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ABSTRACT

The National Women's Political Caucus is presented as the instrument on which the entire feminist movement will depend for leadership and eventual success. Development of the organization is described in the context of Rosenwasser's classification system of rhetorical analysis. The goals, tactics, and strategies of the Caucus are also discussed. An evaluation of internal (member-directed) communication reveals three purposes: reinforcement of the basic beliefs and goals of the Caucus and the movement of which it is a part, dissemination of information, and exhortation to action and unity. Purposes of external communication are to obtain media attention, to influence power agents, and to proselytize (to convert through consciousness raising). This analysis emphasizes that women acting in concert from the basis of strong political organization can have the power to shape any society or nation. (EE)

"The National Women's Political Caucus: A Rhetorical Biography"

Judith S. Trent and Jimmie D. Trent

The dream was implicit a century ago when the first female candidate for the nation's highest office was chosen--at a time when she and nearly all of her sex could not even vote;[1] and the hypothesis, that women, if they can but act in concert, have the power to shape any society or nation, goes all the way back to Aristophanes. One factor in preventing the dream from becoming reality was the absence of a unifying common purpose and a political organization to translate clear numerical majorities into obvious political power. But in July, 1971, 300 women who in Bella Abzug's words would "settle for nothing less than equal representation in all levels of political power,"[2] met in Washington and proclaimed the formation of a multi-partisan organization, the National Women's Political Caucus.

What is the National Women's Political Caucus? What are its goals? Through what means do they seek to achieve their goals? And is the caucus truly multi-partisan and action oriented, or is it simply another attempt by women liberationists to raise consciousness and further publicize the women's movement? The attempt to provide answers to these questions will be the focus of this analysis.

Rosenwasser proposed a classification system applicable to the rhetorical analysis of the Women's Liberation Movement. This five-stage schema placed the movement (as it existed in 1972) in the third stage, which was classfied as conversion and change, and suggested that one of the most significant accomplishments

of the third stage was the formation of the National Women's Political Caucus.[3] We suggest that not only was the formation of the Caucus a significant accomplishment in the third stage--but that the Caucus is the instrument on which the entire movement will depend for leadership through the fourth stage of revision and solidification into the fifth stage--success.

What is the National Women's Political Caucus? It is a part of a larger movement--as Shirley Chisholm said, "the weight and muscle of the women's liberation movement;"[4] and it is the action state of all of the consciousness raising since 1966.

Although the organizational meeting in July of 1971 was convened by the superstars of the women's liberation movement and an odd-lot coalition of activists from Congress, the Caucus quickly proclaimed itself a grass roots political organization issuing a clarion call to:

> Every woman whose abilities are wasted in an underpaid, underutilized and unimpowered job; Every woman who sits at home with little control over her own life, much less the powerful institutions of this country; Every woman who must go on welfare because she cannot afford to work; Every woman of a minority who has endured twice the stigma.[5]

The Caucus is organized in each of the fifty states and the national headquarters in Washington claims its membership to be more than 30,000. Although Caucus membership is open to all women, the organization has thus far failed to attract a significant number of either Black women or women without college educations. In addition, the multi-partisan caucus has proportionally few Republicans or Independents. The results of a caucus headquarter's survey of the Houston convention illustrates the point. A profile

of the average convention delegate indicated that she was a white Democrat between twenty-five and forty.[6] The national profile is not inconsistent with the membership of local caucuses. For example, the Cincinnati Caucus has more that 100 members, three of whom are Black.[7] And a founder of the Dayton-Miami Valley Caucus admits that one of their most difficult problems has been the organizing of minority group women and women with little formal education.[8] Thus, the goal of obtaining a broad-based political organization which will attract all women regardless of race, party affiliation, or level of education has not yet been realized.

The goals stated by the Caucus in that July, 1971, meeting were to insure that women are fairly represented in elective and appointive political offices, to press for women holding policy-making positions in the political parties, to screen all candidates on feminist issues, and to be effective in raising women's issues in every election at every level of government.[9]

Although each goal and its fulfillment is important to the eventual assessment of the Caucus, the most significant is the raising of women's issues, because the achievement of this objective will be crucial to the continued development of the organization and thus to the success of the entire women's movement. Originally, the Caucus defined the primary women's issues as passage of the Egual-Right Amendment, repeal of abortion laws, government financing of day care centers, and reform of anti-female inequities in the tax rules and divorce laws.[10] At the organizations's first national convention in Houston, support was extended beyond women's issues to the broader social questions

of welfare reform, expansion of the minimum wage, and adoption of a program of national health insurance.[11] Although many of the 1500 delegates in Houston (particularly the Republican and many of the independent women) opposed this expansion, Francis Farenthold's election as national chairwomen signaled a victory for the forces who believe that the Caucus must attempt to broaden its appeal by expanding its issues.[12]

We now come to a consideration of how the Caucus is attempting to achieve its goals, i.e., by what means is it involving more women in active politics and working to raise women's issues in every political campaign. The activities of the Caucus can be thought of in terms of internal (member-directed) communication and external communication directed to the general public via the national media and toward local, state, and federal power agents.

