

*Politicized Motherhood: Sarah Palin's Caged Grizzly Bear*

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**Abstract:** In 2008, Senator John McCain elevated Sarah Palin's status as a politician to the national level when he named her as his vice-presidential nominee for the Republican Party. Sarah Palin built her campaign on the foundation of her role as a mother. She drew attention to the numerous responsibilities mothers face as family caretakers and called on her fellow mothers to join her in the fight to build a safer America for their children. Palin made strides as the first GOP woman nominated for the vice-presidential role, but her own party was uncondusive to women occupying leadership positions. Even so, she remained a loyal advocate of her party's ideology and messaging. Palin's subscription to her party's agenda, coupled with her propagation of conservative feminism which called on women to preserve traditional gender roles, set a narrow definition for what a high-level woman politician could look like. Palin curbed the potential gains her nomination in a male-dominated field could have made for American women because her own rhetoric prevented women politicians and constituents from gaining political autonomy outside of the constraints of the role of motherhood.

**Introduction**

When Sarah Palin stepped onto the stage in 2008 to accept her vice-presidential nomination from Senator John McCain, she walked into unprecedented territory. Palin was the first Republican woman to hold the title, and in this monumental moment, audience members looked on to see how Palin would acknowledge this landmark (Beail and Longworth 2013). Palin took to the stage and introduced herself as an average hockey mom from Alaska, someone that could be found at PTA meetings or dropping their kids off at sports—an “everymom” (Beail and Longworth 2013, 31). Palin decidedly placed her role as a mother before her role as an acting office holder, offering her relatability over her credibility. Instead of leaning into her position as the first woman to occupy the role of Alaska's governor, as many expected, Palin instead elected to introduce herself as an average mother from Alaska (Zink 2012). The dichotomy of Palin's conspicuous nomination paired with her persona as a familiar mother figure created a tension that would continue to build throughout her run for vice president and subsequent political career. Throughout her candidacy as vice president, Sarah Palin based her qualifications and appeal to the American public on her experience as a mother, but her decision to lean into the mother persona also led many to label her as unqualified or too feminine for the job (Zink 2012). In tandem with the criticism Palin received, her messaging created a narrow definition in the minds of the American people of who could be a high-status woman politician.

### The “Everymom” for Vice President

The day that Palin won the vice-presidential nomination, she visited a shopping mall with her running mate Senator John McCain to buy a cheerleading uniform for her daughter (Beail and Longworth 2013). Despite receiving a monumental nomination, Palin continued her daily responsibilities that came with being a mother. As such, she adheres to the assumptions of politicized motherhood, which presumes female candidates possess the qualities expected of mothers, including strong multitasking skills (Deason et al. 2015). Palin used the image of motherhood both to garner support from the public as well as conservative groups of American politicians and their constituents (Beail and Longworth 2013). She promised a degree of relatability to voters, working throughout her campaign to mobilize other mothers to become politically active.

Palin attempted to inspire mothers to be involved family members and political constituents, bolstering the credibility of the motherhood persona by emphasizing the numerous responsibilities mothers could undertake. With the added layer of her highly public nomination, Palin surpassed the “everymom” ideal to reach the ultimate “supermom” status, best illustrated by her decision to return to work just a mere three days after giving birth to her son (Beail and Longworth 2013, 33). Quoted in an interview for *People Magazine*, Palin divulged to readers that her night was filled alternating between her BlackBerry and her breast pump, strategically emphasizing mothers’ ability to multitask (Beail and Longworth 2013). By sharing these details of her daily life, Palin artfully paints herself as a relatable figure in order to inspire fellow mothers to maximize their maternal roles through political activism.

Palin, and the Republican Party, largely utilized her appeal as a familiar “everymom” to gain more support for the right-leaning party. Many women saw themselves in Sarah Palin, and if a voter did not personally resonate with her, they knew someone like her. Palin introduced herself to the nation as someone who understood her constituents and attempted to satisfy the conservative right’s image of an ideal woman. She intended to prove that she shared her constituents’ experiences of the mundane tasks of everyday life. Leslie Sanchez, a Republican consultant, reinforced that Palin “knows what it’s like to be a mother, and a wife, and to...pay for the groceries, and the heat, and the mortgage” (Beail and Longworth 2013, 31). Simultaneously, Palin’s emphasis of her ability to balance being a mother and a vice-presidential candidate was meant to illustrate to women and the Grand Old Party (GOP)<sup>1</sup> voter base that her role as a mother would strengthen her political qualifications, rather than detract from them.

To the nation, Palin visually embodied the type of woman that was idealized by the conservative right—she was attractive, feminine, and white (Beail and Longworth 2013). For GOP constituents, Palin aspired to appear as a convincing candidate and did not wish to upend conservative voters’ ideals of traditional gender roles (Beail and Longworth 2013). Palin worked to show that her years of embodying the multitasking mother was the exact experience needed to strengthen her ability to be an attractive candidate to the GOP voter-base, and she could do both without abandoning her role as the primary family caretaker. While this would prove beneficial for the McCain campaign, Sarah Palin simultaneously backed herself into a corner where her relatability would incite questions over her true qualifications to hold office. At the expense of her own political future, Palin strengthened the McCain campaign.

McCain’s choice of Palin as his running mate was immensely strategic. Internally, the McCain campaign acknowledged their desire for a vice-presidential candidate who would

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<sup>1</sup> The Grand Old Party (GOP) is another name for the Republican Party and the two are used interchangeably for the remainder of the paper.

emphasize McCain's "outsider" image while separating him from unpopular Bush. The ideal candidate would attract women voters and most importantly entice Republican constituents (Brox and Cassels 2009, 352). The GOP believed Palin would be able to assuage the criticism that the Republican Party was actively anti-woman, while her appearance and femininity, paired with hints of true American grit, would pacify the concerns GOP constituents had regarding Palin's gender (Beail and Longworth 2013). The full political leverage Palin offered to the McCain campaign materializes through Palin's image of a "guy's girl," a woman who possesses sex appeal but also shares the stereotypical interests and hobbies of men (Beail and Longworth 2013, 30). Hailing from Alaska, Palin was dubbed a "frontier woman," known to icefish, snowmobile, hunt, and an active member of the National Rifle Association (Beail and Longworth 2013, 30). Combined, these characteristics made her more appealing to Republican male voters, compensating for the irreversible fact that she was not a male candidate.

