

Introduction

WEARY OF WAR and relieved to be free of the Great Depression, Americans embraced family life with zeal in the 1950s. Women occupied a revered place in this revived domesticity that valorized homemaking and motherhood through television programming, film, and advertisements for appliances. Although the iconic 1950s housewife offers an abundance of insight into the ideals of the postwar generation, she obscures the countless ways that actual women attempted to live out those ideals. Operating among the legions of self-identified housewives who did not stay home in those years flourished a grassroots subculture of women that emerged mostly behind the scenes of the nascent conservative movement. These female activists on the right made the domestic ideology guiding their family, social, and civic lives into political careers by translating widespread cultural assumptions about female intuition into a basis for asserting authority in local affairs. Indeed, the imprints on the historical imagination left by *Leave It to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy* reruns have hidden the animated, combative, and perfumed world of metropolitan politics developing at that time.¹ Important origins of the postwar right took root in such settings, where women shaped the conservative ascendancy with concerns, ideas, and issues that were drawn from the fabric of their everyday lives. Capitalizing upon cultural assumptions about women and motherhood, they put themselves forward as representatives of local interests who battled bureaucrats for the sake of family, community, and God. Armed with a strong collective sense of where they and their local crusades fit into the global struggles against communism, they successfully overpowered school administrators, boards of education, and teachers in the name of local control and protection of parental authority. Female activists forced their priorities onto the larger agenda of the movement by anointing themselves spokespeople for parents, children, and local communities against the predatory interventionist state.

The gender ideology that proved most formative to the conservatism of women Cold Warriors originated in the early twentieth century and reverberated into the 2008 presidential election. A relatively privileged class position, lifestyle, and set of familial duties located women activists in that familiar social category known as “housewives.” Hundreds of years old, and found in several languages by the twentieth century, that seemingly timeless designation of female domestic labor acquired political capital in the mid-twentieth century by virtue of its associations not just with motherhood, spirituality, and the home but with ordinariness, anonymity, and community. The resurgence of populist

fervor during the Great Depression, moreover, created a new female political sensibility, one that might usefully be called “housewife populism.”

Historians have documented how changing ideals of womanhood shaped American politics from the nation’s founding. Revived but reformulated numerous times over throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the virtues associated with “Republican motherhood,” hewn from Whig philosophy and revolutionary zeal, valorized women’s work of raising morally righteous, informed citizens. Industrialization and the market revolution gave rise to an ideological formation alternately called the “cult of true womanhood” or “cult of domesticity” by scholars to describe the middle-class emphasis on female morality, spirituality, nurturance, and sexual purity in the nineteenth century.² Though “Republican motherhood” and the cult of true womanhood ideals underscored female duties to the home and family, both served as the basis for women’s participation in the nation’s political parties, motivation for social reform work, and the inspiration for women’s club formation.³ Developments at the turn of the twentieth century proved transformative enough to justify naming another version of this ideology “maternalism,” to describe women’s “natural” role in politics as reformers who would uplift society.⁴ Maternalism, according to Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, “exalted women’s capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance and morality.”⁵ Indeed, historians have established that the abolitionist, progressive, and feminist movements cannot be understood without consideration of how these gender ideologies informed the outlook of participants.

The mid-twentieth century gave rise to a gendered political formation that also demands interrogation. Housewife populism spanned the political spectrum, encompassing the attitudes and activism of women on the left and the right. Historian Annelise Orleck’s study of Depression-era wives and mothers who boycotted against rising food prices, demonstrated against evictions, bartered with each other, and lobbied government officials captures a dialectic between the women’s self-portrayals and contemporary media representations of their political work, which she calls “housewife activism.”⁶ The militant style exhibited by Orleck’s subjects drew from long-standing, but unstable, conceptions of femininity, the family, and antielitism in the United States that circumstances of the Depression brought into alignment. The Depression-era housewives inverted class attitudes typically assumed by middle-class female activists, emphasizing women’s lack of status rather than their middle class superiority. They relied upon assumptions about women to express dissent, demanding to be heard as representatives of the economically marginal. Although their “maternal” role proved no less formative to their political subjectivity, these women were not maternalists; they introduced a new politics of

