

**From Alton to D.C.: STOP ERA, Second-Wave Feminism, and the Politics of Women's
Equality**

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May 2025

Throughout the 1960s, the United States was experiencing a period of vast sociocultural upheaval. Among the movements enacted by such changes was second-wave feminism, utilizing the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) as a vehicle for gender equality. Despite widespread public support, a fierce opposition led by Phyllis Schlafly emerged in Alton, Illinois. Schlafly's STOP ERA coalition proved a formidable foil for women's liberation activists and a catalyst for the resurgence of grassroots conservatism. Ratification of the ERA was stymied by Schlafly's often fallacious utilization of fear-based rhetoric to mobilize housewives in the heartland who feared the growing dominance of liberation. Schlafly's role at the helm of the anti-liberation movement also reflects remarkable irony, given her extensive education and political involvement. The ERA debate can best be contextualized by ideological conflict among liberationists, socioeconomic factors impacting the composition of both second-wave feminism and its countermovement, and the powerful role of conservatism within a waning patriarchal culture. The coalescence of these factors ultimately laid the groundwork for the demise of a political proposition with initially unprecedented national support.

While the ERA gained notoriety in the 1970s, its origins can be traced to the 1920s, following the early success of the women's suffrage and prohibition movements. Developed by the National Women's Party (NWP) under suffragist Alice Paul, even the initial iteration of the amendment became a divisive issue.¹ By the late 1960s, however, the cultural landscape had become increasingly optimal in inviting a resurgence of the feminist movement. Following the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, employment discrimination against protected classes was illegalized, at least on the surface. This support sparked a fervent revival of the ERA underlain by a fresh platform within a more receptive culture. This growth of "a new

¹ Miller, Eric C. "Phyllis Schlafly's 'Positive' Freedom: Liberty, Liberation, and the Equal Rights Amendment," (2015), 284.

women's movement in the late 1960s imparted new life to the ERA," thus expanding initiatives beyond suffrage-era voting and maternal health policy and into the more emergent issue of broadly institutionalized sex discrimination.²

The postwar social climate reflected the increasingly multidimensional role of the American woman, with employment rates maintaining an unprecedented uptick.³ Amidst countercultural challenges to traditionality, the 1960s were posed as an opportune decade for garnering ERA support by bridging the sociopolitical gaps between the 1950s and the 1970s.⁴ Under the Kennedy Administration, three landmark initiatives contributed immensely to the growth of second-wave feminism: the aforementioned Civil Rights Act, the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, and the Equal Pay Act.⁵ These advancements led to the acceptance of key objectives of the women's movement, but true social equality remained elusive.

By the late 1960s, many women believed that the progress of the earlier portion of the decade was inadequate. Accordingly, the feminist movement shifted course, embracing a new approach disparagingly classified by opponents as "radical." By 1972, a two-thirds majority of Americans supported the ERA, but one key obstacle remained: three-fourths, or 38 states, were required to ratify the amendment within a seven-year timeline. Almost immediately, 20 states ratified, and the total later reached 30 within the span of its first year.⁶ With six years remaining and extensive public support, the imminent passage of the amendment seemed certain. Despite the initial ratification success, however, progress began to stagnate and subsequently declined.

² Critchlow, Donald T. *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, (2005), 216.

³ Goss, "The Second Wave Surges—And Then? (2013), 50.

⁴ Goss, "The Second Wave Surges—And Then? 50.

⁵ Goss, "The Second Wave Surges—And Then? 51.

⁶ Kyvig, David E. "Historical Misunderstandings and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," (1996), 46.

The ultimate defeat of the ERA was marked by the rise of a new political faction of anti-ERA activists: conservative housewives who, under the leadership of Alton, Illinois native Phyllis Schlafly, launched a campaign entitled STOP-ERA. Despite their general lack of higher education, Schlafly and her supporters took a unique approach to the ERA debate, initially delving primarily into the constitutional rather than the social aspects of ratification.⁷ While this foundation ushered in their later utilization of fear-based rhetoric as political justification, the rise of this unlikely troupe of activists revealed to the liberationists a surprising reality: the most formidable opponents of the ERA were not necessarily men, but rather women.

