

The Huffington Post



Peggy Drexler

Women in Congress -- Don't Sweat the Numbers

Posted: November 4, 2010 09:07 AM

David Gergen made an interesting point Tuesday night on CNN amid the roar of the punditry. The advisor to four presidents and respected political commentator pointed out that not too long ago, the number of women running for office in this election would have been headline-worthy news. Last night it was simply an aside.

Have we gone from the year of the woman in 1992, to the year of the woman-II in 2008, to the year of so-what in 2010?

Even as women in politics is becoming no more newsworthy than women in business, the arrival of a new crop of generally young, seemingly bright and overwhelmingly Republican women does raise a question. Are we seeing a shift in women as a reliably progressive bloc on social issues?

Of the 90 seats women held in Congress Tuesday morning, 56 House women were Democrats and 17 were Republicans. In the Senate, the Democratic edge is 14 to four. So the bad night for Democrats was preordained to be rough on their women candidates.

Not that the new arrivals could turn the tide on those issues alone. Both arms of Congress are still firmly in the hands of men. Women in, women out -- what's the big deal?

We've never seen an influx of women like this.

The incoming group in 1992 -- some say they were a response to the savaging of Anita Hill in the Clarence Thomas affair -- were largely Democrats, and -- it follows -- reliably supportive of social and women's issues. The new arrivals are coming to a Republican controlled House on a tide of righteous conservative anger. It's hardly a confluence that promises a progressive social agenda.

There were Mama Grizzlies and a few who used their mom status to cement their conservative credentials -- but nobody ran saying, "I'm a woman, and I care about women's issues." There were, it seems, bigger fiscal fish to fry.

While it might be assumed that there is little an influx of conservative women to a conservative Congress could do to turn back the clock on these issues, Laurie Rubiner, Planned Parenthood's vice president of public policy says -- not so fast.

She points out, for example, that Title X in the Health and Human Services budget got its first budget increase in ten years. What happens now to the only Federally funded family planning program? She also believes we could see a resurrection of the demand that any health care plan offering abortion coverage be barred from participating in insurance exchanges under the health care plan. There could be new life in the move to de-fund Planned Parenthood altogether.

You could extend the question beyond women's issues. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Vince Bzdek argues that it wasn't until a woman -- Nancy Pelosi -- worked her way to a position of power that we got a health care bill after almost a century of futility. "Pelosi's animating ambition," he wrote, "has been to put so-called women's and family issues such as health care, education and the welfare of children on the same level as homeland security, foreign relations and defense." One can't help but believe that incoming tough-guy Speaker John Boehner will not be similarly inclined.

All in, there is the real possibility that women in Congress -- once a progressive bloc -- could take a turn to the right on social issues. Things we thought were settled or at least protected could once again be in play.

In this "year of the Republican woman," don't look at the numbers of women who won the prize. Look at what they're going to do with it.