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## Women voters could be key to presidential race

But for most, economic issues are more important than candidates' gender.

By [Alexandra Marks](#) | Staff writer / September 21, 2008 edition

Reporter Alexandra Marks discusses why the female vote may be the deciding factor this November.



Charlie Neibergall/AP/FILE

Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke at the Democratic convention in Denver in August.

Scranton, PA.

The economic crisis has quelled the nation's Sarah Palin-mania, at least for now.

While polls show the Alaska governor has effectively energized the Republican base, they also indicate that her nomination has had little impact on key independent voters. At the same time, concerns about her inexperience are rising - especially among women.

That was particularly evident in a series of recent interviews with women in Pennsylvania - a swing state where Barack Obama and John McCain are locked in a dead heat.

But this still is very much a women's election. Both candidates are vying for the women's vote, which could be pivotal in this hotly contested election. And then there are the historic markers: This is the first time the Republicans have put a woman on their presidential ticket. It's also the first time in 25 years that a woman of either party has been on a major party ticket. And then, of course, there is Hillary Clinton's formidable rise as the first major woman contender for either party's nomination.

Political scientists say the impact of both women's candidacies has made this a "transformative year" because for the first time it's given the American electorate concrete examples of individual women leaders at the highest levels of politics that are ideologically and socially diverse.

"This period in 2008 has finally smashed the generic stereotype of one woman leader is all women leaders," says Ruth Mandel, the director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University and a cofounder of the Center for American Women in Politics.

"It used to be that if I said, 'A woman in politics,' it conjured up a generic image," says Ms. Mandel. "Now people might think of Hillary Clinton or Nancy Pelosi or Sarah Palin or Condoleezza Rice. These are very different women with very different ideologies." [Editor's note: *The original version misspelled Dr. Rice's first name.*]

Since the early 1980s women have turned out to vote in larger numbers than men. They've also generally tended to lean more Democratic. In 2000, Al Gore held a five point lead among women over George W. Bush. In 2004, it was a narrower three point lead for John Kerry over the incumbent.

Obama had held a fairly consistent lead over McCain among women during the summer. But the Republicans got a bounce after John McCain chose Governor Palin to be his running mate. In some polls the two camps were even tied among women. But that bounce appears to have disappeared. In current tracking polls, women are now leaning toward Obama/Biden over McCain/Palin by as much as eight points.

But the race is still neck and neck among white women. Married white women are leaning toward the Republican ticket. And working class white women – the “Wal-mart Moms” of this election – are solidly behind the McCain/Palin team.

“The cause of the energized female base was this feeling that they could identify with Sarah Palin as a figure who didn't appear like other politicians. She made them feel like ‘she is one of us,’” says Kay Hymowitz, a senior scholar at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank in New York City.

Ms. Hymowitz has identified the cultural undercurrent Palin tapped as “red state feminism,” a whole segment of strong, working women who don't identify with traditional feminism.

In Scranton, Joanne Charick fits the bill. She rides around town in her dark sedan with a bright poster on the side that advertises her latest venture: “The Successful Women's Club.” Ms Charick first came to Scranton in the 1960s and worked for an employment agency.

“I put the first women to work in places they weren't allowed and fought with every man,” she says.

Charick has also started her own magazine and modeling agency. But she definitely does not think of herself as a feminist. She's a Republican and a great fan of the governor of Alaska.

“I think Sarah Palin is going to give everybody a run for his money, and McCain's a good man,” she says. “I don't agree with everything, I am pro-choice, but I like other things she's done.”

But it was just as easy in Scranton to find Republican women who fit the red state feminism mold, but were offended by McCain's choice of Palin, primarily because of her lack of experience.

“I was kind of insulted at first. I think McCain chose her to be a female puppet to swing people his way,” says Kathy Labori, a marketing executive who was heading for lunch at the Mall at Steamtown in downtown Scranton. “I'm a registered Republican but I think we need a change. I think I'm voting Democratic.”

At the mall, it was also easy to find women of every economic status for whom the selection of Palin had not had any effect at all.

“I think Obama's really going to make a change for us poor people. I work hard and now I have to help my children maintain their family,” says Helen Gaskin, who had her two grandchildren in tow. “Obama is going to make a difference with education, with healthcare. I'm just looking out for my grandchildren.”

There were also plenty of former Hillary Clinton supporters. Most said they were now comfortable voting for Obama.

“I started out Hillary, then I went to see Obama when he was in the area and he definitely won me over,” says Terry Cummings, of Dunmore, PA, who now calls herself an “Obama Mama.” “I just feel Palin doesn't have the qualifications, and I think she was picked because she's a woman and that isn't right. If she had the qualifications, like Hillary, that would have been different.”

Some former Hillary supporters did say they still wanted more information before choosing a candidate.

A national, nonpartisan group called “Moms Rising” would also like clarification on where Palin stands on issues that affect working mothers including healthcare, fair pay, early learning, paid sick days, and flexible work schedules.

The group has an open letter to Palin saying that it was “dazzling” to see “a mom” as the vice presidential pick but also calling on her to make her stands on such issues clear.

“We haven't heard much talk about the issues that are pertinent to moms from the McCain-Palin ticket the way we have from Obama-Biden,” says Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, the executive director of MomsRising.org, which has more than 150,000 members. “We'd like to hear, we're still waiting.”

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## Comments

1.jefflz | 09.21.08

What we have learned so far even though the press has treated her with kid gloves is that Palin is a phony. The facts don't seem to be relevant to her. She lied about the Bridge to Nowhere, she lied about the earmarks, she lied about going to Iraq, she lied about doing business in Ireland, she lied about the so-called plane sale on eBay, she kept her pregnancy hidden for seven months, she lied about her involvement in TrooperGate. She backs Big Oil and says she fought them. The only things that seem to be true are that she thinks the War in Iraq is doing God's will, that 9/11 was