

“Resisting Feminism through Discourse: A Framing Analysis of Phyllis Schlafly’s Rhetoric”

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ABSTRACT: Conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly (1924-2016) founded Eagle Forum in 1975 in order to counteract a dynamic feminist movement which was protesting the patriarchal structures within the family and demanding more equality for women. Conservative women who joined Schlafly’s organization were staunchly opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), passed by Congress in 1972. They started to mobilize in a countermovement and they were especially successful at forging a compelling discourse, fit to compete with that of the feminists. Using the methodology of frames developed by sociologists Robert Benford and David Snow, the article examines the discursive strategies elaborated by Eagle Forum, which gave voice to a normative vision of womanhood, drastically opposed to feminist ideas. Perceiving feminism as a subversion of the social order and societal hierarchies, Schlafly hoped to channel the “moral shock” felt by some of her contemporaries. She positioned herself as the main spokeswoman for conservative women everywhere in the United States and took it upon herself to attack the feminists by “diagnosing” them as dangerous for the American society. With the help of language, she also encouraged the involvement of her peers by proposing a mobilizing collective identity. The “pro-family” frame she crafted allowed her to reaffirm the ideal of the “traditional woman” whose worth and value could be found in her devotion to husband, children, and home.

KEYWORDS: Phyllis Schlafly, antifeminism, feminism, discourse, framing, womanhood, Equal Rights Amendment

For conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly (1924-2016), women in the United States benefited from favorable protections linked to their gendered status: “Of all the classes of people who ever lived, the American woman is the most privileged. We have the most rights and rewards, and the fewest duties” (Schlafly, “What’s Wrong”). In the midst of a powerful feminist wave of mobilization in favor of women’s rights in the 1970s, how was she able to formulate such a view on womanhood and dismiss most of the claims voiced by women themselves?

Since the early 1960s, women had started to question the patriarchal status quo which constrained many aspects of their lives—professional, familial, and sexual, among others.

Despite a sizeable increase in women's participation to the labor force, especially among married ones, the stereotype of the housewife, inherited from the 1950s domestic ideal, still prevailed as a desirable model to achieve. In the home, the homemaker was expected to provide for the emotional and physical needs of both her children and husband, and the latter, the breadwinner, oversaw the financial maintenance of his family. But a new generation of younger citizens started to rebel against social norms and advocated for political reforms and social justice, while the civil rights movement laid the ground for activism (Chafe 529-587). In 1960, the election of Democratic president John F. Kennedy raised expectations that the government would intervene to solve inequalities. With the creation of the 1961 Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, a national conversation on women's experience regarding the workplace, the family, sexuality, and various other topics was sparked. Yet, political efforts towards the recognition of sex discrimination were deemed insufficient, notably in the newly-created Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and some women founded their own structure to campaign for their rights, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. It was first headed by Betty Friedan, famous author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which had put forth white middle-class women's frustrations about the imperative of domesticity. Many women also joined feminist groups after being confronted with sexist rules and hierarchy in other social movements.

In 1972, one of the key demands of the growing feminist movement was answered. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) passed Congress and was sent to the States for ratification by at least three-fourths of them, as the Constitution requires. It was meant to guarantee equality between men and women and prevent sex discriminations at a national level. The ERA, however, was not overwhelmingly popular. Phyllis Schlafly, a figure of authority in conservative circles and the Republican Party, launched the resistance against the ratification process.¹ She was well-educated and self-reliant, since she had obtained a master's degree in

¹ Female resistance to feminism and women's rights has already been studied in numerous works that examined their political, civic, and social engagements, and the interplay between gender and politics. See,

political science from Harvard University and had worked for the conservative think tank The American Enterprise Institute. Married to a wealthy Illinois lawyer, Schlafly not only started a life as a wife and mother but she also developed her own political network.² She became involved in numerous civic and political groups, such as the patriotic Daughters of the American Revolution, and she started to give speeches around her State, especially on issues related to anticommunism and party politics. In 1964, she also became known for her talent as a pamphleteer after she published a book, *A Choice not an Echo*, in favor of conservative Republican senator Barry Goldwater, who was afterwards selected as the Republican presidential candidate. This gave her a certain notoriety in the Republican Party and among conservatives in general.

