

## Conservative religious women continue to shape Republican politics

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 14, 2009



Gov. Sarah Palin gives her resignation speech in Fairbanks, Alaska, July 26. (Anchorage Daily News/MCT/Bill Roth)

### Analysis

In all the commentary about the now former governor of Alaska, some of it comic, much of it trivial, a basic fact has been overlooked: Sarah Palin has come to represent a vital and vibrant constituency in the Republican Party -- religious women -- and they aren't going anywhere anytime soon.

The religious right came to be personified by male preachers like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, but it was built by religiously motivated women who led the fights against sex education and the Equal Rights Amendment.

There are many tributaries that formed the religious right. Evangelical television preachers, such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, have antecedents in the revivalists of the 19th century and of Billy Sunday at the start of the 20th, Charles Fuller's "Old-Fashioned Revival Hour," and Billy Graham's sometimes cozy relationship with politicians. But as the counterculture of the 1960s took shape, it was women who led the conservative pushback.

In 1965, a new sex education curriculum was introduced in Anaheim, Calif. It was infused with the pragmatism of John Dewey and the insights, such as they were, of modern psychology: The objective of the curriculum was to get children to make their own value judgments, not to distinguish right from wrong according to traditional moral categories, and some of the content was very explicit. The program received little notice until, at the dinner table one night in 1968, Eleanor Howe's twin sons asked for a note excusing them from the class. Their older sister grew quiet and Howe asked why she had never discussed the class. Her daughter told her that the teacher had instructed the class not to tell their parents about what was discussed because they would be sure to be upset. In this, the teacher was emphatically correct and Howe's anger did not dissipate when she went to the school and read through the materials used in the class.

Howe distributed the materials to a group of mothers she knew and they descended upon the school board. Foolishly, the board refused to hear from Howe, which garnered much media attention and shaped the way

others would view their challenge to educational authorities. School officials who were condescending only gave the women an additional gripe, one that persists to this day: that "elites" hold views that are antithetical to traditional American values.

The charge that elites in the educational system were undermining the country was not that different from Sen. Joseph McCarthy's charge that communists in the State Department were selling America out to the Russians. Indeed, the similarity became explicit when Howe and her group began showing a movie, "Pavlov's Children," that argued that communists were using Pavlovian conditioning techniques in sex education to make the children of America susceptible to totalitarian influences. For good measure, the movie charged UNESCO with facilitating the effort, adding an anti-United Nations bias that is still common in conservative circles. But Howe perceived a remedy: school board elections. In 1969, conservative, anti-sex education candidates took two of three open seats on the board. Soon the superintendent was forced out and the sex education program was killed.

Conservative women, especially evangelical women, had not usually become involved in politics. Politics was for the men, and even some male evangelicals worried about the corrupting influence of political involvement. But for the conservative woman, it was the government that was changing the rules, moving onto her turf of educating her children in good values. When disgust with the public school system led many families to opt for homeschooling, it was the mothers who did the teaching.

That defense of home and hearth turned into a political mantra that remains at the heart of the GOP's conservative appeals. When Palin questioned Obama's love for America because he "pals around with terrorists," she was reiterating the conservative charge that elites were disloyal to America. In her resignation speech, when she disparaged New York, Washington and Los Angeles by name, contrasting them with "real America," she was stoking the same fires. And when conservatives charge that Obama's health care reform amounts to socialism, they are rebranding the anticommunist charge, which needed rebranding after communism collapsed. So, for all the changes that have occurred in the world of politics since Howe first went to a school board meeting -- the emergence of PACs, the rise of environmental issues, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Vietnam War and prosecution of two wars in the Persian Gulf, the ready accessibility of computers and the Internet, which revolutionized everything from re-districting to fundraising -- despite all those changes, the "pro-family, pro-America" refrain has been consistent throughout, with "pro-life" added after the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*.

In Charleston, W.Va., the issue that brought matters to a head was the introduction of certain books to the literary arts curriculum. Again, the hero of the conservatives was a woman, "Sweet Alice" Moore. As in Anaheim, socioeconomic differences stoked the fires of the culture war, as the largely urban sections of the school district supported the inclusion of a wide variety of books while mothers from the suburbs and rural coal-mining towns were appalled. When Moore confronted the superintendent of schools about the books she found objectionable, he replied, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Moore, but there's absolutely nothing you can do about it." In fact, Moore organized a boycott of schools that was supported by 10,000 coal miners who went on strike to support her efforts. The city was shut down and the school board caved.

Politicians took a long time to understand the power of these conservative religious women. Connie Marshner, who had been active with Young Americans for Freedom, recalls a letter-writing campaign to get President Richard Nixon to veto a child-development bill in 1971. They were not sure where all the letters had come from. "All over our country there were little clusters of evangelical and fundamentalist moms' groups -- and it was mainly mothers," Marshner later recalled. "They were unstructured, they didn't have an organization; they were just in touch with each other, and they were beginning to be aware that there really was a problem." In the pre-Facebook era, Marshner did not know what to call what we now know as social networking.

No issue came to epitomize the strength of conservative religious women as the defeat of the Equal Rights

Amendment. Opposition to the ERA galvanized religious women across the country. Phyllis Schlafly, a GOP veteran from the days of the Goldwater campaign in 1964, was highly visible in the effort, but it was the social networks of churchwomen that killed the effort to ratify the ERA. In Oklahoma, religious women would bake bread and deliver it to the legislators. The head of the group, Women Who Want to be Women, Beverly Findlay, composed a poem to accompany the loaves:

Women Who Want to be Women  
Have made this bread for you  
Because they love being homemakers  
All the year through ...  
So enjoy your bread  
Appreciate it too  
Cause unless the ERA is stopped  
The Homemaker may be YOU!

Again, the government was perceived as changing the rules of the game, forcing traditional women to change their ways. These women were defending their turf, and if that meant baking bread, writing letters and running for the school board, they were prepared to do it.

In 2008, the last Republican challenger to John McCain in his quest for the nomination was pastor-turned-politician Mike Huckabee. Huckabee's campaign had little money and was organized through the homeschooling movement, a social network that turned out to be a workable substitute for the millions of dollars raised by Mitt Romney and Rudy Giuliani. That network consists almost entirely of women. In Huckabee they saw one of their champions, but in Sarah Palin they see one of their own.

When a newscaster speaks of Palin in a condescending tone, Howe can recall what it felt like to be told that the school board did not have time to listen to her complaints. When a rival suggests Palin's controversial personality makes it impossible for her to win, Moore hears the Charleston school superintendent telling her there is nothing she could do to restrict the books being introduced into the schools. When Palin is criticized for being divisive, Schlafly, who burst on the national stage in 1964 with her pro-Goldwater book, *A Choice Not an Echo*, can see in a Palin candidacy a new battle in her lifelong effort to rid the GOP of moderates.

No one knows what Palin's intentions for 2012 are, perhaps not even the former governor herself. But if she chooses to run, I would not bet against her. The women who built the modern religious right are quite capable of building a nationwide campaign. The first social networking group to exert political influence is still networking and they don't only exchange bread recipes anymore.

*Michael Sean Winters is the author of Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats.*

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