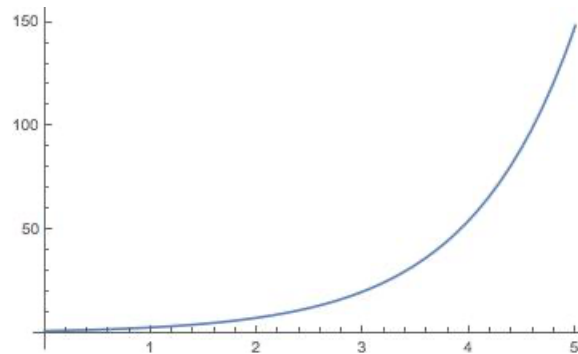


Final Paper on Frances “Sissy” Tarlton Farenthold:

Reformer Turned Radical

(Or: Zero to 100 Real Quick)



If you were to graph feminist progress over time the curve would look exponential. Its growth would initially look slow, incremental, and even sluggish. But as time goes on the progress builds on itself to eventually reach unimaginable heights. Effective feminists have (perhaps unconsciously) recognized this trajectory and shaped their efforts around it: they initially paint themselves as humble reformers and grow into their more radical strands as time goes on. Take the onset of first-wave feminism with Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 as a demonstrative example. The convention started as merely a gathering of women’s-rights supporters focused on reform issues like education, but after the organizers were emboldened by the successful turnout, they started to consider more radical topics like women’s suffrage. The career of Frances “Sissy” Tarlton Farenthold (a Texas politician, lawyer, and activist from the early 1970’s to now) follows a similar trajectory of reformer turned radical. Her work can be delineated into three phases (self-actualization, empowering others, and explicit activism) that demonstrate escalating expressions of her radicalism. This paper presents a novel

framework for analyzing social progress as an exponentially growing path, applies the framework to the three stages of Frances “Sissy” Tarlton Farenthold’s career, and generalizes how the framework manifests itself in the work of other historical icons.

For context, Frances “Sissy” Tarlton Farenthold came from a white, wealthy, Catholic, Texan family that was heavily involved in politics and law. After being one of three women in her law school class of 800, she went on to work as the director of Nueces County Legal Aid, serve as a member of the Texas House of Representatives, run for Texas governor, run for the Vice Presidency, serve as the chairperson for the National Women’s Political Caucus, open her own law practice, and teach law at the University of Houston (Frances Tarlton "Sissy" Farenthold: A Noble Citizen”). Her career fits neatly into the framework of reformer turned radical. Early in her career, Frances “Sissy” Tarlton Farenthold restrained herself into the role of a reformer in order to gain a reputation as an upstanding but unapologetic politician. Then, in the prime of her career, she shifted focus away from herself and concentrated on ameliorating the careers of women she saw potential in to create a larger population of effective and like-minded leaders. In her retirement, finally freed of the shackles of public life, Tarlton Farenthold started to fully embrace her most radical ideologies and speak out for issues that mattered to her with little regard for how her opinions would be perceived by others.

Frances Tarlton Farenthold’s early work in the state legislature aimed to reform the corrupt leadership of the Texas state House of Representatives. She spearheaded a radical group of thirty representatives (frequently referred to as the Dirty Thirty) who deplored the influence of special interests on representatives, the lack of financial transparency of public officials, and the lack of legislative progress on key issues. Most notably, in 1971 she introduced House

Concurrent Resolution 87, also known as the Farenthold Resolution, to investigate the Speaker of the House in light of a federal bribery-conspiracy case by the Securities Exchange Commission (“Frances Tarlton "Sissy" Farenthold: A Noble Citizen”). Although it failed and the Speaker was never censured, the Dirty Thirty succeeded in bringing the rampant corruption closer to the public’s attention (Waldron). It also launched Tarlton Farenthold into the spotlight as a progressive, reform-oriented politician who demanded to be heard.

Riding her publicity as the head of the Dirty Thirty, Tarlton Farenthold ran for the seat of Governor of Texas in 1972. She would never win the governorship, despite running once more in 1974 (Waldron). Similarly, that same year, she was nominated for the US Vice Presidency at the Democratic National Convention but did not win. Despite these personal setbacks, Farenthold used this period in her life to expand her reach and encourage other women to reach their full potential. From 1972 onwards she taught at law schools, founded the Public Leadership Education Network (PLEN), was the president over Well’s College (a prestigious women’s college), and engaged in numerous other organizing roles. Her most influential work for encouraging women in politics was as chairperson of the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC) starting in 1973 (Frances Tarlton "Sissy" Farenthold: A Noble Citizen”). The National Women’s Political Caucus was a bipartisan organization that aimed to elevate (specifically pro-choice) women in political office. “By 1992, the NWPC had assisted in raising the number of women in politics to 1,517 state legislators, 54 congresswomen, and 2 U.S. Supreme Court justices.” (Fields-Hawkins 103). This represented the second major period in Tarlton Farenthold’s career in which she focused on cultivating other leaders. By enabling other like-minded politicians to succeed, her influence was immeasurably large. The sum of the impact of

all of the leaders she influenced as chairperson of the NWPC goes well beyond the impact she could have had alone.

