

**“The World I’m Leaving My Children”:  
The Political Influence of Mothers in Educational Activism**

**Rebecca Sealy**



A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
BACHELOR OF ARTS in PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES  
at THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Faculty Advisor: Professor Elisabeth Clemens

Preceptor: Rubina Hundal

April 15, 2024

## **Abstract**

Women have been involved in activism for centuries in America; however, their roles, credibility, and influence in politics have constantly changed. While there is significant work on mothers' activism, little research has yet focused on how mothers' motivations, legitimacy, and influence within politics have changed across the political spectrum throughout the 21st century. This project uses educational activism in Florida as a case study to address the question: How are women involved in left-wing and right-wing mothers' educational activist groups differently and similarly motivated by their identities as mothers, and how do they utilize their identities to advance their political credibility and influence public policy? I find that mothers involved in educational activism experience conflict between their identities as women and mothers and their political involvement, and they engage in activism around child-raising, an area commonly idealized as apolitical or at least nonpartisan. As a result of feelings of obligation to become involved, activist mothers use distinct strategies, which vary across the political spectrum, to navigate the tensions they experience. The differences in how women across the political spectrum experience and navigate motherhood and activism illuminate the larger ideological disagreements which inform current educational policy debates.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is first dedicated to all the mothers involved in educational activism across America, both now and in the past. My education and my political activism today are only possible due to the work of many of these women—thank you all for paving the way for future generations. Additionally, this project is dedicated specifically to the 16 educational activist mothers who took the time out of their busy schedules to tell me about their lives, their experiences, and their advocacy. This project could not exist without them.

I would also like to thank the professors and advisors who helped me so much throughout my thesis process. My Public Policy Studies thesis preceptor, Rubina Hundal, gave me invaluable advice and input. My second reader and faculty advisor, Professor Elisabeth Clemens, lent me so much of her time, and this thesis would not be what it is without her thoughtful feedback and patient advising. Professor Chad Broughton was also essential in encouraging me to take on the thesis process and lending me his ear as I worked out the initial shape of this project.

I could not have completed this thesis without the love and kindness of all my friends, who have let me lean on them every step of the way, and especially my roommate and best friend, Trisha Vinay, whose support and friendship over the last four years have so deeply shaped my time at UChicago. Finally, I owe so much gratitude to my own mother, who was my first role model and whose drive, passion, and advocacy continue to inspire me every day. I would not be who I am without her, nor would I have pursued this question. Her unwavering support has been vital to me throughout my thesis and for the 21 years beforehand. Thank you, and I love you.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
I. Introduction.....	4
II. Literature Review.....	7
Motherhood as Political Motivation.....	7
Motherhood and Political Legitimacy.....	9
Philosophies of Maternal Activism.....	12
Mothers in the 21st Century.....	14
III. Context: Florida’s Educational Policies and Controversies.....	18
IV. Methods and Data.....	23
Interviews and Analysis.....	23
Interview Dynamics.....	25
V. Findings and Analysis.....	27
Personal and Political Tensions.....	27
Establishing Political Legitimacy.....	35
Ideology and Educational Goals.....	51
VI. Policy Implications.....	60
VII. Conclusion.....	63
Appendices.....	66
Appendix A: Interviewees.....	66
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	68
Appendix C: Recent Controversies.....	70
References.....	72

## I. Introduction

From post-American Revolution concepts of Republican Motherhood through the Cult of Domesticity, and on to today, American mothers have long been expected to raise their children to be good citizens. Although the cultural expectations and norms of motherhood have shifted over time, mothers continue to be culturally held responsible for their children's education, morality, and success (Pew Research Center 2023). American women and mothers have advocated for policy and reform, often using the mantle of motherhood and the moral authority it gives them to claim legitimacy for their causes. Few areas have been as consistently targeted as the education system. What should be taught in schools, who gets to decide, and who gets left out? For as long as America has had public schools, they have been a foremost battleground for the American culture wars, and mothers have long been at the forefront of these battles. This pattern continues today, as some of the most prominent educational activist groups are centered around mothers' identity and activism.

However, the cultural norms of womanhood and motherhood have changed over time: although women are still expected to do the majority of their family's unpaid labor of housework and childcare, mothers are often expected to have successful careers in addition; most women are still expected to be mothers, but they typically have fewer children and have these children later (Pew Research Center 2023). As conventions have changed, some of the ways mothers organize and advocate for their causes have also shifted. Their organizational structures, strategies, and rhetoric have adapted to fit new norms and values. While a significant body of literature addresses the motivations, organizations, and rhetoric of activist mothers throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, there is still limited work on explicit comparisons between the discourses of liberal and conservative mothers and on motherhood's political influence in the 21st century.

Understanding modern discourses of motherhood as they are constructed and presented by mothers themselves, especially across the political spectrum, allows us to better understand how and when motherhood enables or constrains women's political involvement and activism in the 21st century.

This project seeks to address this gap in scholarship by answering the question: How are women involved in left-wing and right-wing mothers' educational activist groups differently and similarly motivated by their identities as mothers, and how do they utilize their identities to advance their political credibility and influence public policy? In this paper, I interview mothers involved in Floridian educational activist groups across the political spectrum, such as Moms for Liberty, Moms for America, the Florida Freedom to Read Project, and Parenting with Pride, in order to answer this question. I argue that mothers involved in educational activism are situated within a field of cross-cutting tensions: they experience conflict between their identities as women and mothers and their political involvement, and they engage in political activism surrounding child-raising, an area commonly idealized as apolitical or at least nonpartisan. As a result of feelings of obligation to become involved, activist mothers employ distinct strategies, which vary across the political spectrum, to navigate the intersecting tensions they experience. The differences in how liberal and conservative women experience and navigate motherhood and activism illuminate the larger ideological disagreements about parental, community, and governmental rights and responsibilities for child-raising that inform current policy debates.

In the following literature review, I give an overview of relevant literature linking motherhood to political activism. I then provide background information on the issues and debates most prominent within the current educational culture wars in Florida. In the subsequent methodology section, I detail the processes I used to conduct interviews and analyze data. Next

is the findings section, which examines how activist mothers experience tension between motherhood and activism, leverage political legitimacy based on their motherhood, understand their activism in the context of their gender, and conceptualize shared and individual responsibility with their communities and the government. I conclude by discussing the potential implications of this work for policy, including insights and questions that activists and policymakers must consider when advocating for and implementing new educational policies.

## II. Literature Review

### **Motherhood as Political Motivation**

Motherhood can shape political beliefs and involvement in complex ways. Greenlee (2014) finds that when women become mothers, their self-identities shift, they begin modeling behavior that they would like their children to adopt, their perceived self-interest changes, and their social networks are reshaped. As a result of these changes in the worlds and identities of mothers, they tend to become more politically aware, alter their political priorities, feel more empathy, and focus more on the future. Specifically, motherhood may increase some women's support for liberal social welfare programs that support families and communities (Howell and Day 2000; Eagly, Wood, and Johannesen-Schmidt 2004; Elder and Greene 2006). Additionally, motherhood may influence some mothers to adopt more conservative or traditional positions on policies relating to moral issues (Eagly, Wood, and Johannesen-Schmidt 2004; Greenlee 2010). As a result of these ideological and attitudinal shifts, motherhood may drive women to become more involved in the politics of education, family-centered policies, social welfare, and peace (Greenlee 2014, 7). Although some work suggests that motherhood can depress overall political participation among women (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001), motherhood can also motivate shifts in beliefs and increase political participation, particularly on specific issues such as education, morality, and social welfare.

Some mothers get involved in activism by conceptualizing their activism as the logical extension of motherhood. Black women engaged in activism during the Civil Rights movement noted that their position as mothers "almost required" them to participate, and they prioritized their children's future rights "above [their] own life and economic security" (Irons 1998, 703). Pardo (1990) and Fuentes (2013) elaborate on this motivation in their studies of progressive



Latina and African-American activist mothers. Activism can arise out of the “traditional” role of a mother, which includes supervising children’s progress in school and meeting other parents and school officials; this involvement introduces mothers to each other and allows them to form networks that can be mobilized for political advocacy on behalf of their children or community (Pardo 1990, 2-3). These mothers extend their conception of family, applying their traditional roles and responsibilities to their broader communities (Pardo 1990, 4; Fuentes 2013, 309). Mothers therefore are able to transform their social and individual identity into a political identity, shifting motherhood from “an individual experience confined to the private sphere of the home” to “a collective practice of grassroots personal politics” (Fuentes 2013, 310).

The white, middle-class activist mothers of the mid-twentieth century conceptualized their political involvement similarly in some ways. Right-wing mothers in this group mobilized to influence school board elections, local education policies, and eventually national politics. Based on their traditional view of mothers as the moral anchor of the nuclear family, these women saw it as their duty to become politically involved (Nickerson 2012). Nickerson (2012) writes that the disputes between progressive and conservative activist women in this period had class and gender obligations at their core: “Both camps believed that it was their womanly duty and social obligation to influence a political system straining under the weight of massive economic disparities, but disagreed on how. [...] Beliefs about female moral authority and the maternal instinct to preserve life informed both approaches” (13). Historically, mothers of all races, classes, and political orientations have been motivated to become activists through the expansion of their maternal obligations from their children and families to their broader communities.

## **Motherhood and Political Legitimacy**

Implicitly or explicitly, mothers have often invoked the traditional roles, responsibilities, and values attached to motherhood to gain political legitimacy. The progressive Latina and African-American mothers and the conservative white mothers mentioned previously, despite having vastly different political beliefs and causes, all utilized images and expectations of traditional motherhood. By expanding their conception of family to encompass their wider community, Latina and African-American activist mothers did not just change their own views of their duties and responsibilities—they also impressed upon observers, including voters and political officials, that they were motivated by their responsibilities as mothers, implicitly relying on cultural conceptions of mothers as trustworthy and concerned primarily with their family’s wellbeing (Pardo 1990; Fuentes 2013). Bayard de Volo (2004), in her study of the use of maternal framing to mobilize support in the Nicaraguan Contra War, explains that “mothers can effectively be framed as ‘apolitical’ and expressive of some transcendent, moral-laden truth, making the political messages attributed to them harder to dispute,” and “maternal framing, with attendant cultural notions of political innocence, pacifism, and self-abnegation, is emotionally evocative and thus effective at eliciting sympathy” (716). The traditional cultural characterization of motherhood as an inherently apolitical and selfless state, primarily concerned with the well-being of children, actually allows women to assert greater political authority.

Characterizations of motherhood as apolitical and nonpartisan might suggest that we expect to see similar rhetoric and expressions of activist motherhood across the political spectrum. However, more recent research has focused on the rise of “politicized motherhood” and claims that mothers have become increasingly political and partisan through their growing involvement in the public sphere (Deason, Greenlee, and Langner 2014). This work raises the

possibility that motherhood and maternal activism might be expressed in ways that vary according to ideology and partisanship.

One strategy many mothers use to capitalize on ideals of apolitical motherhood and advance their political legitimacy is publicly “performing” their motherhood. Some of this performance comes from women facing the loss of their children. By publicly performing their grief, women can perform “an active reification of traditional women’s roles” and reframe the accepted, traditional stereotype of the “silent, mourning mother” for the sake of collective activism (Klein 2011, 105-106). Black mothers who have lost children to structural racial violence in America formed Mothers of the Movement, an organization intended to protest gun violence and racism in the criminal justice system. Through Mothers of the Movement, these Black mothers “mobilize maternal grief” via public expressions of their bereavement to draw attention and empathy for their cause (Lawson 2018, 715). Bereaved mothers performing grief rely on the cultural belief that mothers are concerned with their families above all and that losing a child is the worst thing that can happen to a mother, thus gaining sympathy for their cause.

While they did not perform grief, conservative white American mothers in the twentieth century also engaged in motherhood as performance. As the feminist movement grew and liberal women gained a reputation for shorter skirts and other, less traditional, forms of expression, conservative women “modeled a polite, sweet, and friendly version of political womanhood that sharply contrasted with female protestors” (Nickerson 2012, 152). Conservative mothers promoted “a cult of wholesomeness that introduced nuclear family-style suburban domesticity into political performance” (Nickerson 2012, 138), thus using a public performance of their family’s “wholesomeness” to improve their political legitimacy within the conservative movement. The conservative mothers who dressed and acted in the perfect stereotype of a

middle-class housewife hoped that their performance of traditional motherhood would help them negotiate tensions between the traditional realm of mothers in the household and their new political activism and encourage others in the conservative movement to take them more seriously by acting as representatives of the traditional ideals they were trying to promote.

The ways in which mothers perform femininity and motherhood to gain political legitimacy thus appear to vary across the American political spectrum. Progressive mothers involved in the Black Lives Matter movement express maternal loss and grief in extreme, tragic circumstances, while conservative mothers of the 20th century often performed femininity on a daily basis as a way of appealing to traditional norms of womanhood and motherhood. It may be particularly important for conservative activists to regularly demonstrate their adherence to gender norms: recent work has shown that female electoral candidates who violate gender norms of motherhood and marriage tend to suffer electorally, particularly among socially conservative voters (Bell and Kaufmann 2015), suggesting that conservative women's political credibility may partially depend on fulfilling gender roles.

