

An Election Day Comeback for Women

Tuesday night, I called a lawyer friend of mine who is a genetically encoded Republican. I'd heard earlier in the day from a source close to her that she had done the unthinkable in the Virginia election.

"It's true," she said cheerfully from her home in McLean. "I voted Republican for most of the seats, but when it came to the School Board, I went to the Democratic sample ballot and voted straight Democratic. That creationism stuff just went way over the line. They're not going to be teaching my boys that in school."

The Christian Coalition and the far right may have thought they had a lifelong Republican in the palm of their hand, but when it came to their agenda and her children, she walked.

Tuesday's vote in Virginia was a repudiation of much of the draconian Republican agenda, but it also was an election in which women who ran as women won—a particularly sweet moment for Denise Lee, the Virginia coordinator for the National Organization for Women. "We elected some strong feminist women," she said at a post-election round table sponsored by NOW. "Virginia has made it unequivocally clear to the Christian Coalition and the right wing that we don't want to take this direction."

The NOW round table was designed to introduce its Equality Countdown Campaign for 1996, which it hopes will result in tickets flooded with feminist candidates, an unprecedented number of female voters and the defeat of ballot measures such as the California initiative that would destroy affirmative action. Rep. Elizabeth Furse (D-Ore.) and NOW President Patricia Ireland were specific about the need to elect not right-wing women but those who generally will work on behalf of women. Furse, describing the current Congress as anti-woman, says conservative women in particular have been unsympathetic to the progressive women's agenda.

Three NOW activists told of how they had supported each other and won office in West Virginia in the last few years, in a model of grass-roots activism that NOW hopes to replicate nationwide. Barbara Fleischauer, a former NOW state president, became a state representative. Charlene Marshall, a NOW member and activist, became the mayor of Morgantown, W.Va., and was named the state's mayor of the year in 1994. She is the first African American woman to be a mayor in

the state—and in a town with a 2 percent minority population. "We represent proud feminists and civil rights activists who ran on that," as well as the issues, Marshall said. And Teresa Miller, the third NOW activist, said letters of support for her from her two colleagues helped her win a seat on the Morgantown City Council.

Fleischauer said that she campaigned on the idea that the wage gap was the most important issue in the state, where women make an average of 58 percent of what men do. "We made that the economic development issue for West Virginia. People were very interested in that."

Ireland said that NOW will be taking the wage gap national. It will frame an economic development message for women that will touch on the whole range of issues that affect their economic security, including reforming welfare in a way that provides real jobs for women, closing the wage gap and preserving affirmative action programs that open up better-paying job opportunities to women and minorities.

NOW's membership has been increasing: The number of new members for the first half of 1995 was more than double its entire new membership for 1994. "A lot of folks have gotten over whatever complacency set in in 1992," Ireland said. And they are beginning to understand that affirmative action is a scapegoat for the flight of jobs overseas and for the growing gap between rich and poor.

NOW is taking advantage of new technology: It has a World Wide Web site on the Internet—<http://now.org/now>—and an e-mail address—now@now.org. NOW Vice President Rosemary Dempsey is heading up a college organizing drive that has taken her to 50 campuses this year. "The effort's reaped us great benefits. It flies in the face of the myth that young people . . . run from anything that reeks of feminism," she said. Students were instrumental in defeating an anti-gay initiative on the Maine ballot Tuesday, she said. "A lot of students are waiting for someone to give them a few tips. . . . They want points of entry into the women's movement, into politics, into social change."

NOW is poised to take on the right by reframing the family values discussion in terms of economic values that protect women's jobs, their opportunities for advancement, their economic security and that of their families. With that kind of message, perhaps even my friend the Republican lawyer will start listening.

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