motherhood that positioned themselves, as mothers, in relationship to centers of power. Unlike maternalist activists of the progressive era, they did not intervene in their battles as outside agents of reform or act as mediating agents between the welfare state and the poor. They were not middle-class professionals working through charitable organizations to uplift society. Quite to the contrary, housewife activists based their political claims on women's position *within* the community and characterized their enemies as outsider elitists who aimed to exploit that community for the purposes of fortifying the power of their own office. Housewife activists introduced a new populist outlook to female politics that endured into the twenty-first century.

Maternalism, as a middle-class social reform tradition, lost cultural power over the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s for several reasons.⁷ Historians of the suffrage and early feminist movement have demonstrated that passage of the Nineteenth Amendment never realized the “woman's bloc” that maternalist discourse promised would redeem American politics from the corrupt and selfish impulses of men.⁸ The prosperity and consumer culture of the 1920s, moreover, invited the newer generation to reject the public frigidity they associated with Victorianism in favor of freer heterosexual self-expression by kissing, smoking, and drinking with the boys.⁹ A convergence of social scientific, therapeutic, and liberal individualist discourses subverted Victorian notions of an all-powerful “mother love.” The “silver cords’ of love” binding mothers to offspring, glorified in the nineteenth century, came to be regarded as a potentially sinister, pathological danger to children and society.¹⁰ The post–World War I red scare further undermined maternalism. “Patriotic” women's groups took the lead in anticommunist attacks against reformers, their institutions, and welfare legislation in the 1910s and 1920s, crippling female progressivism.¹¹

This study of American conservatism suggests that the Great Depression also exerted a profound impact upon maternalism, that it radically reconfigured female political ideology by devaluing maternal uplift and reform while elevating the importance of maternal protection and community-building. The severe economic crisis invigorated the nation's appreciation for no-nonsense women with the wits to carry their families through the hard times. The new political woman of the 1930s was not the “angel of her home” housewife who volunteered to Americanize immigrants, rescue prostitutes, or save the nation from demon alcohol. She was an everywoman housewife who worked to keep her family and neighborhood intact—to maintain as much normalcy and security as possible. Orleck's “housewife activist” forged her feminine antielitist expressions of solidarity within a distinctly working-class political milieu. In fact, historian Temma Kaplan has argued that working-class women are more likely to act communally because their shared work and daily proximity to each

other nurture solidarity, while the many different activities enjoyed by middle-class women inhibit communal behavior. Kaplan sees “female consciousness,” which relies upon assumptions about the “maternal duty to preserve life,” as distinct from “feminist consciousness,” which demands that women be given rights based on basic principles of equality. Kaplan’s conceptualization of female consciousness, adopted by many scholars who study women and politics, has proven useful for appreciating the global scope and impact of popular maternal outrage.¹²

The importance of populism in American history, however, justifies a more sustained examination of antielitism in the United States. As the Depression wore on and World War II engulfed Europe and threatened to involve the United States, rage against Wall Street and landlords turned toward Washington as if financial and government leaders operated as one, centralized cabal. Indignation against economic elites shaded into anticommunist and anti-Semitic protest, attributing the nation’s woes to New Deal bureaucrats as well as international Jewish bankers, eventually inflecting protests against U.S. entry into World War II with isolationist overtones. Feminine ideals contributed to a conservative political consciousness in formation. To be a “moral guardian” of society, in the minds of many women, meant to protect the nation from aliens, internationalism, and power-hungry bureaucrats in Washington. As with the working-class “housewife activists” politicizing their ethnic neighborhoods, isolationist women found common cause in shared feelings of marginality, along with a sense of duty to family and community. Postwar women then updated its political styles and culture for the conservatism of a new era.