At the same time, the Republican Party intuitively understood that they could respond to criticism that labeled the party as sexist and oppressive to women if they had a female face at the front of their party messaging (Beail and Longworth 2013). General public opinion dictated the Democratic Party as pro-women, while the GOP was viewed as the antithesis (Uscinski and Goren 2011). In 2007, Democrat Nancy Pelosi had become the first woman to be the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and two years later, Hillary Clinton entered the 2008 presidential race as one of the favored candidates for the Democratic ticket (Wineinger 2019). The visual created by Palin standing opposite Clinton in public forums strengthened the GOP's supposed pro-women status.

Sarah Palin offered McCain and the GOP the ability to discount criticism directed towards their party by pointing to Palin, a woman at the helm of the right-leaning ship of conservative American politics (Wineinger 2019). The hope of the GOP was that Palin would entice more women to support the party because they saw themselves in her, and this influx of mothers as supporters of the party would challenge the notion that the GOP did not support women's issues. Palin's role as a "guy's girl" allowed the GOP to be flexible enough to include a woman in a high-ranking position without the GOP becoming a feminist party. Penny Nance, the president of the conservative women's organization Concerned Women for America, adds perspective to the Republican Party's use of women, declaring the party is "highly sensitized" to the advantageous nature of having female leaders that are visible to the public (Zink 2012, 3). Sarah Palin stands as a perfect example of this, especially during the 2008 election and Clinton's strong efforts to be a candidate for the Democratic Party (Wineinger 2019). Republican women are given certain leadership roles as a direct result of the absence of a large number of women within the general party (Wineinger 2019).

Palin's relatability expanded from female constituents to appeal to GOP working-class voters as a whole. Republicans pushed for what they coined "Main Street" values: an appreciation for God, hard work, and individualism—collectively labeled as patriotism (Beail and Longworth 2013, 35). Never one to abandon her conservative beliefs, Palin was dubbed as a "sexy puritan," faithfully spreading the Republican Party's messaging on family values and their anti-abortion stance while displaying a level of femininity that was celebrated within the confines of the conservative party's traditional gender roles. (Beail and Longworth 2013, 38-89). In her speeches, Palin altered the way she spoke to the American public, such as dropping 'g' sounds from the end of words, to make the language she used to discuss political issues with the general public more colloquial (Beail and Longworth 2013). Palin pushed the GOP's agenda forward in a digestible format that could be understood by the American public, once commenting on the major

Republican issue of the government budget by expressing that “[America’s] financial system needs some shakin’ up and some fixin’” (Beail and Longworth 2013, 34). Palin’s deliberate word choice used when speaking to constituents reveals the pressure she felt to appear accessible, as her womanhood already put distance between her and the stereotypical GOP candidate.

The Republican Party’s focus on building Palin’s persona heightened media criticism of the presentation of Palin’s image, and media outlets claimed her campaign lacked substance. Numerous publications labeled Palin as a figurehead of the McCain agenda—a tool to gain more blue-collar supporters (Beail and Longworth 2013). The McCain agenda had its eyes set on persuading the working-class white voters who lived in the industrial states of the Midwest and the South that Palin was the answer to their problems (Beail and Longworth 2013). When McCain introduced Palin as his running mate, he noted that she was not someone born from the Washington D.C. political machine (Beail and Longworth 2013). McCain added to this narrative, claiming that Palin was someone who “understands the problems, the hopes, and the values of the working people” (Beail and Longworth 2013, 34). As incumbent president Bush saw his ratings continue to fall, Senator McCain selected Palin to help distance himself from Bush, and the “Republican establishment” he embodied, in hopes of becoming more competitive in the 2008 election (Brox and Cassels 2009, 354). McCain’s framing of Sarah Palin was advantageous for the GOP because she stood in direct contradiction to the Democratic vice-presidential candidate Joe Biden. Unlike Palin, Biden had an extensive log sheet of his time spent on Capitol Hill (Beail and Longworth). Even Hillary Clinton had been associated with D.C. politics since her husband Bill Clinton was elected as president in 1992 (Ritchie 2013). Sarah Palin was framed by the GOP as a breath of fresh air, and she rode onto the national stage as a mother ready to reshape American politics to protect the GOP’s idealized version of the everyday American.

### **Politicizing Motherhood: The Catalyst or the Chain?**

The tactic of politicizing motherhood is not a new phenomenon in American politics—Sarah Palin’s appeal to voters led to a revitalization, or arguably a continuation, of employing the mother identity to inspire and justify women’s political engagement (Deason et al. 2015). Throughout American history, motherhood bridges women’s traditional occupation in the private sphere with their entrance into the public sphere of political activism. The concept of Republican Motherhood entered American politics following the Revolutionary War and was the avenue that provided women “access to and value within” politics (Deason et al. 2015, 135). Motherhood served as an entrance into politics for women but only for the select women who satisfied the requirements of being white, heterosexual, married women, raising a middle-class family (Deason et al. 2015). The Progressive Era at the start of the twentieth century saw women advocate for improvements in policy regarding improved sanitation, safer environments, and better schools (Deason et al. 2015). These issues were deemed as acceptable avenues for women to enter the public sphere because of their proximity to caregiving and children’s safety—topics that have traditionally been seen as women’s responsibilities.

Politicizing the mother identity has proven to be volatile: the image of a mother can serve as a foundation for legitimizing a political figure or, conversely, it can provide an avenue used to discredit women in the political sphere. Some have curated the concept of the “mommy brain” as the impressive ability to multitask and display strong diplomacy and budgeting skills, honed from the responsibility of raising a family (Deason et al. 2015, 136). Conversely, the multitasking and diplomatic mother persona dictates that all female politicians, regardless of their political affiliation are only qualified to address policy issues that align with gendered stereotypes and

traditional femininity—typically social welfare issues rather than economic problems (Deason et al. 2015).

