

“Ronald Reagan in Heels”: How Tea Party “Mama Grizzlies” Framed Gender and Public Issues  
in the 2010 U.S. Mid-Term Election

**Abstract**

This study conducted a discourse analysis of news interviews of female Tea Party candidates, television debates, and campaign ads during the 2010 U.S. election. Female candidates attacked both the “femininity” of male candidates and President Obama’s policies, such as health care and abortion. These candidates not only attacked the manhood of their opponents but also constructed a public persona with clear links to widely known conservative luminaries. They tried to depict themselves as disciples of Ronald Reagan and Sarah Palin. By doing so, they framed themselves as determined and courageous politicians. The tactical choice to align their public personas with Reagan and to become Palinesque “mama grizzlies” was the result of their judgment that such personas could be advantageous to their campaigns.

*Keywords:* Tea Party, feminism, framing, election, campaign, discourse analysis

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There is a paradox in American politics regarding male and female politicians. On the one hand, masculine values and themes seem to prevail. This marginalizes both female politicians and male politicians who are seen as overly feminine; they are often viewed as incapable of public leadership and thus are easily excluded from the political mainstream (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 1996). The femininity of politicians is ridiculed and deemed a serious defect (Fahey, 2007). On the other hand, politicians sometimes benefit from a “feminine” style because the emotionalism promoted by feminine communication can make the public feel a more intimate connection to the politician (Jamieson, 1995). According to Butler (1990), gender can be seen as an intentional strategy because it assumes a “dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (p. 139).

Politicians try to construct their political images while taking into account possible negative news-making. Strategic communication refers to “developing and communicating a message that promotes the political goals of a campaign by appealing to a targeted audience and holding the symbolic high ground” (Bennett, 2009, p. 120). Thus, a strategic communication plan is vital for successful image-making. Traditionally, it is Republican candidates who have criticized the femininity of their Democratic challengers. American society’s hegemonic masculinity considers physical toughness and male identity superior to feminine “weakness” (Connell, 1990).

During the 2010 U.S. election campaign, the high visibility of a number of Tea Party movement-supported female candidates was a topic of heated debate not only in political circles, but also in media outlets. In November 2010, the *New York Times* pointed out that “For a while

this summer and autumn, pundits and pollsters (and wishful thinkers) believed that the U.S. midterm elections might bring forth a new ‘year of the women’” (2010, Nov. 23).

Embracing the Tea Party movement, Sara Palin, the Republican vice-presidential candidate in the earlier 2008 election, enthusiastically campaigned for the election of Tea Party candidates. The term “mama grizzlies,” as coined by Palin referred to conservative women who possessed what Palin called “common sense” (2010, June 23). *Newsweek* reported that “Political pundits and journalists were delighted. Like beauty-contest judges, they began to bestow the mama grizzly title upon the women Palin endorsed” (2010, Sept. 27).

Given this background, this study aims to improve our understanding of political communication in several regards. First, it attempts to examine how conservative female candidates try to frame gender and masculinity. A number of studies have explored the masculine and feminine campaign styles of female candidates (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Carroll, 2009; Harp, Loke, & Bachmann, 2010). Others have examined how male candidates attack the “femininity” of their rivals while simultaneously appropriating a “feminine” style to appeal to voters (Fahey, 2007; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 1996; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2000). However, the way in which conservative female candidates attempt to utilize a gendered masculinity has received comparatively scant attention.

Second, this study identifies the kinds of issues female Tea Party candidates emphasized and how they framed those issues, and in so doing it will explore whether Tea Party female candidates were promoting the feminist ideal of the expansion of women’s rights. In American politics, female politicians have frequently advocated cultural issues such as family, welfare, and abortion. One would therefore expect that female Tea Party candidates in the 2010 election would also have emphasized these cultural issues, which are often regarded as “women’s issues.”

To explore whether this was the case or not, this study expands the scope of political communication studies by analyzing how conservative female candidates defined their social identity.

The Tea Party movement is a new political phenomenon. In its relatively short existence it has exerted a powerful influence on American politics. As a strong political supporter of the Tea Party Movement, Sarah Palin was then, and still is, automatically seen as a primary contender for the Republican presidential nomination in the 2012 election. Also, Michelle Bachmann, both a Republican and Tea Party heroine, is a rising star among House Republicans (2010, November 19). She is now running for the Republican nomination for president in the 2012 election. In this context, an examination of female tea partiers in the 2010 election can help to illuminate the political ideologies on which the Tea Party Movement is based.

