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### Linda McMahon Has GOP Women In Her Corner

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Republican U.S. Senate candidate Linda McMahon grew wealthy presiding over a wrestling empire once known for its lingerie-clad divas, sexually charged trash talk, cartoony violence between men with impossibly large muscles and, occasionally, kicks to the groin and simulated rape scenes.

But none of that matters to Deborah Ward-O'Brien, chairwoman of the North Haven Republican Town Committee and a big supporter of the former World Wrestling Entertainment CEO's bid to become the first female senator from Connecticut.

"Was she successful? Yes. Clearly she's a hard worker," Ward-O'Brien said. "Will she be able to go to Washington and play with the big boys? Yes. ... She'll serve us well."

The latest Quinnipiac University poll on the Senate race, released Wednesday, shows that McMahon has surged ahead of her chief rival, Rob Simmons, for the GOP nomination. She is now her party's front-runner for the first time since joining the race in September — a gain fueled by her 22-percentage point advantage among Republican women.

In contrast, McMahon is just a statistically irrelevant 2 percentage points ahead of Simmons among Republican men. "It's a neck-and-neck race," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "Women could make the difference in the primary."

The traditional fault line of gender politics — abortion — is unlikely to play much of a role in this contest. Both Simmons and McMahon favor abortion rights, although McMahon supports parental notification laws and opposes so-called partial-birth abortions.

McMahon's colossal bank account — she has said she would spend up to \$50 million on the race — has allowed her to begin airing television commercials months before the May nominating convention. As a political newcomer who is largely unknown outside the wrestling world, she has used the ads to define herself to voters and to sketch out her life story.

One nostalgia-tinged spot in frequent rotation emphasizes McMahon's role as a wife and mother as well as her success in the corporate world. The ad features McMahon's wedding photos and family snapshots, as a tranquil soundtrack plays in the background; it is narrated by her daughter, Stephanie.

"Linda's support among women is growing because the more women get to know her and learn about her remarkable life story, the more they identify with her," said Shawn McCoy, a McMahon campaign spokesman.

"She's been at rock bottom and bankrupt, she's been a working mother who has juggled a career and a family, she's been married to the same man for 43 years, and that experience is inspiring on many levels."

The Simmons camp has been pitching a different story line: one that focuses on the WWE history of raunch and violence.

Simmons campaign manager Jim Barnett predicted that McMahon's strategy of courting women will stop reaping rewards once those voters learn more about the company built by her and her husband, Vince McMahon.

"People know nothing about Linda McMahon except what they've seen in her paid advertising campaign," Barnett said. He's made it his mission to change that by circulating YouTube clips of the WWE's seamier matches and publicizing the name of the McMahons' boat — Sexy Bitch.

"It's understandable that women voters would find some appeal in one of their own seeking high office, but women aren't going to vote for her just because she's a woman," Barnett said.

Simmons is touting his own support among women. He recently snagged the endorsement of former 5th District U.S. Rep. Nancy Johnson and soon will release a list of 100 Women for Simmons.

Amy DeGraff, who leads the West Hartford Republican Women's Club, said she has yet to endorse a candidate formally. She intends to take many things into consideration as she weighs her decision, but added that "some of the wrestling stuff concerns me as a woman."

Many of the clips cited by the Simmons campaign are almost a decade old, relics of the WWE's edgy "Attitude Era." The company has dismissed criticism about its programming by touting its efforts to recast its content as more "family-friendly."

McCoy, the McMahon spokesman, said that male and female voters alike have grown weary of political broadsides. "Rob Simmons is losing ground because he's focused on the wrong things. He's focused on negative attacks and tearing Linda down, while she's focused on economic recovery and job creation."

Ward-O'Brien, the North Haven party chair, agreed. She said shots at the WWE are nothing more than a "distraction" and noted that the same sort of criticism was levied against California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. She says she's more concerned about McMahon's stance on health care than the antics of WWE performers. "A lot of that is theatrics ... like anything else, you can turn it off if you don't want to watch it."

In the end it may not matter: Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, the favorite to win the Democratic nomination, holds a commanding lead over both Simmons and McMahon. And that holds true among voters of both genders.

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