

The *Julia Learns* Children Series and #1972: A Case Study of Antifeminism in the Tea Party Movement

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ABSTRACT: In 2008, when the Tea Party movement appeared on the US national scene, the focus was initially placed on fiscal issues and libertarian concerns because social issues, such as abortion rights, were deemed too divisive. However, the fieldwork I conducted in 2014-2015 in Pennsylvania among Tea Party groups showed that, at the local level, social concerns were not absent from activists' demands but were relegated to informal discussions. This changed with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Since then, most Tea Party groups have disappeared and many of the women who had been active in Tea Party meetings have focused on social concerns.

In this article, I focus on one of the activists who best exemplifies this shift in the Pennsylvania conservative movement: Carla D'Addesi. She started her political life right after Barack Obama's 2012 election by becoming a children's book author. She wrote a series of books including *Julia Learns How to Marry Wisely*, *Julia Learns How to Vote Wisely*, and *Julia Learns to Protect Life Wisely*. She then grew to be an important political figure in conservative circles in Pennsylvania. She became the president of Berks Republican Women, a devoted Trump supporter, and was frequently invited to the White House to attend various events organized by the first family during the Trump presidency. Her activism was a response to what she perceived as the threat posed by feminists to her children and to the American way of life grounded in religion. Through this case study, I reflect upon what triggered the initial activism of women like her and how they promote their views at the national level but also at the local level through less overtly political actions, such as starting a clothing brand.

KEYWORDS: antifeminism; gender; Tea Party; Women's Studies, grassroots activism, local politics, children literature

Introduction

I was a stay-at-home mom at the time, raising my four children. We decided we could take matters into our own hands and you know that we have a voice and that we can make a difference and so that was the whole premise behind starting Kitchen Table

Patriots. We had an actual Tea Party rally around Tax Day in April 2009 and it was just one of those things... We got the flyers together, we had no money, we had nothing. We had our own energy and our own determination and we spread the word and we had 2000 people show up. So, at the time we thought this was going to be it, we're just going to do a Tea Party rally but the people who showed up had all this energy and they wanted to do something with it. So, it just evolved from there...¹

The story told by Ana Puig, one of the founding members of the Kitchen Table Patriots,² reflected a common narrative in many Tea Party groups in Pennsylvania. Women and especially stay-at-home moms were the driving force behind the nebula of conservative grassroots groups that appeared on the political scene in 2009. In her book *Tea Party Women: Mama Grizzlies, Grassroots Leaders and the Changing Face of the American Right*, Melissa Deckman argues that Tea Party women have developed "gendered narratives [...] to explain their opposition to the debt, Obamacare, minimum-wage increases, pay equity, and gun control" (250). Women such as Ana Puig, Jennifer Stephano or Jenny Beth Martin quickly emerged as powerful conservative leaders and many of them were hired by national conservative organizations such as Americans for Prosperity or Freedom Works to serve as policy directors or spokespeople and to work with grassroots activists across the nation.³

Conservative women's activism is far from a new phenomenon in US history. Historian Michelle Nickerson points to the large number of women in the Tea Party movement as proof of the long-lasting influence of conservative women of the 1950s and 1960s through what she calls the "long durée of housewife populism" (169). In her book *Suburban Warriors, The Origins of the New American Right*, historian Lisa McGirr showed the relentless mobilization of women in Orange County, California for the 1964 Goldwater campaign. However, in this case, the women remained anonymous for the most part as their political activism took place behind the scenes, often in the comfort of their own homes. In her book

¹ Interview with Ana Puig over the phone, 4 Feb. 2015.

² The Kitchen Table Patriots were one of the most active Tea Party groups in Pennsylvania. Anastasia Przybylski and Ana Puig started this grassroots group in 2009. They organized protests, monthly meetings and training for Tea Party activists across the state. They got a lot of support from the national top-down group FreedomWorks who helped them put in place their training sessions.

³ Americans For Prosperity and Freedom Works are two national conservative groups who were the result of a split of Citizens for a Sound Economy in 2004 and were instrumental in providing technical support and training to Tea Party activists from the very beginning of the movement.

Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage Through the Rise of the New Right, historian Catherine Rymph demonstrated that even though conservative women were extremely active in the Republican Party, they were never able to access real positions of power nor to have a lasting impact on the platform of the party. Unlike prior mobilizations, the Tea Party movement provided conservative women with the opportunity to lead and to become professional activists.