The political legitimacy gained through motherhood is not without its drawbacks. As part of gaining legitimacy and a public platform, activists are often concerned with gaining media attention for their causes. Eliasoph (1998) discusses how, rather than covering all activists and advocates equally, journalists and news media tend to focus on the commentary provided by either experts or mothers, and regular citizens are typically not granted the opportunity to portray themselves as experts. This leaves motherhood as the primary way many citizens are able to claim legitimacy for their beliefs or get media coverage. While this can be helpful for mothers who want to share their beliefs, it also produces the phenomenon of "mandatory public Momism," (183), in which women feel obligated to present their arguments from the

self-interested perspective of a concerned mother or potential mother, even when motherhood is not their primary motivation for their activism. By resorting to the emotional and self-interested language of motherhood, women's arguments can be dismissed as "emotional and unreasonable" (200) by opponents. Furthermore, using language of "for the children" or other maternal discourse invokes personal self-interest, which can win battles but does not encourage public debate or open conversation (185, 250). Thus, women experience tension between motherhood and political activism: when women use the rhetoric of motherhood to justify their arguments, it provides them with political legitimacy that they would often not be able to achieve otherwise; however, women are often forced into presenting their opinions through a maternal lens, even when this is not their perspective, which can open them to criticism of being self-interested and overly emotional and can prevent them from inspiring public debate.

### **Philosophies of Maternal Activism**

Mothers' methods of claiming political legitimacy sometimes rely on maternalist philosophies. These have been described as "ideologies and discourses that exalted women's capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values they attached to that role: care, nurturance, and morality" (Michel and Koven 1993, 4)—maternalist movements assert social and political claims through the lens of the virtues associated with motherhood. In fact, maternalism operates on two levels at once, as it "extolled the virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women's public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, and marketplace" (Michel and Koven 1993, 6). Maternalism in the United States relies on the groundwork laid by the concept of Republican Motherhood (Ladd-Taylor 1994, 4). Several prominent American mothers' movements, such as white middle-class mothers'

Progressive-Era advocacy for mandatory schooling and child labor laws (Ladd-Taylor 1994), middle-class mothers in the Welfare Rights Movement (Edmonds-Cady 2009), and conservative American mothers advocating against progressive education policies in the mid-20th century (Nickerson 2012), all utilized maternalist philosophies to assert political legitimacy.

Nickerson (2012) describes how these conservative mothers pioneered an ideology of “housewife populism,” which used maternalist ideas of the roles and responsibilities of mothers to advocate against central government involvement in families and local communities. Unlike most prior American maternalist movements, these mothers sought to limit rather than expand the scope of the government. Traditional discourses of motherhood became associated with a “right-wing gender ideology” that exalted women as the “conservative sex” which knew better than the government what was right for their own children, family, and community—femininity and antistatism became associated, leading to a distinct breed of populism formulated and perpetuated by mothers. These mothers viewed themselves as a final line of defense against communist, globalist, and liberal welfare-state intrusion into the family, and especially against a “concerted left-wing effort, involving progressive teachers and administrators, to diminish the influence of parents – especially ‘problematic’ parents – who did not inculcate socially, racially, or internationally progressive values at home” (75). In addition to cementing housewife populism as an enduring conservative maternalist ideology, these mothers also pushed the conservative movement further towards “community self-determination, mistrust of academic elites, and respect for parental authority” (101), enduring values within the American conservative movement.

Maternalist ideology has been common in historical mothers’ movements, but Ladd-Taylor (1994) urges historians to restrict the definition of maternalism, avoiding “the pitfall

of conflating very different ideologies and types of organizing that relied on the rhetoric of motherhood” (3). Michel (2012) notes that maternalist movements have often viewed the poor with “condescension and moralism” (25). Edmonds-Cady (2009) suggests that African American women in the Welfare Rights Movement, both middle-class reformers and welfare recipients, relied on different versions of maternalism in their advocacy. However, Michel (2012) notes that some scholars distinguish the activism of middle-class and working-class African American women, as they understood and accepted the plight of working-class mothers and did not approach them with condescension. Rather, these women’s activism could be placed under the umbrella of ‘oppositional discourses of motherhood,’ perhaps considering them ‘womanist’ instead of ‘maternalist.’

### **Mothers in the 21st Century**

The presence of specific women’s and mothers’ groups in American politics began to decline throughout the end of the 20th century, and the majority of the women’s groups that remained focused specifically on women’s and feminist issues (Goss 2013). There is still a relative lack of American women’s organizations in politics in the 21st century, compared to the early and mid-20th century, and motherhood appeals seem to be diminishing in some areas of policy discourse (Howe 2015). Skocpol (1999) argues that women’s organizations became less popular as young women came of age in a more tolerant time and continued to join the workforce, reducing their available time for activism. Additionally, maternalism and other discourses relying on the presumed innate qualities of mothers have lost popularity as public policy no longer promotes women staying at home and advocates of gender equality are less

likely to make arguments based on gender-essentialist notions of women and mothers (Plant 2012).

Despite the overall diminishment of women's and mothers' organizations, some politicians and organizations have continued to make maternal appeals. Both Code Pink: Women for Peace, a foreign policy advocacy organization, and the Million Moms March, which advocates for gun control, have employed maternal arguments by embracing the moral authority that women typically derive from them, while also signaling that they did not embrace the political and social subordination that traditionally came alongside maternalism (Goss and Heaney 2010). Maternalist arguments have recently been used to support other mainly liberal policies such as universal paid maternity leave, affordable healthcare, and affordable childcare; Plant (2012) argues that a wave of 'neo-maternalism' has appeared in the 21st century as liberal women acknowledge the reality that they still do the majority of parental labor, allowing them to use maternalist arguments even as they promote gender equality in household labor and parenting.

Discourses surrounding motherhood have continued to be prominent in conservative politics: Sarah Palin's 2008 campaign for the vice presidency relied on the maternalist ideologies popularized in 20th century conservative women's movements, such as housewife populism and a conservative gender ideology that emphasized motherhood's political importance (Nickerson 2012, 173). Palin's conservative gender ideology, which she called a "new conservative feminism" has been influential among some conservative women. Although conservative women in politics rarely refer to themselves as feminists (Schreiber 2018), Palin has helped conservatives appropriate the language of feminism in order to recast conservative mothers in politics as strong, practical, and ferocious and yet feminine, caring, and compassionate women



who can do it all—politics, motherhood, a career—and do it all well, without abandoning women’s traditional roles (Rodino-Colocino 2012; Gibson and Heyse 2014).

Recently, right-wing mothers’ groups advocating for educational policy changes, such as Moms for Liberty and Moms for America, have become nationally known, and various liberal mothers’ groups, such as Red, Wine, and Blue, have appeared both to advocate for left-wing educational policy and to counter the particularly prominent voice of Moms for Liberty. The appearance and increased prominence of these new mothers’ activist groups suggests that maternal activism has not lost its appeal or its political power on either side of the political spectrum, despite the overall decline in women’s and mothers’ groups over the last several decades.

The shifting roles and expectations for mothers in the 21st century, as well as continued increases in women’s political involvement, raise the question of how discourses of maternal activism have developed in light of these social changes. Although women still experience bias based on their gender and on motherhood, changing social roles and experiences for women and mothers mean that few women are still relegated to the home (unless they choose to be housewives), and more parents are sharing parenting duties equally than ever before (Pew Research Center 2015). It seems likely that maternalist and gender-essentialist rhetoric has continued to decline, and women, especially liberals, are embracing neo-maternalist rhetoric that rejects gender-essentialism while using the continuing realities of gender roles to justify activism. However, the continued importance of gender norms for conservative women’s political success and the salience of the conservative gender ideology first promoted by Sarah Palin, which claims that women can be politically powerful while continuing to fulfill traditional stereotypes of American women and mothers (and even because they fulfill these traditional

roles; Schreiber 2016), suggests that conservatives might continue to rely on gender-essentialist or traditionalist rhetoric surrounding motherhood to a greater extent than liberals.

By examining these questions and understanding how current activist mothers across the political spectrum understand their role and their work, we can better grasp how women's experiences of both motherhood and activism have changed in the 21st century. This study seeks to examine how these modern educational activists use their identities as mothers to influence politics and policy. By interviewing a variety of women and mothers involved in mothers' educational activist groups, this study adds to the literature on discourses of motherhood in the 21st century and seeks to understand how modern activists have used, adapted, or changed past representations of mothers' activism.

### **III. Context: Florida’s Educational Policies and Controversies**

Educational activists are currently seeking policy changes and legislative remedies for a huge number and variety of issues within the educational system. Activists interviewed in this paper, and other activists, are currently working on changing standardized test requirements, raising awareness about school shootings and advocating for gun control policies, supporting students with disabilities, creating civics or personal finance course requirements, shaping new pathways to trades and other careers, changing course content and curricula, and a host of other causes. However, certain legislative and policy debates in Florida have recently begun receiving significant attention in local and national media; the current salience of these issues means that they receive significant attention in this project and require additional context.

These debates tend to center on issues of social justice and religious freedom, and particularly on how race, gender, and sexuality are handled within schools. Conservatives are pushing to prohibit “woke” ideology in schools, which Republican Governor Ron DeSantis’s administration has defined as “a slang term for ... progressive activism” which refers to “the belief there are systemic injustices in American society and the need to address them” (Bump 2022). Conservative groups tend to frame debates over social issues or “woke” ideology in schools as matters of parental rights and religious liberty, arguing that parents have the right to decide what their child is taught or exposed to at school, especially when it might disagree with the family’s religious beliefs. In contrast, liberals seek to avoid prohibiting discussion or include instruction on race, gender, and sexuality within schools in order to combat cultural biases and inequality; they frequently argue that banning discussions of race, gender, and sexuality discriminates against students of color and LGBTQ+ students.

Some conservative activists worry that schools discussing gender and sexuality, including teachers sharing their personal views or incorporating non-cisnormative or non-heteronormative material into class curricula, might indoctrinate children into believing ideas about sexuality and gender that disagree with their parents' beliefs or into becoming gay or transgender themselves. Some activists are concerned that expanding protections for transgender students will disadvantage cisgender female students in athletics or expose them to sexual assault in locker rooms or bathrooms. Additionally, some parents worry that if their child begins identifying as LGBTQ+, schools might provide resources that affirm these identities without informing or consulting parents, depriving parents of the ability to participate in important decisions regarding their children's welfare (Jones and Kao 2019).

Another prominent issue is instruction on race and racial bias within schools. Conservative activists worry about students being taught liberal ideologies such as critical race theory, a term which has recently been used outside of its original context as a field of legal and social study to instead describe a broad collection of beliefs which include the idea that racial bias is a systemic issue within America. In particular, many are concerned that white children will be taught that racism is inherent to American institutions, that they will be made to feel guilty or responsible for the racist acts of past generations of white Americans, or that they will be convinced that they should be discriminated against for the sake of equity or inclusion.

As a result, conservative activists and organizations are advocating for policies that remove these topics from schools. This includes implementing policies that mandate that schools report and obtain parental approval for any changes to a child's preferred pronouns or nicknames; restricting how gender, sexuality, and race may be discussed in classrooms; removing books that contain certain content related to gender, sexuality, and race from schools; and

changing state educational standards and curricula regarding race. In Florida, several laws relating to instruction on gender, sexuality, and race have been passed. Prominent examples include the Parental Rights in Education Act (H.B. 1557), which is commonly referred to among opposition as the “Don’t Say Gay” Bill; Florida H.B. 1069; and the Individual Freedom, or Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (Stop W.O.K.E.), Act (H.B. 7). The Parental Rights in Education Act bans instruction on gender identity and sexual orientation entirely for kindergarten through third grade and bans all instruction on these topics for fourth through twelfth grade except when expressly required by state academic standards or included in a course on health or reproduction which parents may opt students out of. Florida H.B. 1069 restricts the use of personal pronouns inconsistent with an individual’s biological sex within schools and mandates the implementation of procedures for reviewing and removing challenged books from schools. The Stop W.O.K.E. Act restricts instruction in schools by declaring that it constitutes legal discrimination to instruct students that, for example, a person is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive by virtue of their sex, race, or ethnicity; that a person’s status as privileged or oppressed is determined by their sex, race, or ethnicity; or that a person should receive adverse treatment on the basis of their sex, race, or ethnicity to achieve diversity, equity, or inclusion.

These policy changes have been enabled by a Republican governor and a Republican supermajority in both the Florida House of Representatives and Senate. Policy changes have been promoted by a variety of conservative educational activist groups, such as the Florida Citizens’ Alliance, Moms for America, and Moms for Liberty. The most prominent of these organizations is Moms for Liberty, which was founded in 2020 to oppose mask mandates and virtual schooling in public schools and then pivoted to address social issues in schools in the wake of the pandemic.

