

THE REPUBLICAN WAR AGAINST WOMEN

What It Means for the 1996 U.S.
Presidential Elections

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In early June of 1988, there was a joke making the rounds in American political circles that Vice President George Bush could only win the fall's presidential election if he repealed the 19th amendment. Passed in 1920, that amendment gave American women the vote.

Polls that spring consistently showed Bush losing to Democrat Michael Dukakis by some 13 percent, and American women were the principal reason for Bush's dismal showing. They favored Dukakis by a lopsided 28 percent.

It was the largest gender gap in a presidential campaign since the phenomenon of women voting radically different from men appeared in 1980.

Eventually, the gap narrowed. The Bush campaign mounted a drive to win the women. It proposed a federal tax credit to help working parents pay for child care, but there was no all encompassing programs to address other concerns of women. In addition, Bush emphasized his strong opposition to a woman's right to an abortion.

The campaign orchestrated what became known as the drive to make George Bush appear to be a kinder, gentler man. But this effort to win the female vote was a half-

hearted one at best. The campaign became a slash and burn operation--macho in its extreme.

Dukakis's patriotism and integrity were questioned. Until the last weeks, he seemed incapable of adequately answering the charges. Issues of peace and prosperity which were of interest to most Americans were seldom addressed. Later historians would call it the dirtiest presidential campaign in the last half century.

But it worked for Bush, who won the men by a 12 percent margin and the women by four. Many women decided that in spite of Bush's policies toward them he would make a better President than Dukakis. And that was exactly what the Bush campaign had hoped would happen.

Now, eight years later almost to the day that the 19th Amendment joke seemed every politician's favorite, Republicans find themselves in another mess with women voters. Only this time, it's even worse.

Today surveys show Clinton beating Dole anywhere from 16 to 20 points with women's dissatisfaction being the primary reason for these large margins. Clinton leads Dole among women by between 20 to 25 points.

So what happened?

Why is the Republican party in so much trouble with women? How could the party that first championed women's suffrage, and until twenty-four years ago was a leader for women's equality, have so radically changed?

The culprit is the Electoral College, that anachronistic method by which Americans select their presidents. Under this strange system, the candidate who wins the most votes doesn't necessarily get elected. Rather it is the candidate who wins 270 Electoral College votes who becomes President.

The lesser populated states have a slight advantage, and regional issues can be more important for winning the White House than national ones. Campaign strategies are often crafted to support positions popular in one region but not in the nation as a whole.

The states of the Old Confederacy have benefitted from this system. For over 80 years until the civil rights movement in the mid-sixties, the Democratic party had a near monopoly in the south.

During these years, with a few exceptions, the Democrats started a presidential campaign knowing they automatically could win the south's approximate 20 percent of the Electoral College, as long as they didn't oppose the region's state's rights segregationist policies.

All this changed in 1964 when Democratic President Lyndon Johnson backed the end of segregation. His Republican presidential opponent, Barry Goldwater, broke with Republican party tradition and voted against Johnson's proposed federal Civil Rights Act.

Goldwater was not a racist, but he claimed the nation's racial problems should be solved through state law, not by the federal government as Johnson's Act proposed.

Never mind that it was over 80 years of states rights that had given my country institutionalized racism. Never mind that states rights had not ended discrimination based on the color of one's skin.

The Goldwater campaign strategy aimed to break the Democratic Electoral College hold on the south by appealing to the voters who opposed the civil rights movement. Goldwater's play to the backlash vote was modestly successful.

While Johnson won in a landslide, Goldwater carried his home state of Arizona, Georgia and the four southern Dixiecrat states of Louisiana, South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi.

They were called Dixiecrat because they had voted for segregationist Strom Thurmond in 1948. Thurmond had stormed out of the Democratic national convention when it backed a modest civil rights plan and he ran, in protest, for president.

The Dixiecrat platform reads like the platform of South Africa's apartheid party. And now Strom Thurmond is a Republican U.S. Senator from South Carolina and heads the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Thus, was born the Republican party's championing of the politics of intolerance. The party that had honorably led America to abolish slavery was now repudiating its own glorious legacy and embracing racism.

It was an unfortunate turn of events, not only for the party but for the nation. Instead of outright dismissal of the old backlash politics, so long hypocritically employed by the Democrats, the national Republicans had fallen into the same trap of expediency over principle.

In the late sixties and early seventies, two movements came together that brought more equality of opportunity to women. One was the effort to legalize abortion which was led by health professionals and protestant clergy. Shocked by the number of women dying or becoming infertile from back alley abortions, states threw out laws banning them.

In 1967, in one of his first acts as Governor of California, Ronald Reagan signed a bill making his state the first to legalize abortion. Later, when he ran for President, he changed and became an ardent opponent of a women's right to choose.

The other was the women's liberation movement. By 1971, it had spawned a political force that began to recruit candidates, raise money and build political organizations. All were relatively independent of the

official party structures.

It took 25 years for this political women's movement to become a significant player in national politics. Its influence, along with the shortsightedness of the national Republican leadership, is one of the primary reasons why the Republicans have a gender gap with women.

