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POLLING POWER

American
women rule
voting booths,
and campaigns
know it, show it

FRONT PAGE



Press illustration by Krishna Mathias

■ BY STEVEN LEMONGELLO and REGINA SCHAFFER, STAFF WRITERS

In every presidential election since 1964, more women than men have been eligible to vote.

In 1980, however, the percentage of women who actually voted exceeded the percentage of qualified men casting ballots for the first time in U.S. history.

That's been the case in every election since.

And if the male/female voting pattern seen in the three most recent presidential elections continues (see chart below), the 2008 election campaign will be characterized by intense gender-based advertising and candidate appeals.

Southern New Jersey voters who have watched the campaign for Tuesday's Pennsylvania primary on Philadelphia-based TV stations have gotten a taste of what's ahead: Remember the "3 a.m. phone call" TV ad?

No matter who ultimately gets the Democratic nomination, women will be the most important demographic target for both presidential candidates as November inches closer.

The challenge for a Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama or John McCain campaign is the

same: How do they fine-tune their message to appeal to women, and what's the most efficient way to get that message across?

"We as women have a chance to make a difference in this election," said Sharon Schulman, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in Galloway Township. "Even better than burning bras."

As the owner of a small business in Absecon and mother of three teenagers, Chris Parker cares about a number of important issues, including education, health care and taxes. She wants her children to be able to afford a home and to be able to pay for their children's education.

She is still undecided on whom she wants as our next president.

"I am looking for a president who is a true leader and can inspire our nation," Parker said. "I want a president that we can be proud of."

Parker is exactly the type of voter a presidential candidate is trying to reach: Concerned about

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Women in the voting booth	Election year	% of eligible women voting	% of eligible men voting
	1996	55.5%	52.8%
	2000	56.2%	53.1%
	2004	60.1%	56.3%

Data courtesy of census.gov

Women will be most important target for presidential candidates in November

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issues, open-minded and female.

"Women voters tend to have a couple unique characteristics," said Brad Lawrence, co-owner of New Brunswick-based Message & Media, a political consulting firm. "They tend to decide later on in the campaign. They're key votes for both (Democrats), in the sense that they typically make up Sen. Clinton's base, yet they also go toward Obama."

Of course, since they make up 50.7 percent of the entire U.S. population, any strategy to attract women in general is bound to be a frustrating exercise. So campaigns have focused on the issues and concerns of certain subgroups — mothers, the working class, young singles. But some allege that in doing so all they have managed to do is stereotype them.

According to a poll cited by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, as late as three weeks before the 2004 election, women made up 60 percent of all undecided voters. So whether or not campaigns are going about it the right way, attracting women voters is essential for a candidate intent on winning the White House.

The issues: What matters to local women?



SMITH

Karen Smith, 56, of Ventnor, is the mother of five grown children and is in between jobs. Health care is the most important issue for her. "If you don't have a job that offers health care, you're screwed," Smith said. She is still "on the fence" when it comes to Clinton and Obama.



JOHNSON

Victoria Johnson, 20, of Glassboro, Gloucester County, is a student at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. The war in Iraq and gas prices concern her most. "My ex-boyfriend just got back from Iraq, and it's scary," Johnson said. She wants a president who can end the war, and she is moved by Obama's promises in his TV ads to end it.



HARTLIEB

Marie Hartlieb, 30, is a married mother of two whose husband was stationed in Guantanamo Bay for 18 months. Health care, particularly for veterans like her husband, is Hartlieb's No. 1 issue. "It's a very tight situation when you have two kids and two working parents," Hartlieb said. Her ideal president "has to deal with the home situation first." She is still undecided.



FOX

Eileen Fox, 35, of Mantua Township, Gloucester County, is a married mother of two children. She quit working for her husband's masonry business to go back to school to become a teacher. She calls Barack Obama a "strong spirit." She is moved by his promise to bring the troops home, but with a husband who owns a business, the economy concerns her, too.

Compiled by Regina Schaffer

The many moms of America

A recent television ad for the Clinton campaign featured mothers looking in on a series of sleeping children in the middle of the night. The sound of a phone ringing is heard, while a voice says:

"It's 3 a.m. and your children are safe and asleep.

"But there's a phone in the White House and it's ringing. Something's happening in the world ...

"Who do you want answering the phone?"

