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Whitman Courting Women Voters In Governor's Race

SACRAMENTO (CBS 5 / AP) — As Meg Whitman has been introducing herself to California voters, she retells a line that usually generates a chuckle: "The next governor of California needs to know exactly what SHE believes."

The statement conveys the kind of confidence the former eBay executive displayed in her trailblazing role as the female head of a Fortune 500 company. It also is a reminder of the pioneering role she would play if she is elected as the first woman to California's highest office.

Whitman rarely dwells on her gender as she seeks to woo the female voters who now make up a majority of California's electorate. But when she does make that pitch, her language at times comes across as tone-deaf. A recent poll shows she is having mixed results in winning over women.

Some of the statements on Whitman's Web site and at campaign events sound as if they come from a previous era, when women could only dream of leading a major company.

For example, in talking about the devastating effects of California's high unemployment rate and faltering economy, Whitman says it has provoked tough conversations in families. Among them, she regularly says, are "husbands telling wives that they can't afford their homes any longer."

After facing criticism for her apparent failure to vote in numerous elections, Whitman, 53, said, "I was focused on raising a family, on my husband's career. We moved many, many times. And it is no excuse." During that time, Whitman was an executive at major companies that included Procter & Gamble, Hasbro, Disney and eBay.

Her response drew criticism from women who said they still found time to vote despite juggling busy work and family schedules, although others have said they welcomed her acknowledgment.

In another example, an article on her Web site titled "Whitman gets mothers, daughters, talking about politics" says "Mothers, many of them for the first time, are talking with their daughters about politics, about achieving their goals and about being unafraid to dream. And their daughters are listening."

It's a statement that seems naive in a state with a long history of women's political activism. Both of California's U.S. senators are women and Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco is the first female speaker of the House of Representatives.

"Ahhh, no. That is so untrue," said Mirna Reyes-Bible, a Republican who said she has discussed politics with her son and daughter, both of whom are now grown, since they were in grade school.

"We have really lively debates about issues, and I love it," she said. "That to me is almost arrogant, to think that just because you came on the scene, we're finally discussing politics."

Reyes-Bible, an officer of the Yolo Republican Women Federated group, gave Whitman a glowing introduction at the group's luncheon in Davis in September, but said she is still undecided about which candidate she will support in next June's primary election.

Despite lengthy political engagement by women in California, the Republican Party has been slow to embrace women candidates.

Two women — U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein in 1990 and former state treasurer Kathleen Brown four years later — have been the Democratic Party's gubernatorial nominee, but the California GOP has never chosen a female gubernatorial or U.S. Senate nominee. Just five of the 43 Republican lawmakers in the state Legislature are women.

In trying to bridge that gap, Whitman's language could be a winning strategy to attract the older conservatives who dominate GOP primaries and who tend to hold social views that are far more conservative than the overall electorate.

Among them are Republican women who typically lead the party's get-out-the-vote efforts in California, said Sharon Runner, a former Republican assemblywoman from Lancaster who is co-chairwoman of Whitman's campaign.

"You'll have a woman candidate who's running for Assembly or Senate who still has children at home, I think a lot of Republican women would not vote for that candidate because they think she should be at home," Runner said. "Democrats don't have that hurdle."

An October Field Poll found Whitman was doing best among the older voters, although half of Republican voters were still undecided. More than a third of those age 50 to 64 backed her, and she was virtually tied with former congressman Tom Campbell for support among Republicans 65 and older. Campbell led with voters 18 to 49.

A Los Angeles Times-USC poll this month found that Whitman still has work to do to win support from Republican women, a third of whom had not yet made up their minds. While 40 percent of men who registered Republican said they supported her, only 30 percent of women did. The other candidates surveyed had about equal support from both genders.

"The rhetoric that she's using is somewhat out of date. Both of those things (her comments about women's engagement in politics and her response to the voting controversy) indicate that she either is insensitive to what has happened or is appealing to a certain segment of the Republican base that still believes in this," said Sherry Bebitch-Jeffe, a political science professor at the University of Southern California. "My guess is it's a little of both."

Voter patterns nationwide indicate that female voters typically lean Democratic, even when a pro-choice Republican such as Whitman is in the race, said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. They mostly have helped male Democrats get elected.

Attracting those voters is important in California, where women make up 53 percent of the state's electorate. That's why Whitman's campaign launched MEGaWomen, an attempt to engage women of all political persuasions early in the campaign.

In a video on her Web site, she asks women to submit their ideas about how to make California better. The attempt at a two-way dialogue tries to capitalize on women's skill at networking, said Jillian Manus, a Palo Alto literary agent and GOP donor who offers motivational seminars for women.

"Meg doesn't want women to vote for her because she's a woman," said Manus, who is co-chairwoman of MEGaWomen. "Women don't vote for other women because they're women. They vote for them because they're the good candidate."



1 of 1 Click to enlarge

Former eBay CEO and Republican candidate for California governor Meg Whitman smiles as she speaks to members of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group at the Yahoo! headquarters April 27, 2009 in Sunnyvale, California. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images