

Did Ferraro's Candidacy Reduce Public Support for Feminism?

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Increasing support for equal rights for women has been one of the chief components of the general liberal movement over the last four decades (Smith, 1982). Public approval for greater female involvement in politics and the labor force have increased tremendously over the last forty years and have shown steady, near linear growth since the early 1970s. (See Table 1A for marginals and Table 1B for modelled trends.) Steadily that is until between 1983 and 1985 (Table 1C). Over this interval expressed willingness to vote for a women showed its first significant drop and similar but smaller reversals occurred on the suitability of women for politics and a role for women in running the country.

While the drop in support for voting for a woman for president and the two other political feminism items is not large, it is anomalous because 1) both linear extrapolations from pre-1985 trends and cohort-education models of change predicted an increase in feminist support from 1983 to 1985 and 2) the one non-political feminist item on approval of a woman working showed a strong rise in support for the feminist position (Table 1A, B, C).

Looking for a factor that would decrease support for political feminism, but not reverse the rising support for equal economic rights for women, we formulated the hypothesis that the candidacy of Geraldine Ferraro for Vice-President may have caused a negative reaction leading to a drop in support of political equality for women. Before Ferraro's candidacy the political feminism questions were abstract and theoretical without either embodiment or expectation of short-term fulfillment. Negative reaction might be expected among groups that 1) did not like the Ferraro embodiment of the idea of unspecified women running for president or running the country and 2) that were not strongly committed to the idea of equal political rights for women and therefore balked when reality faced them square in the face.

The hypothesis that lower support for political feminism resulted from a political reaction to Ferraro is examined in Tables 2 and 3. We identified two political groups, Republicans and Reagan voters who presumably favored different types of woman candidates than New York liberals. Table 2 shows that on all three political feminism measures support dropped the most among Republicans. This pattern is pleasing to the eye, but not to the chi-square which indicates that the interactions are not statistically significant. In Table 3A the same comparison is replicated for presidential vote in the 1980 election. Once again the expected pattern emerges with the drop in support greatest among Reagan voters. In addition on the presidential question the interaction is statistically significant² The difference is even more striking if we compare Reagan and non-Reagan voters in the 1980 and 1984 elections. All of the decline in support for political feminism is accounted for by people who voted for Reagan in both elections.³ When we examine the individual-level results of support for political feminism by vote in the 1980 and 1984 elections (Table 3C), we see that support is lowest for voters who cast their ballot in 1980 for Carter and then voted for Reagan in 1984 and highest (except on the President question) among those who voted for Reagan in 1980 and switched to Mondale in 1984. This suggests that non-feminists moved to Reagan in 1984 while feminists abandoned Reagan and chose Mondale instead (thereby bucking the general movement towards Reagan among voters from 1980 to 1984). Altogether, the party identification and voting comparisons support the hypothesis that the drop in support for political feminism was centered among those who politically found Ferraro an unattractive example of women in politics.

Next, we identified groups that were relatively weak in their support for political feminism. Support may have dropped among these groups not so

much because of political antipathy towards Ferraro as because more members of these groups were not fully reconciled to women actually gaining a substantial amount of power. The main low support groups identified in the literature (Smith, 1976; Cherlin and Walters, 1981; Astle, 1978; Welch and Sigelman, 1982; Schreiber, 1978; Spritze and Huber, 1980; and Smith, 1985) are housewives vs. working women, the less educated, members of older cohorts, and Southerners.

As Table 4 indicates, interactions in the anticipated direction appear on labor force status with women with little or no participation in paid employment showing sharper declines than full-time employed women. The interaction approach^s significance, but falls_s short. (We have included figures for men because of the "natural" assumption that men support women's rights less than women. This is not the case empirically however and as such sex does not actually meet the criteria set by the hypothesis.) Education works better than sex (Table 4B). The interactions are all in the right direction and on one item it is statistically reliable. Cohort follows the pattern predicted by the hypothesis in two of three cases, but the interactions are small and clearly unreliable (Table 4C). Only region fails to show any sign of the anticipated interaction (Table 4D). The interactions are small and uniformly in the wrong direction. Overall, groups that are less supportive of women's rights tend to show the largest drops with more pro-feminist groups showing little or no decline. The interactions are significant only in one case, however so the findings are statistically tentative.

