



Assessing Efforts to Make the Republican Party More Woman-Friendly

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The 2012 presidential election seemed to confirm that the Republican Party has a women problem. Although female voters have favored the Democratic Party since 1980, the 2012 gender gap was the biggest in history, with Obama beating Romney among women by 20 percentage points. Making the party's relation with women even more dire, Senate races that year saw major blunders like Missouri GOP candidate Todd Akin's comment that "legitimate rape" rarely leads to pregnancy and Indiana GOP candidate Richard Mourdock's suggestion that every pregnancy from rape is something "God intended." After 2012, Republicans embarked on a soul-searching process to find its way back into the hearts of women voters. Unfortunately, the attempts to turn the Republican Party into a women-friendly party remained largely symbolic and did not significantly change the way the party supports female candidates or addresses women's issues.

The Post-2012 Republican Leadership Report

After the 2012 election, the Republican Party leadership commissioned a report entitled "Republicans and Women Voters: Huge Challenges, Real Opportunities." The report confirmed that in almost all issue areas, Republicans trail the Democrats in the eyes of women. In surveys, women said they considered the Democrats rather than Republicans to be the party looking out for women by a 40-point margin. Further, the project described former Republican members who now see the GOP as a "scary, narrow minded" party of "stuffy old men" and identified the large gender gap as one of the contributing factors in the loss of the 2012 election.

To reverse these deficits, the report recommended that Republican Party should "improve efforts to include female voters and promote women to leadership ranks within the [Republican National Committee]." Specifically, it called on the Republican National Committee to implement training programs to help Republican candidates reach out to women voters, improve recruitment of female GOP candidates, feature more Republican women in the media, and push back against the Democratic Party's claims that GOP policies add up to a "war on women."

Several years later, we can assess how well Republicans have done in implementing reforms.

Recruitment and Training for Republican Women

Although not discriminatory in nature or content, the recruitment strategies of the Republican Party are inadequate to attract more female candidates and advance them through the electoral process. Several initiatives provide mentoring to female candidates – the most prominent is Growing Republican Opportunities for Women, Project GROW for short – yet all of them fall short in two concrete ways.

- Neither Republican leadership nor Project GROW deals with the primary process, but research shows that support early in the primary process, especially monetary support, is crucial for electoral success. Because the GOP has failed to provide the necessary financial and logistical resources to Republican women in the early stages of the election cycle, few women candidates make it past the primaries and into general elections.
- The Republican Party does not prioritize the election of women but focuses more broadly on maximizing gains results for Republicans. This means that many women are recruited to run in districts where they have little chance of winning. In addition, electoral races featuring Republican women are only prioritized when the race is crucial to the overall electoral strategy of the party. In fact, Republicans in general tend to be dismissive of "identity politics."

Diversity and gender identity are, in sum, subordinated to other considerations – most importantly, the candidate's ideological commitment to the Republican brand of conservatism. Because most Republicans consider gender-neutral recruitment in primaries as the only means to ensure that the best candidate wins, Project GROW and other female recruitment mechanism have no real chance to bring about lasting changes.

Communication Strategies to Attract Female Voters

In the 2014 election, the Republican Party closely followed the advice of the Growth and Opportunity Project to dramatically change communication strategies.

- In Georgia's 2014 Senate race, GOP primary contender Karen Handel emphasized that her female gender made her the best choice to take on Michelle Nunn, the Democratic candidate. As Handel put it, "I would really love to see Michelle Nunn drop the 'war on women' on me." She claimed, in essence, that she would be the best Republican candidate to neutralize Democratic claims that Republicans undermine women's rights.
- Similarly, Stewart Mills – Republican candidate for Minnesota's 8th district – emphasized his strong commitment to fighting domestic violence by showcasing his participation in the "Walk a Mile In Her Shoes" events, a fundraiser for victims of domestic violence.

More broadly, Republicans have tried to highlight emerging female leaders. The GOP response to the State of the Union Address was delivered by women in three consecutive years from early 2014 to early 2016.

New Steps Must Move Beyond Appearances

Overall, the Republican Party has mostly used window dressing to counteract the Democratic "war on women" rhetoric that has often proved damaging in election contests. Rather than address root causes of the accusation – such as antiquated ideas about women's role in public and private life – GOP leaders have deployed women as visual props to convince voters that their party is friendly to women. If the Republican Party is serious about recruiting more women and reaching out to female voters, changes in rhetoric must be accompanied by substantial policy changes on issues like sexual violence and pay equity that rank as top concerns for female voters. What is more, unless the Republicans are willing to abandon gender-neutral recruitment efforts and invest early money in women candidates, efforts to expand the ranks of GOP female officeholders – in Congress and beyond – are likely to remain unsuccessful. It will take more than a few new faces in the media to change Republican fortunes with women.