Sarah Palin’s public image satisfies the narrow definitions of an ideal conservative woman who cares for her nuclear family. Palin is a white, heterosexual, married woman, supporting a middle-class family. Collectively, these characteristics have been packaged as the “good mother” by conservative political elites, creating a persona women should strive to embody (Deason et al. 2015, 134, 135). Thus, the role of motherhood, which served as an initial way for women to enter the public stage of politics, has subsequently proven hard for women to separate from as political actors. Palin’s run for vice president only worked to strengthen these confines. The narrative that women should prioritize their maternal role leads many critical voters and political opponents to question whether being a mother makes a female politician a poor mother or political leader because of the compounding familial and professional responsibilities (Deason et al. 2015). Despite being a seasoned politician, Hillary Clinton received criticism rooted in this sentiment. Although Palin and Clinton presented themselves to the American public with varying levels of femininity and supported conflicting political agendas, both women’s qualifications were questioned on the basis that their familial roles would force them to compromise their professional responsibilities (Deason et al. 2015).

Despite maternal responsibility historically serving as a bridge for women’s entrance into the public sphere, male-dominated power structures have often framed motherhood as antithetical to the ideals of political leadership (Deason et al. 2015). Studies show that American voters associate masculine qualities with political competency and power (Deason et al. 2015). As a result, women seeking high-level positions may deliberately choose to display more stereotypical masculine behavior, though they risk receiving criticism of being overly aggressive, as Clinton did. Conversely, if women embrace traditional feminine behaviors and characteristics, they present themselves in direct contradiction to their male counterparts while reinforcing antiquated gender differences (Beail and Longworth 2013). Women politicians face a double bind, attempting the impossible task of finding the right balance between the idealized version of the warm feminine appeal but not appearing too ‘emotional’ or incompetent (Beail and Longworth 2013). When Sarah Palin chose to introduce herself to the American public first as a mother, rather than the governor of Alaska, she left herself vulnerable to attacks on her professional qualifications throughout the entirety of her campaign.

The limitations of the motherhood persona have also influenced the agency of women constituents. Over the past several decades, political parties have begun to view mothers as a potential voting bloc for candidates to use to increase their number of supporters. For instance, white middle-to-upper-class women in suburbs earned the label of “security moms” following the terrorist attacks of the early twenty-first century, denoting the rising wave of concern among mothers for the safety of their children (Beail and Longworth 2013, 33). The “soccer mom” was another label born from the assumption that all women voters are mothers, encapsulating the typical middle-class, white, suburban mothers of the 1996 election.

The “soccer moms” of the 1996 election faced diminishment as women who have “no identity apart from their children” and see the world “through the needs of [their] children” (Carroll 1999, 9). Although Bill Clinton never used the phrase “soccer moms” in his 1996 campaign, he addressed many issues that were of primary concern to the demographic of women considered under the label of “soccer mom” (Carroll 1999). Clinton included policies relating to family and children in his campaign but never explicitly discussed feminist issues (Carroll 1999). The media latched onto the catchy term “soccer moms” and were responsible for making this demographic of

voters appear to constitute a larger part of the voter base than was accurate. The political focus placed on “soccer moms”—a truly small subgroup of all women voters in the 1996 election—illustrates how appealing to women voters through the role of motherhood disregards an innumerable amount of other women voters (Carroll 1999). Palin continued this trend of compartmentalizing women voters under one identity when she introduced the public to the “hockey mom”—a more aggressive and working-class group in comparison to their suburban counterparts (Beail and Longworth 2013, 33).

Today, the expansion of media access through the Internet has reinforced binding women’s political activism to their identity of being a mother. The rise of “mommy blogs” allows women to connect with other women who both share their political beliefs and also view their identity as a parent as inseparable from their political standings (Deason et al. 2015, 135). The continual reinforcement that women are a voting bloc inherently linked to motherhood restrains women’s conversations of policy to issues that only relate to their mother identity, discounting women as constituents with a wide array of policy concerns. “Mommy blogs” stand as an example of how women constituents themselves can also help reinforce that a woman’s political motivations are derived only from her maternal concerns.

As seen in values like Republican Motherhood, women’s maternal role has historically justified their entrance into the political field and demonstrated women’s qualifications to do so. The “kitchen table” approach, for example, attempts to enhance the credibility of mothers participating in politics—handling a family’s budget can qualify mothers to voice their demands in national fiscal decisions (Deckman 2012). In this sense, many conservative female politicians have grounded their qualifications to hold political office in their experience from “balancing family finances” and serving as decision makers for their family (Deckman 2012, 173). Hillary Clinton counterbalanced the initial criticism she received for being “overly masculine” and “pushy” by turning towards her identity as a mother and even resorted to employing the symbol of a kitchen table in one of her speeches (Zink 2012, 34). At the Democratic National Convention in 1996, Clinton expressed her desire to sit around the kitchen table with her Democratic peers to discuss the policy necessary to protect the futures of America’s children (Zink 2012, 34). Clinton found herself subscribing to the identity in order to gain favor in the eyes of the American public. Politicized motherhood has reduced female leaders and voters alike to their roles in the household and encourages politicians to appeal to women as mothers. As a result, politicians fail to acknowledge women as constituents and citizens outside of their familial relations.

Since the 1980s, gender discrepancies in voter turnout have meant that male voters participate at higher rates than female voters, so politicians have attempted to increase their number of supporters by appealing to American women. Women politicians’ overemphasis on connecting with women voters through their identity as mothers frames the issue of closing the gender gap through the narrow lens of motherhood (Deason et al. 2015). As a result, Palin’s political tactic effectively disregards the political agency of both women without children and mothers who are not white, middle-class women embodying traditional gender roles. Politicians focused on the maternal identity negate their responsibility to appeal to all women on a variety of policy issues. The link between motherhood and female political engagement has consistently restricted women politicians to only a small number of issues, and as politicians narrow the policy appeals they make to women voters, these constraints are passed on to women constituents.

