

Carly Fiorina bucks feminist stereotype

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Senate candidate Carly Fiorina, the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, broke ground in American corporate leadership and is now being heralded as a pioneer again - the vanguard of a new breed of "pro-woman, pro-life" feminists in the mold of former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin.

Darcy Linn, 51, a Contra Costa business executive who sees herself as conservative, proudly pro-life - and a feminist - said it's one reason she's drawn to Fiorina, who is running against three-term incumbent Democrat Barbara Boxer.

"Similar to Sarah Palin, we can look up to Carly," said Linn, who works for the Gap, which is based in San Francisco. "She embodies the better side of us. She's articulate, kind, feminine, beautiful, smart and successful - and she holds dear the values that we hold dear.

"I kind of feel like the old mold - that a feminist cannot be pro-life - has never really been accurate," Linn added. "So many Republican women I know are strong, opinionated, successful earners ... who have been encouraged to be successful on the corporate front."

Voters like Linn are helping to energize the efforts of pro-life and conservative groups now focusing on the Senate run by Fiorina, who is making her political debut against Boxer in a contest that also is a battle over leadership for American feminists.

"This race is going to be a test of all the dogmas of feminism and women in political life, because we'll have perfect contrast between these two women," said Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of Susan B. Anthony List, a pro-life political action committee based in Virginia that said it is donating \$3 million to key 2010 Senate races, including California's.

She called the California Senate race "a bellwether for women running in the future," and a "banner election" for female candidates who she defines as feminists in the conservative model of "Palin-Fiorina-Bachmann," a reference to Minnesota Rep. Michelle Bachmann, a favorite of Tea Party activists.

With five months to go before the general election in California, political observers suggested attempts to redefine Fiorina as a feminist in a new mold - one shaped in part by Palin's conservative, family pro-life agenda - will sharpen the contrast between the Republican and Boxer, a liberal senator and self-described feminist first elected to the Senate in 1992, the "Year of the Woman."

"Every five or ten years someone says, 'This is the new face of feminism,' " said Sacramento author and women's activist Camille Hayes. "When people say 'pro-woman feminism,' my suspicion is what they mean is 'pro-traditional, feminine' feminism ... that old-school rap about feminists being hairy-legged, man-haters evolved in the 1970s is a (public relations) challenge that the movement has always had."

Efforts to tie Fiorina to the more controversial figure of Palin - and to remind voters of her conservative stance on abortion rights - may have political as well as financial implications in blue-leaning California.

On one hand, associating Fiorina with Palin may boost the GOP candidate's fundraising among conservatives, activists and Tea Partiers in other states. Those sources could be crucial if the national party is pressured to put its resources into Senate races in less-costly battlegrounds elsewhere, including Arkansas, Nevada and Kentucky.

Moreover, the wealthy Fiorina, who has put \$5 million of her own money into her campaign, is not nearly in the same financial league as billionaire gubernatorial candidate Meg Whitman, who has so far spent \$90 million - mostly her own funds - on her bid for governor.

But there's a downside to the association with the controversial 2008 GOP vice presidential candidate, said Democratic strategist Dan Newman.

"Among California swing voters, BP, Goldman Sachs and Dick Cheney are all more popular than Sarah Palin," he wryly noted.

The most recent Public Policy Institute of California poll in March 2010 on the issue of abortion showed that more than two-thirds of all voters oppose more restrictive laws on abortion; independents, who make up 1 in 5 voters, are even stronger in their views, with opposition at 75 percent.

Rose Kapolczynski, Boxer's campaign manager, said that "gives us an opportunity to reach out to pro-choice independents and Republicans - because Boxer is more in step with their views."

Jen Bluestein, communications director for EMILY's (Early Money Is Like Yeast) List, the powerhouse political action committee, based in

Washington, supporting pro-choice female Democratic candidates, said GOP national efforts to appeal to women belies the real issue: that being a feminist or "pro-woman" candidate isn't about gender; it's about ideology.

"This (election) is not about who's a bigger feminist. This is about who is standing up for ... the opportunity that American women and their families deserve," Bluestein said.

"And if Carly wants to describe herself as a pro-woman candidate, I'd say presiding over a company where 28,000 people lost their jobs, many of whom were women; working to limit the ability of women to make their own reproductive decisions, and appealing to those who support the idea that climate change is not a significant threat does not seem like a pro-woman position to me."

Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, said Fiorina's position on abortion does not represent something unique for a female candidate. In fact, it may illustrate how the feminist movement has matured to the point that it can accommodate many competing voices.

"What's new in the California race is the high visibility, the high stakes, and the successful, self-funded businesswomen. That's what's really distinctive about her," said Mandel, a co-founder of Rutgers' Center for American Women in Politics.

"Feminism has always been about options, opportunities and part of that is a statement that women are not all the same," she said. "There are many different kinds and many points of view - and women should not be held to one narrow set of views or positions or backgrounds or experiences."

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