

# Creating Pro-Family Law and Politics

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**Date :** February 19, 2020

Stacie Taranto, [\*Kitchen Table Politics: Conservative Women and Family Values in New York\*](#) (2017).

Stacie Taranto's carefully researched, compelling study of antiabortion homemakers in New York captures the kind of populism, gender politics, and economic anxiety that continue to shape the contemporary movement to criminalize abortion. Focusing on activists who mounted a longshot, third-party campaign for the White House, [\*Kitchen Table Politics\*](#) provides a fascinating look into the changing GOP coalition. As important, the suburban homemakers that Taranto studies provide a powerful example of how certain populist, grassroots movements create change by at once relying on and denouncing the legal system.

*Kitchen Table Politics* begins before the vital campaigns that would transform the law of abortion and sex equality. Taranto takes the time to understand the personal experiences and socioeconomic forces that encouraged Catholic homemakers to become active. As Taranto shows, for many homemakers, antiabortion activism had both religious and economic roots. *Kitchen Table Politics* explores the upward mobility cherished by Catholic homemakers born during the Depression, many of whom had only recently settled into a comfortable life in the suburbs. These activists, Taranto shows, felt that the legal reforms proposed by feminists would destroy the lives that they had only just managed to build. And Vatican II, an ecumenical council that laid the groundwork for modern Catholicism, created organizations that homemakers would use to launch state and national legal campaigns. Vatican II consolidated the power of bishops, priests, and other male leaders of the Church. At the same time, as Taranto shows, Vatican II gave rise to parish-level organizations that would serve as the launching point of campaigns to maintain criminal laws on abortion and to defeat an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution.

By chronicling the involvement of Catholic homemakers in the campaign to preserve (and later reinstate) criminal abortion laws in New York State, Taranto shows that grassroots conservatism evolved not just in the Sunbelt but in communities across the country. Shocked by the repeal of abortion restrictions in New York, homemakers successfully lobbied for the reinstatement of criminal laws before Governor Nelson Rockefeller (R-NY) vetoed the proposal.

But Taranto shows that Rockefeller's veto further energized homemakers who committed to the defeat of the ERA. The homemakers who organized Operation Wakeup, one of the groups at the center of Taranto's study, offer fresh perspective on the fight against the ERA. Historians have focused on Phyllis Schlafly's STOP ERA, the best-known national organization in the struggle, but by centering on state-level activism, *Kitchen Table Politics* shows how the anti-ERA campaign mobilized class as well as gender politics to sway undecided voters, especially women. Homemakers emphasized their experiences as mothers and their lack of legal sophistication and elite connections in asking other voters to reject the ERA. In this way, Taranto shows, anti-feminist homemakers used the fight against a state ERA in New York to build an enduring conservative network. The political organizations that sprouted up to defeat the ERA would be repurposed to influence the Republican Party's position on social issues in both New York and in the nation as a whole.

The women who helped to defeat New York's state ERA knew that they stood little chance of winning the 1976 presidential election when one of their own, Ellen McCormack, made a bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. As Taranto details, these women initially saw national politics as a vehicle for television advertisements that could shape public opinion about abortion and lay the groundwork for an antiabortion constitutional amendment. *Kitchen Table Politics* illuminates the interplay between formal strategies for legal reform and failed campaigns like McCormack's. While McCormack did not win a single state, her candidacy forced other presidential candidates to confront the abortion issue, paving the way for many social conservatives to switch parties in the years to come.

McCormack and her allies also helped to crystallize arguments about the rights of women to assume traditional, heterosexual roles in the nuclear family. While not carrying the day in 1976, these arguments captured the attention of national strategists and political operatives seeking to incorporate Catholics and evangelical Protestants into the Republican fold. Historians of the New Right often describe the effort to mobilize conservative religious voters as an effort to broaden the GOP coalition. *Kitchen Table Politics* shows that voters like those who supported McCormack also created a potent new "pro-family" message used to court new allies.

*Kitchen Table Politics* provides a captivating case study of the strategies still used by populist legal reform movements to advance their agendas. The Catholic homemakers who fought legal abortion and the ERA did so by proclaiming their distaste for both legal reform and for politics. This hostility to legal elites was a recruiting tool. By contrasting themselves to (at least theoretically) more sophisticated feminists, homemakers presented themselves as more authentic and in touch with the needs of ordinary people, all the while using the same kinds of legal and political tactics they supposedly abhorred.

While helping make sense of populist movements, past and present, Taranto paints an engaging, complex portrait of the homemakers who created a new brand of maternalist politics. With empathy and nuance, *Kitchen Table Politics* shows how women who made the "personal political" (5) viewed the security of a suburban lifestyle "an achievement to be protected at all costs" (10). The anti-feminist populism Taranto describes so able grew out of more than the reforms championed by the movement for women's liberation. First generation suburbanites reacted as much to the economic downturn of the 1970s, to the parish level changes brought on by Vatican II, and to their own increasing isolation in homogenous, white communities that made them more committed to the defense of families like their own, even at the expense of others. Today, as a kind of pro-family populism again commands national attention, *Kitchen Table Politics* is a reminder that the women who flock to it are anything but simple.

Cite as: Mary Ziegler, *Creating Pro-Family Law and Politics*, JOTWELL (February 19, 2020) (reviewing Stacie Taranto, **Kitchen Table Politics: Conservative Women and Family Values in New York** (2017)), <https://legalhist.jotwell.com/creating-pro-family-law-and-politics/>.