The Tea Party movement, which appeared in February 2009, was largely driven by fiscally conservative women who believed in limited government intervention and lower taxes, a philosophy grounded in classical liberalism and the work of economists such as Friedrich Hayek or Frédéric Bastiat who were very influential in shaping the modern conservative movement. Fiscal concerns drove their activism as the 2009 motto of Tea Party Patriots⁴ showed: "Economic Freedom, Constitutionally Limited Government and Free Markets." Social issues, such as the opposition to gay marriage or to abortion, which had fueled conservative activism since the 1970s (Wilcox), were absent from the rhetoric of most Tea Party groups. This was an intentional strategy as social issues were seen as divisive and as a deterrent for more libertarian activists. For instance, in leaflets and during the monthly meetings organized by Tea Party groups, Tea Partiers who felt strongly about abortion were invited to turn to pre-existing groups dedicated to this topic as social issues "served as distractions from the most pressing issues facing our country."⁵ As a result, many women who wanted social issues addressed framed their concerns about traditional "women's issues," such as abortion, through fiscal issues. This echoed what conservative commentator for the Christian Broadcasting Network, David Brody, argued in his book *Teavangelicals: The Inside Story of How the Evangelicals and the Tea Party are Taking Back America*: although Tea Party activists and Evangelicals do not always share the same ideological position, they agree on the solutions that need to be put in place (60). For instance, rather than focusing on

⁴ Tea Party Patriots was an umbrella organization of Tea Party groups at the national level whose goal was to train activists ideologically, teach them mobilizing techniques and coordinate Tea Party activism across the country.

⁵ Leaflet distributed at the Indiana Armstrong Patriots in Pennsylvania on 13 Nov. 2014. Many pro-life groups existed in Pennsylvania in 2014 such as the Pennsylvania pro-life federation or Pennsylvanians for Human Life.

Planned Parenthood's practice of performing abortions, these activists argued that the government was overstepping when it financed such organizations as it was not part of its constitutional prerogatives. Social conservatives were therefore not absent from most of these grassroots Tea Party groups but they were allowed more or less room to voice their concerns depending on the history of the group they had joined. Just as social concerns were put on the back burner so was the anti-feminist discourse which had been so prominent in prior conservative mobilization of the 1970s such as Concerned Women for America or the International Women's Forum as shown in Ronnee Schreiber's *Righting Feminism: Conservative Women and American Politics*.

Sociologist Abby Scher and journalist Chip Berlet argue that different currents and philosophies are at play within the Tea Party movement and that, even though they are united by the belief that the government has gone astray, they compete to define the movement's goals. The Tea Party nebula which relied on this carefully-orchestrated alliance of religious conservatives and libertarian-oriented activists (Scher and Berlet 103) remained active until the election of Donald Trump. After 2016, most Tea Party grassroots groups stopped meeting on a regular basis and the balance of power within the movement shifted. Among the local meetings that continued in Pennsylvania, currents which had been pushed aside such as anti-immigration activists or Christian conservatives gained more and more ground. In Pennsylvania, for instance, many groups moved on to battles which were no longer grounded in fiscal concerns such as passing laws or policies to restrict access to public bathrooms in accordance with sex/gender assigned at birth.⁶ National developments such as Brett Kavanaugh's appointment to the Supreme Court in 2018 and the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* Supreme Court decision in 2022 also contributed to reenergizing socially conservative activists within the movement. Indeed, this legal decision overturned the 1973 Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision which held that the U.S. Constitution conferred a right to abortion. This was a long-awaited victory for many in the

⁶ This was a debate in Pennsylvania in the 2016 Republican primary for Governor. Candidates were asked to position themselves on the idea of a bathroom bill. A "bathroom bill" is the common name for legislation or a statute that denies access to public toilets by gender or transgender identity. There were disagreements between Paul Mango and Scott Wagner.

conservative movement as it meant that each state was then free to legislate on abortion: to ban it or to impose more or less drastic restrictions on the practice.

Between 2009 and the early 2020s, there was a shift in the power dynamic with the Tea Party movement – libertarians who had been the most vocal had to make room for more socially conservative activists. Many of the women who had been active in the Tea Party movement as leaders or as grassroots activists gained more visibility and used their experience to climb the ladder within conservative groups such as Americans For Prosperity and within the Republican Party by becoming the head of their local Republican party. They initially framed their action as that of women protecting their children from out-of-control government spending. However, just as women like Ann Coulter before them,⁷ they also argued that the American way of life grounded in Christian principles and traditional family values was threatened by the liberal media and feminists thereby shifting their focus to a more cultural angle.

This article is based on fieldwork I conducted between 2014 and 2018 in Tea Party and conservative circles in Pennsylvania.⁸ Among the activists I met and interviewed, Carla D'Addesi's political trajectory is a telling example of Christian-based anti-feminism, which was explicitly discouraged in the Tea Party movement from 2009 until 2016, but flourished after Donald Trump's election. She was one of the women who benefited from the Tea Party movement to launch her career and to build her political brand. The goal of this article is to discuss her flourishing activism and her significance in the context of the contemporary anti-feminist movement.

⁷ Ann Coulter is a conservative media commentator and lawyer who became very popular during the Clinton administration.

⁸ I attended at least one monthly meeting of the following groups and conducted interviews with several of their members: Indiana Armstrong Patriots, Bedford County Patriots, Lehigh Valley 9-12 Tea Party, Blue Bell Tea Party Patriots, Tea Party Patriots - Eastern Montco, Citizens For Liberty, Delaware County Patriots, Kitchen Table Patriots, Valley Forge Patriots, Luzerne County Campaign for Liberty, Berks County Patriots, Williamsport Tea Party, Lehigh 9-12 Project, West Chester Tea Party, Veterans and Patriots United, York 912 Patriots, Lebanon 912 Project, Berks Tea Party, Fayette Tea Party Patriots, Cumberland County 912, Citizens for Constitutional Government, Tea Party Patriots - South Philadelphia, Tea Party Patriots of Central Pennsylvania, Independence Hall TP Association, Tri-County Campaign for Liberty, Mifflin County 9-12 Tea Party. In total, I conducted 73 interviews with Tea Party activists, 20 with Pennsylvania state representatives and senators, 4 with US representatives from PA, and 7 with employees of state or national conservative organizations such as Commonwealth Foundation, Americans For Prosperity, Smart Girl Politics, Heritage Action.