Later, in 1967, after having been voted out from the leadership of the National Federation of Republican Women because of her conservative positions, she launched her own publication, *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, which would become a crucial instrument of her political movement.³ This militant newsletter, along with numerous other pamphlets and writings, contributed to spread a conservative discourse on women's rights, as well as to raise funds for her cause, and to encourage other women join her.⁴ In 1972, Schlafly published her manifesto "What's Wrong with Equal Rights for Women," in opposition to the ERA. Calling the

among others, Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (2005); Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage Through the Rise of the New Right* (2006); Schreiber, *Righting Feminism: Conservative Women and American Politics* (2008); Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (2017).

² Phyllis Schlafly got married to Fred Schlafly in 1949 and they raised six children.

³ According to Schlafly, 3,000 women read her *Report* when it was created in 1967; this figure reached about 30,000 at the end of the 1980s (Schlafly in DePue).

⁴ The women who joined Phyllis Schlafly in the fight against the ERA were from a diversity of backgrounds. Some of them knew her from her campaign to become president of the National Federation of Republican Women or from her speeches in Illinois and elsewhere. Others could be associated to what came to be known as "the silent majority", an expression used by Richard Nixon in 1969 to describe the citizens who felt that their values and lifestyles were endangered by the social movements of the 1960s and by the expansion of the powers of the federal government. Women involved in conservative organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution or in religious groups were also attracted to Eagle Forum.

amendment a fraud and denouncing feminism for downgrading the traditional roles of wife and mother, she rejected sex equality on the grounds that it would remove rights and protections that women already enjoyed. Her STOP-ERA campaign initiated in 1972 was subsequently sustained by the creation of a conservative organization called Eagle Forum (1975) in St. Louis (Missouri), which participated in the antifeminist resistance.

This group is to be situated in the conservative galaxy that started to expand during the 1960s-70s and which gained ground in politics in parallel to other social movements, well into the subsequent decade. In the vein of Lisa McGirr's work on the conservative communities of suburban California, I decided to envision Schlafly's project as a social movement.⁵ Defined by sociologist Erik Neveu as a form of collective action characterized by an intentional coming together and collaboration of actors, eager to participate in politics, to redefine social problems, and to create collective identities, it seems to be the adequate frame of study for Eagle Forum (Neveu 9-10, 33). More specifically, in the realm of social movements, Schlafly's project can be seen as a countermovement, a collective mobilization of individuals who protest against an initial movement, or the social change advocated by said movement (Mottl; Lo; Meyer and Staggenborg).

An essential dimension of the success of the antifeminist movement was the specific discourse devised by Phyllis Schlafly to mobilize her peers and encourage their activism. As political scientist Eric Agrikoliansky and sociologist Annie Collovald have argued, there is still much to explore concerning the production of symbols, narratives, and meaning in conservative movements (Agrikoliansky and Collovald). I therefore propose to see Schlafly's group as a social movement and to apply a methodology rarely used in the study of antifeminism, which connects the history of conservative women with discourse analysis and research on social movements. This article offers an examination of the conservative discourse spread by Eagle

⁵ In her enlightening book *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (2001), Lisa McGirr offered to envision the Right as a social movement.

Forum literature and Phyllis Schlafly herself and it uses the framing perspective developed by David Snow and Robert Benford. According to these sociologists, social movements “frame, or assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Benford and Snow 614).⁶ In other words, they create frames of interpretation. At Eagle Forum, Schlafly was in charge of the discursive strategy, defined around a common vocabulary, a shared understanding of women’s issues, and a set of collective emotions.⁷

In order to study Schlafly’s discourse, documents collected in archival centers at Eagle Forum, at the Library of Congress, and at the Schlesinger Library of Harvard University between 2016 and 2017 as well as an oral history interview conducted with Phyllis Schlafly in 2013 will be analyzed. I chose to look at a variety of sources such as issues of her newsletter, a leaflet, a TV program, and several excerpts from her books in order to highlight Schlafly’s ability to master several channels of expression and to show how her discourse was elaborated on, in link to these specific formats. The corpus is characterized by discursive echoes, which contribute to create a resonance effect for both movement participants and the general public. This article will first examine how Phyllis Schlafly devised and spread a shared understanding of women’s rights and feminism. Then, it will show that she proposed an alternative to this ideology. Finally, it will look at in the circulation of feminist and antifeminist frames, considering not only their antagonistic articulation but also their complementarity.