By using discourse analysis as a methodology, the present study analyzes news media interviews with female Tea Party candidates, as well as the candidates' television debates, campaign advertisements, and web-site contents. Scholars using discourse analysis "examine spoken, signed and written language and focus on any aspect of linguistic behavior" (Yang, 2009, p. 159). Fairclough (1995) states that "Media texts constitute a sensitive barometer of sociocultural change, and they should be seen as valuable material for researching change" (p. 52). Van Dijk (1988) insists that, in discourse analysis, "What is not said may even be more important, from a critical point of view, than what is explicitly said or meant" (p. 17).

The present study focuses not only on Sarah Palin but also on other Republican women, specifically on senatorial candidate Sharron Angle in Nevada; senatorial candidate Christine O'Donnell in Delaware; Nikki Haley, gubernatorial candidate in South Carolina; and Michele Bachman, who, in 2010, was an incumbent representative running for reelection in Minnesota.

While Angle and O'Donnell lost their bids, both Haley and Bachmann succeeded. Haley was elected as South Carolina's first female governor and only the second governor in the history of the United States whose family comes from India. All these Tea Party female candidates were strongly supported by Sarah Palin during the primary as well as the general election campaigns.

### **“Man-up, Harry!”: Masculinity and Femininity as a Framing Strategy**

The 1992-1994 elections in the U.S. were transformative in regards to women's participation in Congress (Fox, 1997). In particular, in the 1994 election, nine women ran for the Senate and 112 for the House, respectively. Fox (1997) stated that “The historic breakthrough made by female candidates in the elections of 1992 provides an important starting point for studying gender dynamics in campaign politics” (pp. 8-9). Fox (1997) went on to explain the importance of examining the role of gender in the electoral process as follows:

Regardless of the skepticism or contempt one might hold for the election process, the simple reality remains that elections are the means by which we choose the leadership of the country. Thus, if election dynamics change with the addition of a new political group—in this case, women—then it is of central importance to grapple with the ramifications of how this change affects the selection of top leaders. (p. 2)

Investigating the function of gender in the election campaign is possible through an analysis of public communication discourse, which is “one of the primary mechanisms through which masculinity is consistently (re)defined, (re)constructed, challenged, and perpetuated” (Fahey, 2007, p. 134). Wahl-Jorgensen (2000) reinforces this notion by observing that “Candidates, through their campaign communication, play out and perpetuate a hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously constructing and reconstructing this masculinity” (pp. 56-57). According to Wahl-Jorgensen (2000), politicians have strengthened and fortified hegemonic

masculinity “through a variety of symbolic enactments, which are helpful to examine in trying to understand the ways in which language is intimately linked to ideology” (p.57).

Connell (1990) defines masculinity as “the culturally idealized form of masculine character” (p. 83). Carrigan et al. (1985) explains that hegemonic masculinity refers not only to “the institutionalization of men’s dominance over women” but also to “how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance”(pp. 592-594). According to Trujillo (1991), gender scholars have detected at least five distinctive features or characteristics of hegemonic masculinity in U.S. culture: physical force, occupational achievement, patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality.

In the 2010 election, Tea Party candidates frequently sought to portray their challengers as being too physically weak to function as strong public officials in charge of governance. They tried to style themselves as strong, virulent, masculine leaders. Tea Party candidates employed masculine terms strategically in order to provide the public with the impression that they were the strong fighter/warriors who would best serve the interests of ordinary American citizens. During the Delaware Primary campaign within the Republican Party in 2010, Christine O’Donnell criticized her opponent Rep. Mike Castle as “unmanly,” when Castle “filed an election law complaint against her” (2010, Oct. 18). Not only a subtle stab at his lack of chivalry toward her, but also his alleged “unmanliness” would make him seem disqualified as a tough, potent leader. Lest the public miss the point, she added, “This is not a bake-off—get your *man-pants* on.”

Rand Paul, a male Tea Party candidate ultimately elected to the Senate from Kentucky, also questioned the virility of his opponent: “You just out-and-out lie because you have nothing

to stand on. Run a race as a *man*. Stand up and be a *man* instead of just calling me names” (2010, Oct. 18). O’Donnell and Rand seemed to be taking their cues from one of the shining lights of the Tea Party movement, Sarah Palin herself. In a campaign speech to help Arizona governor Jan Brewer, Palin decried the femininity of president Obama, by saying “Jan Brewer has the *cojones* that our president does not have . . .” (CNN, 2010, Oct. 18). This was a very strong accusation indeed, but it was apparently permissible if used against a male candidate. If a male candidate attempted so blatant an attack against a female candidate, the result would be quite different. Kathleen Parker, a political columnist, asserted on CNN’s Parker/Spitzer program, “if a man spoke to a woman in a similar way, he wouldn’t get elected dogcatcher” (2010, October 18).

