

In Iowa, GOP's Joni Ernst broke a gender barrier on her own terms

By Maeve Reston

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Joni Ernst's feat this week was one that many thought was impossible: a Republican victory in a blue state that Obama won twice, and the first woman ever elected to Congress from Iowa. Not only did Ernst win a U.S. Senate seat, she clobbered her Democratic opponent by an 8-point margin.

So how did she pull it off in a state that has so long resisted making women its top leaders? A weak opponent, a breakthrough ad in the hog barn that went viral, and a carefully cultivated image that female politicians from Hillary Rodham Clinton to Sarah Palin have struggled to translate into votes. Tough, strong, but nonthreatening.

She is a real model for future Republican women. - Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster

Ernst, a little-known state senator and lieutenant colonel in the Iowa National Guard, burst onto the radar of national Republican strategists late last year, as the Iowa primary field was still taking shape. She was a complete unknown — a 5-foot-2, self-described southwest Iowa farm girl.

Half a dozen state and national strategists summoned Ernst to the state Capitol and fired questions trying to take her measure. Was she ready for the rough-and-tumble of a competitive U.S. Senate campaign?

Ernst was quiet and composed in her answers. As they wrapped up, one skeptical strategist leaned in: "We've been talking here for a while," he said, alluding to the softness of her voice. "Do you think you can command a room of 500 activists and get them fired up?"

She paused for a moment and straightened up: "I command Iowa's largest [military] battalion," she answered. "I don't think it's going to be a problem."

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Ernst has rejected the kind of feminist-centered campaign that Clinton built in 2008 when she tried to convince voters that she was the person you wanted picking up the phone at 3 a.m. in the White House to handle the world's latest crisis.

Throughout the campaign, Ernst avoided references to the glass ceiling, through which Clinton said her supporters had poked holes. And when she won, exit polls showed that she trounced Democratic Rep. Bruce Braley among men, 58% to 40%. Women, who more often lean Democratic, split their support evenly between the two candidates, 49% apiece.

"She is a real model for future Republican women," said Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster, at a postelection panel this week. "She's a real right-winger, but she was able to use her gender and bracket — not just every faction of her party, which was remarkable, but frankly independent women in her state as well."

Lake noted that Republican female candidates had long struggled to survive the gantlet of primary season because women generally make up just 45% of the Republican primary electorate, while they make up about 58% of Democrats who vote in primaries.

Although Ernst may not have run on her gender, she used it — with a wink and a nod — to great advantage to show the dimensions of her background and experience. In her primary ads, she presented herself as "Mother. Soldier. Conservative." In the general election, "mother" was still first, but she pivoted to "Soldier. Independent Leader."

There were feminine touches to her ads — but of the independent, pioneer-woman stripe.

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"At some moments in this campaign, it has reminded me of kind of an Annie Oakley message: 'Don't pen me in, don't hold

me down, I can shoot better than you," said Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

Ernst was the motorcycle-riding woman who could rock a black leather jacket at the target range and shoot a bull's-eye through a paper copy of the president's healthcare law.

In her Carhartt vest in a friend's barn, she promised she would handle "pork" in Washington with the same steeliness that she used when she castrated hogs as a farm girl. ("Let's make 'em squeal," she said with a twinkle in the ad.)

Caption President Obama

Mandel Ngan / AFP/Getty Images

President Obama speaks during a news conference in the East Room of the White House on Wednesday.



Caption Sen. Mitch McConnell greets students

Win McNamee / Getty Images

Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) greets students in the McConnell Scholars Program after answering questions during a press conference at the University of Louisville on Wednesday.

Sen. Mitch McConnell greets students

Caption Sheila Kuehl

Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles County supervisor candidate Sheila Kuehl hugs a supporter at an election night party in Santa Monica.

Sheila Kuehl

Caption Gov. Jerry Brown

Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times

Gov. Jerry Brown delivers his victory speech with wife Anne Gust Brown at his side in front of the governor's mansion in Sacramento.

Gov. Jerry Brown

Caption Pat Roberts

Ed Zurga / EPA

Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), with wife Franki, speaks to supporters in Topeka, Kan., after defeating independent candidate Greg Orman.

Pat Roberts

She did not back down from her antiabortion position on "personhood" the way, for example, Republican Senate candidate Cory Gardner did in Colorado.

She frequently reminded her audiences that her boots had been on the ground in southern Iraq and Kuwait. "We could have kept ISIS from spreading," she softly told a group of Iowa voters a week before the election, referring to the Islamic State extremist group that has taken over portions of Iraq and Syria.

The story those voters were all talking about at the Maid-Rite that morning? The one in the Des Moines Register about how Ernst had told a young soldier under her command in Iraq to keep moving their Humvee down the road even if it

meant running over Iraqis who had thrown themselves in their path in protest. Nobody was run over.

But Ernst also filmed ads at the dining room table in a teal sweater set, and used another ad to share her recipe for making the perfect biscuit as a line cook — an analogy to measuring the right amount of fat in Washington.

When she took the stage on Tuesday night — to the opening bars of Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" — she scarcely mentioned the historic nature of her win. She could let the pundits do that for her.

On Friday, Ernst reported for drills with her National Guard unit. When she goes to Washington, several strategists said, her challenge will be to keep her political stardom in check and show lowans that she's one of them. That might not be hard, since she's best known nationally as the woman who was unafraid to talk about castrating hogs on television.

"We had to do something to break through, and that broke through," Iowa strategist Dave Kochel said. "But you couldn't do that in any other state than Iowa."

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