⁶ Erving Goffman pioneered the reflection on frames with his seminal book *Frame Analysis: An Essay*, published in 1974. His assumption about the existence of schemes of interpretation has been applied by Benford and Snow to the study of social movements.

⁷ I will draw upon the work of sociologist James Jasper who argues that emotions “motivate individuals, are generated in crowds, are expressed rhetorically, and shape stated and unstated goals of social movements. Emotions can be means, they can be ends, and sometimes they can fuse the two. They can help or hinder mobilization efforts, ongoing strategies, and the success of social movements” (Jasper “Emotions and Social Movements,” 286).

Diagnostic Framing: Negotiating a Shared Understanding of Womanhood

In the early 1970s, the first step of Phyllis Schlafly's mobilizing strategy was to diagnose the problems of the U.S. society in such a way that it would dismiss the claims formulated by social movements, and more specifically by feminism. This stage of "diagnostic framing" (Benford and Snow 615) consisted in identifying the social ills that mattered to her, and the people she thought were responsible for them.

Schlafly's views about women's rights were informed by the model of the traditional housewife, or homemaker, a role women were encouraged to embody in the 1950s-60s, as emphasized by different experts such as women's magazines, the medical sector, and others.⁸ Even though she was herself trying to embody this social ideal, Schlafly was in fact very active in politics, and more specifically in the conservative movement. While she was defending the importance of women's roles as wives and mothers, she claimed that feminism attempted to deconstruct the stereotypes that constrained women's lives, in particular thanks to the Equal Rights Amendment, that would inscribe equality in the Constitution. For Schlafly, however, feminism would cost women precious privileges allegedly associated with traditional gender roles. The ERA was not presented as beneficial for women. On the contrary, Schlafly showed that they would be stripped off their social legitimacy and individual rights:

(...) let's not permit these women's libbers to get away with pretending to speak for the rest of us. Let's not permit this tiny minority to degrade the role that most women prefer. Let's not let these women's libbers deprive wives and mothers of the rights we now possess (Schlafly, "What's Wrong").

The set of rights Schlafly is referring to concerns the so-called advantages linked to marriage. When the U.S. were founded, the system of coverture imported from English law defined women as dependent on men (Cott 11-12). Such logic persisted over time and still intended

⁸ The traditional family corresponds to the 1950s model of the nuclear family, which organized strict gender roles for men and women within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage. On this topic, see in particular Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992).

for the husband to provide financially for his wife in the 1950s and 60s. A woman would be entitled to a home, access to her husband's money, and a share of his Social Security rights, thus guaranteeing her a certain standard of living.

This lifestyle, however, was seen by Schlafly and her followers as being endangered by equality claims. She argued that the homemakers would be the first victims of this rearrangement of heteronormative gender roles. For example, in a series of vignettes published in *The Phyllis Schlafly Report* of October 1974, a housewife is shown as being crippled by household duties, therefore implying that she is physically and economically vulnerable; in case the ERA was approved, they would also have to provide for their family and share 50% of the new financial burden, as indicated on the drawing (Schlafly "How ERA Will Affect"). In this conservative approach to gender roles, men and women were not supposed to be equal, but rather complementary, each one performing specific duties: the man breadwinner ensured the economic survival of the family while the woman homemaker took care of the home and children. That is why Schlafly renamed the ERA the "Extra Responsibility Amendment," as she considered that it would hurt women and devalue their role as housewives.

This rhetoric of victimization worked in association with an accusatory tone, the second crucial element of diagnostic framing. Once Schlafly had established that women would be threatened by the ideas spread by feminism, she blamed the people she saw as the real culprits, i.e. all feminist activists, whom she indiscriminately and sardonically qualified as "women's libbers"—thus dismissing the variety of organizations and ideologies within the feminist movement.⁹ She decried them for being responsible for the depreciation of the American housewife and the traditional family: "The women's libbers are radicals who are waging a total assault on the family, on marriage, and on children" (Schlafly, "What's Wrong").

