

[Geraldine Ferraro and the Triumph of Feminism](#)

[David Boaz](#) - March 28, 2011

Geraldine Ferraro; © 1984 Dennis Brack/Black Star

The death Saturday of [Geraldine Ferraro](#), the first woman nominated for national office by a major political party, prompts reflections on the [feminist](#) revolution in our time. Young people today, in a world where women are 57 percent of college students and women serve on the Supreme Court, as Speaker of the House, and as CEOs of top companies, may not recognize how different things were a generation ago. At the same time, we should guard against the tendency to flatter ourselves that everyone who lived before, say, the invention of Google was racist, sexist, homophobic, and uncool.



The nomination of Ferraro, like President [Reagan](#)'s appointment of the [first woman](#) to the Supreme Court just three years earlier, was more the acknowledgment than the catalyst of a remarkably rapid change in attitudes toward women's role in society. Just look at the sitcoms of the 1950s and early 1960s: they portrayed men who went out to work and women who were homemakers. From the late 1960s on, that perspective dramatically changed.

In the 1960s and 1970s feminism swept the field, overwhelming all opposition. (I see that [Betty Friedan](#) also [saw this](#).) Not everyone was instantly converted to the idea that women should be politically and socially equal to men. Conservatives rallied opposition to the feminist movement. They spoke of traditional values and women's natural role. In his 1986 book *Men and Marriage*, an update of *Sexual Suicide* (1973), conservative writer George Gilder argued that society should not "devalue" man's role as "producer and achiever" by "pressing women to provide for themselves, prove their 'independence,' and compete with men for money and status." Phyllis Schlafly, organizer of Stop the Equal Rights Amendment, was the only prominent conservative woman. But as early as 1975 conservatives swooned over the new leader of the British Conservative Party, [Margaret Thatcher](#), and they elected Rep. Marjorie Holt (R-MD) chairwoman of the House conservative caucus, the Republican Study Committee.

By 2008 conservatives insisted that a mother of five, one of them a special-needs infant and another a pregnant teenager, could easily serve as vice president of the United States. They have enthusiastically supported not just [Sarah Palin](#) but Michelle Bachmann, Nikki Haley, Mary Fallin, and Sharron Angle for office.

There were a few pockets of resistance along the way. In 1984 the *New York Times* [insisted on calling](#) Geraldine Ferraro “Mrs. Ferraro,” still refusing to accept the feminist “Ms.,” and despite the fact that her husband’s name was Zaccaro.

But today feminism has become so intellectually dominant that it is difficult to hold scholarly discussions of gender differences. I sent the board members of the Human Rights Campaign reeling when I told them in 1995 that although market capitalism would [continue](#) to [liberate women](#), women would never run 250 of the Fortune 500 companies because “men have testosterone, women have babies.” Even if you’re a [John Bates Clark Medal](#) winner and a former secretary of the Treasury, you can [lose your job](#) as president of Harvard [if you even suggest the possibility](#) that factors other than discrimination might account for the relative lack of women at the very top of the scientific elite.

Still, it was scarcely a generation ago, in 1978, that [Nancy Landon Kassebaum](#) (R-KS) became the [first woman elected to the United States Senate](#) who did not follow her husband into Congress. Her father, [Alf Landon](#), had been governor of Kansas and the Republican nominee for president in 1936. Two years later Paula Hawkins (R-FL) became the first woman elected to the Senate whose entry into politics had not been preceded by any male relatives. Today there are 17 women in the Senate. In California, Maine, and New Hampshire, both senators are women. Women have served as governor in 26 states, including such presumably conservative states as Kentucky, Kansas, Nebraska, Arizona, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Texas, and South Carolina. That’s a real change, and change has been even more dramatic in colleges, law firms, hospitals, offices, and other workplaces. Geraldine Ferraro played a role in that process.

Postscript: By the way, if you ask any well-informed person “who was the first woman in American history to win an electoral vote?,” he or she would likely respond “Geraldine Ferraro.” (Though in my experience, most people are completely flummoxed by the question.) That’s not the right answer, though. The first woman to receive an electoral vote was [Theodora “Tonie” Nathan](#), the vice presidential nominee of the [Libertarian Party](#) in 1972, when a Republican elector from Virginia couldn’t stomach voting for Nixon and Agnew. For a libertarian-feminist perspective, read [Vindication of the Rights of Woman](#) by [Mary Wollstonecraft](#) (1792) or [Reclaiming the Mainstream: Individualist Feminism Rediscovered](#) by Joan Kennedy Taylor (1992).