Right-leaning political groups help encourage the narrative that women politicians and voters make political decisions that align with their household role. Women within the Republican Party have consistently employed the rhetoric of the GOP, echoing the importance of “family

values”<sup>2</sup> and “heterosexual gender roles,” as well as displaying these practices in their own families (Wineinger 2019, 80). Palin continuously placed her family at the forefront of her political speeches. Palin’s choice to publicize her own family life was an attribute for the GOP because she was married to a white man, and together the couple had five children, with the oldest son Track entering the military—collectively forming a picturesque American family (Zink 2012). Sarah Palin’s own emphasis on her family perpetuates idealized expectations for women candidates and the exclusion of non-white candidates. Her actions contributed to the subversion of minority women candidates and representatives by attaching her own political status to her “picturesque” white nuclear family. When Palin embraced the image of the GOP’s idealized mother, she left little room for other women to diversify the message of what a qualified woman politician looks like (Deason et al. 2015). Consequently, women Republican politicians and Palin’s messaging align with their party’s priority of social homogeneity (Freeman 1986).

### **Politicizing Motherhood: Partisan Approaches**

Although Palin pushed an extremely narrow definition of motherhood, numerous women politicians in the modern era have grounded their political debates in their identity as mothers. In the speeches delivered on the floor of Congress from 1993 to 1996 and the Congress in session from 2013 to 2016, thirty-five percent of all the speeches from both parties used motherhood rhetoric<sup>3</sup> (Wineinger 2019). The congresswomen of the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress used motherhood in their speeches at even higher rates because the issue of welfare was a prevalent and debated topic at the time. Overwhelmingly, the Republican congresswomen pushed for the removal of mothers from welfare programs, adhering to their party’s agenda (Wineinger 2019). Several Republican women representatives of the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress claimed that welfare programs detracted from women’s self-esteem and sense of being able to provide for their child (Wineinger 2019). Other Republican women voiced the importance of making alterations to government programs that would decrease childcare costs for mothers on welfare, helping sway the party’s approach to the political issue (Wineinger 2019). Women from all sides of the political debate have employed their identities as mothers to advocate for their desired legislation.

While placing their role as mothers at the front of their political messaging, Republican women reaching back to the Reagan era, have recognized the importance of endorsing their party’s ideology through “partisan woman-invoked rhetoric” (Wineinger 2019, 210). Republican women recognize that if they wish to make statements through their identity as a woman, it must also align with their party’s ideology. This balancing act is extremely difficult because being a self-proclaimed feminist and a Republican has proven virtually impossible as the party helps ensure that the two identities remain mutually exclusive. Party members believe self-proclaimed Republican feminists prioritize feminist issues, reducing their loyalty to the Republican agenda (Freeman 1986). Meanwhile, the values of a feminist, at least one who subscribes to the liberal definition of feminism, would contradict the gendered hierarchical structure supported by conservative ideology. Republican women’s embodiment of their party’s notion of traditional gender roles sets the expectation that parental responsibilities still default to women rather than men (Deason et al. 2015).

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<sup>2</sup> Family values speak to the expectation that one’s family subscribes to the traditional family structure where members operate within the confines of archaic gender roles (Zink 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Motherhood rhetoric is defined as anytime a congresswoman personally identified as a mother or explicitly stated she was representing a mother with her speech (Wineinger 2019).

Due to Republican belief in traditional gender hierarchies, a Republican candidate's familial responsibilities have different effects on their campaign based on the candidate's gender. Both male and female candidates use their identity as parents to bolster their appeal to constituents, but male politicians receive added positive response for embracing their role as a parent and political figure because the Republican gender hierarchy includes a baseline expectation that the female candidate should also be a mother (Deason et al. 2015). Republican men benefit from incorporating their role as a father into their campaign because the American public views the candidate as more well-rounded and associates the candidate with a sense of stability, assuming he is the provider for his family. Republican women also fare better in elections and public opinion polling if they emphasize their role as a mother, versus their peers who are childless (Deason et al. 2015). Republican voters perceive a maternalistic warmth in women who are mothers, satisfying the criticism that a female political candidate without a child is aggressive and "power-seeking" (Deason et al. 2015, 141). The former nevertheless face questions about whether they can be a committed politician and mother (Deason et al. 2015). Therefore, those striving for the empowerment of women in the GOP must do so within the confines of the party's outlined gender roles and social homogeneity.

Both Democratic and Republican women have gained seats in their state legislatures, though neither has successfully escaped the double bind that American women politicians face. During the period from 1981 to 2014, the number of Democratic women who held seats in state legislatures grew by 623 seats (Elder 2014). Within this same time period, Republican women occupied 235 more seats (Elder 2014). Republican women's representation peaked at 673 seats in 1995, a number that fell to 633 seats by 2014 (Elder 2014). Still, the substantial influence of these women and their breakthroughs in a party that largely supports traditional gender roles should not be dismissed. These women are faced with a double bind of being cataloged as too feminine to hold a political position but are frequently criticized if they are viewed expressing traits typically labeled as masculine (Beail and Longworth 2013). To this end, female politicians are criticized for abandoning their gendered duty if they are not mothers but are simultaneously accused of leaving their family when they run for political office (Beail and Longworth 2013). Sarah Palin's public errand to buy her daughter's cheerleading uniform the day she received her vice-presidential nomination was an attempt to quell these exact criticisms (Beail and Longworth 2013). Palin showed the American public that in just one day she could accomplish her responsibilities of being a mother and carry the weight of being nominated for one of the highest-level political positions.

Palin herself labeled the group of conservative women who entered into the 2010 Congress as a "mom awakening," further linking the mother identity with women's political engagement (Deckman 2012, 171). Consistent in her messaging, Palin labeled this group of conservative female representatives as a "stampede of pink elephants," never abandoning gender as a key part of GOP women's political identity (Deckman 2012, 171). Palin's consistent messaging of a "mom awakening," aided by her own candidacy, resonated with many women, such as Stacy Mott who started Smart Girl Politics—an organization whose membership now surpasses 50,000 members (Deckman 2012, 171). The organization aims to assemble women to be future activists and candidates of right-wing political groups in America (Deckman 2012). The political influence of the mother identity extended into the 113th and 114th Congresses, active during 2013 through 2016. Congresswomen cited their own experiences as mothers in speeches at higher rates than their peers in the 103rd and 104th Congresses twenty years prior (Wineinger 2019). The deliberate choice of congresswomen and Sarah Palin to build their political reputation on their image as mothers may help counter the socialization of women and young girls to believe they do not belong



in politics (Deason et al. 2015). Palin's self-proclaimed "mom awakening" is her attempt at showing that women can also have a say in politics, despite the ultimate cost of framing all women as only mothers.

