I mean, you can't go and attack Patricia Ireland and be a man. But you can go and attack her and be a woman (Interview with Ledeen, October 30, 1998, Washington, D.C.).

And, in discussing the impact of women lobbying against abortion, a CWA staffer recited similar thoughts to Ledeen's:

Whereas if the answer is coming from a woman, it is likely to carry more credibility . . . coming from the mouth of a woman it would carry more weight (Phone interview with Arrington, October 14, 1998).

In addition, the CWA's former lobbyist argued that because men feel they will be attacked by feminists and, perhaps the "liberal" media, women make better spokespeople on conservative issues: Sometimes it takes women to stand up and stomp their feet and say enough. This is affecting our home, this is affecting our children, and we want something changed. The Equal Rights Amendment was a perfect opportunity for that to happen; because that was so much perceived as a woman's fight and a woman's battle. Men were so scared to speak out, they still are . . . But we are able to walk into a [congressional] office and say we represent 500,000 women in this country. That rings a bell (Interview with MacLeod, August 18, 1998, Washington, D.C.).

Thus, the CWA, with its 500,000 members, can also make claims on behalf of its large grassroots constituency of women. Kenda Bartlett, a CWA staff member also discussed this effect:

When our lobbyists go to Washington D.C. or our volunteers go [to Capitol Hill], and they say they represent the largest women's public policy organization in the United States, that has clout (Phone interview with Bartlett, November 4, 1998).

Given the (false) stereotype of feminist women as man-haters, it benefits feminist organizations to get public support from men for their policy concerns. The CWA and IWF however, rely on just the opposite approach to gain legitimacy as representatives for their issues. For these conservative women's organizations, who advocate for policies that many feminists and liberals see as "antiwoman," having women speak should give them broader appeal among conservative constituencies and allies and policymakers and the public.

A Distinct Woman's Perspective?

Since both organizations consider the differences between men and women to be natural, one would expect organizational beliefs that reflect these values, with such claims that women's organizations are necessary because women have different needs and viewpoints than men. This perspective, for example, has motivated some women to engage in political activism because of what they consider to be their unique experiences and interests as mothers (Jetter et al. 1997). That is, that substantive will

follow from descriptive representation. While this generally holds true for the CWA, it is not the case for the IWF. Why this difference?

Despite their similarities in opinion about gender differences, the CWA and the IWF do represent different constituencies. As noted, the CWA's base is comprised mostly of "social conservatives" who favor "traditional" gender roles (Klatch 1987). The IWF's looser network of associates does not come to politics through religion, and instead is more activated by its libertarian or "laissez-faire" (Klatch 1987) views on economic and government policies. The need to appeal to, and mobilize, their differing conservative constituencies, mediates the extent to which these organizations see the correlation between descriptive and substantive representation, or more specifically gender identity and women's interests, as relevant to their political strategies.

The CWA believes that women's unique perspectives and viewpoints qualify them to make group-based political claims. One CWA staffer summed it up this way: I think that the true woman, mother, family member's voice, needs to be heard more than it is . . . So I talk about women because I think that it is important, but we definitely view the family as why we're doing what we're doing, but with the woman's vantage point (Interview with Franceski, October 29, 1998, Washington, D.C.).

Both organizations believe that having women speak for them gives them credibility to represent women and challenge feminists. It is entirely different, however, to say that women's messages are different from men's because of their biological differences and differing social locations as wives and mothers. While each organization favors a "messenger" who is female, only the CWA claims that its identity as a women's organization also hinges on women's differences from men. While the IWF does not disagree that women are different from men, it proclaims that the only differences that justify its forming into a woman's organizations, are the differences among women, not between women and men. As IWF's Anita Blair told me:

[W]e just simply wanted to show, to coin a phrase, that gender is not

determinism. You know, your sex does not dictate your political views. So the IWF in particular wanted to present another voice. We wanted to be a voice for women who had different views (Interview with Blair, October 30, 1998, Arlington, VA).

In fact, using gender as a primary organizing principle clearly created tensions for the organization. One IWF associate noted this about the organization's leaders: [T]hey come from a philosophical background that leads them to believe that they are interested in what the argument is, not who the deliverer of the argument is. So this ghettoization into a woman's issue is hard, and the challenge was finding people to actually run the organization, and in a sense *limit* themselves (Anonymous 1999; emphasis added).

Because of the IWF's strong belief in individualism and distaste for identity politics, it has to justify its organizing as a women's group. As noted earlier, it does so in highly strategic terms, conceding to feminists the relative value of acting as women. Nonetheless, the IWF considers gender-based identity activism to be "limiting" in that it has the potential to exclude men and laissez-faire conservative women who do not see their interests as collectively-defined and determined. For the IWF, descriptive representation is often invoked, but not necessarily as a direct correlate with substantive representation. While this may seem paradoxical, it exemplifies a striking tension produced by being a countermovement women's organization.

Conservative Ideology Trumps Gender

While gender identity matters to the CWA and the IWF, there are times when both repudiate its significance. Given findings that women in elected office prioritize women's interests (Swers 1998; Dodson, et al. 1995; Welch 1985; Thomas 1994) I expected that the CWA and IWF would want to increase the number of women in political office to heighten attention to women's issues in general. Neither organization, however, devotes time nor resources to increasing the number of women in public office.

Given the IWF's criticism of the relationship between identity and interests in other contexts, its views about women in public office are not that surprising. But the CWA also denies that women elected officials would be more likely than men to bring different *policy* concerns to a legislative body's agenda. It argues for supporting candidates and elected officials based on issues, not identity. There are several possible explanations for this position.

