

Elly Peterson: "Mother" of the Moderates
Sara Fitzgerald
With a foreword by Haynes Johnson
<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=3152225>
The University of Michigan Press, 2011

Q&A with Sara Fitzgerald, author of *Elly Peterson: "Mother" of the Moderates*

Elly Peterson was one of the highest ranking women in the Republican Party. In 1964 she ran for a Michigan seat in the U.S. Senate and became the first woman to serve as chair of the Michigan Republican Party. During the 1970s she grew disenchanted with the increasing conservatism of her party, united with other feminists to push for the Equal Rights Amendment and reproductive choice, battled Phyllis Schlafly to wrest control from her of the National Federation of Republican Women, and became an independent.



Elly Peterson's story is a missing chapter in the political history of Michigan, as well as the United States. This new biography, written by Sara Fitzgerald, finally gives full credit to one of the first female political leaders in this country.

A native of Michigan, Sara Fitzgerald worked for the *Washington Post* for 15 years as an editor and new-media developer. Prior to that, she worked as a reporter and editor for *National Journal* magazine, the *St. Petersburg Times*, the *Miami Herald*, and the *Akron Beacon Journal*.

The University of Michigan Press: How did you get interested in telling Elly Peterson's story?

Sara Fitzgerald: I grew up in Michigan and my parents were moderate Republicans. In the summer of 1964, I was watching television coverage of the Republican National Convention, and was surprised when a network television correspondent began interviewing a woman about the party's prospects that year. It was Elly Peterson. At the time, she was about to step down as assistant chairman of the Republican National Committee to run for a U.S. Senate seat from Michigan. During that week, she also became the first woman to make a prime-time speech to a Republican National Convention. I was a young teenager at the time, and this made an impression on me because back then it was so rare for a woman to be involved in national politics—and I was very proud that she came from my home state of Michigan.

Over the years, I continued to follow Elly Peterson's career, particularly in the 1970s when she became involved in the early leadership of the National Women's Political Caucus and later co-chair of ERAmerica, the coalition of organizations that worked together to try to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.

Then, much later in her life, she moved to the same retirement community in North Carolina where my parents lived. They became friends, and I finally got to meet her. Since my college days, I had been interested in women's history, and I always felt that her story was one that had never been fully told. I was gratified that when I finally had the time to work on the project, she was still alive and willing to share her memories with me.

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UMP: The subtitle of your book is "Mother of the Moderates." Can you explain the background of that?

SF: Elly Peterson had no children of her own, but dozens of protégées and colleagues called her "Mother" or variations thereof. It all started in 1957 when Lawrence Lindemer, who was then chair of the Michigan Republican Party, hired Peterson as a secretary. The party's offices in Lansing were in total disarray, and, according to Peterson, in desperate need of a cleaning job and someone to organize all of the files. She came in and took charge of every aspect of the clean-up job.

Peterson was 43 at the time, and Lindemer was seven years younger. There used to be a comedy show on the radio called The Aldrich Family that began with an exchange in which the teenager, Henry Aldrich, responded to his mother's nagging by saying, "Coming Moth-her." When Peterson asked Lindemer to do something, Lindemer began good-naturedly mimicking Henry, and the name stuck.

I've talked to many men and women who worked for Peterson, who described how she took a mother-like interest in their lives, gave them valuable advice, but also set high standards for them. Late in her life, she said there were still 15 to 20 people who began their letters to her by writing "Dear Mother." Her political "children" included Christine Todd Whitman, the former governor of New Jersey and administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

When Peterson stepped down as assistant chairman of the Republican National Committee in 1970, her colleagues organized a big party at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, and she was delighted when she saw that the buffet table was decorated with an ice sculpture that spelled out "Mother."

She later observed that, particularly among the newspapers in Michigan, the headline writers never referred to her as "Mrs. Peterson." She said she went from being called "Elly" to being called "Mother."

UMP: Your book details an episode that Elly Peterson identified as her "Click Moment." Can you explain what that means and tell us the story?

SF: The term "Click Moment" was popularized by the writer Jane O'Reilly in the cover story of the inaugural issue of *Ms.* magazine in 1972. It describes that point in a woman's life when something happens to her that awakens her feminist consciousness.

Early in my correspondence with Elly Peterson, I asked her if she had a "click moment" in her life. There was no waffling on her part. She said it was in early 1965, the night she became the first woman elected to chair a state Republican Party.

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The previous November, the party had suffered major losses in Michigan, when President Lyndon Johnson beat Barry Goldwater in a landslide. Party leaders wanted a change, and pushed Governor George Romney to ask Peterson to take on the job of state party chair.

