

Ways & Means Transcript—S1E3—Women in Politics

Emily Hanford (EH): From Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, this is Ways and Means. We're all about fresh insights into how society really works and how it could work better. I'm Emily Hanford.

Pat Schroeder (PS): So, he came home one night and he said, "Okay, they decided that you should run." I said, "Are you kidding? I've got a 2-year-old, a 6-year-old – you know – What?"

EH: This is Pat Schroeder. She's talking about the night when her husband Jim came home to tell her he'd gotten together with some activist friends and they wanted Pat to run for Congress. It was 1972. Pat immediately said, "No." Actually, she said, "Were you guys drinking?" In 1972, the idea of a women running for national office was kind of crazy.

PS: There were many women, who were very good friends, telling me, "We don't even have a woman on the school board, Pat. What are you thinking?"

EH: She was thirty-one and, um, kind of outspoken.

PS: I must say, I got into great trouble really early on. My mother just about died. I don't suffer fools lightly. And every media person would say to me, "How can you be a congresswoman and a mother?" And I got through about 40 of those questions, and on the 41st, I think I said, "I have a brain and I have a uterus and they both work." And my dear mother was like, "You didn't say that."

EH: Coming up on this episode of Ways and Means: women in politics. We're going to look at how women gained a political voice and then, in some ways, lost it. And we're going to ask what can women do to get their political voice back.

PS: Look, I hadn't planned to be a politician. I didn't particularly want to be a politician. I always thought the loser should have to go to Washington because I really liked living in Denver.

EH: When Pat Schroeder was considering that run for Congress in 1972, she was certainly qualified. She'd graduated from Harvard Law School, one of only 15 women in a class of 500 men. She'd been a lawyer for the National Labor Relations board in Colorado. She'd done pro bono work for fair housing and planned parenthood. Those were the issues she cared about. Also, Vietnam. She was antiwar at a time when the Vietnam war dominated the headlines. And there weren't a lot of politicians representing her point of view. Pat says the Democrat who was set to oppose the incumbent republican in the Colorado house race, he planned to run to the right of that Republican. Pat's supporters were desperate for an alternative. Finally, it was her husband Jim who said the magic words, "It'll all end in September." Meaning, of course, that as a woman, she wouldn't win; that wouldn't even win the primary. Pat decided she'd do it. She invited some of her female friends over and they began crafting messages on key issues. They called themselves the Kitchen Table Media.

PS: We had three posters and they were all on paper that we got for nothing. So, they were bright pink, bright green, bright – you know, they weren't the traditional red, white, and blue thing.

EH: These friends made it clear: They were going to do things differently. And they weren't afraid to challenge the accepted political wisdom. Here's an example. It has to do with the Olympics. Denver had received the nod to host the 1976 games, but Pat didn't think it was a good idea. The city was lacking housing and infrastructure, some of the plans to fix those problems were expensive and kind of nutty.

PS: The prospect was they were gonna have to change all the roads – the mounds to one way in the morning and one way at night. It was just crazy.

EH: And she said so. Pat told voters she thought the plans for the Olympics made no sense.

PS: And, of course, with that, I made both the unions and the business people mad, but the people got it. And I think they appreciated somebody not – um, not wobbling on it.

EH: Pat also addressed national issues. President Nixon had been promising to withdraw troops from Vietnam. Pat's group drew up more posters.

PS: And one poster had a picture of the military cemetery in Denver, and the caption under it was: 1. A quote from Nixon, "Yes, many of our troops have already been withdrawn." It was a very dramatic picture with a bird flying over the tombstones.

EH: Pat's outspoken nature brought her notice, notoriety even. And she won the election! But even then, many people questioned whether a woman, especially a mother with young kids, whether she could do the job. Even women questioned her.

PS: I remember even Bella Abzug calling me after I won. I had not met her but she called me to congratulate me.

EH: Bella Abzug was an early feminist. And when Pat was running for office, Bella was already representing a Congressional district in Manhattan.

PS: And then she said, "But I hear you have two kids!" And I said, "Yes, I have two children. I have a 2-year-old and a 6-year-old." And she said, "I don't think you can do it." So, I mean, we're talking 1972, you know?

EH: Pat did do it, though. She spent 24 years in the U.S. House. And now of course, it's not really controversial for a woman to run for office. There are hundreds of women serving in political office across the country. We've had a female Speaker of the House, we've had several female Secretaries of State. There are women governors, women senators, women running for president. The battle is won, right? Well, research shows that while women have made gains in getting elected to office, in some ways, women as a political group are less powerful than they once were; less powerful than they were back in the 1950s. The ideal woman of the 1950s was, in many ways, June Cleaver. She was the mom in the hit TV Show "Leave It to Beaver." She didn't work outside the home, she certainly didn't run for office, and she was often dispensing conventional wisdom. Like she does here, in a scene where her son Beaver is wondering about girls.

