

Women Carry Corporate Success to Campaigns

By Emily Cadei, CQ-Roll Call

Spurred on by the rising anti-incumbent mood and the economic crisis, female executives have emerged as serious contenders for statewide political office in Connecticut, California and Florida.

Though small in number, political observers say their candidacies could create an alternate model for women to enter politics and help the parties — particularly the GOP — broaden their candidate pools.

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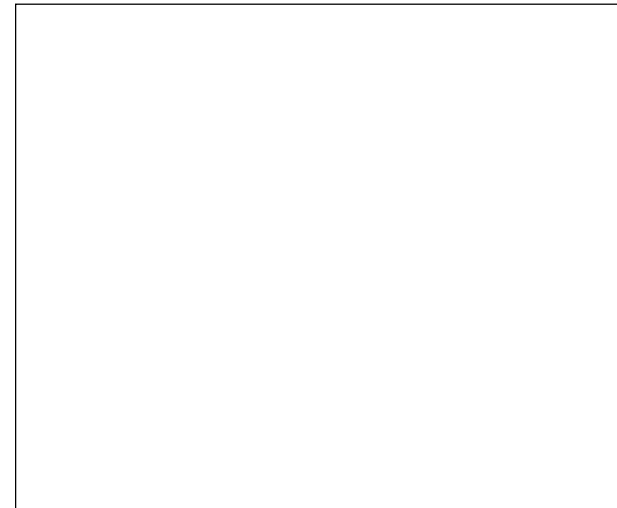
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“What better in this day and age . . . than to have more people who actually created a job involved in government,” said Chris LaCivita, a Republican political consultant who has represented several candidates making the jump from the private sector.

LaCivita said the timing is right for contenders with the type of business backgrounds of [Carly Fiorina](#), [Meg Whitman](#), [Linda McMahon](#) and [Alex Sink](#).

Fiorina, the former CEO of technology titan Hewlett-Packard, and Whitman, the former CEO of the eBay online auction site, are running in California for Senate and governor, respectively. McMahon, until recently the CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment,

is running for Senator in Connecticut. Sink, former president of Florida Operations at Bank of America, is running for governor in Florida.

Of the four, Sink is the only Democrat and the only one who has previously run for elective office, winning election as the state's chief financial officer in 2006.

A number of men — including Nevada Senate candidate John Chachas, a managing director at investment bank Lazard; Ohio Senate candidate Tom Ganley, president and CEO of a chain of auto dealerships; and Arkansas Senate candidate and food-safety services company CEO Curtis Coleman — also are seeking statewide political office after long careers in business.

But while they are following a path already trod by the likes of New Jersey Gov. Corzine (D), Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) and former Gov. Mitt Romney (R-Mass.), no woman has made a similar leap.

"It's a way into elective office and it's a way we've seen some men do it," said Deborah Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

The one woman in statewide elective office "who is slightly comparable is [Maria Cantwell](#)," Washington's junior senator, Walsh said.

Cantwell, however, started out in politics, serving one term in the House in the 1990s before building a career at Seattle-based Real Networks. After rising to senior vice president of consumer products, she left to run for Senate in 2000, kicking in more than \$10 million of her own money to her victorious campaign.

"Numerically there just aren't that many" women executives, Walsh said.

That is starting to change with the maturing of the first generation of women to enter the business world in any sort of significant numbers. And, said Walsh, "as women's leadership in the private sector changes that may . . . trickle over to the public sector."

Such a trend would likely have a greater an impact on the profile of the Republican Party, which has lagged Democrats in sending women to office but whose fiscally conservative principles are attractive to many business leaders.

Whitman, who rose through the corporate food chain with stops at Disney and Proctor & Gamble before landing at eBay in 1998, said that only now is the country seeing "significant numbers of that generation [of businesswomen] coming through the pipeline."

They are women, she said, who "have now been in business for 30 years, so now we have the track record, we have the credibility."

They also have the money — between their personal wealth and business connections, the women are expected to build impressive campaign accounts. McMahon has said she is willing to put \$50 million of her own funds into her campaign, while Whitman has tossed around the mind-boggling sum of \$150 million.

None of the businesswomen candidates are seeking to define themselves by their gender, instead centering their pitches on their experience with economics and job creation.

The degree to which they have embraced their female identity at all has varied by candidate.

On one end of the spectrum is McMahon, who has avoided questions of gender. "Linda believes that ... the gender issue is immaterial at this point," said spokesman Ed Patru.

Fiorina, who's vying to run in the fall against Democratic Sen. [Barbara Boxer](#), has made being a woman part of the argument for her candidacy in a primary with state Assemblyman Chuck DeVore.

Her campaign notes that Boxer has never faced a woman candidate, and contends that Fiorina can challenge Boxer for the votes of women.

Speaking at a breakfast hosted by the American Spectator last month, Fiorina was quoted as saying that DeVore cannot beat Boxer. "With all due respect and deep affection for white men — I'm married to one — but [Boxer] knows how to beat them. She's done it over and over and over," Fiorina said.

Women voters are one of four coalitions Whitman's campaign is looking to build to support her candidacy. Like Fiorina, she is aiming to appeal to them with the same core message she is delivering to the rest of the electorate.

"I'm running on a platform on creating and keeping jobs in California," she said, as well as "fixing our education system." And, she noted, "the number one and number two issues for women of all walks of life in California are jobs and education."

If those four executive candidates get through their primary challenges (all but Sink face competitive primaries) they will face veteran politicians with long records in political life.

Those long records offer many opportunities to criticize specific votes and policy choices, but an extensive history in business can provide ample fodder for opposition researchers, too.

McMahon, Fiorina and Whitman already have faced a wave of scrutiny [over their voting records](#), donations [to the opposition](#)

party and controversial corporate decisions, which is bound to only intensify as the races heat up. Sink's likely general election opponent Attorney General Bill McCollum (R) has, predictably, [begun labeling Sink](#) a "former banker" and questioning her ties to the subprime mortgage industry.

Steve DeMicco, a longtime advisor to outgoing Corzine, the former CEO of Goldman Sachs, said the behavior of companies under the leadership of those candidates are bound to become campaign issues.

When Corzine first ran for the Senate, he was able to combat the attacks on his record at Goldman Sachs with "a well thought out and pretty comprehensive platform of his own," said DeMicco.

McMahon and Fiorina, who have faced the most concerted attacks on their business records, will face the biggest challenge in trying to change the subject.

Fiorina, whose claim to fame as the only woman to lead a Fortune 20 company is clouded by her stormy tenure there, is seeking to turn Boxer's legislative record as well as her reputation as a partisan Democrat into the central issues of the campaign.

McMahon has faced criticism over racy content WWE offered in the past, as well as the wrestling industry's troubled history with steroids. Patru, her spokesman, said much of the controversy is being ginned up by her opponents.

Like the Fiorina campaign, he sought to turn the tables by painting former Rep. [Rob Simmons](#), a Republican primary opponent, and incumbent Democrat [Christopher J. Dodd](#) as Washington insiders who "never created a single job."

It's the sort of talking point that is likely to be a regular refrain among all the businesswomen in 2010.