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Bay State women propel Coakley

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Just one week after announcing her candidacy, state Attorney General Martha Coakley is emerging as the clear front-runner in the Massachusetts Senate special election. And it's in no small part because of her support from a broad, politically active network of women's groups — the same coalition that propelled Hillary Clinton to an overwhelming victory over Barack Obama in last year's Massachusetts Democratic primary.

After watching Clinton fall short in her quest for the Democratic nomination in a state with a dismal record of electing women to Congress, that coalition is determined to help push Coakley, a 56-year-old former district attorney, to victory.

"You had a very large, very mobilized organization behind Sen. Clinton, and that organization has stayed in touch and they're looking for the next candidate to support," said Sheila Capone-Wulsin, executive director of the Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus, a bipartisan organization that supports female candidates. "I think they're very motivated."

Already, EMILY's List, the influential bundling group that backs female candidates who support abortion rights, is coordinating with the Coakley campaign and issued a formal endorsement Wednesday.

Barbara Lee, an influential Cambridge fundraiser who is throwing her support to Coakley, told POLITICO in an e-mail this week, "I look forward to helping elect Martha Coakley as the first woman senator from Massachusetts."

For groups like EMILY's List and the Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus, the stakes could not be higher. Female nominees — Democrat Shannon O'Brien in 2002 and Republican Kerry Healey in 2006 — fell short in the past two elections for governor. Coakley is only the second woman in Massachusetts history to hold statewide office, and in 2007 Democratic Rep. Niki Tsongas became the second woman to win a congressional seat in the state in nearly 25 years.

"Massachusetts has not had a great history of electing women into their own office in their own right," said Mary Anne Marsh, a Democratic strategist in the state. "Women haven't done as well in Massachusetts elections as people might think they have."

"Massachusetts is a state that has a history of progressive politics, but that has not gone hand in hand with electing women," noted Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers. "It's been, I think, a struggle. And I would think the prospect of electing a woman would mobilize women's groups who are motivated by electing women to office."

State Democratic insiders add that Coakley's front-runner status has much to do with her decisive early campaign announcement and her political home base of Middlesex County, the most populous in the state.

But she also has an advantage as the sole woman in an all-male field. With Vicki Kennedy, the widow of the late Sen. Ted Kennedy, telling friends that she is not interested in filling the seat, Coakley is expected to remain the only female candidate in the Democratic field. Observers say her support from the women's coalition will help her close the fundraising gap with her better-funded potential primary opponents.

"She's in a very good position to tap into this network," said Jeffrey Berry, a Tufts University political scientist. "She's clearly favored by having a number of men in the race."

“There’s pent-up demand for a woman candidate statewide,” said Dan Payne, a Democratic strategist in the state. “On the Democratic side, women are a force to be reckoned with.”

The rest of the field — at least Coakley’s top potential Democratic competitors — is expected to be drawn from the ranks of the state’s all-male House delegation.

Reps. Michael Capuano and Stephen Lynch have both signaled their intentions to run, while Rep. Ed Markey continues to weigh his options.

Over the holiday weekend, Capuano took a shot at Lynch, his South Boston colleague, over Lynch’s reluctance to voice full-throated support for a government-run public health care option.

Health care “will be a major test to see who actually walks the walk and who actually talks it,” Capuano said at a Boston health care rally on Monday.

Lynch, who opposes abortion rights and is regarded as the congressional delegation’s most conservative member — a relative term in Massachusetts — brushed off the barb, calling Capuano “a close friend of mine.” But Lynch didn’t flinch from taking a not-so-veiled shot at the front-running Coakley, arguing that his 15 years as a legislator set him apart.

“I think we’re in a time of real crisis. We’ve got two wars going on, so I think experience in foreign policy will be an advantage; I think experience in the national legislature will be an advantage,” he told POLITICO.

However they frame their arguments against the attorney general in the December special primary election, Coakley’s competitors will need to tread carefully or risk antagonizing her already energized base of female support.

“I think you have to be careful because — while none of the members of the congressional delegation are sexist — you don’t want to appear sexist,” said James Roosevelt, a member of the Democratic National Committee from Massachusetts.