



## Campaign Trail

# Rough Economy Leaves Women Looking Out for No. 1

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*In the wake of Barack Obama's nomination victory, female voters are expected to turn attention to the economy and scrutinize each party's position on pay equity, home mortgage foreclosures and extending jobless benefits.*

(WOMENSENEWS)--Following Sen. Barack Obama's June 3 victory in the Democratic delegate race, Sen. Hillary Clinton's supporters--some of whom are vowing to defect to Republican Sen. John McCain after a bitter primary battle--are being thrust into the election-year spotlight.

"If these women stay home or vote for McCain in Ohio, Pennsylvania and other hotly contested states, Democrats' chances of winning the White House will decrease," said Susan J. Carroll, distinguished scholar of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.



Celinda Lake

And as these and other women come under more media scrutiny they are expected to intensify public attention to the economic programs that each party offers to address their immediate financial concerns: from pay equity to stemming foreclosures to extending jobless benefits.

Just ask Valerie Reeder, a 52-year-old single mother, who recently lost her job as a loan clerk at a Chester, Penn., bank.

In previous presidential races, the high school graduate said she was too busy working and raising her daughter to pay attention. But this year, she is keeping close watch.

"For me, the economy is the No. 1 issue," said Reeder. "The candidate who comes up with the best plan to help women who are struggling financially will get my vote. Jobs are scarce; I won't be able to send my daughter to college this fall if I don't land a new position soon. I have no health insurance and may have to spend my savings for retirement on food and other basic necessities."

With unemployment benefits and paychecks stretched thin by a rising global oil market that has doubled gasoline prices from a year ago, Washington Post surveys show that over half of primary voters said the economy was the most critical problem facing the nation.

Pollster Celinda Lake says women are at the forefront of that trend.

## Economy Rising in Priority

"Women turned against the war before men and began concentrating on the economy early this year when they noticed that the cost of everyday items like food and gasoline were going up," said Lake, president of Washington-based Lake Research Partners. "If unemployment increases this summer, economic issues will become even more important in the November election."

Heidi Hartmann, president of the Washington-based Institute for Women's Policy Research, gives the Democrats an edge with women who cite the economy as the No. 1 issue. "The party in power gets blamed for the loss of jobs and higher prices," she said. "Jobs didn't come back after the 2001 recession, deregulation produced the sub-prime mortgage crisis and CEOs are paid millions while the wages of workers are squeezed."

Obama has steadily reminded voters that he was raised by a single mother who at one point relied on food stamps.

Obama has also appealed to female voters by emphasizing support for pay equity. Unlike McCain, Obama voted for a Senate bill to make it easier for women to sue employers for sexual discrimination in wages.

Financially pressed women, however, can't be taken for granted by the Democrats because studies show those who have experienced economic hardship are less likely to vote.

In April, the U.S. economy lost 20,000 jobs, the fourth consecutive month for a decline of 260,000 jobs since December. The unemployment rate of women was 4.3 percent compared to 4.6 percent for men.

### Retail Layoffs Loom

"Women fared better than men because they held fewer jobs in sectors that had widespread losses like manufacturing and construction," said John Dodds, director of the Philadelphia Unemployment Project, which fights for fair wages and jobs. "But this could change. Retailing, a major source of jobs for women, is starting to lay off workers or requiring them to work part time."

Part-time workers--70 percent female--are often hit harder by economic downturns and their savings' cushions are thinner. The special overnight and weekend shifts they take on when business is good get cut. Often companies will allocate their work to skeletal full-time staffs.

Women who work in low-wage industries such as retailing and food service are often left destitute after exhausting their 26 weeks of unemployment insurance.

The New York-based National Employment Law Project predicts that 1.7 million U.S. workers will exhaust state unemployment benefits in the coming months, totaling 3 million in 2008. Women represent 43 percent of the long-term unemployed, workers who have been seeking jobs for more than six months.

Obama has called upon Congress to extend benefits for laid-off workers who have exhausted their unemployment compensation. "If we can extend a hand to a bank on Wall Street, we can extend a hand to Americans who are struggling," he said.

McCain has called for the 73-year-old unemployment insurance system to be scrapped and replaced with personal accounts. Under this system, workers would tap the accounts when unemployed and pocket the rest when they retire.

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## Homeowners Falling Behind

Meanwhile, as monthly payments on adjustable and sub-prime mortgages have jumped, more homeowners fall behind. The foreclosure rate was up 64 percent in April from a year ago and over 1 million foreclosures are forecast by the end of 2008.

The Consumer Federation of America in Washington says women were 32 percent more likely to receive subprime loans than men, leaving them more exposed to foreclosure pressures.

The candidates' positions on handling foreclosures will be an important factor in attracting Clinton's supporters in states like Michigan, California and Nevada, where foreclosure rates have soared.

McCain initially warned against vigorous action to solve the deepening mortgage crisis, saying it wasn't the government's duty to bail out "irresponsible" borrowers. But in recent weeks, he has called for government to help qualified homeowners refinance subprime mortgages.

Obama has supported creation of a federal program to make it easier to convert subprime loans to fixed-rate, 30-year-loans as well as a \$10 billion fund to help people avoid foreclosure.

Roxann Lucas, a safety inspector at Chicago's O'Hare Airport who commutes 70 miles a day from her home in Crown Point, Ind., is among those blaming the party in power for her own tighter purse strings.

"I already work two and a half weeks each month just to pay my gasoline and mortgage; I don't know what I will do if prices continue to rise," she said. "The economic policies of the Bush administration have been a disaster for hard-working women like me. That's why I voted for Sen. Barack Obama in the Indiana primary and will vote for the Democratic nominee in November as well."

The national grassroots Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, based in New Orleans, has so far registered more than 77,000 voters across the country as part of a campaign to encourage 2.8 million low-income people to vote.

"I tell every unemployed worker, single parent and woman struggling to hold on to her home that the best thing they can do to ensure that their economic concerns are addressed is to vote," said Kate Weathersby, a site coordinator for ACORN's office in Crown Point, Ind.

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Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at [editors@womensenews.org](mailto:editors@womensenews.org).

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