

Positioning Sarah Palin: Feminism in American Politics

Bachelor's thesis

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1. Introduction

No one told me that running for office means a woman candidate has to switch off her maternal instincts and hide her children from view. If that's required, then count me out. Let's debate ideas. Let's argue about legislation and policy. Let's talk about political philosophy. But leave my children alone. (Palin *Going Rogue* 372)

This quote by conservative politician Sarah Palin illustrates that, on the one hand, she thinks being a mother is part of being a woman and part of her own identity. On the other hand, the quote suggests that Palin believes that her personal life has little to do with her job as a politician. Consequently, this quote reveals that there is a certain tension between Palin's various ideas about women and gender that I will elaborate on in this thesis.

Sarah Palin was born in Idaho in 1964 in a traditional Christian family with two parents and four children and moved to rural Alaska only a few months after she was born. As a young child she was always eager to read and to participate in various school activities. Palin studied journalism in Idaho and it was at this time when she developed her interest in politics. She had deep admiration for Ronald Reagan and his Cold War politics. Currently, she is still married to her high school boyfriend Todd Palin and they have five children together (Palin *Going Rogue* 63-100).

Palin is the first woman in American history who was a vice-presidential candidate for the Republican Party. Her candidacy sparked a large amount of controversy not in the least owing to her gender in relation to her conservative ideas and her family. Indisputably, Palin is not the only woman in American politics who

faced identification problems due to her gender. Women such as Hillary Clinton have long been the topic of discussion because they are not easy to label as either being a feminist or being something else. However, this thesis will focus on Palin because she is an interesting object of study due to her outspoken views on gender, women's roles and motherhood, sometimes contradicting personality and her many media representations. The fact that she emphasizes the power of women and is a conservative politician at the same time, makes analyzing Palin all the more interesting.

In this thesis, I will explore the tension between Palin's various views relating to women and feminism by positioning Sarah Palin's ideas vis-à-vis Anglo-American feminism. Therefore, I will start by defining feminism and distinguish between various movements and waves of Anglo-American feminism. Most definitions will be drawn from a variety of sources, written by both Americans and scholars from other countries, from different ethnic, religious or sexual backgrounds and written in different periods in time. From these sources, a new definition will be constructed that will function as a standard definition against which various statements and actions will be reviewed.

Subsequently, the first chapter will focus on Palin's personal views in relation to this standard definition and other definitions if applicable. Her personal views will be derived from the memoir *Going Rogue* (2009) and relatively informal and personal interviews with Palin at different moments in her career. The second chapter will examine Palin's political views with regards to Anglo-American feminism, including the views of the Republican Party, the Tea Party, and Sarah PAC. These ideas can be deducted from official websites, formal interviews and campaign material. Also, I will review to what extent political and personal ideas can be separated and how

reliable various sources are, especially related to personal ideas since the reason that there is an interest for Palin's ideas is simply because she is a politician. The conclusion will provide a critical overview of the question if, where and how Sarah Palin can be placed in the current Anglo-American feminist discourse and according to what definitions.

1.1 Defining Feminism

In order to investigate Palin's position vis-à-vis Anglo-American feminist discourse, a definition of Anglo-American feminist discourse is necessary. It is useful to start off with a general definition of what feminism entails, although this is very difficult to do, since there is a vast number of movements that are defined as feminist. Furthermore, there is a large difference between Second wave feminists and Third wave feminists.

The definition by Karen Offen in her often quoted article "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach" (1988), offers a broad definition, since she does not limit feminism to a certain philosophical, geographical, racial, sexual, generational or other point of view. She describes feminists as:

[a]ny persons, female or male, whose ideas and actions (insofar as they can be documented) show them to meet three criteria: (1) they recognize the validity of women's own interpretations of their lived experience and needs and acknowledge the values women claim publicly as their own (as distinct from an aesthetic idea of womanhood invented by men) in assessing their status in society relative to men; (2) they exhibit consciousness of, discomfort at, or even anger over institutionalized injustice (or inequity) toward women as a group by men as a group in a given society; and (3) they advocate the

elimination of that injustice by challenging, through efforts to alter prevailing ideas and/or social institutions and practices, the coercive power, force, or authority that upholds male prerogatives in that particular culture. Thus to be a feminist is necessary to be at odds with male-dominated culture and society. (Offen 152)

This definition is also very generally applicable, since it does not mention what type of interpretations, values and needs need to be acknowledged. Therefore it can be interpreted as an almost universal definition of feminism. It does, however, show that this quote was formulated in a time when Second wave feminism was the norm, since it assumes that culture and society are dominated by males. Therefore it can collide with, for example, conservative feminism. Conservative feminists do not necessarily want to fight male domination in society. In some cases this is due to the fact that they do not recognize society to be dominated by men. I will discuss this feminist movement in more detail later on. Yet, Offen's definition can be considered very useful because of its broad applicability and will therefore form the basis of the definition that will be used throughout this thesis.