Not until the early 1960s did American conservatism become a recognizable and self-conscious “movement,” though its major ideological components, institutions, and political actors had been aligning since the end of World War II. While the Cold War and red scare of the 1950s revived anticommunism, critics of the New Deal welfare state located mainly in the nation’s universities articulated corresponding economic arguments against centralized government. As the word “liberal,” once associated with laissez-faire economic principles and small government as the means of realizing American egalitarianism, became linked during the Depression to federal growth and intervention on behalf of economic equality, proponents of small government formerly known as liberals claimed the designation “libertarian.” A second group of scholars seeking to confront the “relativism” they perceived as so corrosive to Western values forged another intellectual tradition on the right referred to alternately as “traditionalism” or “Christian traditionalism.” Also called the “new conservatives,”

Peter Viereck, Russell Kirk, and other (mostly) men of academe argued for a revival of faith and moral absolutes as the necessary antidotes for confronting recent scourges on the Western world, like genocide and totalitarianism. Anticommunism, which infused both libertarian and traditionalist thought, gave conservatism the characteristics of a crusade around which adherents who disagreed about some things could rally.¹³ Conservatives gradually seized control of the GOP through important state battles, nominated conservative Barry Goldwater for president in 1964, and launched the political career of Ronald Reagan, who would complete the conservative revolution as president in the 1980s.

Right-wing women drew inspiration from the emerging intellectuals by reading their books and articles in periodicals like *Human Events*, the *Freeman*, and the *National Review*. Intense personal and group study aided by a flurry of clipping, reprinting, and the sharing of literature through neighbors or the U.S. Postal Service taught them to see the events of their everyday worlds in a broader political landscape. In the process, they became a formidable political force locally before becoming a force within the conservative movement when it finally coalesced. Through their reading, group discussion, and activist projects, women developed common self-perceptions of their own political relevance that incorporated ideas from the new conservative thought and from American culture at large. Though housewives and mothers did not launch the first attacks against progressive education, they invigorated and transformed that opposition, insisting that policy decisions made by their local school boards held national importance that should engage the interest of anticommunists.¹⁴ Indeed, the collapse of the progressive education movement in the 1950s resulted directly from conservative protest, mounted in large part by women, linked through newsletters, who undermined the zeal of school reformers one district at a time. Such a victory raises questions about how women shaped political history through the minds of schoolchildren, since the social reform agenda of the progressive education movement might have become a liberal force in postwar history had conservatives not killed it. Anti-elitist critiques of progressive educators soon led to scrutiny of anyone with the authority to brainwash, including psychologists. Their attacks against mental health “experts” reverberated in the larger movement, even in the *National Review*, which initially chided the “hysterical” housewives for spinning wild conspiracy theories.¹⁵



This study of women and conservatism examines how the anticommunist protest that scorched Southern California politics in the 1950s fueled a local

conservative movement with broad national importance. In 1962 the recently elected governor, Edmund “Pat” Brown, asked state attorney general Stanley Mosk to lead an investigation of the conservative John Birch Society. Mosk declined, disdaining the society as a bunch of “wealthy businessmen, retired military officers, and little old ladies in tennis shoes.”¹⁶ The latter part of Mosk’s dismissal lived on as a caricature of right-wing women in California and beyond who blanketed the nation’s metropolitan corridors with anticommunist leaflets. The rock duo Jan and Dean solidified associations between the old lady and Pasadena with their popular 1964 hit, “Little Old Lady from Pasadena,” about a speedster granny who raced around Colorado Boulevard in her little red car. Little old lady cartoons soon became regular features of *Frontier* magazine, California’s equivalent of the liberal *Nation*. 1964 subscription forms exhibited a scowling old woman hunched in a black dress and dowdy shawl that patriotically displayed the stars and stripes. “There are more things dear little old lady,” proclaimed the advertisement, “than are dreamt of in your untainted philosophy.”¹⁷ Female and old, the little old lady symbol stood for attributes that opponents of the emerging right wanted to believe, that the movement represented the views of a befuddled, impotent, waning generation of crackpots. The iconic granny also provoked laughter, however, because real live women—some old, some middle-aged, some young—had indeed imprinted activist culture with their own distinct style, becoming a nuisance to many.