An analysis of internal (member-directed) communication reveals three purposes. The first purpose is to reinforce the basic beliefs and goals of the Caucus and the movement of which it is a part. Perhaps the best examples of reinforcement can be found in Caucus newsletters. Standard lines of argument are: 1) we have accomplished so much in such a short period of time, 2) but we still have a long way to go to achieve equality, 3) so don't relax your efforts or we can not continue accomplishing. A newsletter from the national headquarters in December, 1972, illustrates this reinforcement effort:

> As you well know, the accomplishments of the NWPC have been many and varied. The Equal Rights Amendment passed Congress in March and has now been ratified by 22 of the 38 states needed to make it a constitutional amendment. Women comprised 40% of the delegates at the Democratic Convention and 30% at the Republican, as compared to 13%

> and 17%, respectively, in 1968....We are building a base of experience, organization and talent. In each of these gains and in many others the NWPC has been the major catalyst and action organization for women on both the local and national level.[13]

The rhetoric goes beyond praising past efforts to exhorting members to further accomplishments:

> We have had a strong start--but we all know how very far there is to go. Women are absent from the U.S. Senate and the Supreme Court....Comprehensive legislation in child care, economic discrimination, and a host of other issues is critical. It is all possible--but it will not happen without your support.[14]

The second purpose of Caucus internal communication is to disseminate information--to provide a clearing house function for major issues affecting the membership. The Caucus distributes this information through newsletters and through special "White Papers" sent to local and state caucuses. The issue that seems to have stimulated most of the rhetoric in this category is the Equal Rights Amendment. The March, 1972, newsletter was devoted to a description of the Amendment that had just passed both houses of Congress, the names of congresspersons voting for and against it, a list of the dates of the sessions of state legislatures, and the names of state organizations not officially for the amendment but who would be supportive of it.[15]

The final purpose of internal communication is to exhort members to unity and action. Caucus activities which illustrate this purpose are numerous. For example, national Caucus headquarters have prepared and distributed to local and state caucuses many of what can be termed "how to" papers--"How to Organize a Caucus," "How to Run a Meeting," "How to Form a Picket Line and Demonstrate," "How to Register Voters," "How to Plan a Political

Workshop," or "How to Organize for ERA Ratification." Each of these instructional papers calls on members to get unified (organized) and then to take action (hold a meeting, demonstrate, register voters).

The call to unity and action can also be illustrated by state and local political workshops--where in a concentrated period of time women can learn more about important Caucus issues and the practical politics involved in directing national attention to the issues and in passing legislative proposals.

Exhortation to unity and action was also apparent during the 1972 campaign when the Caucus provided "flying squads" of superstar Caucus members who went into a congressional district to help rally feminine support for candidates such as Rose Bowman, Majorie Holt, Bella Abzug, and Elizabeth Holtzman.[16]

Caucus activities analyzed in terms of their external communication directed at media and power agents also have three purposes which merit examination.

The first purpose of external communication is to obtain media attention, primarily for public relations purposes. Examples of public relations rhetoric are press releases announcing elections of local caucus officers or explaining a Caucus activity, and news conferences (such as the one conducted by the Cincinnati Caucus before they boarded the chartered buses to go to demonstrate at ERA ratification hearings in Columbus). Another example of public relations rhetoric is the emphasis on semantics--chairpersons, spokespersons, congresspersons, or at Caucus headquarters in the

Betsy Ross Hotel at the Democratic National Convention--the phones were womanned or personned, but never manned.

Perhaps the most extensive use of public relations rhetoric was at the Democratic National Convention. By the time the convention began, the NWPC leaders were undergoing a profound sense of anticlimax. There were 1212 women delegates and there was a comprehensive women's plank in the platform. There were battles still to be fought at the convention--the South Carolina challenge and the abortion plank, but the leaders knew that abortion was a guaranteed loser and the South Carolina challenge, at least in the beginning, was a relatively small issue. And so, the major function of the Caucus was ornamental--that is, it was simply to be there, to make its presence felt, to have each candidate acknowledge caucus existence, to wear buttons that said "make policy not coffee", to put forth the best possible face, to pretend a unity that did not exist, and above all, to put on a good show.[17]

A second purpose of external communication is to influence power agents. To date, demonstrations of this form of rhetoric are found primarily in the activities of local and state caucuses as they have sought ratification for ERA. For example, local and state caucuses have demonstrated at many state legislative hearings and have written letters to individual legislators urging their cooperation for the amendment. And in February, the Cincinnati Caucus sent hundreds of valentines to each of the ERA hearing committee members which said: "Every day will be Valentine's Day when they pass the ERA."[18]

The final purpose of Caucus external communication is to raise consciousness (proselytize). NWPC leaders continually try to expand Caucus human and financial resources. Demonstrations of consciousness raising can be found in any effort the Caucus makes to find new members. Cocktail parties (expressively for older, wealthier women) were tried on several occasions,[19] and the preparation and distribution of lists of local individuals and groups who are possible sympathizers are but two examples of this form of rhetoric.