In the beginning, both Republican and Democratic national leaders backed the general aims of the feminists. However, strategists working to win the White House for Reagan soon discovered that some southerners, already disturbed over the changes in their lives caused by the end of segregation, viewed the women's movement with the same alarm.

After ten years of painful racial strife, some southerners were particularly frightened by what the federal government might do to women. They couldn't comprehend--or didn't want to-- that constitutional protection against gender discrimination could help improve women's lives. No matter how unsatisfactory the present might be, it seemed safer not to change it.

Not surprisingly, nine of the fifteen states that refused to ratify the federal Equal Rights Amendment came from the south and the others were states where religious fundamentalists were influential.

Meanwhile, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops launched a public campaign to stop the

legalization of abortion. The Reagan strategists determined they could win votes among Catholic Democrats in the north as well as the south by backing the bishops.

Reagan won the Republican nomination with the help of those who opposed the civil rights and women's movements. The campaign recruited into the party the Dixiecrat Democrats, now transformed into Wallacites named after segregationist George Wallace, and religious right southern fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority.

At the 1980 national Republican convention in Detroit, the delegates -- at the behest of the Reagan operatives -- dropped the party's longtime support for the ERA and for private-public child care partnerships, passed a plank calling for a constitutional amendment banning all abortions, and downplayed its traditional role of seeking opportunity for women.

The Republican war against women had begun. Even women who paid little attention to politics could not escape the media coverage that loudly heralded the party's rejection of women's rights.

The war was an Electoral College strategy to win the White House by opposing the goals of the women's movement. The Reagan campaign aimed to win by holding on to its Republican voter base, picking up the southern states, and winning Catholic Democrats who were clustered

in the suburbs of northern industrial states like Michigan and New York.

The campaign's main message was the traditional Republican one of reasonable fiscal policies and lower taxes. These had great appeal to many of the urban Democrats, who had become affluent and were moving to the suburbs. But the campaign made another more subtle appeal: the Republicans would slow down those uppity women's quest for power.

This war was a national strategy. With a few exceptions, it was not adopted at the state and local level. Many Republican men and women continued to support the goals of the women's movement and to elect candidates who were pro-choice, pro-ERA, pro-child care, and pro-affirmative action.

This state of war didn't mean that Republicans were anymore against individual women than were Democrats. This was not about whether one liked or disliked women personally or even whether one hired women to be on one's political staff. Both Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich have professional independent wives and yet both back policies opposing women's equality.

This war was about issues, and the issues that the party had decided to back were those that appealed to voters who disliked or were afraid of women's power.

I am often asked how I can call this a war when

there are so many impressive Republican women leaders, such as Governor Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey and U.S. Senators Nancy Kassebaum, Olympia Snowe and Kay Bailey Hutchinson. A party at war with women would not have such women in their ranks I'm told.

But these questioners miss the point. Reassured by the women's political movement, Republicans and Democrats have learned that running women candidates is a smart thing to do. Women can sometimes win elections more easily than men these days. This war is not about the gender of the candidates. It's about the messages and the policies the party supports, not who it nominates, who it hires or even who its candidates marry.

There were many reasons why Jimmy Carter, a born-again Baptist southerner, lost to a northern movie star like Ronald Reagan, and most had little to do with the place of women in society. But, just as in 1964, when Republicans learned backlash strategy could win southern electoral votes, so the strategy to oppose the women's movement did help Reagan in 1980. Except for Carter's homestate of Georgia, Reagan won all the other states that had refused to ratify the ERA. And eight of them had belonged to the Confederacy.

But adopting these backlash strategies did long term damage to America's promise of equality for all. Instead of seeking ways to bring people together, the national

Republican leadership played to the bigots of race and gender.

An unwelcome religious radicalism entered into my party's philosophy. This view held that women were not to be partners with men but servants to a strict interpretation of biblical law where women served God by unequivocally obeying men.

The equal partnership ethos practiced by old-line conservatives such as Eisenhower and Gerald Ford, became distorted. Words of 'equality' graced the party's speeches, but its policies towed the line of religious extremism.

For three presidential elections, the Republicans followed their backlash strategy and held the White House. With his charm, Reagan muffled the party's bigotry. Bush won by deflecting intolerance with a meanness that frightened voters from seeing clearly. And his opponent was too paralyzed to bring light.

By 1992, Bush had been found out. For four years, his Administration attempted to outlaw abortion, opposed equal opportunity in education for women, dismantled affirmative action programs even though they had no quotas, failed to follow through on promises to improve child care, and showed great insensitivity to the plight of the poor working women. The last straw came when he vetoed the Family and Medical Leave Act, which gave men

and women the chance to take unpaid leave from their jobs in order to care for newborns and sick relatives.

The Republican house of expedient politics collapsed in 1992. Clinton won the women by 5 percent while Bush won the men by one percent. It was the first time the Democrats had won the women's vote in a presidential election since the beginning of the women's movement.

Republican and independent women had had enough. As they said, what good is national economic growth if you have little opportunity to share in it?

