

Rise of the Republican women

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It's hard to say whether it's a measure of progress or stagnation that the last election cycle dubbed "The Year of the Woman" — with its implication of novelty and transience — was when the Democrats put up many of them in 1992. (President George H. W. Bush, on when his party might nominate a woman for president: "This is supposed to be the year of the woman in the Senate. Let's see how they do. I hope a lot of them lose.")

Now, 18 years later, after the historical primacy of women in the 2008 presidential election, here we are again.

This time, it's the GOP that has seen an unprecedented influx of women run for office — 128 filed to run for the House, though not enough made it through the primaries to constitute a record number of Republican candidates. In the general elections, there are 47 Republican women running for the House, five for the Senate and five for governorships.

The number of high-profile races involving Republican women in places like Delaware, California and Connecticut — some featuring political neophytes — has furthered the sense that the party may be undergoing a fundamental shift.

"There's a story that underlies what we're seeing," says Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "These big, marquee races, the GOP nominating women for both governor and Senate in California — that's significant. South Carolina put forward a woman for governor. That's the only state legislature in the country that does not have a woman serving."

The governor's races in Oklahoma and New Mexico have women on both tickets, which means, either way, those states will have their first female governor. There is also the new brand of female politician, the middle-aged former CEO — Linda McMahon, Carly Fiorina, Meg Whitman — "coming from the private sector and taking the express ramp into politics at the highest level," as Walsh puts it.

Yet many prominent female leaders on both sides of the aisle find the phenomenon perplexing. Why, really, has it taken the GOP this long? And just how great is it when women make up 54% of the electorate yet hold only 17% of the seats in Congress?

"We've always been here," says Sue Lynch, president of the National Federation of Republican Women. But it's only recently, Lynch says, that the 72-year-old NFRW has become "very aggressive about informing women and asking them to run. And they see that the door is open, and they shouldn't be intimidated by men."

She, like most everyone who spoke for this piece, cited the rise of Sarah Palin as a game changer. "There has been a dearth of role models for women in the party at the highest levels," says Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of the Susan B. Anthony list. Her group is the pro-life, conservative answer to the pro-choice organization Emily's List, which works to get Democratic women elected.

"Money's big," Dannenfelser says, "and Emily's List had a lock for a long time on the type of woman that runs."

She believes that it was gender that made Carly Fiorina the more attractive candidate against her male, pro-life rival in the primary and that the emergence of another prominent pro-life woman on the national scene has made things exponentially easier.

"Sarah Palin helps," she says. "There is a desire on the part of Republicans to see women running."

What's most compelling about this crop is their level of fund-raising and success, given their relative inexperience: Sharron Angle, who served in Nevada's state Senate but had no national profile, may very well knock off Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. Kelly Ayotte, running for the Senate in New Hampshire against incumbent Paul Hodes, holds a 13-point lead. Christine O'Donnell, Delaware's Republican candidate for senator, has never held elected office before and will most likely lose, but an endorsement from Sarah Palin gave her the edge in the primary (as it did for many other Republican candidates).

Analysts and politicians cited the Palin effect, the economy and anti-incumbent rage as factors fueling the rise of the Republican woman. But a few also think that the destabilizing impact of the Tea Party — the outsiders barreling their way through backroom politics — has had a ripple effect.

"It goes to that general sense of frustration," says Kristin Soltis, director of policy research at The Winston Group, a DC-based polling and strategy company. "If women have disproportionately not been part of the status quo, it makes sense that women would enter these races." Soltis also cites the lessening power of "the Republican old boys' club, which has been part of a previous era," and the institutionalized outreach within the party to cultivate female contenders.

Republicans have historically lagged behind Democrats when it comes to female office-holders, though this election may prove historic for women in an unintended way. "Republicans will likely pick up enough seats, and Democrats will lose enough that, for the first time in 30 years, the number of women will go down in Congress," Walsh says.

"The number of women serving has grown remarkably, but we still have a long way to go," says Rep. Jackie Speier (D-Calif.). She is, however, heartened by the number of Republican women running.

"The Republican Party has been populated with white, older men, and it took them a while to realize women were an asset, not a liability," she says. "It's about time, don't you think?"

Sarah's army

There are 57 Republican women running for the House, the Senate and governorships this year. Beyond high-profile candidates like Carly Fiorina, and Linda McMahon, here are some of the Sarah Palin-endorsed "Mama Grizzlies":

Kelly Ayotte, 42

Running for: Senator from New Hampshire

Against: Rep. Paul Hodes, the state's first Jewish representative

Previous office: Attorney General of New Hampshire

Polling: Up by 13 points

Mary Fallin, 55

Running for: Governor of Oklahoma

Against: Democratic incumbent Lt. Governor Jari Askins

Previous office: Lt. Governor (1995-2007). Congresswoman, 2007-.

Polling: Up by 26 points

Nikki Haley, 38

Running for: Governor of South Carolina

Against: State Senator Vincent Sheheen

Previous office: Member of the state House of Representatives since 2004

Polling: Up by 4 points

Susana Martinez, 50

Running for: Governor of New Mexico

Against: Lt. Governor Diane Denish

Previous office: District Attorney for the state's 3rd Judicial District

Polling: Up by 8 points