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Who Speaks for Women? Print Media Portrayals of Feminist and Conservative Women's Advocacy

RONNEE SCHREIBER

Feminists have frequently accused media outlets of not giving them enough coverage and/or portraying them negatively. Conversely, conservative women have argued that media suffer from liberal biases. While some studies have addressed the larger question of media and ideological prejudices, none have examined how media report women's activism in comparative terms. Since feminist and conservative women's organizations vie with one another over who represents women's interests, how media portray them has implications for how well they achieve this goal. Using data gathered from four major national newspapers, this study analyzes how print journalists depict feminist and conservative women's activism over a 14-year span. In so doing, it provides information about frequency of media coverage, as well as how advocates are labeled, on which issues they are getting visibility, and whether or not media present feminist and conservative women's organizations as being in direct conflict with each other. Implications for understanding women's political efforts, broadly speaking, are also explored.

Keywords women and politics, conservative politics

Shortly after its founding in 1992, the conservative Independent Women's Forum (IWF) published the *Media Directory of Women Experts*, which listed "knowledgeable women [who could] provide balanced commentary on timely issues" (Schreiber, 2008, p. 45). IWF's intent was to supply journalists with the names of women who could offer conservative analyses of issues usually considered to be the purview of feminists. Like other conservatives (Goldberg, 2003; Coulter, 2002), IWF contends that liberals have a stronghold on the media and bias their reporting in favor of those who are ideologically in line with them. Indeed, one IWF staff member charged that media present her group as a bunch of "crazy wing nut right wingers" (Schreiber, p. 45). In producing its directory and actively continuing to pursue media appearances, it aims to counterbalance this perceived bias and get the views of conservative women widely publicized.

Conversely, feminists have argued that media are "soft" on conservative women and accuse journalists of amplifying antifeminist women's opinions, often at the expense of, or in disparate proportion to, the coverage feminist organizations achieve (Rhode, 1995; Faludi, 1991). They also contend that media present feminists in narrow and sometimes

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unflattering ways (Rhode). Research bears some of this out, showing that the feminist movement is portrayed as being run by a small handful of leaders and tightly focused on a limited set of issues. Those associated with the movement are also characterized negatively or in terms that misconstrue their intentions or goals (Barakso & Schaffner, 2006; Ashley & Olson, 1998; Huddy, 1997; Costain, Braunstein, & Berggren, 1997).

The conflict between feminist and conservative women over media depiction also exemplifies political polarization that seems to be deepening over time. Although some are skeptical that such polarization exists among the public writ large (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2005), evidence of polarization among elites, activists, and partisans (Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005; Evans, 2003; Jacobson, 2000) has been demonstrated. For national interest groups, like those that represent feminist and conservative women, the idea of polarization can work in their favor by giving both sides more airtime. Fiorina et al. suggest that journalists have in part created the belief in a polarized electorate because of their propensity for stories involving debates, sensationalism, and conflict (see also Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, and Gamson, 1992, for claims about media sensationalism and balancing norms). Berry (1999) shows that media disproportionately showcase commentary from citizen groups on news programs, and Huddy (1997) finds that feminism is most often represented in newspapers by organizational leaders. Fiorina et al. refer to these spokespeople as "purists" (p. 95) and argue that media preference for them fuels the perception that the public is politically polarized.

Whatever the specific outcome, that media are part of the polarization controversy suggests that coverage of feminist and conservative women's organizations will be shaped by this political climate. Given increasing polarization among some actors and the media's aim to generate and promote controversy, we should expect journalists to highlight and promote the tensions between feminist and conservative women's organizations. It is also likely that these groups recognize the power of the media in constructing this dynamic and frame their messages in ways to get attention. It is beyond the scope of this study to confirm the reasons for shifts in organizational strategies and intent over time, but I do recognize this factor in discussing my findings.

Beyond perpetuating the idea of polarization, how media present feminist and conservative women's organizations and the extent to which they are pitted against each other has important consequences for the relative efficacy of these groups. Reporters help construct knowledge about political movements, mobilize people, shape public opinion on the issues for which they advocate, and influence political attitudes (Barakso & Schaffner, 2006; Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). How women's groups are portrayed also has significant implications for political support of women's policy goals and partisan responses to them. And, when journalists write about interest groups, they are not only providing a venue for the communication of ideas and values, but are constructing identities about the groups.

How frequently media reference advocates, the terms with which they label them, and the context in which they place them also shape how authoritative interest groups appear, and on whose behalf we believe they are acting (Eisinger, Veenstra, & Koehn, 2007; Rohlinger, 2002; Barker-Plummer, 2000). Dominant narratives, like those produced by major media outlets, matter in terms of who gets credit for political actions (Meyer, 2006). This is especially important for feminist and conservative women's organizations because they vie with one another over who really speaks on behalf of women in legislative debates and to the public. Each side has publicly accused the other of ignoring the interests of most women. For example, Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation

(FMF), argues that "IWF [only] represents a small group of right-wing wheeler-dealers inside the Beltway State" (Lobe, 2004), while IWF contends that "NOW, the Feminist Majority, the National Council of Women's Organizations, and other such groups are sadly out of touch" (Lukas, 2004). Putting aside the issue of whose claims are accurate, this article assesses what role media play in helping these organizations achieve their goal of being identified as speaking for, and as, women. Political standing is critical to interest groups' ability to have an impact politically and mobilize members (Beckwith, 1996).