1.2 Anglo-American Feminism

Since Palin is an American and grew up with American ideas about gender, it is logical to study her ideas in relation to Anglo-American feminism. Even within the Anglo-American feminist tradition, there are multiple movements that represent various feminist ideas. Zillah Eisenstein, an American feminist scholar, makes an attempt to a definition of Anglo-American feminists, but starts by emphasizing that perceptions of gender and feminism are moving and evolving, and it is therefore

difficult to pinpoint if a person is a feminist or not (91). However, she laid down a number of criteria that define if someone is a feminist or not. These criteria are deducted from the general perception of a feminist in the United States. Eisenstein argues that feminists value an attempt to improve civil, children's, women's and workers' rights (95-97). Moreover, feminists are ambitious, keen on power and oppose patriarchal acts such as adopting a man's last name when marrying (98). She adds that feminism is traditionally seen as a white issue, because this is seen as the neutral race in the United States. However, this is changing and women of color are becoming more involved in gender issues (Eisenstein 122).

Furthermore, the word feminism has a bad reputation in the United States as it evokes the figures of radical Anglo-American feminists who favor the right to have an abortion and same-sex marriages. They are often times seen as a threat to the traditional family and the Christian institution of marriage (Eisenstein 94). This is one of the reasons why few politicians define themselves as feminists. However, even fewer politicians will argue against mainstream equal-rights feminism. As a result, people who are moderate feminists or people who do not want to be associated with radical feminists, often say: "I'm not a feminist but..." (Offen 120). A consequence of this identification problem with feminism in American politics is that "liberal feminism [is] neutralized as though women [are] already equal and feminism [is] no longer needed" (Eisenstein 99). This puts people who define themselves as feminists in a bad light because in the eyes of many people they are no longer fighting for important women's rights; these feminists are merely complaining about differences between men and women that will always exist or that should not be solved by government regulations. Adding to Eisenstein, Offen argues that one of the main features of Anglo-American feminism is its focus on individual women, not defined by

family relations, in a patriarchal society (137). Thus, according to Offen, Anglo-American feminism is centered around abstract and non-gendered human rights, promoting personal independence and opposing all socially defined gender roles.

Eisenstein and Offen's definitions of Anglo-American feminism provide a useful image of Anglo-American feminists on the one hand, and the perception of Anglo-American feminism in the United States on the other hand. Based on Offen's general definition of feminism, and Offen and Eisenstein's definitions of Anglo-American feminism, the definition that will be used in this thesis to define Anglo-American feminism is the following: Anglo-American feminism presupposes that individual biological bodies are non-gendered and therefore men and women should have equal opportunities. In addition, these feminists wish to protect the more vulnerable in society such as children, workers and women and sometimes homosexuals with regulations.

1.3 Conservative Feminism and Third Wave Feminism

At the beginning of the 1980s, Second wave liberal feminism faced a "crisis of confidence". Anti-feminist movements such as the *New Right* emerged and represented women who did not feel represented by feminist groups. It was not only neo-conservative people that moved away from feminism, but leftists as well. This resulted in a rising unpopularity of feminism to the extent that the media coined the 1980s era post-feminist (Stacey 559). In reaction to the crisis, multiple new feminist movements emerged. Due to the size of this thesis, it is not possible, although it would have been interesting, to introduce all new movements in Anglo-American feminism. Therefore I will discuss only those relevant for this thesis. The first movement I will define is conservative feminism, since this is most likely to be the

movement closest to Sarah Palin's ideas, considering she is part of the conservative Tea Party movement and a former vice-presidential candidate of the Republican Party. The second reaction to Second wave feminism I will discuss here, is Third wave feminism. Third wave feminism is of importance here, because it concerns a new generation of feminists that have influenced every feminist movement including conservative feminism.

American social and cultural analysis scholar Judith Stacey defines the basis of conservative feminism in contemporary America in "The New Conservative Feminism" (1983). Although the article is rather dated, it provides a coherent overview of how the new conservative feminism developed. According to Stacey, the new feminist movement was primarily based on three ideas that supported the central issue of new conservative feminism: the rejection of the notion that the personal is political. Firstly, these feminists are "profamily," they believe that the politicization of personal relationships harms the family as an institution. Secondly, it promotes certain alleged characteristic qualities of women, especially those concerned with motherhood. Thirdly, supporters of this movement argue that fighting male domination is not a political priority and only distracts from the issues that truly matter (Stacey 562).

Angela Dillard, a specialist in American race and gender issues, argues in a more recent article that it is more appropriate to label the conservative feminism that Stacey describes, as "enlightened conservative feminism." She claims that most conservative feminists today, deny the fact that there is still violence and discrimination against women in America. Consequently, they can hardly be called feminists if it was not for the claim that they make that they strongly believe in equal rights for men and women. Dillard draws on a different definition than Stacey,

showing that Stacey's definition was formed directly after the movement was established as a countermovement, whereas Dillard's definition describes the movement as a methodology with ideas of its own. However, Dillard's definition also consists of three main ideas and touches on ideas within Stacey's definition. She describes the ideals of conservative feminists as follows:

Uniform standards of equality and justice must apply to both sexes; second that women have suffered and continue to suffer from historical injustice; and third that the problems which confront women can best be addressed by building on—rather than repudiating—the ideals and institutions of Western culture.” (Dillard 26)

Additionally, Dillard signifies a split among conservative feminists. One grouping emphasizes the special qualities of women as mothers, whereas the other grouping focuses more on the classical Anglo-American notion of feminism, where gender is shaped by culture and biologically female bodies do not necessarily possess the stereotypical caring qualities of women (27). All in all, conservative feminism can be identified as a movement that aims at representing women who do not feel represented by liberal and Second wave feminists. Although some conservative feminists are more conservative than others, and some value the traditional role of women more than others, they all reject the notion that the personal is political.