⁹ This expression was used by conservatives, and later by the media, to talk about the more radical members of the feminist movement active in the women's liberation movement. They were denigrated because they were asking for profound changes in society on the contrary to more reformist feminists, and because some of them did not "spare" men in their critique of patriarchy.

The feminist movement as a whole was denounced as subversive and was identified as the real source of women's unhappiness, whereas Betty Friedan had linked "the problem that has no name" (housewives' struggle with domesticity) to their unequal status. The attribution of the blame aimed at establishing a clear limit between a good side and a bad side, in the spirit of "boundary framing" (Benford and Snow 616). As the use of the prefix "anti" testifies in the following quote, feminists were situated on the "wrong side" of the issue: they were described as "anti-family, anti-children, [yet] pro-abortion" (Schlafly, "What's Wrong"). On the contrary, conservative women were on the "right side" of the debate, leading Schlafly to put forward a narrative about "positive" womanhood, as shown in her 1977 book *The Power of the Positive Woman*, which encourages women to find fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers. Such a narrative functioned as the cornerstone of the countermovement opposing feminism. The recognition of an enemy and the creation of a counternarrative allowed the emergence of a collective identity of proud housewives ready to fight for their community.¹⁰ An extreme polarization regarding women's identities was thus necessary to the antifeminist reaction.¹¹

Part and parcel of the culture of the movement was also the set of emotions associated with the construction of this mobilizing identity. The injustice frame elaborated by Schlafly, whereby housewives were threatened by the feminists' demands, was intended to provoke specific emotional responses, that would function as a natural fuel for the movement. On the one hand, it elicited indignation on the part of conservative women, which led them to fight for the protection of the socioeconomic status quo that regulated gender relations. Sociologist James Jasper talks about the creation of a "moral shock" as a social movement trigger (Jasper, "The Emotions of Protest"). On the other hand, the possibility for conservative women to

¹⁰ On the notion of collective identity, see, among others, Melucci, "The Process of Collective Identity" (1995).

¹¹ For a more in-depth analysis, see the author's doctoral thesis entitled "The Sociocultural Discourse and the Militant Practices of Conservative Women in the United States. The Example of Phyllis Schlafly and Eagle Forum," conducted under the supervision of H el ene Le Dantec-Lowry and defended at La Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris, France) on November 29, 2019.

identify with the cultural figure of the housewife reinforced their sense of belonging to a cohesive group. It created solidarity and camaraderie among those involved in the movement.¹²

This set of framing mechanisms, often associated with emotions, were meant to increase the salience of the cause in the eyes of the participants. In the mobilization plan of social movements, diagnostic framing usually works in association with “prognostic framing” (Benford and Snow 616) that provides the impulse necessary for collective action.

Prognostic and Motivational Framing: Articulating an Alternative to Feminism

The purpose of prognostic framing is to provide a variety of solutions and strategies to remedy the ills identified in an earlier step of the construction of the movement. The political project of Eagle Forum was developed in several complementary directions.

First, Phyllis Schlafly's movement positioned itself within—or rather outside—the framework of 1970s social movements by defining its *raison d'être* as being essentially opposed to theirs. An early leaflet produced by Eagle Forum indicates that it stood as an “Alternative to Women's Lib,” while also, paradoxically, supporting women's rights. Their goals are defined as followed: “being a fulltime wife and mother,” forbidding “the display of printed or pictorial materials that degrade women in a pornographic, perverted or sadistic manner,” being “protected by laws and regulations” in physically demanding jobs, and opposing the Equal Rights Amendment (Eagle Forum, “The Alternative to Women's Lib”). This list is interesting since half of these objectives focuses on specific social conservative causes (domesticity and the rejection of gender equality), and therefore strongly contrasts with the ideology of feminism, whereas the other half evokes positions defended by some feminist groups (the fight against pornography and job-related protections). Additionally, on the central page of the leaflet, the

¹² In her dissertation, the author identifies a range of socializing mechanisms devised by Schlafly to foster cohesion, support, and friendship.

organization reveals the cornerstone of its cause: the defense of the family, and more specifically the “traditional” family.¹³ In this organization, women’s rights were only seen through this prism, pointing to a conservative stance on gender relations. Eagle Forum, therefore, was not a feminist organization, even if it focused on women-centered issues and seemed to encourage a “gender-conscious activism” (Schreiber 69). Also trying to avoid an antifeminist etiquette, Schlafly referred to it as the “pro-family movement.” This definition of Eagle Forum’s purpose, in opposition to feminism, was part of a strategy of counter-framing.

