

Laidlaw Report: Race, religion and gender in US politics: An analysis of Christian right-wing women and the issues that matter to them

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Introduction to the project:

My research project, under the supervision of Professor Katie Gaddini, aimed to analyse how race, religion and gender combine to influence US politics, and how these condition white evangelical support for Donald Trump. Her work looks to understand what the most important issues are to Christian right-wing women in the present, as well as what women's role is in US religious and political relationships.

Working within a team of research assistants to Katie Gaddini, I was assigned two specific groups of women to research within her broader scope of study: Black Female Conservative Activists and Mama Bears (a group of conservative mothers that uses their children's protection as a way to promote and justify their political views). These would then be compiled in two different chapters of her book, which followed the broader scope of study mentioned above.

Methodology: Qualitative research

My research was split in two chapters: that of the Mama Bears and that of the Black Activists. I conducted both in similar ways, using mainly qualitative analysis research methods. I started both with a literature review on the subject, then moved towards a thematic analysis of interviews done by Professor Gaddini, her participant observation notes, archives, and social media posts. The analysis for the Mama Bears chapter was conducted primarily using the interview data (which I then compared to the other qualitative sources of data), whilst the Black Activist chapter used a broader combination of data, including interview, archives and other research sources (mainly due to the fact that less interviews had been conducted for this chapter). The interviews (three in the Black Activists chapter and seven in the Mama Bears chapter) were all semi-structured and conducted through a snowballing method by Katie Gaddini.

Political engagement based on faith, race and gender

The analysis I carried demonstrated the strength of race, religion and gender's influence on US politics. These identity factors intersect in unique ways when examining different groups of women, such as Mama Bears and Black Conservative Activists, as well as within their respective subgroups. The ways in which they assert and navigate their identities within political spheres are detailed below.

Mama bears

The chapter I spent the most time on was the Mama Bears chapter. To undertake the analysis, I started by doing a quick literature review, through which I was able to trace the main Christian motherhood movements in US history. The literature showed these were driven by movements such as antisemitism (1930s/40s), anti-communism and anti-internationalism (1950s), anti-desegregation (1960s), anti-feminism (1970s), anti-gay (1980s and 1990s) and anti-abortion throughout. Throughout the past century, Christian motherhood movements showcase right-wing women exercising their political identities through their motherhood identity, always following a “protect the children” narrative (the reason to protect them changing throughout history). Mothers frame the necessity to deal with these as issues that threaten their children.

Proceeding to analyse the interviews conducted by Katie Gaddini, as well as her notes on participant observation, I was able to compare and contrast the motivations behind Mama Bears’ political involvement and what matters most to them. I furthered this through archival analysis, and well as social media analysis of key figures from the chapter (both groups and individual women). Through this, I was able to start a thematic analysis, as seen in the subheadings below.

Save the children as political rhetoric and motherhood as political movement

The interviewed women exhibited the “save the children” rhetoric as a main reason for their involvement in politics. They spoke of saving their children from a socialization agenda that involves LGTBQ+ issues, critical race theory, a sexualisation agenda, a comprehensive sex education, dependency on the government, vaccines and public school. This was tied to education and the way children are being “indoctrinated”. All themes seemed to intertwine under the idea of parental rights, children’s protection and the tethering of political identity to motherhood identity.

This “save the children” narrative proved to be similar in a historical context, in which women such as Beverley LaHaye believed that one gets involved in politics because it affects one’s family, as she expressed the need of restoring the country to righteousness for the sake of one’s children. The motherhood argument seems to have the same basis for involvement throughout history, while the specific political issues that lead them to get involved can vary.

Faith driven political involvement

These Christian right-wing women also spoke of the different ways in which their faith informs their political activity. The first way their faith influenced their politics is through their strong emphasis on pro-life positions in candidates, rooted in the belief in the sanctity of life. Additionally, the interviews and data revealed that their faith shaped their preference for “policies over personality” when voting for Trump (For some women, Trump's character conflicts with some of their Christian values and morals, so they opt not to support him).

Analysis of the anti-vaccine and the homeschool movement

In addition to these themes, I delved deeper into two issues that have surged in recent years: the anti-vaccine movement and the homeschool movement, both of which are deeply intertwined with the women's faith and belief that the government should not control parental roles.

To begin with, literature review, archival research, and social media analysis revealed that the anti-vax movement has consistently centred around defending parental rights: particularly concerned mothers advocating for their children's health and resisting perceived government overreach (viewing vaccines as an infringement on individual rights). However, its scope and advocates have evolved over time.

While the anti-vax movement used to be associated with left-wing politics (promoting a natural and alternative lifestyle) as well as focused on safety related to vaccines (as seen in opposition to the DPT vaccine in the 1970s and the measles vaccine in 1997), COVID-19 has made the movement more intertwined with ideologies and politics of far-right wing agendas. Vaccines are seen by these women as the promotion of a globalist agenda and an infringement on individual rights: they criticized COVID regulations for the unnecessary restrictions. The women interviewed associated their opposition to vaccines both to their motherhood identity (protecting their children from them, the mask mandate, and social isolation) and to their faith. Some women even framed their refusal to wear a mask as something demanded by God. Overall, reservations about the COVID vaccine and excessive Covid regulations have become a gateway into a broader anti-vaccination movement supported by Mama Bears.

Similarly, I found that homeschooling was a way for these mothers to counter an excessive control of children in their education and values. Over the decades, the homeschool movement has consistently relied on the parental rights argument. This idea, developed by figures like Michael Farris and reflected in the rhetoric of groups such as Concerned Women for America, remains central. More recently, this argument gained further prominence in Trump's 2023 campaign, where he advocated for a federal parental bill of rights, aiming to return power to parents and reform the US education system. Through this argument, mothers claim that the government has too much control over their children's lives (they frame the government as "anti-parent"). Another argument which has remained is a general dissatisfaction tied to public education and its lack of hard work.