Contrasted with the unification of the STOP-ERA campaign, a failure among second-wave feminists was the intramovement ideological and organizational tendency toward disagreement. When compounded with “the mass media’s distaste for active, assertive women,” the consequent lack of cohesion contributed to the increasing instability of the movement.⁸ Diversity of opinion can often operate symbiotically with a movement’s organization, particularly when support extends across the lines of race, class, and socioeconomic status to reflect the widespread importance of an initiative. Conversely, this diversity can only be truly appreciated and maximized when all sectors are provided with an equitable platform. Within the second-wave feminism movement, a number of political and activist organizations sought to form an alliance, including the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the League of Women Voters (LWV). Unfortunately, however, even where these groups agreed ideologically, they found conflict in organizational approaches.⁹ NOW, alongside fellow pro-ERA organization ERAmerica, initially led successful lobbying and fundraising campaigns. In a post-*Roe* America, however, debate among these organizations ensued regarding the prudence of encompassing

⁷ Bird, “Women’s Colleges and Women’s Lib, (1972), 563.

⁸ Beck, Debra V. “The ‘F’ Word: How the Media Frames Feminism,” (1998), 139.

⁹ Boles, Janet K. “Building Support for the ERA: A Case of ‘Too Much, Too Late,’” (1982), 573.

abortion within the umbrella of the ERA.¹⁰ This chasm between highly visible groups at the forefront of the ERA battle “reflected the contentious nature of the feminist movement itself in the 1970s, as feminists splintered into liberal, socialist, separatist, and other tendencies.”¹¹ The issue of abortion, in conjunction with LGBTQ+ rights and a failure to embrace intersectionality, continued to divide feminists, thus amplifying the strength of its countermovement.

Another fundamental error committed by feminist leaders was the prioritization of white, educated, middle-class voices. A particularly questionable approach was often employed by movement leaders, including Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, wherein she drew upon a number of highly problematic, racially charged analogies to further her feminist rhetoric.¹² This false equivocation “assumed that the struggle against sexism encompasses the struggle against racism” while ignoring the many facets of the dark history of Black oppression in the United States.¹³ Friedan’s unfortunate narrative also reflected irony within the feminist agenda: broadly speaking, movement leaders often sought to utilize the experience of Black Americans to conceptualize the oppression of women, yet they deliberately excluded Black women from positions of power within their organizations.

Furthermore, “the recurring deployment of the sex-race analogy as a legitimization device for what were almost entirely depicted as white women’s complaints worked to make Black women largely invisible as a constituency for feminism,” thus leading to the formation of the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973.¹⁴ This move was met with reproach from the establishment of white feminists, who criticized Black women for their separatist approach rather

¹⁰ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade*, 227.

¹¹ Critchlow *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade*, 228.

¹² Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*, (1963), 139-140.

¹³ Simons, Margaret A. “Racism and Feminism: A Schism in the Sisterhood,” (1979), 384.

¹⁴ Dow, “After 1970: Second-Wave Feminism, Mediated Popular Memory, and Gloria Steinem,” (2014) 171.

than taking accountability for the inherent racism that laid the groundwork for this inevitable departure, cementing an unfortunate nail in the coffin of the movement's downfall.

Despite the seemingly liberal makeup of the feminist movement, nearly all of its notable leaders were white, educated, middle-to-upper-class women. Figures such as Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, and Bella Abzug controlled much of the narrative surrounding the ERA, often consequently sidelining key Black feminists such as Shirley Chisholm and Audre Lorde in the process. Furthermore, Gloria Steinem's role as a poster child for second-wave feminism reflected a number of questionable points of emphasis, ultimately giving her prominence above other activists who played larger roles within the gruntwork of the movement. Friedan, despite her own controversies, grew irritated with the "vivid heterosexual appeal" Steinem deliberately leveraged.¹⁵ Friedan's irritation is understandable given Steinem's hypocritical critique of the patriarchy while concurrently utilizing her media blitz to appeal largely to the male gaze.

Friedan's status as an ideological leader of the feminist movement is evidenced by the success of her book, which set forth the most difficult pro-liberation arguments with which Schlafly was later faced. It was never given weight, Friedan suggested, "whether women were inferior or superior to men; they were simply different."¹⁶ This argument enabled Friedan to appeal to the "separate but equal" constitutional prohibition instituted post-*Brown v. Board* in 1954. While this again reflects an improper conflation of two distinctly separate issues, Friedan's role was fundamental as a crucial thought leader in second-wave feminism.

Conversely, by the time she entered into the discourse surrounding the ERA, Phyllis Schlafly was already an experienced political candidate, albeit with little electoral success. Her expertise was neither in the field of women's liberation nor abortion; rather, she was primarily

¹⁵ Dow, "After 1970: Second-Wave Feminism, Mediated Popular Memory, and Gloria Steinem," 188.

