

Many Clinton backers reluctant to switch

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Conventional wisdom held that women like Norma Woods of Eastpointe would find it in their dyed-in-the-wool Democrat, blue-bleeding hearts to back their party's presidential nominee, whoever it was.

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So far, though, the conventional wisdom has been wrong about Woods -- a grandmother who declines to reveal her age but is proud to admit she tools around to car shows in a paradise blue '67 Chrysler 300 -- and a lot of other Hillary Clinton supporters, many of them women, who remain uncertain whether they can vote for Barack Obama.

"I just might go to the polls and vote everything else and forget president," Woods said last week.

Today, the Democrats at the national convention in Denver will make an effort to reach out to those women, topped off with a prime-time speech by Clinton -- and there's a lot riding on it.

Women outvote men nationally and can easily turn an election, and there is evidence lately that many Clinton supporters are refusing to come on board with Obama.

A USA Today/Gallup poll taken late last week showed just 47% of Clinton supporters solidly back Obama, for instance. The overall sample was 57% women. And a CNN poll released this week showed that although the race between Obama and presumptive Republican nominee John McCain is a tie, 27% of former Clinton supporters are now backing McCain -- up from 16% in June.

In the Detroit Free Press/Local 4 Michigan Poll conducted last week, women favored Obama 47%-36% -- but 15% were undecided, compared with less than 9% of men.

You don't have to tell McCain the potential -- he's already airing TV ads using Clinton's attacks against Obama during the primaries to try to undermine him and her speech tonight. He has even found a former Clinton supporter to appear in an ad, in which she says, "A lot of Democrats will vote McCain. It's OK, really!"

Obama's strategy

On Monday, Obama campaign manager David Plouffe met with reporters from newspapers in battleground states like Michigan to explain how the number of women supporting Obama dwarfs their support for McCain nationwide, as many polls show, and how that will be a central part of the race. The Democrats will criticize McCain as a staunch opponent of abortion and accuse him of being unwilling to support laws to require equal pay for women.

Both sides know the race to win over women -- especially the undecided ones -- will be crucial.

How important might it be?

In 2004, in the 12 states decided by 5 percentage points or less, President George W. Bush won every one where he kept Democrat John Kerry's winning margin among women at 5 percentage points or less. Kerry won the others, including Michigan, where he won by 7 percentage points among women, according to exit polls.

That augurs well for Obama, but as the race has tightened, so has the contest for support among women, even though he remains ahead.

Many factors could explain the tightening gap. A bit of Obama fatigue could be involved.

But part of the trend likely is attributable to Clinton's appeal.

"The Clinton supporters, the die-hard Clinton supporters, haven't moved off the dime since June," said Dianne Bystrom, director of the Catt Center for Women and Politics at Iowa State University. "To me, those women are locked in."

That makes Clinton's speech tonight even more important.

"I'm going to listen to every word," Woods said.

Trends among women

As a rule, women are more likely to vote for Democrats -- just as men are more likely to vote for Republicans.

Women often list the same top issues as men, polls show, but they tend to feel more strongly about some issues -- like health care or the economy. And antiwar feelings tend to be stronger among women.

Men tend to want government to mind its own business; women tend to want government to provide a safety net.

"These are all things that come up in their lives," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "They see the value of a larger role for government."

And those feelings can turn around an election: For instance, four years ago, Bush kept Kerry's lead among women to 3 percentage points -- and Kerry lost. In 2000, Democrat Al Gore held an 11-point advantage among women, which helped him narrowly win the popular vote but not the Electoral College vote. In 1996, Bill Clinton had a 16-point advantage among women and won re-election.

Take the analysis a step farther, though, and you find that white women have tended to back Republican candidates -- but by a small enough margin generally that the Democrats' overwhelming support among nonwhite women has more than made up the difference.

White women vote at a higher rate than any race-gender demographic and African-American women are second, Bystrom said, voting at a higher clip than white men.

African-American vote also key

Obama's support among black people could make a huge difference then, if turnout is higher than usual and his support -- now in the high 80% or 90% range -- holds. Obama could even make history.

David Bositis, an analyst with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C., said Obama could break Lyndon Johnson's record of getting 94% of the black vote in 1964.

The biggest sector of the black vote comes from women -- a key voting bloc in many battleground states, Michigan among them.

Ten months ago, before Obama's surge got under way with victories in Iowa and South Carolina, a CNN poll showed 68% of black women backing Clinton compared with 25% for Obama. Last week, the Free Press-Local 4 poll showed 92% of African-American Michiganders saying they would vote for Obama.

"McCain is a totally unknown quantity to African Americans," Bositis said. "I think that Obama certainly can get 95, maybe 96% of that vote. There won't be any situations like last time, where there are states like Ohio where Bush did fairly well among African Americans, about 16%."

Pastor's hope: Informed voters

Obama also still must deal with some black women who feel that he has spent so much time keeping race out of his campaign that he may keep out their issues as well. They say the convention offers a chance to change that perception.

The Rev. Georgia Hill, associate pastor of Plymouth United Church of Christ in Detroit, said she knows many black women who thought this should have been Clinton's year, but she thinks they'll come around for Obama if they haven't already.

"My hope is that people vote in informed ways and that they learn about different positions these senators are putting forward," she said.

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