The other important reaction to Second wave feminism is Third wave feminism. Although this new wave initially started as a reaction to Second wave feminism at the beginning of the 1980s, it is not opposing the ideas or visions of the Second wave feminists. Third wave feminists offer a new answer to the same ideas

that the Second wave feminists had, by redefining the theoretical into the practical. The key word within this type of feminism is individuality (Gilmore 215-221). These feminists focus on the complex diversities that exist among women. Stephanie Gilmore, feminist activist and scholar, concludes this by saying: "The defining feature of this generation, ironically, may well be its inability to be categorized" (218). She adds to this notion by explaining how their ideas are constructed:

[T]hird wave feminists are also aware of their own contradictions and multiplicity. Much of this perspective is born out of the fact that the conventional, dichotomous way of ordering the world is [...] especially difficult for a generation that has grown up transgender, bisexual, interracial, and knowing and loving people who are racist, sexist, and otherwise afflicted. For us the lines between Us and Them are often blurred, and as a result I find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate our multiple personalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving. (Gilmore 218)

Moreover, Third wave feminists are more practical than theoretical. Where Second wave feminists fought for anti-discrimination policies, Third wave feminists are eager to translate these policies into actions. They are searching for a practical manner to implement feminism in their daily lives, incorporating different angles of feminism such as lesbian, Marxist or religious feminism (Gilmore 218).

Thus, Third wave feminism is the logical consequence of Second wave feminism that has similar goals but differs in its approach. Following from this new approach, feminists from all various movements were influenced by Third wave

feminism, including Sarah Palin. Third wave feminism corresponds with the definition of Anglo-American feminism that I will use in this thesis, in a way that Third wave feminists still believe in non-gendered bodies. They argue that a body is gendered because of cultural influences from society and not due to natural or physical causes. Additionally, these feminists value equal opportunities and care about the more vulnerable in society. However, the definition does not capture the multipolar approach to feminism that Third wave feminists have. Since this thesis is about a woman who is more influenced by Second wave feminism, this is not incorporated in the definition but it is necessary to keep in mind that Third wave feminism has influenced every type of feminism by its individual and practical approach.

2. Palin's personal beliefs.

In order to obtain an understanding of Palin's views, ideas and beliefs concerning feminism, it seems only logical to start off by studying *Going Rogue* (2009), a memoir in which Palin describes her personal as well as her political life. It was published in November 2009, a year after the presidential election, in which she was the running mate of Republican candidate John McCain. Although the Republicans lost the elections, Palin remained politically active and therefore her book must also be seen in this context: a representation of how she wanted to be perceived by the American people. This does not necessarily mean that the information provided by Palin is not authentic or always influenced by her political image. She also reflects on her personal life and elaborates on her ideals and the causes of how she became the person and the politician she is today. I will limit myself to several parts of the text where Palin elaborates on her personal views with regards to feminism or feminist issues.

For many politicians in the United States, their personal lives are almost as important as their political lives. The press uses the issues from people's personal lives to come to conclusions about what their strengths and weaknesses are. Towards female politicians, the media is even more critical when it comes to their personal lives. They comment on a woman's role as a mother and wife, or how a woman is not a "true" mother or a wife. Naturally, this relates to the main idea of Second wave feminism: the personal is political. Applying this to Palin, it means that her personal life is a continuation of her political life, as the decisions she makes in her private life are mirrored by the ones she makes as a politician.

That the personal is political is not necessarily Palin's own belief, in this case the personal merely functions as a media tool to gather more information about how

Palin might be influenced by her personal life when practicing politics. Obviously, not everything that the media produces is true and many facts and rumors about Palin are being used against her by people with opposing views. However, what the media writes about her personal life can also function as a tool for Palin, since she can, to a certain extent, manipulate what the press knows about her personal life. Consequently, the personal views that can be deducted from her book will indeed be partly personal, but certainly partly politically charged as well.

2.1 Going Rogue

In one of the first passages of the text, Palin discusses how she walks around at the Alaska State Fair with her little daughter and runs into a poster of the Right to Life, an organization that is against abortion. The poster portrays Palin's daughter. Palin states,

[It] reminded me on how impatient I am with politics. A staunch advocate of every child's right to be born, I was pro-life enough for grassroots RTL folks to adopt Piper as their poster child, but I wasn't politically connected enough for the GOP machine to allow the organization to endorse me in early campaigns.

(Palin Going Rogue 2)

The quote summarizes how Sarah Palin represents herself and is represented in the media: she has a dual role of being a mother of five children on the one hand and being politically active on the other hand. That she is a dedicated mother and a ambitious politician at the same time might seem paradoxical, since the two full-time roles are hard to combine. However, Palin views her political career as an extension

of her role as a mother. Therefore, in this case the two roles are not opposing each other at all. In the Oprah Winfrey Show, Palin explains that the feeling of responsibility that she has for her own children, and the way she takes care of them, can be translated and enlarged to a bigger feeling of responsibility towards the American people as a whole (Winfrey). This connects to Stacey's definition of conservative feminism. Palin promotes her caring, motherly qualities, and depicts these as the basis for her political career.