Media are critical in helping organizations frame issues, but, as noted, I am particularly interested in how media help women's groups frame themselves as representing interests. Since we can gather a more comprehensive picture of how media frame movements when we also consider how media frame their opponents (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996), I compare how feminist and conservative women's movement organizations are covered. Feminists have many opponents in the political realm, but for this study, I am interested in the specific competition among women over who can represent women's interests. As such, I consider conservative women's organizations to be countermovement institutions that compete with feminist groups over the construction of women's interests. Indeed, conservative women's groups like Concerned Women for America (CWA) were founded in part to publicly counteract feminist organizations. On its Web site, the history of CWA includes the following:

> [CWA founder] Beverly LaHaye watched a television interview of Betty Friedan, founder of the National Organization for Women. Realizing that Friedan claimed to speak for the women of America, Beverly LaHaye was stirred to action. She knew the feminists' anti-God, anti-family rhetoric did not represent her beliefs, nor those of the vast majority of women.

While these groups may be vying with one another over the right to represent women, do the media pick up on this struggle?

Assessing Media Portrayals of Women's Organizations

Broadly speaking, feminists have set the tone on public debates over women's issues. And when scholars, the press, and the public refer to women's movements, they most often mean feminist activism. Nonetheless, feminists are increasingly being met with public challenges from institutionalized conservative women actors (Schreiber, 2008; Hardisty, 1999). As noted, these established organizations aim to be taken seriously as advocates for women. Indeed, some, like CWA and Eagle Forum (EF), have achieved this status in debates over issues like abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Despite the tensions between these ideologically distinct groups of women, and the expectation that media will present them in polarizing ways, almost no studies compare how media cover feminist and conservative women's movements.[1] Here I address this gap and examine how newspapers report on four feminist and four conservative women's organizations to ascertain which specific advocacy efforts get attention and which organizations are being constructed as representatives of women's interests. I move beyond assessing whether or not media are biased in coverage or tone toward one group or another and instead examine how a broad range of women's activism is presented to the public. To do so, I pose the following series of research questions:

1. Are there differences in the frequency of articles that mention feminist and conservative women's organizations?

2. How are the organizations described? Do journalists label them as women's organizations, or is other language used to explain their roles?
3. What issues are attributed to feminist and conservative women's organizations? Are they women's issues? Do these correlate with organizations' stated policy priorities?
4. Are feminist and conservative women's organizations positioned as being in direct opposition with one another?

First, frequency of coverage is one measure to ascertain media interest and if group actions are getting attention. How often organizations appear in articles reflects how newsworthy journalists believe them to be, but it is also the outcome of the dialogical and sometimes contentious interplay between interest groups and media (Rohlinger, 2002; Barker-Plummer, 2000; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Thus, the relative proficiency with which political institutions develop savvy media strategies factors into how much press they will receive. Women's organizations are not immune from this dynamic—studies have shown that NOW's command of the press directly affected the amount and type of coverage it garnered (Rohlinger; Barker-Plummer). In addition, organizational resources may affect a group's ability to get noticed. Thus, frequency of mention is not a complete measure of media interest. However, such an evaluation does provide data about which organizations are actually getting visibility and being presented to the public as agents of social change.

Second, organizational identities are shaped in part by how journalists label them. The descriptors used to categorize and explain political actors provide readers with a lens through which to understand the groups (Eisinger et al., 2007). Since feminist and conservative women's organizations are vying with one another over representational status, whether they are defined as "women's groups," or depicted in alternative ways, affects how the public perceives them and whether or not women's interests are presented in ways to suggest there is public debate about their meaning. Thus, I analyze the terms used to describe the organizations under study and the extent to which these reflect the goals of the groups themselves. Since feminists have set the stage for the definition of women's interests over the past few decades, we should expect that the press will refer to them in ways that specify their gendered status. In addition, since media aim to present both sides of a story and position opposing political actors in contrast to each other, journalists might offer similar terms with which to describe conservative women's groups. However, with some notable exceptions (e.g., in the case of the ERA), conservative women's activism has often been dismissed as being supplemental to the conservative movement as a whole, with little attention paid to the central role of conservative women (Schreiber, 2008). Given this latter concern, print coverage of conservative women's organizations may not reflect their gendered identities.

Third, although feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW) have multi-issue agendas, only a portion of their efforts are detailed in the press, indicating that media do not present a comprehensive picture of feminist activism. There is a disjuncture between the goals of media and interest groups that affects the type of coverage activists will receive. The economic or business needs of media corporations can mean that stories will be selected with viewers and advertisers in mind. Advocates, on the other hand, aim for stories that shape public opinion and effect social change. These two sets of goals are not always complementary (Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001; Gitlin, 1981). In addition, media coverage of issues and activism tends to be episodic, with journalists highlighting events at their onset, when they are novel, and when there appears to be the most conflict over them (Oliver & Myers, 1999).

As noted, previous research finds that when feminist movement activity is reported, it is most often about gender equity issues and reproductive rights. Newspapers, which have a larger "news hole" than network televisions broadcasts, tend to cover a wider range of issue activity and more accurately represent the efforts of feminist movement organizations (Barakso & Schaffner, 2006). Nonetheless, even newspapers fail to fully convey the breadth of issues prioritized by feminist groups, thus constructing a movement that is narrowly focused and out of touch with public opinion (Barakso & Schaffner). The outcome for women's groups is that certain issues, especially contentious and controversial ones like the ERA and reproductive health, get the most attention (Barakso & Schaffner; Costain et al., 1997; Huddy, 1997). In addition, cautious framing has assisted feminists. When NOW offers relatively mainstream messages to the public, media take them more seriously and give them coverage (Barker-Plummer, 2000). As such, feminist organizations' alternative or more "radical" interpretations of political problems get less publicity and thus less consideration. Thus, in examining which issues are associated with feminist and conservative women's organizations, we can expect the list to be smaller than the actual policy agendas stated by the groups themselves. But is there a difference between the coverage of feminist and conservative women's organizations in terms of the issues for which they get credit? Since both aim to be taken seriously as representatives of women's interests, and since we expect the media to be picking up on this battle, are both sides portrayed as being active on women's issues?

