

Wednesday, Sept. 10, 2008

ANALYSIS

Can Palin's Rise Lift The Boats For GOP Women?

MCCAIN'S VP PICK MAY HELP REDEEM RECENT DECLINES IN FEMALE REPUBLICAN LEADERSHIP

Wednesday, Sept. 10, 2008
by Brian Friel

The number of elected Republican women trails Democrats at every level of government, but that could begin to change soon with **John McCain's** selection of Alaska Gov. **Sarah Palin** as his running mate. She has energized GOPers committed to getting more women -- particularly those who are anti-abortion -- elected to office, said several prominent Republican women at the convention in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Rep. **Marsha Blackburn** of Tennessee has already begun to cite Palin in her speeches to groups aimed at recruiting more women to run for office. Speaking to two dozen young women gathered in Minneapolis-St. Paul this week, Blackburn noted that as a young woman, Palin joined clubs and local organizations to develop leadership skills. "Our vice presidential nominee is a great example of this," she said. "She's been PTA president, she's been on the city council, the mayor, and now the governor."

Indeed, the Republican Party has seen a decline in female officeholders in the House and in state legislatures as moderate women candidates have lost in primaries, such as Rep. **Heather Wilson** in New Mexico's 2008 U.S. Senate race, and in general elections in swing districts, such as Rep. **Nancy Johnson** of Connecticut in 2006.

"As the Republican Party has shifted to the right, moderate Republican women have had a harder time getting through primaries," said **Debbie Walsh**, executive director of the nonpartisan Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Marie Wilson, president of the White House Project, which supports the political aspirations of women of either party who favor abortion rights, said that Republicans had a strong crop of female leaders in the 1970s until the ascendancy of social conservatives in the Reagan revolution. After that, women were discouraged from leadership positions in the GOP, she said.

On the Republican side, there are three women governors, five senators, and 20 House members. By comparison, Democrats have five women governors, 11 senators, and 52 House members, including Speaker **Nancy Pelosi**.

Up-and-coming women in the GOP said this week that Palin could be a boost to efforts to build a female farm team for the party. "We need to do a better job at getting more women to run for office," said Rep. **Mary Fallin**, Oklahoma's former lieutenant governor. "Governor Palin will be an excellent model for other women."

The central divide for women in the political world is abortion. EMILY's List, the powerhouse political action committee, confines its support to Democratic women candidates who favor abortion rights. The WISH List PAC does the same on the Republican side, while the Susan B. Anthony List PAC supports women who are anti-abortion.

"There are really just a handful of pro-life women in office with children at home," said Susan B. Anthony List President **Marjorie Dannenfelser**, whose organization supported Palin, a mother of five who is anti-abortion, in her gubernatorial race two years ago.

Dannenfelser said that conservative women have only recently begun thinking of themselves as potential candidates, in part because they haven't related to prominent women politicians who are abortion-rights supporters, such as liberal Sen. **Barbara Boxer**, D-Calif. "There haven't been really strong role models for this kind of woman, a Sarah Palin kind of woman," Dannenfelser said. "Barbara Boxer offers a very different model."

Rep. **Cathy McMorris Rodgers** of Washington was the minority leader in the Washington House, and as such was the first female leader from either party in that body. Men often initiate their candidacies, while women need to be recruited, she said. "A lot of women wait to be tapped on their shoulder," McMorris Rodgers said. "I'm not sure the Republican Party in general has reached out to women like it should, and basically tap them on the shoulder and welcome them and say we would like you to step forward and run for office."

Blackburn told the young women in Minneapolis-St. Paul this week that on the campaign trail they should be ready to explain how being a woman -- especially being a mother -- prepares them for office. "I've been the 3-year-old [children's] choir director, the room mother, the room mother chairman, and the Girl Scout cookie mom, and if you can handle those jobs, you can handle the U.S. House of Representatives,"

ADVERTISEMENT

The New
NationalJournal.com

NEW WEBSITE
MORE INSIGHT

Having trouble activating
your subscription?
[Click here for help](#)

Blackburn said. Then she pointed at a woman in the group and smiled: "You know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you?"

Copyright ©2008 by National Journal Group Inc. The Watergate 600 New Hampshire Ave., NW Washington, DC 20037
202-739-8400 • fax 202-833-8069 NationalJournal.com is an Atlantic Media publication.

http://www.nationaljournal.com/conventions/co_20080904_7984.php