

EXPLORING AMERICAN SOCIETY

“FEMINISM” VS WOMEN’S RIGHTS

By Karlyn H. Keene

Some observers have suggested that in the aftermath of the hearings on Clarence Thomas’s nomination as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, the feminist movement will benefit from a groundswell of support. Others suggest the precise opposite, that the movement will suffer a backlash resulting from the way allegations were brought and the role interest groups played in them. A review of public opinion polls suggests that neither outcome is likely. Feminist sentiment has reached a plateau, but not for the reasons its supporters or detractors think.

The Emerging Consensus on Women’s Rights

In the mid sixties and early seventies, the idea of expanding women’s opportunities in our society was not a consensual one. In 1970 women themselves split in response to a Roper question, with 40% in favor, and 42% opposed to “efforts to strengthen and change women’s status in society.” By 1974 the idea had majority support. Today, over three quarters of women support such efforts; only 12% disagree. In 1989, 78% of women indicated to Yankelovich Clancy Shulman in a survey for Time and CNN that they were a strong (18%) or somewhat (60%) of a supporter of the women’s movement. [See this issue’s center section for more data.]

Paralleling the development of favorable opinions about the women’s movement has been a much more skeptical attitude about “feminism.” In the YCS/Time/CNN survey cited above, a third of women said they considered themselves feminists. A solid majority, 58%, did not. An October 1991 Gallup survey for Newsweek found just 34% accepting the “feminist” label. Perhaps more revealing for the future of the movement, only 16% of women in college in a R.H. Bruskin survey for Whittle Communications “definitely” considered themselves feminists, though a near majority said they were “probably” feminists. The University of Michigan National Election Study surveys have seen support for the “women’s movement” grow in every presidential election since 1972, but when the surveyors substituted “feminist” for “women’s movement” in the questionnaire in 1988, support dropped significantly. In a Times Mirror poll in 1990, only 29% of women said the term “feminist” described them well (8-10 on a scale of 1-10), compared to 58% (at that time) who called themselves anti-communists, 45% “supporters of the civil rights movement,” 40% “environmentalists” and 38%, “business supporters.”

Resistance to “Feminism”

Additional and more politically consequential evidence about feminism’s future comes from the attitudes of women

voters. In both 1988 and 1990, exit pollsters asked women whether they considered themselves “strong feminists.” Only 18% and 14%, respectively, agreed. In both surveys, those who accepted the label were not “average” women—they were highly educated and very wealthy. For example, three times as many women making over \$100,000 as those making less than \$15,000 chose the label. In 1988, all women supported Bush by a razor thin 50-49%; among feminists, Dukakis led 71-28%. Now there’s a gender gap!

“Do you consider yourself a feminist, or not?”

	Total	Women	Men
Yes, a feminist	30%	34%	26%
No	60	57	63
Don’t know/refused	10	9	11

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Newsweek, October 10-11, 1991.

What do these data say about the prospects for a rebirth of the movement? First, the pull of the label is not very strong. The lack of enthusiastic endorsement among young college educated women signals particular vulnerability. That this group’s more liberal views on some social issues does not incline them toward the feminist label spells trouble. Many of the movement’s activities—the effort to create a third political party, for example—make its reemergence as a political force with widespread appeal unlikely and in fact suggests further marginalization of its standing. Feminists who are more vocal than other women may create the impression of significant support, and they may be effective in some political contests, but they do not speak for most women. Still, these data don’t indicate any likely diminution of support. The numbers of female voters who chose the label are not inconsequential in politics.

The Movement vs. the Message

Second, labels are not very useful in understanding the views of women today. Traditional indicators such as age and education are far more telling and reliable predictors of attitudes than whether one accepts the feminist label. The YCS/Time/CNN questions illustrate this nicely. With the notable exception of one key area, feminists and nonfeminists are in remarkable agreement about a variety of issues facing women. Eighty-three percent of feminists and 81% of non-feminists agreed that “job discrimination is a very important issue for women today”; 45% of feminists, and 43% of nonfeminists felt that a woman should be able to get an abortion if she wants one

Keene/continued

no matter what the reason; 93% and 94% of feminists and nonfeminists said equal pay for equal work was very important for women. Where they differed profoundly was on perceptions of the feminists. Sixty-two percent of feminists but only 37% of nonfeminists had favorable impressions of NOW, 67% of feminists compared to 45% of nonfeminists said the movement accurately reflected the views of most women. If the movement, not the issues that gave birth to it, is the obstacle, then feminists won't gain ground.

Third, and perhaps most important, these data fit into a familiar pattern of development of political movements in the United States. As we have seen, the idea of providing women more opportunities in society was not one the country shared in the early 1970s. Now we do. When we agree on the ends, we disengage from specific policy debates about the means to accomplish them. This explains why President Bush's approval ratings among women (and men) did not diminish after he vetoed the parental leave legislation, an item high on feminists' list of legislative priorities. Most women believe that most Republicans and Democrats are committed to the

goal of equality; where they differ is on the best approach for accomplishing the larger goal. The Thomas hearings may have done many things, but they did not threaten the basic consensus on making progress toward equality for women.

Feminism's advance has also been stalled by the success of the women's movement. Many older women see more doors open than ever before. Younger women don't feel common cause with their embattled elders. Both groups believe that enormous strides have been made for women since the 1960s. Just how many options are available for women is shown by Anita Hill's support for the nomination of conservative Robert Bork to the Supreme Court. Feminists may have expected women to follow in their footsteps; instead they have walked quietly and purposefully in a variety of new directions.

The label "feminist" is not compelling for a majority of women today, not because they believe women have achieved perfect equality with men, but because they believe we as a society are working to live up to the idea of equal opportunity that was often denied in the past.

Karlyn H. Keene is editor of The American Enterprise Magazine and a resident fellow of the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research

ARE WOMEN BETTER OFF NOW THAN 10 YEARS AGO?

With Regard To:

Income and Economic Resources	Total	Women	Men
Better off	78%	74%	84%
Not better off	19	23	15
Don't know/refused	3	3	1
Legal Rights			
Better off	84	81	88
Not better off	12	13	10
Don't know/refused	4	6	2
Status in Society			
Better off	78	74	82
Not better off	17	19	14
Don't know/refused	5	7	4
The Burden from Housework and Child-Rearing			
Better off	59	50	69
Not better off	33	39	25
Don't know/refused	8	11	6

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Newsweek, October 10-11, 1991.