When the city of Pasadena celebrated its sixth annual Festival of the Arts in the fall of 1968, organizers entertained the community with a funeral procession for the “little old lady in tennis shoes,” since the iconic grassroots activist had brought unwanted notoriety to the community. The festival’s forty-four days of concerts, poetry readings, and art exhibits inaugurated the transition into another era, as symbolized by the “new” Pasadena’s three-pointed crown, meant to represent education, cultural enterprise, and economic development. After a eulogy for the right-wing female political culture that had made Pasadena known for its conservatism in recent years, a Superior Court judge presented a will bequeathing prize possessions to well-known comic celebrities. Jack Benny received the tennis shoes; Dean Martin inherited a collection of old bottles; and Johnny Carson won possession of the little old lady’s favorite books. At the final reception, city officials laid the right-wing effigy to rest as they raised the crown.¹⁸

The parody of conservative women, staged to mark Pasadena’s embrace of freshness and modernity, highlights the widespread awareness of—and discomfort with—female right-wing activists in the region. Orange County tends to win recognition as the epicenter of California conservatism. Indeed Lisa McGirr’s outstanding study of the county’s grassroots right, *Suburban Warriors*,

reveals the constellation of historical factors that indeed bred a robust right-wing political culture that earned the southern suburbs their reputation. The historical forces that made Orange County conservative, however, actually flourished within a much broader metropolitan context that stretched from the northwestern parts of the San Fernando Valley east to the San Gabriel Valley and south into the O.C. Though more politically, racially, ethnically, and economically diverse than Orange County, Los Angeles County figured as centrally in this movement as its notoriously homogenous neighbor. The growth of the defense industries, influx of migrants, rapidly changing demographics, expanded highway system, proliferation of suburbs, industrialization of those suburbs, and court rulings that chipped away at segregation fueled the metropolitan-based conservative movement. The sense of political community that made conservatism feel like a crusade in Southern California enveloped activists across greater Los Angeles. Southland activists built a movement that took advantage of their multinodal cityscape. Housewives who lived in Pasadena drove cars over the hills to meetings in Encino and speaking engagements downtown. While living rooms in the newer suburbs proved comfortable for study groups, old Los Angeles venues like the First Congregational Church and Ambassador Hotel provided room, grandeur, and centralized locations appropriate for prominent lecturers. The new freeways made it easy for activists to attend each other's events and haul the cartons of the mimeographed literature they printed in their garages. The thirty-six different right-wing bookstores that opened across Southern California in the 1960s assisted each other like branches of the same regional bank, rather than competitors. Tracking the size of this movement in number of participants proves difficult, since organizations left few membership records. If we use scholarly, government, and contemporary reports to estimate, a core group of at least 2,100 diligent women across the greater Los Angeles metropolitan region had contributed significant hours to the movement by the early 1960s. The same reports would figure 8,600–10,750 less active participants. Rather than publishing newsletters, starting organizations, opening bookstores, and driving around the Southland to give lectures, less active participants subscribed to those newsletters, joined and attended occasional meetings, shopped in the bookstores, and sat in the week-long Schools of Anti-Communism at hotels and stadiums.¹⁹

Women activists first asserted themselves effectively in postwar Southern California politics with the 1950 "Pasadena affair," a battle waged by parents against the city's school superintendent, whom they deemed too progressive. Recently hired for his stellar Ivy League credentials and performance as an administrator in Minneapolis, Superintendent Willard Goslin angered conservatives in his district by introducing progressive pedagogy, desegregating part

