



Women rock the boat and vote

In the howling winds, she didn't just rock the boat, she tipped it over. At yesterday's "Boston Tea Party for Women Who Rock the Boat," hundreds of Democratic Party leaders paid tribute to Ann Lewis for her longtime advocacy on behalf of the nation's women. The former

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Clinton communications director, Lewis has been active at home

and abroad, training women leaders to build democracies, strong economies and peace.

U.S. Rep. Barney Frank thanked his sister for inspiring him to enter politics and praised her for being able "to be nasty on TV while smiling."

He commented that she knows how to blend pragmatism and idealism. Lewis had to draw upon both during the Clinton impeachment crisis. President Clinton thanked her (on video) for "defending me in ways you couldn't have imagined."

He went on to describe Ann as "one of those truly rare people who doesn't ask for credit and steps out when you have to."

Lewis now chairs the Women's Vote Center, established in 2001 at the Democratic National Committee. The center conducts voter research for an effective, targeted message strategy; trains women activists to motivate other

women with the party message and implements women's vote initiatives in targeted states.

Considering the decisive role of American women voters underscored again and again this week, her initiative might just tip the balance to the Democrats.

The current gender gap is 17 percent (favoring the Democrats), allowing the Women's Vote Center online site to claim that "When women vote, Democrats win."

Recognizing the power of this constituency, President Bush recently sent twins Barbara and Jenna to join Laura on the campaign trail, representing the softer side of the Bush family. Alexandra and Vanessa Kerry will also be out with Elizabeth Edwards and Teresa Heinz Kerry, vying for women's votes.

Young or older, family-oriented or globally-minded, there won't be a shortage of role models for women this election season. One of the strongest role models is Maryland Sen. Barbara Mikulski, whom Lewis served as chief of staff during her early days in the House. Lewis helped Mikulski develop a women's health agenda. Thanks to their work, funding for women's health has increased 700 percent.

But revolutions happen in quiet ways as well.

Earlier in the week, Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm recalled the "butterfly effect" of her mentor, union activist Millie Jeffrey, who died recently at age 93. The activist had no way of estimating her impact on Granholm, who said the beat of Millie's wings was felt by countless young women, encouraging them to assume leadership roles.

There aren't a huge number of women running this year — only 14 percent of the candidates, the same proportion as currently hold seats of Congress. But the number of women voters has exceeded the number of men in every election since 1964.

If efforts to motivate women are successful, they'll get to the polls this year in record numbers, creating a whirlwind that will lift a host of women into leadership roles. And when they land, it won't be in Kansas.

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