

ACTIVISTS FOR AND AGAINST THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

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Since the 1972 submission of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the states for ratification, controversy has arisen over the desirability and the need for such an amendment. Both pro-ERA and Anti-ERA activists have organized and been actively involved in efforts to ratify the ERA. Unlike previous periods in American history when women's rights were at stake, the main activists in this issue, have been women. This raises the question of the similarities and differences of the women on opposing sides of the ERA dispute.

In 1975 Brady and Tedin studied a group of female anti-ERA activists attending a Texas legislative hearing on rescinding the ratification of the amendment. These women fit the pattern characteristic of the "religious right" in that they "believe in a domestic communist conspiracy, feel big government in the United States is a menace, and are very preoccupied with the state of morality" (Brady, Tedin 1976 574). They were primarily from middle and upper-middle class, smalltown backgrounds and were motivated to political activism by commitment to traditional religious beliefs and values.

Several studies have been reported concerning the characteristics of women's liberation advocates. In examining personality, O'Neil, et al. (1975) found these women to be more independent and less concerned with traditional social customs than a group of control women. They were depicted also as less feminine and less traditional in their religious outlook. Welch (1975) reported a relationship between support for women's rights and such variables as younger age; higher educational level and less religious commitment.

While a number of subjective descriptions of the participants in the ERA controversy have appeared (Williams, 1977; French, 1978), few comparative investigations between relatively matched pro- and anti-ERA women have been reported. However, Arrington and Kyle (1978) studied both male and female ERA proponents in North Carolina by sending a mail questionnaire to known leaders and members

of ERA groups and other identifiable activists. Pro-ERA women were better educated, more likely to be employed as professionals, less likely to be housewives and less likely to be members of a fundamentalist religious denomination than were the anti-ERA women. They found also that both pro- and anti-ERA activists were likely to be from an urban area and were younger, with a higher family income than the general population of North Carolina.

METHOD

Pro-ERA subjects for this study were participants in a strategy planning rally held in an Oklahoma metropolitan area. Those attending the meeting had been notified by letter from a mailing list of pro-ERA activists, and they represented a number of communities across the state. Participants at the rally were predominantly women, although several men were present. Permission to conduct the study had been received prior to the meeting, and those in charge offered to cooperate. After participants registered for the meeting, they were given a questionnaire and asked to complete it as time permitted. The questionnaire was administered by four female university students accompanied by a male professor. A cover letter on university letterhead stationary explained the procedure and gave assurance of confidentiality. The research team remained unobtrusively in the meeting room the entire session. A total of 42 (approximately 80 percent) usable questionnaires were obtained.

The Texas study of anti-ERA women was conducted by obtaining a sample of 154 respondents from a group of approximately 2,500 women who were attending a legislative hearing of rescinding ratification of the ERA. Data was gathered by a group of female students, and respondents were selected from the total participants on the basis of apparent representativeness of age and style of dress.

Texas and Oklahoma, though not identical, are more similar than dissimilar. The two states are adjoining with similar patterns of agricultural and industrial production. The population percentages by age are nearly the

same. These two states have been alike in political party preference, both voting around 50 percent Democratic in the 1976 presidential election (Scammon, McGillivray, 1977). Also, Oklahoma and Texas are quite similar in patterns of religious behavior (Shortridge, 1976). Both are in the "Bible belt" and indicate a low proportion of liberal Protestantism, and they are comparable in proportion of the population claiming church membership.

In obtaining the pro-ERA data, efforts were made to duplicate the instrumentation of the anti-ERA study. The questionnaire included the same items measuring demographic, political and religious beliefs, and political efficacy that were used in the Texas study of anti-ERA women.

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUNDS

Table I presents a comparison of sociodemographic data for the pro- and anti-ERA activists. Those supporting the amendment were found to be younger than their counterparts. Half of the pro-ERA sample was single, while only 14 percent of those opposing the amendment were unmarried. The pro-ERA females studied had obtained a higher level of education: 70 percent had completed college compared with only 16 percent of the anti-ERA respondents. In addition, while 41 percent of the pro-ERA women had obtained graduate or professional degrees, none of the anti-ERA women held post graduate degrees. Pro-ERA women were more likely to come from cities or suburban communities, and those opposing the amendment were more often from the country or small towns. Seventy-six percent of the pro-ERA activists were employed, either full or part-time, whereas only 27 percent of the anti-ERA women were employed. Those opposing the amendment, pro-ERA women were younger, much more likely to be employed, and they were more apt to be urban, single and have a higher level of educational achievement.