Moreover, the quote portrays Palin's claim to practicing politics on the basis of her own personal principles and ideals. In the Oprah Winfrey show, she explains that she started practicing politics because she did not feel that "ordinary American citizens," including women like her, were represented well enough in American politics. Therefore, she was eager to represent the concerns of these ordinary people and to safeguard the nation for future generations (Winfrey). This urge to defend the rights of underrepresented groups of people such as ordinary Americans in this case, corresponds with the definition of Anglo-American feminism that is used in this thesis.

However, in this definition and Eisenstein's definition alike, the underrepresented groups are usually more easily definable as for example women, workers or children and not, as in Palin's case, ordinary American citizens. Relating the group to Palin, it can probably be defined best as rural, conservative, lower to middle class Anglo-Americans. This can be assumed since she claims to be part of this group of people and, considering Palin's background, this group can probably be classified as what she views as the normal, the neutral (Palin *Going Rogue* 1-8). However, because Palin chooses not to define the concept of ordinary Americans, a great many Americans can identify with this group. Consequently, everyone who feels underrepresented in American society as it is, may believe that

Palin is set to change society according to their interests and needs. Leaving this group undefined, is therefore a politically strategic move since Palin wants for as many citizens as possible to see her as their spokesperson so she can obtain more political power.

When she mentions her beliefs in relation to feminism before she became politically active, she argues that she was not a radical or dedicated feminist. However, she did believe in equal opportunities for men and women. Palin states that "It [feminism] was a matter not of ideology but of simple fairness" (29). This quote reveals a lot about Palin's view on emancipation politics. It suggests that she believes that most Second-wave feminists are focusing too much on trying to gain more political and economic power through new emancipating regulations. As a true Republican, she believes that a great amount of regulations are harmful to society and are intervening in people's personal lives. Instead, she states that individual women should step up and make use of the opportunities First wave feminists created for them, in order to create more emancipation (Palin *Going Rogue* 29-30). This can be emphasized by Palin's review of Jessica Gavora's book *Titling the Playing Field* (2001) on Title IX, a part of the law on equal educational opportunities. She states:

I agreed with a lot of what she wrote: "Instead of reflecting and, indeed, reveling in our expanded horizons, the feminism of the National Organization for Women and other so-called 'women's groups' depicts women as passive victims rather than the makers of their own destinies, and overlooks our individuality in favor of a collective political identity that many of us find restrictive". (Palin *Going Rogue* 29-30)

Palin argues that she agrees with what Gavora writes about reflecting and celebrating women's expanded horizons. This view on feminism connects to Third wave feminism rather than First wave feminism, as Palin herself claims. When she mentions she agrees with the statement that women should be the makers of their own destinies, she basically argues that feminism should be more practical than theoretical. Also in line with Third wave feminism, she clearly favors grassroots feminism or individual feminism above organized women's groups (Gilmore 215).

The quote suggests that the National Organization for Women functions as a standard for what feminism and feminists are to a great many American people, including Sarah Palin. The organization is the largest feminist organization in the United States and is considered a Second-wave liberal feminist group. It promotes the right to have an abortion and the use of birth control, wants to eliminate all violence and discrimination against women, and strongly opposes racism, sexism and homophobia (*National Organization for Women*).

Apart from the fact that Palin does not support organizations such as the National Organization for Women, because of their ideas about practicing feminism, and their position towards abortion and same-sex marriage, as I will discuss later on, there is another reason why she is unsupportive. She is disappointed in their current impact and responses to various issues. When the media was mocking Palin because of the pregnancy of her daughter Bristol Palin was frustrated with "the reaction by some women's groups and feminists, who, as usual, stayed silent too long" (352). Moreover, she said that "if they [feminist groups] couldn't articulate some concern, if not outrage, then this kind of 'humor' was still acceptable - to the detriment of young women, who are already too often made to feel like sex objects by sexist

older men - then these women's rights activists were hypocrites" (Palin *Going Rogue* 352).

A third relevant part of Palin's memoir in relation to feminism, is where she states that she is a member of the philosophy of Feminists for Life, a group of women who identify themselves as feminists as well as anti-abortionists (Palin *Going Rogue* 238). That Palin openly identifies with this feminist movement is interesting since she is careful with labeling herself with regards to feminism. The fact that she not only identifies with this feminist movement but is also an active member, shows that Palin is indeed a feminist.

In another section, she elaborates on the topic of abortion which she is highly concerned about and explains that she is pro-life, and consequently opposes abortion, even when a woman is a victim of rape. She sees life as a gift, and as an opportunity for the unborn children that should not go to waste. The way she formulates her point of view, choosing to talk about being pro-life instead of anti-abortion, reveals the fact that she is careful with positioning herself towards women's rights (Palin *Going Rogue 2*). Since the issue of abortion is quite controversial in present day America due to new liberal laws in certain states and the reaction of the large amounts of conservatives, the media is rather sensitive to someone who has an outspoken opinion about this. As a conservative female politician, Palin is questioned about the issue very often. She writes about a time when she was being interviewed on her stance towards abortion.

