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Democrats losing control of equal rights voting bloc

Ensclosed in her Capitol Hill office at Republican Party headquarters, the president's daughter still seems nostalgic for the good old bipartisan days on the women's rights trail. Back in 1977, Maureen Reagan remembers, she and Judy Carter were fellow travelers for the Equal Rights Amendment. She still recalls

Ellen Goodman

the day when the leader of the Nevada Senate chamber stood up and said, "It is my job to protect women who want to do the role for which God intended them. It is not my responsibility to help those women who want to go out and live in a man's world." The two of them, a Reagan and a Carter, were equally appalled.

"For years we (Democratic and Republican women) sat in the same rooms where if we'd ever gotten off the subject of women's rights, we would have killed each other," she says with her boisterous laugh. Then she adds, "What I am saying to you is that five years ago when 'A Woman' was appointed to the Cabinet we helped break out the champagne. There is no more of that bipartisanship."

Reagan, who is by blood and inclinations a highly political creature, isn't entirely surprised by the way that women and women's issues have become politicized. Both parties want their votes and allegiances. Women who came together for some issues may split on other ideological lines.

As a loyal daughter, feminist and Republican, this energetic 42-year-old Californian ardently disputes the notion that women's rights activists were actually expelled by her party or her president. "My father," she protests more than once, "is not the problem."

In this frame of mind, Maureen Reagan has the formidable task of trying to make women's rights a bipartisan issue again. She is working for women candidates within the party and for the party with women voters.

You might call Maureen Reagan the Republican assigned to close the gender gap, but she prefers this des-

cription: "My job is to create a support mechanism for the Republican women candidates and officeholders within this party and to bring about a better dialogue with women."

A "support mechanism" includes getting party money and backing for women candidates. Last election, for example, Republicans Millicent Fenwick and Margaret Heckler lost the endorsement of women's rights groups to male Democrats. This year, Reagan hopes that a strong network of Republican women caucuses and councils in the states will be on hand — "women who can stand up at a press conference and say that we too are the women's movement and this is our choice; we won't get blind-sided."

At the same time, this President's daughter wants to encourage Republican women to follow her lead in loyal opposition: "What our women have to understand is that it is okay to not always agree. It's okay not always to agree with each other and it's okay not always to agree with the men and it's okay not always to agree with everything that our party does. You are allowed to say 'I'm not for the Equal Rights Amendment and I'm a Republican.'" After all, she does it all the time.

Much of what this politically savvy lady says makes a good deal of sense. At the same time, she can sound wildly uncritical of her father. She defends the president's record on women, even the decision that replaced Mary Louise Smith and Jill Ruckelshaus on the Civil Rights Commission.

But her main point is a solid one: "What we have to make sure is that the women's movement does not take itself out of the vote market, that no matter who is elected and no matter what side holds the policy position, there is advancement, however much, in every four, five, eight, 10-year period for women."

In a two-party system, women can't afford to default on the Republicans. Women's rights can't become a totally partisan issue. The First Daughter is right about this. But why do I get the feeling that there's a gender gap between Maureen and her dad?

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