Becoming Politically Active

I was first introduced to Carla D'Addesi at the Lebanon 9-12 Tea Party meeting on January 20th, 2015.⁹ She was one of their guest speakers and came to introduce her new book series *Julia Learns How to...* After this initial introduction, I was able to interview her by phone that same year and then again on September 7th, 2018 at the meeting of Berks Republican Women, an organization of which she was the president.¹⁰ Aside from these two interviews, I have also listened to and watched her numerous appearances on TV and in radio shows¹¹ and have followed her on Facebook and social media throughout the years. This article is based on these sources as well as on the participant observation I conducted in Pennsylvania in 2014-2015 and in 2018.

Carla D'Addesi was born into a very religious and politically active family. She grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia. In our initial interview, she insisted that unlike some families who say they are religious but do not really show it, they were active church-goers and spoke about politics and religion at the dinner table. D'Addesi's father owned three construction companies, started by his father. She describes her father as a successful and hard-working businessman who did not know who Madonna was but was familiar with the names of all politicians. Of German immigrant origin, he was able to run businesses that employed 500 people thanks to his hard work. Carla D'Addesi added that the employees loved him and he loved them in turn. The insistence on "hard-work" and the idealized vision of the relationship between employees and the employer, which replaces the relationship of power with one of care and love, are core conservative principles and exemplify her feelings toward capitalism and small businesses. In our interview, she explained that she believes in hard work and capitalism. She identifies with candidates who embody conservative tenets which she sums up as: "hard-working, love God, believe that there is a heartbeat at 3 weeks and who help

⁹ The name "9-12" is a reference to a movement launched by conservative media host Glenn Beck. 9-12 refers to the day after 9-11 when, according to Beck, US citizens were uniquely united. Glenn Beck came up with 9 principles and 12 values that Americans should follow. These groups fueled the Tea Party movement.

¹⁰ Their meeting took place at Seasons Café, 15 Village Center Drive, Reading, PA, 19607 on September 7th, 2018.

¹¹ Among others: her show "Your Family Matters" on WFYL which is a radio station in Pennsylvania, her interviews on Fox News or the One America News Network.

small businesses.” She sums up her position using a trope common in conservative circles: “a Christian first, a conservative second and a Republican third.”¹² This rhetoric, which was also used by Vice-President Mike Pence, among others,¹³ allows her to show that her principles are ingrained in who she is and that she cannot be bought by a political machine or stray from her values.

In terms of education, she was the only conservative Republican in her class in a very liberal suburb of Philadelphia. She went on to get a Master’s degree at the University of Pennsylvania and became an occupational therapist. She married a surgeon and had three daughters. After the birth of her first child, she decided “to get a PhD in motherhood” and quit her job to be a full-time stay-at-home mother and homeschool her children (Brown). Although we did not explicitly discuss her socioeconomic background, the fact that her husband is a surgeon, that the family was able to do without her income for years, and that they lived in a large house with a pool in a wealthy suburb, all indicate a very privileged life. After several years of homeschooling, she sent her daughters to public school as she felt it was important for them to meet their neighbors and socialize with other kids. Her two eldest daughters went on to attend Liberty University, a private evangelical university founded by Jerry Falwell and Elmer L. Towns in 1971.

This case study offers an opportunity to reflect upon what triggered the initial activism of women like her and how they promoted their views not only on the national political scene but also at the very local level. At first glance, Carla D’Addesi does not seem to be the best example of women’s activism in the Tea Party as her involvement in politics started a bit after the initial Tea Party wave and focused on traditional “women’s issues” often using an anti-feminist discourse. Many other women, whose lives were chronicled by the media as well as the historiography on the Tea Party movement, entered the political field for the first time in their lives immediately after the election of Barack Obama (Skocpol and Williamson, Lepore, Zernike). For instance, Jenny Beth Martin started organizing Tea Party rallies in 2009 and quickly started the very influential national umbrella group Tea Party Patriots. It was also

¹² One hour-interview over the phone with Carla D’Addesi on 22 Apr. 2015.

¹³ Mike Pence’s acceptance speech for Vice-Presidential nomination in July 2016 (Garcia).

in 2009 that Katy Abram became instantly famous after confronting Pennsylvania Democratic Senator Arlen Specter at a town hall. She then went on to work for Americans For Prosperity. Jennifer Stephano is another example of a woman who went from starting a small grassroots group called The Loyal Opposition to being the Vice-President of Americans For Prosperity Foundation. At the time, Carla D'Addesi was pregnant with her third child and did not have time to get involved. Barack Obama's reelection in 2012 was the trigger that launched her political activism. The political discourse women like Jenny Beth Martin or Katy Abram developed also seemed of a different nature. They were stay-at-home moms in their 40s who were afraid for their children's future. These "mama grizzlies", to use Sarah Palin's expression, organized rallies and formed groups to raise awareness and mobilize like-minded people by employing fiscally conservative language but leaving aside the socially conservative discourse that women like Carla D'Addesi would seize (Deckman). Her example shows that even though the Tea Party movement appeared to focus solely on fiscal conservatism at the expense of issues conservative women traditionally care about, a vocal sub group of socially conservative women actually participated in the movement. These activists used the Tea Party as a vehicle to advance an agenda focused on women's issues and interests and promote their anti-feminist views.