Finally, another way to assess how media are constructing the efforts of advocates working on behalf of women is to look at whether or not feminist and conservative groups are positioned as being in direct conflict with one another. As discussed, scholars note that media will attempt to "balance" their stories about an organization or cause by presenting the other side, even if the intensity of political activity on both sides is not equal. These researchers contend that journalists are motivated by a desire to appear "objective," as well as to create controversy and thus make stories more sensational and newsworthy (Fiorina et al., 2005; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Gamson, 1992). Meyer and Staggenborg also theorize that such coverage may help mobilize and strengthen countermovements by making them seem more powerful or more well organized than actually warranted. The battle between feminist and conservative women over who represents women has been ongoing. Are these two ideological groups presented to the public as being in direct conflict over women's interests? Do journalists convey to readers that women are not monolithic in how they define their interests?

Methods

Data

Data for this project come from a content analysis of randomly selected articles from four major newspapers: the *New York Times, USA Today,* the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post.* I chose these papers for the following reasons. First, reports from each are transmitted to local newspapers throughout the country and are thus geographically dispersed. Second, each is essentially a national newspaper, read by policymakers and other important decision makers, and stories from each are also frequently reported on television and radio broadcasts. Finally, this group of papers represents an ideological range, with the *Washington Post* considered to be among the more liberal and the *Wall Street Journal* the more conservative. A total of 864 articles published between

1991 and 2004 were coded for this project. Articles were located in Lexis/Nexis by using the following search terms, the names of four feminist and four conservative women's organizations: National Organization for Women, Fund for the Feminist Majority and its newer incarnation the Feminist Majority Foundation, American Association of University Women, National Women's Law Center, Eagle Forum, Concerned Women for America, Independent Women's Forum, and Women's Freedom Network. While there are many more national women's organizations, these are among the most prominent in terms of membership numbers, visibility, and longevity (see, for example, Wilcox, 2009; Barakso, 2004; Hardisty, 1999). In addition, information about the stated political agendas of the organizations was gathered to compare if organizational priorities correlate with those that the newspapers convey are most central to the organizations. Table 1 outlines these policy priorities, and Appendix A provides more information about the organizations.

I started the project by conducting a preliminary analysis of 205 articles to develop and refine the coding instrument. These articles came from a random selection of two articles about each organization from every year between 1991 and 2004. Following the development of a coding instrument, two graduate students were trained to code the data. The training took place over three meetings. In the first meeting, the project, variables, and process were explained, and we coded 20 articles together. The coding instrument was further refined after that 3-hr meeting. Next, the students and I coded a random sample of 45 articles independent of each other and then met for a second time to compare findings and finalize the coding scheme based on our findings. In the third meeting, intercoder reliability was determined as the students coded another random sample from the universe of articles. On nine key variables, coders were in agreement 90% of the time. Finally, the students coded the sample of 864 articles.

The Organizations

Eight women's organizations are analyzed for this project, four feminist and four conservative. I consider an organization to be a women's group if it explicitly claims to be representing women and/or many of its issue priorities specifically reference women's interests (e.g., Title IX, Equal Rights Amendment). Feminist organizations are those that either self-identify as feminist, support women's equal rights under the law and/or believe that women's oppression relative to men is the result of discrimination. In addition, feminists believe that women's status is predominantly shaped by processes of institutional and structural inequality, not individual actions or circumstances. Conservative women's groups are those that promote socially conservative issues such as opposition to abortion rights and economic conservative issues (as in calling for "free market" values), contest the existence of intentional or institutional discrimination, and/or make public claims challenging the goals and successes of the feminist movement. It should be noted that in a phone conversation with the founder of WFN, she declined to categorize her organization as "conservative." I put the organization into that fold because its founding mission and agenda challenge the gender-conscious organizing of feminist organizations and contest the policy priorities of feminist groups like AAUW. As such, it functions as a countermovement organization relative to feminist efforts. It is important to note that when terms like "education" and "violence against women" are used for conservative organizations, this often refers to organizational efforts to oppose feminist policies such as the Violence Against Women Act or AAUW's report on sexual harassment of girls in schools.

Table 1
Organizations and issue priorities

Organizations	Budget ($) (as defined by revenue)[a]	Year founded	Issue priorities
AAUW (Feminist)	4,502,000	1881	Educational equity for women and girls; women's economic security; promote civil rights (includes reproductive rights)
FMF (Feminist)	5,969,000	1987	Global feminism; women in sports; women's health; violence against women; reproductive rights; arts and entertainment
NOW (Feminist)	4,867,000	1966	Reproductive rights; violence against women; constitutional equality; ending racism; lesbian rights; economic justice
NWLC (Feminist)	7,229,000	1972	Child care; poverty and income support; gender equity in education; workplace fairness; health care; reproductive rights; judges and courts; economic security
CWA (Conservative)	8,380,000[b]	1979	Religious liberty; national sovereignty (e.g., opposes UN); anti-abortion; opposition to gay rights; opposition to pornography; education
Eagle Forum (Conservative)	2,873,000	1972	Immigration; courts and judges; family and opposition to feminism; opposition to abortion and gay rights; national sovereignty; education; opposition to ERA
IWF (Conservative)	2,337,000	1992	Women in Iraq; women and work; courts/judges; national security; health/science; education; international women's rights; violence against women
WFN (Conservative)	6,000	1993	Violence against women; education; financial security for women; immigrant women; affirmative action

[a]Figures are from 2005 IRS 990 forms available at guidestar.org and rounded to the nearest thousand.
[b]Figure is from 2006, as 2005 was unavailable.