POLITICAL ACTIVISM, EFFICACY AND BELIEFS.

As shown in Table II, both the pro-ERA and the anti-ERA respondents indicated a relatively high level of political activity, with the pro-ERA women being slightly more active in talking to others about a candidate, wearing a

TABLE 1: SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC DATA

	(Percent)	
	Anti ERA* N = 154	pro ERA N = 42
AGE		
18-25	9	17
26-35	26	36
36-45	19	21
45+	44	25
Respondent's Occupation		
Employed, full or part-time	27	76
Full time housewife	70	10
Student or retired	0	9
EDUCATION		
Less than high school	14	0
High school graduate	33	10
Some college	35	21
College graduate	16	10
Some graduate school	0	19
Graduate, professional degree	0	41
Marital Status		
Married, widowed	84	50
Single, divorced, separated	16	50

TABLE 2: POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND EFFECT

Campaign activity		
Talk about candidate	73	79
Display buttons, stickers	47	52
Gave money	30	52
Voted last election	88	93
Political Efficacy		
Public officials don't care what people like me think.	Yes 42 No# 46	19 62
Only by vote can people like me affect acts of government	Yes# 26 No# 63	0 98
People like me have no say on what government does	Yes 18 No# 75	0 95
Politics sometime so complex I don't understand it	Yes 55 No# 40	38 55

*Source: Brady & Tedin 1976

#Remaining percent Undecided, No Answer

political button or displaying a bumper sticker and voting in the last election. Pro-ERA activists were considerably more likely to contribute financially to a political campaign however, this may be due to a generally higher level of income. This high level of political activity by both groups of women would indicate that the

respondents' involvement was not based solely on the ERA issue but described a general pattern of political behavior.

Brady and Tedin (1976:572) comment that the anti-ERA women could not be described as alienated from the political process but, in fact, felt that they could influence the political system. As Table III shows, the pro-ERA activists were even more confident than the anti-ERA women that they could affect the policy and operation of government. Almost all of the pro-ERA individuals felt they could influence the government in ways other than by voting, while only 63 percent of the anti-ERA group felt this way. Nearly all of the pro-ERA respondents, compared with 75 percent of the anti-ERA women, felt that they have a say in what the government does. Concerning the complexity of politics and government, a larger proportion of the anti-ERA women felt that it was too complicated to be understood.

These findings suggest that both pro- and anti-ERA activists are involved in political action on a more general level than just of the ERA issue, and both groups feel that they have an influence on governmental policy and officials. The findings also indicate that the pro-ERA women are more likely to be involved and to believe more strongly that they can be influential than are their counterparts.

Concerning political beliefs, Brady and Tedin conclude that the anti-ERA women have views consistent with the Radical Right. Eighty-eight percent felt that communism was a great danger in the United States and that the country had been moving "dangerously close to socialism" during the last 25 years. These anti-ERA women also gave highly conservative responses to questions on the state of morality in the country, on loss of freedom to the government, and on loss of military power in the world. The pro-ERA activists cannot be classified as belonging to the Radical Right. Only two percent of this group saw American Communists as a threat to the United States, while less than a third thought that the country was moving "dangerously close" to socialism. The pro-ERA activists were not overly bothered by the state of morals in the country, since 45 percent said that the morals were the same as ever and another 25 percent thought they were good and getting better. Since these items were not designed to measure

TABLE 3: CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL BELIEF

	(Percent)	
	Anti ERA* N = 154	pro ERA N = 42
What danger are American Communists to this country now?		
Very great danger	88	2
Some danger	7	17
Little or no danger	0	69
Past 25 years we moved dangerously close to socialism	Yes 88 No# 7	29 64
Federal Government is taking away our basic freedoms	Yes 91 no# 4	38 62
Which shows how you feel now about morals in this country.		
Pretty bad getting worse	86	12
Pretty bad, getting better	4	7
Pretty good, getting worse	8	2
Pretty good, getting better	0	24
Same as ever	0	45
Is the U.S. losing or gaining power and are you disturbed?		
Losing, much disturbed	73	7
Losing, some disturbed	18	21
Losing, not disturbed	1	31
Becoming more powerful	2	5
Staying the same	1	31

TABLE 4: RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, AND PREFERENCE

Church member?	Yes 98 No# 2	45 52
Denomination		
Fundamentalist Protestant	66	2
Other Protestant	25	52
Catholic	3	12
Athiest or Agnostic	0	22
Unitarian	0	10
Importance of religion.		
Very important	92	26
Important	6	21
Moderate importance	2	21
Not important	0	31

*Source: Brady & Tedin 1976

#Remaining percent Undecided, No Answer

liberalism, it cannot be concluded that the pro-ERA women held liberal orientations; but it is clear that they do not fit the Radical Right description. Additional support for the less conservative orientation of pro-ERA activists is that 81 percent of them were registered as Democrats compared with 30 percent of the anti-ERA women.

RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES

Table IV compares the two groups as to religious preferences and importance. The pro-ERA women were less inclined to church membership. Among those who were religiously affiliated, two-thirds of the anti-ERA women were classified as fundamentalist Protestants, while only two percent of the pro-ERA activists were so classified. There was, also, a large difference in how respondents felt about the importance of religion. Almost all of the anti-ERA women said that religion was "very important," compared to 26 percent of the pro-ERA individuals. The two groups appear to be different in religious preference with the anti-ERA women being more likely to be affiliated with a fundamentalist Protestant denomination; and although the pro-ERA women were not anti-church or irreligious, they appeared to place less importance on religious activities.

CONCLUSION

It can be said that the women active in promoting the equal Rights Amendment differed in many respects from those lobbying in opposition. The pro-ERA women were somewhat younger, more affluent, and much better educated than the anti-ERA women; and they were more likely to be both single and employed. The pro-ERA activists were slightly more involved politically and felt that they had a stronger role in influencing government. They were also considerably less conservative, both politically and in their religious outlook on life.

The women who actively supported the Equal Rights Amendment were quite different from those who strongly opposed it. The "ladies in pink" described by Brady and Tedin were overwhelmingly Religious Right and politically conservative. However, the questionnaire used by Brady and Tedin was not a neutral instrument as it placed the politically conservative, religiously oriented respondent in a position of agreement on most questions. Many of the pro-ERA women expressed objections to this bias, both verbally and in written comments at the end of the questionnaire, since they found themselves in disagreement most of the time. It is possible that this displeasure may have expressed itself in a backlash of disagreement on the part of the pro group which matched the agreement orientation of

the anti-ERA women. Although differences on most political and religious issues would probably remain, a neutral instrument could have resulted in less polarization of the two groups in these areas.

Brady and Tedin's "ladies in pink" appeared to be very homogeneous with close to 90 percent agreement on many issues". The pro-ERA group, on the other hand, were much less unanimous in their responses; and a substantial percentage voiced political and religious opinions similar to those of their opponents.

As Brady and Tedin pointed out, the initial achievements of the Equal Rights Amendment have been rather successfully countered by the activities of those working to halt the movement. A question of interest to both sides, then, is that of why this switch has come about and what elements are present in the controversy that have enabled the anti-ERA forces to stall passage of the amendment just three states short of ratification. The data from the Texas and Oklahoma activists may suggest some answer as to what has happened and offer some future avenues of research to help clarify the problem. The fact that the anti-ERA women were a highly homogeneous group might indicate that they were also single minded in their efforts to stop the ERA. Most were married and did not work outside the home. Perhaps the issue of womens rights had more of an emotional than a practical appeal for them. These women were highly religious and were leaning toward fundamentalism in their beliefs; and, as Brady and Tedin noted, the fundamentalist denominations promote the role of woman as being dependent, submissive and subservient.

The pro-ERA faction would have a more practical objective in furthering the cause of equality for women, as over three fourths of them were employed and half were not married. In addition, the fact that the educational level of these women was higher and the average age lower than that of the anti-ERA women could mean that they had higher expectations for employment and more to gain from equality in that area.

Attending the pro-ERA rally gave the researchers the advantage of observing the actual organization and interaction of that group, and it soon became apparent that these women were not single minded in their approach to

passage of the amendment. Just as they were heterogeneous in their religious and political beliefs, the pro-ERA women were also heterogeneous in their reasons for supporting the ERA. A labor union representative put forth some quite practical needs for the support of equal rights, others expressed concern for the concomitance of pro-abortion and pro-lesbian interests, the League of Women Voters represented an intellectual approach, activity from religious groups was apparent, and a small but obvious faction was there to enjoy, and add to, a controversial issue. These diverging interests and expectations, coupled with rumors of infiltration from the group opposing the amendment, made it difficult for the women to agree on objectives, coordinate activities and present the united front that would be necessary for an effective campaign.

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