Furthermore, Phyllis Schlafly situated her battle for traditional womanhood and family within a larger mission, encompassing other motivating issues for conservative women. This extension of the original goal of the movement—i.e. to oppose the ERA—is part of “motivational framing” (Benford and Snow 617). Schlafly’s ideas are to be perceived in the larger context of the conservative mobilization in the 1970s-80s. In the early 1970s, the feminist movement became more radical, through the women’s liberation movement, which favored revolutionary means to overthrow the patriarchal order. Concomitantly, and partly in reaction to this evolution, the American Right also became more visible in the activist landscape, and this continued into the 1980s.¹⁴ Some conservative groups would use a discourse that focused on moral questions and the need to save America more systematically. In 1979, for example, the Moral Majority, a political organization associated with the Religious Right, was created by pastor Jerry Falwell, who attempted to trigger a moral crusade to “take back America”:

It is now time to take a stand on certain moral issues, and we can only stand if we have leaders. We must stand against the Equal Rights Amendment, the feminist revolution, and the homosexual revolution. We must have a revival in this country (Falwell 19).

¹³ In this article, the use of quotation marks sometimes signals the author’s distancing from certain terms.

¹⁴ Some historians have besides shown that the Right was already getting more militant in the 1960s in the shadow of social movements. See, for example, Farber and Roche, *The Conservative Sixties* (2003).

The same undertones pointing towards social decadence, in connection with women's rights, could be found in Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum. In addition to the initial rejection of the ERA—and sometimes correlated to it—a fight against other social changes was undertaken. For example, demands for equality would pose a major problem, according to Schlafly, as regards same-sex marriage, adoption, and the right for homosexuals to teach in schools. In *The Power of the Positive Woman*, she reflects on the wording of the ERA:

it is precisely "on account of sex" that a state now denies a marriage license to a man and a man, or to a woman and a woman. A homosexual who wants to be a teacher could argue persuasively that to deny him a school job would be discrimination "on account of sex" (Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* 90).¹⁵

The ERA indeed stated that "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex," and this wording potentially widened its legal scope. Schlafly's efforts to maximize the consequences of the ERA in directions that touched onto the moral anxieties of conservatives aimed at both diversifying the movement's participants and inscribing the antifeminist cause into a moral fight ("frame bridging") (Benford and Snow 624).

And, again, emotional responses to social changes—and often to the discourse developed around these changes—are key to understand this mobilization. The moral outrage felt by conservatives was channeled by the mounting religious wing within the conservative movement, which revived fervent Christians' moral duty to get involved in a fight against fantasized evil forces (Wilcox and Robinson). As Schlafly contended, "God has a mission for every Positive Woman," and that was to safeguard "the fabric of civilization" (Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* 139). Thus, trying to get the attention of conservative Americans

¹⁵ The growing acknowledgement and tolerance of other sexualities and familial arrangements at the expense of traditional families constituted a strong argument crafted by Schlafly in her fight against the ERA. She tried to mobilize moral and social conservatives who were potentially less sensitive to arguments strictly related to women's experience.

and to encourage them to get involved, Schlafly's discourse was also imbued with religious and patriotic subtext.¹⁶

The conservative's crusade for righteousness required an identified evil. For Schlafly, it was personified by the feminists, whom she would vilify at length. In this regard, another dimension of Eagle Forum's prognostic framing was the practice of shaming. Feminist activists, in particular those involved in the women's liberation movement and who were depicted as the greatest threat to traditional families, made ideal scapegoats. In Eagle Forum's literature, they often appear as bitter and seditious. For example, in *The Power of the Christian Woman* (1981), an adapted version of *The Power of the Positive Woman*, Schlafly describes them as follows:

a bunch of marital misfits who are seeking their identity as *Ms*, mistaken about morals, misinformed about history, motivated by the axiom "misery loves company," and who want to remake our laws, revise the marriage contract, restructure society, remold our children to conform to liberal values instead of God's values, and replace the image of woman as virtue and mother with the image of prostitute, swinger and lesbian (Schlafly, *The Power of the Christian Woman* 175).