We examined various multivariate models to test whether the political and realization reactions were independent explanations for the drop in support for political feminism. The data support^{the} _A model that both hypotheses have independent effects, but given the case base and the size of the

interactions the data are stretched too far to produce significant results and thus we can not favor this conclusion with statistical assurance. However, the overall pattern of the results do suggest that Ferraro's candidacy suppressed support for political feminism both because of political antipathy to Ferraro and because of a reluctance by groups lukewarm on women's rights to back feminism when faced with real gains.

END NOTES

¹For voting for a woman for President the 1985 point was 6.1% lower than an extrapolation using the 1972-1984 best linear fit. Since voting for a woman for President is associated with higher education and younger cohorts the changing cohort-education mix of the population increases approve at about 0.5% every two years.

²If we include the vote leaning of non-voters along with those of voters we find slightly larger interactions for suited and run (with suited achieving significance) and a slightly smaller difference for President.

³While this is not quite an apple and orange comparison, it does compare MacIntosh and Golden Delicious since we are not comparing responses by the same individuals for both elections and since the non-Reagan vote is for Carter or Anderson in 1980 and for Mondale in 1984.

Table 1

Trends in Support for Feminism

A. Marginals^a

Year	% Willing to Vote for a Woman for President	% Disagree that Men Better Suited for Politics	% Disagree that Men Should run the Country	% Approve of Women Working if her Husband can Support
1972	70.1	--	--	64.0
1974	77.8	49.2	62.6	67.8
1975	77.9	48.3	62.6	70.0
1977	77.1	48.2	60.3	65.4
1978	79.4	53.9	65.9	72.4
1982	83.4	58.6	71.4	74.2
1983	83.9	61.9	74.2	75.1
1985	79.8	59.1	72.0	84.4

B. Models^b

Best Fit	Linear Component	Linear Component	Linear Component	Linear Component
Slope (% per annum)	0.73	1.15	1.21	1.33
R ² (with time)	.64	.79	.83	.80

C. Changes, 1983-1985

Don't Knows Included % change/ Prob.	-4.1/.003	-2.8/.105	-2.2/.173	+9.3 <.001
Don't Knows Excluded % change/ Prob.	-4.2/.002	-3.0/.083	-3.2/.041	+9.8 <.001

^a % in feminist category vs. non-feminist category + no opinion.

^b For details of the models fitted to the marginals see Taylor, 1980.

Question Wordings:

If your party nominated a woman for President, would you vote for her if she were qualified for the job?

Tell me if you agree or disagree with this statement: Most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women.

Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country up to men.

Do you approve or disapprove of a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her?

Source: General Social Surveys, NORC, University of Chicago. Same source used in all subsequent tables.

Table 2

Support for Feminist Positions by Party Identification, 1983-1985

Willing to Vote for a Woman for President	<u>1983</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>Change</u> <u>(1985 - 1983)</u>	<u>Interaction</u> <u>Probability^a</u>
Democrat	86.9%	84.9%	-2.0%	.528
Independent	89.4	86.1	-3.3	
Republican	82.4	76.1	-6.3	
Disagree that Men Better Suited for Politics				
Democrat	63.5	62.0	-1.5	.273
Independent	70.2	70.9	+0.7	
Republican	57.9	51.4	-6.5	
Disagree that Men Should Run the Country				
Democrat	73.8	70.8	-3.0	.515
Independent	79.9	79.2	-0.7	
Republican	77.5	72.0	-5.5	

^aThe interaction test is described in Davis, 1975.