While liberal activist organizations already existed across Florida (for example, Moms Demand Action and other gun control movements grew in the wake of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida), liberal groups developed and shifted priorities as conservative groups gained prominence and the Republican government in Florida passed controversial legislation. Some liberal activists and groups first mobilized to advocate for stricter Covid-19 mitigation policies in Florida, and—much like Moms for Liberty—were able to develop out of Covid-19 advocacy organizations or shift their priorities to instead address the current debates over social issues in schools. A broad coalition of liberal activist groups, including the Florida Democratic Party and grassroots organizations like the Florida Freedom to Read Project, Parenting With Pride, Foundation 451, and local STOP Moms for Liberty groups, have mobilized in response to this conservative activism and legislation.

These liberal activist groups use a variety of strategies to advocate for discussion of social issues within schools, including organizing protests and school walkouts, suing the DeSantis administration over its recent regulations, publicizing and widely distributing books that have been deemed inappropriate for school libraries, and mobilizing liberal school board candidates. They have seen some success in these ventures. Although the Stop W.O.K.E. Act remains in place in public schools, it has been overturned for both employers and public colleges and universities in Florida on First Amendment grounds (Nottingham 2024). Liberal school board candidates gained ground in 2023; Brookings estimates that only about 33% of Moms for Liberty candidates nationwide won their elections in 2023 (Perera et al. 2023), due partially to recent scandals surrounding Moms for Liberty (covered in Appendix C) and partially to the mobilization of liberal opponents and electorates for competitive school board races. The removal of books from school libraries has become a particularly salient point in national media

and debate, as liberal organizations decry the practice as book banning and censorship, and popular children's books and classic literature alike have been removed from school shelves. Although many Republicans contend that coverage of "book bans" in schools is sensationalized, some Republican lawmakers in Florida have recently come out in support of revisions to this law that would limit the number of books an individual can challenge (Atterbury 2024).

The educational culture wars continue to rage in Florida, with a particular focus on social justice issues, parental rights, and religious liberty. Although liberal groups have mobilized and achieved some moderate success, particularly in left-leaning major cities and college towns, Florida is still dominated by conservative activists working with a Republican-supermajority government, and conservative policies and interventions persist throughout the state. The activists interviewed for this project advocate for and chose to discuss a wide variety of educational issues, but current debates over social issues receive special attention in both interview questions and responses, and the particular political dynamics currently at play in Florida informed the ways interviewees perceive broader issues and their own activism.

#### **IV. Methods and Data**

Although mothers' political involvement has been broadly studied, little work yet focuses on 21st century maternal activism or how it may have changed in response to modern political dynamics and shifting social norms surrounding gender and motherhood. Additionally, the current educational controversy in Florida offers a dense and politically-charged climate to better understand how women become activists, understand their own work, understand the work of their political opponents, and work to achieve political legitimacy. To answer these questions, I interview mothers involved in educational activist groups across Florida in order to understand how activist mothers perceive their involvement and construct discourses of motherhood. I chose to focus on educational activism since the education system offers particularly strong opportunities for mothers to frame their claims in terms of children's interests and development, areas culturally considered to be mothers' domain. Additionally, the culture wars within the education system in Florida are nationally prominent at the moment, providing the opportunity to analyze a high-profile issue with rhetoric that has resonated (and caused outrage) across the country.

##### **Interviews and Analysis**

To locate interviewees, I identified a number of local school board and educational activist groups across the political spectrum in Florida, and I browsed their websites to find either organization-wide Facebook groups or email addresses of members and leadership. At the conclusion of interviews, I conducted snowball sampling by asking the interviewee to pass along my contact information to anyone they knew who might be willing to participate in this project; however, only two interviews resulted from snowball sampling. I also got in touch with one



conservative interviewee through a family connection. After identifying potential respondents, I emailed them to explain my project and asked to set up an interview. I reached out to approximately 70 activists from a wide variety of activist organizations, in addition to posting on the Facebook pages of one liberal and one conservative activist group, to conduct 16 interviews. Some interviews were conducted in person in Florida, while others were conducted via Zoom; it would have been ideal to conduct all interviews in person, but scheduling constraints made this impossible. A list of interviewees, organizational affiliations,<sup>1</sup> political identifications, and interview format is provided in Appendix A.

During interviews, I first discussed informed consent procedures and obtained consent from interviewees, which took the form of signed consent forms for in-person interviews and verbal consent at the beginning of recordings for virtual interviews, following IRB-approved procedures (IRB protocol IRB23-1635). In the body of each interview, I followed a semi-structured format in which I asked the same questions to each interviewee for the most part, but skipped questions that had already been answered and added follow-up questions where necessary to clarify responses. My semi-structured interview format can be found in Appendix B. This method allowed me to ask similar enough questions between interviewees to compare responses, while also providing flexibility to ask follow-ups and to keep conversation flowing smoothly; however, a weakness of this approach is that questions did not perfectly correspond between different interviews, so different respondents sometimes highlighted different topics. With respondents' permission, all interviews were recorded and then transcribed by Otter.AI, an artificial intelligence transcription software, before being hand-corrected to ensure quotes were accurate.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although individuals' organizational affiliations are provided and used for context during analysis, interviewees' statements are their own and should not be presumed to represent the opinions or stances of organizations or their other members.

Corrected interview transcripts were then imported to Dedoose, a qualitative coding and analysis software. I began by coding responses to fit into categories identified through the literature review process, including gendered experiences of activism, motherhood's influence on beliefs and involvement, politicization or apoliticization of motherhood, and rhetorical strategies used by mothers to gain political legitimacy. I created additional categories as I noticed new themes arising during the process of transcribing and coding interviews, such as who has responsibility for child-raising and whose interest—the activist's children, all children, or society as a whole—respondents claimed to pursue during their advocacy. I reviewed the categories, codes, and interview excerpts I selected during my coding process in order to understand the overall themes and subjects of my findings, eventually sorting them into the tensions activist mothers experience, strategies through which mothers are able to establish political legitimacy, and the ideology and goals of education that inform mothers' activism. Using this information, I was able to construct the thematic areas included in the Findings section.

### **Interview Dynamics**

Throughout the interview and analysis process, one prominent conservative educational activist group in Florida faced a series of controversies and received significant public criticism as a result. While they experienced fewer organization-related scandals, perhaps because the liberal activist organizations involved have received much less national media attention and scrutiny throughout the duration of this project, some liberal politicians and activists have also faced controversy. More information on these situations is available in Appendix C.

Educational activism is the subject of national political scrutiny at the current moment, particularly as it relates to broader national conversations about race, gender, and sexuality, and

these areas are the subject of increasing controversy and polarization. This controversy and polarization is heightened by the upcoming presidential election in 2024. As a result, although political beliefs and issues are always changing, this study in particular is influenced by the dynamic nature of political activism and public perception, especially as various organizations and individuals involved with the study have rapidly changing experiences in the public spotlight and in public opinion. Experiences with controversy and public scrutiny may have affected who was willing to participate in interviews and how interviewees answered questions and interacted with me—for example, causing some activists to feel the need to defend or hide their beliefs and experiences—thus influencing the results of this project. While study results may have been affected by the dynamic nature of politics, activism, and public opinion, studying an issue at the center of national controversy also affords an opportunity to better understand how mothers become involved in activism and how their experiences with activism—including controversy—are colored by their identities as mothers.

## V. Findings and Analysis

Throughout the 16 interviews I conducted with mothers involved in educational activism in Florida, respondents described how they experience tension between motherhood and activism, including feeling that child-raising has become politicized against their will and becoming the targets of sexism and stereotyping. Liberals and conservatives experience this tension differently and to different extents. However, although activist mothers experience conflict between motherhood and activism, motherhood does not preclude women's involvement in activism. Activist mothers often gain legitimacy from assumptions about qualities associated with motherhood, such as apoliticism and selflessness, and they have developed a variety of rhetorical strategies to assert themselves within politics and gain credibility. Conservative mothers are more likely to leverage emotion and traditional femininity, while liberals more frequently use logic, reason, and the skills afforded by careers or motherhood. The varied experiences and understandings of motherhood and activism across the political spectrum inform educational policy debates and display more fundamental differences in mothers' beliefs and goals for families, child-raising, and the education system.

### **Personal and Political Tensions**

#### *(A)political Child-Raising*

Interviewees often touched on the idea that motherhood and child-raising more broadly have become politicized, especially as they are subjected to partisan politics, but they asserted that these fields should be apolitical. They implied both that the personal is political, the classic second-wave feminist argument, and also that the political is personal: the impacts of policies and activism would directly help or harm their families and therefore could not be detached from

the private sphere. As a result, activist mothers experience a tension between the ideal of motherhood as a private, apolitical role and their actual experiences of both their identities and their children's experiences becoming a site of charged political conflict.

Allison explained: "I just want to raise my kid right. All these things in the schools—they can hurt my kid. With all the fights over my kid's education, how can I not get involved? Raising my kid, being a mom, I feel like it has just become so political." Allison shared that she believes motherhood has become politicized as mothers are forced to engage in politics to raise their children well. Similarly, Elizabeth said that "I do think politics is essential [for mothers]. Someone who doesn't have a child can obviously still understand how politics impacts the future for all children. But having your own children gives you a unique, direct perspective into these policies." Since mothers directly see and understand the impacts of educational politics on their children, both now and in the future, they understand themselves as uniquely and closely linked to politics and policies. Their identity as mothers and the education of their children often feels directly political.

However, although my interviewees largely felt both motherhood and education are politicized, they all expressed that both motherhood and education should not be political realms. Maria asked, "When did wanting to make the world a better place for your children become a political view? Why is it political? It shouldn't be, right?" Maria claims that motherhood, and even wanting to influence the future for the sake of a child, should not need to be political. Similarly, Megan said: "I never wanted to be involved. I probably wouldn't be involved, if I had the choice. But when they're coming into my kid's school and banning books and preventing students from learning real American history, I had no choice except to get involved." While interviewees often framed activism as a natural extension of motherhood (discussed in

“Motherhood as Warrant”), many of them simultaneously couched this in claims that they were forced to participate in activism, rather than doing so voluntarily.

Particularly in the realm of educational activism, interviewees expressed discontent that the education system itself was politicized. Most conservative interviewees expressed a desire for education to go “back to basics,” focusing on teaching children essential skills rather than covering social issues. For instance, Angela described the politicization of schools as her main motivator for running for a school board position: “We need to have somebody on the school board that stands for protecting our kids and making sure that the focus is on education, and getting back to the basics of why we send our kids to school, [...] reading, writing, arithmetic, art,” rather than beliefs or morals. Similarly, Olivia explained that “I just want teachers to teach, but you have people who want pride flags hung in their classroom or things that allude to sexuality and gender, and to me that is like a religion that you're trying to force on children.” Nearly all conservative interviewees expressed their perspectives on the politicization of education in similar terms.

Liberal interviewees agreed that schools and school politics were becoming unnecessarily politicized. Elizabeth shared that although she was not motivated to run for school board by culture war or social issue debates—she chose to run largely to advocate for better teacher pay and treatment—she instead “was thrust into a political hellscape from the day I got this office, and I define my experience and where I live as the battleground birthplace of public education culture wars.” Due in particular to the circumstances of her election and ongoing political controversies within her district (described in Appendix C), Elizabeth’s role in deciding school policy as a school board member was politicized against her will.

Liberals and conservatives similarly argued that education and educational activism is more politicized and polarized than it should be, but liberals defined this politicization very differently from conservatives. Liberals characterized the attempt to remove representation of diverse groups or discussion of social issues from schools as overtly political, depicting diversity and social issues as true representations of American society and attempts to remove them as censorship and political maneuvering. In a particularly drastic characterization, Clara compared some right-wing educational activist groups to the Taliban:

The reality is, [*The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, which have been debated or removed in some schools in Florida] are about the creation of the Taliban and far right authoritarian rule in those countries. And I think they really want them removed, because they don't want us to see how it can happen. You can change the name, Christ instead of Allah, but it's still the Taliban running your schools, running your government, determining what you can wear, determining what you can say. And it's just as destructive to society, no matter whose name you put in there, whether it's Allah, Jesus Christ, or Buddha, it's still the Taliban.

Clara compared a variety of hard-right policies and causes to religious extremists seeking a theocratic or authoritarian government, and she categorized current legislation surrounding the books and topics acceptable within the education system as efforts to keep the next generation of children from recognizing a transition to theocracy or authoritarianism. Most other interviewees spoke in less strong terms, but Clara's sentiment held; liberals were largely concerned that the removal of social issues and diversity from schools was political, rather than their inclusion being political to begin with.

Although interviewees often perceived the politicization of education as a more modern issue, complaints about the politicization of education have been ongoing for nearly as long as the American education system has been around. Unlike most other areas of American society, where disagreement is accepted, expected, and even encouraged, educational policymakers and educators have typically sought consensus in the public school system and, in the process,

popularized the belief that schools can and should be “above politics” (Tyack and Hansot 1981, 3). Despite this belief, decisions over educational policy and practice have direct economic consequences, and they also take on a broader symbolic value as decisions about what values are “legitimized” through their acceptance within the school system (Tyack and Hansot 1981, 2), so debates about educational policy are often fiercely political. However, interviewees’ insistence that the education system should be apolitical speaks to the enduring power of ideals that child-raising more generally should be a private and apolitical matter.