However, the movement has also evolved. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was tied to schools' "secular humanism" and mothers' belief that Christianity did not feature enough in curriculums. Today, many mothers are angry at how public schools are handling mask mandates, sexual orientation, gender identity, critical race theory, and a general progressive agenda. They seem to focus less on the argument of secularism in schools, rather using their faith to claim that they have been divinely appointed to be the primary educators and spiritual guides for their children. Many mothers also portray homeschooling as a way to feel more connected to their families and promote values based on the traditional American family, which would otherwise be disintegrating, according to them. In practice, the movement today seems to be less isolated, and its growing network means that mothers can more easily connect, share

ideas, etc (many Christian homeschooling moms have started blogs offering advice). Overall, it seems that COVID19 led to many mothers discovering that they preferred homeschooling and have continued doing so since (homeschooling seems to be reestablishing itself rather than being a specific movement in time).

Black Conservative Activists

The Black Activists chapter features women that are both a minority in terms of race and gender within the Republican Party and are particularly interesting in their ways of staking out these identities to promote anti-abortion and anti-government intervention agendas.

I started this chapter in the same way that I had done for the “Mama Bear” one: with a literature review to gain a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary meanings of Black Conservatism and how these intertwine with gender. I then proceeded to thematically code and analyse interviews carried by Katie Gaddini as well as social media and archival data. Through this analysis, I was able to find the key characters of the chapter (such as Mildred Jefferson and Elaine Brown Jenkins historically, and Candace Owens and Kay Cole James today). Many of these women describe the realization that, throughout their life, they had been wrongly voting for the Democrat Party, following an expectation from members of their race and gender. This moment of realization comes with a sense of empowerment, in which they switch from passively voting democrat to actively making the choice to vote for the GOP. Overall, these women wish to exit the victimhood mindset that they say is perpetuated by the Democrat Party (seen in the Blexit foundation= black exit from the victimhood mindset).

Framing race and racism

To begin with, I looked at how racism is framed and discussed by Female Black Conservatives. Black Conservatives tend to believe that racism is a barrier that can be easily overcome with merit and personal effort. They believe that racism creates a mindset of victimhood, and that it is a way, as Candace Owens claims, to turn Black voters into “single issue voters”. Although they acknowledge historical racism, they deny the present existence of systemic racism in modern institutions. They say systemic racism narratives are used to justify policies that expand government intervention and reduce personal freedoms and highlight how disempowering continuously emphasizing racism can be. They tend to focus on individual responsibility and opportunity and often oppose identity politics. What matters is hard work: they, rather than their skin colour, are the authors of their own destiny.

These women merge their racial, gender, and religious identities to varying degrees, with some emphasizing one aspect over others. They share a common narrative of empowerment and personal responsibility, challenging conventional identity politics and advocating for a more individualistic approach. Most acknowledge their identities as Black women, but for different purposes, and many highlight the importance of their faith rather than their skin colour.

Anti-government intervention and individual freedom

I further found that female black conservatives rally around the rhetoric of anti-government intervention. They frame conservatism as a way to gain control over your own destiny. Rather than always finding someone to blame for their issues, they rely on themselves and their individual responsibilities. It is all about individual freedom.

Abortion

Lastly, an aspect I found extremely interesting is the way these women frame their opposition to abortion, which is one of the main issues for black female conservatives. They frame it in a way that emphasizes its impact on the Black community, often portraying it as a form of "Black genocide." This is distinct from how white conservatives typically discuss abortion, which tends to focus more broadly on the sanctity of life and the rights of the unborn child without as much emphasis on racial implications. Black Activists discuss the legacy of racial oppression that is instilled in abortion and the importance of protecting the future of the Black race. This is contradictory because claiming that black babies are under attack plays into the victimhood narrative that Black these activists fervently denounce (tension between emphasizing systemic racial threats and advocating for personal responsibility and empowerment, acknowledging a systemic threat).

Reflections

Above all, this project has illuminated how Christian right-wing women navigate and defend their involvement in politics, their beliefs and racial, gender and religious identities shaping their support for the Republican Party. The motivations of Mama Bears and Black Conservatives differ in many ways (While Mama Bears emphasize traditional family values and children's protection, Black Activists often steer away from the Democratic Party's portrayal of them as victims and promote self-empowerment), but both groups find alignment with the same party. They coincide in their conservative values, such as anti-abortion stances.

Furthermore, undertaking this research has enabled me to get a grasp of qualitative research methodology as well as comprehend and experience that the research process is not linear. As my conclusions evolved, I repeatedly revisited data sources that I initially thought I no longer needed to look at. I transitioned between analysing literature, social media, interviews, and participant observations, each time viewing them through new lenses and with different objectives. This iterative process reinforced the importance of flexibility and adaptability in research.

I have also learned the value of comparing and contrasting contemporary and historical themes. Observing the resurgence of certain themes and identifying their parallels and differences with the past provided deeper insights. For instance, understanding how narratives within specific themes, such as the anti-vaccination movement, have both changed and remained consistent over time, enabled a more comprehensive understanding of these issues.

Throughout this process, I engaged deeply with the concept of reflexivity. When researching the Mama Bear Republican women, I initially felt irritated by their political stance

and the ways they used their children to express it. However, I was also struck by how easily I could envision finding their arguments compelling had I been exposed to different sources of information and news. This reflexive awareness shaped my understanding of their viewpoints, highlighting the importance of considering one's own biases and the context of differing perspectives.

Sources

Candace Owens, “Black America: White People ARE NOT Holding You Back...,” April 26, 2022, 10:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvsvdMVG8kA4>.