Persona politics, one of the main characteristics of American politics, thus emerges. A political persona is created and sustained not only through the candidate’s voluntary campaign maneuvering but also through the social construction of the candidate by the media. Fahey (2007) emphasizes that character construction (and character assassination) is crucial to persona politics, “most notably as the themes they introduce are often perpetuated in popular mainstream media commentary both in traditional news coverage and in entertainment formats and on the Internet” (p. 133). In an election campaign, candidates generally try to create a public persona or character that is not overly enmeshed with femininity. Republican politicians have often been assessed as particularly skillful not only in portraying themselves as masculine, strong and forceful but also in successfully characterizing Democratic Party candidates as ineffective, weak, and feminine (Jeffords, 1994; Fahey, 2007).

Sharron Angle consistently and unfailingly tried to frame herself as a strong politician in the tradition of Ronald Reagan. Whether in news interviews or television debates, she reinforced

this connection to Reagan. “I have a volunteer that calls me Ronald Reagan in heels” (2010, June 30); “I am a great fan of Reagan” (2010, Oct. 14); “I got the Ronald Reagan Freedom Medallion” (2010, June 14). Attempting to link her public persona to Reagan’s, she repeatedly used “Reagan” and “American exceptionalism” as the *ideographs* in her speeches: “Well, people often ask me why I smile so much. It’s because I’m an optimist like Ronald Reagan. [Like him] I believe in American exceptionalism” (2010, Oct. 14).

The term “ideograph” refers to the “basic structural elements, the building blocks, of ideology (McGee, 1999, p. 459). McGee (1995) explains the concept of an ideograph as “a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal” (p. 459). An ideograph “warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by the community as acceptable and laudable” (p. 459). In this respect, the use of “Reagan” and “American exceptionalism” as *ideographs* was intended to exert a powerful influence on public discourse and individuals’ attitudes.

Jeffords (1994) alleges that Ronald Reagan has been perceived by the American public as “the premiere masculine archetype for the 1980s, embodying both national and individual images of manliness that came to underlie the nation’s identity during his eight years in office” (p. 11). The Reagan era in the 1980s was marked by the prevailing ethos of the neoliberal doctrine of free markets and minimal government (Chavez, 2008). Neoliberalism suggested that “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2).

American exceptionalism refers to a political ideology which imagines the United States, in contrast to all other countries, as constituting something fundamentally unique. In American exceptionalism, five values—liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire—are especially cherished (Lipset, 1996). Lipset adds, “The emphasis in the American value system, in the American Creed, has been on the individual. Citizens have been expected to demand and protect their rights on a personal basis” (1996, p. 20). American exceptionalism, as symbolized by the Star Wars program and neo-liberalism, functioned in the 2010 election as a basic value system emphasizing hegemonic masculinity.

In tight alignment with American exceptionalism, Angle said that “I believe that with God’s help we the people have the solutions to our economic problems and they are as simple as cut back on the spending, pay back on the debt, and take back our economy by repealing policies like Obama care” (2010, Oct. 14). Associating her policies with God and “American exceptionalism,” Angle also tried to construct a public persona of a “fighter” or “warrior.” To do this, she used tough, masculine terms and images persistently: “my battle-tested, proven conservative record”; “We have got Harry Reid water-boarding our economy out here”; “We are going to fire him”; Reid is a “disconnected good old boy.” In one campaign speech, she said, “we need to pile on Harry Reid . . . . You people are too nice, if that’s a good word . . . . Freedom is not inherited; every generation must fight for it” (2009, May 30). Angle also exhorted her supporters to be tougher, more masculine when attacking Reid. In short, in order to further her appeal to the public, Angle painted herself as a disciple of Reagan and repeatedly highlighted traditional “masculine” traits in constructing her public persona.

