

CAMPAIGN 2008

Opportunity for McCain among women voters?

End of Clinton campaign could leave key group up for grabs

By Jill Zuckman

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WASHINGTON — Angling for the backing of women voters, the Obama campaign has created a wide array of support groups: Prime Time Women for Obama, Boomer Women for Obama, Middle-Aged Women for Obama, Women over 50 for Obama and even Obama Mamas.

But after wrapping up the Democratic nomination in a long and bruising battle against a popular female politician, Sen. [Barack Obama](#) will begin his general election push trying to attract women voters who feel a keen sense of disappointment that Sen. Hillary Clinton will not become the first female president next year.

Those women may be open to hearing what Sen. John McCain has to say, creating an opening for him to make inroads with a group of voters who traditionally lean Democratic.

"To the extent that McCain can make Obama look like a big risk—make them feel a little leery about the change he might bring about—he might be successful in attracting them," said Susan Carroll, senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "He does have that independent reputation and that reputation of thinking for himself and not necessarily going along with the Republican Party line, which I think a lot of people find appealing."

McCain advisers recognize that his chances with women will depend largely on how the Democratic fight ends.

"It's changing every hour—how [Barack Obama](#) reacts to Hillary Clinton this afternoon will drive how many Hillary Clinton voters see [Barack Obama](#) tomorrow. And it all has some bearing on our race," said Rick Davis, McCain's campaign manager. "If they're open to a dialogue with John McCain — well, heck, when was the last time a Republican candidate running for president was having a dialogue with women Democrats?"

It's far from certain that will be happening this time, either. With his macho image as a former Navy fighter pilot and POW, as well as his strong support for the war in Iraq, McCain is not the most likely figure to pull in women's votes. Obama, on the other hand, has kept his focus on the domestic issues squeezing women's wallets. Add to that McCain's opposition to abortion rights while Obama supports such rights — a key issue for Democratic women.

A slide for Obama



But according to a new poll from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Obama's image among white women has declined dramatically as he has clashed with Clinton. Just 43 percent of them hold a positive opinion of Obama, compared with 56 percent in late February.

Women are a hot commodity for politicians because they make up more than half the electorate nationally, and in some states as much as 55 percent.

Republicans tend to do better with men than women voters, and GOP strategists say their candidates generally need to pull in support from about 45 percent of women to win a national race. In 2000, George W. Bush won the support of 43 percent of women and lost the popular vote, though he won the election; in 2004, he won re-election with votes from 49 percent of women.

"If you're a Democrat, you have to win among women in order to be able to win a national election," said Mark Mellman, a Democratic pollster.

Political analysts focused on women in 2000 as "soccer moms" concerned with domestic issues. In 2004, campaigns had moved on to "security moms" nervous about terrorists breaching the nation's borders. This year, the candidates are still eyeing women, particularly mothers worried about filling up the sport-utility vehicle and paying for groceries.

'It's still the economy'

"It's still the economy, stupid," said Donna Brazile, who was Al Gore's campaign manager in 2000, repeating Bill Clinton's famous slogan from his first run for president.

It's no accident that McCain has called repeatedly for a holiday from the federal gas tax. "When we look at the numbers, women love the gas tax [holiday]," Davis said. "They are the ones who fill up the minivans and the SUVs. They are much more price-sensitive to gas prices and the cost of food."

Advisers to Obama believe that he can win women angry over Clinton's loss by emphasizing traditional Democratic issues and contrasting Obama's positions with McCain's.

"Even though this is a bitter disappointment for many of Sen. Clinton's passionate supporters, I know these women," said Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.), a key adviser to Obama. "I have a great deal of confidence that in the privacy of that voting booth, they would not vote for a man who would set women back in this country."

Obama officials have brought in a new face as campaign spokeswoman: Linda Douglass, a veteran network news correspondent who says she can identify with the concerns and frustrations of the women Obama hopes to win over.

"I'm clearly of the generation that is the most important generation for both of them to try to reach," Douglass said. "I am the classic Boomer woman who started out seeking a job out of college where I assumed I would have to be a secretary no matter what I wanted to do."

Whit Ayres, a Republican pollster, insisted that showing sensitivity to Clinton's supporters may not be enough for Obama.

"There are going to be some real disgruntled women who feel like [Barack Obama](#) took what should have been Hillary Clinton's because he wasn't willing to be patient," Ayres said. "John McCain is a very attractive alternative to people who are upset. He's not a threatening Republican; he's not a right-wing Republican."

Still, officials with the McCain campaign acknowledge that they need to do more to connect with women.

Judy Black, co-chair of Women for McCain, said she hopes to create a Women for McCain group in every state. When the McCain campaign launched its Web site, the first two groups targeted for outreach were women and veterans. "The Republican Party has had a gender gap for a while with women, and we realize we have to give

them as many avenues to get involved in the campaign as we can," Black said.

But McCaskill said when women learn more about McCain's opposition to raising the minimum wage and requiring equal pay for women, their feelings would harden. "He's a great war hero, but certainly not the president that's going to lift the issues that most women are concerned about," she said.

Most voters, said Mellman, the Democratic pollster, are looking for a candidate who can forge an emotional connection with them, and that has not been McCain's strong suit. "It's harder for any man to do," Mellman said, "but particularly for someone like McCain to have women say, 'Here's a guy who gets my unique situation.' "

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