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Are California's GOP women the start of a political trend?

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By Mackenzie Carpenter, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It was, perhaps, inevitable.

No sooner had two women, in a historic first, been nominated to the GOP ticket for the two biggest political jobs in the nation's biggest state than so did the predictably snarky hair-and-hemline stories, along with news Tuesday that one of them shoved an employee.

But beyond the predictable "year of the woman" or catfight-themed media coverage, Carly Fiorina and Meg Whitman, who are running for senator and governor, respectively, in California, may actually represent a new trend: the high-powered businesswoman joining the schoolteacher, the nurse, the lawyers and the mad-as-hell housewife in seeking political office.

South Carolina's GOP candidate for governor, Nikki Haley, has a business background. So does Linda McMahon, the GOP Senate nominee in Connecticut, who formerly headed World Wrestling Entertainment. And a prestigious university think-tank is actively recruiting businesswomen to run for legislative offices in 2012, when redistricting will mean more open seats.

Locally, it should be noted that Pennsylvania doesn't have a woman running for Senate or governor, has never had a female governor and is currently ranked 45th among all state legislatures for the proportion of women, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Nonetheless, businesswomen in Pittsburgh and across the country are applauding the increase in their numbers seeking public office, even if they don't agree on whether Ms. Fiorina or Ms. Whitman, former heads of Hewlett Packard and eBay, respectively, are the right ones to blaze this particular trail.

Ms. Whitman has received mostly positive reviews from colleagues for her management skills in taking eBay, a 30-employee startup, and turning it into a Fortune 500 company -- while Ms. Fiorina's record at HP, which ended with her firing, is more mixed.

"I think they both have great skills," said Marsha Firestone, head of the Women Presidents' Organization, which represents multimillion-dollar companies headed by women worldwide.

"In Meg's case, that company [eBay] was small and she grew it, built a team, focused on innovation and was extremely creative -- and revenues skyrocketed. If you've never met a budget, cut expenses or grown revenue, how can you run for any kind of political office?"

Still, it's not easy to switch from corporate boss to, say, junior senator or chief executive of a dysfunctional state where ballot initiatives don't make it easy to govern. And the best manager in the world will go nowhere in the political arena without the ability to build consensus, inspire and juggle ferociously competing interests.

Technically, Ms. Whitman would have an easier transition, moving from CEO to governor, but Ms. Fiorina would be just one of 100 senators -- with similarly strong personalities.

"You're in charge when you're a CEO, and when you're a politician you have all these constituents who don't have to do what you tell them to do," said Jacqui Morby, who heads a Massachusetts-based venture capital firm and has served on a number of corporate boards.

Many corporate people have made the transition very successfully, notably Michael Bloomberg, billionaire media company owner and now mayor of New York City. But high-profile executives also provide a target-rich environment for opponents.

Case in point: Ms. Whitman's shoving incident. The New York Times reported earlier this week that Ms. Whitman cost her company \$200,000 in a settlement after a physical confrontation with an employee. As for Ms. Fiorina, she was caught off-microphone last week criticizing the hair of her Democratic opponent, Sen. Barbara Boxer. Ms. Fiorina called Ms. Whitman's decision to appear with Sean Hannity, a conservative talk show host on Fox News, "bizarre."

Ms. Fiorina's tenure at Hewlett Packard has been far more colorful than Ms. Whitman's, shoving or not. She has an ambitious, limelight-seeking style -- there was a Forbes magazine cover photo with Condoleezza Rice and lots of television -- and she made some controversial decisions which are still being studied in business schools today, including a controversial merger with Compaq Computer Corp., thousands of layoffs, infighting with the company's family members and the departure of many well-regarded employees. She was fired in 2005 and received a \$21 million severance package.

Ms. Fiorina is unrepentant, saying in her memoir, "Tough Choices," that she was treated more harshly because she was a woman, and, indeed, Ms. Morby says, "it appears she was undermined, so it's really hard to know if did a good job or not."

Ms. Fiorina and Ms. Whitman are hardly typical, given that they are both committed to spending many millions of dollars to win; Ms. Whitman has already spent \$91 million and vows to top \$150 million if necessary.

"These women are rich, but they're self-made, which is notable in itself," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, which has launched a new program to attract women with business backgrounds to run for office.

"Will we see other women follow? How will the experience that these women have in the corporate sector be relevant in the public sphere? One year doesn't a trend make," she said.

Nonetheless, the 2012 Project at Rutgers is trying to identify women over 45 "who have made it in other sectors -- science and technology, small business, the defense industry, international affairs," Ms. Walsh said.

"We're looking for women with expertise in finance, regulation and budgets, areas that the government needs expertise in," she said. "We're saying to these women, 'Think about it now, you've made it, you've been a glass-ceiling breaker. Take that experience and, as a capstone to your career, think about running for office.' Entire legislatures don't need to be dominated by white male lawyers."

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