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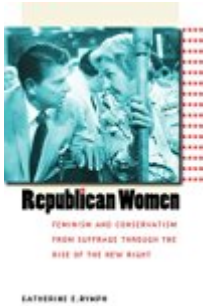
Catherine E. Rymph. *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xiii + 341 pp. $59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2984-4.



Reviewed by Aaron Haberman

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During the last fifteen years the so-called right turn in American politics, which began in the late 1970s and culminated in 1994 with the Republican Party's capture of both Houses of Congress, has been the subject of intense scholarly inquiry. There exist numerous monographs chronicling the intellectual origins of modern conservatism, the rise of prominent Republican politicians, and the socioeconomic and cultural changes that helped contribute to the GOP's triumphs. More recently, historians have shifted their focus to grassroots conservative movements with a special emphasis on the role women played in the conservative political ascendance. Catherine Rymph's *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right* adds much to this new literature with a sweeping and detailed account of women's political involvement in the Republican Party from roughly 1920 to 1980.

Rymph's book examines the "evolving efforts of women to establish themselves in the GOP, the political socialization efforts and cultural practices of grassroots women's organizations, and the relationship between women's thinking about power and their thinking about party ideology over the course of sixty years" (p. 7). She is particularly interested in the challenges faced by women, who upon receiving the franchise in 1920, had to make a choice between integrating into the various political parties "on the same terms as men or organizing separately as women" (p. 3). Men controlled the party structures, which meant that if women were to ever have a chance at future leadership positions they would frequently have to subordinate or compromise their advocacy of women's rights. The more women organized separately and pursued an active rights-based agenda, the less chance they would have to influence the party's direction. This conflict would define women's experiences within the GOP from the 1920s to the 1980s, leading to tension not only between men and women in the party, but among Republican women as well.

Rymph frames much of the book around the development of the National Federation of Republican Women's Clubs (NFRWC). Founded in 1937, the NFRWC sought to instill party loyalty in Re-

publican women who engaged in political activities with numerous local Republican women's clubs. These clubs, many of which were founded in the 1920s and 1930s, provided an avenue for female political participation. They educated women on the important political issues of the day, and pushed their members to vote for particular candidates who were sympathetic to the women's rights agenda. Often the clubs stood at odds with the mainstream party over matters such as inclusion of more female representatives on key party committees, but also over political issues including greater U.S. involvement in World War II. Under the leadership of Marion Martin, who from 1937 to 1946 served as the first Republican National Committee assistant in charge of women's activities, the NFRWC attempted to reign in the influence of the local clubs that took positions counter to party doctrine. Martin believed that women should not present their political concerns as different from or morally superior to men's--a tactic long used by women engaged in political and social activism before suffrage. Rather, Martin wanted women to be loyal Republicans above all, in exchange for which the GOP promised to elevate some women to key leadership positions in the future. In her years as leader of the NFRWC, Martin struggled both to break the influence of the independent women's clubs and garner more leadership positions for women. As Rymph points out, most Republican men considered women's presence in the party important, but believed that their duties should be confined to political "housekeeping," which included voter drives and election-day poll work. By promising total loyalty to the GOP, Martin essentially sacrificed what little leverage she had with the male leaders, who almost never acted on their promises to elevate women within the party.

One of Martin's successors, Elizabeth Farrington, who headed the NFRWC from 1948 to 1952, had more success in bringing women under the organization's fold by adopting rhetorical strategies opposite to Martin's. Farrington emphasized the separateness of women's issues and the moral superiority of women. This generated more membership in the NFRWC and enhanced political activity by women on behalf of the GOP during the late 1940s and 1950s. Yet, according to Rymph, in one of her most interesting arguments, these new strategies resulted in the emergence of newly politicized women from the far Right, who in time would become increasingly impatient "with the moderate (or 'modern') Republicanism that became ascendant in the 1950s" (p. 100). It is not surprising then that when Joseph McCarthy made his famous speech in Wheeling, West Virginia accusing the State Department of harboring known communists, he did so at a Republican Women's Club, where Rymph claims he "found a sympathetic audience" (p. 113).

Much of the second half of the book delves into the rise of these conservative women, who, frustrated with the GOP's moderate leadership, decided not to leave the party, but instead to take it over. As Rymph argues, the struggle between conservative and moderate Republican women mirrored the larger conflicts that raged within the GOP from 1960 to 1980. The story of the Right's takeover of the GOP has been well told elsewhere and Rymph does not break a lot of new ground. The author, however, like Don Critchlow in his 2005 biography of Phyllis Schlafly, makes a strong case for the essential role that women at the grassroots played in the conservative triumph.

Rymph's greatest scholarly contribution is her coverage of the moderate and feminist women who challenged Schlafly and her conservative allies in the battle for the soul of the party. Because the political Right and the Republican Party are considered virtually synonymous today, it is easy to forget that the GOP was once home to many feminists. Indeed, Mary Louise Smith, who became the first woman to chair the Republican National Committee, was both pro-choice and an outspoken supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Her rise to the head of the RNC in

1975 demonstrated the strength that feminists could wield in the party. That same year, Republican feminists formed their own organization to lobby Republican leaders for inclusion of their agenda in official party platforms. The presence of these Republican feminists illustrates the complex interaction between gender consciousness and political identity that occurred for many women in the 1970s.

Republican feminists still sided with the GOP on a host of issues, including foreign policy and the size and role of the federal government. These women favored the ERA and abortion rights, believing that the GOP had always stood for equal rights, dating back to Abraham Lincoln's freeing of the slaves. Ultimately, the rising conservative forces within the Republican Party overwhelmed the feminists. Phyllis Schlafly and countless newly politicized conservative Christian women drowned out the GOP's moderate voices (both male and female) during the late 1970s. Though many female moderates supported Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election, their agenda was largely ignored during his administration.

The book's shortcomings are few. While the book is a study of women's experiences in the Republican Party, it would have been useful for Rymph to have included more analysis of the Democratic Party and its relationship with feminists. Rymph notes, for example, that the Democratic leadership became more receptive to feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s and that Democratic feminists were more aggressive than their Republican counterparts in pushing their agenda. Rymph, however, provides little explanation for these occurrences other than to cite noted feminist scholar Jo Freeman's argument that Democrats "were traditionally comfortable with the concept of politics as a coalition of competing interest groups," while Republicans "had historically discouraged expressions of group concerns, leaving little space for GOP feminists to make appeals to gender identity" (p. 210). The problem with this argument is that both parties had dramatically changed over the course of the twentieth century and it is unlikely that either by the 1970s were operating based on older party cultural traditions. Rather, it would seem, demographic shifts in both party's bases--Republicans gaining greater influence in the Sunbelt while the Democratic Party became more aligned with the eastern academic elite--account for the party's differences on feminism. This is clearly an area that needs more scholarly exploration. Another weakness is that Rymph barely mentions the Vietnam War. It would have been interesting to know to what extent, if any, Vietnam divided conservative and feminist Republicans, or if their conflict was solely rooted in differences over social and cultural issues like abortion and the ERA.

The book's strengths far outweigh its weaknesses. Rymph has done fine archival work, yielding valuable portraits of women leaders like Marion Martin, Elizabeth Farrington, and Mary Louise Smith, who are not well known. Having combed through countless scrapbooks, fliers, and bulletins, Rymph was able to provide an inside look into many grassroots Republican organizations. Her book should serve as a model for future studies of grassroots political activism. In the end, this book, which covers the largely overlooked post-suffrage period in women's political history will be of great use to students of women's history, as well as specialists on twentieth-century politics and the rise of modern conservatism.

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