¹⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 37.

concerned with national defense policy, reiterating her vehement anti-communist and anti-SALT views in her first publication, *A Choice Not an Echo*, released in 1964. As the women's liberation movement continued to grow both socially and politically, however, Schlafly began to develop a strong oppositional force. In turn, she leveraged her social influence within the Midwest to garner support for her STOP ERA campaign.¹⁷

Regardless of Schlafly's fortitude as an opponent, the feminists began to quest for ratification at a disadvantage given that "it is generally conceded that the side working for the adoption of any new policy is at a great disadvantage in American politics; the more controversial the issue and the higher the level of interest group conflict, the greater likelihood that the status quo will be retained."¹⁸ Despite its initial nearly unanimous national support, the ERA unintentionally "helped revive the GOP right and the GOP generally," and the "catalyst for this transformation was found in the grassroots reaction against feminism, legalized abortion," and a multitude of other factors.¹⁹

Indeed, the linkage of abortion to the ERA was highly contentious and served as a key point of criticism launched by Schlafly. Many feminist leaders, including Friedan, understood that abortion was central to the movement yet too controversial to officially include in the ERA platform. Accordingly, Schlafly exploited the endorsement Steinem and her peers gave to the notion of abortion inclusion within the ERA, "arguing that the federal ERA was a way for feminists to push abortion-on-demand and homosexual rights surreptitiously into the U.S. Constitution," demonstrating her frequently employed argument that activist judges would surely utilize the ERA to liberalize the legal system.²⁰

¹⁷ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, 217.

¹⁸ Boles, "Building Support for the ERA: A Case of 'Too Much, Too Late,'" (1982), 575.

¹⁹ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, 214.

²⁰ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, 225.

By 1972, Schlafly had recruited her vast network of conservative Christian women into STOP ERA, consequently mobilizing their entry into the political realm, a road previously untraveled by many of the group's activists.²¹ In speeches and debates, fear was the primary tactic Schlafly shrewdly employed, convincing women that "their values were being threatened by the secular left," and shortly thereafter immortalizing her perspective in her article entitled "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women," which she included in her *Phyllis Schlafly Report* in 1972.²²

While 1972 was the year in which the revitalized ERA was proposed, Friedan and other feminists had been vocal champions of the wider movement for over a decade preceding its passage through Congress. Schlafly, on the other hand, only became involved in women's issues once the ERA itself reached headlines. She refused to allow her belated entry into the discourse to limit her involvement, but she faced the challenge of rallying largely uneducated masses. By the year in which the ERA was granted congressional approval, "Schlafly had developed an effective arsenal of human and material resources with which to launch her opposition," and she sent out monthly *Eagle Forum* newsletters, associated with her political action group, designed to provide women with talking points consistent with the STOP ERA mission.²³

Ironically, the liberation movement was supported in the highest proportion by highly educated women, and Schlafly herself fell into that category with a graduate degree from Harvard and, later, a law degree from Washington University in St. Louis. Still, however, many of the women who comprised her base of support had received no higher education and worked exclusively as full-time housewives. As a result, Schlafly elected to educate the women via a

²¹ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, 217.

²² Critchlow *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, 217.

²³ Marshall, Susan E. "Ladies against Women: Mobilization Dilemmas of Antifeminism Movements," (1985), 358.

platform largely built upon fearmongering and appeals to traditionality. Schlafly portrayed the feminists as a radicalized coalition seeking to eliminate the nuclear family, a notion that figures such as Steinem vocally supported, but Friedan notably avoided.

Schlafly then extended her argument to a jarring extreme, arguing that women were the more privileged class in society as the beneficiaries of the male obligation to “support and protect their wives and children.”²⁴ Furthermore, she viewed the ERA, rather than male oppression itself, as the primary threat to authentic female empowerment. She argued that equal employment and equal pay—which she claimed to support independent of the feminist movement—were false pretenses with which the ERA sought to employ merely to garner public support while instead seeking to utilize the ERA as a vehicle for more drastic legal reform via activist judges.²⁵

Antithetical to Friedan, Schlafly suggested that ““the women libbers don’t understand that most women want to be a wife, mother and homemaker—and are happy in that role.””²⁶ Both Schlafly and Friedan, in their opposing arguments, committed the same offenses. Firstly, they each purported to speak for *all* women, all of whom were either vastly unfulfilled or wholly delighted by the prospect of housewifery, when the reality was far more moderate. Furthermore, the liberation movement, with its increasing emphasis on abortion, as well as Schlafly’s emphasis on child support, distilled the entire premise of women’s liberation down to the same faulty principle: women are not valued for who they are or what they accomplish, but rather for their capacity for reproduction. The true focus of the movement extended far beyond these factors, and yet these two components independently overtook much of the narrative surrounding the ERA.