Although the aspects of the education system they saw as political differed, mothers across the political spectrum agreed that both motherhood and education feel inherently political, particularly as a result of ongoing culture wars within the education system both in Florida and nationally. However, they also agreed that child-raising—both motherhood and education—should not have to be political. As a result, mothers involved in activism experience a unique tension between apolitical ideals and political realities: they believe motherhood should be apolitical and the education system should not be an area of political conflict, and yet they personally engage as political activists in educational politics.

### *Gender Bias in Politics*

The conflict between the ideal of mothers as apolitical and the perception of motherhood as a politicized role highlights one way women experience conflict between gender roles and political engagement. Beyond this conflict, mothers across the political spectrum also shared how they have experienced gender bias or stereotyping as they engage in activism. Interviewees described how stereotypes and clichés about women and mothers sometimes worked to limit their political influence by labeling them as overemotional, unreasonable, or pretty and senseless.



Both Carol and Elizabeth directly related experiences with sexism to a lack of political credibility for women and mothers. Elizabeth explained that “Women are painted as hysterical or bored or just looking for something to complain about, so [being a woman] is an obstacle more than anything.” Similarly, Carol said:

Nobody takes women seriously. I think that women have to go into [activism] knowing that's going to happen, and they need to make sure their backbone is in place. Because it's going to be harder. Men are going to gaslight you, they're going to talk over you, they're going to co-opt you. They're going to ask for credentials from you when they don't ask for them from the men standing next to you.

Both Elizabeth and Carol explain how enduring sexism has influenced the ways they are perceived and prevented them from establishing more political legitimacy. They describe how pervasive stereotypes of women, including being hysterical, complaining too much, and lacking expertise and knowledge, have caused men to dismiss their claims and refuse to listen to them. As a result, although motherhood may cause women to be taken slightly more seriously in the realm of education, they claim that the misogyny they experience results in less credibility than if they were men engaging in the same activism.

There has been a recent rise in the political prominence of mothers' groups, particularly within the Republican Party in Florida and nationally. Elizabeth attributed this rise and seeming increase in political credibility to sexism, rather than a genuine desire to listen to mothers:

The Republican Party of Florida had a specific goal of targeting middle aged women to participate in their party, so they elevated a group of women and moms to meet their needs. If that wasn't their goal, would they have listened to that group of moms and met their needs? No, probably not. Historically, they don't. [...] They're taking advantage of moms and intentionally lying to them or stoking their fears to feel like they have to protect their kids from some boogeyman that does not exist.

Elizabeth claims that the current prominence of mothers' activist groups among conservative circles in Florida is due to the Republican Party's desire to generate more involvement in party

politics among women with children,<sup>2</sup> rather than any desire to listen to or respect the opinions of concerned mothers. In this way, she attributes the success of conservative mothers' groups to misogyny—manipulating women to support the goals of the Republican Party—rather than a genuine increase in the political legitimacy of women and mothers.

However, conservative interviewees attributed the rise of mothers' activism to the strength and persistence of conservative women trying to protect their children, not to elite manipulation. Jane partially credited the mothers' influence to “a marketing thing,” claiming that mothers' activism is more prominent than fathers' activism right now because “moms are marketing, and it's more powerful that the moms are standing up.” In saying this, Jane claimed that promoting women's activism is helpful public relations work for the Republican Party. However, rather than attributing conservative women's influence to manipulation, Jane gave conservative mothers credit for standing up for their beliefs and becoming involved in activism. Isabella said: “We've fought so hard to protect our kids. I've heard people say that we're political tools or pretty faces to be manipulated, but we're not. That's demeaning. We've been successful because we are strong, and smart, and stubborn, and we'll do anything for our kids.” Conservative mothers described the tendency for their activism to be dismissed as a product of manipulation or exploitation as itself an example of bias, claiming that their political opponents were discrediting their accomplishments on the basis of their identities as women and mothers.

Sophia more broadly described the biases she has faced as a conservative mother involved in activism:

---

<sup>2</sup> Christian Ziegler, the former chair of the Republican Party of Florida, told the Washington Post that Moms for Liberty had helped him achieve a long-time goal of getting 20- and 30-year-old women involved with the Republican Party (Craig 2021). The Republican Party nationally has seen declines in the numbers of younger women voting for them, a trend which has increased in the wake of the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade* (Gardner 2023).

We get dismissed. Unfortunately, the prettier we are, the worse it is. It's look, the pretty girls showed up at the meeting in their t-shirts. It's almost the opposite [of mothers being taken more seriously in politics]. We had to earn respect. Everybody does, but it's more obvious for us that we had to earn the respect. People forgot what the role of the mother is, so we had to go remind them, not only should you respect us, but we have the right to be here because of who we are in our children's lives. It's kind of a dual thing that we have to reteach people what moms are and then earn that respect, have them understand that we weren't sitting on the couch eating bonbons all day before we got involved.

In describing the disrespect she and other conservative mothers have faced, Sophia objected in particular to observers dismissing their activism because of their physical appearance. Notably, Sophia did not attribute this disrespect or dismissal to misogyny. Instead, she said that she and other conservative women have had to fight harder to be taken seriously because people have forgotten the role of mothers in raising and educating their children. Sophia saw the reason observers dismiss activist mothers as lazy, uninformed, or unqualified as a loss of traditional gender roles rather than sexism or misogyny. Despite opposing beliefs on the cause of the problem, Sophia experienced and observed the same bias against women and mothers that liberal observers did.

Although they attributed these problems to different sources, liberal and conservative women alike discussed how they have been dismissed in educational activism because of their identities as women and mothers. Observers disrespected activist mothers across the political spectrum by calling them lazy, uninformed, overemotional, dumb, or unqualified. A couple liberal mothers characterized some conservative mothers as being manipulated or acting as political pawns, and they described this as misogynistic and demeaning to women. On the other hand, conservative mothers described how being dismissed as political pawns was demeaning to themselves and other mothers, and they attributed their recent political success to their own strength and agency. Despite differences in how these women perceive and experience gender-based bias, their experiences highlight how women across the political spectrum face

discrimination and dismissal as they attempt to engage in activism. Given that traditional American gender roles consider education to be a mother's responsibility, it is particularly notable that these biases persist even within educational activism; it is possible that women and mothers still receive more credibility in educational activism than they might in other areas of activism.

The persistence of experiences of gender bias among interviewees across the political spectrum highlights the tension mothers experience between their identities and activism. In addition to feeling as though their role as mothers is wrongly politicized, they also continue to experience gender-based bias as they engage in activism, illuminating a continued tension between womanhood/motherhood and political involvement. As a result, mothers involved in educational activism find themselves uniquely situated in cross-cutting tensions both between gender/motherhood and political engagement and through their political activism in both a role and a policy arena idealized as apolitical.

### **Establishing Political Legitimacy**

#### *Motherhood as Warrant*

Due to the intersecting tensions between motherhood, womanhood, and educational activism that they must navigate, mothers engaged in educational activism are often forced to justify their political involvement. Like many historical activist mothers, interviewees across the political spectrum used motherhood as a warrant for their political engagement and legitimacy by characterizing activism as a natural extension of their motherhood or even an obligation. Both liberal and conservative mothers justified their involvement through the enduring social norms that cause mothers to be primary caretakers of children, but some conservative interviewees also

continued to rely on gender-essentialist rhetoric to explain why they were politically engaged. Interviewees across the political spectrum explained how the perspectives and skills they have learned through motherhood contribute to their activism, warrant their involvement, and afford them credibility.

Angela explained that getting involved in politics and activism “really matters because it can make or break your child's future. What we do now affects our kids’ futures.” Similarly, although Clara had the same political beliefs before and after becoming a mother and grandmother, she noted that afterwards, “I fought more for what mattered to me. It was really easy for me to let other people fight when I didn't have those children or grandchildren.” All of the mothers I interviewed reported that since educational policies and other political outcomes directly affect their children, motherhood made them more motivated to become involved in politics.

Jane, a conservative activist, went further:

I think if you have any moral integrity at all, you can't put your head back in the sand, and you can't just stand by. The reason we got in the place that we're in is because of my parents and their parents ignoring some of these things that started creeping in. So I feel that it's my generation's job to take a stand for what we believe in and to pass that on to our kids.

Here, Jane claims not only that activism is a natural extension of motherhood, but that becoming involved in activism is a moral obligation for mothers. She claims that the development of current issues within the school system was enabled by previous generations of parents who did not take sufficient political action, so her generation of mothers must engage in educational activism and teach their children to do the same.

Mothers related their increased engagement in politics to their desire to care for their children. Evelyn explained that becoming a mother “entrenched [her political values] more, because I feel so much more protective of my children.” Mothers across the political spectrum

reported that the care and protection they gave their children extended naturally into the political sphere, motivating their activism.

Just one mother described how caring for her children made it more difficult to justify her political involvement, and it was related to a desire to protect her child. Elizabeth, a liberal school board member who experienced harassment after winning an election in a conservative district, said that “it's hard. You get that mom guilt for sure, that those men don't have to deal with or that they don't express.” However, she elaborated that the conflict she felt between motherhood and activism arose because the harassment she experienced also affected her child. She explained, “I have to worry about things. Like am I putting my child in danger, legitimately? [...] I have to worry about that. If I was a single woman, there'd be one less major thing for me to consider, but I have a daughter.” Elizabeth therefore experienced significant conflict between her involvement in local politics and her identity as a mother, which she felt went unexpressed by men and which a childless woman would not have to worry about. However, even as she experienced this tension, she noted that motherhood simultaneously motivated her to stay involved:

When it's a man in power coming at me and saying such typical things about a woman, like that I'm mentally ill, and I'm hysterical, and I'm a bad mom, and I'm a whore—he called me a whore publicly. I can't sit back. I've got a little girl at home, and I can't tell her this story 10 years from now and say, “Mommy gave up.” [...] As cliché as it sounds, that's truly what kept me going every single day, that I cannot look back on this story and tell my kid 10 years from now that I failed. [...] And to know that my own daughter has less rights today than I did when I was her age [referring to abortion, which has been restricted in Florida] makes me way more passionate, because I can see how what I do now affects her in the future.

Due to her desire to protect her child and live a life her daughter can be proud of, Elizabeth has transformed her experiences with both policy changes and harassment into a drive to continue in her activism. Although Elizabeth's particular experiences were unusual among interviewees, this was a common sentiment.

Interviewees also commonly justified their involvement in political activism by discussing how the perspectives, skills, and traits developed through motherhood can make mothers more driven to become activists and more effective in their advocacy. Both liberals and conservatives discussed the role of social expectations for women and mothers in activism. Ava, a conservative activist, explained that how the role of mothers as primary caregivers makes them more likely to be engaged and effective activists in the education system:

Mothers generally are the primary caregivers and the main ones, at least in our household, who are keeping up with the emails and the grades and the notes and the lunches and whatever. [...] In a lot of families, it's still like that. So that perspective that we can bring, it definitely shapes how we are involved in the schools and how we communicate with them.

While this sentiment arose in interviews with both liberals and conservatives, liberals were more likely than conservatives to emphasize different social roles rather than gender-essentialism.

Evelyn explained how being her children's "default" caregiver has made her a more effective advocate for her and other children:

Mothers become the default caregiver parent. [...] It's keeping track of the minutia, and knowing what each kid likes to eat for breakfast, and which kid can't stand to have his socks inside out, and which kid would wear three pairs of socks if you didn't monitor him. Just keeping an eye on all of those little details and organizing my children's life has made me learn how to keep track of details and organize everything.

Through her close knowledge of her children and the organizational abilities she has gained from raising her kids, Evelyn claims that her social role as the "default" primary caregiver for her children both drove her to get involved and made her a stronger educational advocate.

In contrast to this social-constructivist perspective, some conservative women used gender-essentialist arguments to clarify mothers' roles and involvement in activism. Olivia emphasized the role of biology, claiming that "mothers always have a different perspective because we carried and birthed our children. It is a little bit different than being a father. We've given so much to bring our children into this world." Other conservative interviewees described

religious or otherwise traditionalist reasons for women's activism. Sophia explained, "I try to go by the U.S. Constitution and the Bible. The mother's role is nurturing and bringing up your children in your image and your desires, and we're constantly competing with the spirit of the age to do that." Conservative activists were more likely to discuss inherent advantages and special perspectives women could bring to educational activism on behalf of their children through the lens of gender-essentialist biological or religious arguments.

The use of gender-essentialism among conservatives echoes historical maternalist rhetoric—women bear their children and naturally are more caring and nurturing, so extending this care to activism and communities is a logical step. On the other hand, the increase in explaining mothers' influence the position of women as the default primary parent, a social expectation women continue to shoulder even as they work outside the home in the majority of households, reflects Plant's (2012) prediction that neo-maternalist rhetoric would continue to gain influence in mothers' activism. All liberals and many conservatives did not emphasize anything biological or inherent about women's ability to care and nurture, but rather noted how women's enduring social responsibility as caregivers leads to their continued involvement and expertise in policy involving children, justifying their involvement in educational activism.

