

The GOP's women problem

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November 9, 2009 04:11 AM EST

Conservatives say they [pushed Dede Scozzafava](#) out of the House race in [New York's 23rd District](#) a week ago because of her left-of-Republican social views — and not because she is a [woman](#).

But the growing schism between the Republican Party's ascendant right wing and its shrinking moderate core has clear gender undertones — and Scozzafava's departure raises fresh questions about the GOP's ability to recruit, elect and even tolerate the sort of moderate women who used to be [part of its ruling mainstream](#).

While Republicans scored a pair of impressive electoral victories in New Jersey and Virginia [with solid support among female voters](#), the events of the last week offer harbingers of serious trouble ahead with the largest swing voter bloc in the country — women.

"Women tend to have a more practical, less ideological way of approaching life and, therefore, approaching politics, and our party doesn't always take kindly to that," said former Ohio Rep. Deborah Pryce, chairwoman of the House Republican Conference from 2003 to 2007.

Democrats have long maintained that the Republican Party is hostile to all but the [most conservative women](#), and they cited last week's rough-and-tumble [House health care debate](#) as proof that things are getting worse.

On Saturday, Rep. Tom Price (R-Ga.) repeatedly cited parliamentary rules in an attempt to shout down Rep. Lois Capps (D-Calif.), who was trying to deliver a speech defending abortion rights.

A day earlier, [Rep. Pete Sessions \(R-Texas\)](#) [suggested that women](#) who complained that their gender was designated a "pre-existing condition" by some insurers were on a par with smokers because both groups incur higher treatment costs.

"Why should a smoker pay more?" asked Sessions, who runs the National Republican Congressional Committee — which is tasked with recruiting new female candidates.

It wasn't always this way. When Pryce was first elected in 1992, Republicans had recruited so many female candidates that then-Conference Chairman Jerry Lewis of California ordered up posters featuring their several dozen smiling faces.

But there are just 17 Republican women in the House today.

And with less than a year to go before the 2010 midterm elections, Republicans have enlisted just 13 more to challenge Democratic incumbents. Even if all of them won, Republicans would have at most 30 women in the House — about half the number Democrats now have.

"It's unfortunate," Pryce said. "Look at what's happened in New England. We've lost virtually all of our seats there because the base of the party doesn't take kindly to moderates."

Nobody knows that better than Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine), who's [found herself targeted by possible 2012 GOP presidential aspirant Gov. Tim Pawlenty](#), who warned her against "deviating" from conservative orthodoxy.

"They could probably borrow more from me in that sense, in terms of being in touch with your constituents," said Snowe, when asked about her conservative critics, including the Minnesota governor.

Scozzafava's conservative critics — including [former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin](#) and Rush Limbaugh — chalked up their opposition to her liberal positions on abortion and gay rights.

But not everyone sees it that way.

"The case in the [23rd District] is a terrific example of what happens when you have a strong, moderate Republican woman on the ticket," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers. "She struggled because the stalwarts of the party turned against her."

Scozzafava's friend Janet Duprey, a moderate Republican who represents the adjacent state Assembly district in western New York, says the defection of party elders like George Pataki to her more conservative opponent Doug Hoffman reminded her of the GOP's bad old days in the mid-1970s.

"I started my career in politics in 1975. ... I went through that," Duprey told the Albany Times-Union. "I had some people who felt that a woman should not enter politics, a woman should not run. ... I hope that we've moved beyond that point. But I have to tell you, watching this go on, I've had some déjà vu back to 1975."

"It has been very difficult to watch," she added. "You have to ask some of these men, why weren't they there with our Republican candidate when she could have really used our help?"

Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.), one of the most outspoken feminists in the House, put it more bluntly: "This is a party that doesn't respect women, a party that doesn't believe women are equal to men," she told POLITICO. "I don't think they attract women to their party," added Wasserman Schultz. "I think they repulse women."

Many male national GOP leaders — from former House Speaker Newt Gingrich to House Minority Leader John Boehner — endorsed Scozzafava until she withdrew and backed the eventual winner of the seat, Democrat Bill Owens.

And Sessions's NRCC, which threw nearly \$1 million at her campaign, is taking heat from conservatives for backing a candidate who supported gay marriage and abortion rights.

House Republican leaders have spent years trying to bolster female recruitment, often with frustrating results. While the number of Democratic women willing to challenge sitting Republicans keeps rising, recruiting GOP women to challenge Democratic incumbents is becoming harder.

From 1994 to 2004, the NRCC recruited an average of 20 women a cycle to challenge incumbents, and even they won only three of those seats during the entire decade.

In 2006 and 2008, the number of female challengers dropped to 13 and 18, respectively, with only one winner, Rep. Lynn Jenkins of Kansas.

In the days after Scozzafava's departure, House GOP leaders took pains to emphasize the contributions of their female members, allowing Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-N.C.) and others to

kick off a series of floor speeches against the Democrats' health care proposals.

But Foxx and the best-known female Republican in the House — Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann — are firmly ensconced in the party's right wing, and Foxx proved it with her opening salvo on health care: "I believe we have more to fear from the potential of that bill passing than we do from any terrorist right now in any country."

Bachmann, who trumpeted the "death panel" argument and has accused President Barack Obama of trying to turn the country into a socialist state, is a particularly big draw with conservatives, who flocked by the thousands to her rally at the U.S. Capitol Thursday.

Despite the internal tension caused by the special election in New York, Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), — who's spearheading the caucus's recruitment efforts for 2010, appointed Jenkins and Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.) to travel across the country to encourage female candidates and, he hopes, diversify the GOP caucus.

"If you want to be the majority, you have to reflect the majority. For women to run, it gives more strength as a party," McCarthy said.

Jenkins, who said she speaks regularly with women in the 2010 candidate class, praised the leadership's "extra efforts" this cycle to try to get more women into races.

"We can do better," she said. "That's why many of the female members have stepped out and visited with these folks to encourage them to run."

For her part, Pryce has recently revived her political action committee, Value in Electing Women, to help potential female candidates, regardless of where they fall on the political spectrum.

"There are a lot of people thinking about this," Pryce said. "I don't think it's a lack of trying or effort, but history has hurt us. I just wish our party had a gentler face once in a while."