Data Analysis

Frequency of Coverage

Of the articles sampled, coverage of the National Organization for Women (NOW) is by far the greatest, with the organization garnering attention in 53.2% of the articles sampled. The feminist National Women's Law Center (NWLC) gets the second highest with 10.1% (see Table 2). Eagle Forum (EF) and Concerned Women for America (CWA) appeared in 8.4% and 8.2% of the articles, respectively (see Table 2). Overall, feminist organizations were mentioned in 80% of the articles and conservative organizations in 20%, due in large part to the number of articles that mention NOW. Without NOW in the analysis, coverage between feminist and conservative women's groups is considerably more balanced.

To ascertain whether an individual newspaper showed a preference for an organization or ideologically similar group of organizations, I examined the frequency of mentions of an organization by specific newspapers (see Table 3). The only paper that appears to have a bias relative to the others is the *New York Times*. In its case, it designates a disproportionate share of its coverage to feminist organizations (88.7%) as compared to the other three newspapers, where the range is 74.7% to 79.7% (see Table 3). Another finding of note is that compared to its newspaper counterparts, the *Wall Street Journal* devoted significantly more attention to IWF (see Table 3). Given that IWF is an economic conservative organization promoting "free market" values that are consistent with the *Wall Street Journal*'s business theme and audience, the paper's attention to this organization is not surprising. It does suggest, however, that economic conservative women activists have a prominent venue for the promotion of their ideas. As noted, however, the *Wall Street Journal* was no more likely than the *Washington Post* and *USA Today* to cover conservative women's organizations overall.

Although feminist organizations attract significantly more newspaper coverage on the whole, media bias may not be a suitable explanation. The amount of coverage may have more to do with organizational strategies than with journalists' views about the importance of these groups. As noted, the type and frequency of media coverage is not determined by a linear process; organizations seek out and inform the media just as media seek them out and interpret what they do (Rohlinger, 2002; Barker-Plummer, 2000). Previous research found CWA to be less professional and savvy in terms of its media strategies, and two of the conservative women's organizations under study (IWF and WFN) are relatively new. WFN is also quite small and not nearly as active compared to its conservative counterparts. As such, the groups may not have had the same amount of time and resources to establish contacts with media, secure supporters, and/or become as established as the feminist groups under study. Indeed, the two oldest conservative organizations received about the same coverage as three of the feminist groups, suggesting NOW to be in a category unto itself. Although organizational resources may help groups get media attention, it is not clear that the budgets of these groups mattered significantly in the overall coverage. Of all of the organizations, CWA has the largest budget, boasting annual revenues of over $8 million (see Appendix A). Comparatively, NOW's revenue was $4.8 million. As a group, feminist organizations do have higher revenues than their conservative counterparts, but this does not seem to directly affect frequency of coverage. Organizations may not be directing their incomes toward this endeavor.

Table 2
Organizational mentions in major newspapers, 1991 to 2004

	% of mentions all years	% of mentions 1991–1994	% of mentions 2001–2004	Correlation with year
All feminist groups combined	79.7	87.6	69.0	−.180***
National Organization for Women	53.2	60.9	44.6	−.128***
National Women's Law Center	10.1	8.3	12.7	.140
American Assoc. of University Women	7.9	8.8	5.2	−.046
Feminist Majority Foundation	8.5	9.9	6.6	−.038
All conservative groups combined	20.3	12.4	31.0	.180***
Concerned Women for America	8.2	8.0	17.8	.128***
Independent Women's Forum	3.2	0.0	3.8	.100**
Women's Freedom Network	0.3	0.3	0.0	−.017
Eagle Forum	8.4	3.9	9.4	.077*

*$p < .05$; *$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Table 3
Mentions of organizations within specific newspapers (in percentages)

Organization	*New York Times*	*Washington Post*	*USA Today*	*Wall Street Journal*	Total
All feminist groups combined	88.7	74.7	79.1	75.6	79.7
National Organization for Women	62.6	48.8	47.1	58.5	53.2
National Women's Law Center	7.5	11.5	13.6	3.7	10.1
American Association of University Women	8.3	7.3	7.8	9.8	7.9
Feminist Majority Foundation	10.2	7.3	10.7	3.7	8.5
All conservative groups combined	11.3	25.3	20.9	24.4	20.3
Concerned Women for America	3.8	10.4	10.7	6.1	8.2
Independent Women's Forum	1.1	2.9	2.9	12.2	3.2
Women's Freedom Network	0.4	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.3
Eagle Forum	6.0	11.2	7.3	6.1	8.4

Between 1991 and 2004, feminist organizations did get more print coverage than their conservative counterparts. However, conservative women's organizations have also been working to change their relationship with the media to increase their visibility and position themselves as prominent political players. Recent studies suggest that CWA is "working hard to get [its president] in the news" (Schreiber, 2008, p. 46), and IWF has directed resources into increasing its media presence (Spindel, 2003); indeed, its current president, Michelle Bernard, is an on-air political analyst for MSNBC. To determine if these efforts have had any effects, I examined frequency of media coverage over time. As detailed in Table 2 and displayed in Figure 1, there is a negative correlation between feminist organization and year, indicating that conservative groups indeed increased their visibility in newspaper articles between 1991 and 2004. For example, from 1991–1994, feminist groups received 87.6% of article mentions as compared to 12.4% for conservative organizations. Jumping to 2001–2004, that percentage drops to 69% for feminists and rises to 31% for conservatives, suggesting significant growth in media interest of conservative women's activism. While this may be in part an effect of conservative women's efforts to counteract coverage of feminist organizations and the media's eagerness to present this controversy, it may also reflect the political context in which these groups are operating.[2] A Democrat was in the White House for much of the 1990s, while a Republican took over in 2000. Thus, an increase in coverage of conservative women's efforts may also reflect a shift in media attention to conservative political actors in general.