Mothers involved in activism across the political spectrum expressed how their desires to make their children proud, protect their children, and create better futures for the next generation shaped their experiences with and commitment to activism. This sentiment was present in previous generations—for example, among Black women involved in the Civil Rights movement—and it continues to serve as a powerful warrant for mothers' political involvement. Motherhood becomes an identity that implies activism and politicism, and through mothers' role as caregivers for their children (whether this is because of biology, tradition, or social norms),



they have valuable knowledge and skills that justify engagement in educational politics. Through this characterization of motherhood as a role which extends naturally to activism through the perspectives, knowledge, and skills mothers develop, interviewees were able to warrant their engagement and navigate the cross-cutting tensions they experience in their activism.

### *Political Benefits of Motherhood*

Although interviewees described the tensions they experienced as mothers involved in educational activism, they also described how motherhood could help them establish political legitimacy, especially within the realm of educational politics. Some of the reasons interviewees gave for this increased legitimacy include real-life experience with the policies and people they were advocating for, as well as the ideals of selfless and apolitical mothers.

Mothers across the political spectrum detailed how the personal experience and knowledge of educational policies they had through their children helped them establish credibility. Amelia discussed how her real-life experience with her child's public education helps her be taken seriously in both school board meetings and as she attempts to get other members of her church (which is attended by many retirees and snowbirds from outside Florida) to become involved in activism:

Every time I get up there in a school board meeting, I'm a parent of a child in this county in this school district. [Knowing about my child's experiences] has 100% helped me. I also think that at the church a lot of people do listen to me because they know that I've got more information than they might. [...] I have more information than somebody whose grandkids live in New Jersey. They're not involved. They don't know how fully extended the schools are. Those mothers who choose to be informed absolutely have some extra credibility. I do.

Similarly, Jane discussed how she has been able to share information from her child's school and other nearby schools to gain credibility:

I've been getting in front of people and showing them the actual letterhead that's coming from the schools that says what is allowed, and actual books that are in school libraries that our kids can access and what they say. [...] We could prove that these things were really happening, so if you don't get off your butt and vote, then you're going to let our kids go down the drain, basically.

Both Amelia and Jane, a liberal and a conservative activist, explained how having children in the school system gave them a unique advantage in educational activism. Through both addressing issues from the perspective of a mother whose child has experienced the impacts of school policies and having access to materials and stories from their children's schools, mothers are able to claim greater experience with and personal stake in controversies. As a result, listeners are more likely to take mothers seriously and believe that the policies they discuss are real issues, establishing greater political credibility.

In addition, although mothers perceive their role as increasingly politicized, the ideal of selfless, apolitical mothers has endured, and it plays an important role in establishing mothers' political legitimacy. Angela explained that "I do think people listen when a mother comes [to a school board meeting] because it's not personal. [...] They have so much on their plate, and for them to have to actually come in and advocate for their children—people stop and listen." The perception of mothers as motivated by their child's welfare rather than personal or political reasons helps mothers build political legitimacy. Although interviewees largely reported that they felt motherhood had become politicized, the historically constant social ideals and beliefs of mothers as apolitical, child-motivated, and selfless have continued to motivate onlookers to take mothers more seriously within political arenas.

In particular, interviewees often shared the sentiment that mothers are particularly suited to make decisions about educational policies since they are motivated to make the best decisions for the sake of their children. Ava claimed that mothers are often elected to school boards since "you do have skin in the game when your kids are in the district. You have more motivation to

make the best decisions for the schools because your own kids are going to be affected.” Mothers gain political influence in their children’s school districts by emphasizing their investment in making decisions for their own children. However, beyond their own children, mothers also gain legitimacy by emphasizing their general knowledge of and care for children, even when they are not making decisions that immediately influence their own children. Olivia mentioned that as she was helping to choose a new district superintendent, “it was important to me that she’s also a mother and has children. She was also an educator. I knew that she had a lot of experience with children and had their best interest in mind.” Since mothers are still frequently perceived as selfless and apolitical, they can gain political legitimacy, even in decisions that do not directly affect their child, by emphasizing their knowledge of children and experience in prioritizing their best interests.

This line of reasoning—that motherhood and care for one’s own child uniquely prepares mothers to make decisions about an entire school district or even the education system as a whole—contributes powerfully to mothers’ political legitimacy. Explaining this sentiment, Mia said that “everyone has a mom, so everyone can relate and understand why an activist is doing what she’s doing.” Maria elaborated that when people hear an activist is a mother, “there’s an empathy connotation, a care connotation, a listen to your mother connotation.” Particularly in a society where most people’s mothers did the majority of their family’s child-rearing and caregiving, people perceive mothers as being concerned mainly with children’s well-being—both their own and others—and give motherhood rhetorical power as a result. Ava actually used the term “every-mom” to describe this phenomenon:

It’s kind of that everyman—every-mom—character that’s really making a difference. It’s this go-round’s Joe the Plumber. [...] Like look, what’s a more common-man situation than a mom? The mom could be very well-connected or very wealthy. But when she comes in this situation as a mom, nobody cares about the rest.

Through the every-mom label and comparison to Joe the Plumber,<sup>3</sup> Ava makes the point that people perceive mothers first and foremost as mothers, regardless of their wealth, connections, or other traits; as a result, the advocacy of mothers seems universalizing.

However, several interviewees pointed out their disagreements with this logic. In the quote above, Ava noted that when people perceive motherhood first, they can overlook wealth, connections, or personal interests that may also motivate or influence a mother's activism. Evelyn said that when mothers become involved in activism, "there is that presumption that we're all in it together, and we all have the same priorities, and we all want what's best for every kid, but that's not really true." Instead, she argued that many mothers involved in political activism use motherhood as a convenient tool to gain political power or advocate only for the benefit of their child or their family while actively working against the interests of other children and families. This sentiment was more common among liberal than conservative interviewees, but mothers across the political spectrum worried that opposing activists were not taking into account the needs or beliefs of other children and families in their advocacy. Nevertheless, interviewees noted the persistence of beliefs that mothers are caring, selfless, and concerned with the well-being of all children, and that they receive significant political legitimacy as a result.

Therefore, respondents emphasized how motherhood both constrains and enables their political activism. Although mothers involved in educational activism must navigate intersecting tensions between their identities as mothers, women, and activists, they are frequently able to leverage cultural ideals, beliefs, and experiences of motherhood to gain credibility as activists and negotiate this tension.

---

<sup>3</sup> Joe the Plumber was a symbolic "average man" from Toledo, Ohio brought up several times by John McCain during the 2008 presidential elections for his image as an average hard-working American man (Rohter 2008).

## *Rhetoric Across Ideologies*

Beyond the cultural beliefs and experiences surrounding mothers, interviewees also detailed a variety of different rhetorical strategies mothers choose to employ to gain political legitimacy. Liberal and conservative activists alike explained how they used political and policy logic or leveraged motherhood-based experiences or emotions in order to achieve legitimacy, but liberal women were more likely to rely on logic, reason, and data, while conservative women were more likely to use emotion or “mama bear” instincts to protect their children. Additionally, some mothers discussed how performing motherhood can increase political legitimacy, but liberals and conservatives alike tended to characterize performing motherhood or femininity as a conservative strategy.

Interviewees commonly reported employing facts and reason to gain political credibility.

Clara explained:

When we [liberal activists] speak on the issues, we speak unemotionally and logically. We have a lot of community support, and not just from the Democrats or from STOP Moms for Liberty. I have personally reached out to parts of the business community, saying, ‘This is what’s happening. We need you to speak out.’ I involve the communities that my political opponents think they own and tell them what’s happening, and they come out. I work really hard to just be rational.

Clara claims that by approaching potential allies with logic and without emotion, she has been able to convince traditionally Republican-aligned groups in her conservative county to speak out for liberal causes in education. Clara also noted how she highlights her real-life experience and actual stories from the school system, one of the political benefits afforded to mothers (discussed in the previous subsection), as part of her reason- and fact-based approach to advocacy and recruitment. Similarly, Maria emphasized the importance of reason and data in both activism and policy-making:

Sometimes these folks will get up and say things that absolutely are not true at all, so it’s important to be able to provide data, statistics, and research, do myth-busting, and get up

and say that what you're describing is not the case. [...] I demand it of my kids, so I also think we should demand that elected officials and people in government and law enforcement do research and look at smart solutions for solving complex problems.

By employing logic and statistics to debunk false claims, and by calling for well-researched policy solutions, Maria is able to reduce the legitimacy of political opponents who make incorrect statements while establishing her own credibility.

In both of the above quotes, Clara and Maria invoke or rely on motherhood. To gain support, Clara uses the real-life experiences and evidence of the school system that she has gained from motherhood, and Maria supports her demands from elected officials by noting that they are no larger than her expectations for her own children. Even as they rely on rational and entirely unemotional rhetoric to make claims and change minds, Clara and Maria are still able to bolster their political legitimacy through their identities as mothers. Motherhood gives them a way to frame their beliefs and advocacy as common-sense decisions made on the basis of real-life experiences with the education system, tapping into a common American perception of mothers as practical and thus justifying their logic and reason.

In contrast, Evelyn omitted motherhood entirely as she explained her own rhetorical strategies: "I've been practicing law for 25 years, so I have good public speaking skills, and I kind of know how to craft an argument by now. I really think that matters most." Evelyn elsewhere discussed at length the kind of rhetorical and political power that comes with motherhood, but when talking about her own activism, she mentioned motherhood only as a motivator. Although she may discuss her motherhood while advocating, she chose in our interview to highlight the skills and qualities gained from her education and career rather than from her role as a mother.

Conservative activists also appealed to reason and logic, especially in terms of defining their advocacy as common sense. For example, Sophia explained that Florida is now passing

much more conservative education policies because “common sense finally prevailed.” However, conservatives brought up facts and logic less than liberals on average. Instead, conservatives were much more likely than liberals to attribute their political influence to emotion, particularly through a maternal instinct to protect their children. Angela claimed that “we've seen this rise in mothers becoming involved because they're messing with our kids, and if you mess with our kids, you're gonna get a mama bear.” This “mama bear” phrasing was especially common among conservatives—five out of the eight conservative interviewees described their educational activism using this specific phrase.<sup>4</sup> Sophia claimed that “I think that we're starting to see some very prominent females on the [Republican] side, and I do believe it's that mama bear strength that got them there.” Conservative activists credited their “mama bear” instincts for providing motivation for their activism, giving them the strength and persistence needed to withstand criticism and fight for political influence, and forcing others to take them seriously.

Three liberal interviewees also mentioned the desire to protect their children—Evelyn said “motherhood entrenched [her political beliefs] more, because I feel so much more protective of my children”—but it was a less common argument among liberals, and no liberals used “mama bear” language in this argument. However, liberals did still use “for the children” rhetoric to justify their activism. Instead of discussing the instinct to protect their own children, liberals tended to voice a desire to “do the best for everyone's child” (Amelia). Maria explained: “As a mother, I volunteered a lot in ways where I mentored other kids. [...] So I worry about other people's kids, since it's not just my own in the schools.” Many more liberals than conservatives expressed that they were trying to support and protect all children through their activism, even

---

<sup>4</sup> The usage of the phrase “mama bear” to describe conservative activist mothers appears to originate from Sarah Palin’s characterization of herself and other conservative mothers as “mama grizzlies” during the 2010 midterm elections (Burnett 2023).

when their own motherhood played a role in motivating this desire. This difference is discussed in more depth in the “Individual and Community Responsibilities” section, but it’s worth noting that justifying activism in terms of children’s wellbeing was common across the political spectrum. This is not unexpected; children are often used to symbolize “lofty, emotionally charged ideas [...] including, among other things: innocence, hope, the future, human potential, and humanity’s essential goodness” (Rosen 2009: 269), so protecting and supporting children is a particularly salient argument to people of many different political ideologies.

Overall, liberal interviewees discussed using logic, statistics, and outcomes for all children much more frequently than conservative activists, while conservative interviewees were more likely to use language involving moral outrage or “mama bear” protection of their children. A few studies have shown that in political debates, Democrats are more likely to use “reasoned consequences” and projected outcomes, while Republicans are more likely to employ “sacred rhetoric” rooted in moral outrage and hard boundaries (Marietta 2009; see also Painter and Fernandes 2021). However, while political ideology may play a role in these rhetorical differences, it is unclear how much the social and political contexts interviewees operate in also influences the rhetoric they use to gain political legitimacy. Given that Florida currently has a Republican governor and a Republican supermajority in the state legislature, and the majority of interviewees live in predominantly Republican areas, it is possible that liberal activists are forced to turn to the language of facts, reason, and community wellbeing to persuade others to support their positions, while conservative activists are able to rely on rhetoric that galvanizes pre-existing supporters rather than entirely changing stances.