The creation of a fighter/warrior image was a consistent aim of Christine O’Donnell as well. O’Donnell often disparaged the perceived weakness or femininity of her opponents,

especially that of her male opponents: “That kind of throw-in-the-towel mentality is what got us to this mess that we’re in the first place” (2010, Oct. 7); “That kind of—what you hear coming from my opponent is just that throw-in-the towel mentality that’s gotten us into the mess that we’re in. I think the voters are tired of it” (2010, Sept. 13). *Throw-in-the-towel* is defined as “to abandon a struggle or contest: acknowledge defeat” (Merriam-Webster). O’Donnell sculpted a public image in which she was depicted as a warrior ready and able to challenge an unjust world. When she was asked which Republican politician, dead or alive, she most admired, she answered as follows:

I would say Governor Palin and Ronald Reagan. And the reason is both of them had a spine of steel. Governor Palin understands the politics of personal destruction and she didn’t let it get her off track. Ronald Reagan, as I mentioned, foreign policy when (sic) all of his so-called advisers were saying end the Star Wars program, he had a spine of steel and said absolutely not. I’m going to call their bluff and stay strong and support our military. And that’s how we won the cold war. (2010, Oct. 11)

Not content to attempt solely to adopt the steely unwavering masculine mantel of Ronald Regan as her own, O’Donnell also tried to link her public persona to that of “mama grizzly” Palin. When she was asked whether Palin had given her any advice, she answered, “She gave me ‘You go, girl’ advice: ‘Don’t listen to them’” (2010, Oct. 7). “You go, girl” advice is essentially encouragement; it is a mainstay in the narratives of strong females who overcome struggles.

This drum-rolling, fighting attitude—calculated to evoke a revolutionary spirit—was one of the central themes in the public communication of Tea Party candidates. O’Donnell herself defined this fighting spirit as the *raison d’être* of her candidacy: “And especially one of the things that really helped me to stay on track and stay motivated was meeting with many of the

disabled veterans and realizing—I spoke to this one gentleman George, who said you’ve got to keep going. You’ve got to stick to the fight” (2010, Oct. 11). In emphasizing her own battle readiness and strength, O’Donnell depicted her opponent as weak and feminine, relying on others to defend him: “My opponent is scared and can’t defend his record, so he is making baseless accusations to the FEC [Federal Election Commission]” (2010, Sept. 13). For Michele Bachmann, it was Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic House Speaker, who deserved this pugnaciousness. Pelosi, who led the health care bill to passage, should be vanquished in battle: “[Pelosi is my] number one target to defeat next year . . . . I am going to fight hard” (2009, Dec. 14). By repeatedly using strong words such as ‘fight,’ the tea party candidates tried to show that they were firm, determined, and resolute politicians.

On the other hand, female Tea Party candidates occasionally tried to use a feminine style when they thought it advantageous to attempt a connection with voters through empathy. For example, in the TV ad entitled “Real World,” Angle highlighted Nevadans, from seniors to small business owners, who were suffering from the economic crisis at that time. In this ad, she says in a feminine voice dripping with motherly concern, “They’re not statistics, they’re people . . .” (2010, Sept. 30). When she speaks of “the frightened senior” who risks losing her home, she seems to be on the verge of tears.

Christine O’Donnell also tried to adopt a conventional feminine style when it could be beneficial. Her TV ad “I’m You” became one of the most famous ads in the 2010 election—even being spoofed by *Saturday Night Live*. In it, she begins by reassuring the viewer that she’s not a witch and that in fact she’s just like us. She is wearing a string of white pearls. Her use of a traditional female accessory is especially appropriate to her message. It reassures the public that she is not weird or different, but rather conventional, mature, educated, upper-class, and

sophisticated. She is in effect saying here, “I value traditions and customs and am not wild or reckless.” She says in a soft voice, “None of us are perfect, but none of us can be happy with what we see all around us. Politicians who think spending, trading favors and back-room deals are the ways to stay in office (sic). I’ll go to Washington and do what you’d do” (2010, Oct. 4).

Prior to this ad, O’Donnell had been in the midst of a controversy in which her credibility as the Republican candidate for Delaware was severely damaged. An old videotape emerged in which she said “I dabbled into witchcraft . . . . One of my first dates with a witch was on a Satanic altar” (2010, Sept. 18). The clip instantly ignited a political firestorm, even though it was eleven years old and had been made in 1999 when she appeared as a guest on ABC’s Bill Maher comedy show, “Politically Incorrect.” O’Donnell’s primary victory was partially based on her socially conservative platform. She strongly opposed gay rights, abortion, and in the past had even argued against masturbation. The television ad “I’m You,” locating O’Donnell well within a traditional feminine context, might be seen as a strategy not only to counter the effects of this controversial video but also to attempt to reverse any anxiety by the general electorate about her qualifications to be a U.S. Senator (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 here]

Her accessories and clothes were without doubt calculated to convey subtle messages to the viewers—an attempt to reassure voters of this female candidate’s adherence to cultural and political norms. Interestingly, the aggressive Michele Bachmann frequently favored very feminine clothing and jewelry in her public appearances, often wearing day-glow pink sundresses and big earrings rather than the typically staid pantsuits worn by many female politicians (2010, Sept. 30) (Figure 2).

