

Tea Party Women Could Change the Score, Long Term

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GOP women are coming out of the woodwork and challenging Democrats' double-X dominance. But the game for political women is still more noise than transformative numbers. Corinna Barnard's editorial kicks off Women's eNews' upcoming campaign coverage.

(WOMENSENEWS)--It could be the way Republican billionaire Meg Whitman is spending record millions of her own money on her gubernatorial campaign in California and attracting attention to her domestic-worker employment practices.

Or maybe it's the upset victory by Christine O'Donnell in the Delaware Republican primary that has everyone--including late-night TV comedians and GOP strategist Karl Rove--going ga-ga.

Or maybe it's the way Nevada Democrat Harry Reid, Senate majority leader, is seriously worried about Tea Party upstart Sharon Angell.

Everywhere you look, Republican women are popping up this election cycle. Animated by Sarah Palin-brand politics, they are also juxtaposed to two women from Maine--Sen. Olympia Snowe and Sen. Susan Collins--cast in the role of leading party moderates.



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The Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University of New Jersey, runs the mother of all Web sites and research operations on the state of the U.S. female franchise.



Two weeks ago the center said yes, it has been a record campaign season for Republican women. But many apparently did not win their primaries, which means that the final number of women in congressional races--Democrat or Republican--is a bit lower than high-water marks reached in 2004. And while Democratic women ran for election at lower levels than in the past, more won, leaving Democrats with the edge on female leadership.

More Noise Than Numbers

All that means some women are lending higher notes to the current howl of national discontent. But our actual leadership participation is somewhere between unchanged and slightly down from peak levels. More noise than numbers.

The female candidates of either party who are still on the field want to join a U.S. Congress--in both the House and Senate--that is still only about 17 percent female.

That's below the magic tipping-point figure for women's political representation, which the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Geneva sets at about 30 percent.

A select group of 20 or so countries have achieved this level, providing evidence, in the case of Nordic countries in particular, that it promotes economic growth and support for social amenities such as health care, day care and environmental care. Nurturing policies, in other words.

Social architects recommend governments emerging from civil war to draft or redraft their constitutions to include 30 percent of women in their parliaments. It's considered both stabilizing and a step to economic development. Rwanda currently leads the world in female representation, with women now more than 50 percent of its legislators.

The attention-getting Tea Party female candidates seem to defy the social expectations of women-sensitive social planning.

Many are incensed by what they call the federal welfare state. Some want to undo the national health care vote. Palin hunts animals from a helicopter.

Angry at the Wall Street bailouts, some of these women are similarly outraged by government regulation of a financial system that just finished running completely amok.

They oppose one of the mainstays of women's autonomy--full reproductive choice.

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Challenge to Male Grip on Politics

But these women--whatever their political positions--are still challenging the male grip on politics, with sometimes unpredictable effects.

In Nevada, Reid battled Angell on the topic of domestic violence, claiming that he was a more stalwart champion of women's safety. Would that have happened if the Republicans had nominated a man?

In California, a nurses' group is backing its attorney general, Jerry Brown, against Meg Whitman, seeing him--the guy--as more likely to stand up for them, a female-dominant work force.

It's the polarizing ying-yang that comes with politics, which is not, after all, a controlled laboratory experiment. You don't pour more estrogen in here and necessarily come out with day-care-for-all there.

These are hard, divisive times and the women who join this year's political fray mirror that.

This is probably not the election to bring us closer to the transformative "critical mass" of women in higher public office.

For now, the battles for affordable health care, day care, senior care, jobless benefits and environmental safety--the nurturing agenda--remain just that, battles.

All the women who are out there running their hard races are changing the overall political dance steps, just by being there.

The Palin cohort may seem machista, but that's not where their influence ends. Arguably it's not even where it begins.



Tea Party protest in Hartford, Conn.

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Palin vs. Clinton

Palin may seem, in many ways, like the polar opposite of Hillary Clinton, politically speaking. But Clinton could also be seen as her political patroness. Would John McCain have tapped Palin for the No. 2 spot if the Democrats hadn't just showcased a dazzling multicultural, male-female power struggle? Doubtful.

When female politicians attack the traditional bloc of women's issues--the social safety net--they also open the floor for male politicians to move in new directions.

If a female rival attacks school lunch and child care subsidies for hard-pressed single mothers, her male rival no longer has to fear that supporting these programs might somehow make him seem soft and womanly.

The political rules change. Men can decide that they're the ones to champion day care and work-family balance.

It's like the counter-intuitive polarity of Richard Nixon, the hardliner on communism, "opening" the United States to China.

At current rates of progress, the Inter-Parliamentary Union estimates that women's global legislative representation will not reach 30 percent until 2025 and it won't reach parity until 2040.

This year's Tea Party female politicians oppose many things that are conventionally termed women's rights.

But if they attract more women to the game--via inspiration or opposition--they could move us closer to the long-term goal of parity, and possibly faster than anything else we could dream up.



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For more information:

Center for American Women in Politics:

<http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/>

Inter-Parliamentary Union: "60 Years of Women in Retrospect":

http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmninfokit06_en.pdf

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