Interviews with members of the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), which includes both Republican and Democratic women, report that referencing experiences as mothers is a tool used by both parties (Wineinger 2019). The two parties share a similar tactic but diverge from each other in what policy changes they advocate for using the mother identity. The Democratic Party has used appeals to maternal experience to gain support for issues separate from the Republican Party, including gun control and environmental protections (Deason et al. 2015). Meanwhile, Congresswomen of the GOP aim to verbally address issues that their female constituents can relate to without failing to reinforce their own party's ideological priorities of "individualism, family values, and traditional gender roles" (Wineinger 2019, 83, 103). Congresswomen of the 113<sup>th</sup> and 114<sup>th</sup> Congresses delivered speeches referencing motherhood with more partisan undertones than congresswomen had twenty years earlier (Wineinger 2019). The GOP's crafted appeal to women within the context of their family reinforces the idea that the appeal to women constituents is largely constricted to their identity as mothers. Sarah Palin's intense loyalty to the Republican Party served as a catalyst for media criticism that labeled Palin as ignorant of true political issues and a brainless mouthpiece for the Republican Party (Hancock 2010, 331).

### **Feminist Role Model or "Femball" Hard Hitter?**

It would be unfair to suggest that Sarah Palin was not in control, at least to some degree, of her own narrative. Palin famously declared in her vice-presidential acceptance speech, "You know the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull: lipstick" (Beail and Longworth 2013, 33). This line is perfectly representative of the toughness she aimed to embrace, while never abandoning her femininity. Here, Palin takes ownership of the more feminine quality of makeup, despite many arguing that the media's ample attention given to her hair and style—labeled as "lipstick watch"—would be exactly the thing Palin might downplay in the curation of her own narrative (Beail and Longworth 2013, 28).

It is often assumed that female candidates should aim to emphasize their masculine characteristics because the dominance of masculine ideals and male politicians encourage future political leaders to embody stereotypically male characteristics (Zink 2012). Hillary Clinton, who the public labeled as too masculine, stands as a cautionary tale for the women who attempt to take this approach. Criticism of Clinton ranged from her aggressive approach to military and foreign policy issues to her appearance, compounding to negatively impact her political reputation (Ritchie 2013). Because Clinton did not embody traditional feminine qualities, the American media labeled her a "monster" with cyborg-like qualities, particularly for her overt competitiveness during the Democratic primaries in 2008 (Ritchie 2013, 103). Her display of stereotypically male characteristics led onlookers to perceive Clinton as someone absent of emotion and life. Palin, rather, embraced feminine qualities to appear as a more attractive candidate to both her male Republican counterparts and the party's voter base. Because the party supports the preservation of traditional gender roles, in order for Palin to be accepted in such a high-level position, she had to meticulously subscribe to the image of the "good mother," a perfect woman with wholesome, traditional family values. Palin objected to images of her face posted on bikini-clad women, most likely because she found it personally offensive, in addition to the images failing to adhere to conservative politicians' curation of the ideal mother (Deason et al. 2015). Palin presented herself

to the American public as a woman with perfect makeup, preaching of family values and calling on others to protect children from the ailments of the liberal left. Her deliberate choices perfectly subscribe to the Republican definition of a woman and mother and provide the American public the opportunity to criticize other women candidates who do not meet the feminine appearance embraced by Palin.

Despite Palin's own political agenda closely mirroring the "family values" of the Republican Party, she declared herself a feminist, claiming the women of America were resolved to shatter the glass ceiling (Beail and Longworth 2013, 40). Palin even denounced feminist activists who, she felt, criticized her when they should have been offering their support (Beail and Longworth 2013). She exclaimed that the liberals' exclusivity regarding who can be considered a feminist is a form of "old-fashioned sexism" that suggests a single group of individuals can speak for all women (Zink 2012, 69). Further, conservative feminism provides Palin and the GOP women with a way to add their voice to gender issues instead of leaving women's issues to be tackled by Democratic women alone.

Palin was the first non-male governor of Alaska and was her party's first woman nominated as the vice-presidential candidate. Her occupation of a high-level leadership position as a woman may not be sufficient to earn her the label of "feminist." Her political agenda often preached women should follow the outlined gender roles of a traditional society, contradicting her own occupation of the public sphere. Anita Blair, who is the co-founder of the Independent Women's Forum, a right-wing nonprofit that pushes for conservative policies, has labeled this tension "femball," defining the term as the use of feminist techniques to spread conservative or, what liberal feminists would view as, anti-feminist values (Schreiber 2008). Palin labels herself as a feminist, but more liberal women categorize her as the perfect example of someone taking advantage of the "femball" technique. In her own acceptance speech as McCain's running mate, Palin pays homage to the glass ceiling, declaring that the American women are not done fighting for equality (Schreiber 2008). In this instance, Palin employs imagery often used by more liberal feminists while accepting her high-status position. Despite this recognition of female inequality in the public sphere, she would go on to build a political career grounded in the value of traditional family roles, reinforcing the glass ceiling she claimed to be fighting.

By establishing women's right to enter the political realm and be a feminist within the confines of conservative gender roles, Palin ensures that any move to empower women also reaffirms ideals of masculinity and the gender hierarchy in the private and public spheres (Zink 2012). A feminist, to Palin, is a woman who uses her status to help her family and children (Zink 2012). The distinction for Palin between liberal feminists and conservative feminists, like herself, is the latter maintains their femininity and "[are] taught to be proud of the fact that [they] were girls" (Zink 2012). For Palin, a woman politician should not attempt to embody the characteristics of male politicians. Women should instead lean into their appearance and the "strengths" women are expected to possess according to traditional gender roles.