Potentially, the most significant proselytizing activity has been the expansion beyond women's issues (as demonstrated by the final recommendations of the Houston convention) in an apparent attempt to broaden support, particularly among minority group women. Although the support of such measures as welfare reform, expansion of minumum wage, and national health insurance may be admirable morally, it must be recognized that, as a strategy, the change represents a gamble which may determine the fate of the Caucus as a political force. To the extent that this strategy is successful, it will increase support among the impoverished and the Black populations. Whether women who would not otherwise support the women's movement will choose the Caucus to represent them in nonwomen social reforms is questionable when other organizations which will not involve them in women's rights are available. Even if successful, before the move can benefit the women's rights struggle, Black and/or impoverished women must be organized into a viable political force.

Since a large percentage of these groups do not presently vote, the chance of increasing political power through this technique seems slim.

What does not seem unlikely is that inclusion of social action issues will create new opposition for the Caucus and thus for the entire women's movement. The promotion of a national health insurance program will certainly incur the wrath of Washington's most powerful lobby, the American Medical Association. The odds of uniting women by this action are further reduced by the apparent mood of the nation to oppose social programs--a mood which many political commentators thought decisive in the success of Mr. Nixon's great non-campaign in 1972. While it may be true that the majority of women who currently support the women's movement also support other social reforms, it seems doubtful that the Caucus can be a true multi-partisan organization uniting women when it is committed to supporting issues on which women are sharply divided.[20] Republicans and women married to "hardhats" are not likely to rally behind a social action banner. The fate of the Caucus, and to some extent the fate of the women's movement, may have been determined by the decisions in Houston which certainly expanded if not changed the goals of the Caucus. It may have been possible to unite women for women's political rights. It seems less probable that women will unite for women's political rights and social legislation for the impoverished and/or minority groups.

What is the National Women's Political Caucus? It is a

young organization in a state of development. It is dedicated to establishing women as a viable political force. It is the action arm which the women's rights movement depends on to provide muscle and leadership during what Rosenwasser called the conversion and change stage of development. At this point, the Caucus does not seem content to limit its activities to obtaining political rights for women, but it is too early to say how much emphasis will be given to the social planks passed in the Houston convention. The answer to the question may determine whether the Caucus and the women's rights movement can succeed.

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[1]More than 600 delegates to the Equal Rights Party Convention of 1872, nominated the first woman candidate for President of the United States, Victoria C. Woodhull. See Miriam Schneir, "The Woman Who Ran For President," Ms., September, 1972, pp. 84-89.

[2]"Never Underestimate . . .," Newsweek, July 26, 1971, pp. 29-30.

[3]Marie J. Rosenwasser, "Rhetoric And The Progress Of The Women's Liberation Movement," Today's Speech, 20 (Summer, 1972), 45-56.

[4]"Chiefs of Women's Political Unit Differ on Course," The New York Times, February 10, 1973, p. 20.

[5]National Women's Political Caucus, "Statement of Purpose."

[6]"Private Talks Calm Women's Dispute," The Washington Post, February 11, 1973, p. A-3.

[7]One of the three Black women is the co-chairwomen of the Cincinnati Caucus.

[8]Gladys Wessles, Interview, February 16, 1973.

[9]Nancy Axelrad Comer, "The National Women's Political Caucus," Mademoiselle, May, 1972, pp. 188-192.

[10]Originally, as end to the Vietnam war was also considered to be a women's issue--as Caucus leaders reasoned--it was women who suffered because of the war.

[11]Eileen Shanahan, "Texan Will Head Women's Caucus," The New York Times, February 12, 1973, p. C-15.

[12]Ibid. The decisions made at Houston on the structure (constitution) of the NWPC, the slate of officers, and the determination of Caucus issues and goals inspired much bitterness within the Caucus. Many of the delegates spoke at various points through the long sessions of their dismay at the fierce infighting and the mistrust of each other's motives that characterized the debates.

[13]National Women's Political Caucus, "Open letter to all NWPC supporters," Newsletter VI, December, 1972.

[14]Ibid.

[15]National Women's Political Caucus, Newsletter III, March, 1972.

[16]"Caucus: A Young Organization Powers the Movement," Life, June 26, 1972, pp. 48-49.

[17]Nora Ephron, "Women," Esquire, November, 1972, pp. 10-14.

[18]The valentines were written by the women during a meeting immediately following Valentine's Day.

[19]Minutes, National Policy Council Meeting, Sep[illegible], 1972. Until the Houston convention, the NWPC had serious financial problems. The cocktail parties had been started to bring in some much needed money--but at the Policy Council Meeting, Ronnie Feit reported that the cocktail parties netted "little or nothing."

[20]Although the Republican women who were delegates in Houston eventually supported the expanded issues, there were many heated arguments--perhaps beginning with Bella Abzug's remark that called Mr. Nixon "the nation's chief resident male chauvinist" and called on Republican women to fight his domestic program cuts.