Beaver: Girls have got it lucky. Don't they, Mom?

June Cleaver (JC): Why do you say that?

Beaver: Well, they don't have to be smart. They don't have to get jobs or anything. All they have to do is get married?

JC: Well, Beaver, being smart isn't exactly a drawback to marriage.

Beaver: Well, if they don't get married they can become dressmakers, or cut people's nails in the barbershop, or take care of kids, and a lot of other dumb stuff.

JC: Well, Beaver, today girls can be doctors and lawyers, too, you know. They're just as ambitious as boys are.

EH: Not many women were doctors and lawyers back then. But you might be surprised to know that many 1950s women, whether they lived in Topeka or Portland or Memphis, many of those women actually had a powerful voice in Washington.

Kristin Goss: What I found is that in the June Cleaver 1950s, women's groups were incredibly active on a wide range of issues.

EH: This is Kristin Goss. She's an Associate Professor at Duke University. She studies women's role in policy and politics over the decades and she's written a whole book on the subject titled "The Paradox of Gender Equality." Her research shows, contrary to popular belief, women in the 1950s were not tied by their apron strings to their stoves. After World War II, when many of them did go to work, think Rosie the Riveter; after the war, many women in America joined local and national groups and were actively supporting causes they cared about. And they were not simply dealing with, air quotes here, "women's issues."

KG: Most of the issues they were engaged in in the mid-century decades were things like international relations, poverty, health, juvenile justice. All sorts of issues that you wouldn't normally think of "women's issues." Women's groups were incredibly important working both individually and in coalitions to push for all sorts of policy reforms.

EH: So, even though there were fewer women in elected office in the 50s, women were actively pushing for change behind the scenes. They were involved in local affiliates of big national groups, like the League of Women Voters, and the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and The American Association of University Women. They spent time, lots of time, conducting research on things they cared about. They even testified in front of Congress, regularly.

KG: I read thousands of hearing transcripts in the course of doing this research. And you could see very often, the woman who was testifying, the leader of this organization starting her testimony by establishing the organization's credibility by suggesting the number of members the chapter had, or the number of chapters that the organization had, the amount of time they had put into studying or gathering political information about the issue. So, these groups had leverage

EH: Kristin found that these 1950s women? They got a lot of respect from politicians and policy experts.

KG: They had a lot of political clout. Women voted and they were organized in every Congressional district. So, members of Congress were actually listening to what women's groups were doing.

EH: From the 50s, to the radical 60s, to the 70s, women's opportunities were expanding and so was the League of Women Voters. Members of the league peaked in the 1970s at the height of the women's movement. But then membership started to fall. It seems there was a price to pay for women's lib. As soon as women started working outside the home, they had less time. And when women do get involved in political action today, according to Kristin, they often focus on a single issue they care about. One that's near and dear to their heart; maybe their kid's school or reproductive rights. Women as a group, speaking with one voice on a range of issues? That's not really happening anymore, not like it was back in the 1950s. So, why does this matter? Who cares whether women's groups are active? After all, we have lots of women in positions of power now. But Kristin argues, it's not enough for women to hold office. First of all, women aren't being elected in the same numbers as men. Not even close. And Kristin says women, as a group, they traditionally hold views that are quite distinct from men; on key issues like social spending and the decision to go to war. Those views are hard to press for if you're one of the only, or the only woman in the room.

KG: So, if you have a taken woman in some position of power, she's not necessarily gonna feel comfortable advocating for some of the perspectives or concerns that women as a group might share. She might actually be penalized for that.

EH: Kristin says without strong women's groups behind them, women in office can behave, well, not that much differently from men. Kristin says for a good example of this, look to the business world. To women who lead corporations and nonprofits.

KG: You're there having to be responsive to your general membership regardless of gender. To your board of trustees or directors, to your funders, you know. Women just like men have multiple constituencies when they're in these kinds of groups. So, they're not always going to be bringing some kind of "women's perspective."

EH: And Kristin argues there is indeed a women's perspective. Her research shows women tend to be more progressive than men.

KG: So, I think gun control is a great example. There's always been a gender gap on that issue where women are more in favor of gun regulation than are men. And by the way, that is not driven simply by the fact that men are more likely to own guns than women. There is a real underlying gender difference there.

PS: The one question I used to get all the time in college campuses is: When is it a convenient time to have a baby? Yeah, well, like, never. We haven't done anything to make it convenient.