Feminist activists, no matter their affiliation, were thus casted out of society for their criticism of inequalities and their desire to change the world. For Christine Bard, French expert of antifeminism, the use of shaming is inscribed in a long tradition of defamation, noticeable as soon as women start questioning the social status quo (Bard 26). In the case of Eagle Forum, this practice laid the foundation for the antifeminist frame spread by the organization.

¹⁶ My study of 389 applications to become president of an Eagle Forum state chapter (1974-82) shows that Schlafly's organization attracted a variety of Christians. More precisely, the sample included 21% Catholics, 23% Mormons, and 52% Protestants, with only 4% declining to state their religion. Although led by a fervent Catholic, Eagle Forum was not openly a religious group; it was, however, characterized by a peculiar blend of believers (Ribieras "The Sociocultural Discourse and the Militant Practices of Conservative Women in the United States").

Once established as the main detractor of feminism, Schlafly's movement engaged in a relentless framing competition to gain political support and to win over public opinion. This discursive confrontation led to "framing contests" (Benford and Snow 626).

Framing Contests: The Discursive Life of a Countermovement

After having examined the elaboration of Schlafly's discourse and the mechanisms that enhanced its reception by potential adherents, this section will focus on its diffusion. As a countermovement's existence is inherently linked to the life of the initial movement it responds to, it is relevant to look at how Schlafly's rhetoric interacted with feminist discourses, through a series of framing processes. The framing contests in which both movements took part helped Schlafly to weaponize the arguments of her opponents.

A striking feature of the literature disseminated by Schlafly is the mentioning, and sometimes the reproduction, of feminist documents. By employing a strategy of diffusion called "strategic selection" (Benford and Snow 627), Schlafly actively contributed to make the feminist message known. For instance, in two of her books, *The Power of the Positive Woman* (1977) and *The Flipside of Feminism: What Conservative Women Know—and Men Can't Say* (2011), she comments—twice—upon a famous poster circulated by the National Organization for Women (Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* 11; Schlafly, *The Flipside* 44). It features a baby girl, turning her back to the photographer and having abandoned her toy on the ground, in what appears as a gesture of despair. It is accompanied by the caption "This healthy normal baby has a handicap. She was born female." Here, Schlafly tries to re-connect womanhood to pride, suggesting that feminism was an ideology that shamed and crippled women from the start. Phyllis Schlafly wanted conservative women to be confronted with the words and images of feminism and she thus initiated a sort of double-voice discourse, in which feminist and antifeminist sources entered dialogue. However, she remained in charge of interpretation and she guided the reading of feminist material to highlight its radicalism. As opposed to the "positive" woman, "the women's liberationist (...) is imprisoned by her own negative view of

herself" (Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* 11; Schlafly, *The Flipside* 44). Far from facilitating the circulation of feminist ideas, this strategy of diffusion mostly helped Schlafly to delegitimize the views of the feminist movement through her comments.

This reinterpretation of feminism also translated into misappropriation of feminist concepts and claims, leading to reversals. In connection to the weaponization of the victimization frame, Schlafly also diverted the word discrimination. In a 1989 speech entitled "The Politics of Daycare," transcribed in her book *Who Will Rock the Cradle?*, she explains that the federal project of day care, discussed throughout the 1980s, would have "discriminate[d] against mothers who take care of their own children" (Schlafly, *Who Will Rock* 258). The Dodd-Kildee ABC Bill, introduced in 1988, indeed intended to alleviate the situation of working mothers, the number of which was steadily growing. It meant to create federal day care and vouchers that parents could use in these infrastructures.¹⁷ Yet, conservatives like Schlafly considered that it was not the government but families who were responsible for their children. Her argument consisted in pointing out that federal aids to some families, i.e. economically-disadvantaged ones, would be detrimental to others, i.e. traditional families, who chose to organize day care at home. This manipulation of the injustice claim, through the appropriation of the word discrimination, framed those feminists who advocated for federal day care as tormentors of traditional households. Schlafly used this strategy to enrich her "pro-family" frame and to influence the perception of feminism.