[Figure 2 here]

### **Opponents Are Elitist and Against the Constitution**

The primary issues emphasized by the Tea Party female candidates during the 2010 election were economic. This makes sense given that the United States was in the midst of a deep economic recession. The candidates stressed their ability to put the economy back on track, using this point to underscore differences between them and the current regime. The words, images, and manner in which Tea Party candidates described public issues were closely related to their “message framing,” which refers to “delivering the message with the right scripting (i.e., sound bites) and postdelivery spin to lead journalists to pick the right category for accentuating the message” (Bennett, 2009, p.121).

As politicians present themselves to the public, they try to portray themselves as “better” than their opponents by transmitting political cues that are culturally consonant with that message. Cultural resonance is one of the important elements in making a specific frame powerful since “Certain packages have a natural advantage because their ideas and language resonate with larger cultural themes” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 5). Snow and Benford (1988) claim that “framing resonates with cultural narrations, that is, with the stories, myths, and folk tales that are part and parcel of one’s cultural heritage and that thus function to inform events and experiences in the immediate present” (p. 210).

An examination of the ways issues were discussed by Tea Party candidates yields certain insights. First, it seems that they were nominally libertarian regarding their view of the relationship between the government and the individual. Dick Armey and Matt Kibbe (2010), the authors of the book “Give Us Liberty: A Tea Party Manifesto,” write: “Our founding fathers designed a constitutional system based on private property and the rule of law to protect the individual from an overbearing federal government” (p. 66). In this vein, unbridled government

intervention in the private lives of individuals was unacceptable to tea party candidates. Furthermore, Tea Party candidates have often linked governmental programs to anti-constitutional social engineering, which contravenes freedom, liberty, and responsibility—basic values of American society. Sharon Angle’s claim was clearly situated in this context: “We know that our founding fathers wanted Supreme Court judges who would stand up for the Constitution, a Constitution that was created for we the people to be free” (2010, Oct. 14). Haley also criticized government as detrimental to the individual. She asserted that not only was the Tea Party movement a grassroots movement but that her candidacy would return power to the people: “It was a respectful observation in the fact that government is not the answer to all things. We were looking at these health care mandates are dangerous for our states. We can’t sustain the debt it will cost our states” (2010, June 23).

Another tactic used to distinguish themselves from their often more experienced adversaries was to describe themselves as common “folk,” anti-elite, and political outsiders, not tainted by national politics and beholden to no one. Thus, Angle introduced herself during her television debate: “I am not a career politician. I am a mother and a grandmother. I was a teacher for 25 years. Senator Reid has been a politician for 30 years. I live in a middle-class neighborhood in Reno, Nevada. Senator Reid lives in the Ritz Carlton in Washington, D. C.” (2010, Oct. 14). By highlighting the fact that Reid lived in a luxury hotel, Angle succinctly portrayed him as elitist—a man unconnected to the concerns of the average citizen. Apparently she had decided on this message at least two months earlier when in a television interview she claimed that “[Reid] has become one of the elite that is no longer in touch with what the real—the country is thinking about in these economic times” (2010, July 12).

Angle's anti-elite message framing strategy was adopted by other female Tea Party candidates. Appealing to the public's cynicism about an insular political elite in Washington, O'Donnell emphasized that "I am not a candidate anointed by the party boss" (2010, Oct. 11). She seemed confident of the prevailing anti-Washington sentiment: Referring to common-sense men and women in Delaware, she asserted, they're "tired of politics as usual, and they're really behind me because they trust me to represent them in Washington—a much-needed real campaign in Washington" (2010, Sept. 14). In the same vein, Haley also said that "My husband and I saw an income decline with his business and our careers as many Americans do . . . . The problem is career politicians don't understand that" (2010, Aug. 9).

This pedestrian, average-Joe sort of message occurs again and again in Tea Party communications. In a video entitled "I'm voting for Liberty," Tea Party Patriots Chicago—a supporting group of the Tea Party Movement—multi-ethnic people of both genders appear and intone short, pithy phrases such as, "There's a ruling class in Washington" and "They mock the Tenth Amendment [state power]" (2010, Oct. 21). One Hispanic woman says mournfully, "They say they don't care about the Constitution." It seems that this video's real intention is to give legitimacy to the movement. The message is "We're not racist, sexist, right wing nut jobs," but rather, as Christine O'Donnell would say, "We're you."