The Book Series *Julia Learns...*

Prior to 2012, D'Addesi was already very active in her church and community, organizing events for various pro-life charities. For instance, she was the chair of the Pennsylvania Bethany Christian Services fundraisers for ten years before writing her first book.¹⁴ In 2012, she decided to take on a more public role and started a book series to teach children about Christian and conservative principles. She wrote a series of books entitled *Julia Learns How to Marry Wisely*, *Julia Learns How to Vote Wisely*, and *Julia Learns to Protect Life Wisely*, which reflect the way she homeschooled her daughters.

¹⁴ Xulon Press is a hybrid publisher owned by the Christian publishing company Salem Media Group. In 2007 it claimed to be "the largest publisher of Christian books in North America," claiming more than 3,900 print-on-demand titles published by 2007.

For instance, in *Julia Learns How to Vote Wisely*, she introduces Julia to yard signs that are planted in one's lawn to support a candidate, explains what the voting age is and then moves on to the core message of the book, which is that: "the Bible helps people choose who they are going to vote for" (12). According to the book, a good candidate should have three main qualities. First, he or she must have a pro-life record meaning "they wish to protect babies while they are growing in their mommies' tummies [...] protect these tiny lives" (12). Second, he or she must believe in the importance of managing a budget: The mother explains: "these verses teach us to save our money to pay for our house, food, and education" (13). She continues: "God wants us to be responsible with the money we are given" (13). The mother then introduces a dichotomy between hard-working people and people who rely on government's help: "We vote for the candidate who encourages people to work for what they have, instead of the candidate who promises 'free' things" (13). Third, it is crucial for the candidate to spend money wisely: "The mother thoughtfully educated the girls about the money their country was borrowing and was not able to pay back" (14). When Julia responds: "They should pay it back with their credit cards," her mother warns her that: "The Bible teaches us that credit is not the answer. We must spend less and pay back the money we owe" (14). This part of the book presents the common conservative principles of hard work, fiscal responsibility, limited government, and opposition to abortion to young children in very easy terms grounded in Bible verses. Aside from the issue of abortion, these talking points were commonplace in Tea Party meetings.

The next part of her book tackles what should be done to elect wise candidates. All the grassroots campaign activities presented in her book coincide with what Tea Party activists have been trained to do in the month before election day. These get-out-the-vote tactics, which have been theorized and tested by political institutes over the years (Liegey, Müller, Pons), appear in Julia's activism: she puts a bumper sticker on her mom's car, she wears a campaign shirt, she makes calls for the candidate and goes door-to-door to help the candidate get elected. Finally, on election night, she prays that her candidate wins the election but her mother reassures her that she should not worry because they she has to trust God's plan, even if they lose. Finally, as a Christian conservative who deeply cares about

family values, Carla D'Addesi presents voting as a family outing in the last section of her book. The mother "proudly showed her identification to the lady behind the desk and signed her name" (24). At the time Carla D'Addesi wrote the book, in 2013, a debate was underway around laws that were being passed in several states to require voters to use an ID to vote.¹⁵ Conservatives argued that it was meant to prevent voter fraud while liberals showed how this measure disproportionately affected minority voters and was in fact a way of disenfranchising them (Hertel-Fernandez). This debate is undoubtedly a point of reference here. Through her presentation of the hard work of the campaign, Carla d'Addesi draws attention to how important political mobilization prior to the election is and provides conservative children with a guide to political activism. Political parties and political campaigns rely heavily on grassroots volunteers in order to get-out-the-vote and to convince people to support a particular candidate. Candidates are eager to find trained groups of people who are ready to go out and canvass a neighborhood when the election approaches. Carla D'Addesi is doing the preliminary work in building an army of campaign volunteers who will work for conservative candidates in the future: her book ends on a note to parents which argues: "why not begin teaching our children how to vote biblically and wisely as well? You will be thankful you did, when your child is of voting age!" (24). Finally, there is a two-page section entitled "thoughts for little thinkers" which encourages children to rephrase the arguments of the book. For example, children are asked to list the three reasons Julia's parents voted for their candidate. Each time, the Bible verses that explain the answer appear. The book series is built as a teaching tool for young children who are homeschooled. Conservative arguments are presented in a very simple and didactic manner for kids to understand and are always linked to biblical passages. For instance, the book *Julia Learns How to Marry Wisely* presents the idea that the only viable option for marriage is between a man and a woman (Viefhues-Bailey). This is explained to them through the story of Noah's ark: if Noah had not rescued a female and a male from each species then there would not be

¹⁵ In the U.S, voters need an I.D. to register to vote but they do not need to show I.D on the day of the election. In Pennsylvania, a bill requiring voters to show ID to vote was eventually passed on March 14th, 2012: Pennsylvania Election Code – Omnibus amendments, Act of March 14th, 2012, P.L. 195, No. 18, Cl. 25, Session of 2012, No. 2012-18, HB. 934.

any zoos today because none of the animals would have survived. This explanation is accompanied with an illustration of Julia standing in front of the entrance of a zoo that is closed.

