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## CAMPAIGN '08

### Women voters lining up behind Obama

McCain hopes to lure Clinton loyalists. But polls show they are staying Democratic.

By Michael Finnegan

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Marilyn Authenreith, a mother of two in North Carolina, felt strongly about supporting Hillary Rodham Clinton in the Democratic presidential primary.

But once the former first lady quit the race, Authenreith switched allegiance to Barack Obama, mainly because she thinks that he -- unlike Republican John McCain -- will push for universal healthcare.

"I can't understand the thinking of how someone would jump from Hillary to McCain," she said. "It doesn't make any sense."

Now that the Democratic marathon is over, Clinton supporters like Authenreith are siding heavily with Obama over McCain, polls show. And Obama has taken a wide lead among female voters, belying months of political chatter and polls of primary voters suggesting that disappointment over Clinton's defeat might block the Illinois senator from enjoying his party's historic edge among women.

The rancor peaked two weeks ago with televised images of furious Clinton loyalists protesting a Democratic Party meeting in Washington to settle a dispute over Florida and Michigan delegates.

"There are women still struggling with a real sense of grief that Hillary is not the nominee," said Maren Hesla, who runs campaign programs for EMILY's List, a group that promotes female candidates who support abortion rights. But that sense "will grow smaller with every day that passes from the nomination battles."

Still, McCain hopes to capitalize on the disillusionment of women who voted for Clinton. The Arizona senator has appeared recently on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" and "The View," TV talk shows with many female viewers.

A top McCain advisor, former Hewlett-Packard Co. Chief Executive Carly Fiorina, met last week with dozens of Clinton loyalists in Ohio. On Saturday, she joined McCain in a "virtual town hall" with other Clinton supporters.

"I admire and respect her," McCain said of Clinton.

Aides suggested that McCain's support for a gas tax holiday, a hawkish foreign policy and steps against climate change would appeal to many women.

But in a year that strongly favors Democrats, McCain faces an uphill battle to cut into Obama's advantage among women, who made up more than half of the voters in recent presidential elections.

"Women are voting for Obama because they dislike [President] Bush, they dislike McCain, they dislike the war, and they're upset about the economy, and those facts override any concerns about the Clinton-Obama primaries," Democratic pollster Mark Mellman said.

During the final weeks of the Democratic race, Obama took pains to praise Clinton almost daily and to avoid any appearance that he was trying to force her to drop out.

In the days since Clinton abandoned the race and endorsed him, the political arm of Planned Parenthood and other women's groups have rallied behind Obama and joined forces to attack McCain. Among other things, they have highlighted McCain's opposition to abortion rights. The Republican's moderate image, they say, has misled many women into thinking he supports abortion rights.

"It's astonishing the extent to which that's just assumed about him," said Hesla.

For a generation, women have favored Democrats, and men have leaned Republican. In 2000, Al Gore won 55% of the female vote; Bush offset that with 54% of the male vote.

In his run for reelection, Bush fared better among women, thanks partly to his emphasis on terrorism in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks. Although he held a 7-percentage-point lead among men over Democratic rival John F. Kerry, Bush finished just 1 percentage point behind among women.

But terrorism is no longer the dominant issue. Bush administration shortcomings in the Iraq war and Hurricane Katrina have damaged the Republican Party. Four out of five voters see the country as headed in the wrong direction.

And now, the nation's economic slowdown is the top concern for voters, and they see Democrats as better suited than Republicans to lead a turnaround.

Among those most concerned about economic troubles are white blue-collar women, a swing group targeted by both the McCain and Obama campaigns.

"Women see themselves as more economically vulnerable than men, more likely recipients of the social safety net at some point in their lives, and they see a larger role for government," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

An NBC/Wall Street Journal poll found a wide gap last week: Women favored Obama over McCain, 52% to 33%. The survey also found that voters who cast ballots for Clinton in the Democratic primaries preferred Obama over McCain, 61% to 19%.

Authenreith, a 43-year-old business owner who lives in West Jefferson, N.C., said Obama "popped out of nowhere" last year and seemed less experienced than Clinton.

But Authenreith, who was a respondent to a Times poll in February, said there was no question now that Obama would better handle the economy and, she hoped, overhaul the healthcare system.

"I know if I vote a Republican in," she said, "it will never happen."

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