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We inspire women to run, we hone their skills to win.

Our goal is clear: to increase the number of Democratic women in public office.

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Reaching Pro-Women Voters and Candidates

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By Lori Droste, EmERGE California Class of 2013

Extensive research indicates that men and women assess candidates differently and care about different issues. This research has found that the voting “gender gap” is significant and can range from 4 to 19 percentage points (Carroll, 2010). Men are more likely to favor candidates who support strong national security and more privatization (Burrell, 2005) while women are concerned with issues of health care and education. Since more women are Democrats than Republicans (41% to 25%), they seem to follow a more progressive trajectory. Consequently, women are more supportive of policies advocating for non-military interventions, disadvantaged populations, and environmental protection and more critical of big business, the death penalty, and guns.

Authors Susan Hansen and Laura Wills Otero make a compelling case for managing media portrayal of a candidate in their article “A Woman for U.S. President: Gender and Leadership Traits Before and After 9/11” (Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy, 28:1). The authors claim that perceived traits are often more influential than substantive policy issues. Perceived leadership and compassion positively influence voting behavior while morality, honesty, and intelligence “did less well at predicting the vote.” While women politicians are seen as naturally more compassionate, they have a more difficult time convincing voters that they are “tough” leader. Hansen and Otero also make the point that

voters are immediately inclined to support a male politician simply by virtue of his gender. At the same time, women are more likely to support a female candidate because of her gender. While previous experience may contribute to perceived leadership traits, I think that image shaping (sadly) is probably more influential. If you look at many recent campaigns, many are characterized by image shaping with relatively little public interaction and media interviews. This solidifies my belief that women politicians need to really focus on crafting their image—and in some ways, using the media—while simultaneously addressing the issues and directly communicating their message.

How can we convince mainstream politicians that “women’s issues” are “society’s issues” and get more women to vote? I believe the two are inextricably linked. Since many more women than men vote, politicians have begun to take the women’s vote a bit more seriously. However, single women have been discouraged from voting in non-Presidential elections because they feel as if their needs have been ignored (Carroll, 2010). Women’s organizations should continue to lobby and demand that their needs are listened to and ensure that the politicians are following through on their promises. In addition to this, these organizations should conduct and release studies showing how candidates often lose elections because they are ignoring the women’s vote. This approach may be more influential because it focuses on how candidates can win elections.

Mobilizing young and single women is of paramount importance to politicians, particularly Democratic politicians since the vast majority of this population votes Democratic. It is essential to reach out to these voters. Online advertising will prove to be more fruitful than television advertising in courting the young women’s voting bloc. Young people are often intimidated by midterm elections. They may feel intimidated and under-informed because lesser-known politicians and various propositions dominate the ballot. It is important to educate and, in some ways, simplify the ballot process so women feel empowered enough to vote.

It’s important not to ostracize Republican and Independent women from the “women’s movement.” While I personally believe the Republican platform is fairly sexist, we still have to invite all women to participate in the process, especially when 26% of women classify themselves as Independent. Educational and health care themes are a fantastic way to incorporate more moderate women into the debate, regardless of party affiliation, both in terms of candidates and voters. If we can recruit more moderate Republican politicians ala Olympia Snowe, we can shift the political culture in the United States away from the Right.

Organizations like Emerge California are actively working to include more women into the political process pipeline. By training Democratic women to cultivate strong policy stances, develop leadership qualities, examine image shaping, and collaborate with various stakeholders, Emerge California is creating an elite class of potential Democratic candidates. These women will be essential elements in the fight to increase female political representation and educate and mobilize young voters. Emerge women are already making an impact across California and the United States; therefore, it is critical to support organizations like Emerge so women’s voices are heard in the political process.

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