Palin's mockery of liberal feminists has dangerous implications for all women if it is adopted as the primary narrative of feminism. Palin laments that "at some point feminism began to be about emphasizing women as victims," expressing her disagreement with the idea that social problems are too burdensome for women to resolve themselves (Zink 2012, 69). In line with the anti-abortion platform of her party, Palin ensured her own personal choices in her private life aligned with the values of her party. She gave birth to Trig, her son born with Down syndrome, and vocalized support of her daughter Bristol who decided to become a mother as a teenager, rather than electing to get an abortion (Zink 2012). Palin emphasized both experiences during her

political speeches as they augment the importance of motherhood and support the Republican pro-life stance. Palin even acknowledged that she “[could] understand why a woman would be tempted perhaps” to consider receiving an abortion (Adams 2010, n.p.). By sharing her experiences, Palin personifies the Republican agenda. Her employment of the idea of temptation allows the conservative party to use Palin as an example of a “strong” woman who elects not to get an abortion.

By broadcasting her own personal experiences, the GOP strategically uses Palin’s narrative as justification for larger policy implementation, including a push for anti-abortion legislation. Other women can be held in comparison to Palin and her daughter, and the GOP is able to portray the Democratic Party as a morally weak party, detracting from the pro-choice supporters who frame abortion as a right to autonomy rather than an issue of individual character. Consequently, Palin discredits concerns surrounding the various types of oppression faced by women as easily resolved by commitment to virtue, which could have detrimental legislative and social impacts. Through discounting the weight of social problems women face, Palin ensures that gendered discrimination is viewed as the personal responsibility of women rather than advocating for gender equality to be cemented in official legislation.

### **Media Mockery**

Pushing a family-focused campaign, Palin’s personal life was naturally a large focus of the media coverage she received during her run as a vice-presidential candidate. Rather than covering Palin’s political agenda and her professional qualifications, media sources narrowed their coverage to focus intensely on her gender, appearance, and family—an experience uniform to any female public figure (Miller and Peake 2013). The media’s angle can be partially attributed to the McCain campaign’s introduction of Palin to the American public, which unveiled Palin’s family alongside her, placing an added emphasis on her mother persona (Miller and Peake 2013). Palin represents a unique case for a high-level nomination since she lacked previous widespread public recognition as a political figure, creating a “low-information context” that left voters heavily reliant on the media to learn about her (Miller and Peake 2013, 486). The American public, knowing little about Palin before her entrance onto the political stage alongside McCain, turned to television broadcasts to learn about her: for instance, Palin’s vice-presidential debate against Joe Biden drew in 69.9 million viewers, more than any other vice-presidential debate (Miller and Peake 2013).

The GOP incorrectly assumed the emphasis on Palin’s gender, appearance, and family life would strengthen Palin’s popularity with constituents, but these areas of media focus left Palin vulnerable to ridicule among voters. Further, the American public’s reliance on media outlets to familiarize themselves with Palin left the media with an immense amount of control over the curation of her narrative (Miller and Peake 2013). Many entertainment-oriented media publications circulated pictures and written pieces on Palin’s appearance which diminished her qualifications to hold such a high-level political position (Beail and Longworth 2013). This media coverage included an image of Sarah Palin’s face photo-shopped onto bikini-clad female figures (Zink 2012). A Saturday Night Live skit that aired in 2008, leaned into the media’s stereotype-laden evaluation of Palin. Tina Fey, acting as Palin in a debate with Hillary Clinton, begs the American media to stop editing her head onto women dressed in bikinis, lamenting “don’t refer to me as a MILF” (Saturday Night Live 2008). Throughout the skit, Palin’s character is criticized for her lack of knowledge on political issues while also being illustrated as the more feminine, attractive counterpart to Clinton’s overexaggerated masculine aggressiveness.

The exaggerated SNL skit was inspired by mainstream news platforms' coverage of Palin. Both *The Washington Times* and Fox News published a provocative photograph of Palin from a campaign event, reducing her to the crudest assessment of her gender. The angle of the photo makes it appear as if a man is intensely looking up between Palin's legs, with his face placed directly in between her high-heels while the rest of Palin's body remains absent from the photograph (Beail and Longworth 2013). This same media portrayal did not occur with Joe Biden, the other vice-presidential candidate in the 2008 election, nor is it a norm set by the media coverage of any previous male candidates. The media can largely be held responsible for the objectification of Sarah Palin during her run in the 2008 election. For women watching the election unfold, they saw Palin's candidacy stripped down to the oversexualization of her appearance, detracting from the argument that her nomination helped counter the gender socialization complicit in male-dominated politics (Deason et al. 2015).

The excessive attention given to Palin's appearance proved to have disastrous consequences for her campaign, convincing the public she was less competent and equipped to hold a high-level political position (Miller and Peake 2013). She was often critiqued as a tool of the McCain campaign to help make the Senator appear as an anti-establishment and relatable candidate, sacrificing her own political legitimacy in the process (Beail and Longworth 2013).

Even though Palin ran for a position that rarely includes women candidates, media coverage of her campaign was consistent with the coverage of previous women candidates running since the nineteenth century (Miller and Peake 2013). Media coverage of previous women candidates has helped push a narrative that paints them as an unrealistic choice, focusing on their appearance rather than their qualifications and political agenda (Miller and Peake 2013). The continual focus on women candidates' appearances detracts from the professional qualifications of women in the public sphere. In contrast, male candidates receive more coverage on their policy stances and professional qualifications, even if their female opponents are equally as qualified in their professional experience (Beail and Longworth 2013). Even female candidates, who unlike Palin, have chosen not to emphasize their appearance, still cannot escape the media's prioritization of their physical appearance over their hard-earned qualifications. Women candidates are therefore left fighting an uphill battle against a landslide of media posts that focus on their appearance rather than qualifications.

