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Sex and the GOP

Betsy Reed | September 29, 2010

In the media spectacle that is the 2010 midterm elections, women of the GOP are playing starring roles. They have figured prominently in nearly every plot and subplot that holds any real interest or potential for debased amusement: from Indian-American Nikki Haley's triumph over her mudslinging male rivals for the GOP gubernatorial nod in South Carolina, to Carly Fiorina's catty open-mic swipe at her opponent Barbara Boxer's hair in the first-ever contest between two women for a California Senate seat, to WWF founder and Connecticut Senate hopeful Linda McMahon's gifts to oh-so-lucky Democratic ad firms (including video of the candidate physically attacking a buxom, scantily clad woman purporting to be her husband's lover), to the daily dose of clips revealing Christine O'Donnell's youthful preoccupations with witchcraft and masturbation. Remember when politics was boring?

Before the new GOP women entered the picture, the Republican Party was like Kansas in *The Wizard of Oz*: colorless, defined by a white male old guard along with a lackluster lineup of "young guns" cut from the same drab cloth. Now the party is dancing down a yellow brick road to what it hopes is victory in November. As Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, a 2012 presidential aspirant, proclaimed, "It's going to be a new day, a new era in terms of the face and voice and tone of the Republican Party, and I think that's really good." A movie just released by the conservative group Citizens United tells this happy tale: *Fire From the Heartland: The Awakening of the Conservative Woman* features Michele Bachmann and Ann Coulter, among others.

The "GOP Year of the Woman," a label tossed out by pundits in the wake of some primaries in June, has been zestfully adopted by party operatives. "I like strong women," wrote strategist Mark McKinnon in *The Daily Beast*. "Agree with them or not, it's the women of the GOP...who are tough enough to say exactly what they think. And their words are resonating with an increasingly vocal electoral bloc."

But are they? Has the party truly cultivated and supported its women candidates, and is it, as a result, poised to bring more women to Washington and more women voters into the fold? Or, as it lurches to the right, is the GOP in fact alienating women, including voters and potential leaders, who tend to be less conservative than men in their partisan identification and ideological views? Is the party's embrace of the current array of female candidates really about enhancing its appeal to *men*?

Before turning to these questions, let's be precise: if 2010 is the year of anything other than antiestablishment rage, it is the year of the *right-wing* woman, a type that has prospered at the expense of moderates, male and female alike. It is true that a record number of women filed to run for office this year as Republicans—some of whom may have been inspired by Sarah Palin's example. But it is also true that a record number lost: of the 128 women running for the House, eighty-one were defeated in their primaries, leaving forty-seven still in the running. In the Senate, seventeen filed to run, but only five won. That's a much higher rate of primary loss for Republican women than in the previous six election cycles. With some exceptions, the female candidates who survived are very, very conservative. Debbie Walsh, director of the Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics, says, "This is something quite far from a year of the woman. From the past, I would have assumed that the Republican women who are elected tend to be more moderate than Republican men. In this crop, we saw

some very conservative women running and winning." It may well be that the Tea Party, with its bottom-up structure, provided an opening for ultraright women, like Christine O'Donnell, who had been grassroots activists but were hungry for a larger role in the electoral arena.

But to understand where GOP gender dynamics really are, it's important to consider not only the women who won this year's primaries but those who lost, and why. The picture that emerges is one of a national party that, at best, takes its women candidates for granted even as it plays up its new female-friendly image. Take Alaska's Lisa Murkowski and Colorado's Jane Norton, both mainstream Republican women who saw little support from the party as they struggled to fend off their hard-right male challengers. While the party whacked away at O'Donnell in its futile attempt to save moderate Mike Castle in Delaware, it failed to respond with such alacrity when the Palin-endorsed Tea Partyer Joe Miller took aim at Murkowski—emphasizing her relative liberalism on abortion rights—in the Alaska Senate primary. "The national party seemed conflicted about Murkowski," noted another GOP woman who has had her own conflicts with the party, former New Jersey Governor Christie Todd Whitman, in an interview for this article.

