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Osborn Tracy L. *How Women Represent Women: Political Parties, Gender, and Representation in the State Legislatures.*

New York: Oxford University Press 2012. ISBN: 9780199845347

Reviewed by Arlene Violet, former Attorney General of R.I. and the first woman elected to that position in the U.S.

Tracy Osborn has contributed greatly to the understanding of women in politics and just how belonging to a political party influences their positions on and approach to policy issues affecting women. She joins the field of impressive scholars who have explored the link between deliberative bodies and the outcome on so-called women's issues. Her conclusions are that a common "sisterhood" is not behind legislative initiatives. The single most influence, she argues, is partisan, i.e. the political party to which the female legislator belongs. I think that she is correct but maybe not solely for the reasons her painstaking research led her to conclude.

In reaching the conclusion that party matters, Ms. Osborn wisely studied the sponsorship and roll call data in nearly all 99 state legislatures. Her research showed that women's political party identities structure the policy alternatives they support and proffer to address women's issues problems. Secondly, the institutional parties structure the legislative environment in which they pursue these policies, by controlling the legislative process. Parties fundamentally shape the pursuit of women's policy issues and, therefore, her own initiatives. Her inevitable conclusion that partisan women hold positions more similar to the men in their own party than the women in the opposing party, even on issues directly related to women is really no surprise. She undoubtedly is correct again. I wonder, however, if there is a more basic reason why women vote as the men do in their party. Perhaps women join the Democrat or Republican Party because they agree with that parties' "take" on issues, including women's issues. The political party may not be shaping her issues at all. Maybe, she has just gravitated to that party based on her analysis that the party shares her viewpoint.

It's been over 25 years that I have held statewide office but since that time I have been on a political "talking head" weekly TV show, written a weekly political column, tucked 20 years of talk radio, mostly on political issues, into my resume and have been a 10 year faculty member for the Women's Campaign School at Yale. Frankly, I was dismayed by these experiences that there wasn't more of a bipartisan "stretches across the aisle" by the women I interviewed or

taught. They have led me to conclude that women join a party because they primarily agree with the ideology.

Democrat women on the state and federal level that I have interviewed have a different set of “women’s issues” than their republican women counterparts. As Ms. Osborn also notes Democrats focus on women’s health, equality and reproductive freedom. Republican women consider themselves feminists when they focus on child care and morality issues, including the championing of “children’s rights to be born, which in their view is the ultimate woman’s issue. It seems to me that women have gravitated to the respective political party because they feel at home with its ideology.

At the Campaign School at Yale held each summer women who aspire to run for office show the same election for a political party with whom they identify as the conduit philosophically for their issues as well. At least 10% of the Yale class comes from outside the United States. These women also identify with the respective political parties in their countries of origin which most approximates their view points on all things women. My experience has led me to believe that women chose the party and try to mold it if it’s not exactly aligned with her priorities, not vice versa.

Granted all the above feedback is only anecdotal. It does lead me to posit, however, that party identity may not per se shape the women candidates. It could be that their own opinion on what issues are women’s’ issues and how they should be addressed is what leads them to party affiliation.

So many other factors also make a party affiliation. Matters like child support, family leave policies, welfare, food stamps, etc. can be viewed as not even being a women’s issue but rather through the prism of growing up in a culture where self-reliance was the biggest virtue or love thy neighbor as thyself was the operative value .

This is not a criticism of the fine research this book represents. In making the above comments, I feel like I’m in a Charlie Brown cartoon I saw years ago .Charlie, Linus and Lucy are lying on their backs looking up at the clouds. Lucy asks, ”What does that cloud look like to you?” Linus answers, “It looks like Renoir’s Still Life”. Lucy responds, ‘I think it’s more like Paul

Gauguin's Still Life Apples. What do you think it looks like, Charlie Brown?" Charlie responds, "I was going to say it looked like a doggie".

Forgive me if this review is a lot like Charlie Brown's analysis!