

Pro-choice GOP candidates gain momentum in party

By Mary Lynn F. Jones

When pro-choice GOP candidates Judy Biggert and Loleta Didrickson seek their party's nomination in the March 17 Illinois primary, each will not only enjoy the backing of some Republican voters, but the support of pro-choice GOP women's groups as well.

The two candidates for a House seat and a Senate seat, respectively, have already taken in thousands of dollars from such groups, who view them as a chance to safeguard abortion rights nationwide and boost women's numbers in Congress.

"Our main focus is getting people elected. We have to spread out across the country," said Lynn Grefe, political director of the Republican Pro-Choice Political Action Committee (PAC), founded in 1995, which supports both male and female GOP pro-choice candidates. "We have to pick and choose races. We have to work from strength and target states where we feel we have a presence."

The rise of GOP pro-choice groups in recent years was highlighted at the Republican National Committee's (RNC) meeting in Palm Springs, Calif., last month,

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when such organizations played an important role in defeating Texas National Committeeman Tim Lambert's proposal to end party funding for any candidate who supports partial-birth abortions. Such a litmus test could have been especially devastating for female GOP members of Congress, many of whom face election this year.

Had the litmus test passed, it would have effectively ended party support for several prominent Republicans, including Sens. Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe of Maine, Reps. Nancy Johnson of Connecticut and Connie Morella of Maryland, as well as two other senators and six other members. Governors, such as New Jersey's Christie Todd Whitman, who barely won reelection last fall, would also have been affected.

Indeed, moderate Republican women's groups admit they "dodged a bullet" last month and acknowledged that the same battle will now be fought in the states. Several groups said they wouldn't even bother raising money in Alabama, the site of an abortion clinic bombing last week.

"In some states, you have less opportunity to make noise," said Susan Cullman, president of the Republican Coalition for Choice, a single-issue interest-group that wants to remove abortion from party platforms and does not distribute money to candidates.

"In some states, it's too late," conceded Grefe. "If people feel [strongly that they want to oppose abortion], there's nothing I can really do."

Instead, the groups are turning their attention to states with more moderate ap-

peal, such as Illinois, New Hampshire, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, which have already elected pro-choice members, and the 12 states that currently have abortion clinic safety laws on the books.

They have also been busy supporting a network that already exists: current members who favor abortion rights.

"We're focused on protecting incumbents and helping candidates around the country," said Karen Raye, executive director of the WISH List, founded in 1992.

The WISH List, which hopes to best its 1996 fundraising figure of \$380,000 this year, plans to do mailings and give money to incumbents — such as Johnson and Morella — who may be open to challenges from anti-abortion groups.

Protecting incumbents is also the primary goal of the Republican Pro-Choice PAC, which has raised more than \$250,000 since its founding in 1995. "We're afraid someone might go after them because they stood their ground," said Grefe.

But pro-choice groups — and political observers — are more worried about the broader message the litmus test proposal sends to all party candidates, particularly women.

The resolution was "no surprise" in a party that has moved increasingly to the right on abortion, said Leslie Wolfe, director of the Center for Women Policy Studies, a nonpartisan interest-group. She warned, however, that now "pro-choice Republican women need to fight like hell to [save the soul] of their party."

The litmus test "was a direct challenge to the long-held tent theory, that a big tent is the way to expand the party and win,"



MEREDITH LEIMAN/THE HILL

Rep. Connie Morella



PAMELA HAZEN/THE HILL

Sen. Olympia Snowe

agreed Shara Kaplin, political director of the Women's Campaign Fund (WCF), which endorses both Republican and Democratic pro-choice candidates and plans to give away \$360,000 in cash contributions this year.

Yet Wolfe added that "most pro-choice Republican congresswomen are very secure in their seats. I doubt they will be beaten in GOP primaries." So groups are also placing their bets on first-time party candidates, who they hope can bolster abortion rights in their own states and on Capitol Hill.

The WISH List, for example, has already raised \$20,000 for Didrickson, while the Republican Pro-Choice PAC has given her \$5,000. The WCF does not plan to support Didrickson financially because she is fac-

ing a pro-choice incumbent, Democratic Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun. But the group has given \$5,000 to Biggert, who is running to replace Rep. Harris Fawell; the Republican Pro-Choice PAC has given Biggert \$2,000 for her primary race.

Of course, while such donations help candidates, the money doesn't necessarily mean that the candidates will win, acknowledged Grefe.

But with many candidates already running from an existing base — that of an office they currently hold — and attracting voters on issues other than their pro-choice stance, "for these women, the ones who are in [politics] are in for good," said Kaplin. "Pro-choice Republican women who win do it by building coalitions, [ones] that include party support."