I answered there were good people on both sides of the abortion debate, but that I was unapologetically pro-life, and that I would counsel someone to choose life. I also said that we should build a culture of life in which we help

women in difficult situations, encourage adoption, and support foster and adoptive families. (277)

In this passage, Palin emphasizes that she is not against women's rights in the sense that she does not believe women should not have an option to choose whether or not to raise a baby. She does, however, think that it is wrong if women decide not to have a baby at all. In relation to promoting women's rights, she argues that women should have more access to professional help during their unwanted pregnancies.

Subsequently, she suggests that giving up a baby for adoption is an opportunity to provide a baby with a chance to live, and a woman with a chance to live her life as she wants.

When comparing the philosophy of Feminists for Life and Sarah Palin's individual ideas about abortion with Stacey and Dillard's definitions of conservative feminism, it appears that the philosophy fits within the conservative feminist tradition. Although Stacey and Dillard do not explicitly mention that conservative feminists are anti-abortion or pro-life, it seems obvious that pro-life feminists are necessarily pro-family. In this respect, Palin's views certainly fall within the conservative feminist definition.

Another issue traditionally related to women's emancipation is that of same-sex marriage. Palin strongly opposes a marriage between two people of the same sex. She supports the traditional Christian definition of marriage between a man and a woman, and claims that she does not want to change this. Consequently, she was harshly criticized by conservative Christians when she vetoed a bill that prohibited state benefits for same-sex couples in Alaska. However, she claims that the fact that she vetoed the bill, was due to judicial reasons concerning her role as governor, as

she would have supported the bill personally (Palin *Going Rogue* 143). The fact that she mentions this in her book shows that although this book is a personal memoir, Palin tries to set her political record straight. The vetoing of a bill against same-sex marriage does not fit into the image that Palin wants people to have of her, and therefore this book is, to a certain extent, part of her political campaign. Explicitly opposing the equality of a minority does not correspond with the definition of Anglo-American feminism used in this thesis. However, it can relate to the definition of conservative feminism since this type of feminism is pro-family in the traditional sense of the word.

Thus, *Going Rogue* offers various insights into Palin's personal views in relation to feminism. Palin values and promotes the motherly characteristics of women and is concerned about minorities whose voices are not being heard. Also, she identifies with the Feminists for Life, arguing that although she opposes abortion, she is a feminist. However, in another section she claims that feminism is not the main issue, equality is, hereby neutralizing feminism. This relates to her opposing stance towards traditional Second wave feminism that focuses on active organized emancipation. Palin prefers individual grassroots activism with a focus on traditional Christian values. Since Palin had the possibility of weighing every word she wrote in this memoir, keeping in mind that her future electorate will read it, more spontaneous sources such as interviews might provide useful insights in Palin's persona.

2.2 Interviews with Katie Couric

The first interview I will discuss is the interview with CBS anchor Katie Couric. This interview was quite controversial. Palin explains in the other interview that I will discuss, with Oprah Winfrey, that the interview with Couric was initially to be rather

informal and would focus on Palin as a person rather than a politician. The relevant part of the interview to this thesis is where Palin is being questioned about her stance towards feminism. When Couric asks her the question: "Are you a feminist"? (Couric), Palin responds positively. She states that she is a feminist because she believes in equal rights for men and women. Furthermore, Palin argues that she thinks American women today have equal opportunities compared to men. This is typical of her generation of feminists in the United States. As formulated by Eisenstein, Palin's generation of feminists have experienced a neutralization of liberal feminism which assumes that men and women are equal and feminism is something unnecessary (99).

However, Palin explains that Couric was not content with her answer and started asking leading questions in order to make Palin say something controversial. In *Going Rogue* Palin explained this in the following way: "I answered as graciously and as patiently as I could. Each time, I reiterated my pro-life, pro-woman, pro-adoption position. But no matter how many ways I tried to say it, Katie responded by asking her question again in a slightly different way" (277).

All the same, Palin agreed having additional interviews with Couric to set her image straight. In subsequent interviews, Palin explained that she was annoyed by Couric, and answered questions in a different way than she would have normally. In addition, these interviews took place two months before the 2008 presidential elections, and therefore Palin must have answered the questions in a way that she thought would favor her image. This does not necessarily mean that her answers did not portray her personal ideas, especially because she told Winfrey that she was called back by the McCain campaign team multiple times, for speaking on behalf of her own beliefs instead of the beliefs of the Republican Party as a whole during the

interview. Palin's statement on whether or not she is a feminist, comes from the first interview where she was not influenced by Couric's persuasive interview techniques yet. Therefore the statement can be considered reliable (Winfrey). The Couric interview was a clear example of how the media is eager to portray a politician in a certain way, in this case as a conservative anti-feminist . Therefore, I will discuss another interview where Palin is questioned more objectively in my opinion.

2.3 Oprah Winfrey interview

The Oprah Winfrey show interview was held in November 2009 right after the publication of *Going Rogue*. The interview was personal but started out rather awkward. When introducing Palin, Winfrey states that she received a large amount of critique for not inviting Palin to her show during the 2008 presidential elections. Winfrey explains that this was due to the fact that she publically supported Barack Obama but was not opposing Palin as a person. Although the air seemed cleared, both women still looked rather tense but after a while the conversation seemed honest and quite informal. When Winfrey questions her about her stance towards feminism and issues related to feminism, she remains vague and her answers do not always correspond with each other. Winfrey finally pushes Palin to explain how her view towards equal rights for men and women corresponds with her stance on abortion. Palin explains that women are stronger than they think they are, and should simply work harder to raise a baby in difficult situations. She also argues that having an abortion is the easy thing to do, and that it is absolutely a waste of human life (Winfrey).