of the district, and expanding the budget. The women who became deeply involved in the campaign to oust Goslin not only discovered their effectiveness in local politics, they also developed a sense of purpose and importance from shared ideals as mothers and housewives, from the larger universe of conservative thought generated by intellectuals on the right, and from populist notions of women's inherent legitimacy as nonelite political actors— notions that acquired discursive power during the Great Depression and World War II. The Pasadena affair unfolded, moreover, on a national stage of anticommunist education battles that turned parents against administrators and teachers in communities as far flung as Scarsdale, New York, and Houston, Texas. Southern California women not only read about these other school districts in newspapers but developed camaraderie and activist networks with the distant community members involved. The momentum and political culture that emerged out of the Pasadena affair cascaded into other successes. In 1952 anticommunists in Los Angeles forced public school administrators to eliminate all teaching materials published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and three years later they compelled the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to suspend a popular adult enrichment reading program deemed by them as too liberal. Such local victories proved fleeting, concentrated as they were in the few years when anticommunist anxiety gripped the nation most forcefully. Red purging waned in the late 1950s. However, the power enjoyed by women on the right in the early and mid-1950s stimulated activist fervor for years to come by forging community, intellectual bonds, and enthusiasm among them.

As this examination of the Pasadena affair will illustrate, Southern Californians mounted early opposition to desegregation in concert with conservatives in the South and other parts of the country. While the massive resistance of the early 1960s and antibusing demonstrations of the 1970s dominate most historical accounts of segregationist resistance, community battles against school integration actually preceded the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that mandated desegregation nationwide in 1954. California had been experimenting with integration and parents had been expressing their defiance of it for several years before the Warren Court handed down *Brown*. After the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in California upheld the *Mendez v. Westminster* ruling of 1946 that “segregation of Mexican youngsters found no justification in the laws of California,” the Anderson bill repealed segregationist statutes.²⁰ School administrators then slowly crafted policies to bring their districts in line with the new mandates.

Examination of the Southern California right contributes to the growing literature on race and the American right after World War II by examining the

formation of racial attitudes transregionally. To productive scholarly effect, recent historians have been calling attention to structural forces embedded over time into commercial, residential, and leisure spaces, as well as legal, education, and financing systems that perpetuate racial inequality.²¹ I hope to expand upon this literature by examining how conservative activists in greater Los Angeles helped to forge a transregional approach to protecting segregation in the public education system, an institution that they recognized for its importance in maintaining racial order. Californians worked in concert with activists all over the country, many in the South, to forge a common anticommunist discourse of protest against the civil rights movement. The literature that circulated among them cultivated a language of states' rights, internationalism, nationalization, and other terms that expressed shared interpretations of the forces shaping racial transformation in America.

Dissecting the relationship between anticommunist and anti-integration protest demands gender analysis. As the red scare and civil rights movement charged the otherwise mundane business of public school education with new significance, activities once "civic" became political. Claiming a stake in these battles as representatives of the family—mothers and housewives protecting children, home life, and neighborhoods—women drew power from their class position and from red scare anxiety to exert their political will over local administrators who had more official power than they. These female activists, in dialectic with conservative men, also cultivated an essentialist interpretation of women's political talents and duties, asserting that housewives and mothers were better suited than men to the work of anticommunist vigilance. Emphasizing that their flexible schedules gave them time to study communism, they argued that women were more politically aware than men, since husbands necessarily focused on the economic well-being of the family. Relying on long-held notions of women's inherent spiritual nature, right-wing literature published by men also encouraged women by naturalizing the relationship between conservatism and femininity.

Conservative women fought desegregation with the belief that their communities were under siege by political elites inciting turmoil that they, as women, needed to repel as housewives—the humblest, most self-sacrificial, and least pretentious members of American society. Women activists thus cultivated a gender consciousness, already in formation on the right, that valorized the local community as the fountainhead of American democracy. The links they made between feminine powerlessness and community powerlessness in the age of federal welfare and intervention isolated an amorphously defined centralized state as the most dangerous threat to freedom. Convinced that progressive educators, civil rights activists, UNESCO, and the Supreme

Court constituted a unified assault on community sovereignty that they were duty bound as mothers/housewives/citizens to confront, they conflated the problems of racial and bureaucratic outsiders. The anticommunist campaigns against government intervention, moreover, buried unspoken—well, usually unspoken—assumptions about the consequences that would result from racial mixing.