### **Political Figure or Figurehead?**

Although Palin lost alongside McCain in 2008, Palin remained a strong actor in conservative politics. In 2010, Palin was one of the prominent leaders of the Tea Party, formed from supporters of the Republican Party that had branched off from the GOP because of their more conservative political agenda on religion, social issues, and fiscal concerns (Deckman 2012). Tea Party women are overwhelmingly more conservative, wealthy, and educated than the average Republican woman, and are older and whiter than both Republican women and the general female population (Deckman 2012). Interestingly, the policy issue relating most with motherhood—deciding who should control whether one becomes a mother or not—is where Tea Party women outshine their male counterparts in their conservative approach: Tea Party women are less conservative than Tea Party men on most issues, except for anti-abortion policies (Deckman 2012). Tea Party women are ensuring their voices are included in the political debate, preventing the domination of male voices on a largely gendered issue. Subsequently, Tea Party women's heightened attention on abortion policies reinforces conservative women's focus on gender issues rather than general political issues.

As a part of right-wing American politics, the Tea Party provides a unique perspective on the possible future direction of women in conservative politics. The Tea Party women find themselves in the same double bind as their female counterparts who seek to occupy leadership roles in the Republican Party. In 2010, six out of the eight national coordinators on the Tea Party board were women, and Tea Party women won a record number of seats in Congress (Deckman 2012, 171-3). Despite these leadership positions, Tea Party women mirror Republican women politicians' advocacy of the GOP agenda and are generally more committed supporters of GOP candidates than Tea Party men. Tea Party women are 11 percent more likely to vote for a Republican running in their respective congressional district than Tea Party men (Deckman 2012, 186).

Women's overcommitment to their party's values, in comparison to their male peers, raises the question of whether conservative women feel the need to show overt dedication to the GOP in order to advance as women in a party which supports traditional gender roles and, consequently, men in leadership positions. Because their own party does not support women holding leadership roles, conservative women may recognize their loyalty must be unwavering to advance into roles of increased leadership. Republican women must be the perfect party member to ascend beyond their female identity. Considering future political strategy, both the Tea Party and the Republican Party may see the most growth in their voter base, while still maintaining their gender hierarchies, if they continue the trend of politicizing motherhood (Deckman 2012). If conservative groups wish to convince women that their philosophy about government supports women's roles as caregivers and mothers, a way to do so is leaning into the rhetoric Palin popularized through her appeal to women rooted in their identity as mothers. Despite conservative women's efforts to be the perfect woman politician, the innate hierarchy of the GOP is not constructed to allow a great number of women to reach leadership positions.

The structure of the Republican Party allows for the amplification of a select few women's voices to counteract the gaping presence of women in the overall party. In general, if a state's legislature leans towards a Republican majority, less of those seats are won by the women of the party (Elder 2014). Put another way, as a state embraces more conservative politics, Republican women are growing increasingly underrepresented in the state's government. A plausible reason for this relationship is the environment fostered by the Republican Party, which continually diminishes the role of women in the public sphere, unveiling a clear problem for female Republican politicians who are hopeful their party will serve as a catalyst for their respective careers (Elder 2014).

Adding to their limited numbers, Republican women face a clear lack of fiscal backing, despite their persistent promotion of the GOP's political agenda. Republican women consistently receive less funding than their male counterparts (Kitchens and Swers 2016). In contrast, Democratic women have found much more success than their Republican peers and have even historically raised more money than some male Democratic candidates (Kitchens and Swers 2016). The intersection of women candidates' gender and their respective political parties proves to have different implications for Republican and Democratic women. Voters see Democratic women as more competent than Republican women in comparison to their male party members because the Democratic Party's agenda aligns more with typically feminine issues, including social welfare (Deason et al. 2015). In contrast, Republican women operate in a party whose central issues are those deemed as more masculine, such as defense or economic concerns (Deason et al. 2015). Palin's kitchen table rhetoric and her embodiment of the mother role serves as an attempt to counter

this mismatch of gender and party issues. Palin argues that mothers have the necessary experience in financial areas because of running their family's finances (Deckman 2012).

The failure of the GOP's female candidates to earn equal fiscal backing can be partially attributed to the Republican Party's internal funding structure. In recent decades, the Republican Party has mirrored the hierarchical structure of a business where money and professional expertise are extremely valued. The Republican Party disproportionately supports long-standing members with donations from high-level business figures who want little involvement beyond their donations (Freeman 1986). Campaign contributions historically reveal that Republican women who win their primaries are granted less campaign contributions in their general elections than their male counterparts. This pattern can be explained by the lack of support Republican women get from the party's leaders and elites because the longstanding leaders and donors of the conservative party do not see the women candidates as a viable option (Bucchianeri 2017). Further, outside groups who aim to fundraise for Republican women candidates, such as Maggie's List and the Susan B. Anthony List, lack the established donor networks seen in Democratic groups like Emily's List (Kitchens and Swers 2016). Palin's choice to augment the narrative of women politicians as mothers detracts from their professional credibility in the eyes of the American political system. As a member of a party that doles out funds based on a candidate's perceived level of professional expertise, Palin harmed her own chances, and those of her fellow Republican women, of receiving financial backing from their own party.

### **The “Mama Grizzly” Appeal**

Notably, Palin's campaign embraced an aggressive stance on policy but never strayed beyond the framework of the maternal identity she built her political persona on. Assumingly a nod to her Alaskan roots, Palin employs the imagery of an animal, referring to herself and women like her as “mama grizzlies” (Beail and Longworth, 43). This label represents Palin's own embodiment of “outraged populism” channeled through “a feminine voice” (Beail and Longworth 2013, 43). The mama grizzly image is a skillful balancing act: Palin and her fellow Republican women embody the protective mother persona, angered and driven to protect their children—a character many American citizens can empathize with. Yet, in line with their party's ideology, they do not wish to expand public services and government spending to protect their child, but rather, subscribe to the traditional Republican goals of smaller government, free markets, and lower taxes. Simultaneously, these passionate women maintain their attractive feminine persona, so as not to be seen as “angry feminists” (Beail and Longworth 2013, 43-44). Palin defines the mama grizzly character to the American public as a rejection of “the notion of women as victims” (Zink 2012, 72). The persona carefully exists within the confines of conservative feminism, an alternative to liberal feminism that allegedly victimizes women and undermines their ability to combat forces of oppression (Zink 2012).