Eventually, Frances “Sissy” Tarlton Farenthold took a step back from her public life and started to concentrate on specific issues that she was passionate about. Because she was no longer running for office she was allowed to grow into her more radical roots and advocate for issues regardless of how appealing they were to the public. The breadth of her work in the last stage of her career is incredibly broad, both in terms of the issues covered and in terms of the geographic areas she concentrated on. Her work spanned, but was not limited to, El Salvador, Germany, and Kenya where she advocated for abortion rights, gay rights, and (most notably) anti-war movements (Fields-Hawkins 112). In her later years she refused to mince words: for example she was openly critical of US military involvement. In response to the nuclear arms race she deplored how we “keep arming ourselves and arming other people as well.” (Farenthold as quoted in Fields-Hawkins 114). Similarly, she refused to support Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2008 against Barrack Obama because she “wasn’t going to support anyone in the beginning who supported the Iraq war” (Farenthold 2009). It is hard to imagine the Tarlton Farenthold of 1972 saying the words uttered by the Tarlton Farenthold of 2008 because of the way she shifted from presenting herself as a reformer to acknowledging that she is, at her core, a radical.

A 1990 Times article titled “It’s Our Turn” drew parallels between the surge in women running for office in 1972 (like Tarlton Farenthold herself) after the passage of the national Equal Right’s Amendment (ERA) in the Senate and the uptick in women getting involved in politics at the outset of the 1990s (Carlson). It also repeatedly highlights the work in the 1990s of the National Women Political Caucus that Tarlton Farenthold served as the chairperson for

back in 1972. Just as Tarlton Farenthold's career followed an exponential track that relied on earlier work to bring increasing levels of success going forward, the institutions she was instrumental in building followed the same trajectory. This article, which explains the benefit women candidates have when running as reformers because they had no part in creating the mess in the first place, is not specifically about Tarlton Farenthold and never mentions her by name, but demonstrates the lasting impact of her career.

The exponential path of Frances "Sissy" Tarlton Farenthold's career is not an outlier in the set of social progressions. Instead, it exemplifies a framework that is common to many of the social progress movements. Radicalism cannot appear out of thin air; instead it is built up on a solid foundation of reform. For example, consider the Declaration of Sentiments (Kerber 214). Its overarching goals include women's economic independence, moral agency, education, representation, and most surprisingly, women's suffrage. Suffrage is so surprising because of how radical it was at the time, and was only included thanks to Elizabeth Cady Stanton's insistence (Harris 9). Due to the controversy surrounding the clause, Frederick Douglass gave a rousing speech on the second day of the convention in support of women's suffrage. The other clauses can be taken as a reformist foundation for this radical clause. On a more macroscopic scale, the convention itself can be seen as the reformist foundation for the subsequent radical feminist movement as a whole. Just as with Tarlton Farenthold's career we can once again see the telltale signs of the ever-present exponential curve of progress.

This exponential curve framework is also present in the work of activist Yuri Kochiyama's in the 60s, 70s, and 80s for political prisoners and against racism, as outlined in *Grassroots Leadership*. On a personal level, Kochiyama's role early on as a reformer quickly

turned radical after being exposed to racism and the black power movement through Malcolm X. For example, she was able to turn her early interest in journalism (she helped with her family's newsletter from 1950-1968 and was a journalism major before the war) into a foundation for her later influential work in the creation of an annual political newsletter called the *North Star* (Fujino 298). However, the curve is also visible at a macroscopic scale through Kochiyama's work as a "centerperson" rather than a "spokesperson". By opening her home, highlighting commonalities rather than divisions, and serving as an archivist for political prisoners, Kochiyama was able to "nurture the individual in the process of creating social change" which makes her overall contributions to the cause super-linear just like the second phase of Tarlton Farenthold's career (Fujino 301).

Both the women's suffrage movement and Yuri Kochiyama's work on the political prisoner movement demonstrate how early work can build into exponential social progress. It is worth explicitly reiterating the ways in which this path manifests itself in Tarlton Farenthold's career. Without the reform-oriented foundation she built early in her career, Tarlton Farenthold's advocacy would have been easily dismissed and therefore ineffective; without the shift to radicalism later in her career, Tarlton Farenthold's potential would have been squandered on small niche topics rather than larger thematic issues. She was only qualified to chair the NWPC because she had already made a name for herself in politics through her work as a member of the Texas House of Representatives. Thus, she could not have skipped the early part of the curve she was on and jumped straight to a later step in her career. Instead she was able to use her strong personal platform from her early career to level up the power she exerted over the careers of other pro-choice female politicians. However, while she was in the process of building this platform (and to a lesser extent even when she was chairing the NWPC, the president of Well's

College, etc.) she did not have the flexibility to be critical of the widely revered US military. She portrayed herself modestly despite the fact that as early as 1974 she said “I perceive myself [...] more radical” (Farenthold 1974). It was only once she had left the public sphere that she was able to tackle the most radical issues she needed to. Although the later stages of her career seem the most appealing, it is worth considering the entire continuous summation of her work because every stage was dependent on one another.

The long and winding journey of Frances Tarlton Farenthold’s career paints a picture of a dissatisfied optimist. She trail blazed early in her career by being one of the few women at her law school and becoming the first female Texas House of Representatives member. As her career progressed, she took a step back from personal advancement and focused on cultivating a multitude of other strong candidates with her work on the National Women’s Political Caucus. Finally, in more recent years she shifted focus yet again away from cultivating leaders and towards influencing issues directly by advocating for abortion rights, gay rights, anti-war movements, etc. At each stage in Tarlton Farenthold’s career you can see her outdoing herself in the magnitude of influence she affected for causes that she was passionate about. These three phases of her work demonstrate Frances “Sissy” Tarlton Farenthold’s monotonically increasing radicalism along her exponential path of progress. In this way her story is indicative of a larger framework of effective feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Yuri Kochiyama who tempered the radicalism of their early work and steadily ramped up the focus of their reform over time to reach for theoretically unbounded progress.

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