She was surprised to be asked, but eager to take on the challenge. A month later, at the state party convention, she was backstage, preparing to go out and greet the delegates as their new leader. Max Fisher, the industrialist and philanthropist who chaired the party's finance committee, came up to congratulate her, then told her the party couldn't pay her what her male predecessor had received because she was a woman. The previous party chairman had earned \$21,000; Fisher told Peterson she would be paid \$6,000 less.

He had put Peterson in a terrible bind. On the other side of the curtain, the convention-goers were waiting for her to speak. She was frustrated and angry, but she also really wanted the job. She acknowledged years later that she had almost started crying, but then she came up with an idea that exemplifies the kind of person Elly Peterson was.

As press reports described it at the time, she went out on the stage and brought the delegates to their feet with an emotional speech calling for party unity. During the course of the speech, she noted that the party faced a substantial debt, and announced that to help retire it, she was going to donate \$6,000 worth of her salary, and she expected the rest of them to make contributions, too. Well, of course, she never had the money, but the party delegates didn't know that, and began passing the hat.

The amazing thing is, she didn't complain, and she didn't name Fisher until many years later. At the time, the press reported that she was making the contribution, and her deputy also thought she had voluntarily reduced her salary. But late in life, she pointed to that night as the first time she began to pay attention to the sex discrimination she encountered as a political pioneer.

UMP: Over the course of her life, Peterson's political identification shifted from the Republican Party to the women's movement. How did that happen?

SF: I think there were two major factors. Peterson's most active involvement in politics spanned the years 1957 to 1982. During that time, the Republican Party moved away from her. At the beginning of her career, the party had a growing moderate wing, exemplified by leaders such as George Romney, Nelson Rockefeller, William Scranton, Mark Hatfield, Jacob Javits and later William Milliken. She worked closely with many of those men. But over the decade of the 1970s, the party moved increasingly to the right, culminating in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Historically, the Republican Party had been more supportive of women's rights than the Democrats had been. But by 1980 that changed. In its platform, the party refused to support ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, and many of its leaders opposed a woman's right to choose—issues that had become vitally important to Peterson and many other moderate Republican women.

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Peterson started her career as a very loyal soldier for the Republican Party. But over the course of her career, she endured many difficult episodes, such as the time her salary was cut. Early in her career, she believed that the best way to succeed was to keep your mouth shut, put your head down and go to work. But as the women's liberation movement evolved in the 1970s, the feminists' message began to resonate with her. This did not happen overnight, and she remained concerned that the movement's more radical members would make it more difficult for women to achieve their political goals, particularly ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. But as she began to work with more women across the political spectrum, she often found that she had more in common with them than she had thought.

Her last public political act occurred in 1982 when she helped organize a group of prominent moderate Republican women to endorse the Democratic candidate for governor of Michigan, rather than the Republican candidate, who actively opposed the women on their most important political issues. Late in life, Peterson said she viewed herself as an Independent, and contributed financial support to the campaigns of Democratic women, including the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton.

UMP: If Elly Peterson were alive today, what do you think she would think of the state of our politics?

SF: First, I think Peterson would have been very disappointed that the last election actually represented a step backwards for women in politics. Both the number of women in serving in Congress and the number serving in state legislatures declined. Peterson also interacted with women leaders in China and the Middle East late in her career. Thus she would also be distressed that the United States ranks only 71st in terms of the number of women serving in the country's lower legislative body, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

When I interviewed Peterson back in 2006, she was also very distressed by how much the cost of political campaigns had increased, and how the need for continual fund-raising had distorted the political process. She died before the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its so-called *Citizens United* decision, which makes it easier for corporations to contribute to political campaigns. I'm sure she would have been very concerned about that. She preferred campaigns that reached out to voters on an individual basis, and in a positive way, rather than campaigns that blanketed the airwaves with negative television ads.

Finally, I believe she would have been very concerned about how polarized American politics has become. Peterson died in mid-2008, and I think this polarization has only increased since then.

Peterson was a very strong believer in bipartisanship, and had many close friendships with Democrats. I think this is demonstrated by the fact that in 1976, when she and Democrat Liz Carpenter were serving as co-chairs of ERAmerica, they lived together in Carpenter's house in Washington. At the time, Peterson was a deputy chairman of Gerald Ford's presidential campaign, and Carpenter was actively supporting his opponent, Jimmy Carter. It's hard to imagine that happening today.

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Here's another example. In 1964, Peterson ran for a U.S. Senate seat from Michigan against the Democratic incumbent, Phil Hart. Six years later, he was among the guests who attended the party marking her retirement from the Republican National Committee. Peterson was very frustrated when she retired, and her friends knew it. Hart wryly told a reporter that as a Democrat, he hoped that the Republicans continued to ignore Elly's good advice!

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