When, after her primary loss, Murkowski launched a write-in campaign targeting Miller—a climate change denier who favors abolishing Medicaid and Social Security—as an extremist, the party's wrath was unleashed upon her, with minority leader Mitch McConnell threatening to strip her of her position as ranking member of the Energy Committee and declaring that she "no longer has my support for serving in any leadership roles." As Senate vice chair, she had been the party's sole female in a top leadership position. Karl Rove called her a "spoilsport" and her write-in campaign "sad and sorry."

As for Norton, the GOP establishment candidate for Senate in Colorado, after being recruited by the party she was largely on her own in a nasty contest with Tea Partyer Ken Buck—who opposes abortion even in cases of rape and incest along with many forms of birth control and asked for voters' support because "I don't wear high heels." A much hoped-for Palin endorsement never came through for Norton.

Even though moderate Republican female candidates are more in sync with women voters, they are not faring well in the present environment, in which the passion is with the angry Tea Party voters who are "sick and tired of what is going on" but are less clear about what they are for and are unmoved by women who "don't voice the same kind of passion but want to get things done," Christie Whitman observed. But Whitman still sees "an enormous place" for moderate women in politics and peril ahead for the GOP if they continue to be sidelined. "Purity is a nice thing in concept, but in a country as diverse as ours, [the party] risks becoming irrelevant" if it pursues its present course.

It was not always thus. The first female senator to be elected in her own right (as opposed to inheriting a seat after the death of her husband) was the prochoice Kansas Republican Nancy Kassebaum in 1978, who famously worked with Ted Kennedy on healthcare legislation. In the '80s, Republican women actually outnumbered Democratic women in Congress, and many of them stood in the middle of the road ideologically. Over the succeeding three decades, however, Republican women in Congress have moved steadily to the right, according to a study by the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota—to the point where in 2009 they were voting more conservatively than 77 percent of the House as a whole, a modern record. At the same time, their overall numbers relative to Democratic women have diminished; today, of a total of seventy-three female House members, just seventeen are Republicans. In the Senate, just four of seventeen women are Republicans, making Maine moderates Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins members of a rare species indeed. One reason for the paucity of Republican women in office is that qualified candidates are much less likely than their Democratic counterparts to have been recruited to run for office by party leaders and activists, according to research by Jennifer Lawless of American University and Richard Fox of Loyola Marymount University.

Among the very few institutional forces dedicated to fostering Republican women's leadership is the Susan B. Anthony List Candidate Fund. (It was at an SBA breakfast that Sarah Palin gave the Mama Grizzlies speech heard round the world.) But the fund, which says it promotes prolife women in politics, allotted 25 percent of its Congressional endorsements this cycle to antiabortion men, highlighting how several such candidates could

unseat prochoice women in Congress. "Have you heard about the wonderful SBA-list endorsed men candidates who are running against women who have been backed by pro-abortion groups?" asked one fundraising appeal titled "More Nancy Pelosis?"

Then there are groups like the Republican Majority for Choice, which are facing a tough slog right now. "I would be very careful marketing all Republican women candidates as Sarah Palin. I actually think that's insulting to these women—they should be seen on their own terms," says RMC co-chair Candy Straight, who observes how rough the electoral environment is for moderate women, who are seen as more ready to collaborate than convey the voters' anger to Washington. (Moderate GOP women running in governor's races appear likely to fare better in November, perhaps because voters are more apt to support a perceived problem-solver in an executive role.) To put the "GOP Year of the Woman" in further perspective, keep in mind that some of the most conspicuous Republican women candidates, like Carly Fiorina, Linda McMahon and Meg Whitman (who has spent a record-shattering \$119 million), are self-funders—meaning that their campaigns do not reflect any significant investment of resources by the national party.

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Just as the "stampede of pink elephants" that Sarah Palin warned Washington to expect in November may not amount to more than a modest new presence in Congress, the Mama Grizzlies, as an electoral bloc, do not pose a tangible threat to Democrats, strategists say. The gender gap, in which women voters consistently favor Democrats, is holding steady this year, at anywhere from 16 to 20 points, depending on the poll. Says a high-level Democratic operative working on the midterm election campaign, "Do we have a battle on our hands? Yes. But am I concerned that in particular we have the Mama Grizzlies, lots of really conservative women, coming to the polls? No. That is a branding strategy, not an electoral strategy."