"There are some things that will never change, and that's women wanting their child to be safe, healthy and happy," said Amy Colton, a co-founder of the Marketing to Moms Coalition, an industry group that studies women as consumers.

That may be why some claim the ad worked — Clinton won the Texas Democratic primary by a slim 3 percent margin over Obama, but she won by 19 points among white women. According to an Associated Press exit poll, one-fifth of Democratic primary voters decided in the last three days, and Clinton won them by 21 points. By a 55-39 margin, those late deciders viewed Clinton as better qualified to be commander in chief.

Campaigns have previously reached out to women by targeting moms, Colton said. The term "soccer mom," broadly referring to a middle- or upper-middle-class woman who spends a significant amount of time taking her children to activities such as soccer practice, was dubbed a niche group in the early 1990s.

That term has since evolved, to "security mom" — moms who were supposed to be concerned primarily with issues such as the war in Iraq, domestic terrorism and the security of their children following Sept. 11. But Colton doesn't think labeling women, or moms, is very effective.

"Some campaigns do it better than

others," Colton said. "The ones that are most successful recognize all aspects of what it means to be a mom. A lot of politicians think about the stereotypical moms and try to speak to them with assumptions."

A 23-year-old and 43-year-old woman may seem different, but they can have a lot in common if they both just had a baby, Colton said.

"The smart campaigns understand the differences and the similarities, and use a bunch of different touch points to resonate, like preschool care, health care, to business issues," Colton said.

'Convenient constructions'

Others, though, are more cynical about using mommy labels in American politics.

"I think they're damaging," said Sid Ray, a professor of women's and gender studies at Pace University in New York. "They're stereotypes."

Susan Carroll, a senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics, echoed Ray's skepticism.

"Soccer moms" was (coined) in 1996," Carroll said. "Prior to that, people didn't think of themselves as 'soccer moms.'

"They noticed a group of swing voters," she said, "and a whole bunch of characteristics that couldn't be found in polling were attached to these women, like how they all (supposedly) drive minivans."

Not only are those labels inaccurate, Carroll said, but they're a little too "convenient" when it comes to dealing with women's issues.

"Soccer moms" are not an organized interest in American society," she said. "No organization is coming to knock on the White House door saying, 'You promised to do this, this and this.' It's an attempt to deal with women voters without really dealing with women voters."

Security moms, she said, are basically just soccer moms given a new label and a new supposed concern. And what about the newest designation, "waitress moms?"

"They've always been there," she said. "They've always been economically marginalized. Women not in professional jobs are paid less than men, and a disproportionate number of minimum-wage jobs are held by women."

The problem, Carroll said, is that these labels make it appear as if women "aren't concerned with themselves and their own interests. Women are kind of dismissed because it's all about their children, and any other interest a woman voter might have had is erased."

One result of this kind of division is that women who don't fit any of the traditional labels tend to become marginalized — the messages aren't tailored to people like them.

"I like Barack Obama's views, but if you listen to Hillary, she's saying the same things," said Egg Harbor Township resident Shirley Schuetz, 42, who is married with no children. "Nobody has said anything that has hooked me yet."

Still, Carroll had to begrudgingly admit that — simplistic or not — breaking down women voters into segments has proved an effective tactic.

"Those constructions," she said, "have served campaigns really well."

'Overworked, underpaid, overlooked'

Aside from the "moms," the latest buzzworthy demographic group that will supposedly decide the next elec-



Press photo

Hillary Clinton's famous '3 a.m.' ad used an image of a sleeping child and contrasted it with an ominous ringing phone at the White House. 'There are some things that will never change, and that's women wanting their child to be safe,' said Amy Colton with the Marketing to Moms Coalition. The ad is credited with aiding Clinton's victory in the Texas primary.



Press photo

One of Barack Obama's latest TV ads focuses on the women in his life — his half-sister, Maya Soetoro Ng (pictured), his grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, and his wife, Michelle Obama. 'He wants to make sure that everybody's children have the opportunities that his daughters have,' Soetoro Ng says in the ad, which has been running in Pennsylvania in advance of Tuesday's primary.

tion is "single anxious females."

Coined last year by Clinton adviser Ann Lewis, "SAFs" are youngish, unmarried women whose main concerns are a bit harder to pin down, although the economy and Iraq are listed near the top — something that really could be said of every voter.