This subversion of vocabulary to dismantle the reputation of feminists peaked with a critical framing dispute: the debate about the right to abortion. Since 1973, when this medical procedure was nationally decriminalized by the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, conservatives had aimed to reverse it. One strategy to do so was the manipulation of discourse. Schlafly's organization actively contributed to shift the terms of the debate.

¹⁷ In 1985, more than half of married women with at least one infant worked (Cohen 130).

Adamantly opposed to the feminists on this issue, she denounced them for supporting abortions, before families. For instance, in 1991, when interviewed by televangelist Pat Robertson, she argued that their “number one right” seemed to be “the right to kill a baby” (Schlafly in Eagle Forum 1991). The process of counter-framing was in this case particularly destructive since Schlafly spread a discourse that completely distorted feminist claims. This she did through a mechanism of inflation called “frame amplification” (Benford and Snow 623). She stressed the death component of the procedure by mentioning the “killing” of a “baby” and she made it look like this “right” was more important than a woman’s right to control her own body. Conversely, conservatives presented themselves as guardians of life. As linguistics professor Andrea Tyler has argued, “by positioning themselves as ‘pro-life,’ this group essentially won the war of words” (Tyler in Shepard). The abortion debate stands as an instructive example of the devastating repercussions of conservatives’ discursive mastery.

The last essential component of Schlafly’s discursive strategy, which explains why conservative discourse endured from the 1970s to the beginning of the 21st century, is recurrence. By repeating the frames analyzed in this paper, antifeminists produced echoes that resonated regularly among Eagle Forum members and within U.S. society as a whole. The reproduction of NOW’s poster in Schlafly’s books is one example. But Phyllis Schlafly also multiplied her means of expression to channel her ideas: debates and interviews on national television and radio broadcasts, several books and a newsletter, mail to activists, op-eds to the press, speeches on campuses, congressional hearings, and the Republican Party’s platform were all aptly exploited. She regularly hammered home her message and sometimes even reiterated her various narratives with the exact same words. It is thus possible to uncover chains of repetition in her discourse. For instance, when interviewed by historian Mark DePue in 2011, and again when I met her in 2013, she used very similar phrasing to what is found in her book *The Power of the Positive Woman*. In all three instances, she insisted to say that American women were extremely fortunate. She stated, chronologically, that “Of all the classes of people who ever lived, the American woman is the most privileged,” “American women are

the most fortunate class of people who ever lived,” and “American women are the most fortunate people who have ever lived on the face of the earth” (Schlafly, “What’s Wrong”; Schlafly in DePue; Schlafly in Schlafly, “Interview with the Author”). This reiteration of key expressions and narratives functioned as an everlasting engine that helped her disseminate her conservative discourse.

Conclusion

This article examined the construction and diffusion of Phyllis Schlafly’s conservative discourse through the lens of framing. It showed how different discursive mechanisms worked as vectors of mobilization and cohesion for antifeminist women. Moreover, it discussed tools pertaining to the maintenance of the countermovement in the political arena. Through rhetorical means, the movement led by Schlafly actively took a stand against feminism. Discourse, and its associated production of cultural meaning, thus remains part of cultural resources that social movements strategically employ to compete against one another. The “pro-family” frame developed by Phyllis Schlafly to oppose the feminist movement of the 1960s-70s proved very effective. In particular, the ERA reached the deadline set for its ratification in 1982 without having been approved by the necessary number of States.

It is worth wondering why the feminists were not able to effectively oppose Schlafly. If she was vilified for being “a traitor to her own sex,” as feminist Betty Friedan put it (Friedan qtd. in Felsenthal 301), and for performing a character that she was not, i.e. the perfect homemaker, it never seemed to affect her popularity. Besides her rhetorical skills and her strong leadership, the stability of her message also explains the force of her discourse: she firmly supervised and controlled her followers and established herself as an expert on a wide range of subjects, from politics to women’s issues. Consequently, she rose as the uncontested leader of Eagle Forum, and presumably a major voice—if not the leading one—of the American antifeminist movement.

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