The experiences shared by Ava, a school board member who intentionally separated her religiously-motivated, moral conservatism from blind party loyalty or “extreme” right-wing



beliefs, seem to anecdotally support this explanation. Ava often disagrees with both liberal and conservative fellow school board members. When this happens, she relies on data and logic to make her point: “I don’t just tell them, ‘You’re an idiot.’ I do my homework, and I do the research, and I take the time. I think that makes my voice a little louder and more influential.” In one campaign forum, she was the only candidate in favor of an unpopular millage proposal, and she explained that to support her stance, “I just gave as much data as I could fit into one minute.” She did not get applause, but some voters told her they respected her willingness to stand up for unpopular opinions when she had facts to back them up—and she was elected to the school board. One interviewee’s responses do not prove or disprove a trend, but Ava’s experiences illustrate the possibility that facts and reason are particularly necessary to generate support for oppositional or minority opinions, whether an activist is liberal or conservative.

Beyond logic and “mama bear” protectiveness, the other strategy interviewees commonly discussed was performing motherhood. Both liberals and conservatives typically attributed this tactic more to conservative activists than to liberal activists. Jane, a conservative, explained that mothers have so much political influence—and conservative mothers have been so successful in Florida—because “you have strong, tough, beautiful women that have raised children standing up there, and they’re out doing things that the normal, average person is not doing. Maybe it just glorifies activism or makes it sexy in some way.” Jane explicitly addressed the physical appearance of conservative activists, tying their political success to the way their public images allow them to glorify activism or make it “sexy.”

On the other hand, while liberal interviewees acknowledged how performing motherhood could be advantageous for activists, two of them criticized conservative activists for

“weaponizing motherhood” or pushing agendas using a particular appearance of motherhood.

Clara claimed:

It's easy to parade a group of moms wearing Lululemon with pretty curls in their hair. They can say the same awful things that a guy with tattoos and a beard can say, but it doesn't sound as awful coming out of the mouth of a woman with Lululemon and curls in her hair. So they're better tools.

On a similar note, Evelyn said that “Casey DeSantis is Exhibit A. It's like, look at me, I'm just a mama like you. ‘Mamas for DeSantis!’ But I'm not running around in camo cargo pants with white high heels. I think it does get weaponized.” Casey DeSantis, the wife of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, often frames her political activism in terms of her motherhood and formed a group called Mamas for DeSantis to mobilize mothers in support of DeSantis’s 2024 presidential campaign (Burnett 2023). Evelyn and Clara claim that by dressing in ways that exemplify conservative ideals of womanhood and motherhood—Lululemon clothing, curled hair, high heels, fashionable uses of camouflage—conservative activist mothers perform motherhood for their own political benefit. They are able to make statements that other conservative activists might not be able to express without repercussions, and they can take advantage of social ideals of motherhood as a universalizing identity that results in a shared concern for the welfare of all children, in order to advance conservative policy goals. Additionally, like the conservative white “housewife populists” of the mid-20th century (Nickerson 2012; discussed in more detail in the literature review), conforming to particular traditional ideals of womanhood and motherhood might lend these activist mothers more legitimacy not only to a general audience, but also within the conservative (and typically traditionalist and religious) political circles where they seek to gain influence.

Although most interviewees highlighted ways in which their motherhood influences their activism and improves their political legitimacy, liberals and conservatives tended to agree that

conservative activists emphasize their motherhood and explicitly frame their advocacy through this lens more than liberal activists. During interviews, liberal activists more commonly discussed how they employ logic, reason, and data to persuade others and gain political legitimacy. While doing so, they often implicitly or explicitly invoked their motherhood, especially as a way to justify their demands as logical and practical. However, some liberal interviewees deemphasized motherhood in their rhetoric and focused on their professional experience or education to gain credibility, and liberal activists almost never used motherhood as the primary justification or rhetorical strategy within their activism. In contrast, conservatives were more likely to explicitly rely on motherhood. Liberals also discussed wanting to protect children, but conservatives more commonly attributed both their advocacy and their success to a “mama bear” desire to defend their own children, an instinct which arose directly from their identity as mothers. Additionally, liberals and conservatives alike described conservative activist mothers as performing motherhood to achieve legitimacy.

These differences in how and when activists emphasize motherhood in their rhetoric point to enduring variations in the conceptions of gender and maternal identity in politics across the political spectrum. Conservatives tended to emphasize their desires to protect their children and their adherence to conventional femininity, relying on standards of traditional motherhood to assert their ability to raise their children and consequently their ability to determine educational policy. In contrast, liberals tended to emphasize logic, reason, and data gained from motherhood or their careers, leaning away from traditional femininity to instead assert a political credibility informed but not determined by motherhood. Thus, modern conservative women continue to emphasize tradition, personal rights, and conventional gender roles even as they assert themselves within politics and the public sphere, while modern liberals seek to promote a gender

ideology that is flexible, less traditional, and more progressive, in which women might be informed by, but not limited to, motherhood within the public sphere. These ideological differences in how women negotiate conflicting roles as mothers and educational activists additionally illuminate more fundamental debates about the nature, goals, and responsibilities of child-raising and the education system.

## **Ideology and Educational Goals**

### *Individual and Community Responsibilities*

As interviewees discussed the politics of education and motherhood, liberals and conservatives disagreed in how they defined child-raising as a personal and shared responsibility. Activists across the political spectrum talked about their desires to raise their children well and improve the world for future generations, but the language and goals they used differed. Conservative mothers talked about raising children as a personal responsibility, emphasizing the duty of every parent to be involved in their own child's education and their desires to raise their children in their own beliefs and values. In contrast, liberals tended to frame child-raising as a personal and shared responsibility, in which their motherhood obligated them to advocate for both their own child and all other children.

Conservatives emphasized the importance of raising their own children in their own values, which they described as a personal and familial responsibility. Sophia foregrounded the personal responsibility of each parent:

Education needs a moral foundation. Parents are uniquely qualified to bring that to the table—I don't really want a stranger teaching my kids about moral issues. I think kids have to have that foundation to have a context with which to see the rest of the stuff that they're learning. Otherwise, it doesn't make any sense. So it comes back to personal responsibility. But it's super important that we teach those shared values to our children

as early as possible, so that they can see the world how it's meant to be seen. And frankly, especially in America, that we teach our kids a Judeo-Christian view of all of it.

Although Sophia generally appreciated the public education system, she clarified that each parent should teach their children about morals and values to give them context for the content-based knowledge they would learn through at their schools, rather than teachers trying to teach other people's children how to understand morality. Beyond entirely leaving these decisions up to parents, she also advocated that each American parent has a personal duty to teach their children Judeo-Christian values. However, other conservative activists explained that while they personally raise their children with Christian values, they believe each parent should make these decisions individually: "Parents and especially mothers, they know what is best for their child and what to teach their child. Policies need to reflect that" (Angela). Conservative activists thus believed that each person should take a personal responsibility for the education of their child.

Beyond responsibility for teaching them morals, conservatives also emphasized the importance of each parent advocating for their own children. Jane explained:

If I didn't have kids, why would I even care? I may be doing some sort of activism on a different front, but I don't think it would be anything near what I've done now. [...] There are very good programs that assist kids that don't have parental support. But for those that do, parents have to get involved and back into kids' lives, because that is really the root of the issue.

Here, Jane describes being concerned primarily with her children's education and supporting other children mainly by advocating for a society where every parent is involved in their own child's education.

Conservative interviewees, and particularly school board members, also did discuss how they take into consideration other parents and children. Olivia explained that "having your own children makes you consider other parents and their children as well, and be thoughtful of their

concerns, and not just to brush them off, because their children are important to them as well.” Through being a mother and an activist, Olivia described how she is able to take into account what other families want and need, but she characterized this mostly in terms of listening to the concerns brought to her school board by other children and parents rather than anticipating their needs or immediately advocating for other children. Ava similarly defined her activism by her own children first: “Some people say, ‘I’m in it for all kids, not my kids.’ That’s a political, stupid statement. We are doing it for all kids, but those three reasons make it more important for me to get it right.” Ava explained that although she does want to help all children through her role on the school board, her three children (the “three reasons”) are her first priority and raise the stakes for her activism. Additionally, she characterizes statements to the contrary made by other activists as stupid and political—she claims that they are also concerned with their own children, but they have figured out that it is more rhetorically powerful to make demands on behalf of all children.

In contrast, while liberals also frequently discussed how their care for their own children motivates them, they were much more likely to frame child-raising as a shared responsibility and define their activism by the good of all children. Clara explained her issue with the parental involvement argument frequently used by conservatives:

It’s very easy to say that the biggest solution to educational problems is parental involvement. There are kids whose parents can’t be involved, whose parents are drug dealers, or prostitutes, or are living terrible lives. Those parents’ lack of involvement should not determine the outcome for these children. We’re losing gifted and talented humans because only children whose parents are involved get a voice. I want to be a voice for those kids.

Although conservatives might argue that there are programs in place to advocate for children whose parents are out of the picture, Clara claimed that in reality, prioritizing individual parental involvement over all else disadvantages these children further. She sees her activism as a way to

be a voice not only for her own children and grandchildren, but also for other children that deserve advocacy and consideration. Evelyn also described how her care and advocacy for other people's children manifests in her activism:

I really believe in those taglines, 'it takes a village,' and 'there's no such thing as other people's children.' I didn't understand that until I had kids. Now, I will feed everyone's children, I will clothe them, I will give them a ride, because we're all in this together. But we don't all feel like that. That's something that has been difficult for me to wrap my brain around over the last couple of years, especially after having a kid with a disability during the pandemic. But I will still treat your child like mine, even if you don't treat mine like yours. [...] I want to clear the path forward for everyone.

Evelyn described how becoming a mother made her appreciate the difficulties of motherhood and find more care and compassion for both her own children and other children. She later elaborated on how being the mother of a child with an immunocompromising disability during the pandemic threw into focus how important it is for an entire community to care for children: without precautions in their school system and community, her child would not be able to attend school or see friends without the risk of severe illness or death. Through these experiences, she learned to believe that "there's no such thing as other people's children" and that everyone shares the same responsibility for helping every child, so her advocacy should benefit all children, not just her own.

Both liberals and conservatives described how they hoped their advocacy would reshape the world for the sake of the children. They all expressed a desire to change their communities and the world for the good of the next generation: "There's no force more powerful than motherhood. This isn't about me. I have three grandkids, and I don't believe that the world I'm leaving them as anything close to what they deserve, or what I had" (Sophia). Sophia, a conservative, described how being a mother and grandmother ultimately motivates her to step up and make a better future for her grandchildren instead of leaving this job for others. Similarly, Maria, a liberal, defined her activism by changing the world for her children: "You're trying to

craft a world, to make sure the world is better for your kids going forward. If you have a child, you now have a responsibility to pay attention to what world you're going to be handing off to them.” Clara extended this not just to her own children and grandchildren, but to all children: “When I am done on this earthly plane, nobody ever needs to know my name. But I want to know that the world is a little bit better, not just for people who look like me, but for everyone, because I've walked it.” Although liberals were more likely to define it in terms of all children (and conservatives were more likely to dismiss that as a meaningless platitude), mothers across the political spectrum discussed how they hoped their activism would allow them to reshape the world for the sake of their or all children.

Interviewees also discussed how they hoped to educate children growing up now to be able to change the world themselves. Angela discussed her desire for the school system to create “good, wholesome members of society.” Maria similarly explained:

We want to raise critical thinkers. We're raising the generation that's going to cure cancer, solve world hunger, and find peace. If we raise a bunch of idiots without the very best that they can have, then we're not doing the best for our world. We need to raise humans that are going to be kinder, more human, more empathetic. I don't want to send little jerks off into the world.

By improving the school system and doing better by children now, Maria claimed, children will be able to go into the world and make it a better place than previous generations have been able to. Through their activism, interviewees expressed how they take responsibility for their community and the world through a hope to reshape the world both for and through their children.

### *My Rights, Your Rights*

Interviewees across the political spectrum broadly agreed that parents should have the right to raise their own children as they see fit without interference from the government or other



parties; in this sense, they actually shared a similar language of rights, liberties, and advocacy. However, liberals and conservatives disagreed on when and where they saw the government or other activists overstepping their boundaries.

Conservatives were more likely to see the school system as overstepping, with teachers, administrators, liberal school board members, and librarians attempting to undermine conservatives' ability to raise their children with their family's religious or traditional values. Sophia explained that to her, "the biggest impact on conservative values is having a child, because you have to provide for them, and you start caring about how they learn your values. You're constantly fighting the world on who's going to be able to teach that." Similarly, Olivia focused on parents' ability to raise children without government interference: "you should be able to raise your children how you see fit without the government telling you what to do. That's what America is about. It's about having the freedom to live out our own values." Conservatives want the school system to teach children skills like reading, arithmetic, and critical thinking, but that schools should "teach students how to think, not what to think. [...] It's not the right approach to try to make all our children into little social justice warriors" (Jane). As they discussed their beliefs about and goals for the education system, conservative interviewees largely portrayed a world in which they are fighting against the government and education system for the right to preserve their own traditions and beliefs. As a result, they seek to decenter schools in a child's emotional and moral growth, leaving these areas for parents to teach in the home in line with their own cultures and values.