Frequency of media coverage does provide important information about media attention and organizational visibility. Another critical question is how they are being covered. On what issues are these organizations portrayed as spokespeople? Do newspapers seek to strike a balance between the two ideological camps and/or frame these groups as in contestation with each other?

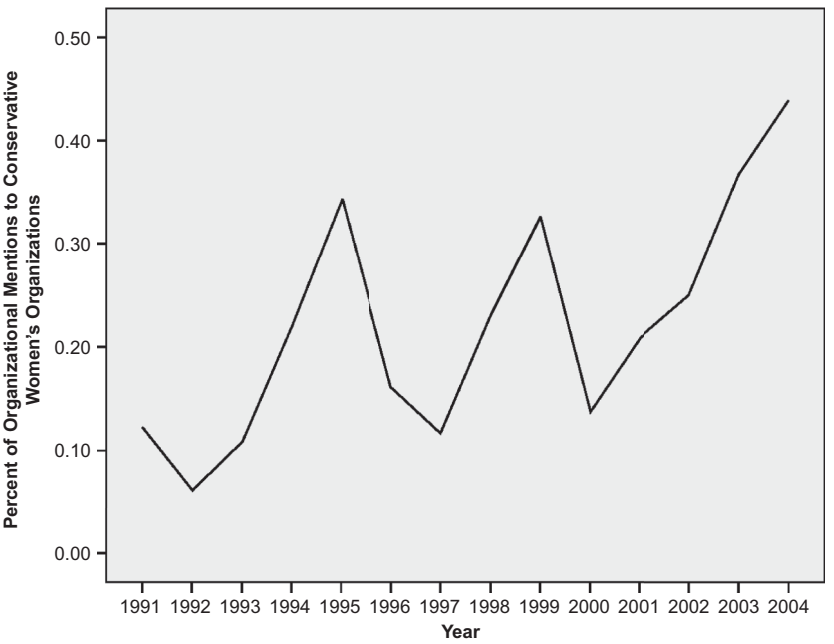

Figure 1. Conservative women's organization mentions by year.

Description of the Organizations

The terms with which media label organizations shape public perception and meaning about interest groups and reflect journalistic interpretations of where organizations fit within political movements. Since all of these groups aim to represent women, I examine how reporters reference or describe them. Were they explicitly deemed to be women's organizations? Or were more broad ideological terms like "liberal" or "conservative" used? Coders recorded the verbatim descriptions of the organization for each article. I divided these descriptions into the following categories to assess how journalists label the group: no description, liberal, conservative, conservative women's, feminist, women's group, or other. Overwhelmingly, when any organization is referenced, no description is used (76.6% of total organizational references). Presumably, reporters assume we know something about the organizations from the article's context, the name of the organization itself, the quote from the organization's representative, and/or common knowledge. If we calculate the same figures separately for feminist and conservative groups, in 83% of cases when feminist organizations are mentioned, they are not described. In the small number of cases where they are defined more specifically, they are either referred to as feminist or women's groups (3.5% and 5.5%, respectively) or as "other." Conversely, only 48% of mentions of conservative organizations are without labels. In the cases where they are qualified, conservative women's groups are most often labeled "conservative" (in 36% of cases where they are defined) or as "conservative women's groups" (7.6%).

Conservative women's organizations are therefore more likely to be defined by their overall ideology than as women's organizations. In terms of status among conservatives, these women's groups are placed squarely within the mix, with journalists labeling them as advocates for conservative politics broadly speaking. Feminist groups, however, are assumed to have either achieved enough name recognition to not warrant a label or to be separated from other liberal groups into a category that specifically identifies them as women's organizations.

Issues

The agendas of the multi-issue organizations in this study are wide-reaching, but share some commonalities. With the exception of the more libertarian IWF and WFN, all address the issue of reproductive health/abortion (see Table 1). In addition, issues related to workplace and educational equity rank high among the groups under study. To analyze which issues get discussed in reference to a particular organization, I created six categories: elections/appointments, reproductive health, women's health and safety, workplace/educational equity, other women's issues, and other issues. The "elections/appointments" category includes stories about all elections, not just those having to do with women candidates. "Reproductive health" refers to abortion, birth control, and sex education. The "women's health and safety" category includes domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, and medical issues like breast cancer. The broad category of "educational/workplace equity" encompasses stories about Title IX, affirmative action, sexual harassment, pay equity, balancing work and family, comparable worth, welfare reform, and equity for girls in schools. All other issues specifically discussed in terms of their impact on women, such as women in Afghanistan, media representation of women, and gay rights, fell into the "women's issues" group. Finally, "other issues" includes topics like tax cuts, the war in Iraq, and the Patriot Act.

Table 4
Issues by organizational type, 1991 to 2004

	Conservative organizations	Feminist organizations	χ^2 of difference
Elections/Appointments	16.3	11.2	3.617
Reproductive health	14.2	18.1	1.580
Women's health/safety	4.7	9.6	4.608*
Workplace/Educational equity	18.9	32.9	14.080***
Other women's issues	21.6	17.7	1.537
Non-women's issues	24.2	10.4	25.009***

Note. Chi-square is a comparison of a dichotomous variable of the issue vs. all other issues and the dummy variable indicating either a feminist or a conservative organization is mentioned ($df = 1$).
$^{*}p < .05$; $^{***}p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Consistent with previous research, I find that newspapers devote significant coverage to workplace/educational equity issues—29.6% of the issues mentioned fell into this category, with 32.9% for feminist organizations and 18.9% for conservative ones, a statistically significant difference between the two groups (see Table 4). That these issues received the most coverage overall may be in part reflective of the national agenda during the time period under study. Two significant pieces of legislation that directly affect women—the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which offers unpaid leave to care for family members, and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which dramatically changed the national welfare system—were signed into law in 1994 and 1996, respectively. In addition, in 1996, women at Brown University won a major ruling in federal court that the university discriminated against women athletes by violating Title IX. The outcome of this case represented a victory for feminist activists as well, since Title IX was enacted due to feminist efforts in 1972.