The Reagan-Bush backlash strategy had not proven as effective or long lasting as its creators had assumed. As early as the 1980 election, the majority of American Catholics proved that they were no more influenced by their religious leaders than Americans of other faiths. Catholics were just as pro-choice. For most, it had been Reagan the man and the party's economic policies that had drawn them to the Republicans, not their stand on abortion.

Republican intolerance brought about another backlash. Voters, especially women, were turned off by the party's bigotry. They didn't like its new sanctimoniousness toward women that had crept into national Republican rhetoric from the religious right.

As one woman said to me, "I don't know what to do. The Republicans pass moral judgment on me and take away

my freedom and the Democrats want to give my money away."

Four years of intense fighting over abortion had taken its toll. The majority of Americans are pro-choice and the Bush Administration's zealotry in trying to limit legal abortion made them wonder: How could the party of less government aggressively champion interference into the personal lives of women? It was a stark contradiction, easily understood. The public was not fooled.

Then, in 1994, Gingrich and his revolutionaries swept to power. Supposedly, they brought a great sea change to American politics. But when it came to the Republican war against women, there'd been no change.

Women's preference for the Democrats continued. Republicans lost the women's vote, 53 to 47 percent. When reporters asked the Republican National Chairman why the majority of American women didn't back the Republicans, he said that wasn't the case.

If you take out the black women who predominately vote Democratic, this former Mississippi state Republican official said, the Republicans won the women.

Well, he was partly right. But the numbers were not what they seemed. White women had voted Republican 53 to 47 percent, but the same patterns that showed up in the presidential elections stood.

Analyzing the numbers by regions, one finds a more

accurate picture. Republicans did win the white women in the south by a whopping 61 to 39 percent, but in the east the Democrats won 54 to 46 percent. And in the mid-west and the west, there was a statistical dead-heat.

The pattern was becoming just a little too common. Republicans did well with southern women, but not with women in other parts of the country.

It is not surprising that Clinton maintains the lead among women that he does. Even with his questionable philandering, he has made an effort to address their issues as has his party.

On the other hand, the Republican national leadership has done little.

But there are rumblings that the backlash strategy may finally be put to rest because it simply isn't working. The moderate Republicans are fed up. Twenty-six percent of Republican women deserted Bush for Perot or Clinton in 1992. More could do so this year.

The Dole campaign needs a new strategy. And no where is this more urgent than with the abortion issue. It has taken on a symbolism far beyond the issue itself.

For many Americans, the party's harsh anti-choice position symbolizes its rejection of the nation's tradition of separation of church and state. The party's unbending loyalty to the religious right's position on women outrages those who do not want an official

governmental religious doctrine.

Dole owes his early nomination to the Christian Coalition whose members voted for him in the primaries rather than their ideological favorite, Pat Buchanan. Dole could win the White House, they said. Buchanan couldn't.

Is Dole willing to reject the Coalition's positions on women and make a bold move toward the center? Will he eliminate the anti-choice plank and pick a pro-choice running mate?

For the first time since 1976, moderate Republican Governors and leading legislators are organizing for a fight at the Republican convention in San Diego. Only the dropping of the entire anti-abortion plank and a pro-choice running mate can help bring back alienated voters. Such activity would be a clear sign to the nation the party is not dominated by extremists.

Pat Buchanan has been isolated. No matter how much noise he makes, he is no longer an inside player.

The leader of the Republican Right is Christian Coalition executive director Ralph Reed, who says he is trying to find a compromise on the abortion issue. His solution is to add rape and incest exceptions to anti-abortion legislation, not to the party's platform. That is not a compromise. That is a stealth, meaningless gesture. Nothing has changed.

The decisions in San Diego will be determined by the Electoral College strategy Dole pursues. He could stick with the backlash and target the southern, rocky mountain, border, and mid-west states. In doing so, he would be writing off America's two largest states, California and New York, as well as the rest of the west coast, the east and New England. It is a dangerous and cynical view of politics.

A better and more healthy direction would be to change. Scrap the backlash strategy that now lets a vocal religious minority dictate to the majority. Unload the bigotry. Drop the abortion issue. Pick a vice-presidential candidate that speaks to my nation's reasonable moderate center.

The party could then concentrate on its conservative economic policies that are attractive to so many Americans.

The war against women is a cancer that has spread beyond women's issues. It has infected our body politic. Its corrosive force is best exemplified by Pat Buchanan's hateful attacks first against women and minorities and then against pro-choice Catholics, foreigners, Jews, legal and illegal immigrants and anyone else who happens to disagree with him.

Primary voters effectively repudiated him. But no major candidate for the nomination of one of America's

two major parties would have ever had the credibility he had last winter if his party had not been pursuing a politics of intolerance for the last 16 years.

The American political system is remarkably flexible. History has shown that when Americans understand the nature of attacks on their freedom, they act.

This year women have already let the Republican party know that they are sick and tired of being treated as pawns in a political game. The 19th Amendment will not be repealed. Women will turn out in droves in November to vote for the candidate who takes them seriously.

The Republicans have a golden opportunity. But will they have the courage and vision to change course and seize it?

San Diego will tell the tale. Until then, I continue to urge all like-minded Republicans to speak out.

Who knows? Maybe Dole will listen to America's majority after all.

Thank you.