In contrast, liberals tended to see the state government and conservative activists as overriding the ability of parents and educational experts to fully educate all children to the best of their ability, including those without involved or informed parents. Amelia explained: "Parents

should not be able to tell the school what happens with other people's children. They should only be able to decide what's going on with their own kids. [...] And they shouldn't be able to restrict content, but they should be able to add it.” Liberals tended to express a desire for an education system that taught a wide variety of knowledge and values, that allowed all children to feel represented and respected, and where community members could advocate for the broad inclusion but not exclusion of material. Although they emphasized personal responsibility less than conservatives, one area where they heavily emphasized personal responsibility was in regards to what children are learning. Carol said that “parents have to be involved and know what's going on. They can limit their own kids from reading anything, but they just shouldn't remove a book completely, so that nobody can read it.” In this sense, liberals sought an expansive education system that would expose children to a variety of topics and opinions, where individual parents are responsible for deciding what to exclude from their child’s education in schools and how to supplement in-school knowledge at home if they chose to.

Throughout their discussion of rights and liberties, activists across the political spectrum actually used similar language. Both groups emphasized the importance of parents’ involvement in their children’s education wherever possible and affirmed that parents should have the right to decide what their children learn or are exposed to within schools, and both groups claimed that other parents, policymakers, or the government should not be allowed to unilaterally make decisions about what or how children learn. However, the groups that were presumed to be encroaching on parental rights and the policies and curricula in question varied widely across the political spectrum.

These differences are probably largely shaped by both historical beliefs and context. Conservative politicians and activists since the early 20th century have seen themselves as

defending their way of life from a power-hungry liberal establishment and education system, and they often portray the current Florida state government as fighting back against decades of creeping liberal indoctrination. In current Florida, liberal activists see themselves as defending inclusivity and the representation of multiple perspectives against an encroaching state government that seeks censorship and conservative indoctrination. It is possible that the beliefs here are not representative of conservatives and liberals more broadly, but rather reflect the current political climate of Florida, but this is impossible to answer in the scope of this project.

However, differences also illustrate more fundamental ideological disagreements over the purpose and goals of child-raising and public education. Conservatives tend to focus on the values and morals taught at home, defining home as the center of a child's education and school as a place to learn social skills and subject-specific knowledge like reading and writing. In contrast, liberals instead focus on what should be taught in schools; this is not because they believe the home is unimportant or parents should not have rights, but rather because they focus on an education system that reaches the majority of children, including those whose parents are uninvolved and will not expose them to necessary ideas at home. Both groups emphasize both shared and personal responsibility for children's education, but the realm and scope of these responsibilities looks different across the political spectrum. These disagreements illustrate how liberals and conservatives view the role of mothers in education and politics—conservatives more frequently hold traditional beliefs of mothers and the home as the center of a child's education, while liberals see the responsibility of mothers and the education system less traditionally, designed to teach for a variety of children without assuming parental involvement or education at home. Alongside other ideological differences, fundamental disagreements around the nature of education are likely one of the primary causes for the differences in rhetoric,

motivations, and efficacy of mothers' activism across the political spectrum—and a reason the education system remains politicized.

## VI. Policy Implications

Technocratic educational policymakers often assume it is possible to develop and implement optimal school policies. With enough research, the belief goes, it is possible to set aside politics and partisanship to settle on educational policies that equitably benefit all children and families. However, education is fundamentally political: school policies and curricula determine what children learn and how they learn it, shaping the next generation and thus potentially reshaping communities, states, and countries. As a result of their political potential as well as the salience of children's wellbeing in policy arenas, schools are frequently the epicenter of intense and recurrent cultural battles. The variety of beliefs and opinions shared by respondents during this study illuminate how educational activism is centered not just on debates about optimal policy-making, but also on differing and often conflicting beliefs about the responsibilities, rights, and goals of parents, communities, schools, and governments. These findings call into question the potential for technocratic optimal policies. If politicians, policymakers, and activists cannot agree on the fundamental goals of education, it is almost impossible to come to a consensus on what and how schools should teach. However, by bringing these underlying conflicts to light, it is possible to initiate discourse on the values and goals that should inform educational policies, creating the potential to develop better compromises and stronger educational policies.

Debates about these educational ideologies and school policies occur at the national, state, and local levels throughout the United States, and education is regulated at each of these levels. However, respondents showed significant disagreement over the responsibilities and roles of educational policymaking at each level of government. Should educational policy be implemented at a mostly national level to bring equal education to all children, or should local

communities be largely responsible for deciding what and how their children learn? The results of this study demonstrate that activists often hold conflicting views on who should decide educational policies—and often, it is determined as much by which level of government they feel will be most favorable towards their beliefs as by strong or consistent ideological beliefs about the roles of federal, state, and local governments. The conflict between local, participatory school board politics and technocratic national policy design debates demonstrated by participants exemplifies a deep tension between local self-determination, participatory governance at various levels of government, and universal rights for students. Although there are no easy solutions for this conflict, better understanding the tension that activists and policymakers must navigate as they regulate education at different levels of government can help policymakers make informed decisions about the regulations and policies they design for schools and the potential backlash they might receive.

As politicians, policymakers, activists, and other stakeholders fight to determine educational policies, this study demonstrates that mothers currently have a strong voice in influencing school policy. Motherhood both motivates activists and provides them with a way to gain political legitimacy through cultural stereotypes of practicality, apoliticism, selflessness, and universal care for all children. As a result, activists should consider how and when they frame arguments in terms of motherhood and children, and in particular what influence this rhetoric can have on their political goals, and policymakers should consider which stakeholders they listen to and which they ignore when writing policy. Most of the activists participating in this study were upper- or middle-class straight white women, as this is the group most prominent and most represented in educational activism in Florida. As a result, the voices and opinions of low-income mothers, queer mothers, mothers of color, and other parents and stakeholders are

underrepresented both in this study and in educational activism in Florida as a whole.

Policymakers must be cognizant of this divide when deciding policy and take into account the best interests of children who do not have parents who are able to spend as much time, money, or effort advocating for educational change. By considering which stakeholders are being heard and which are being rendered invisible, examining the ideological conflicts underlying educational policy, and understanding debates about the rights and responsibilities of different levels of government, policymakers can begin having conversations that might move the education system forward and—at least temporarily—resolve the policy debates fueling this round of educational culture wars.

## VII. Conclusion

Mothers have long been involved in American educational activism, from the early establishment of the public school system until today, and the ways in which they have expressed their activism, gained political credibility, and conceptualized their own roles and responsibilities have shifted along with gender roles and women's rights in America. As women's social expectations and opportunities have continued to evolve throughout the 21st century and new debates (and the same old debates, reframed) about the American education system have emerged, it is likely that the ways mothers perceive their activism and political influence have also changed. Through this project, I sought to explore how women involved in left-wing and right-wing educational activism are differently and similarly motivated by their identities as mothers and how they utilize motherhood to advance their political credibility and shape policy.

During our interviews, activists emphasized how motherhood influences their political involvement, opinions, and legitimacy. The tension between motherhood and political involvement that many women historically experienced persists, situating mothers involved in educational activism at the site of cross-cutting tensions between motherhood and activism and between apolitical ideals of child-raising and their political realities. To justify their involvement, mothers characterize activism as a natural extension of raising children or even an obligation for mothers. While education (and perhaps motherhood) have always been political in America, cultural ideals of motherhood as apolitical and selfless continue to carry weight both among activist mothers and among observers. As a result of these ideals, as well as mothers' leveraging of the skills and perspectives they have through motherhood, logic, "mama bear" protection of children, and public performances of femininity and motherhood, motherhood can help women establish political legitimacy within the realm of educational activism.



Although motherhood similarly motivates liberal and conservative women to advocate for children and create a better future for the next generation, liberal and conservative women differed in how they conceptualized the responsibilities and goals of education, which altered both their rhetoric and the policies they advocate for. In particular, mothers across the political spectrum varied in how they understand the role of women and mothers in children's education and what they believe the responsibility for raising children should be distributed between parents, community, and the government. Liberals' preferred policies of inclusivity and intellectual openness are designed to include a variety of families' beliefs, values, and histories, including children whose parents are not able to advocate for them, but individual parents must take responsibility to opt their child out from anything they do not want their child to be taught. Conservatives' advocacy for schools sticking to hard skills and social growth rather than addressing beliefs or controversial topics is intended to support a system in which parents take individual responsibility for their own children's education, including teaching them family values and traditions in the home and using school mainly to augment home education. These ideological differences are reflected in the rhetoric liberal and conservative mothers use, such as the liberal focus on "all children" and the conservative focus on "one's own children," and on the relative efficacies of these phrasings.

After interviewing just 16 women from Florida, it is not possible to make sweeping generalizations about liberals and conservatives or about all mothers, especially in states that do not share Florida's particular social, political, and educational context. However, this study uncovered a number of promising new questions to explore within the fields of educational activism, mothers' activism and political involvement, and changing social roles for mothers and women more broadly. Future work studying mothers' activism in other states, how different

stakeholders understand the division of responsibility for raising children, and how mothers' activism is effective or ineffective in realms of policy beyond education could provide new insights into these areas.

As the ever-present culture wars continue to revisit old and visit new topics, and as women and mothers continue to assert their presence in public life and politics, understanding the role of women and mothers in educational activism—and activism more broadly—becomes increasingly relevant for understanding politics and public policy. By exploring why and how mothers change policies, influence politics, and reshape their communities and world for their children, we can gain insight into how America is changed by and for women, children, and mothers, and we can explore ways to find compromise, resolve debates, and create educational policy designed to benefit all families and all children.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interviewees

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Organization(s)</i>	<i>Political Views</i>	<i>Format</i>
Amelia	Florida Freedom to Read Project; activism with Unitarian Universalist Church	Liberal	Virtual
Olivia	School board member; Moms for Liberty	Conservative	Virtual
Clara	Florida Democratic Party (county leadership)	Liberal	In-person
Maria	Foundation 451; Moms Demand Action	Liberal	In-person
Carol	The Opt Out Florida Network; Florida Freedom to Read Project	Liberal	In-person
Evelyn	Public education advocacy organization* (founder); League of Women Voters; Moms Demand Action; Parent Teacher Association, Student Advisory Council, and textbook revision committee at child's school	Liberal	In-person
Sophia	Moms for Liberty (leadership); running for state office	Conservative	Virtual
Angela	School board member; Leadership Institute; associated with Moms for Liberty and Moms for America	Conservative	Virtual
Elizabeth	School board member; Florida Democratic Party; Parenting With Pride	Liberal	Virtual
Ava	School board member; local food insecurity-related nonprofits	Conservative	Virtual
Jane	Moms for Liberty (formerly chapter leadership); county public schools book review committee	Conservative	Virtual
Mia	Moms for America; religious education advocacy organization* (co-founder)	Conservative	In-person
Megan	School board member; racial justice advocacy organization*	Liberal	In-person
Isabella	No Left Turn in Education; Leadership Institute	Conservative	Virtual

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Organization(s)</i>	<i>Political Views</i>	<i>Format</i>
Allison	Florida Citizens' Alliance; county public schools book review committee	Conservative	Virtual
Brianna	ACLU of Florida (volunteer); Parent Teacher Association at child's school	Liberal	Virtual

*\*Names of small local organizations removed to protect participants' anonymity.*

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

How did you get involved with [organization]?

What does your involvement in [organization] look like? Activities, meetings, etc.

What sort of work does your chapter of [organization] do? School board candidates, school board meetings, parents' rights legislation advocacy, etc.

Did you have previous experience in activism or civic outreach before getting involved with [organization]?

Do you plan to stay involved with [organization] or with activism more broadly in the future?

Do you have kids?

*NO:*

- What led you to be involved in [organization] despite not being a parent?

*YES:*

- Did becoming a mother influence your political views? If so, how?
- How does being a mother shape the way you're involved in activism?

Do mothers have a unique or important perspective on political issues?

Do you think people take activism more seriously when it comes from mothers?

Is there a distinction between the roles of mothers and fathers, socially or in politics? How about between mothers and other women who don't have children?

What makes someone a good mother?

What role should mothers' play in their children's education?

What is the role of parents versus the government in educating children?

Who should have a voice in deciding school policies? Government, parents only, all taxpayers, students?

Both liberal and conservative education organizations sometimes bill themselves as supporting liberty. What does liberty mean to you?

What is the role of school libraries in educating children? Who should decide what kids can read, and who should decide what books can be available in school libraries at all?

Vignette questions:

I have a couple different examples of books. Can you tell me on what basis they should be available to students – removed entirely, allowed with some form of parental consent, or freely available? Does this change depending on the students' ages?

- A book with a gay side character. It contains no explicit sexual content. It does explain, in basic terms, what it means to be gay.
- A book that celebrates southern heritage, including very positive depictions of the antebellum South and the Confederacy. It has no sexual or violent content. It does not discuss slavery.
- A book depicting a teenager healing from sexual assault. The sexual assault is not described graphically. The teenager struggles with this experience throughout the book and sometimes copes through (non-graphically described) drug use or sexual behavior.