Although the conservative movement did not coalesce until the early 1960s, I alternately refer to women activists on the right as “conservative,” “anticommunist,” and “right-wing” to underscore the ideological contribution their work made to the ascendance of the American right. By no means audacious, this decision mimics the practice of women’s historians who describe Mary Wollstonecraft or Charlotte Perkins Gilman as “feminists,” though Wollstonecraft left her intellectual mark before the term came into usage and Gilman chose not to adopt the term as a description of her political outlook. Although anticommunist fervor united women activists more than any other factor, libertarianism and Christianity also shaped their political outlook. I wish to emphasize that their political activism represented conservatism in formation.



Mothers of Conservatism examines conservative women’s history in five chapters organized roughly by chronology, starting with a preliminary background study of activist thought and practice leading up to the Cold War. The first chapter starts with female “patriotic” groups of the World War I era that promoted national loyalty, attacked communism, and curtailed expansion of the progressive state. Speaking up on behalf of their families, these predecessors of Cold Warrior activists established ideological connections between the growth of centralized government in the United States and the expansion of communist regimes abroad. The first chapter also charts the changing relationship between class attitudes and antistatism during the Depression era, when housewife populism came to mark the political discourse of conservative women.

Chapter 2 documents the formation of conservative activist culture in Los Angeles after World War II. Starting in the early 1950s, the grassroots right started meeting in study groups, publishing newsletters, giving speeches, forming letter-writing clubs, volunteering at GOP headquarters, and agitating in local politics. Activism thrived in tandem with the movement’s intellectual development, not subsequently. After outlining the historic recipe of political, economic, religious, and ethnic factors that made conservatism so powerful in metropolitan Los Angeles, this chapter examines the formation of conservative female political culture and consciousness.

Chapter 3 focuses on a series of educational battles in the early 1950s that reveal the step-by-step process of how political ideas germinated in the fabric of women's everyday lives. Starting with the "Pasadena affair" of 1950, this investigation shows how new ideas about "mind control" and "brainwashing" inspired political epiphanies among women otherwise busy with their children's homework and PTA duties. Parents, especially mothers, started to think they saw communism in action. For a few years, conservative women asserted themselves in school politics as activists and school board members in Southern California, forcing teachers to resign and blocking policies they deemed subversive.

Chapter 4 documents how activism in education politics turned the attention of conservative women to professional psychology as a logical next target. Fears of "brainwashing" segued into fears of mental health professionals and the policy making they promoted in Washington, D.C., resulting in conservative protest of an amorphous "mental health establishment." Anticommunist activists characterized psychology as a dangerous medicine that could be used to manipulate thought and, by extension, political will. Although conservative intellectuals scoffed at the conspiracy theories circulated by the "hysterical" housewives, the women's arguments nevertheless found their way into criticism articulated by scholars and politicians by the mid-1960s.

Chapter 5 studies women's influence of conservatism as it entered the movement phase in the early 1960s. Even as they denounced the mass politics they feared, conservatives came to recognize the necessity of stimulating a popular consciousness on the right to thwart momentum growing on the left, especially among youths. The anticommunist crusade that had been building among activists over the 1950s became a natural source from which to draw the necessary vigor to generate a movement, which leaders explicitly recognized. Women activists, already a central part of this crusade, became an essential part of the coalescing conservative movement. They formed chapters of the John Birch Society, a national organization that self-consciously sought to replicate leftist tactics to thwart "communism," which it conflated with all liberal movements. Women opened "patriotic" bookstores in their neighborhoods that featured their favorite conservative authors. One talented transplant from Ohio composed anticommunist music to lend the movement its own soundtrack as competition for the guitar-wielding folk singers on the left. The chapter ends with the Presidential election of 1964, when the campaign of Barry Goldwater, which incorporated conservative women in new ways, came to be known as a movement.

The conclusion examines how housewife populist ideology influenced a new generation of conservative female activists, and questions how the history

of women on the right might bring useful scrutiny to the categories and assumptions that frame U.S. feminist and political history. I argue that the endurance of housewife populist ideology demands that scholars pay closer attention to the ambiguities and paradoxes that conservative women have managed to reconcile and marshal to their own interests, in much the way that suffragists and other skillful political actors in American history achieved their goals.