



Businesswomen Lead the Pack in 2010 Elections

Meg Whitman, Carly Fiorina, and Linda McMahon are just three of the women shaking things up this cycle

By Johanna Neuman

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"I'm Linda McMahon and I approved this ad because it's time for something different."

The former CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment, the theatrical stage for street brawls that enthrall much of America, McMahon is running for the U.S. Senate seat currently held by Connecticut Democrat [Chris Dodd](#), who is retiring. Battling through a Republican primary against former Rep. Rob Simmons and facing a general election contest against a longtime Democratic favorite, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, she makes no apology for her unusual resume. "I may have to set up a ring in the Senate chamber and lay the smackdown on them," she often tells voters to cheers and applause.

In the past, most women candidates worked their way laboriously up the political ladder, beginning in the back rooms of campaign offices addressing envelopes or answering the phones, running for the local school board or city council. Speaker of the House [Nancy Pelosi](#)'s first job in politics was as an intern for a U.S. senator from Maryland. [[See information on Pelosi's campaign financing.](#)] But McMahon is one of a vanguard group of powerful businesswomen who excelled in corporate America. Now, they present themselves in the political arena just at a time when voters are desperate for jobs and pining for change. Not since writer Claire Booth Luce and actress Helen Gahagan Douglas served in Congress together in the 1940s has there been such star power on the hustings.

Pundits proclaimed 1992 the Year of the Woman in politics. But for much of Senate history, it really was a good old boy's club. Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas and [Barbara](#)

[Mikulski](#) of Maryland were the only two women serving in the Senate in 1991. By 1992, they were joined by four others, all Democrats: [Barbara Boxer](#) and [Dianne Feinstein](#) of California, Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois, and [Patty Murray](#) of Washington. A year later, Republican [Kay Bailey Hutchison](#) joined the club, winning a special election in Texas as more glass shattered to the Senate floor. If 1992 was the Year of the Woman, 2010 could be the Year of the Woman Outsider.

The GOP has a lot of hopefuls. Meg Whitman, running for governor in California, is the former CEO of eBay, a Fortune 500 company that she grew from a \$4 million, 30-person shop to an international dot-com powerhouse. Former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina, once named the most powerful woman in American business, hopes to challenge liberal icon Boxer in what could be an all-female Senate race in California. Michele Rollins, a former Miss USA with a law degree from Georgetown University and a business perch running a luxury vacation resort, has just declared for Delaware's only House seat. On the Democratic side, Diane Denish, who ran a small business in Albuquerque before becoming lieutenant governor of New Mexico, is now running for the state's top job. Rosa Scarcelli, running for governor of Maine, is CEO of Stanford Management, a low-cost housing provider. And Alex Sink, an executive at Bank of America before becoming Florida's chief financial officer, is now working to become the state's first female governor. "This is a new generation, a new animal," says Jennifer Duffy of the *Cook Political Report*. "They are savvy, successful women in their own right, who don't seem to spend a lot of time thinking about social issues." [[See a slide show of the women of the senate.](#)]

What they are talking about is business, how to run it, how to grow it, and how to create jobs and steer federal policy toward fiscal sanity. With millions of Americans still out of work or losing their homes to foreclosure, Tea Party activists clamoring for an end to government spending, and voters regularly shouting down professional politicians, this is the Year of the Outsider. And you can't get much further outside the good old boy's club than to be a high-powered business executive who happens to be a woman. "I know where jobs come from," Fiorina says. "I've met a payroll, I've balanced a budget, I've cut expenditures. When people are worried about cutting spending, my experience resonates."

Male candidates have long cleared a speed lane from the private sector to the public. New Jersey's Jon Corzine went straight from Wall Street to the Senate to the governor's mansion. And North Carolina's John Edwards went from being a big-time malpractice attorney to the Senate to a vice presidential run. Maybe it is a function of how high women have risen in the corporate world, breaking barriers to the corner office once thought impenetrable. Maybe it's a sign of how hungry voters are for candidates who break a mold that seems dysfunctional. Either way, the women entrepreneurs have arrived. "A handful of women are now following a path that men have taken, an express ramp from business to politics," says Debbie Walsh, who runs the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. Linda DiVall, a Republican pollster, echoes the point. "This may be the Year of the Outsider, but voters won't go with someone not up to the job or in need of on-the-job training," she says. "And these are not your mom and pop businesses."