Some mothers who are education activists make religious arguments about politics, education, and the role of mothers. Is religion a factor in your advocacy, and if so, how?

Have you or has your organization been able to influence school or government policy? If so, why do you think you were successful in this?

Is there any current legislation focused on the education system that you're either excited about or disappointed in?

In an ideal world, what role does your organization play in developing policy?

What does your ideal education system look like?

Is there anything I missed that you'd like to add?

## **Appendix C: Recent Controversies**

Conservative activist groups, particularly Moms for Liberty, have faced several controversies throughout the duration of this study. Moms for Liberty and some other organizations offer a process for candidates running for local, state, and national offices to become endorsed by the organization. While Moms for Liberty candidates had enjoyed significant success before 2023 and continued to do so in particular regions, a relatively low proportion of Moms for Liberty candidates won elections in 2023. Also in 2023, an Indiana chapter of Moms for Liberty quoted Adolf Hitler in its newsletter, and the chairwomen of two chapters in Kentucky were removed after posing for photos with members of the Proud Boys, a far-right militant organization with a record of violence (Lerer and Mazzei 2023). At the end of 2023, Moms for Liberty founder and Sarasota County School Board member Bridget Ziegler and her husband, former Florida Republican Party Chair Christian Ziegler faced a sex scandal that resulted in the removal of Christian Ziegler from his position as Florida Republican Party Chair and a joint resolution from the rest of the Sarasota County School Board calling for Bridget Ziegler's resignation (Atterbury 2023; Leonard 2024).

Liberal activists have also been the subject of local or statewide controversy, although there has been less national media attention over scandals within liberal organizations. Over the last several years, liberal teachers and school board members have received criticism from parents and conservative political figures who claim they are attempting to indoctrinate students with liberal ideologies and purposefully exposing students to explicit or pornographic materials, which some say is done with the intent of grooming and preying on children in the school system (Nerozzi 2022; Grossman 2022). Liberal activists, politicians, and media sources have also received criticism for allegedly lying about book bans, including the scope of Florida's new

regulations and the books that have been removed from schools as a result (Chasmar 2022). Additionally, one liberal interviewee, Elizabeth, received targeted harassment, including death threats, physical intimidation, and false reports to social services regarding her family, after winning a local election, and she has received media attention in Florida and nationally after discussing these experiences.



## References

- Atterbury, Andrew. 2023. "Moms for Liberty Cofounder Refuses to Resign from Sarasota School Board." *POLITICO*. December 12, 2023.  
<https://www.politico.com/news/2023/12/12/sarasota-school-board-moms-for-liberty-00131448>.
- . 2024. "After National Backlash, Florida Lawmakers Eye Changes to Book Restrictions." *POLITICO*. January 19, 2024.  
<https://www.politico.com/news/2024/01/19/florida-book-challenges-fees-00136409>.
- Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. 2004. "Mobilizing Mothers for War: Cross-National Framing Strategies in Nicaragua's Contra War." *Gender and Society* 18 (6): 715–34.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4149391>.
- Bell, Melissa A., and Karen M. Kaufmann. 2015. "The Electoral Consequences of Marriage and Motherhood: How Gender Traits Influence Voter Evaluations of Female Candidates." *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 36 (1): 1–21.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2015.985150>.
- Bump, Philip. 2022. "Analysis | What Does 'Woke' Mean? Whatever Ron DeSantis Wants." *The Washington Post*, December 5, 2022.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/12/05/desantis-florida-woke-critical-race-theory/>.
- Burnett, Sara. 2023. "'Mama Bears' May Be the 2024 Race's Soccer Moms. But Where the GOP Seeks Votes, Some See Extremism." *AP News*. July 23, 2023.  
<https://apnews.com/article/2024-republicans-president-mama-bears-moms-desantis-a96ae3d1ed167f823360e7645ca4b519>.
- Burns, Nancy, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba. 2001. *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation*. Harvard University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1pncpnf>.
- Chasmar, Jessica. 2022. "Florida Gov. DeSantis Repeatedly Targeted by False Viral Claims amid 2024 Speculation." *Fox News*. August 23, 2022.  
<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/florida-gov-desantis-targeted-false-viral-claims-2024-speculation>.
- Craig, Tim. 2021. "Moms for Liberty Has Turned 'Parental Rights' into a Rallying Cry for Conservative Parents." *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2021.  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/moms-for-liberty-parents-rights/2021/10/14/bf3d9ccc-286a-11ec-8831-a31e7b3de188\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/moms-for-liberty-parents-rights/2021/10/14/bf3d9ccc-286a-11ec-8831-a31e7b3de188_story.html).
- Deason, Grace, Jill S. Greenlee, and Carrie A. Langner. 2015. "Mothers on the Campaign Trail: Implications of Politicized Motherhood for Women in Politics." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 3 (1): 133–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2014.992792>.

- Eagly, Alice H., Wendy Wood, and Mary C. Johannesen-Schmidt. 2004. "Social Role Theory of Sex Differences and Similarities: Implications for the Partner Preferences of Women and Men." In *The Psychology of Gender*, 2nd Ed, 269–95. New York, NY, US: The Guilford Press.
- Edmonds-Cady, Cynthia. 2009. "Mobilizing Motherhood: Race, Class, and the Uses of Maternalism in the Welfare Rights Movement." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37 (3/4): 206–22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27740590>.
- Elder, Laurel, and Steven Greene. 2006. "The Children Gap on Social Welfare and the Politicization of American Parents, 1984–2000." *Politics & Gender* 2 (4): 451–72. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X06060144>.
- Eliasoph, Nina. 1998. *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*. Cambridge Cultural Social Studies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fuentes, Emma. 2013. "Political Mothering: Latina and African American Mothers in the Struggle for Educational Justice." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 44 (3): 304–19. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24028882>.
- Gardner, Sophie. 2024. "Republicans Have a Young Woman Problem." *POLITICO*. April 5, 2024. <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/women-rule/2023/06/30/republicans-have-a-young-woman-problem-00104401>.
- Gibson, Katie L., and Amy L. Heyse. 2014. "Depoliticizing Feminism: Frontier Mythology and Sarah Palin's 'The Rise of The Mama Grizzlies.'" *Western Journal of Communication* 78 (1): 97–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2013.812744>.
- Goss, Kristin A. 2013. "Women, Citizenship, and Public Policy in the 21st Century." In *The Paradox of Gender Equality; How American Women's Groups Gained and Lost Their Public Voice*, 186–202. University of Michigan Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.4844961.11>.
- Goss, Kristin A., and Michael T. Heaney. 2010. "Organizing Women as Women : Hybridity and Grassroots Collective Action in the 21st Century." *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (1): 27–52. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25698514>.
- Greenlee, Jill S. 2010. "Soccer Moms, Hockey Moms and the Question of 'Transformative' Motherhood." *Politics & Gender* 6 (3): 405–31. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000292>.
- . 2014. *The Political Consequences of Motherhood*. University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.5915695>.
- Grossman, Hannah. 2022. "Florida Dad Speaks out after School Board Cut His Mic for Reading 'Pornography' Books He Found in District." *Fox News*. July 12, 2022. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/florida-dad-speaks-after-school-board-cut-mic-reading-pornography-books-found-in-district>.

- Howe, Samantha. 2015. "THE PROFESSIONAL IS POLITICAL: THE ABSENCE OF MOTHERHOOD IDENTITY IN MODERN US HEALTH POLICY DISCOURSE." *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 5 (2): 54–70. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=306566>.
- Howell, Susan E., and Christine L. Day. 2000. "Complexities of the Gender Gap." *Journal of Politics* 62 (3): 858–74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-3816.00036>.
- Irons, Jenny. 1998. "The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation: A Study of Women in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement." *Gender and Society* 12 (6): 692–709. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/190513>.
- Jones, Andrea, and Emilie Kao. 2019. "Sexual Ideology Indoctrination: The Equality Act's Impact on School Curriculum and Parental Rights." *The Heritage Foundation*. May 15, 2019. <https://www.heritage.org/civil-society/report/sexual-ideology-indoctrination-the-equality-acts-impact-school-curriculum-and>.
- Klein, Emily. 2011. "Spectacular Citizenships: Staging Latina Resistance through Urban Performances of Pain." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 32 (1): 102–24. <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.32.1.0102>.
- Koven, Seth, and Sonya Michel, eds. 1993. *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315021164>.
- Ladd-Taylor, Molly. 1994. *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930*. University of Illinois Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctv30pnvdb>.
- Lawson, Erica S. 2018. "Bereaved Black Mothers and Maternal Activism in the Racial State." *Feminist Studies* 44 (3): 713–35. <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.44.3.0713>.
- Leonard, Kimberly. 2024. "Ex-Florida GOP Chair Ziegler Won't Face Criminal Charges." *POLITICO*. March 6, 2024. <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/03/06/florida-gop-christian-ziegler-00145380>.
- Lerer, Lisa, and Patricia Mazzei. 2023. "Florida Sex Scandal Shakes Moms for Liberty, as Group's Influence Wanes." *The New York Times*. December 18, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/16/us/politics/moms-for-liberty-sex-scandal.html>.
- Marietta, Morgan. 2009. "The Absolutist Advantage: Sacred Rhetoric in Contemporary Presidential Debate." *Political Communication* 26 (4): 388–411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600903296986>.
- Michel, Sonya. 2012. "Maternalism and Beyond." In *Maternalism Reconsidered: Motherhood, Welfare and Social Policy in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Marian van der Klein, Rebecca Jo Plant, Nichole Sanders, and Lori R. Weintrob, 1st ed., 22–37. Berghahn Books. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qdfdr.4>.

- Nerozzi, Timothy. 2022. "FL Mom Describes Horror of Finding 'sexualized' Books at School as DeSantis Signs Curriculum Transparency Bill." *Fox News*. March 25, 2022.  
<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/desantis-signs-bill-curriculum-transparency-parents>.
- Nickerson, Michelle M. 2012. *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right*. Princeton University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7sqjx>.
- Nottingham, Shawn. 2024. "Florida's 'Stop WOKE Act' Commits a 'First Amendment Sin,' Appeals Court Says in Ruling That Blocks Part of the Bill | CNN Politics." *CNN*. March 5, 2024.  
<https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/05/politics/florida-anti-woke-act-blocked-businesses/index.html>.
- Painter, David Lynn, and Juliana Fernandes. 2021. "They're Not Just Words: The Verbal Style of U.S. Presidential Debate Rhetoric." *Communication Studies* 72 (5): 899–914.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2021.1975145>.
- Pardo, Mary. 1990. "Mexican American Women Grassroots Community Activists: 'Mothers of East Los Angeles.'" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 11 (1): 1–7.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3346696>.
- Perera, Rachel M., Jon Valant, Nicolas Zerbino, and Brock Schultz. n.d. "How Did School Board Candidates Endorsed by Moms for Liberty Perform in 2023?" *Brookings*. Accessed March 12, 2024.  
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-did-school-board-candidates-endorsed-by-moms-for-liberty-perform-in-2023/>.
- Pew Research Center. 2015. "Raising Kids and Running a Household: How Working Parents Share the Load." Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project (blog). November 4, 2015.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/11/04/raising-kids-and-running-a-household-how-working-parents-share-the-load/>.
- . 2023. "Gender and Parenting." Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project (blog). January 24, 2023.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/gender-and-parenting/>.
- Plant, Rebecca Jo. 2012. "Afterword: Maternalism Today." In *Maternalism Reconsidered: Motherhood, Welfare and Social Policy in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Rebecca Jo Plant, Marian van der Klein, Nichole Sanders, and Lori R. Weintrob, 1st ed., 244–50. Berghahn Books. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qdfdrd.15>.
- Rodino-Colocino, Michelle. 2012. "Man Up, Woman Down: Mama Grizzlies and Anti-Feminist Feminism during the Year of the (Conservative) Woman and Beyond: Women & Language." *Women & Language* 35 (1): 79–95.  
<http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=84559642&authtype=shib&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

- Rohter, Larry. 2008. "Plumber From Ohio Is Thrust Into Spotlight." *The New York Times*, October 16, 2008, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/16/us/politics/16plumber.html>.
- Rosen, Lisa. 2009. "Rhetoric and Symbolic Action in the Policy Process." In *Handbook of Education Policy Research*, edited by Gary Sykes, Barbara Schneider, and David N. Plank. London: Routledge.
- Schreiber, Ronnee. 2016. "Gender Roles, Motherhood, and Politics: Conservative Women's Organizations Frame Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann." *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 37 (1): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2016.1115319>.
- . 2018. "Is There a Conservative Feminism? An Empirical Account." *Politics & Gender* 14 (1): 56–79. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X17000587>.
- Skocpol, Theda. 1999. "Advocates without Members: The Recent Transformation of American Civic Life." In *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, edited by Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, 461–510. Brookings Institution Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctv86dhdr.16>.
- Tyack, David, and Elisabeth Hansot. 1981. "Conflict and Consensus in American Public Education." *Daedalus* 110 (3): 1–25. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024738>.