



October 22, 2008

Election 2008

McCain Woos Clinton's Female Supporters

by Nancy Solomon

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A woman holds a sign as GOP Sen. John McCain speaks at a campaign rally at Colonial Volunteer Fire House on Feb. 4, 2008, in Hamilton, N.J. Getty Images

All Things Considered, June 17, 2008 · Republican John McCain has wasted no time in making direct appeals to former supporters of Hillary Clinton — particularly women.

Making campaign stops in New York and New Jersey, the Arizona senator has offered a message that's part admiration for the New York senator and part tough talk on terrorism.

During a recent Internet chat, McCain also spoke about his respect for his former rival. "Every place I go, I'm told Sen. Clinton inspired millions of young women in this country — and not necessarily young women — inspired a whole generation of young Americans in this country. So I admire and respect her," he said.

McCain's tough talk about the Middle East and his status as a war hero also give him standing with the local suburban women, who after Sept. 11 became known as "security moms," given their communities' close proximity to Manhattan's World Trade Center.

Thirty-nine-year-old Maxine Schwartz is one such woman from Westfield, N.J., who voted for Clinton and is now supporting McCain. "Israel's security is an issue is for me," she said. "Either president will secure the United States, but as far as being an ally and friend of Israel, I think McCain is the right person, not Obama."

Security or Soccer?



Nicholas Kamm

A woman cries as New York Sen. Hillary Clinton announces her plans to drop out of the Democratic race at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., on June 7, 2008. AFP/Getty Images

McCain is the first Republican presidential candidate to open a campaign office in New Jersey in the past 16 years. And his appeal among suburban women may hinge on whether the women consider themselves security or soccer moms. The security moms fear terrorism, whereas the soccer moms worry more about gassing up their minivans and funding education.

At a weekend soccer game in South Orange, N.J., Clinton supporters were in great supply. Some expressed doubts about Obama, but none said they would vote for McCain.

Kim Hughes of Cranford is a 41-year-old mother of two, as well as a teacher. "I would have liked to have seen Clinton make it further than she did. However, if she isn't there, I'll still stick with the party," she said.

The women at this game talked about the Iraq war, the economy and access to health care as their primary issues of concern.

Colleen D'Allesandro, 40, of Maplewood, said that until now, she has always voted Republican. She is now unhappy with the war and global warming but continues to support some Republican positions, such as opposition to abortion.

"This is the first time in my life I'm actually having difficulty with the decision," she said. "This is the first election that I don't know months ahead of time what I'm going to be doing."

A Quinnipiac University poll released last week found Obama leading McCain 45 percent to 39 percent, with all of that lead coming from women.

Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute on Politics at Rutgers University, says if McCain is to reach female voters, he will have to talk more about economic issues facing families.

"He's got a way to go in fine-tuning the way he talks about pocketbook issues," Mandel said. "It hits them in the grocery store. It hits them at the dinner table. It hits them driving their car. It hits in their daily lives and certainly their health care, and he's not associated with those issues."

Mandel says she does not expect to see Clinton supporters who are Democrats leave the party in any significant numbers.

McCain appears to understand that his success with independent women is likely to depend on whether security or "bread and butter" is of utmost concern.

Taking a page right out of the 2004 Bush playbook, McCain's aides attacked Obama on Tuesday for being weak on terrorism. They said Obama as a Democrat has a "Sept. 10 mind-set."

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