What is of particular note here is that feminists tended to get press coverage on these issues with reporters considering groups like NOW to have expertise on the topics. Comparatively speaking, conservative women's organizations are called upon less often to comment on these gender equity issues. This relative lack of coverage may be a function of the lower priority the groups actually place on these concerns, although this mostly holds true for CWA. Eagle Forum and IWF have stepped into the fray, arguing, for example, that Title IX has been "used as a weapon against male athletes in the name of 'gender equity'" (http://www.iwf.org). Given the media's propensity for reporting controversy, one would expect more coverage of debates between women over these relatively high-profile policy concerns. That conservative women's groups get so much less attention suggests that print journalists still consider workplace/educational equity issues to rest squarely within the domain of feminist activism and rarely think to call upon conservative women to comment upon them.

Articles about reproductive health are also well represented in the newspaper articles mentioning these organizations (17.3%), with no statistical difference in the amount of coverage feminist and conservative women's groups get on the issue (14.2% for conservative

women and 18.1% for feminists; see Table 4). As noted, the abortion issue is prominent and rife with controversy, and thus journalists are eager to report on the topic. In addition, during the time period under study, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992),[3] and the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act became law in 2003.[4] Six of the eight groups under study (IWF and WFN are exceptions) list reproductive health issues as policy priorities, and feminist and conservative women's organizations essentially received the same coverage on this issue. This suggests that reproductive health debates are played out as important to both feminists and conservatives and are polarizing among women, not just between women and men (Fiorina et al., 2005). As feminists have long argued, reproductive health policies are central to women's lives. By writing about women's organizations' efforts on the abortion issue, journalists reinforce that abortion is a women's issue. But, by including feminist and conservative women's points of view in the articles, media also show that women are not in agreement on this issue.[5] This is undoubtedly positive from the perspective of CWA, which has urged conservatives to start "focusing on the woman" in abortion debates in an effort to show that they care about women as well as their "unborn children" (Hurlburt, 2001).

On concerns about women's health and safety, conservative women garner far less attention than feminist groups (4.7% vs. 9.6%; see Table 4), although overall the percentage of articles highlighting this issue is relatively small (8.6%). It is not surprising that the efforts of feminist groups get some attention from journalists on this topic—all prioritize these issues. In addition, feminists were engaged in a public, and ultimately successful, policy campaign to enact the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA). Since conservative women, especially IWF and WFN, made it their mission to challenge certain provisions of the VAWA[6] after its passage (Hammer, 2002), more coverage of their efforts was expected. It could be, however, that one of the most vocal critics of feminists on this issue, Christina Hoff Sommers, received increased media attention when she published the controversial *Who Stole Feminism?* (1994), a text that chastises feminists for their efforts on behalf of VAWA, leaving other conservative women out of the debate.

As noted, the issues on which the organizations get coverage may conform to the national agenda. To test this hypothesis, I examined on which issues feminist and conservative women's organizations got attention by three time periods—during the presidencies of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush (Table 5). Although there are no stark patterns to suggest that coverage of issues significantly correlates with presidential agendas, there are some findings of note.

First, on the issue of abortion, having a Republican president promoting conservative reproductive health policies gives conservative women's organizations more coverage. Compared to the first two time periods, conservative women's organizations got considerably more coverage on reproductive health issues. As noted, in 2003, under George W. Bush, the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act passed and was signed into law by Bush. This was considered a huge victory for anti-abortion advocates, and the press promoted their role in it. However, during both the senior Bush's administration and under Bill Clinton, pro-choice activists introduced the Freedom of Choice Act, a bill aimed at codifying the ruling in *Roe v. Wade* that legalized abortion. We should expect that women's groups that opposed abortion would get attention for their efforts to challenge this bill, since opposing abortion has always been central to the agendas of both CWA and EF. That attention to their anti-abortion efforts increased after 2001 may reflect efforts on the part of conservative women to increase their coverage on women's issues over time (see

Table 5
Issues by time period

	1991–1992	1993–2000	2001–2004
Conservative organizations			
Elections/Appointments	5.6	19.8	13.6
Reproductive health	11.1	10.4	21.2
Women's health/safety	0.0	6.6	3.0
Workplace/Educational equity	38.9	24.5	4.5
Other women's issues	33.3	14.2	30.3
Non-women's issues	11.1	24.5	27.3
Feminist organizations			
Elections/Appointments	10.7	9.7	16.3
Reproductive health	21.5	17.3	16.3
Women's health/safety	5.1	9.7	15.0
Workplace/Educational equity	37.3	32.4	29.3
Other women's issues	18.1	19.1	12.9
Non-women's issues	7.3	11.8	10.2

Table 3), as well as media efforts to show increasing polarization among women on some issues.

Another shift over time stands out. For conservative women's organizations, there is a large drop in coverage of their workplace/educational equity efforts. There is a much smaller drop for feminist organizations. Generally, there was more national and presidential attention to these issues prior to 2001. As noted, FMLA, welfare reform, and the Title IX court case all occurred in the mid-1990s, and conservative women's groups did harness efforts to contest them. Perhaps because George W. Bush paid little attention to these issues, then so did conservative women's organizations and the media with respect to presenting them in terms of a contest between women.

Finally, there is a clear pattern of coverage of elections and appointments that conforms to the differing parties in the White House. During the Clinton years, conservative women got more coverage as compared to the Bush years. The opposite is true for feminists. This finding suggests that media were promoting the idea of polarization by highlighting the oppositional efforts of interest groups that challenged presidential appointments and were gearing up to contest the party in power in national elections.