EH: Pat Schroeder is in her 70s now. She left Washington in 1997. During her time in office, she was known for her sassy wit. While she was on the Armed Services Committee, she told Pentagon officials that if they were women, they'd always be pregnant because they never said no. And she was known for her hard work, too. And her ambition. She even thought about running for president. It was 1987 and Senator Gary Hart's presidential bid had suddenly fallen apart because of a sex scandal. Pat publicly flirted with the idea of making a bid for the White House. But ultimately determined it was too late to raise millions of dollars and attract enough delegates. And she concluded that as a woman, she just wouldn't be able to win. So, standing at a podium in Denver, she told the world she would not run for president.

PS: I said that I wanted America to see me as a candidate for president who was a woman, rather than a woman's candidate and label me and pigeonhole me because I felt my qualifications were every bit as good and had my name been Patrick that's how they would have treated it.

EH: A little later in the speech, she began to cry.

PS: That's why I will not be a candidate for president. I could not figure out how to run –

EH: Pat says she caught a lot of flak for crying and it's always bugged her. For years, she kept a file of men who teared up in public.

PS: And it seemed to be great if men did it. If men did it, it showed compassion and sensitivity and all these wonderful things. If women did it, then it was, "Oh, my word. She's having a breakdown. This is just terrible. I can't believe it."

EH: And that moment, that moment where she showed human emotion in the speech? Pat says this is why women should be elected to political office and why they should band together as a group to support one another to fight for issues they care about. She says showing emotion is something many women are comfortable with and she's glad to see men getting comfort in that area, too. That's something Washington, D.C. needs more of, not less.

PS: Oh! One of the things I used to say when they criticized me about crying – I would say, "Well, you don't – I'll debate that. If you want someone who answers the red phone, which is the nuclear phone, that doesn't cry, okay. I think I would like somebody who does cry, because I would like to have them think, "This is a really compassionate, terrible thing that could happen to humanity if that phone rings."

EH: Today, both Pat Schroeder and Kristin Goss are involved in women's groups. Kristin, with the League of Women Voters.

KG: I mean, women are what 20, roughly 20 percent of Congress? And, you know, that's up quite a bit from 20 years ago but women are 50 percent of the population. So, we're dramatically underrepresented in Congress. So, if you're interested in building a movement to change some sort of policy, it's really important that you be able to find a way to tap into underlying identities and bring people together and hold them together. And I think gender is still one of them.

EH: Pat works with a Florida group called Ruth's List. It's a network of women who give their skills, time, and money to help Democratic women get elected to local and state office in Florida. Pat recruits women for the group. She tells them how fun it is to put down their laptops and cellphones and get their hands dirty in face-to-face politics. She tells them stories from the heyday of women's lib. Like when she was participating in the effort to get the Equal Rights Amendment ratified. She and a bunch of women got together to show their support. They had such fun, she says. They would show up at conservative events wearing hats, and gloves, and aprons, carrying ironing boards. And they also wore pins that said "59 cents is enough". That was an ironic reference to the pay gap back then. Women were paid 59 cents to every dollar men earned. And by the way, there's still a big wage gap. Today it's 78 cents to the dollar. But Pat says many women today seem reluctant to join women's groups and fight for things like pay equity. A lot of them don't have the time. But Pat thinks it's more than that. She thinks

women suffer from a lack of self-confidence. Somehow, they still don't think they belong in positions of power and influence. They doubt themselves more than men do.

PS: And you've seen all of the studies come out saying, you know, men will apply for a job that they're only 60 percent qualified and women think they have to be 150 percent qualified. We still have some kind of hang up about thinking that we're not really able to do it. It makes me crazy.

EH: Ways and Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Johns, and Karen Kemp. If you head to our website, waysnadmeansshow.org, you can find an essay Pat Schroeder wrote about gender and politics. You can also find more information about Kristin Goss' book "The Paradox of Gender Equality: How American Women's Groups Gained and Lost Their Public Voice." Katherine Zhou does the art for our show. You should go to our website and check it out it's really cool. Our assistant producer is Susannah Roberson and we had engineering help from Rob Byers. We're a production of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University and we thank you so much for listening. We've gotten notes from a number of you telling us you like the show. Thank you. We hope you'll take a minute to leave a review at iTunes. It'll help other people find the show. Until next time, I'm Emily Hanford.

Clip from TV show

Man 1: ...and Jerry Mathers as The Beaver.

Beaver (Boy): Hey, it's funny.

Man 2: What's funny, son?

Beaver: Well, whenever we cook inside, Mom always does the cooking. Whenever we cook outside, you always do it. How come?

Man 2: Well, it's traditional, I guess. They say a woman's place is in the home. I suppose as long as she's in the home, she might as well be in the kitchen.

Boy: Oh. Well, that explains about Mom. But how come you always do the outside cooking?

Man 2: Well, I'll tell you, son. Women do all right when they have all the modern conveniences, but us men are better at this rugged type of outdoor cooking. Sort of a throwback to cavemen days.