Table 3

Support for Feminists Positions by Presidential Vote, 1983-1985

A. 1980 Election

Willing to Vote for Woman for President	<u>1983</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>Change (1985 - 1983)</u>	<u>Interaction Probability</u>
Carter	86.8%	86.1%	-0.7%	.036
Reagan	86.6	78.9	-7.7	

Disagree that Men Better Suited for Politics

Carter	66.4	62.1	-4.3	.625
Reagan	59.6	53.1	-6.5	

Disagree that Men Should Run the Country

Carter	76.0	72.0	-4.0	.632
Reagan	79.4	73.5	-5.9	

B. Vote in 1980 and 1984 Elections

Willing to Vote for Woman for President	<u>1983</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>Change 1983 - 1985</u>	<u>Interaction Probability</u>
Voted for Reagan	86.6%	75.5%	-11.1	<.001
Did not vote for Reagan	88.1	91.1	+3.0	

Disagree that Men Better Suited for Politics

Voted for Reagan	59.6	52.2	-7.4	.007
Did not Vote for Reagan	68.5	72.9	+3.4	

Disagree that Men Should Run the Country

Voted for Reagan	79.4	71.2	-8.2	.004
Did not vote for Reagan	78.8	81.3	+2.5	

C. Vote in 1980 and 1984 Elections (1985 GSS)

Willing to Vote for a Woman for President

Carter/Reagan	74.5%
Reagan/Reagan	76.7
Carter/Mondale	90.5
Reagan/Mondale	88.2

Disagree that Men Better Suited for Politics

Carter/Reagan	46.2%
Reagan/Reagan	50.3
Carter/Mondale	69.1
Reagan/Mondale	81.8

Disagree that Men should Run the Country

Carter/Reagan	64.8%
Reagan/Reagan	71.2
Carter/Mondale	77.7
Reagan/Mondale	91.2

Table 4

Support for Feminist Positions by Selected Demographics

A. Labor Force/Sex

Willing to Vote for a Woman for President

	<u>1983</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>Change</u> <u>(1985 - 1983)</u>	<u>Interaction</u> <u>Probability</u>
Full-Time Employed Women ^a	93.5%	90.5%	-3.0%	.143
Other Women	81.3	73.0	-8.3	.101
Men	86.2	85.0	-1.2	

Disagree that Men Better Suited for Politics

Full-Time Employed Women	73.7	72.0	-1.7	.162
Other Women	60.7	52.4	-8.3	.112
Men	61.9	62.1	+0.2	

Disagree that Men Should Run the Country

Full-time Employed Women	87.6	86.6	-0.8	.188
Other Women	68.4	62.4	-6.0	.581
Men	77.2	74.9	-2.3	

B. Education

Willing to Vote for a Woman for President

Less than High School	81.0	70.9	-10.1	
High School Graduate	87.1	82.9	-4.2	.060
Some College +	90.1	89.6	-0.5	

Disagree that Men Better Suited for Politics

Less than High School	55.4	49.4	-5.0	
High School Graduate	67.2	61.0	-6.2	.084
Some College +	68.4	70.1	+1.7	

Disagree that Men Should Run the Country

Less than High School	59.5%	50.5%	-9.0	
High School Graduate	79.4	75.4	-4.0	.031
Some College	87.2	88.0	+0.8	

	<u>1983</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>Change (1985 - 1983)</u>	<u>Interaction Probability</u>
C. Age				
Willing to Vote for a Woman for President				
18-29	91.3	88.0	-3.3	
30-54	90.0	87.4	-2.6	.733
55+	77.2	71.8	-5.4	
Disagree that Men Better Suited for Politics				
18-29	73.2	71.6	-1.6	
30-54	67.5	65.9	-1.6	.885
55+	52.3	48.9	-3.4	
Disagree that Men Should Run the Country				
18-29	85.9	84.8	-1.1	
30-54	82.7	79.5	-3.2	.805
55+	60.2	58.5	-1.7	
D. Region				
Willing to Vote for a Woman for President				
North	89.2	84.8	-4.4	.576
South	80.3	77.6	-2.9	
Disagree that Men Better Suited for Politics				
North	68.9	65.5	-3.4	.518
South	54.3	53.7	-0.6	
Disagree that Men Should Run the Country				
North	81.0	77.7	-3.3	
South	67.4	66.1	-1.3	.597

^aFull-time employed included those working full-time last week plus those who normally work full-time. Other women include part-time workers, housewives, and retired people. Students, the unemployed, and those coded "Other" on labor force status are excluded from analysis.

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