Although the electorate in general is more conservative this year, and conservative voters are more energized, there has been no relative growth in the proportion of women who describe themselves as conservative—it's around one-third, compared with 44 percent of men. That doesn't mean that the passionate female following described in so many breathless stories about the Mama Grizzlies is imaginary, just that its size and significance have been inflated. "Palin does have appeal among really conservative women, but it is a very small group. They do a great job of marketing it, to make it look bigger than it is," says Molly O'Rourke of Hart Research Associates.

Women, by and large, are leery of the new right-wing female politicians, but men are far more receptive. Palin has a much larger gender gap than her ideological persuasion would predict: men are split 44 to 45 between those who hold favorable and unfavorable views of her; for women, the split is 35 to 58, according to a *National Journal* poll. Says Christie Whitman, "Palin appeals to more men than women. It was the white men in the party who put her on the ticket [in 2008], thinking that women who would have voted for Hillary would vote for her. That was dumb. They weren't going to buy into that." In a recent survey presenting respondents with a hypothetical matchup between Palin and Obama, Obama beat Palin by 13 points among women, but men preferred Palin by 2 points. In other words, if it were up to men, Palin might very well become president in 2012 (if it were up to white men, she'd be a shoo-in).

No doubt the "babe factor" has something to do with it: Palin's sex appeal is a frequent topic of right-wing male talkers like Rush Limbaugh, and similar voices in Delaware waxed on about Christine O'Donnell being "easy on the eyes"; one even issued an "Alert" for the "Major Babe." The gambit resembles that of Fox News shows with predominantly male audiences that have featured a bevy of attractive right-wing females, boosting the careers of commentators like Laura Ingraham and Ann Coulter. In Minnesota a Republican district office sparked an outcry in August when it posted a salacious video showing GOP politicians and pundits, including Palin and Coulter, in flattering poses set to "She's a Lady," followed by a montage of stern images of Nancy Pelosi and Hillary Clinton set to "Who Let the Dogs Out?"

More substantively, government-bashing, a favorite pastime of many ultraconservative female candidates, goes over much better with men than with women, who are more likely to support an active government role in the

economy, education, healthcare and environmental protection. After all, women benefit more from government policies like childcare subsidies and family leave, and they are disproportionately reliant on Social Security to protect them from poverty in old age, so it is only logical that they look askance at politicians of either gender who make careers out of demonizing government.

Michele Bachmann provides a vivid example of how right-wing female politicians divide voters along gender lines. In her quite conservative Minnesota district—as she has emerged as a national Tea Party darling, inveighing against "death panels" and urging Minnesotans to get "armed and dangerous" to "fight back" against cap-and-trade legislation—she has become increasingly dependent on male support. According to political scientist Eric Ostermeier of the University of Minnesota, who blogs at smartpoliticsblog.org, in polling before the 2008 contest Bachmann received support from 49 percent of men and 42 percent of women. In a recent poll, she got the support of 56 percent of men versus just 39 percent of women against her new rival, Democrat Tarryl Clark. What's more, the two women vying in the Democratic primary for a shot to oust Bachmann reaped big donations from female donors, at twice the rate of such contributions to other Congressional candidates, indicating a fierce determination among Democratic women to knock Bachmann out.

"Bachmann's appeal is definitely more to men. People here are really focused on bread-and-butter issues, and women are disproportionately affected when the economy is bad," says Donna Cassutt, associate chair of the Democratic Farmer Labor Party. She adds, "Women don't just vote for women. They must be capable, prowoman, profamily. Bachmann takes a hard line with the Tea Party against women's issues. And women are starting to say, We don't have jobs; we need more support for public education and healthcare. And they are looking for an alternative."

In Nevada, where all eyes are on Sharron Angle's Tea Party–infused run against Senate majority leader Harry Reid, the gender gap is similarly pronounced. Angle's unfavorables among women, at 64 percent, surpass even Palin's. (Christie Whitman, apprised of these numbers, quips, "Well, I would hope so, frankly" before hastening to add, "much as I'd love to see Harry Reid go down.") This trend is not lost on Reid's campaign, which has been targeting women with ads featuring Angle's positions on women's issues and others, like Social Security, that are especially important to female voters. Angle has given them a lot to work with, from her statement about how rape victims who become pregnant should avoid abortion and turn "a lemon situation into lemonade"; to her declaration that it is "right" and "acceptable" for women to raise children rather than work outside the home; to her infamous pledges to phase out Social Security and abolish the Education Department; to her vote against a law that, according to Reid's campaign, would prevent Nevada from being a "safe haven" for domestic abusers. In response to these and other attacks, Angle accused Reid of trying to "hit the girl." (In an attempt at damage control, Nevada Republican National Committeewoman Heidi Smith told *Politico*, "We always wondered what would happen with Harry and his nastiness because some people would get upset if he's mean to a woman.")