Concluding from this interview, Palin struggles with positioning herself towards feminism and issues related to it. Although the interview is intended as a personal

interview, Palin remains a politician who is trained to answer in politically correct ways. She knows that Winfrey is more liberal and does not seem to want to offend her. At the same time, Palin tries to carry out her political message which results in compromising statements.

3. Politician Palin

In order to construct an image of how Sarah Palin's political points of view relate to the Anglo-American feminist debate, a closer look will be given at the views of the different parties that Palin associates with. First I will look at the main ideas of the Republican Party, secondly we will consider the Tea Party's stance towards emancipation and feminism, and, lastly, the ideas behind Palin's protest movement Sarah PAC will be discussed. I will do this by analyzing official websites, formal interviews, official speeches and other campaign material. Subsequently, I will relate these views, and how she portrays these in the media, to Anglo-American feminism.

3.1 *Republican Party*

When looking at the official Republican Party website, there is hardly any information about women, let alone statements on feminism (*GOP*). The party's key points do not include specific points about women, nor do they mention equality per se (*GOP*). Moreover, when searching for "feminism" on the website, there are absolutely no results. However, at the bottom of the website there is a small heading that says RNC women, right below Black Republicans and GOP Hispanics, which takes you to the official Republican website for women. When trying to search for feminism on this website, there is one hit. However, it is impossible to find a statement on what the goals of Republican women are. The only clear statement with regards to this issue, is that the website disagrees with what they call "Obama's war on women." A clip on the RNC women website on this so-called war on women, claims that due to Obama's economic policies, the number of women that live in poverty has grown enormously and that women have been "hit hardest in every poverty related category" (*RNC*) by the economic recession. In addition, the clip shows that "men

have gained four times as many jobs as women” (*RNC*). Critics say that this number is right, although it does not provide an honest overview of the situation. Before Obama was President, even more men lost their job as a result of the economic crisis and women were simply hit later on by the crisis (Farley). The focus on the mistakes of President Obama and the democrats suggests that RNC women attempts to divert the attention of the American electorate from their own agenda, since the Republican Party is not actively promoting emancipation politics.

The only point about the Republicans themselves in relation to women can be found in a blog on the homepage. The blog explains why the Republican Party is “the real party of American women”, as it reads: “We have a dynamic group of 24 women in the House, including a record nine freshmen. Four of the six women governors today are Republicans. We’re also the only party in the past 25 years to nominate a woman for vice president” (*RNC*). It continues by stating: “American women have a right to be self-confident [...]. We, the House Republican women, will continue to advocate for the positive solutions that women want — and America needs” (*RNC*). What can be deduced from this, is that the Republican Party does want to act upon “solutions that women want” but does not mention promoting equality between men and women.

This connects to Eisenstein’s theory of neutralizing feminism (99). Especially conservatives consider feminism unnecessary because they deny the fact that men and women do not have equal opportunities in present day America. Enlightened conservatives, as Dillard labels them, do recognize the fact that there are still some boundaries to take for the emancipation of women. However, they will be hesitant to call themselves feminists, because in their definition that means not being conservative (26-27). Therefore, the Republicans will hardly ever speak about

promoting women's rights or feminism as such, but rather mention "what women want." That the party does not take an official stance towards emancipatory issues is also due to the fact that the party stands for liberalism, and promotes individual initiatives instead of organized groups that represent women. This notion of individual initiatives is in line with Third wave feminism in which the emphasis lies on individualism and diversity. However, since the Republican Party can still be considered to be dominated by older conservative men, the Republican Party cannot be defined as being part of Third wave feminism since a great many members are simply not feminists. However, it does work the other way around. Third wave feminism in the United States shows influences of the laissez faire ideology of the Republicans.

Although the Republicans are not necessarily concerned with feminism, they are determined to counterbalance Obama's progressive policies such as same-sex marriage and therefore the party tried to be progressive by having a relatively large percentage of female politicians. During the 2008 presidential elections, Palin was viewed as a means to receive "the women's vote" for the Republican Party. She was supposed to inspire both conservative women, because she shared their views, and feminists to vote for her because she represented "what women want."

However, as Eisenstein nicely puts it, "female bodies -in their biological sense- can have different meaning than their culturally constructed and chosen definitions of womanhood" (92). The women who represent the Republican Party do not necessarily represent women's rights or the women of the Republican Party merely because they are women.

Moreover, in an official interview that was held by NBC news reader Brian Williams, during Palin's time as a vice-presidential candidate, the Republican Party's

official stance towards feminism is compared with Palin's political ideas. The interview is highly formal and hotly debated political issues are discussed with both Palin and John McCain. Williams asks her if she considers herself a feminist. Palin is hesitant to answer and then replies that she does not want to "label herself" (Williams). This is another example where Palin chooses to say "'I'm not a feminist but...'" (Offen 120). Palin continues by saying that she believes in equal rights for men and women, and elaborates on that by stating that she has been raised in an environment where gender was not an issue. It seems as if she wants to leave it there, because she inserts a little pause. This seems logical, since this is the common viewpoint of a lot of conservative people who deny that there is still discrimination and violence towards women (Dillard 26). These conservatives are a very important part of the Republican electorate and their opinion should therefore not be contradicted.