The reason for their importance? So far, they have been an untapped resource.

According to Women's Voices Women Vote, unmarried women make up 26 percent of the electorate — but in 2004, only 55 percent of unmarried women younger than 50 voted, compared with 67 percent of married women younger than 50.

"Unfortunately, for the last eight years, the needs of unmarried women have been largely ignored," Page S. Gardner and John Podesta write in their policy paper "Overlooked So Far: The Nation's Unmarried Women in 2008."

More than 40 percent of unmarried women have household incomes of less than \$30,000 per year, they write, while more than 10 million single-parent families are headed by single mothers. Unmarried women also are more likely than other Americans to have no health insurance.

"For these voters, the 2008 campaign is not an intellectual exercise; they are looking for real solutions," they write. "They are a key to this year's campaign."

The Clinton campaign recently unveiled a new ad that speaks directly to this group.

"You pour coffee, fix hair, you work the night shift at the local hospital," the narrator says. "You're often overworked, underpaid and sometimes overlooked. But not by everyone."

Among those who could be described as an SAF — whether she likes it or not — is 20-year-old Victoria Johnson, of Glassboro, Gloucester County, a student at Richard Stockton College. Besides gas prices, the Iraq War concerns her the most — because for her, the war hits close to home.

"My ex-boyfriend just got back from Iraq, and it's scary," Johnson said. She wants a president who can end the war, and Obama's promises in his TV ads to bring the troops home have pushed her into his camp.

Working-class women have trended Clinton's way. But to the chagrin of her campaign — which, after all, coined the SAF label in the first place — large numbers of college-age women have joined with Johnson in backing the challenger from Illinois.

Reaching women: A new strategy

In the run-up to Tuesday's Pennsylvania primary, the Obama campaign is running a new television ad. Obama does not speak in the ad. Instead, three women — his half sister, Maya Soetoro Ng, his grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, and his wife, Michelle Obama — all talk about why Obama should be the next president.

"Barack and I talk all the time about making sure that our girls can imagine any kind of world for themselves, with no barriers," Michelle Obama says in the ad.

The ad is a bit of a shift for the

Obama campaign. In the past, the campaign ran a number of ads in which Obama speaks broadly about hope and change at large rallies.

That was before the country went into recession, resulting in a shift in what is most important to voters, said Lawrence, of the political consulting firm Message & Media.

This time last year, Lawrence said, the Iraq War was the No. 1 issue to campaign on. Today, it's the economy — a very important concern for women voters.

"Clinton has appealed (to women) much more on bread-and-butter issues, like economics," Lawrence said. "Whereas Obama has talked about big atmospheric things, like change. Well, women tend to be more concrete.

"Obama is a brilliant speech maker, he has a record on the war, but you don't have a sense of his economics," Lawrence said. "Whereas with Clinton, you do."

The issue shift from the war to the economy leaves many women undecided — and both Democratic campaigns battling for their vote.

"I can't retire because my husband is a farmer," said Marsha Reed, an undecided grandmother who runs Reed's Farm with her husband in the Bargaintown section of Egg Harbor Township. "So I work for a pharmacy for the health insurance."

High gas prices also make running a farm difficult, Reed said. She is looking for a candidate who has a plan to get oil prices under control.

"It's the razor's edge sort of thing, whether to support Obama or Clinton," said Ray, the Pace University professor. "And for many, it's sort of breaking down on generational lines."

Surprisingly, Ray said, gender does not factor in for women as much as people think.

"Being female goes a long way — but not all the way," Ray said. "The war is such a big issue for women, and the fact that (Clinton)'s on the wrong side of that vote is detracting from full-on support from women."

If Obama does end up with the nomination — which, after crunching the delegate numbers, is becoming more and more likely — Carroll said that one worry in the general election would be how Clinton supporters take to his candidacy.

"With the Clinton campaign, older women are a major source of support," Carroll said. "I think there's going to be at least a chunk of women either considering not voting (at all) or voting for McCain. There are two questions: One, how will women in the Democratic Party be able to forge a reconciliation? And two, what percentage of these women will be attracted to a McCain candidacy?"

There is, though, one other possibility — Obama/Clinton '08, anyone?

"I think they would be an awesome team," said Marie Hartlieb, 30, a married Stockton student and mother of two. "That would be exciting."

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