

Blue nation or red? Women are key in 2016



Diane Mack

VIEWPOINT

The Republican Party is getting some wake-up calls during this year's contentious presidential nominating process. Here's another one: There are too few Republican women candidates and officeholders, and the long-term consequence of this disparity will be a weaker party.

Let's take a look at the numbers in the U.S. House and Senate and the state legislatures.

There are 188 Democrats in the Congress; 33 percent are women. House Republicans hold 246 seats, 9 percent of which are held by women.

Thirty percent of Senate Democrats are women as compared to 11 percent of Senate Republicans.

In the state legislatures 34 percent of Democratic officeholders are women; among Republicans the proportion of women legislators is 17 percent.

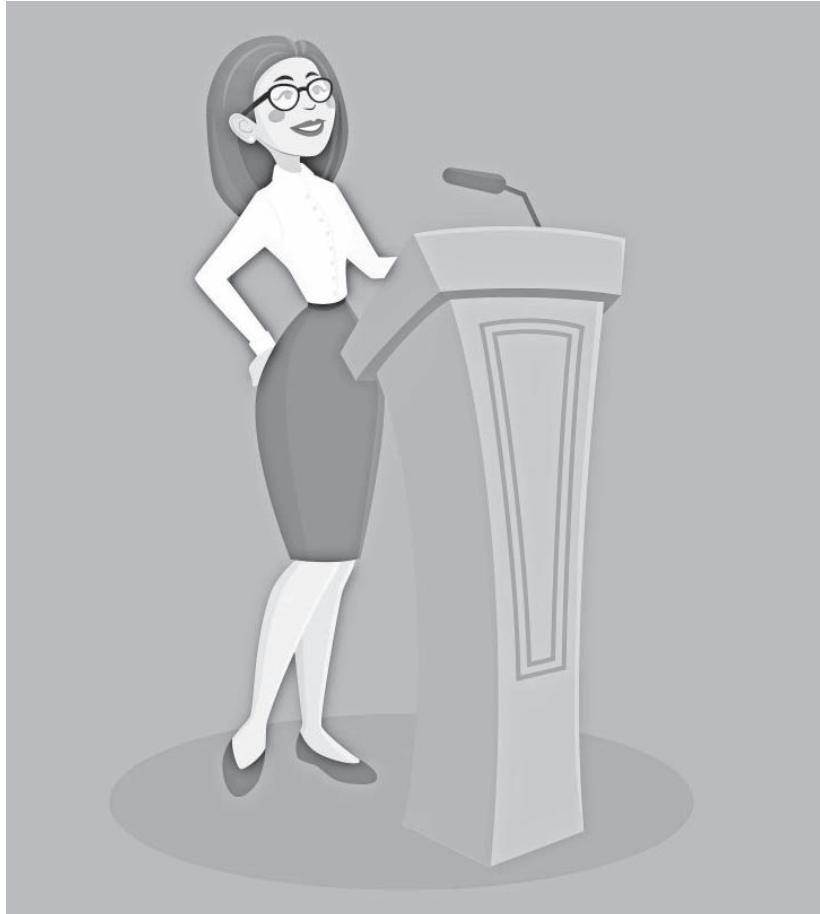
"Let's stipulate that neither party even approaches gender parity among its elected officials; except for the very rare local council, it's nearly impossible to find places where women are represented at levels that match their numbers in the population."

So writes Kathy Kleeman, senior communications officer at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers, in a recent article for the Center's Footnotes publication.

She continues, "But one of the key reasons that the number of women in elective office remains surprisingly low is the paucity of Republican women. The imbalance in the proportion of elected women from the two major parties is a fixture of American politics; Democrats have long had a substantially greater percentage of women among lawmakers at the federal and state levels than Republicans. What would the number of women officeholders look like if the proportion of women in the GOP matched Democrats' level of women's representation?"

"In the U.S. Senate, there are currently 20 women, 14 Democrats and 6 Republicans. The Democratic women constitute 30 percent of the Democratic delegation. If the Republican side, with 54 senators, were 30 percent women, there would be 16 GOP women, giving us a total of 30 women in the Senate, an increase of 10 from today.

"The same process yields a U.S. House with 81 Republican women and a



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total of 143 women (rather than the current 84). Applying the formula to the state legislatures, we would see 2,493 women instead of the current 1,808.

"Some might note that these numbers don't mean much on their own. But whatever distinctive qualities women bring to elective office, we'd have a lot more of them if Republican delegations looked more like their Democratic counterparts."

There are indications that the Republican national organization is finally acknowledging it has a women problem. "Most Republicans agree that encouraging women to assume leadership roles is critical to the party's prospects," writes the conservative Newsmax magazine.

Here's our message to the Republican Party: Encouraging women is not enough. You have to recruit them, you have to support them with political muscle and resources, and you have to make their election a priority. That may not seem fair to your male candidates, but that's what it's going to take until

the gap is narrowed and finally eliminated.

There is now a multitude of regional, statewide, and national organizations working actively and diligently to get more women elected to office. Some are nonpartisan, like our Institute; others are partisan, many of them devotedly Democratic. The movement to elect more women is a flame that has been ignited and will burn fiercely until gender parity is achieved — think of it as the new suffragette movement. It is the Democratic Party's best chance to regain legislative control of the country.

So, Republicans, what are you going to do about it?

Diane Mack is president of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida and offers this viewpoint on behalf of the IWP board of directors. She served on the Pensacola City Council 2009-2010. Ms. Kleeman's commentary is quoted by permission of the author and of the Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University.