Yet, Palin continues by arguing that it is time that women are finally going to fight the glass ceiling that prevents them from having certain professions or positions. She admits that the ceiling is still there, but that women are going to change that within a short period of time. In addition, she literally presents herself as a role model for women and talks about protecting small businesses, which she associates with women. This sounds as if Palin's beliefs are more feminist than the official Republican Party and the Tea Party movement programs prescribe. In addition, by admitting that the notion of the glass ceiling is still present, Palin moves away from the truly conservative feminists as defined by Dillard, and is at least an enlightened conservative feminist (26). She underlines her feminist views by concluding the interview by stating she wants to become Vice-President of the United States to represent women (Williams).

3.2 Tea Party

The Tea Party started as a grassroots protest in 2010 as a response to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, better known as the stimulus package President Obama designed to recover from the economic crisis. Tea Party members are in general extremely conservative and patriotic and are inspired by what happened during the Boston Tea Party and laissez-faire Republican politics that were practiced by politicians such as Ronald Reagan (TeaParty). Palin is a prominent member of the Tea Party and is widely associated with the conservative rightist protest movement. Therefore I will discuss the political agenda as formulated on the movement's official website in relation to emancipation and feminism.

On the Tea Party's website, women as a group are absent. Under the header "about", there is information on the core values of this movement. It states that what led to the creation of the Tea Party, was the belief in the conservative Christian values that are rooted in American society.

We believe that the responsibility of our beloved nation is entrenched within the hearts of true American Patriots from every race, religion, national origin, and walk of life who share a common belief in the values which made and keep our beloved nation great. (TeaParty)

Although this quote makes an attempt to emphasize the equality of different groups of people, it essentially merely states that people from different ethnic backgrounds and religions are equal. It does not include sex, or sexual preference for that matter. It seems as if the Tea Party neutralizes feminism as well, and does not believe that gender inequality is an important issue. The only sign of a certain position vis-à-vis

Anglo-American feminism can be found in the 15th and last point of the Tea Party's "Non-negotiable Core Beliefs" (TeaParty). It reads "Traditional family values are encouraged" (TeaParty), which shows that the Tea Party values women as mothers and wives. Because this is all there is on "women" and "feminism" on this website, it is arguable that the Tea Party is not a feminist movement and does not claim to be one either.

However, the Tea Party does stress that the movement is formed through grassroots activism, which means that the movement consists of individuals with different backgrounds and ideas, some perhaps feminist, but who all want to direct "awareness to any issue that challenges the security, sovereignty, or domestic tranquility of our beloved nation, the United States of America" (TeaParty).

3.3 Sarah PAC

The official website of Sarah Palin's political action committee, which she established, as it claims, to refresh and reform American Politics, states that Palin believes in conservative principles, fighting for freedom and American Exceptionalism (SARHPAC). However, the website does not mention women's rights and therefore it seems that this is also not a big priority on Sarah Palin's personal political agenda.

In contrast to this website, the Sarah PAC campaign video titled *Mama Grizzlies*, focuses almost solely on the empowerment of women. To be more concise, she argues that she speaks for the "common sense conservative women" (Palin *Mama Grizzlies*). Palin argues that these "moms" are concerned with the changes that are occurring in contemporary America and that they want to stop these changes to secure a better world for their children and grandchildren (Palin *Mama Grizzlies*). This suggests that Palin can be defined as a conservative feminist according to the

criteria formulated by Stacey. Palin talks about women as if they are all mothers and wives, and as if their main concern is their children. This illustrates that Palin is pro-family and emphasizes the power of women within this family. She celebrates the natural motherly role of women, and argues that the latter can use this power to change American politics. In addition, Palin does not mention men at all. She does not call for women to fight against men or male politics, but against democratic political changes in themselves. Therefore, this clip perfectly fits within conservative feminist definitions.

All in all, it becomes clear that Palin's political ideas do not coincide with the definition of feminism as defined in this thesis, nor do they represent an absence of feminism or anti-feminism. At times, Palin addresses herself as a feminist but in other cases she states she is not a feminist but merely believes in equal rights for men and women. This shows that Palin uses the term feminism as a pragmatic instrument, almost uninfluenced by her own stance towards emancipation and feminism. However, what has to be taken into consideration here, is that Palin obviously has more ability to influence the ideas of her own political action committee than to change the official program of the Republican Party. Therefore, her political ideas with regards to the Sarah PAC are closer to her personal ideas than the Tea Party's ideas or even the Republican Party's ideas.

4. Conclusion

To formulate an accurate conclusion on Sarah Palin's position vis-à-vis Anglo-American feminism, I will first formulate my conclusions based on *Going Rogue*, the Couric Interview and the Winfrey interview. I will do this by discussing in what way Palin's personal ideas fit into the general definition of feminism. Subsequently, I will compare her views with the definitions of Anglo-American feminism. Then I will look at Palin's beliefs in relation to conservative feminism and lastly, I will conclude on her stance vis-à-vis Third wave feminism. Moreover, I attempt to do the same for her political ideas based on the various websites, the clip and the formal interview, however, this will be more difficult since some parties and movements do not mention women as a separate group. Finally, I will draw a general conclusion based on my findings in this thesis.

