

A Wave for Hillary?

Feminism and the Generational Divide in Democratic Women Voters

Pragya Malik

In a Tortoiseshell: *In this excerpt from Pragya's writing seminar research paper (the "R3"), she analyzes the generational split in female support for Hillary Clinton during the November 2016 election. This introduction is a great example of how to approach a risky, controversial topic by grounding the argument in data, engaging with the existing literature to build an **original theoretical framework**, and **motivating** it all with relevance to current events.*

Excerpt

On February 7, 2016, two weeks before the New Hampshire primary election, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright spoke to a crowd of Hillary Clinton supporters. She criticized young women voters, calling them out for their lack of support for Clinton and infamously reminding these young women that “there’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other” (Albright). A crowd of notably older women laughed and cheered loudly. However, as this statement went viral on the Internet, many others had a different and more uncomfortable reaction.

Before further analyzing Albright’s statements, it is important to see if there is a notable difference in how older and younger women vote for Hillary Clinton. An article in *TIME Magazine* looked at exit polls in New Hampshire and uncovered how significant the generational gap really is. It noted that only 18% of Democratic women under thirty supported Hillary Clinton compared to 56% of women over forty-five (Atler). A common explanation for the generational gap in this election is addressed in Nate Silver’s “FiveThirtyEight” blog, an award-winning political statistics and analysis blog. He finds that younger voters empirically favor more radically liberal candidates like Senator Sanders and have a more favorable outlook towards labels like “socialism” (Silver).

However, these preferences do not explain the whole picture. Hillary Clinton’s generational split among liberal, or Democratic, women is not new. Even in 2008 against Obama, a more moderate candidate than Sanders, the *New York Times* reported that “the generational gap haunted Mrs. Clinton...as Mr. Obama took 51 percent...and Mrs. Clinton just 11 percent of the [Iowa] caucus vote among women younger than 24” (Chozick, Alcindor). Additionally, if there were simply a generational split among *all* liberal voters, then this divide would be equally significant among both women and men. However, a January 2016 survey of online voters by *U.S. News* showed that women under the age of 35 supported Senator Bernie Sanders by nearly a 20-point margin, compared to only a 4-point margin for men (Kurtzleben). These polling data suggest that there is indeed a large generational gap specifically among liberal women voters in their support for Hillary Clinton. This fascinating divide among Democratic women voters warrants an examination into their voter preferences for women candidates.

Unfortunately, there is no scholarly literature yet on the current election cycle, let alone a specific discussion of women's voting choices in it. The next natural place to seek answers is the scholarly discussion in feminist theory as it pertains to the personal political choices made by different generations of women. Thus, potentially relevant is feminist theory surrounding second-wave feminism of the mid-to-late 20th century and third-wave feminism of the late 20th century to early 21st century. As I will show, though, the scholarly literature surrounding third-wave feminist theory does not examine applications related to politics and political decision making, and second-wave feminist literature does not delve deeply into personal choice. Yet, connecting them reveals interesting insights.

In this paper, I look at personal political choice by bringing together these two generational theories of feminism and how they relate to the generation gap among liberal women voting for Hillary Clinton. I will specifically analyze three feminist magazines: *Bitch* and *BUST* magazine, identified by prominent feminist scholars as the two main third-wave feminist magazines, and *Ms.* magazine, founded by liberal second-wave feminist Gloria Steinem. For additional primary material from a second-wave perspective, comments made by prominent second-wave feminists Madeleine Albright and Gloria Steinem will also be analyzed. For *Bitch* and *BUST* both the writers and target audience are younger women (under 35) while *Ms.* has pieces primarily written and read by older women. There are, of course, young women who are second-wave feminists, older women who are third-wave feminists, and men who are feminists of all types. However, this paper will draw on the more significant and heavy correlation between younger women and third-wave feminist thought and older women and second-wave feminist thought (this correlation will be substantiated towards the end of the paper). Looking at personal political choice through the lens of second-wave and third-wave feminism, I argue that the waves' different ideologies advance different positions of what matters for the woman voter in an election with a woman candidate—differences that partially explain why older women tend to support Hillary Clinton disproportionately more than younger women.

Author Commentary

Pragya Malik

In the heart of an emotional, historical, and highly-watched election, I explored a debate surrounding the meaning of the ballot for different generations of Democratic women in the Democratic primary for my final writing seminar paper. Driven by my own experiences as a Democratic voter and feminist, my paper examined how separate waves of feminism—with their corresponding feminist ideologies—produced distinct characteristics of the role of the ballot for women who had the choice of voting for a female political candidate, a difference that could help explain the statistical gap of high levels of support for Clinton from older women compared to Clinton’s relatively lower levels of support among younger women.