Returning back to Table 4 and general coverage of issues, the clearest finding is that when either feminist or conservative groups are mentioned, 86.8% of the articles are about a women's issue. This generally conforms to the missions of these groups. However, if organizations are seeking to link women and women's activism to "broader" issues like tax policy cuts and the Iraq war, the media are not picking up on this. Moreover, feminist and conservative women's organizations are having differential success with getting media to discuss their agenda beyond women's issues. In almost 25% of mentions of a conservative group, a non-women's issue is the focus of the article. This is much higher than the 10.4% of non-women's issues stories for feminist organizations.

For conservative groups like IWF, which claims that "all issues are women's issues" (http://www.iwf.org), this should be welcome news. In addition, although both feminist

and conservative women attend to electoral and judicial politics, articles citing conservative women's organizations' efforts on the subject were marginally more likely to be published than those mentioning feminist groups (16.3% vs. 11.2%; see Table 4). This suggests that conservative women are considered to be opinion leaders on electoral politics and have secured some status as experts on mainstream politics. These findings also correlate with the policy agendas of the organizations—the priorities of the conservative women's groups are slightly broader than those of the feminist institutions. Eagle Forum, for example, has the broadest policy agenda of all of the groups under study and is most often written about in terms of its work on elections and/or non-women's issues. Nonetheless, combined with the media labeling of conservative women's organizations in broad ideological terms, media are positioning these activists in terms different than their feminist counterparts. They are more likely to be portrayed as part of a larger conservative movement concerned with a wide range of issues, while feminists are more narrowly identified.

Oppositional Groups

A focus on sensationalism and conflict helps media project to readers that stories are newsworthy. As noted, some argue that a balancing norm exists and that media will likely present both sides of a debate even if one side is less active or visible than the other. Because of their formation in response to feminist activism and because they explicitly state antifeminist goals in their missions, I consider CWA, IWF, EF, and WFN to be countermovement organizations vis-à-vis the feminist groups in this study. If media do consider them to be acting in direct opposition to feminists and seek to promote the idea of polarization among women on women's issues, they would appear in the same articles as the feminist groups as opposing viewpoints.

This, however, is not the case. First, in 56% of cases, no conflict with other political actors in portrayed in the articles. In 42% of the cases, conflict is portrayed between a feminist or conservative women's organization and other organizations that are not specifically gender identified. For example, in an article about protests at abortion clinics, NOW's comments are countered by leaders from the anti-abortion Operation Rescue and the Prolife Action League. Conflict between feminist and conservative women's organizations accounts for only 2.2% of the articles under study. If media do seek to balance movement and countermovement activity, these findings suggest that newspaper journalists do not perceive feminist and conservative women to be in direct competition with one another. Since other data from this study indicate that conservative women's organizations are often cast as part of the larger conservative movement, perhaps reporters consider the conflict to be between feminists and conservatives broadly speaking, and not in terms of women debating with other women over the representation and construction of women's interests. In effect, media are promoting the idea that women are in more agreement over political issues than may actually be the case, curiously downplaying polarization among activists of the same gender.

Discussion

Media help construct organizational identities. The findings in this study indicate that feminist organizations are more likely to be narrowly tailored as representatives of women's interests than their conservative counterparts. Conservative women's organizations, while garnering attention for a range of the issues they prioritize, are more often categorized

by their conservatism, not by their identities as women's groups. In addition, the two sides rarely appear in the same article. In so doing, media fail to convey that debates among women exist over how to define women's interests. This omission of stories about conflicts between women may lead the public to erroneously believe that women, at least at the elite level of politics, are working peacefully with one another in the policy-making process. In the case of women activists, this research also contradicts the notion that media are promoting the idea of polarization, except on the issue of abortion since 2000.

By presenting conservative women's organizations more broadly, media suggest that they are well institutionalized within conservative movement politics. This could help the organizations cast a wide net and be taken seriously by other conservative activists and citizens. It might, however, hinder them in their quest to specifically make claims as and for women. CWA refers to itself as "the nation's largest public policy women's organization" (http://www.cwfa.org) but is more likely to be defined as a "conservative" group than a "women's" organization in newspaper stories. This may not necessarily impede its overall efforts, but it can affect its ability to mobilize those who are seeking to work with like-minded women for social and/or political reasons. On the other hand, Eagle Forum never explicitly calls itself a women's group, and thus the coverage it receives generally reflects how it positions itself within conservative movement politics. Although it is most well known for its anti-ERA efforts, Eagle Forum tackles a wide range of issues from immigration to tort reform.

For feminists, the picture is different. Their efforts on behalf of workplace/educational equity and reproductive health are noticed more than anything else they do. Although they are rarely defined as representatives of women, the advocacy for which they get attention suggests their priorities lie in addressing issues typically associated with women's interests, albeit narrowly defined. If, however, feminists seek to be taken seriously on a range of issues, including ones like tax and trade policy and the Iraq war, the media are not helping them achieve this goal. Finally, for all groups, their efforts on issues like violence against women and women's health are not getting the same level of attention as workplace/educational equity and/or reproductive health. Given that women cited reducing domestic violence and sexual assault as a "top priority" for the women's movement,[7] this could hinder how well women think both feminist and conservative women's organizations are representing them.

As for NOW, the organization has clearly maintained its status as the "flagship" organization of the feminist movement (Barakso & Schaffner, 2006, p. 36), at least in the eyes of the press. Although AAUW is significantly older, and CWA has as many members, NOW is the organization that journalists go to most often when they seek expertise on women's issues. As such, journalists are giving the misleading impression that one organization in Washington, D.C., is fighting for women's interests. This may be due in part to their savvy handling of the press, but more research needs to be conducted to compare how other feminist and conservative women's organizations stack up to NOW to fully assess this claim. This research does demonstrate that media favoritism of NOW has declined over the past decade, while conservative women's organizations enjoy more of the spotlight. Alone, this finding suggests the need for more detailed and comprehensive evaluations of the press strategies of both feminist and conservative women's organizations and indicates the increasing clout of groups like CWA and IWF.

