

A Watershed Year

By Terry O'Neill, President of NOW

This year could very well be a watershed year for women's rights, and the task before National Organization for Women activists is clear: we must mount an aggressive program of voter education and mobilization to get the word out about what is at stake for women in the 2012 U.S. elections.

Since the disastrous 2010 elections, when the participation of women voters plummeted, right-wing extremists have been waging a relentless war against women. As soon as Republicans took control of the U.S. House of Representatives they began passing legislation to codify the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits federal funding of abortion care, and extend its prohibition to private health insurance plans. One of their bills even allowed hospital emergency rooms to refuse to perform an abortion to save a woman's life. They then set their sights on reversing health care reform regulations that would expand women's access to birth control.

It's not just our reproductive rights that are under attack; our economic security is threatened, too. Last year the House passed the infamous Ryan Budget (named after House Budget Committee Chair Paul Ryan, R-Wis.), which would have: converted Medicare to a private voucher system; converted Medicaid to a block grant program while reducing the federal contribution by 20 percent; fast-tracked future cuts in Social Security benefits; and slashed a range of social programs, such as family planning clinics, tuition assistance, after-school programs, child care, and more. All of these programs disproportionately serve women. And -- although this is not widely recognized -- these programs disproportionately employ women, too, as teachers, nurses, health care workers, child care workers, social workers and case managers.

The Ryan Budget could not even be defended as a plan to reduce the federal deficit because its savings were offset by increases in military spending and an extension of tax breaks for corporations and the wealthiest individuals. Yet every Republican in the House, as well as a handful of www.facebook.com/humanprospect 23

Democrats, voted for it.

Thanks to the efforts of women's rights advocates across the country, the radical anti-abortion bills stalled in the Senate, which is still under Democratic control, and the Ryan Budget met the same fate. Elections do matter.

However, if control of the Senate changes hands in the 2012 elections, there is no doubt that attacks on women's access to safe, affordable abortion care and birth control will become devastatingly effective. As will the attacks on programs like Medicare, Social Security, Medicaid, family planning clinics, and others that women rely on to make ends meet in tough economic times.

There is good news for 2012, though. We have an opportunity to send some strong feminists to join those who have been fighting for our issues on Capitol Hill. Elizabeth Warren, Tammy Baldwin, Shelley Berkley and Mazie Hirono are running for the U.S. Senate, and Lois Frankel, Suzanne Bonamici, Ann McLane Kuster and Dina Titus are running for House seats.

The fact is, we can't withstand another disaster like the 2010 elections. We must get engaged, stay engaged, and vote as if our lives depend on it -- because they do!

Terry O'Neill, a feminist attorney, professor and activist for social justice, was elected president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in June 2009. She is also president of the NOW Foundation and chair of the NOW Political Action Committees, and serves as the principal spokesperson for all three entities. She oversees NOW's multi-issue agenda, which includes: advancing reproductive freedom, promoting diversity and ending racism, stopping violence against women, winning lesbian rights, ensuring economic justice, ending sex discrimination and achieving constitutional equality for women.