That outside experience might be just what voters are looking for. "This cycle, a lot of voters want to send someone to Congress who has had to meet a payroll, created jobs, run a business," says Duffy. As if to confirm the sentiment, the latest *Los Angeles Times*/USC poll found that 40 percent of California voters think it is more important that a [candidate for governor](#) has a background in business, while 35 percent believe a government background is more important.

Whitman understands that. In a 48-page economic plan, she lays out an agenda. She promises to reduce [government spending](#) by \$15 billion in her first term, cut the state payroll by 40,000 workers, and address California's 12.6 percent unemployment rate with targeted tax cuts, less stifling regulations, and aggressive competition with neighboring states that offer incentives to new businesses. Pitching herself as a results-oriented businesswoman to a state where the budget is way beyond busted and many voters owe at least some of their income to selling goods on eBay, Whitman is way ahead in the polls against state Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner. "Voters tell her they are excited," says press secretary Sarah Pompei. "They are looking for an outsider, not a career politician with a failed agenda of raising taxes and more spending as solution to every problem."

Not all the female candidates can boast of a background in business. Cindy Straight, cochair of Republican Majority for Choice and cofounder of WISH List, a group that

backs female pro-choice Republican candidates, says a record number of women are running this year in the House. Many entered through traditional avenues such as state and local government or law and education. But some of them are portraying themselves as outsiders anyway.

Kelly Ayotte is a prosecutor appointed by both Republican and Democratic governors to serve as New Hampshire's nonelective [attorneygeneral](#). Now she's running for the Senate seat being vacated by [Judd Gregg](#), as a nonprofessional pol. "Watching our country go way off track last year, I realized that our elected leaders were more concerned with their own self-interest than doing what's right," she says. "As the mother of two young children, I couldn't stand by and see their future jeopardized by out-of-control spending in Washington."

Even Robin Carnahan, who as Duffy notes was "born on the political ladder," is running as an outsider. From a Democratic family with deep roots in Missouri—her father Mel was governor, her mother Jean was a U.S. senator, and brother [Russ Carnahan](#) is a congressman—the 48-year-old [secretary of state](#) and manager of a farm is contrasting herself with her likely opponent, Republican Rep. Roy Blunt, and all his "Washington insider friends."

But whatever the pitch, Democratic pollster Celinda Lake thinks the business-minded woman makes a good candidate and attitudes about female politicians are changing. Lake says a few years ago during testing, voters nodded approvingly when male candidates unveiled a plan. With women candidates, they asked who supported it. "The big, important question this cycle," she says, is, "Will this crew of Republican women with business credentials be different?" With the election six months away, there are reasons to wonder.

For one thing, the White House intends to run against greed on Wall Street, and Democratic candidates across the country are beating the same drums. If corporate America becomes the villain of the piece, business credentials could seem tainted by corporate excesses.

Then, too, the ghosts of businesses past could haunt the candidates. Already, critics belittle Fiorina for being pushed out of HP after William Hewlett, son of the company's cofounder, objected to her merger with Compaq, a leading competitor. Opponents are

likewise assailing McMahon for WWE's one-time tendency to look the other way on steroid use. And Whitman has been pilloried for self-funding her campaign. But if biography is destiny, and character often trumps other factors in politics, their narratives could prove compelling.

On the campaign trail, millionaire McMahon is careful to remind voters that she and husband Vince at one point lost everything to bankruptcy. Rebuilding WWE into a \$1 billion business listed on the New York Stock Exchange, McMahon now lives in tony Greenwich, where she surely annoys some of her neighbors by burnishing her tough-girl image. In a fit of moxie that Sarah Palin might envy, McMahon named her boat "Sexy Bitch." And embracing the shtick that first put Minnesota's Jesse Ventura on the political map, she once got into the wrestling ring (albeit in a business suit) and kicked an opponent in the crotch during a stunt for WWE. Though opponents have made liberal use of the clip, some McMahon supporters believe it is just the image that could appeal to voters this year.

- *See which [industries give the most to Congress](#).*
- *See a [slide show of the women of the Senate](#).*

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