In my introduction, I highlighted both a scholarly and personal motive. I reached my scholarly motive by examining the scholarly literature on feminist theory as it related to second-wave feminism thought—held typically by older women—and third-wave feminism thought—held typically by younger women. I looked at works with broad-based definitions of the two waves and analysis on their differing goals and approaches that I could apply as a lens to analyze my other sources. The two waves had distinct areas of focus: second-wave feminism focused on political reform and achieving legal equalities while third-wave feminism focused on the personal choices of women. I then looked at the papers in which the two were studied together or applied to voting and realized that they seemed to operate in separate spheres. There was little existing literature on their intersection. I connected the two in a discussion on *voting*: an act that represents the political outcomes about which second-wave feminists care and women’s personal choices about which third-wave feminists care.

My paper was also born from a personal motive: the fascinating generational gap in the voting of Democratic women that has haunted Hillary Clinton. I began with anecdotal evidence from the election cycle that captured the essence of the conflict in the feminist waves: the second-wave belief espoused by Madeleine Albright that “there is a special place in hell for women who don’t help other women” and the third-wave’s uncomfortable response to that statement. In order to engage the readers as well as convince them of this conflict, I chose to also highlight statistical evidence. I focused on evidence from multiple states in the current primary to reveal the scope of the disconnect between the different waves of feminism, as well as comparative statistics regarding Clinton’s support among men in order to show that this phenomenon was unique among women. I also used statistics from Clinton’s 2008 primary against Obama as a control variable. The use of contemporary examples as well as empirical data gave multiple ways for the readers to understand the phenomenon that I sought to explain in the rest of my paper.

Moving past the introduction, the biggest struggle was narrowing down my paper. I knew I could not convincingly and systematically explain what millions of women were thinking. After meeting with my writing seminar instructor, I narrowed my methodology to focus on how articles from different feminist magazines—some second-wave and some third-wave—characterized how women should be voting. I then characterized the evidence I found into three broad types of differences and found them to be in line with some of the key differences in the waves of feminism that I read about in my background reading.

Fellow Commentary

Isabella Lloyd-Damnjanovic

Writing about current events—especially when they relate to controversial issues—can be a risky endeavor. Without knowing how the most recent presidential election would turn out, Pragma took a gamble in this paper by making a bold argumentative claim: that the significant correlations between younger women and third-wave feminist thought and older women and second-wave feminism, which advanced different ideas about what mattered to female voters, could explain the generational divide in female support for Hillary Clinton witnessed during the November election. Pragma wrote this paper before the November 2016 election, and this is precisely what made her risk-taking successful: she managed to make an argument grounded in current events that nevertheless remains important today for the questions it raised and the reflections it triggered. Pragma’s analysis of the generational split in female support for Hillary Clinton is not an isolated academic thought exercise; instead, it fills a gap in the existing feminist scholarship on political decision-making and personal choice that reveals insights relevant beyond what could have been simply 2016 election analysis.

Pragma begins the introduction with a description of women’s varying reactions to Madeleine Albright’s now infamous statement at a Clinton rally, “There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other.” With this opening, Pragma effectively captures the reader’s interest, highlighting the relevance of her topic, and establishes the motive to which her thesis responds. She follows up with some data on the specific generational gap between liberal women voters to refute assertions that this finding can be explained by a larger trend of generational differences between liberal voters. Pragma then introduces the theoretical framework—feminist thought of the second and third waves as represented by three magazines—to explain trends in the data and primary source material (comments from prominent second-wave feminists). This introduction has it all: informative orienting information, thought-provoking motive, engagement with the existing literature, and a strong, argumentative thesis—making it a model example for motive as well as a thrilling introduction to a fascinating paper.

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Bios

Pragya Malik '19 is a sophomore from Princeton, NJ. She is majoring in Economics and pursuing certificates in Statistics and Machine Learning and Values and Public Life. Outside of school, she is on the Princeton Debate Panel and participates nationally and internationally in competitive debate representing Princeton against other colleges and universities. Debate has exposed her to a wide range of topics, including those that inspired her to write this paper— voting politics and feminist theory. She wrote this paper as a freshman.

Isabella Lloyd-Damnjanovic '17 is a senior from Los Angeles, CA, and a proud member of the Sociology Department and the Values and Public Life certificate program. During her time on campus, Isabella has been part of the Women's Mentorship Program's leadership team, a Fellow in the Writing Center, a research assistant for the International Panel on Social Progress, and a member of the USG Princeton Perspective Project student advisory board. She studied abroad in Rome junior spring and is still readjusting to Princeton. She is currently writing her senior thesis on U.S. immigration policy, exploring how differing demographic characteristics impact immigrants' perceptions of the efficacy and justness of immigration policy. She wrote this as a senior.