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Five myths about female candidates

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By Rebecca Traister
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We've already heard a lot of grand pronouncements about what women will mean for the 2010 midterms -- and vice versa. But from mama grizzlies to mean girls, much of the conventional wisdom about the women who are running for office this year is mangled or badly misguided.

1. There are more Republican women than Democratic women running in 2010.

The high profile of Republican women this election cycle, led by non-candidate Sarah Palin and her band of "mama grizzlies," has given the impression that Republican female candidates are more plentiful than their Democratic counterparts.

Yes, a record number of Republican women filed to run for Congress in the primaries, but those numbers were record-breaking only by Republican standards. The GOP has never put forth as many female candidates as the Democratic Party, which holds 69 of the 90 congressional seats occupied by women, and which elected 25 of the 38 women to serve as senators to date. Despite the Republican uptick, more Democratic than Republican women filed to run for Congress again this year. The only category in which GOP women outpaced those to their left was gubernatorial: Fourteen Republican women filed to run for governor, compared with 12 Democratic women, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers.

After tea-party-approved candidates pushed a number of relatively moderate Republican women - including Lisa Murkowski and Jane Norton - off the Republican map, only 47 female GOP House candidates and five female GOP Senate candidates remained, while 91 Democratic women stayed in contention for the House and nine for the Senate. Five women from each party were nominated in governors' races. The belief that Republicans are running more women speaks both to the GOP's success in rebranding itself as more committed to female empowerment and to the failure of Democrats to challenge this factually flimsy strategy.

2. This year's female candidates are extra-stupid and extra-extremist.

There are endless clips of female office-seekers saying silly and hateful things; see, for example, the constant reruns of Christine O'Donnell betraying her [ignorance of the First Amendment](#), or of Sharron Angle [telling Latino students](#) that they look "a little more Asian to me."

But political fatuousness and fear-mongering are neither unprecedented nor particularly female habits. In politics, appalling people have often said appalling things; very few of those people, historically speaking, have been women.

Compare O'Donnell's oft-quoted comments about "[mice with fully functioning human brains](#)" with the claim by Colorado's Republican gubernatorial nominee, Dan Maes, that Denver's bicycle-sharing program is part of an international plot designed to "threaten our personal freedoms," or Oregon GOP congressional candidate Art Robison's writings about how "all we need to do with nuclear waste is dilute it to a low radiation level and sprinkle it over the ocean or even over America."

Angle has rightfully received attention for her suggestion that voters seek "Second Amendment remedies" to electoral frustration, but are those comments more alarming than Texas congressional candidate Stephen Broden's remark that a violent overthrow of government is "on the table"? Why do we see looping video of O'Donnell's every gaffe and Angle's every racist statement, but next to nothing about West Virginia's John

Raese, whose proud inability to recall or pronounce Sonia Sotomayor's name did not provoke incredulity that a Senate candidate would not know the name of a sitting Supreme Court justice?

The news media seems possessed by a desire to linger on female candidates' foolishness and to portray it as emblematic of a larger story line. This frenzied attention to female candidates' fallibility doesn't just cheat dopey men who have failed to win the spotlight, it does a disservice to the many women running for office whose nimble and articulate self-presentations have been lost amid the tittering and hooting. Alex Sink, Gabrielle Giffords, Betsy Markey, Libby Mitchell, Diane Denish, Nikki Haley, Carly Fiorina, Meg Whitman and Susana Martinez should be furious.

3. Female voters love female candidates.

No, most female voters love Democratic candidates because they agree with them on issues. Or at least they have for the past 30 years. A recent New York Times-CBS News poll suggests that this year, economic anxiety may be pushing female voters to favor Republicans for the first time since pollsters started tracking these numbers in 1982, but don't confuse that with a knee-jerk enthusiasm for mama grizzlies.