First, the push to increase more women in office appears to be too similar to affirmative action -- a policy that the CWA and many other conservative organizations, oppose.²¹ The CWA's Seriah Rein noted:

I don't think you need to have cancer to be able to articulate how to prevent it and how to deal with it and how to treat it. I don't believe in quotas period. I know some men who can more effectively express the concerns of women than a lot of women I know. I'm totally gender unbiased on this. I don't think you should have a certain percentage of women for the sake of having women, I think that is the big disservice we did with Blacks in affirmative action . . . I feel the same way about women being represented in Congress (Interview with Rein, August 6, 1998, Paramus, NJ).

The CWA's Carmen Pate articulated a similar concern:

I think it goes back to that having the best person in the job, a person who reflects our values, whether it be a man or a woman. I think it's important that we support the person. Our organization is a bipartisan organization, but we are always standing with those candidates who believe as we do. . . So if it takes a woman to do that, great. If it takes a man to do that, great. We just want the best person (Interview with Pate, August 18, 1998, Washington, D.C.).

Second, as noted, empirical studies of women elected officials suggest that women tend to be more liberal than their male counterparts within the same party (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Thomas 1994). Given these findings, the CWA may not be in any hurry to call for the election of more women to elected office. There are already many men in public office who support its policy agenda.

²¹ In addition to the IWF, these organizations include the Center for Equal Opportunity, the American Enterprise Institute and the Campaign for a Color-Blind America.

Nonetheless, while the CWA does not embrace the idea of increasing women in office, its former lobbyist, Laurel MacLeod, did acknowledge that some women elected officials may have more credibility on its issues than men (1998). Thus, the CWA may seek out like-minded women in office to speak on behalf of its issues at key times during a legislative contest. As MacLeod confided:

If you had more women in Congress like Linda Smith and Helen Chenoweth, who are pro-life and are willing to go down and speak out, and on some issues really give courage to the men, I would see that as an enormous and very positive change (Interview with MacLeod, August 18, 1998, Washington, D.C.).

It is somewhat surprising that these organizations do not push for more women in political office. The “impact on women in public office” literature does find that a range of women bring “women’s traditional areas of concern”²² to the policy making process (Dodson et al. 1995; Dodson and Carroll 1991). Since the particulars of these “traditional areas of concern” were not defined by researchers, it is unclear exactly what policy *positions* elected women would take on them. Thus conservative women’s organizations might benefit from conservative women’s election to office. That they have chosen *not* to actively encourage and support the election of more women to public office, suggests the need as countermovement women’s organizations to appeal to and mobilize their conservative allies, at the risk of not co-opting a successful feminist strategy.

Conclusions

Both organizations consider gender identity to be an organizational resource for them. My research suggests that factors associated with being countermovement women’s organizations, help determine the form in, and extent to which, gender identity

²²26. I use the term “traditional areas of concern” here to mirror the language used by Dodson and Carroll in their study (1991). They use the term “traditional” to reflect national public opinion among women in the U.S. over the past few decades and thus the meaning of “traditional” here is limited in its historical and cultural manifestations.

is invoked. The CWA holds a more essentialist view of women's identities and interests and promotes these beliefs not only by positioning women in key leadership positions, but by (mostly) advocating for a woman's perspective that is distinct from men's. In so doing, it signifies women as different from men. Consistent with its socially conservative ideology and desire to contest feminist representational claims, the CWA, then, positions itself as an organization that speaks to the "true" nature of women's interests.

The IWF is more self-consciously essentialist (Spivak 1993) in its deployment of the category "woman," and mostly invokes gender identity to raise the question of *which* women's interests are getting represented. In its case, identity politics, and more specifically the use of descriptive representation, is a reactive gesture, one meant to counter feminist political actions. It emanates not from the belief that women are different from men and thus have particular interests, but on the need as a countermovement women's organization to "risk" essentialism to achieve the political goal of proving feminists to be wrong in their claims about women's interests.

Both organizations also reify the problem of relying on descriptive and descriptive-substantive representation. As many feminists have argued (Butler 1992; Mohanty 1991; Collins 1990; Lefkowitz and Withorn 1986) assuming a correlation between identity and interests elides differences among those within a group. When conservative women's organizations make representational claims as women, whether to counter feminists and/or speak to women's "true" nature, they suggest a homogeneity of interests and experiences that may not exist even among conservative women. And, although the IWF critiques its own use of gender identity, this does not nullify the power that it has as a national organization to promote particular narratives about women's interests.

My research also points to questions for future studies. Through engagement with identity politics, both feminist and conservative women battle over whose stories about women are most representative. And, given that these narratives about women's

lives have very real policy implications, the battle over their authenticity is quite valid. But there is another critical aspect to these competing narratives. Shane Phelan suggests that “[r]ather than arguing with one another about which story is true . . . we must examine the consequences of our stories in terms of power and change” (1993, 773). That is, what meanings do these differing accounts of women’s lives have? In this spirit, future research could investigate if and why conservative women’s organizations may (or may not) be more effective and successful than feminists. What impact might the CWA and IWF have on the policies for which they advocate? Does speaking as women, as they claim, really help them achieve their goals? Are their stories about women more credible and plausible than those offered by feminists? Given that the media do give them access and that these organizations have close ties to powerful members of Congress and the new Republican Administration, we should expect that they will indeed be taken seriously as policy advocates for women.

Invoking gender identity enables the CWA and IWF to establish themselves as legitimate representatives of women’s interests. Thus, the CWA’s and IWF’s activism poses a challenge to feminists as they strive to sway policymakers, mobilize members and influence the media and public. Their acting as and for women, however, also reinforces the feminist contention that women’s issues and interests are relevant to politics.