²⁴ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade*, 217.

²⁵ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade*, 218.

²⁶ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade*, 218-219.

As Schlafly's role at the helm of STOP ERA continued to expand, it was ultimately Friedan who elected to debate Schlafly at Illinois State University in 1973, exemplifying the battlefield of their shared home state of Illinois. While Friedan entered the debate with a far more extensive body of work and activism than Schlafly, the debate took a visceral turn when Friedan launched into a personal crusade against Schlafly herself, rather than her ideology. At this debate, Friedan "manifested a personal antagonism that never emerged with other opponents [Schlafly] had energetically fought," and Schlafly's experience and knowledge of emotional appeals "usually backfired by allowing her to portray her opponents as the actual extremists," which operated as the linchpin of her platform.²⁷ In response to Friedan's anger, Schlafly said, "I'm glad you said that because it just shows the intemperate nature of proponents of the ERA."²⁸ Though clearly blanketed and biased within this assumption, Friedan's outburst placed a damper on the public opinion of the feminist movement. Frequent personal attacks gave Schlafly increased airtime as a political quasi-celebrity and thus strengthened her own mobilization efforts.

Another strategic choice that led to the success of Schlafly's movement was her decision to focus the aptly named STOP ERA group exclusively on the fight against the ERA, rather than extending into complementary issues. Despite pressure to return to her roots of anti-communism, she maintained a singular focus and was savvy in noting the merits of anti-abortion stances expressed by formerly pro-ERA splinter groups, such as FFL. This unified approach proved to be particularly effective not only in garnering public support for STOP ERA but also in compelling the remaining states to refuse to ratify or rescind existing ratification of the ERA.

²⁷ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, 227.

²⁸ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, 227-228.

This loss for second-wave feminists can be attributed not only to their own internal divisions but also to their underestimation of the organization Schlafly employed through her vast network. Her success “was in large measure due to Schlafly’s accurate reading of her potential female constituency and to her skilled direction of the countermovement’s rhetoric, tactics, and organizations.”²⁹ Perhaps most interesting about Schlafly’s ultimate victory in defeating the ERA was her hypocritical stance. While arguing that a woman’s ultimate fulfillment came from her familial role, Schlafly spent much of her adult life campaigning, both for herself as a candidate and for her causes of choice. Despite the trend that liberationists were generally more educated than their opponents, Schlafly pursued education to a higher degree than many of her feminist counterparts. All the while, she lauded housewifery as she quite literally liberated herself from the same endeavor, with a career as an “author, political candidate, and lawyer; yet she continues to describe herself primarily as a housewife.”³⁰ This dichotomy exemplified the ways in which she indirectly empowered thousands of housewives nationwide to liberate themselves in pursuit of the noble endeavor of political activism.

The ultimate inability to effectively ratify the ERA thus occurred amidst a multitude of factors, both internal and external. The rise of grassroots conservatism under the tenacious yet hypocritical leadership of Phyllis Schlafly saw a remarkable mobilization of women activists championing a cause in direct conflict with their own autonomy. Schlafly’s willingness to accept diverse viewpoints posed a contrast with the failure to adequately embrace intersectionality as well as the ideological struggle for compromise within the feminist movement that ultimately led to the categorization of feminism as a radical political agenda. Furthermore, the omission of the Black experience within the pro-ERA movement alienated a key demographic and fueled deeply

²⁹ Marshall, “Ladies against Women: Mobilization Dilemmas of Antifeminism Movements,” 355-356.

³⁰ Marshall, “Ladies against Women: Mobilization Dilemmas of Antifeminism Movements,” 357.

problematic ideological separatism. Despite the failure of the ERA, however, many feminists continued to fight tirelessly to shift the narrative surrounding their label in opposition to a stiflingly patriarchal society. While the campaigns of Schlafly and the feminists both left much to be desired, the organizational errors of the liberationists can continue to serve as a lesson for future generations of feminists in hopes of more effectively harnessing and maintaining the support of the nation should a further opportunity for ERA ratification arise.

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