Women vote not based on gender affinity, but based on their opinions about the economy, health care and foreign policy. They have in recent decades tended to vote against candidates who back big business and for those who back more progressive social causes. All these factors have led to a persistent gender gap in which women have largely voted Democratic, regardless of a candidate's sex. This pattern was affirmed most recently in 2008, when most women did not jump the partisan fence to vote for Palin. Still, in every election cycle, political strategists persist in treating women like a unified bloc that will flock to the nearest female office-seeker the way Carrie Bradshaw is drawn to Manolo Blahniks.

Yet even with conditions favoring Republicans, approval ratings for GOP candidates such as O'Donnell, Angle and Michele Bachmann are higher among men than women, indicating little gender-based allegiance. According to a new Los Angeles Times-University of Southern California poll, likely male voters favor California's Democratic gubernatorial nominee, Jerry Brown, over Republican Meg Whitman by three points, while women favor him by 21 points. In California's Senate race, men like Fiorina over Barbara Boxer by two points, but likely female voters choose Boxer by 17 points.

4. Candidates like O'Donnell, Angle and Bachmann are bad for women.

Even if you don't like them, it's not fair to suggest that their presence on the ticket represents a step backward for women. In the pursuit of true gender equity, people across the political spectrum need not only women to vote for, but women to vote against. The notion that female candidates should clear a higher bar for civility, intellect or compassion than the one set for men is a damaging fallacy that impeded Hillary Clinton's campaign for president in 2008, when many liberal women turned up their noses at what they saw as her compromised politics, apparently hoping that the first female president would be made of finer stuff than her male counterparts.

What's good for women in politics is an expansion of potential roles, and on this count, the 2010 election cycle has enormously widened our sense of what is possible. At the same time we have watched mature, business-groomed entrants such as Fiorina and Whitman and incumbents such as Markey, Giffords and Patty Murray compete tenaciously (sometimes with little financial support from their own party), 2010 has also featured a new generation of younger women, including 28-year-old Krystal Ball in Virginia and 38-year-old Nikki Haley in South Carolina, who have worked to disprove the hoary notion that women cannot simultaneously govern and mother. We have heard candidates like Angle, Bachmann and Jan Brewer dubbed "mean girls," but it's politics, not women, that's mean. We're just seeing the girls play with as much ugly glee as the boys.

Yes, there may be some duds. But as Bella Abzug said, the feminist struggle was never simply about ensuring that a female Einstein might be appointed assistant professor; it was also about ensuring that a "woman

schlemiel" might get promoted as speedily as a "male schlemiel." If only if Bella had lived to see 2010.

5. 2010 is the year of the woman.

Pundits keep comparing 2010 to 1992, when a then-unprecedented five women were elected to the Senate. While 2010 has featured a surprise [resurgence of the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas controversy](#), which inspired so many women to charge the Capitol 18 years ago, 2010 will not include comparable electoral gains for women. To the contrary, we will probably see the first decline in the number of women in Congress since the 1970s. It is also a year in which we have watched female candidates attacked on openly sexual grounds and [one of history's most powerful House speakers](#), Nancy Pelosi, practically burned at the stake - not just by her political opponents, but also by those in her own party - in often flagrantly sexist attacks.

But even if 2010 won't be remembered as the year of the woman, it was a year in which the conversation about women and how they participate in the political process has been fierce, vibrant and angry; in which Pelosi has weathered her storm with calm; in which a number of women have run against each other in statewide races, familiarizing us with a phenomenon that should be less and less extraordinary in the future. We have seen candidates such as Whitman and Ball [tackle sexist criticism head-on](#), blasting new paths for female candidates who don't want to do as they have traditionally been counseled to do, de-sexing themselves and feigning indifference to sexism.

On the heels of 2008, an election that altered the landscape of political possibility for women, 2010 has kept exchanges about gender and power alive. And that, despite many indications to the contrary, has made it a valuable year for women.

Rebecca Traister is the author of ["Big Girls Don't Cry: The Election That Changed Everything for American Women"](#) and a senior writer at Salon.com. She will be online Monday, Nov. 1, at 11 a.m. ET to chat. [Submit your questions](#) before or during the discussion.

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