Aside from the obvious homeschooling audience that these books aim at reaching, Carla D'Addesi also went around the state of Pennsylvania and the country to promote her books in Tea Party groups or at conservative gatherings such as the Conservative Political Action Conference.¹⁶ I attended several Tea Party meetings during which she would present her books and every time she had great success with grandparents who bought them for their grandchildren, including some who thought they would be great tools to ensure that their grandchildren would be exposed to a worldview alternative to their parents' "liberal agenda." Tea Party groups were especially receptive to this type of literature, as some of them had already started organizing activities directed towards children. In 2011, the Cumberland 9-12 organized a "Vacation Liberty School" to familiarize children with a conservative take on the history of the Constitution (Mencimer). Carla D'Addesi's books were also translated in Spanish, which is symptomatic of the desire of the conservative movement to attract Latino voters.¹⁷ Through her books, she is working on expanding the conservative coalition adding a deeply pro-life and socially-conservative message to the typical Tea Party message.

The Radio Show "Your Family Matters"

The promotion of D'Addesi's books also resulted in interviews on radio shows and conservative TV programs. She eventually got her own radio program, which was called "Your Family Matters," broadcast on WFYL 1180 AM which stands for "Working For Your Liberty."¹⁸

¹⁶ CPAC is an annual conservative conference hosted by the American Conservative Union. The first conference was organized in 1974.

¹⁷ Historically, many Latino voters have voted for the Democratic Party. However, since the 1970s, the Republican Party has been trying to attract Latino voters by focusing on social issues that these voters might respond to. For more on this topic, see: Cadava, Gerald. *The Hispanic Republican: The Shaping of an American Political identity, from Nixon to Trump*. Ecco, 2020. More recently, conservative organizations such as Americans For Prosperity have also created initiatives such as the Libre initiative to try to bring Latino voters into the conservative movement: <https://thelibreinitiative.com/>. Accessed 13 Jun. 2024.

¹⁸ For more information on this radio station, see: <https://www.1180wfyl.com/about-us.html>. Accessed on 12 Jun. 2024.

It aired in 2017 and 2018, at a time when Tea Party activism had greatly receded. By then, the themes tackled in Tea Party meetings have almost disappeared from her discourse and she focused on more traditional women's issues such as childcare, abortion, equal rights, and feminism.

On this show "where political correctness isn't the form but biblical correctness is," she shared "practical and biblical strategies for strengthening your family" (D'Addesi, "Raising Anti-Feminist Pro-Women Kids"). Her episodes tackled a variety of themes, including "the counter culture mom," "to smoke or not to smoke?" and "raising anti-feminist pro-women children." Carla D'Addesi's four episodes on this last topic broadcast in 2017 will be my focus here. She presents the message of feminists from the 1960s such as Betty Friedan or Gloria Steinem and explains why she believes that these women were wrong. She points to the lasting impact of their ideas in contemporary society. She argues that her audience should raise their kids as anti-feminists while encouraging them to be "pro-women."

In each episode, she details what she interprets as "the pillars of feminism" of the 1960s. According to her, the first principle would have children be taught in schools that lesbian and gay relationships are just as respectable as relationships between men and women. She is outraged by this principle, which she sees as incompatible with family values. According to her, sex should not be a topic in schools and children should not be exposed to any message that strays from the Christian traditional way of life. She encourages parents to check what their children are reading in schools and to pay attention to what she sees as "feminist indoctrination," thereby presenting the feminist movement as a cult which is endangering children by pushing pornography onto them through their school curriculum. This recommendation stems from personal experience. In 2017, she organized a mobilization at a schoolboard meeting for a group of parents whose children were required to read *The Handmaid's Tale* in school, a book that they consider to be pornography (Griffin).

The second pillar of feminism she focuses on is government-funded abortion which she vehemently opposes. Third, she criticizes the idea that the state should have to pay for childcare. According to her, it would cost more than 20 billion dollars a year, which would be

fiscally irresponsible and morally dangerous, as it would allow the state to start “indoctrinating” children at an even earlier age. This argument brings together three important tenets of conservatism: defiance of the government, religious concerns, and fiscal issues. Finally, the total ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment is the last point she highlights in her series as a ploy to force women to be drafted in case of war, to prevent them from staying home to raise their children if they choose to, to force them to return to the workforce, etc.¹⁹ Here, she rehashes arguments provided by the conservative women who opposed the ratification of the ERA in the 1970s (Critchlow).

