

S.C. voters not too warm toward women.

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Sep. 3--South Carolina's long history of rarely electing women doesn't appear evident in the state's 2008 Democratic presidential primary.

U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton has led in almost every S.C. poll taken so far this year. The New York Democrat has money and momentum here.

But it remains to be seen if S.C. voters will make good on their poll promises when they vote Jan. 29, a first-in-the-South primary that will play a pivotal role in determining who wins the nomination.

In a state where the majority of voters are women, none holds statewide elected office and no women represent South Carolina in Congress.

The state also ranks 50th --last in the nation -- in the number of women in the state Legislature.

Clinton is the first woman in U.S. history with a legitimate shot at winning a major party nomination.

Clinton -- and the other Democrats in the field -- will need heavy support from women to take South Carolina's primary.

But some question whether Clinton's gender will help her with female voters, the majority of Democratic voters in this state.

"Women (in South Carolina) are not more likely to vote for a candidate because she is a woman," said Furman political science professor Danielle Vinson.

MAJORITY DOESN'T RULE

South Carolina women vote in high numbers, Vinson said, despite so few women holding public office.

In the 2004 S.C. Democratic presidential primary, women made up 57 percent of the vote. In the general election, they accounted for 56 percent of the vote.

The campaigns know winning over women is the key to victory.

"We're not going to concede any vote in this state," said Kelly Adams, state director for the Hillary Clinton campaign. "Women are a great target of our campaign efforts. We are basically looking at people who can relate to Sen. Clinton."

Nationally, in 1992, women accounted for 53 percent of all votes in Democratic primaries across the country, and political analysts expect the same to hold true next year.

That will not necessarily correlate to votes here for Clinton, though, Vinson said, and history backs her up.

Last year, S.C. voters rejected a chance to keep at least one woman in statewide elected office when they chose Democrat Jim Rex over Spartanburg Republican Karen Floyd as state superintendent of education.

Women had held that office since 1991, when Republican Barbara Nielsen was elected. She served until 1999, when Democrat Inez Tenenbaum won the seat and held it until 2007.

The only other S.C. woman to hold statewide office was Charleston Democrat Nancy Stevenson, who served as lieutenant governor from 1979 to 1983.

Similarly, women have rarely represented the state in Congress.

One woman, Spartanburg's Liz Patterson, has represented the state in Washington. Patterson, the daughter of legendary U.S. Sen. Olin Johnson, served in Washington from 1987 to 1993.

Before Patterson, four women represented the state in Congress, but only for a total of five years, according to the Center for American Women and Politics.

Elizabeth Gasque, Clara McMillan, Willa Fulmer and Corinne Riley, all Democrats, each won special elections between 1938 and 1963 to fill vacancies created by the deaths of their congressmen husbands. It didn't last.

In a state where women lead the way to the voting booth, Laura Wolliver, associate dean of women's studies at USC, said she is surprised there is not more "agitation" to effect greater female representation in both elected and appointive offices.

Wolliver said Tenenbaum got "great numbers" in her 2004 U.S. Senate bid against Sen. Jim DeMint, but was hurt by President Bush at the top of the ticket.

South Carolina "still has a line to overcome" as it pertains to putting women in leadership positions, said Liz Smith, also a Furman University political scientist.

Putting a woman in charge of education is different from putting a woman in charge of the country, Smith said, but "I don't think anyone thinks (Hillary Clinton) is incapable of leading the country," whether it be the U.S. military or any other part of government, she said.

Smith said one of the primary reasons more women do not hold elective office in the Palmetto State is because they hesitate to run.

In that regard, Hillary Clinton is stepping into a void of sorts that may be ripe for the picking, she said.

THE OBAMA FACTOR

The Democratic primary has so far been a race mainly between Clinton and U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, a black male whose candidacy, like Clinton's, is making history.

Obama, who represents Illinois, is the most well-funded black candidate to seek the presidency. He has mainstream appeal and a compelling personal story that transcends race.

Both Clinton and Obama are heavily romancing the women's vote, while each also seeks to dominate the black vote.

"Hillary Clinton strongly depends upon splitting the African-American vote with Obama and winning the women's vote," said Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Governmental Studies.

Sabato likened Clinton's 2008 outreach for the women's vote to the lyrics of Helen Reddy's 1972 hit song "I am Woman, Hear Me Roar."

Key for Clinton is black women voters, who Vinson said might identify more with race than gender.

"The challenge in South Carolina for (Clinton) rates more to race than gender," Sabato said. "She's got to pull the gender card on African-American women to pull them away from Obama."

While African-Americans, out of sheer identity politics, probably would like to support Obama, Clinton is forcing them to make a choice, he said. "If she gets the African-American female vote, it's lights out for Obama."

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