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# Serial Politics of the Equal Rights Amendment: Revisiting a Feminist Legacy

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Invoking the lack of a common ground is not new in American politics. Neither is conceiving this national division in terms of a battle of opposing visions of what democracy should look like. In his “Tale of Two Cities” speech, held at the Democratic National Convention on July 16, 1984, New York Governor Mario Cuomo took President Reagan to task for describing the country as “a shining city on a hill.” Such a comparison necessitated, according to Cuomo, overlooking the fact that a significant part of the American population lived in conditions far removed from the splendor and glory implied by the Puritan ideal. By offering, instead, the image of a country split into two separate cities—one for the lucky and the other for those left out or left behind—Cuomo sought to drive home to his Democratic audience that it was essential that they unite as a party, as only they could bring the country together again. One of the issues Cuomo’s Democrats stood for at the time was gender equality, concretized in the legal text of the Equal Rights Amendment: “We speak for women who are indignant that this nation refuses to etch into its governmental commandments the simple rule ‘thou shalt not sin against equality.’ [...] It’s a commandment so simple it can be spelled in three letters: ERA” (Cuomo 415).

We now know that in November of that year the incumbent Ronald Reagan won in a landslide. For a majority of the American people, Reagan’s narrative about a shining prosperity for the fittest was the one they preferred. Nevertheless, gender equality has remained a compelling issue in the United States, again becoming clear when Joe Biden asked Kamala Harris to join his ticket in the 2020 election. At the same time, this highly vetted choice drew into focus how politics brings feminist issues back in waves, or, to use a different model, in serial installments, thereby producing a general effect of seriality. One might speak of a

déjà-vu effect. As certain political issues keep resurfacing, what also returns are the tropes used in speeches and news coverage to appeal to the political emotions of the audience. Back in 1984, Walter Mondale had already chosen a prominent female lawmaker as his running mate. Only three decades later, however, would the hope that Mario Cuomo's speech placed in the Italian American Geraldine Ferraro come to be fulfilled: "We will have America's first woman Vice President, the child of immigrants, and she will open with one magnificent stroke a whole new frontier for the United States" (Cuomo 421). In 2020, Cuomo's dreamt-of scenario finally seems to be realized with a female candidate in the second highest office of the nation.

By contrast, the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) still remains unfinished business. Proposed as an amendment to the constitution, it had passed both houses of Congress in 1972. When it came to ratification by the individual states, however, it fell short of three states, even after the deadline was extended to June 1982. While that meant that the ERA had failed, feminist politicians have revitalized it in the last few years. Yet part and parcel of what I am calling serial politics is that the traction, which the revival of this amendment as a powerful sentimental narrative for national unity has gained since the early twenty-first century, is something that television drama, a favorite American genre for political re- and pre-enactments, had already tapped into in the meantime. Margaret Tally has described the "priming effect of popular culture" and, indeed, television shows have experimented with women as presidents over the last two decades. Precisely because concerns like women's equal rights return in waves, the serial format of TV drama is particularly appropriate for putting serial politics on display. The first TV drama to put a woman in the Oval Office was Rod Lurie's *Commander in Chief* (2005-2006). After the president, who chose his female VP solely because of her popularity with women, dies of a stroke, Mackenzie "Mac" Allen (Geena Davis), an Independent, finds herself attacked on two fronts. The Republican Speaker of the House does not recognize her legitimacy, while her husband has difficulties reconciling himself to his new subordinate role. Allen, however, is able to confront all obstacles with poised self-confidence. In the final episode, she is the one to receive a standing ovation at a townhall meeting after her impassioned call for a revival of the ERA, not the Congressman who has just decided to challenge her re-election. Initially, the camera draws out a parade of women's faces. Then, while Allen continues speaking about the differences this amendment would make, the camera pans across the audience to also include both young and old men. The conviction that this shared vision might be a unifying force finds its apotheosis in the final sequence. A multitude of people has gathered outside the townhall and is cheering the president as she descends the stairs to greet them. As the camera moves back, Allen remains standing at the center of the crowd, a tiny grey-clad figure in the midst of a hybrid body politic. Cultural climate, however, is key to the

workings of serial politics—and Lurie’s vision was both too late and too early, failing to speak to its historical moment. ABC canceled the show after one season.

Yet, not much later, more shows featuring female presidents would follow and would continue to pre-enact female leadership in (or at least close to) the White House, among them *House of Cards*, *Homeland* (season 6), *Scandal*, *Veep*, and *Madam Secretary*. The final season of *Madam Secretary* (2019) eventually succeeded in speaking to its *zeitgeist*. When Elizabeth McCord (Téa Leoni), who, like her predecessor, is an Independent, ascends to the Oval Office, she, too, is confronted with a series of crises inside the government and inside her family, which serve to illustrate her command on both fronts. Although she was actually elected by the American people, she, too, must ward off the threat of impeachment, spearheaded by a vindictive Republican senator. Her legitimacy is restored when a ten-year-old girl from Atlanta asks her mother to drive through the night so she can hold a sign up in front of the White House that reads “She’s my President.” Picking up the story, cable news and social media set off a mass demonstration of support from women voters. Taking to the streets, as real-life women did after Donald Trump’s election, albeit with the opposite rallying call, the women of the show stage the largest public protest in their history. While this feminist fantasy—we could also call it wishful thinking—leaves open whether McCord will win re-election, it is this show of solidarity that emboldens her to undertake a whistle-stop tour to help ratify the ERA. In the final sequence, President McCord and her husband embrace before a cheering crowd on the open platform of the observation car, as their train is about to depart from one of the many small towns on their trip. As a sentimental trope, this public performance of their marital union plays to the hope that achieving gender equality might itself be the common ground in a divided America.