Firstly, when looking at the general definition of feminism, Palin can certainly be considered a feminist: she values women's own interpretations and status in society, also if they do not coincide with the traditional idea of womanhood as invented by men. She disagrees with the discrimination of women as a group and promotes equality between men and women. This mainly shows in *Going Rogue*, where Palin portrays herself as a driven and ambitious woman who values equal rights for women. Additionally, in her memoir, she states that she is a member of Feminist for Life, which shows that she indeed identifies with feminism.

According to the definition of Anglo-American feminism used in this thesis, Palin's ideas can also be considered in line with this Anglo-American feminism since Palin emphasizes equality as something that is non-gendered and therefore less concerned with feminism than with fairness, as she mentions in *Going Rogue*. In addition, Palin is eager to protect underrepresented minorities although she does not

want to protect certain minorities such as homosexuals and leaves the minorities she wants to help largely undefined. In the Winfrey interview as well as in *Going Rogue*, she mentions that she became a politician to stand up for the ordinary American. Moreover, she behaves as a typical female politician when it comes to feminism according to the definitions of Offen and Eisenstein, since she hardly ever labels herself a feminist due to the fact that she sees feminism as neutralized.

Furthermore, it becomes clear that Palin opposes certain views that are related to Second wave feminism such as the notion that the personal is political and the idea radically opposing a traditional patriarchal society. Moreover, Palin does not favor organized emancipation, she believes that First wave feminists have provided women with the tools to continue the emancipation process through individual grassroots initiatives. This shows that Palin is certainly not a Second wave feminist. She rather draws from conservative feminism and Third wave feminism.

Fourthly, conservative feminism as defined by both Stacey and Dillard, certainly applies to Palin. She acts as a traditional conservative feminist who almost denies the need for feminism in some cases, and in other cases she can be defined as an enlightened conservative feminist who acknowledges that men and women are not equal at present. Palin projects these conservative feminist ideas mainly on the institution of the family by promoting this institution and disapproving of issues that can endanger this traditional institution. Moreover, Palin does not view emancipation as fighting male domination. She focuses on individual initiatives that promote women's role in society by building on traditional Western and, more specific, American culture.

With regards to Third wave feminism, it becomes clear that Palin is influenced by this type of feminism. That reveals itself primarily in the fact that she

strongly values grassroots activism and a individual, unorganized continuation of emancipation. However, this focus on individuals instead of organization is part of the laissez-faire ideology of the Republican Party as well and can therefore not be solely contributed to Third wave feminism.

Shifting to Palin's political ideas, none of the parties that Sarah Palin is part of, openly identify as feminist. The Republican Party makes an attempt to promote what women want and to put more women in political positions. However, the party never mentions feminism and confuses biological bodies with gender representations. The Williams interview provides an image of how Palin does not fully agree with the Republican Party's political agenda. According to the party program, Palin claims men and women are equal in present day America. However, she continues by stating that women have to punch through the glass ceiling, acknowledging that men and women are not equal yet. This shows that Palin's political views, in contrast to the Republican Party's, are feminist and they can also be considered Anglo-American feminist.

The only movement that sometimes suggests to be feminist is Sarah PAC. The official program does not mention women as a separate group, however, the "Mama Grizzlie" campaign clip certainly hints at conservative feminism. Due to its focus on the traditionally alleged female qualities and the fact that Palin uses moms and women as synonyms.

Thus, in a political sense, Sarah PAC is the only grouping which Palin is part of, that actively promotes women's rights and could therefore be considered feminist. Sarah PAC is founded by Palin herself because she believed that there was not party or movement that could achieve what she was willing to achieve with Sarah PAC. Therefore, it is logical that the political views and values of this grouping are closest

to her personal views when comparing Sarah PAC, the Tea Party and the Republican Party. However, Palin also played an important part in shaping the Tea Party movement and therefore these views are also quite close to her personal views. Yet, as mentioned before, the Tea Party does not prioritize women's rights. The views of the Republican Party, are views that are for the most part supported by Palin but they are furthest away from Palin's personal political ideas.

When comparing the personal views from *Going Rogue* with the political views of Sarah PAC, there are a great many similarities. In both instances, the institution of the traditional family is emphasized which is a key point in conservative feminism. Also, in both cases the motherly characteristics of women are celebrated. However, in *Going Rogue* Palin explicitly pleads for a division between the personal and the political whereas in her "Mama Grizzlie" campaign clip, she encourages women to act as mothers and to be politically active.

The reason that Sarah Palin, as a political and historical figure, is difficult to define vis-à-vis Anglo-American feminism is not solely owing to her paradoxal ideas with regards to conservatism and feminism. Palin uses the option of being defined as anything between being a conservative anti-feminist and a symbol of a new kind of feminism in a pragmatic and rhetoric way. In order to strengthen her political image and to receive as much support as possible, she wants to be a role model for as many people as possible. Since the term feminism is charged with numerous assumptions and ideas of different movements and waves within feminism, Palin only sparsely uses it at moments she thinks are appropriate. In other cases she gives the politically correct answer to today's feminist politics in the United States: I am not a feminist but...

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