Even Meg Whitman, an oft-cited role model for moderate women in the party, struggled initially to attract female support in her bid to become governor of California. During the primary, in which she tacked right on issues such as immigration, she had the backing of 40 percent of Republican men, versus 30 percent of women. Now, up against Democrat Jerry Brown, she has been making a concerted effort to appeal to women, forming a campaign group called MegaWoman, dedicated to attracting female voters and volunteers. And while she still owes much of her strength to her consistent support among white men, she has pulled even with Brown among women, a rare feat for a Republican these days (and something Carly Fiorina, running a more conservative campaign for Senate in the same state, has not achieved). The Whitman campaign is being closely watched by moderate Republican women nationwide, who hope that, if elected, she would broaden the scope of what is permissible in Republican discourse. "Whitman can't afford to talk much about being prochoice right now. Once she's earned the respect of the right, then she'll have leverage," says Margaret Hoover, a Fox News commentator and self-described conservative Republican who is also an ardent advocate of choice and gay rights.

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In the bigger picture, while Republicans crow about their "Year of the Woman" and pander to their base of white men (who prefer them, today, by a whopping margin of 25 points), Democrats see the support of women as a

bright spot on an otherwise gloomy horizon. But there are ominous signs of torpor in this ordinarily energetic group. In a Gallup poll taken in September, women were much less likely than men to say they had given much thought to this year's midterms, 31 percent to 45 percent. This is a key indicator of who is likely to turn out at the polls, and it's significantly lower than in previous years, though it is important to remember that women tend to make their decisions later, and they are also more likely to deem themselves uninformed even when they are more informed than male voters. Still, it hints strongly at the much-feared "enthusiasm gap," which may see Tea Partyers flocking to the polls while women—among other core Democratic constituencies like blacks and young people—stay home. "This is what wakes me up at night," says Stephanie Schriock, president of EMILY's List.

Just like the rest of the demoralized progressive base, women had high hopes for Obama but feel let down by his administration. Women, especially those who are noncollege educated, are economically anxious and frustrated with the jobs situation. And although they might favor some aspects of the healthcare reform law, they don't see it as a "lifeline," according to pollster Geoff Garin of Hart Research. They don't feel that the Democrats and the Obama administration have done enough for them. If they had to choose, they'd mostly opt for Democrats; but many don't believe that it makes much difference which party controls Congress.

Schriock contends that when presented with detailed information, women—including those who are swing voters—will head to the polls and pull the lever for Democratic candidates. "What we've seen, in poll after poll, in House and Senate races, is that when you lay out the case clearly about what these Republicans bring to the table, women who are independent or even Republican-leaning come back to the Democratic candidates. That is a really good sign, so that is what we are going to spend our time doing," says Schriock.

EMILY's List launched a "Sarah Doesn't Speak for Me" campaign to challenge Palin's claim to represent ordinary women, and it has received emphatic responses from many women, including Republicans. But it remains to be seen whether the masses of women who are turned off by the Michele Bachmanns and Sharron Angles running for office will turn out to reject them at the polls or will simply tune out the election.

When all is said and done in the 2010 midterms, it's quite possible, even likely, that the ranks of women in Congress will be depleted by ten or more. Given the Democratic advantage in women legislators, even if a few more Republican women are elected, a bad year for Dems will be a bad year for women, as many Democratic women legislators who arrived in 2006 or 2008—like Arizona's Gabrielle Giffords, Colorado's Betsey Markey and Illinois's Debbie Halvorson—find themselves vulnerable to challenges from Republican men. Such a decline in female representation would be the first in more than thirty years. We may see the faces of some newly elected right-wing female legislators on TV, but moderate and independent women will likely find themselves with an even smaller voice in Washington. The irony is that, in this so-called year of the woman, this result will be, more than anything else, an expression of the preferences and passions of angry white men.

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