

Through the Looking-Glass:
Creating An Independent Paradigm for Electing Women

On November 3rd I received an email, "Today's Inspiration", with the quotation: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the sea." (Antoine de Saint-Exupery)

How do we teach women to long for equal rights so then we can drum them up to elect more women, especially to Congress where the most far-reaching legislative decisions are made? Make no mistake, history and the numbers tell us that **equal rights and electing more women go hand-in-hand** – and until we have more women in Congress (and state legislatures) we will have to continue fighting for every equality issue over and over again.

Some of you have heard me speak about electing women in my four years as President of the National Women's Political Caucus of Florida – about recruiting and training candidates, the need for women to support those candidates financially, and, yes, the good 'ol boyz. You've then also heard me say that gender balance in government is not just a matter of simple justice, but electing women is good for government on many levels.

Now, **we need to "kick it up a notch", to look beyond those typical issues,** because the truth is that regardless of collective and individual achievements, the status of women in this country is on

shaky ground. We are even losing ground in some state legislatures -- but I am going to focus on Congress:

1. As 52% of the population, we are still grossly underrepresented even if our paltry 13.8% of Congress recently went up to 14.8%. By international standards we were 61st in the world (tied with Andorra!) in electing women to congress/parliament on November 1st, now we may move up to 59th -- still a ways from the 30% threshold the UN has set for marking real progress for women in elective office.
2. Even though we will send a record 65 women in the 109th Congress, our numbers in Congress have been relatively stagnant. Our net gain of +5 does not, unfortunately, hearken back to the infamous "Year of the Woman" (1992) as some have suggested. Then our net gain was +14 (28 to 42 seats). **In next 6 cycles, we have added only 23 new seats for women.**
3. Subsequently we are stuck with few seats at the decision-making table, and **very little real political power** – that's why we are still talking about an Equal Rights Amendment 81 years after it was first proposed and 84 years after women won the right to vote. We have simply not used the vote to our advantage!

Things, however, are not so bleak as the numbers suggest **because it's now 2004 and we have a lot of political experience under our belts -- and there a plethora of women qualified to run for Congress.** NWPC-CA says, "50/50 by 2020" (100th Anniversary of Suffrage), although they haven't laid out their blueprint for doing so yet. Still I believe that we could achieve gender balance by 2020 -- **if we really made it our business to do so, and accept the fact that "the system" as it stands is broken and must be revised to accelerate the process.**

An obvious way to start is simply by being better organized:

1. **First, by having quantifiable goals** -- rather than the vague, "feel good" elect more women thing that has been relatively goal-less. We need goals and a strategic plan just like anyone else trying to achieve something great. Gender balance by 2020 would amount to 19 new seats per cycle for women, either open seats or challenges. **We don't need permission from anyone, so let's just make that our goal!**
2. **Women have gotten ahead in many countries via specific strategies,** mostly initiated by political leaders with vision and a true commitment to gender balance. "Every Open Seat a Women's Seat" is such a strategy – a bipartisan effort where women specifically are recruited and supported for seats that are easier to win, a strategy which should also trickle down to state legislatures. Political leaders need to do the right thing and adopt

this strategy toward gender balance – **but we don't need to wait for that, we can just adopt it ourselves right now!**

(This year women actually won 7 of 34 open seats or 21%, and one woman won a challenge for 8 new members, but three women also left Congress for the +5.).

Goals and strategies are essential, and most certainly there must be a multi-pronged approach -- **but let's kick it up one more notch, to look at this challenge through another prism** and then ask ourselves some tough questions:

Let's visualize: there are no blue states or red states, there are no states at all, there are 435 Congressional seats, in 435 distinct districts -- **where one size does not fit all; where the people and the issues are in some way unique; where women in sync with their districts could get elected towards our goal of 50/50 by 2020. I don't know about you, but I find this incredibly liberating!**

This way of looking at things immediately provides a plethora of possibilities...and also begs a number of questions:

1. Can we continue to seek and support for Congress mostly, if not exclusively, women who are Democrats, 100% pro-choice with \$500,000 already in the bank?

2. Can we learn the lessons of the 2004 Election and widen the playing field, even as we try to level it?
3. Can we reach out and touch many more women -- not just building coalitions, but recognizing that Choice is not the most important issue for so many women (especially those trying to get elected in this climate)...
4. Can we respect the concerns of women who do not agree with us on every issue, creating allies where we can find common ground instead of being patronizing, intolerant, self-righteous, and hostile? (NOT to be confused with changing our own beliefs or giving up our principles!)
5. Can we learn to support most women around the country for election to Congress regardless of our differences and/or political party so we can achieve critical mass -- rather than waste opportunities and energy opposing them and/or supporting more (mostly white) men?
6. What is our two-party system actually doing for the election of women beyond "lip service"? (There are only 23 women Rs in Congress, so in some ways that speaks for itself -- I can only refer specifically to my own D party, of which I have been a member for nearly 40 years. Let's look at some of the 2004 results: In MA, for example, all 10 Congressional seats are held by Democrats -- none of them women, one woman ran, an R

defeated in the primary. In NY, 20 of 29 seats are held by Ds, only 5 by women, and a total of 10 women ran this time. These are shocking indicators!)

7. Should we continue to tolerate and kowtow to party or political action committee policies that support candidates based on failed de-selection strategies that can never mean more when you start out supporting so few? (Take Tracy Velasquez in Montana for example!)
8. Should we even seriously consider becoming Independents -- rather than powering political parties with dollars and sweat equity with never a fair-share of seat at the decision-making table in return?

There are more questions, more ramifications -- more food for thought. But I ask you to consider the view through this looking-glass, and **the real potential in creating an independent paradigm for electing women -- many more women of many stripes to Congress so we achieve critical mass and real political power toward equality and opportunity for all women.**

We don't have bow to worn-out strategies or conventional wisdom any longer -- because after all, we are women without boundaries!