

Why Carly Fiorina Has Stalled

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On the night of the first Republican presidential debate, Carly Fiorina stormed the so-called kids' table, then got upgraded to the main stage. There, she gave a shrewd performance that shot her all the way to second place in a [national CNN/ORC poll](#). In the night's most memorable zinger, she calmly excoriated the race's front-runner, Donald Trump, for commenting on her looks: "I think women all over this country heard very clearly what Mr. Trump said," Fiorina said.

Since then, however, Fiorina hasn't found a way to break through in the broader race. Her poll numbers have notably fallen, despite another highly competent performance in the third debate last week in which Florida Senator Marco Rubio was widely considered the victor.

As the next debate looms in Milwaukee, questions press in on her campaign: What has held Fiorina's campaign back from the same kind of lift-off as Rubio? And what can she, a master of the debate form, do to reverse the downturn? Here's what Republican activists, pollsters, scholars, and Fiorina's advisers said.

Name Recognition

For all the admiration Fiorina has won at the debates, she remains a lesser-known figure than many of her rivals, and the theatrical dynamics of this contest's elephant tent have made it particularly difficult to introduce oneself. In a [Quinnipiac University national poll](#) released Wednesday, 18 percent of Republicans said they haven't heard enough about Fiorina to form an opinion of her, compared to 6 percent for Trump.

As much as Fiorina "got that media love right after the second debate, Donald Trump takes up as much of the oxygen in the room," said Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Fiorina and her campaign stress their belief that, in the candidate's words on Friday on the *View* talk show, "when people hear me, they tend to support me." Her campaign felt "very good" about the latest debate, "another opportunity for Carly to introduce herself to the American people," said spokeswoman Anna Epstein in an e-mail.

Media Coverage

Keeping herself in the spotlight is a tall order, in the era of Trump.

Fiorina "doesn't appear in other media venues between debates as much as Trump, who seems to be everywhere every day, usually on the phone," said Kathleen Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

"If you want to sustain a bump," Jamieson said, "keep in the public eye. Keep around and maintain what you're saying."

Trump and Ben Carson, the retired neurosurgeon now vying for the national front-runner spot, aren't the only ones, Jamieson said.

"Fiorina didn't have a history of being a regular on some of these shows, like, say, Lindsey Graham and Chris Christie," even if she outranks them in polls.

And media coverage can be something of a self-perpetuating cycle.

"When Fiorina is in Iowa, she's remarkably well-received—big crowds," said Mary Kramer, a former president of the Iowa Senate who is backing Jeb Bush. "But she gets four paragraphs in the newspaper by the political columnists. She rarely makes the 6 o'clock news."

It's not for lack of trying. According to the *Des Moines Register's* [Iowa Caucuses Candidate Tracker](#), Fiorina has put in more time in the Hawkeye State than the two front-runners, including 11 appearances in October compared to three by Trump and eight by Carson.

Signature Issue

"She hasn't found her issue niche," said Ann E. W. Stone, the founder of Republicans for Choice, a pro-abortion rights political action committee. "Carson really started to go up after he made the comment about a Muslim president—that really does strike a chord with a lot of the xenophobic folks in the party. Trump, of course, had his anti-immigration comment."

"She tried with Planned Parenthood," Stone said, noting Fiorina's references to a string of videos about the health-care provider that sparked a movement to defund it, "but the majority of Republican women are [not pro-life](#)."

Jamieson said she was "waiting for the intriguing policy proposal from Fiorina that makes you say she isn't just a standard business Republican."

Ground Game

CARLY for America, a super-PAC supporting Fiorina, has managed her ground game, grassroots organizing, and infrastructure [to an unusually large extent](#). By law, the super-PAC and her campaign aren't supposed to coordinate. The super-PAC's activities help Fiorina conserve her own campaign

dollars, but leaving voter mobilization to an outside group is risky.

Nancy Russell, chair of the Republican Party of Hanover County, a conservative area north of Richmond, Virginia, said that Fiorina is more or less the only candidate who has not reached out to seek her support on petitions and more. "It's a surprise to me," Russell said. "Everyone else has pretty decent organization, even [Rick] Santorum."

Carson may lack political experience like Fiorina, but "he's got an organization, he's got offices, he's got people," said Iowa-based pollster J. Ann Selzer (who conducts surveys for Bloomberg Politics). "He's sort of doing the things you do to win a caucus," she said, whereas Fiorina "doesn't have the same kind of visibility."

Outsider Status

The value of being a political outsider is much-heralded in the 2016 race, but the transition from business executive to higher office is harder for a woman, Walsh said. "We haven't seen examples of women doing the kind of accelerating on-ramp into politics in the way that she's doing," said Walsh.

There are a few examples of "men who have come in from private sector and won," she said, like Frank Lautenberg, the CEO of Automatic Data Processing who became a New Jersey senator, or Jon Corzine, the Goldman Sachs and MF Global CEO turned senator and governor of the same state. "We don't have examples of that kind of express lane to the political highway for women."

Fiorina has run for office once before. In 2010, she sought a U.S. Senate seat in California, coincidentally the same year that Meg Whitman, today the CEO of Hewlett Packard Enterprise, ran for California governor. (Both lost.)

"While I think business strengths are important, I also think having worked in government is an important part of the criteria," Whitman, who is backing New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, said in a recent [CNN interview](#). "I think it's very difficult for your first role in politics to be president of the United States."

Women Base

Perhaps Fiorina's greatest hurdle has less to do with her CV and more with her party's ideology. As the only woman in the Republican field, it would seem she could depend on women as a natural constituency, yet, not wholly unlike Hillary Clinton in 2008, Fiorina does not want to make gender her pitch.

"Republicans are gender-blind, and they don't see an advantage to electing a woman over a male," Stone said. "That is problematic with getting women elected."

Or, as president of the anti-abortion group Susan B. Anthony List Marjorie Dannenfelser said, "Yes, gender is an asset, but it's not the whole ballgame."

Republicans have a particularly difficult time achieving gender parity in their representation—especially, according to a [study](#) of Congress published in January by Political Parity, at the primary stage. Female Republican candidates have a harder time raising money, the study also found, noting there is no Republican antidote to the Democratic group EMILY's List. "The underrepresentation of women in politics is a compelling catalyst for Democratic funders, but far less so for Republicans," the report said.

All of which puts the Republicans' outsider woman candidate—who calls herself a feminist and has cited Gloria Steinem as a hero—in something of a bind.

In her final words in the latest debate, Fiorina conjured up a picture of herself at a podium opposite Clinton. Jamieson said this was Fiorina's strongest moment: "She said 'I neutralize gender advantage' without saying it." But to finally meet Clinton there, Fiorina will need to find a way to clinch her party's nomination. How long can she go *without* saying it?

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