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Dan Morain: Fiorina takes a risk and stays to the right

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Imagine this: In environmentally sensitive California, Carly Fiorina, hoping to be this state's next U.S. senator, supports offshore oil drilling and nuclear power, and hates the law that promises to reduce greenhouse gases.

Fiorina publicly says she'd vote to overturn Roe v. Wade if given the opportunity, this in a state where an anti-abortion rights candidate at the top of the ticket has not won since the 1980s.

For good measure, she proudly supports the Second Amendment, opposes same-sex marriage and looks to the free market libertarian Cato Institute for counsel on the economy.

What gives? Unlike so many candidates before her, Fiorina clings to her stands on social issues. It endears her to Republican stalwarts. But in a state where there are 2.3 million more Democrats than Republicans, she may be making a fatal error. Then again, perhaps it's all part of a much bigger plan, beyond the U.S. Senate.

Whatever the reason, this we know: Virtually all of those positions will come up when Fiorina meets Democratic incumbent Sen. Barbara Boxer in their one and only scheduled debate, to be aired Wednesday on Channel 3 (KCRA).

Voters know Boxer.

She's the darling of environmentalists, and advocates of gun control and abortion rights. An all-around social liberal, she may be too far left for much of the California electorate. But Boxer has been flattening Republican opponents since 1992 by portraying them as out of step on social issues with mainstream California. She'll do the same with Fiorina, or at least try.

Unlike Boxer, Fiorina only now is coming into focus for much of the electorate.

On the campaign trail, Fiorina doesn't dwell on social issues. She homes in on the economy, jobs, taxation and more jobs. She is gambling that with the number of unemployed at record highs, Californians care far more about their shrinking wallets than any social issue.

"We're going to talk about the same issues – economic issues, tax cuts, getting control of

government spending," said Fiorina's campaign manager, Marty Wilson. "She is not going to change, whether it is abortion or immigration, or bread and butter issues."

Offering her knowledge of business as the prescription for what ails California, Fiorina describes herself as a one-time receptionist who worked her way up to become chief executive officer for one of America's great companies, Hewlett-Packard.

Her story is hardly one of rags to riches, however.

Fiorina's father was a law school dean and judge who spent 35 years on the federal bench. As a kid, she lived in London and Africa, and graduated from Stanford University.

After dropping out of UCLA law school, she worked as a temp, briefly. But by age 30, she was a manager for AT&T, and steadily moved up the corporate ladder until she became Hewlett-Packard's CEO in 1999.

If she stretches her personal story, Fiorina comes by her conservatism honestly.

President Richard M. Nixon took office pledging to remake the U.S. Supreme Court and appointed four justices during his first term. If Nixon had served an entire second term, Fiorina's father, Joseph T. Sneed, might have become Nixon's fifth appointee to the nine-member court.

The president spoke of Sneed during a November 1972 meeting with H.R. "Bob" Haldeman and John Ehrlichman as a potential high court appointee, according to a tape transcribed by the Miller Center for Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. He mentioned the possibility several other times, too.

In the early 1970s, Sneed was dean of Duke Law School, Nixon's alma mater. Nixon appointed him deputy attorney general in January 1973, and to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals six months later. Sneed often offered the conservative dissent on a court where liberals have been dominant for years. He gained notoriety in 1994, when then-Chief Justice William Rehnquist selected Sneed to sit on a three-judge panel that selected Kenneth Starr as special prosecutor to investigate President Bill Clinton.

Sneed was dean at Duke when Starr was a student there, and Fiorina has described Starr and his wife, Alice, as family friends. Alice Starr donated \$1,000 to Fiorina's primary campaign.

Fiorina won the primary by espousing conservative views, underscored by Sarah Palin's endorsement. Fiorina almost surely won't be stumping with Palin in California this fall. But she hasn't "refudiated" Palin's glowing endorsement:

"She is pro-life, pro-traditional marriage, pro-military and pro-strict border security and against amnesty," Palin wrote on her Facebook page in May. "She is against Obamacare and will vote to repeal it and prevent the government takeover of private companies and industries.

"Carly is also a strong supporter of the Second Amendment. Like me, she is a member of the NRA, has a 100% NRA rating, and she and her husband are gun owners. She is pro-energy development and believes as I do in an all-of-the-above approach to energy independence."

Campaign manager Wilson shrugs about his candidate's social stands: "Whether they are consistent with the public's views or not, they are Carly's views. What people hate are politicians who win a primary and then say, 'Son of a gun, now that I've won the primary, I have new ideas.' "

Unlike the GOP's gubernatorial nominee, Meg Whitman, who has veered to the center, Fiorina is working to make friends on the right. After winning the nomination, Fiorina telephoned Republicans who had endorsed conservative Assemblyman Chuck DeVore in the primary.

"The base likes Carly Fiorina far better than Meg Whitman," said Michael Schroeder, former California Republican Party chairman who received one of Fiorina's peace-making calls. "She has run a better campaign to Republicans. She is more accessible."

Perhaps Fiorina's decision to stay to the right is an honest stand. Perhaps it's a rookie mistake.

"If she is a person of strong conviction, we can admire her and she will lose," Democratic attorney and strategist Darry Sragow said. "If she is not of strong conviction, she is making a mistake, and she will lose."

There is another possibility. Fiorina worked at a high level in Sen. John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign and was nearby when McCain selected Palin to join him on the ticket. In the process, Fiorina no doubt learned a thing or two about national politics.

If she were to win in November, Fiorina immediately would move onto the list of vice presidential candidates. Given the conservative social views of the GOP base, no Republican presidential nominee would consider a running mate who has equivocated matters such as abortion rights.

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