In the following spring, the mini-series *Mrs. America* (FX 2020) countered this hopeful speculative fabulation by looking back to the past. In her revisitation of the 1970s battle for the ERA, Dahvi Waller again draws into focus the women who bonded together in this struggle: primarily real-life Democratic feminists Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, and Shirley Chisholm, but also the Republican Jill Ruckelshaus. If this is political melodrama at its best, it is because Waller’s retrospective gaze recalls a moment of functioning bipartisanship, in which a motley group of second-wave feminists were fighting for rights rather than about values (Spruill). Yet the National Women’s Conference in Houston in 1977 serves both as the nostalgic climax of *Mrs. America* and as the significant turning point in the genealogy of national division, which is Waller’s central concern in this mini-series. At the end of the final assembly, Gloria Steinem is shown to have been successful in mediating the discord between diverse factions, and a racially diverse array of women from all walks of American life come together

in shared song to celebrate the new sisterhood they hope to have forged against all injustice. Yet, even as they resolve not to be divided and defeated again, members of the conservative Eagle Forum, who have also attended the convention, turn their backs to the stage and walk out. The very common ground this sentimental performance sought to proclaim is shown to have been a watershed moment for the successful opposition to the ERA, as well—and, with it, the rise of the Christian Right, the Tea Party, and Trumpism. The leader of the ERA opposition, Phyllis Schlafly, brilliantly played in *Mrs. America* by Cate Blanchett, would become an icon of conservative womanhood and of the conservative revolution. Shortly before her death in 2016, she embraced Trump as presidential candidate and her pro-Trump book was published one day after her death.

Phyllis Schlafly is the embodiment of the conservative counter-vision, dividing the women of America into two cities—those committed to gender equality, including issues of sexual orientation, and those who see an equal rights amendment as an attack on their family values (Spruill). In the title sequence of *Mrs. America*, we see this battlefield between feminists and housewives as a cartoon indicating a fight for rights versus privileges and lifestyle. Gloria Steinem's face on the cover of the women's magazine *McCall's*, in the hands of a woman sitting under a hair dryer in a salon, is replaced by a poster that reads "ERA. Now," held up by another woman at a demonstration. She and her fellow activists then morph into the cherries in a pie with a lattice pie crust, which a resolute Phyllis Schlafly is dragging behind her in a cart as she faces her own troops with a megaphone in hand. Out of this megaphone Shirley Chisholm's campaign bus emerges, leaving a yellow female sign in its trail, which, tossed upwards by a disembodied woman's hand, transforms into a cross—the two insignia of the competing vision of feminine values. In a final visual morphing, Schlafly's supporters are shown vacuuming up the sentences of the amendment, which a woman, cigarette in hand, is in the process of typing up. A bird's-eye view captures a second squad of women marching forward alongside the resolute housewives, before both camps are absorbed by multicolored waves that turn into the stripes on the American flag. What this title sequence encapsulates is not only how one political wave engenders a counter-wave with which it is also entangled, but how both movements also run parallel simultaneously.

If Waller's historical revisitation draws on the simultaneity of these contradictory yet intertwined women's movements, *Mrs. America* ends on a bitter note. In the closing sequence Schlafly speaks on the telephone with President-elect Ronald Reagan. He has called to thank her for her coalition but tells her he will not be appointing her to his cabinet because he cannot afford to upset the pro-ERA groups. Devastated, she puts on her apron and, sitting all alone at her kitchen table, begins to peel apples, the clock ticking in the background. We, of course, know

the consequences that this turn of events will have, and, in what has become a standard technique in historical TV drama, a chilling montage sequence splices documentary footage with title cards commenting the subsequent real-world events. The first of these reminds us that Reagan appointed Jeanne Kirkpatrick, a pro-ERA cold warrior, to be the first woman to serve as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. A further title card, following upon images of the historic Phyllis Schlafly, reminds us that the battle over the ratification of the ERA “helped to realign the Republican and Democratic parties along a conservative and liberal divide.” A series of images of those second-wave feminists which *Mrs. America* paid homage to then segues into a further series of title cards, recalling the outcome of the battle between the two cities of women that the TV drama had brought to the screen: ratification in Nevada in 2017, Illinois in 2018, Virginia in 2020. Yet while each is followed by images of rallies for gender equality, culminating in the female Democratic lawmakers who arrived at Donald Trump’s State of the Union address dressed in white as a tribute to the suffragettes, the final title card once more draws into focus a refusal of the very common ground that had previously been achieved. While the House passed a resolution to rescind the deadline for ratification, it reads: “the Republican-controlled Senate has indicated that it is highly unlikely to take up the measure.”

In her speech at the victory rally in Wilmington, Delaware, on November 7, Kamala Harris began by reminding the audience that democracy in America is a political project that demands to be fought for over and over again. After acknowledging her debt to her mother and the generations of women who paved the way for her, she may well have been thinking of the tedious serial installments in which women have made progress when she introduced President-elect Biden by stating “and what a testament it is to Joe’s character that he had the audacity to break one of the most substantial barriers that exists in our country and select a woman as his vice president” (Harris). He was, after all, recalling the Mondale-Ferraro ticket. Yet, as TV drama had already anticipated, what has also returned is the doubt some Republican lawmakers have cast on the legitimacy of her claim to this office. The legacy that Harris is tapping into cannot be unencumbered by a recollection of its opposition. The sentimental appeal in national division is too persistent to be overlooked.

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