



Dems Need a Bachmann!

Author: Gloria Feldt -- Sep 10, 2011 3:24 PM EDT

Liberals are repelled by Michele Bachmann and Sarah Palin—when what they should be is envious. Gloria Feldt on how a fiery, crusading female leader could rally the Democrats.

Passion! What a relief to see President Obama express some in his [jobs speech Thursday](#). And for the first time that I can remember, a presidential proposal specifically addressed women's essential role in driving the economic engine.

But the political narrative shifts awfully quickly these days. [Congresswoman Michele Bachmann's](#) presidential candidacy, a hot ticket just a couple of weeks ago, is suddenly melting. And [Sarah Palin](#) is [in her bus](#), hurtling full-speed toward self-parody as an attention-seeking political used-to-be. While women's importance in the political landscape can no longer be overlooked, some might say that the much-hyped “year of the conservative women” is over.

To feminists, right-wing ideologues like Bachmann and Palin might seem like tools of the patriarchy, co-opted by their oppressors as mouthpieces for a party that would disempower women and return us to the days of back-alley abortions and economic discrimination. But you have to hand it to the women on the ideological right. What they lack in compassion they make up for with passion. They have the fire of moral certitude. You know where they stand. That kind of clarity connects with voters.



Republican presidential candidate Michele Bachmann (R-MN) debates during the Ronald Reagan Centennial GOP Presidential Primary Debate at Ronald Reagan Presidential Library on September 7, 2011 in Simi Valley, California. The debate is sponsored by POLITICO and NBC News., Kevork Djansezian / Getty Images

And so I say, learn from your adversaries. Progressive women could stand to emulate these characteristics of their sisters on the other side of the partisan aisle. I doubt fewer right-wing women will run in 2012, and that's fine with me. But the dual Bachmann-Palin flameouts provide a critical window of opportunity for progressive women—whose numbers and experience in elective office are triple those of women on the right, and who have by and large been the unsung trailblazers for all women in politics—to kick their roles up a few notches and lead the nation forward from its current morass.

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It's great that barriers to all women in politics have fallen precipitously despite continuing media bias and unequal access to big-money donors. Voters are more likely to trust women candidates, and rightly so: women legislators work harder and [bring home more results for their constituents](#). Though they make up [just 17 percent of Congress](#), women are 51 percent of the U.S. population, 54 percent of voters, and upward of 60 percent of progressive voters. That's voting power that, if mobilized collectively and strategically, could change everything.

So many progressive policy initiatives and social movements since the 19th-century suffragists have been led by progressive women that it's no wonder we get cognitive dissonance from the possibility that the first female president might be a right-wing Republican. Progressive women's groups have led the way to recruit, train, and support women to run for office. Most of those groups are nonpartisan, such as the Women's Campaign Forum, The White House Project, Women Under Forty, the 2012 Project, Running Start, and the National Women's Political Caucus.

Without them, we would not have had Hillary Clinton's 2008 run for president, after which voters understood that leadership is as likely come in a yellow pantsuit as in navy gabardine with a yellow tie. But as Siobhan "Sam" Bennett, CEO of the [Women's Campaign Forum](#), the oldest organization financially supporting women candidates, wryly told me, "Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann have breezed through the door that Hillary painstakingly built."

That's what we get for playing too nice. So let's face down the progressive elephant in the room once and for all and nix the idea that any woman in political office is a net plus. Although complicated policies that work for the country are harder to communicate than simplistic antigovernment nastiness, women like Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) show it's quite possible to employ passionate progressive arguments without the negative aspects of zealotry. More progressive women need to step up just as boldly—now.

Because with lockstep “just say no” partisanship on the Republican side as the new normal and Democratic leaders too often supinely begging for crumbs of compromise, talk of bold change on the progressive side has gone mute. Yet small ideas will never be able to increment the nation’s economy into a future that’s emerging faster than Andrew Breitbart can whip up the blogosphere to bring down a member of Congress who tweeted inappropriately—sex scandals being one of the few truly bipartisan endeavors. And, by the way, haven’t those guys all been, well, guys?

This is exactly the breach into which progressive women should step. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) [took a stab](#) at it and her vision, the Emergency Jobs to Restore the American Dream Act, substantively informed the president’s proposals. Feminist economists like Nancy Folbre have long advocated [many of the ideas](#) that the president has now urged Congress to pass.

For progressive women, seizing this opportune moment to assert our own authentic moral strength, strong language that inspires our base, and courage to advance bold policy initiatives is nothing less than a profound responsibility.

It’s time to pump up the passion and let it rip.

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[Gloria Feldt](#) is an activist, former president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and author, most recently, of [*No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power*](#).

For inquiries, please contact The Daily Beast at editorial@thedailybeast.com.