### **Is Government Intervention in Moral Issues Justifiable?**

The active involvement and success of female candidates in the 1992 election can in part be linked to "the televised Senate Judiciary Committee's hearing on Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas" (Fox, 1997, p. 9). Specifically, Fox (1997) points out that "The spectacle of the hearings, which for many women showed a believable woman [Anita Hill] being derided by a panel of older white men, helped mobilize professional women to become active in the 1992

elections” (p. 9). In the 1992 election, more than ten female and pro-abortion Democrats, such as Patty Murray and Barbara Boxer, entered the House and Senate (2010, Nov. 23). The visibility and prominence of conservative candidates running in the 2010 election was also hailed as a positive step toward women’s participation in American politics.

Feminism originated from “a concern about, and desire to effect change in, the subjugated status of women” (Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992, p. 18). Under the roof of feminism, various kinds of feminist perspectives have sprouted. Cirksena and Cuklanz (1992) explain that each feminist theory focuses on “different aspects of social relations between women and men, attention to the status of women in society, and the nature of gender” (p.18). In this regard, Dubriwny (2005) claims that “During the second wave of feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the United States experienced a revival of both difference/maternal feminism and liberal/equality feminism” (p. 91).

First, maternal feminism views women as fundamentally different from men due to “their domesticity and innate maternal values” (Dubriwny, 2005, p.91). In the maternal feminist perspective, women’s competence and power “are drawn from their status as mothers, or potential mothers” (Dubriwny, 2005). Dubriwny adds, “Maternal nurturance becomes the dominant reason for the extension of women’s responsibilities into the public sphere” (2005, p. 89). This perspective limits women’s roles to social welfare issues such as child-care. Second, in contrast to material feminism, liberal feminism emphasizes that women are persons having the same rights as men (Donovan, 1994). Thus, this perspective “insists upon women’s equality under the law and denies the idea of inherent differences between women and men” (Dubriwny, 2005, p.91). Liberal feminism opposes the social customs and institutions that “reinforced women’s status as domestic servants and confined women to activities in the private sphere” (p.

91). Thus, there is some tension between the two perspectives in viewing the role and activities of women in the private and public spheres.

Even though Tea Party candidates generally opposed the government's intervention in the private sector, they advocated government's intervention in cultural and moral issues. They put great emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility when addressing such issues as immigration, health care, and the economy but insisted on limiting freedom in regard to gay relationships and reproductive matters. For example, Angle claimed that "The solution to the cost of health care insurance is [the] free market" (2010, Oct. 14). In contrast, when considering cultural and moral issues, Tea Party candidates took a very different attitude. Some female Tea Party candidates, such as Angle and O'Donnell, were strongly against abortion, even in cases of incest and rape. When radio host Bill Mander asked, "Is there any reason at all for an abortion?" Angle said, "Not in my book . . . . I'm a Christian and I believe that God has a plan and a purpose for each one of our lives" (2010, Sept. 16).

According to Angle's assertion, in cases of incest and rape, the right of abortion is in the hands not of the pregnant victim but of the politicians. O'Donnell emphasized that "I respect the human dignity on all levels, the unrepentable precious human dignity on all levels . . . . And my opponent and others will use the scare tactic about rape and incest when that is less than one percent of all abortions performed in American" (2010, Oct. 16). These candidates' view parallels the way that pro-life women frame abortion. According to Press and Cole (1999), pro-life women "interpret pregnancy as evidence of God's plans" and consider abortion as wrong, "even when pregnancy is unplanned or unwanted" (p. 49). This begs the question. If the government should decide whether or not a woman can receive an abortion after incest and rape, where is a woman's liberty and freedom to control her own life without government

interference? Also, what about the limited government advocated by the Tea Party Movement? MSNBC's news program host Rachel Maddow pointed out this contradiction: "Remember, this is the year of small government conservatives—getting government out of your life, government just small enough to—yes. This is obviously awkward for the whole libertarian character of this year's conservative uprising" (2010, Sept. 16). She added that "If you are 14-year-old girl who is raped by your uncle or your father, the government will force you, as a 14-year-old, to give birth to the child that is the product of incestuous rape" (2010, Sept. 16).