In the legislative and public arena, feminist and conservative women have been battling over policy debates, outcomes, and the desire to be taken seriously as representatives of women. Newspaper stories may be helping in some regards and creating obstacles in

others, but overall they have failed to let readers know that women advocates are competing with one another over how to define and interpret women's interests. Some may consider journalists' lack of attention to this fight between activists as a positive finding (see, e.g., Fiorina et al., 2005), but on the flip side, leaders of women's interest groups may not agree. Their getting little credit for engaging their female opponents means that the full range of women's political activities and concerns may not be registering with the public and potential constituencies.

Notes

1. Rohlinger (2002) does compare NOW to CWA, to determine how the organizations frame messages and how media respond to these organizational tactics. See also Ashley and Olson (1998) for research on how media frame feminism and antifeminism.

2. One reviewer helpfully suggested that another explanation for the increase could be that compared to CWA and EF, IWF and WFN are relatively new, thus causing a spike and shift in coverage of conservative women's organizations when they arrived on the scene. I conducted the same analysis as reported in Table 3 but removed the cases of IWF and WFN and found no significant differences from the analysis in which these two groups were included.

3. Generally considered to be a blow to abortion rights activists, the ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* lowered the standards for considering restrictions on abortion. For example, the court ruled that states may enact waiting periods for women seeking abortions.

4. The Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act outlaws a type of procedure that is performed in the third trimester of a woman's pregnancy. The ban, upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2007, is considered to be a restriction on women's access to abortion.

5. Polling data support this split in views on abortion. See, for example, "Pragmatic Americans Liberal and Conservative on Social Issues: Most Want Middle Ground on Abortion," released by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, August 3, 2006.

6. VAWA represented a major victory for feminists in that they secured a federal commitment to reduce the incidences of battering and sexual assault against women.

7. "Progress and Perils: New Agenda for Women," 2003 poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Center for the Advancement of Women.

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Appendix A: Description of Organizations

Feminist Organizations

American Association of University Women (AAUW): This is the oldest of the eight, founded in 1881 as a membership organization for women with college degrees. According to its Web site, the group works to promote "education and equity for women and girls" (http://www.aauw.org). AAUW claims about 100,000 members, and local branches in every state. It has both a public policy and research component, as well as a foundation that gives money to individual scholars for research and groups that promote its feminist mission. This well-established grassroots organization is pro-choice and has supported policy efforts like Title IX, affirmative action, equity in school athletics, and the Family and Medical Leave Act.

Feminist Majority Foundation (FFM): Originally founded in 1987 by past NOW president Eleanor Smeal as the Fund for the Feminist Majority, FFM claims 100,000 supporters. Less of a grassroots organization than AAUW and NOW, it promotes "research and action" on a range of feminist issues, both domestically and within a global context. Among its priorities are advocating for reproductive rights, getting women to vote and seek elective office, and encouraging women on college campuses to become politically active. Since 2001, FFM has also been publishing *Ms.* magazine.

National Organization for Women (NOW): By far the largest and likely the most well recognized of the feminist organizations, NOW claims 500,000 members. NOW got its start in 1966 and, like AAUW, has a grassroots membership, state affiliates, and a multi-issue platform that includes working for abortion rights, eradicating violence against women, promoting rights for gays and lesbians, and supporting affirmative action.

National Women's Law Center (NWLC): NWLC was founded in 1972 by a group of women working for a public interest law firm who demanded more of a commitment to women's rights and the hiring of female lawyers from the mostly male staff of the firm. Since that time, NWLC has litigated and lobbied for a host of feminist issues including pregnancy disability pay, Title IX enforcement, abortion rights, workplace fairness, and elimination of employment discrimination.

Conservative Organizations

Concerned Women for America (CWA): Founded in 1979 by Beverly LaHaye to oppose the ERA. Today CWA has a professionally staffed office in Washington, D.C., members in all 50 states, and claims 500,000 members. Its multi-issue policy agenda includes opposition to homosexuality, abortion, pornography, and funding the United Nations. The staff work closely with an active grassroots membership. CWA's mission, according to its Web site, is to "protect and promote Biblical values among all citizens—first through prayer, then education and finally by influencing our society—thereby reversing the decline in moral values in our nation."

Eagle Forum (EF): The oldest of the conservative women's organizations, Eagle Forum was founded in 1972 by Phyllis Schlafly to oppose the ERA (which it did successfully). Since that time, the EF has grown into a nationally prominent conservative organization with leaders in most states and an agenda that includes opposition to abortion and gay rights, support for prayer in school, and promotion of limited government regulation of business and public economics.

Independent Women's Forum (IWF): Established in 1992, this organization delights in caricaturing feminists and "debunking" supposed myths about issues such as the need for an ERA and pay equity policies. Its policy program, which reflects its economic conservative ideology, includes opposition to the implementation of Title IX and the reauthorization of the VAWA, challenging feminist claims about workplace discrimination, and promoting "democracy" for women in Iraq.

Women's Freedom Network (WFN): The smallest and likely the least well known of the conservative women's groups, the WFN was founded in 1993 to counter feminist advocacy in settings of higher education and to publish reports countering feminist "myths" about gender bias in medicine and the classroom, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. It claims to be an "alternative to extremist ideological feminism and the anti-feminist traditionalism [that] celebrates the achievements women have already made . . . and defines women and men as individuals and not in terms of gender" (http://www.womensfreedom.org). WFN has also called for economic security for women and the abolition of sex trafficking.