FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS AND CANDIDATE PREFERENCE AMONG AMERICAN WOMEN, 1972–1988

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Recent research has suggested that women with a feminist consciousness differ from non-feminists in their attitudes and values. This paper investigates the impact of feminist consciousness on candidate preference and vote choice in presidential elections from 1972 to 1988. In those elections in which candidates took divergent positions on feminist issues, feminism was a significant predictor of candidate preference after controls for demographic variables, political attitudes, and partisanship. In elections in which the candidates took similar positions, however, feminism did not affect candidate preference. The 1980 election was the exception: in that election, feminists cast reluctant ballots for Carter, while rating John Anderson higher.

Over the past decade, scholarly research has focused on the sources and implications of gender and feminist consciousness (Gurin, 1985; Klein, 1984; Miller, Hildreth, and Simmons, 1986; Tolleson Rinehart, 1988). Less research has investigated the consequences of feminist consciousness. Conover (1988), and Conover and Sapiro (1991) have demonstrated that feminist consciousness influences the political attitudes of women in the U.S., and Wilcox (1991) has shown a similar pattern among women in western Europe. Yet to date, scholars have not investigated the impact of feminist consciousness on candidate choice.

If feminist consciousness affects political attitudes, it is likely that it will affect political behavior as well. Feminist women may be more likely to support certain types of candidates than their nonfeminist counterparts. First, feminist women may be more likely to support candidates because of their social location. Feminists are better educated, more affluent, and more likely to work outside the home than nonfeminist women, and all of...
these factors may incline them to support different candidates. In the general public, increasing levels of education and especially income are associated with greater support for Republican candidates. Some of the effects of social location may be mediated through specific policy issues: women who work outside the home are likely to be more supportive of public funding for child care, equal pay for equal work, family leave, and other policies that help women. This issue-based impact of social location might lead feminist women to greater support of Democratic candidates, who are more likely to support such policies.

Second, it is possible that feminist women will vote differently because they differ from other women on general ideology and partisanship. Other studies have established that feminist women are more liberal than non-feminists on a range of issues, especially those that concern war and peace or sympathy for the disadvantaged, and are more likely to be Democrats (Conover, 1988; Wilcox, 1991; Cook and Wilcox, 1991). Conover (1988) has argued that a feminist consciousness sensitizes women to their basic feminine values, which implies that feminist women would favor candidates who are more supportive of aid for the disadvantaged and less supportive of military expenditures. This would suggest that a feminist issue agenda is broadly based in a variety of issue areas.

It is also possible that feminist women will cast their ballots more frequently for candidates who support women's rights, or issues of special relevance to women. Some of the elections between 1972 and 1988 have provided the voters with clear choices on feminist issues, while in one of the elections the candidates tended to echo one another. In those elections in which the candidates took divergent positions on women's rights, a feminist vote is possible (see Page, 1978, for a general discussion of this point). Between 1972 and 1988, feminist and antifeminist activists gained influence in shaping the parties' platforms, which resulted in an increasing polarization of platform positions on feminist issues.

This paper will investigate the impact of feminist consciousness on candidate evaluations and vote choice. The first section will develop a measure of feminist consciousness that can be used in the 1972–1988 NES data. Next, the paper will focus on the different positions taken by presidential candidates between 1972 and 1988 on women's issues, and determine whether the public perceived these differences. Third, the impact of feminist consciousness on candidate affect in each of the presidential elections will be examined, first in bivariate analysis and then after a series of multivariate controls. Fourth, the issue basis of feminist candidate evaluations will be explored. Finally, the paper will focus on a seeming paradox—that substantial numbers of feminists voted for Reagan in 1980 and 1984.