Angle said that she supported Clarence Thomas, an African-American justice on the U.S. Supreme Court. Thomas is one of the most conservative members of the Court, and was branded as anti-women by feminist activists for allegedly making provocative sexual comments to his subordinate attorney, Anita Hill, before he was nominated for the Supreme Court by President George H. W. Bush in 1991. Angle's support for Thomas derived from what she claimed was his understanding of "his constitutional boundaries as a judge in the Supreme Court" (2010, Oct. 14).

Angle also disagreed with the protection of gay rights, claiming that marriage should be between a man and a woman. Also, in the area of education she was socially conservative. She advocated the elimination of the Department of Education. *Newsweek* pointed out that "With few exceptions, the grizzlies have been disinterested in the issues and policies that their political opponents say are good for children—despite new numbers from the census showing that rising numbers of America's children are poor" (2010, Sept. 27). The magazine then added that Tea Party candidates' policies stood in great contrast to the priorities of feminist activists:

Most of these candidates have vowed to fight to repeal President Obama's health care plan, for instance, and Bachman and Haley have taken special aim at CHIP, a federal

program aimed at helping low-income kids get health insurance. In 2001, as a member of Nevada's state Assembly, Angle voted no on a domestic-violence bill that would recognize restraining orders issued in other states. In 2007 Haley, a state representative, voted against a measure that would have created a kindergarten program for at-risk kids. (Sept. 27, 2010)

Tea Party female candidates' opposition to the federal government's activism can be traced to Barry Goldwater, the Presidential candidate of the Republican Party in the 1964 election, who led the conservative movement in the 1960s during the American racial crisis. Goldwater's anti-federalism is evident in the following assertion: "I am firmly convinced—not only that integrated schools are not required—but that the Constitution does not permit any interference whatsoever by the federal government in the field of education" (Goldwater, 1960, p. 35). The political scientists Carmines and Stimson claim that "his [Goldwater's] racial conservatism has a powerful appeal to anti-civil rights forces that had been deserted by the national Democratic Party" (Carmines & Stimson, 1989, p. 45).

Female candidates also emphasized their social identity as women. It was a deliberate strategy to appeal to the public. In a TV ad called "Better," Haley introduced herself first as ". . . the wife of a man who puts on a uniform every day" and then added, "I'm an accountant and business person who knows the value of a dollar" (2010, May 18). Her husband was an officer in the Army National Guard. This ad implied that being a woman meant being a wife and mother. It seems as if she was saying that she could now run for governor because she had already fulfilled her primary responsibility as a woman. Haley appears here to have been advocating a maternal feminism that emphasizes the fundamental difference between men and women.

In another TV ad entitled “Possible,” Haley said, “I’m a woman who understands that through the grace of God all things are possible” (2010, May 25). In this ad, Palin called Haley “Pro-family.” More importantly, the ad reassured Christian voters that Haley was one of them. She was in fact raised as a Sikh. There were rumors during the campaign that she was not a Christian. The use of a Biblical phrase here acts as a signal, especially to Christians, without directly requiring her to discuss her personal religious views. Haley tried to tie her “Pro-family” stance to Christian beliefs. On her web-site, in response to the question “Is Nikki a Christian?” she replied, “My faith in Christ has a profound impact on my daily life and I look to Him for guidance with every decision I make . . . . Being a Christian is not about words, but about living for Christ every day” (2010). Haley’s public discourse gave the strong impression that her feminism was of the maternal brand. She was certainly not a proponent of liberal feminism, which denies the inherent difference between men and women.

It has been claimed that the emergence of female candidates in the 1992-1994 elections was propelled by women who watched Anita Hill being grilled and taunted on television by male senators during Thomas’s confirmation hearing in 1991. Black feminists were particularly mobilized after the Hill-Thomas incident. In the history of the women’s movement in the U.S., the 1992-1994 elections were precipitating events for feminist activists into national politics. In contrast, in the 2010 election, the Tea Party female candidates were culturally conservative and were frequently criticized as anti-feminist. For instance, Miller claimed that “Policy debates about equal pay, parental leave, and day care hardly register with these grizzlies” (Sept. 27, 2010). Similarly, MSNBC’s Maddow asserted that “Maybe all sorts of voters will do like they’ve done in the past and vote on abortion and other women’s issues rather than just on which candidates are themselves women” (2010, Sept. 16).

