

Mama Grizzlies Die Hard

Betsy Reed | November 3, 2010

As doleful Democrats survey the wreckage left by the 2010 midterms, one sight is at least slightly cheering: Sarah Palin's Mama Grizzlies licking their wounds. Sharron Angle, Carly Fiorina and Christine O'Donnell were supposed to lead a "stampede of pink elephants" to shake up Washington. Instead, "Democrats are holding the Senate because these Republican women were just too conservative for their states," observes Debbie Walsh of the Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics.

This result should not come as a huge surprise, given that the GOP Year of the Woman was always mostly hype, fueled by a potent mixture of Republican propaganda, Democratic hysteria and the mainstream media's fondness for loopy ladies (though to be fair, much of the independent media suffered from the same affliction). One of the oddities of these midterms was the inverse relationship between O'Donnell's standing in the polls and her prominence in the press: even as she trailed her Democratic rival by double digits, she was the single most covered candidate in the election, according to the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism. Only Barack Obama got more attention. In that respect, as in many others, she is truly Palinesque.

But don't count the Mama Grizzlies out. Thanks to them, there is a distinct and fascinating gender component to the rancorous divide that has emerged within the Republican Party as a result of the Tea Party insurrection. Ill treated by a GOP establishment that is almost exclusively male, women like Palin, O'Donnell and Michele Bachmann are already finding gratification in their ability to remain irksome to Karl Rove. The morning after her loss, O'Donnell lashed out at the party honchos who spurned her, suggesting that, with Rove and NRSC chair John Cornyn's support, she could have "closed the gap" and that her loss was a "symptom of Republican cannibalism." Bachmann—who founded the House Tea Party Caucus—has indicated her interest in a leadership post, which will no doubt discomfit her colleagues because of her embarrassing tendency to take their philosophies to their logical extreme (suggesting, for example, that we could solve unemployment by abolishing the minimum wage). Palin, for her part, stands center stage in the drama as the party's 2012 positioning commences—and she is not afraid to play the gender card: in response to a *Politico* piece featuring unnamed sources casting aspersions on her general election chances, titled "Next for GOP Leaders: Stopping Sarah Palin," she told Fox News, "Some within the establishment don't like the fact that I won't back down to a good-old-boys club."

All of this is admittedly fun to watch. These fractures weaken the Republican coalition. Plus, fear is a great motivator (especially when hope is in short supply), and "President Palin" is probably the most galvanizing rallying cry Democrats can muster for 2012 at the moment. But as we pass the popcorn, we might usefully reflect on what the Democrats' losses in this election cycle represent, especially in terms of women.

Perhaps alarmed by late-breaking polls threatening a female abandonment of Democrats, in the last days before the vote the White House launched an effort to tout its accomplishments on their behalf, with a white paper on women and the economy as its centerpiece. Given the level of economic anxiety racking American women, this intervention was clearly too little, too late. As economist Heather Boushey of the Center for

American Progress points out, women are bearing the brunt of the job losses and budget cuts roiling the states in ways that are largely invisible in our political culture. Funding for home health aides, for example, has been slashed, meaning the thousands of women who held those jobs are jobless, and the thousands of women to whom the responsibility for caregiving falls are now weighed down with new burdens they have no choice but to bear. It's hardly strange that many of them are not feeling especially enthusiastic about politics right now.

The point Democrats should take away from this is simple: women matter. And if they aren't moved by the poignancy of women's struggles in this harsh economy, they should at least think about how their fate as a party is intertwined with that of women as a social group. The gender gap—in which women are more likely than men to favor Democrats—did persist in this election, according to early exit polls. But it appears to have been less impressive than in previous years. The apparent drop not only reflected the same shift toward Republicans that appeared across the board but also likely manifested depressed turnout among women who would have voted Democratic had they gone to the polls. Where it held strongest, the gap was a key factor in wins for Democrats, helping Harry Reid overcome Sharron Angle in Nevada and carrying Michael Bennet to victory over Ken Buck in Colorado. But overall, the Democrats need to do better in wooing and turning out women if the party is to regain its footing.

By all means, Democrats and feminists should continue to rip apart the Republican Party myth that it's been born again as the party of women. That's the easy part. Restoring women's confidence in Democrats is the tougher job.

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