In these episodes, Carla D’Addesi also tackles the idea that with the ERA, feminists used very attractive and convincing language: “who does not want equal rights?” She argues that in fact feminists are angry and depressing. She sums up their message in the following words: “The whole assumption of the feminist movement is that somebody has dealt women a wrong card whether it’s God, the establishment, white males, conspiracy of male chauvinistic pigs. [...] We are in bondage, in slavery, oppressed. [...] We are told we’re not even persons, we are second class citizens. [...] Life is not fair, we’ll never be promoted” (“Raising Anti-Feminist Pro-Women Kids”). She does not negate the fact that there are fewer women in positions of power or that women doctors or women CEOs are a rare breed. However, she claims that it is because women choose to take a break from their careers and raise their children. Therefore, this gap between men and women in terms of position or wages should be seen as a positive trend as it proves that women have the luxury to stay home with their children. This stems from an argument used by anti-ERA activists who believed that women had a privileged place at home because their husband provided for them and their family while the wife could focus on her children. In the course of these episodes, she praises Phyllis Schlafly, who fought fiercely against the ERA, and disparages pro-ERA activists such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan. She encourages parents to take action to protect their children

¹⁹ The Equal Rights Amendment was an amendment that was first introduced in Congress in 1923. The goal was to guarantee equal rights to all American citizens regardless of sex. It passed the House of Representatives in October 1971 and the U.S Senate in March 1972 but failed to be ratified by 3/4th of the states. The campaign for the ratification of the ERA led to a massive mobilization of conservative activists, such as Phyllis Schlafly, who campaigned against the amendment.

and their families from these dangerous ideas. She also sends a clear message to young boys: “steer clear of feminists if you want a happy life” (“Raising Anti-Feminist Pro-Women Kids”). Just as in her book series, in the last part of her radio program, she turns to the Bible to find biblical examples of feminists and anti-feminists and prove her point one last time.

As Ronnee Schreiber points out, the rhetoric that portrays feminists as a threat to family values and women's financial security in the home did not start in the 1970s but was already key to antifeminist activism in their fight against suffrage (53). By using verbatim the arguments of these different waves and strands of feminism, Carla D'Addesi's inscribes herself in a long tradition of conservative women.

Fashion Company – Culture of Life 1972

As D'Addesi was becoming more and more involved with the radio shows and getting a platform on shows on Fox News and other conservative media, she also embarked on another adventure: her own clothing company, Culture Of Life 1972.²⁰ 1972 is a reference to the year before the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, which granted women access to abortion. According to D'Addesi, it was the last year the culture of life was celebrated in the U.S. (Gayle). Like many conservatives, she believes that the Hollywood industry spreads pro-choice ideas through its movies and TV series. One of the challenges conservatives therefore face is to find other cultural avenues to popularize their ideas on a wider scale. D'Addesi launched this clothing line with the help of her daughters, who often model for her. The brand sells clothes as well as jewelry, and even started making masks during the pandemic. They have an online store and are looking to expand throughout the U.S. and the world.

D'Addesi considers the brand a great tool to promote the pro-life movement and what she calls the “life tribe” by showing that they are happy people who love life and enjoy it to the fullest. Using this type of vocabulary is typical of conservative activists who have fought not to be framed as “anti-abortion” or “anti-women” but to have their fight associated with a

²⁰ The website “Culture of Life 1972”, <https://col1972.com/>. Accessed 13 Jun. 2024.

positive vision of “life.” Her goal is to fight the perception that the Republican Party and conservatives are waging a war on women. As was made clear in the episodes of the radio show I mentioned, D’Addesi believes that liberals and the people she calls “pro-aborts” are the ones who are waging a “war on women”²¹ and who are promoting a culture of death. Just as the members of CWA before her, she also questions the feminist assertion that it is in women’s interest to be pro-choice (Schreiber 98).

Through her brand, she is also trying to attract younger people to the cause. In order to do that, they organized a fashion show at Liberty University (Shank). D’Addesi points out that it is often easier to convince a friend to come to a fashion show than to have them attend a pro-life conference.²² As she was promoting her brand on various shows,²³ Carla D’Addesi explained that the idea first came to her because she realized that she and her girls were spending money on brands who were then donating money to Planned Parenthood. As they did not find any companies openly supporting the pro-life movement, they started their own. They also present their clothes as a unique conversation starter: people will stop them and say “I love your shirt. Where did you get it?” or “what does COL 1972 mean?” This is a way for her to reframe anti-abortion activists as young, fashionable women who care about their appearance, thus appealing to a broader audience of young women.

According to an interview she gave on Abby Johnson’s podcast, D’Addesi is especially proud of the 1972 necklace that she wears all the time. The piece was created to counter the pro-choice message sent by the singer Selena Gomez when she wore a 1973 necklace as a reference to the year *Roe v. Wade* was decided by the Supreme Court. To Carla D’Addesi, Selena Gomez’ choice was shocking: “It’s like they are wearing a tombstone around their head. They have swallowed a poisonous pill of life” (Johnson and D’Addesi). In this interview, D’Addesi reveals that she hopes that COL 1972 will be as successful as brands such as Ralph Lauren. The fact that she gave an interview to Abby Johnson, who is one of the

²¹ This expression is used by people who oppose the Republican policies and legislation around women’s rights.

²² Interview with Carla D’Addesi at the meeting of the Republican Women of Berks County in Reading, PA. 7 sept. 2018.

