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Women and the Political Landscape: Unraveling Perplexing Issues



Who gets to decide what the narrative for women in politics really is? Is it the female candidates who choose to run? The media that interprets them to the public? The platforms they align themselves with?

Currently, women comprise only 17 percent of Congress. Women of color are completely missing in the Senate, and make up only 5 percent of the House of Representatives. Oft-repeated stats show that when the ratio of women in national legislatures is examined, the United States places 71st out of 189 countries. Even Cuba and Pakistan surpasses us in the rankings.

Headlines emerged declaring 2010 the year of the Republican women (although many appeared to fall under Tea Party jurisdiction). In my efforts to comprehend the competing story lines about this new breed of woman politician on the scene, I was getting a cacophony of competing arguments in my head.

A revolving loop with a series of questions kept playing. Is gender trumped by ideology? What is the subtext when two women candidates face off against each other? Why does the "Mama Grizzly" phenomenon, and right-wing women candidates staking a claim to the feminist legacy, leave me both

incredulous and aggravated? Since Christine O'Donnell, Michele Bachmann, and Sharron Angle oppose abortion in the case of rape and incest, do their supporters follow them down that road? Every time Christine O'Donnell says something laughable, is it any more absurd than the candidacy of Alvin Greene? Why do corporate titans who have turned their sights on elected office--such as Carly Fiorina, Meg Whitman, and Linda McMahon--embody the style of leadership that emanates from a traditional male model, and what do they bring to the party? And finally, what's with women using the "man-up" taunt? Is that any better than telling a woman in a debate to "act like a lady?"

I kept asking myself, "What makes women good leaders, regardless of their philosophy?" I pulled out my copy of *Secrets of Powerful Women: Leading Change for a New Generation*. The book, released earlier in the year, evolved from conversations that were part of the Lifetime "Every Woman Counts Campaign," which encouraged women to run for office and be active in the political process. I checked all the pages with the turned-down corners to see if any addressed the uncertainties that were gnawing at me. I got more confused. Advice ranged from "Don't be oversensitive" and "Be tough" to "Wield power like a woman"--referencing different life experiences for women that create "greater empathy." Susan Bevan, co-chairwoman of the Republican Majority for Choice, wrote about "protecting individual autonomy" and why "a woman's right to control her reproductive health is absolutely central to our success as a civilization." Susan Wolf Turnbull, Former Vice Chair of the DNC, related, "The scrutiny of women's clothing choices in politics is ridiculous. There's a double standard in the ways men and women are judged on appearance." Repeatedly mentioned was the "unique perspective that women bring to government." Rep. Shelly Moore Capito (R-W.Va.), said that "good policy depends on input from a wide variety of views and perspectives." Madeleine Kunin, the first woman governor of Vermont, advised finding your own voice and seeking power to empower others. She also emphasized why women needed to be in charge...because of their unique understanding of families and women's lives.

So if there was concurrence on how women could add to government in a special way, why was I seeing some women as über-destructive in their approach?

I called Lisa Maatz (also featured in the book), Public Policy & Government Relations Director at AAUW. She walked me through a few basics. Regarding those women I find so alienating, she suggested that stylistically--in order for women politicians to get noticed in their caucuses and move their agenda forward--some research reveals that women who break the glass ceiling utilize more traditionally masculine strategies. That's what gets rewarded. "Typically, more women in politics lends itself to a more rational conversation," Maatz said. Yet with all the hyper-partisan histrionics, and as Maatz underscored, "women in the political middle are getting edged out," I was having trouble seeing evidence of evenhanded dialogue. We parsed the "who has a right to call themselves a feminist" issue. Maatz posited that "the goals of feminism were to create social, political and economic independence--allowing women to take full advantage of life opportunities and to express independent opinions and decisions." On the topic of choice, Maatz explained that one of the successes of the women's movement is that "it has created opportunities for women and allowed them to judge, compare, and contrast women candidates in a way that is less dependent on gender." However, she noted that there are still "crazy amounts of sexism" out on the campaign trail. Regarding my O'Donnell vs. Greene question, Maatz saw reaction to O'Donnell as having "gender based undertones," whereas in the case of Greene, there was "a general dismissal--with racist undertones." On a positive note, she assured me that "women can self-define and move forward."

