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Dems focused on women's issues, but some in base want to see more

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Wisconsin Dem political leaders appear to be sharpening their focus on women's issues, but some rank-and-file Dem voters say they're still not reaching out enough to women and minorities.

Several speakers at the Democratic Party of Wisconsin's Founders Day Gala on Saturday mentioned women's issues -- some hurling jabs at Gov. Scott Walker and Wisconsin Republicans over equal pay and new laws regulating women's health.

As master of ceremonies, Wisconsin Dem Party Chair Mike Tate said, "We must fight like hell to make sure our daughters have the same opportunities as our sons."

"We must end the days when people like Glenn Grothman are making women's health decisions as opposed to decisions between a woman and her doctor," said Tate. "We will end the war on women in the state of Wisconsin."

State Sen. Chris Larson blasted the GOP over women's health care.

"You all remember last June when Mike Ellis broke his gavel while trying to silence us and silence women across the state by forcing medically unnecessary ultrasounds on our state's women," said Larson. Instead of grappling with the economy, Larson said, "GOP senators prioritized limiting a woman's freedom to unrestricted access to health care options."

Attorney general hopeful Susan Happ was interrupted by applause when she mentioned she'd fight to protect the right of women to make health care decisions.

And Mary Burke, who hopes to become the state's first woman governor, asked, "If Scott Walker cared about people, would he have taken away women's right to equal pay for equal work? Would he have taken away women's freedom to make our own health care choices?"

Keynote speaker Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley had the harshest words of all, calling the GOP-run House of Representatives "tea party Republicans with a small, small view of America" that's the opposite of its founding patriots.

"Our founders did not appeal to America's fears, they inspired American courage, and they would never, ever abandon the war on poverty in order to declare a war on women, a war on workers, a war on immigrants, a war on the sick and a war on hungry children," said O'Malley.

But other speakers, including Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, Milwaukee County Exec Chris

Abele and state Rep. Peter Barca made no mention of women's issues. And only O'Malley made significant mention of issues having to do with minorities.

Some people in attendance agreed when asked if Democrats need to do a better job reaching out to women and minority voters.

"Yes," Norbert Gilmore of Shorewood, who is African American, quickly answered.

"And it has to be in a concrete way," he added. "They have to really make the connection."

Candice Owley, president of the Wisconsin Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, hesitated. "Well, they're doing better than the Republicans," she said.

But Owley said more action needs to be taken on preserving voting rights, a cause she says is overwhelmingly a minority issue. Restricting voting hours greatly affects people working in the health care industry, she said, noting this includes not only nurses and doctors, but also housekeepers, kitchen service workers and others who work long and varied shifts.

Tammy Maddente of Shorewood said Dems are getting better at addressing women and minorities. "For many years, I kept saying, 'Where are they? Where are they?' " she said. Still, Maddente said she's weary of being inundated with emails from the Democratic party asking for donations, yet, she said, "They're not talking about the issues."

Tate told WisPolitics afterward that "this campaign is focused like a laser beam on talking to women."

"One thing I'm very confident about is not only are we going to communicate with these audiences but we're going to get their vote out in November," said Tate. "It's early. 'We're not on television yet because we don't have the kind of money that Scott Walker and the Koch brothers do, but as we're out there campaigning, as Mary Burke is traveling the state, as John Lehman is traveling the state, those are the core issues that our candidates are talking about."

In an interview with WisPolitics afterward, O'Malley said, "I think we need to reach out to all voters." adding that his party has more diversity within its ranks than Republicans. "I think that's because our principles and ideals attract a broad range of individuals," he said.

This, O'Malley said, will be increasingly crucial to attracting the youth vote.

"Our children and their generation embrace diversity as a value, as an American value and as a good thing, and I think that bodes well for our future and for our party's future," said O'Malley.

-- *By Kay Nolan*
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