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In primaries, female candidates didn't make gender an issue

By [Anne E. Kornblut](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
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With victories by several prominent women in [Tuesday's primary elections](#) came the familiar declarations that a "year of the woman" is underway. But in at least five races, something even more remarkable occurred: The candidates' gender never became much of an issue.

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Tuesday's elections put on display the increasing diversity of female candidates, as well as their growing resilience. They were for abortion rights and against them, old and young, part of the political establishment and new to it. Their male opponents attacked them -- relentlessly, in some cases -- apparently unworried about being seen as picking on a woman. The women touched on their gender, but did so sparingly. And they made few appeals to traditional women's issues.

Take California, where [Meg Whitman](#) won the Republican gubernatorial nomination. (Most of the female candidates competing in Tuesday's primaries were Republicans.) She is the first female billionaire to translate her business acumen into politics. Whitman rarely talked about gender in public and frequently campaigned alone, without her husband or sons; she presented herself as a strong, solo businesswoman rather than as a mother or a wife. When she was attacked by her male rival -- on her spotty voting record, her stance on immigration and her reluctance to talk to the news media -- Whitman did not complain that the treatment was sexist (at least not out loud).

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Primary Analysis video: Bob Schieffer

Chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer talks to Maggie Rodriguez about the message the voters sent Tuesday night in primaries across the country.

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The same was true of former Hewlett-Packard chief executive [Carly Fiorina](#), who made her personal toughness a theme of her winning campaign for California's [GOP](#) Senate nomination. She talked about how she recently battled breast cancer, but more as a way to convince voters of her strength and determination than to win sympathy.

Whitman, in her victory speech Tuesday night, noted what she and Fiorina have in common: "Career politicians in Washington and Sacramento be warned, because you now face your worst nightmare: two businesswomen from the real world who know how to create jobs, balance budgets and get things done."

Halfway across the country, in Arkansas, [Sen. Blanche Lincoln](#) defied predictions to hold onto the Democratic nomination in a campaign that was more about incumbency, health-care reform and the economic stimulus package than it was about identity politics. And in South Carolina, Nikki Haley withstood the sort of nasty accusations of adultery usually leveled at male candidates and is headed to a runoff for the Republican nomination for governor.

Of course, parity in politics nationwide is still a ways off. Women make up less than one-fifth of Congress and hold the governorships of just six states. (In Haley's South Carolina, there are no women in the 46-member Senate.)

The shift toward female candidates is especially dramatic in the [Republican Party](#), which put forward fewer women than the Democrats. In part, that tended to be true because of the makeup of the electorate: Roughly 57 percent of Democratic primary voters are women, but women make up 46 percent of Republican primary voters. For Whitman, Fiorina and Haley, as well as former state lawmaker [Sharron Angle](#) in Nevada, running as a Republican meant starting from behind.

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"The Republican women who emerged seem to have finally unlocked the key to their primaries," Democratic pollster Celinda Lake said. "It used to be that Democratic women would emerge from their primaries and Republican women would not." This was certainly true of Whitman and Fiorina in California. Until Tuesday, the state's GOP establishment, described for years by frustrated insiders as the ultimate boys' club, had never nominated a woman for governor or Senate.

Former Alaska governor [Sarah Palin](#) has been given credit for both inspiring female candidates and endorsing them. She was particularly helpful

to Haley, who rose in the polls after Palin appeared on stage alongside her. One Democratic official said the winning night for Republican women "tells me we've underestimated Sarah Palin again." Democrats, this official said, have been late to understand that Palin has fundamentally altered the way the GOP establishment views women, even if Palin herself is a divisive figure within the party.

Supporters of the "tea party" movement also appear more open to backing female candidates than the Republican Party has been historically. The movement's mix of contrarian and [libertarian](#) views and the value it puts on outsiders combine to benefit women.

"There are more paths being revealed to Republican women," with candidates emerging from business and political backgrounds, GOP strategist Nicolle Wallace said.

In South Carolina, race seemed to play as big a part as gender. While Haley was under fire for the alleged affairs, it was a state senator's reference to her as a ["raghead"](#) -- she is the daughter of Indian Americans -- that risked making her appear to be a victim. It was a role she rejected.

The general election in the fall will be the real test of whether the "year of the woman" label is fitting. Party strategists on both sides noted past elections, most recently the House races in 2006, in which large numbers of women were nominated only to lose in the general election. And they noted that it was just two years ago that a woman seemed poised to win the presidency -- and a woman won the Republican vice presidential nomination -- only to lose.



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"It could be a bit of an indication of something resembling progress," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "I wouldn't want to go completely out on a limb, but let's see where things are when we get to November."

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