In a column entitled “Are Palin’s ‘Mama Grizzlies’ feminists?” Eleanor Cliff wrote, “Why is all the energy among women on the right, the cohort Palin dubs ‘Mama Grizzlies’” (2010, July 16)? She says critically, “Surely progressive women love their children and their way of life and the Constitution every bit as much as the self-appointed Mama Grizzlies.” The Tea Party Movement was closely connected to conservative religious groups who attacked abortion and gay rights as anti-religious and contrary to God’s teaching. Green (2000) points out that “Evangelical theology puts a special stress on individual morality and assigns to social institutions, including the government, responsibility for fostering individual moral behavior” (p. 122). It is clear that there was considerable distance between the Tea Party female candidates of the 2010 election cycle and liberal/equality feminism.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined how, in the 2010 election, female Tea Party candidates frequently attacked both the “femininity” of male candidates and President Obama’s policies. Tea party candidates’ masculine style was expressed in various ways. One salient tactic was to attack the manhood of their opponents. Second, a recurring strategy favored by female tea partiers was to construct a public persona linked to widely known conservative luminaries in order to appeal to voters. They purposefully attempted to depict themselves as disciples of Ronald Reagan and Sarah Palin. By doing so, they framed themselves as determined, strong, and courageous politicians. The tactical choice to align their public personas with Reagan and to become “mama grizzlies” came from their judgment that such personas could be advantageous to their campaigns. The persona-ization of politics was propelled by the candidate-centered and media-propelled campaign that tended to assign authority to candidates’ masculine power (Wahl-

Jorgensen, 2000). In the 2010 election, Tea Party female candidates generally tried to create public personas or characters that were not overly enmeshed with their femininity.

Third, in their public discourse, female Tea Party candidates mobilized ideologies—neoliberalism and American exceptionalism—which resonated with the hegemonic masculinity of American society. Conservative female candidates tended to present these ideologies as consonant with Christianity and the U.S. Constitution and, thus, appealing to voters. Intentionally, female Tea Party candidates framed their challengers not only as provoking unconstitutional programs, but also as elitists who were out of touch with ordinary peoples' lives. The anti-Washington (or establishment) strategy of female Tea Party candidates elicited a powerful, emotional connection and created a narrative in which economic issues such as unemployment were promoted as the primary concern of voters.

Even though female Tea Party candidates expressed strong opposition to government intervention, they nonetheless advocated the state's involvement in individuals' private lives in moral, cultural issues such as abortion and gay rights. This contradiction possibly derives from a conservative religious viewpoint. It is thus problematic to conclude that female tea partiers would necessarily have advocated for women's rights just because they were *women*. Green (2000) claimed, "The Christian Right is a social movement concentrated among Evangelical Protestants and dedicated to restoring 'traditional values' in public policy" (p. 124). In this tradition of the Christian Right, Palin defined the 2010 election as a struggle between the "culture of life" and the "culture of death" in a speech to an anti-abortion group in October, 2010, claiming that Obama's health care promoted taxpayer-funded abortions (2010, Oct. 6).

One major difference between the 1992-1994 period and 2010 is that while the earlier Democratic Party candidates, who were energized by the 1991 Thomas-Hill confirmation

hearing, sought to put women' issues on public agenda, the campaign by conservative women in 2010 election was driven not by "women's" issues but by economic distress among the American public. The Tea Party Movement did not dissolve with the passing of the 2010 mid-term election. Indeed, politicians and pundits are still scrambling to understand the role it will play in the 2012 presidential election both within the Republican Party as well as on the larger national stage. Female Tea Party politicians, including Sarah Palin, continue to be visible. Will they be perceived as pseudo-feminists? If the Tea Party Movement's political ideologies do not situate women's rights as the *raison d'être* of feminism, its female candidates, at least in some quarters, are likely to be seen as "anti-feminist."

Given these considerations, this study should be expanded to employ a number of other theoretical approaches and empirical methods. In particular, the examination of the way in which the news media covered and framed female Tea Party candidates would be a valuable research topic in the future because it could unveil the often hazy and ambiguous relationships between the news media and politicians. While this present examination of female Tea Party candidates in the 2010 election has provided a good opportunity to unveil not only the ideological roots of the Tea Party Movement but also the framing strategies of those candidates, it is obviously not exhaustive. Further study is needed in order to analyze ways in which the public discourse of female Tea Party candidates is tied to public communication in American politics.

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## Appendix



Figure 1. Picture from Christine O'Donnell's TV Ad "I'm You." Retrieved Nov. 10, 2010, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGGAgIjengs>.



Figure 2. Michele Bachmann from Interview with Fox News Channel. Retrieved Aug. 6, 2011, from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-843PG5B\\_D4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-843PG5B_D4)