²³ She did a series of interviews on Fox News, in the conservative press or on conservative podcasts such as Abby Johnson’s *Politely Rude* podcast.

contemporary spokespeople for the pro-life movement, is a brand ambassador, suggests that her brand is gaining popularity in conservative circles. Abby Johnson models for their website, and wore a 1972 pin during her speech at the 2020 Republican National Convention.

A GOP Activist, a Vocal Trump Supporter, a Social Media Enthusiast

Carla D'Addesi's political involvement really took off under President Trump, when she became an extremely vocal supporter of the President and was invited to the White House several times during his term.²⁴ She also became very active in state and local politics, supporting candidates for governor or for commissioner, hosting fundraisers at her house,²⁵ and serving as the president of Berks Republican Women. She worked on making the group more visible and more active on social media and brought younger women and other stay-at-home moms to the group. At a more local level, she also fought to prevent Planned Parenthood counselors from coming into her daughters' high school in Reading, PA.²⁶

Her political activism was also very visible through her social media presence and her tackling a wide range of issues important to conservative and pro-life movements. First, when the COVID pandemic hit, she was very vocal about her disagreement with the PA governor's decision to close down businesses or to force hospitals to reschedule procedures that had been planned for a long time. She made a series of posts on social media lamenting the fact that liberals did not care that babies were being killed but they were ready to take away everybody's liberties to fight COVID. She presented this period as a "free 30-day trial for communism."²⁷ According to her, the state of Pennsylvania was behaving like a totalitarian

²⁴ Here are a few examples: May 6th, 2017 for the Cinco de Mayo Party hosted by the White House in the East Wing Indian Treaty Room; November 3rd, 2017: White House Tax Reform briefing, April 13th, 2019: At the screening of Gosnell -The Trial of America's Biggest Serial Killer; April 17th, 2018: speeches by Vice President Mike Pence, Kellyanne Conway and several members of Congress & Senators speak; January 20th, 2018: an event at the White House.

²⁵ For instance, on April, 19th, 2015 she organized a "Doctors only fundraiser on Healthcare reform with Commissioner Christian Leinbach and Senator Dave Argall". On May 13th, 2017, she hosted the Berks Republican Women sushi lunch fundraiser.

²⁶ In August 2017, with other activists, she led a campaign against the opening of an on-campus Planned Parenthood Center at her daughters' school.

²⁷ Carla D'Addesi's Facebook posts from April 2020.

regime. She became part of a broader movement in Pennsylvania to resist the state's decision to close non-essential businesses. A rally was held at the state capitol to protest the measures and to demand PA be reopened to business (Fernandez). At this rally, some of the signs used the common pro-choice slogan "my body my choice" as a way of fighting for the right not to wear masks and to start working again. This can be read as a clear instance of anti-feminists like Carla D'Addesi borrowing language from the pro-choice movement in order to reveal the movement's supposed hypocrisy.

The second example of direct engagement in country-wide political debates was her reaction to the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of the summer of 2020 which emerged to protest the murder of George Floyd, an African American man, in police custody in Minneapolis. These demonstrations, which lasted three weeks, called for justice for George Floyd and aimed at denouncing systemic police brutality. Carla D'Addesi was outraged about the looting in Philadelphia and claimed she had to be escorted out of the city with her daughters. As the march was getting closer, they were afraid that their Trump bumper stickers would make them targets. She lamented the fact that the activists did not pay more attention to the number of African-American children being killed in abortion clinics. By linking the Black Lives Matter movement to the issue of abortion, Carla D'Addesi completely leaves aside the question of police brutality in favor of a discussion she cares more deeply about. She tries to reverse the accusation of racism, often waged against conservative women, by implying that feminists, who mobilize in favor of abortion, are not adequate representatives of women, as they do not care about African-American women.

Conclusions

Carla D'Addesi's activist trajectory and the discourse she employs may be used to formulate broader conclusions about the contemporary anti-feminist women's movement. First, her activism appears to be built directly on the heritage of anti-feminist rhetoric, social movement repertoire, and activists who have led this fight before her such as Phyllis Schlafly. Indeed, what Carla D'Addesi advocates for is very much in line with an organization like Concerned Women for America which was founded in 1978 and was mostly made up of

evangelical Protestant women who held socially conservative views. CWA activists focused on the defense of moral values in the public and private spheres, opposition to abortion, denial of civil rights for gay people, and the defense of prayer in schools (Schreiber 7). She reveres activists like Phyllis Schlafly whom she quotes extensively, but disparages feminists such as Betty Friedan. If Carla D'Addesi does not adopt the label of "conservative feminism," she does identify herself as "pro-women." D'Addesi portrays herself as a woman leading a life of service, loving her children and husband and finding fulfilment in doing so.

