



Posted on Sun, Sep. 21, 2008

Campaigns wage intense battle for women's vote

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McClatchy Newspapers

Meet the new Obama girls.

Not the same as the old Obama girl, a scantily clad YouTube singing sensation given to watching the candidate on C-SPAN and caressing his photographs.

The new crew is an array of prominent Democratic women who plan an all-hands-on-deck effort around the country during the next six weeks. Courtesy of the Wall Street meltdown, they have a single message.

"John McCain says the fundamentals of our American economy are strong," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Wednesday. "American women know better."

Their mantra will include efforts to promote an equal-pay law for women and expanded health insurance for children, two issues that hit close to home for many women and that McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, has voted against. Protecting Social Security is another because McCain has supported private investment accounts.

Two of Obama's leading messengers in his new focus on women voters are Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill. Both were early supporters of the Illinois senator's presidential bid.

"Women often are in the front and center in some of the challenges that families are facing," Sebelius said. "They are more likely to be head of a household in single-parent family or in a job without health insurance."

But Republicans are not ceding any ground in what's become one of the most aggressive fronts in the race for the White House - the war for women.

Their biggest weapon isn't any one issue, but one woman: Sarah Palin.

"Women, like men, are supporting John McCain and Sarah Palin because they are a team of mavericks with a plan for real reform in Washington," said Amber Wilkerson, a Republican National Committee spokeswoman.

The McCain campaign thinks that the Alaska governor's working-mom persona has struck a chord with women in both parties and independents.

"The Democratic Party has historically tried to hold women hostage by talking to them only about classic women's issues: reproductive rights, using scare tactics on Roe v. Wade," said McCain adviser Carly Fiorina. "Our approach is to talk to women as the leader in their families and in the community. All issues are women's issues."

McCain, too, has some help. Several Republican women in the House are part of the campaign's "truth squad," formed to defend Palin.

The battle should be intense. Both campaigns are buying up airtime on "Oprah" and other shows with large female audiences. They're sending targeted mailings and hoping Hillary Clinton's historic run for the White House will brighten their own efforts.

"The women's vote can be decisive in this race," said Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Women account for more than half of voters and have favored Democrats in the past four presidential elections. However, Palin has energized Republicans and recent polls have been encouraging for McCain.

Some find the race to be a dead heat. Voter confidence in McCain is on the rise, and Palin has helped him with women.

A recent Newsweek poll gave McCain a 16-point lead among white women. In July, he led only by five points.

However, Walsh said that's pretty much business as usual because white women typically support the Republican candidate.

"It's the African-American women's vote that's pushed the women's vote to the Democratic side," she said. "It's such a strong Democratic vote and there's nothing to indicate that's not going to happen this time."

Indeed, evidence suggests that McCain's surge comes not from voters thought to be leaning toward Obama or disaffected Clinton supporters, but from supporters he would've gotten anyway.

A recent Diageo/Hotline poll found that fewer than two out of 10 Democrats view Palin favorably, compared with more than eight out of 10 Republicans.

Moreover, the race probably is still Obama's to lose because the basic elements remain unchanged: The incumbent Republican president is unpopular, and a majority of the public believes the country is headed in the wrong direction.

But the Obama campaign, sobered by the polls and criticized by supporters for fighting McCain with mittens, has punched up the volume. Besides his tougher talk and more negative ads, his corps of women allies has begun to fan out across the country.

Sebelius campaigned in Ohio and Indiana last weekend and in Iowa, Wisconsin and North Carolina last week. McCaskill appeared Friday in Miami with Obama and Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Fla., another prominent Obama backer.

Earlier in the week, Betsy Myers, national chairwoman of Women for Obama, held a meeting to talk to women in a Republican enclave near St. Louis. Clinton has been stumping faithfully for her former rival in battleground states.

"It's greatly exaggerated there is some secret woman's strategy," McCaskill said. "We're making a concerted effort this week to talk about the issues where there is chasm of difference between Barack Obama and John McCain."

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