I was still feeling badly. Elected women remain in the minority and we need more women in office. But if they are using tactics and rhetoric that are unconstructive, where's the benefit?

I checked in with Sam Bennett, President and CEO of Women's Campaign Forum and former Congressional candidate. The WCF is a partner in the "Name It. Change It." action to fight sexism in the media coverage of women candidates. "What we're seeing are consequences of the conservative wing of the Republican party making abortion a wedge issue," she told me. "Back in the

70s, scores of Republican candidates that WCF supported were advocates of choice for women. In the Senate, that number has dwindled to two women, Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe. Like Maatz, Bennett acknowledged traditional Republican women getting squeezed out by far more conservative candidates. The only Republican women who are surviving electorally are the ones "that embrace the platform of right wing men."

Bennett sees the solution as "oceans of women who support reproductive choices and options of both parties. The WCF endorses women standing up and running for office because women legislate differently than men. They bring something to the table that men don't." She added, "But if I have to, I'll even take a take a conservative woman over a conservative guy"--because part of the problem is that men are making all the decisions. Men don't get pregnant--women do, even conservative women."

I hit pay dirt speaking with Susan J. Carroll, Senior Scholar at the Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics. She was able to nail the "Mama Grizzly" and "Man-Up" issues for me with succinct explanations. "The Mama Grizzly thing is fascinating," she said. "It's extremely effective politics in a very masculine space. It's tough for women to be both masculine and feminine. It works for these Republican women, because it combines motherhood with the masculine." Okay, I see the visual iconography...the ultra-femme woman protecting her young and defending home and hearth. She continued, "They cast themselves in a conventional, traditional kind of way. It's a creative, effective image." On adding the term "man-up" to the campaign jargon, Carroll elucidated, "You're dealing with a masculine space, so it's a way of telling your opponent, 'You don't fit in this space.' It's intentionally a gender thing. 'I'm a woman, but I'm more masculine than you are.' The job is defined as masculine, so it's interesting strategically. They position themselves as stronger for the job than their opponents, using gender to do that." Carroll expressed recognition of continued sexism articulating, "There's been a lot of that, and it operates against all women."

Which brought me back to the subject of "who gets to claim the feminist mantle." Carroll said, "Feminists opened the door, and right wing women politicians walked through." She asked rhetorically, "How much do we want to police the term feminist? I understand the frustration. Yet, we have to learn from our own history that there is a problem when some people and not others get to decide. In the past, someone has claimed, 'I'm a feminist, and this [description] doesn't fit me,' whether it was working-class women, women of color, or lesbians. That's what makes this so complicated."

More angst. I went back to the original notes I had taken when I first read *Secrets of Powerful Women*. I had gotten a quote from Kunin which contended, "Many women run for office because they are attracted by the issues, such as improving education or protecting the environment. They tend to be less ideological and more practical than men and are more comfortable with crossing party lines... If there were more elected women in the United States Senate today, I believe there would be less gridlock and more action."

I also had an e-mail note from Michelle Bernard, political analyst and the President and CEO of the Independent Women's Forum. Her insights echoed some of what her colleagues had suggested, amended by a strong dose of pragmatism. She wrote:

"Women absolutely can work across partisan and ideological lines to seek solutions that work best for people. In fact, women who tend to be better listeners and more open to compromise and finding areas of common ground, may be better suited to this task than most men. That said, it is critical that we recognize that there are real differences of opinion among women. Some women firmly believe in the ability of government to do good, while others just as firmly and passionately believe that government tends to cause more problems than it solves and want government to leave their families alone. We

shouldn't fool ourselves that just because two policymakers are women that they are immediately going to agree about a matter of policy. The 2008 presidential election demonstrated quite clearly that women are not a monolithic voting bloc. Under one tent, we now hear the voices of both big and small government women voters and policymakers."

Coming down the home stretch I was beginning to feel a modicum of clarity. I got some closure from Erin Vilardi, Vice President of Programs & Communication at The White House Project. She describes herself as "a young feminist who has dedicated her career to developing women as leaders and political candidates for the past seven years." She wrote, "At The White House Project we tell women that our vision is a place where women can be judged on their agenda, not their gender. And that's something every woman can get behind."

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