What might be different from the previous generations of conservative women activists is how quickly and efficiently she was able to climb the ladder within the Republican Party, going from an anonymous voter on the sidelines of the party to somebody with influence at the state level as the president of the Berks Republican Women, and with access to prominent politicians in her visits to the White House. As Michelle Nickerson points out in her book *Mothers of Conservatism*: "Conservative women have been able to hold public office because of feminist pressure for antidiscrimination legislation that opened doors for women in education, the professions, the business world, and politics – legislation that antifeminist women opposed vigorously" (174). Aside from this clear debt to the feminist movement, the rapid elevation of anti-feminists and Tea Party activists in professional politics could also be attributed to the fact that, in recent years, conservative think tanks and organizations, such as Americans For Prosperity or FreedomWorks, have pushed women to the forefront of the political scene because they were seen as less threatening when presenting conservative arguments, especially those related to fiscal responsibility (Vogel). In the conservative circles, women are seen as the ones in charge of managing the family budget, which makes them uniquely equipped to understand and push for fiscal reforms such as tax cuts or balanced-budget amendments. Furthermore, I argue that women like Carla D'Addesi benefited from the Tea Party grassroots mobilization, which allowed them to meet one another more easily, to have access to a wider pool of people sympathetic to their cause, and to build their political careers on an existing network of activists including conservative think tanks, advocacy organizations, talk radio hosts, and journalists. Working alongside conservatives who had access to more sophisticated tools of media exposure and

to the national political sphere explains the quick rise of women like Carla D'Addesi in political circles.

Second, in her activism, Carla D'Addesi constantly advocates for the importance of waging a conservative battle in the cultural sphere and resisting the so-called liberal cultural hegemony. This is also in line with anti-feminist activists before her. In her book *Righting Feminism*, Ronnee Schreiber points out that Concerned Women for America was concerned about the feminists' influence in U.S. politics, education, and the media (7). Carla D'Addesi is also working on changing these three fields of influence, but the cultural side of her activism is perhaps the most interesting. Creating children's books and a new clothing line is supposed to reach new people and create an alternative to a mainstream culture that she perceives as very much biased toward liberalism. In their book *A Second American Revolution*, Jenny Beth Martin and Mark Meckler, two of the founders of Tea Party Patriots, urged their readers to fight against the movement which started in the 1960s and supposedly led young Americans to abandon morality, religion, and the Founding Fathers (191). One of the culprits they identify is Hollywood and its promotion of immoral behaviors. As we have seen, Carla D'Addesi shares this point of view. On social media, she often reviews movies, such as the 2019 movie *Unplanned* (Solomon and Konzelman) based on the memoir of anti-abortion activist Abby Johnson, which D'Addesi believed to be a must-see. Her visits to the White House were often linked to cultural events organized by the Trump administration during which conservative movies were screened. Carla D'Addesi is very clear about her goals in terms of the cultural changes she would like to see occur so as to convince more young conservatives to join her movement. Bringing new people to the fight is so crucial that, in one of our interviews, she expressed the hope that one of her daughters would run for office one day.

Finally, Carla D'Addesi's activism's is so multi-faceted that it may be challenging to grasp it fully without studying this movement on the ground and doing extended fieldwork. When I started interviewing Tea Party activists in 2014-2015, commentators and pundits were quick to announce the end of the movement even as less visible local efforts continued. The

anti-feminist movement seems to share this characteristic. While it came back into the spotlight during the Trump administration, since Joe Biden was elected in 2020 these women activists have become less visible at the national level. Their fight retreated to the local level, a level that is much more difficult to scrutinize and keep track of. This is especially true of Clara D'Addesi's activism. In 2020, she and her husband became the targets of a social media campaign led by a liberal group "Berks Stands up."²⁸ The group became aware of Carla D'Addesi's posting of transphobic Facebook messages about PA's top health official, Rachel Levine, who is one of the few openly transgender government officials in the U.S. The Facebook account with the messages in question belonged to D'Addesi and her husband. The activists launched a social media campaign against the clinic where her husband worked to convince them to fire him.

This is how Carla D'Addesi explained what happened on her Facebook page:

6 months ago, a Tsunami unexpectedly hit my family. We were targeted and persecuted for being pro-Christ, for life & family values and for Trump. A handful of loud haters in our community defamed, slandered and lied about our family. My daughters received close to 1000 pieces of violent hate, my husband was terminated from his practice that he built these last 12 years. Our family's homeschool scholarship fund was terminated which granted families free music lessons and instruments for almost a decade. I had to cancel my public figure social media platforms of 60,000 followers and step away from women's clubs where I served. And that was only the beginning...²⁹

As a result, she stepped down from her position as president of Berks Republican women but she continues her fashion brand COL 1972 and will carry on her anti-feminist and anti-abortion work under the radar, away from public scrutiny. Just as President Trump warned in the last speech he gave before leaving Washington, "we will be back in some form."³⁰

²⁸ After the election of Donald Trump, liberal groups started popping up around the country. Many of them following the playbook of the Tea Party and presenting themselves as being part of the Indivisible movement. For more on this comparison, see: Theda Skocpol and Caroline Tervo, *Upending American Politics: Polarizing Parties, Ideological Elites, and Citizen Activists from the Tea Party to the Anti-Trump Resistance*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

²⁹ Facebook post on Carla D'Addesi's Facebook page on December 4th, 2020.

³⁰ "Donald Trump Tells Supporters "We Will Be Back in Some Form" in Last Speech as President", CNBC Television, 20 Jan. 2021," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUmfcMLPw9Q>. Accessed 25 February 2021.

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