What is now coined the “mama grizzly” rhetoric has taken on a life of its own, used recently by other Republican women in Congress during their speeches (Wineinger 2019, 83). This rhetorical approach can be further described as a tool of “kitchen table conservatives” that emphasizes family values upheld through a limited government (Wineinger 2019, 83). The conservative right views women's roles as mothers as direct preparation for political activism. Republican women like Sarah Palin offer what they argue is a more conservative stance on feminism, reasoning their involvement in politics is necessary for the protection of their children (Zink 2012).

The impact and breadth of the mama grizzly appeal should not be underestimated. In the 103rd and 104th Congresses, 82.3% of female representatives' speeches used a "generational theft" framework that argued federal spending and the accumulating debt would shackle their children's futures (Wineinger 2019, 105). Although the mama grizzly concept had, at the time, not been officially coined by Palin, the same sentiment was prevalent among the congresswomen's speeches, calling for policy changes that would save their own children and American youth from a plague of political issues. Over time, Republican congresswomen used the combined mama grizzly and generational theft framework to explain the significance of creating a balanced budget for the American economy (Wineinger 2019).

The mama grizzly appeal is an attempt by women politicians to bring attention to their outrage with legislative policies, while being careful to not lose their femininity. The mama grizzly appeal offers Republican women a way to combat the views of Democratic women that have historically dominated the conversation on gender issues. Palin and her mama grizzly rhetoric represent Republican women's unwillingness to relinquish the conversation of gender issues to their more liberal counterparts. The mama grizzly rhetoric implies that Palin's motivation to run for office was to protect her children and the general youth, and if it were not for her motherly instincts, she would not be justified in her desire to enter office (Zink 2012). In return, Palin leaves her peers and future women candidates with the challenge of breaking free from the restrictive standards that the mama grizzly appeal demands of politically active women. In a speech given at the Republican National Convention in 2008, Palin addressed her onlookers: "...this is America, and every woman can walk through every door of opportunity" (*The New York Times* 2008). Palin came onto the national stage blazing, standing as an emblem for women, but the door she held open for other women was one with a narrow entrance.

### **Epilogue: Palin for President**

Four years after her bid for vice president, many expected Palin to run for president in the 2012 election. Ultimately, Palin announced she would not be running for the position because of the need to prioritize her family (Zink 2012). Although this decision may have been a true reflection of personal circumstances, it nonetheless demonstrates the ultimate dilemma of Republican women who hold office positions. Palin chose to prioritize her commitment as a mother and a member of her family over her own political advancement, making her fulfill the very message she preached to other conservative women: the role of mother should be a conservative woman's guiding identity. Motherhood and political advancement are not mutually exclusive in theory, yet the two seem to be within the framework of the Republican ideology.

Palin's influence did not dissipate following the 2008 election, or even after her decision not to participate in the election four years later. Riding on the coattails of the American media's focus on her personal life during her vice-presidential nomination, Palin decidedly turned to several media platforms to further craft a personal narrative, aiming to override her negative media experiences of the past. TLC aired the television show *Sarah Palin's Alaska*, portraying her family's everyday activities at home in Alaska. Seemingly a light-hearted source of entertainment, Palin ensured that episodes communicated political messages, including topics of national border security (Zink 2012). Palin in one episode even responded to the media's previous criticism of her supposed lack of knowledge of foreign policy (Zink 2012). Palin continued to promote her own story and ideology through other mediums, such as her two best-selling books and her self-named Political Action Committee SarahPAC (Zink 2012). These different mediums provided Palin with a space to continue to spread her messaging. Further, her work resulted in monetary profits that

could support her own political endeavors and other candidates that shared her vision of a traditional family with a protective, but feminine, mother.

### **A Cage for the Mama Grizzlies**

Palin, along with her Republican female counterparts in Congress, represents the tension of a gendered partisan identity that is continually present in conversation about the role of motherhood. Women from both sides of the aisle use the identity of motherhood in their political commentary, but Palin's high-status nomination and her membership in a conservative party placed her in a particularly unique situation. Sarah Palin helped cement the modern revitalization of the idea that a woman's qualifications for political engagement stems from her role as a mother (Zink 2012). Further, by choosing to spotlight her private life, Palin made her family structure and personal values a central focal point of her campaign (Zink 2012). Her strategy restricted the definition of a morally sound woman candidate to one who draws from her experience as a mother, without ever abandoning her familial roles. Her adherence to traditional gender roles and outdated standards of femininity, as well as her criticism of women who do not subscribe to them, tied women politicians to a limited narrative (Zink 2012). The consequences of Palin's choices include encouraging the American public and other politicians to question women's qualifications to occupy a public office. Indeed, Palin's own portrayal of an ideal mother, and therefore ideal woman, encouraged the broad generalization of women voters as primarily mothers (Beail and Longworth 2013). As a result, American politicians appeal to American women as mothers rather than viewing them as constituents with comprehensive policy concerns.

Given such a large stage, Palin could have accepted her nomination and introduced herself as Alaska's first governor, ready to apply her professional experience on a national scale. Instead, Palin talked about driving her children to sports practice (Beail and Longworth 2013). She argued for an expanded definition of feminism that included more traditional values and worked to inspire other fellow mothers to join the sphere of political activism. Palin and her fellow Republican representatives voice the concerns of mothers on a variety of political issues. Although doing so gives women the space to enter the political conversation, it greatly limits which women can do so and how. Perhaps, Palin's encouragement of the mama grizzly persona is the only way women can exist within the GOP. Can Republican women only lead if they stay within the lines drawn by their male-dominated party? The duality of the mama grizzly character allows women to express discontent anchored in femininity, enabling Republican women to face their peers across the aisle and influence legislation that impacts the lives of women everywhere. Democratic women such as Hillary Clinton, who have tried to voice discontent while abandoning traditional femininity, have received excessive backlash from American politicians, media, and voters alike. Still, the mama grizzly appeal ensures that women do not stray far from the GOP's idealized version of a good mother. To many, Palin can only be considered in association to Senator McCain. Is Sarah Palin only an addition to John McCain's campaign, or did she help hold back the curtain to allow other women to walk onto the political stage? If Palin did hold back the curtain, did she simply reveal a waiting cage of expectations for women?



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