

nbc6.net

When XX Marks The Ballot: Six Gender Myths

POSTED: 11:07 am EDT October 24, 2008

UPDATED: 9:43 am EDT October 27, 2008

Less than two weeks before an election marked - some would say scarred - by historic firsts for female candidates, the presidential campaigns are still convulsing over the classic question: "What do women want?"

Whether they're fretting over the neck-and-neck race for the votes of married women or striving to bolster support among still-undecided baby boomers, presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain are trying to seal the deal with the ladies, whose turnout is expected to be large - and crucial.

Despite the attention lavished on female voters during this nearly two-year campaign, persistent myths linger about how and why women vote the way they do.

It's still widely assumed that women automatically align with gender or are solely responsible for the gender gap, analysts note.

Here's a primer on the most common myths about women voters, gleaned from interviews with political scientists and pollsters and a review of past voting patterns.

Myth No. 1: Women vote as a group

The myth of a single-minded sisterhood among women voters alternately amuses and annoys political scientists, especially those who must routinely remind people that diversity abounds among more than half of the nation's population.

"Women aren't a monolithic vote," said Barbara Norrander, a political science professor at the University of Arizona.

Women make up not only more of the general population, but also more of the adult voters, totaling about 67 million in the 2004 presidential election, compared to 58 million men, according to U.S. census reports. But unlike slightly more predictable ethnic, racial or religious groups, women do not share a common geography of place, persuasion or philosophy. And they certainly don't vote in a united bloc.

"Women's political preferences, attitudes and partisan choices are heterogeneous and vary along race, ethnic and class lines," noted Karen Beckwith, a political science professor at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, and the author of a new book, "American Women and Political Participation."

Women aren't even adequately captured by popular categories that are supposed to define and unite them, noted Maryann Barakso, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

"We've had the soccer moms, the security moms," said Barakso, who neglected to mention hockey moms. "Those monikers didn't explain much then and I think it explains even less now."

Mark Blumenthal of the National Journal, who's also editor and publisher of the poll tracking site Pollster.com, agrees.

"My own sense is that elections are rarely about one type of voter, soccer moms, NASCAR dads, whatever, even though news coverage makes it seem that way," he said. "To the extent that turnout among a particular demographic is going to matter, the one that is most important is men and women under age 30 or 35."

Myth No. 2: Women vote less often

Perhaps that's why, early in the primary season, there was a spate of stories fretting about the "single, anxious female" and emphasizing a get-out-the-vote imperative aimed at pushing reluctant women, particularly young women, to the polls.

While it's true that unmarried women vote less often than married women - about 55 percent to nearly 65 percent, according to 2004 reported census figures - in the big picture, women vote more often than men.

"It's definitely true that overall women are voting more frequently than men," said Barakso, who noted that in every presidential election since 1980 and in every mid-term election since 1986, women have registered and voted in larger numbers.

Margie Omero, president of the Democratic polling firm Momentum Analysis, noted in a Pollster.com blog that although single women are less likely to vote than their married counterparts, they're much more likely to vote than unmarried men, by 55 percent to 46 percent. "The marriage gap is actually larger among men," Omero wrote.

In 2004, 8.8 million more women than men reported that they voted in the presidential election, U.S. census figures show, a number that likely could be eclipsed this year, thanks to record numbers of newly registered voters.

"It has the potential to have women determining the outcome of the election," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Groups such as the Women's Voices. Women Vote Action Fund aimed to register more than 7 million unmarried women in 24 states before Election Day.

Myth No. 3: Women favor female candidates

Of all the myths about women voters, the notion that they always support fellow females - the so-called "affinity effect" - remains the most egregious, said Kathleen Dolan, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. There's no history at the presidential level, of course, but a review of other high-profile national races between 1990 and 2000 showed that women are swayed much more by party than gender.

"Party identification is the single biggest predictor of choice among women - and men," Dolan said.

Sometimes, women appear to be favoring women candidates, but it usually turns out that they're supporting Democrats, whose ranks include 60 percent to 65 percent of all female candidates, Dolan said.

"We don't have any evidence that women cross party lines to vote for a candidate," she said.

That may be why the selection Sarah Palin as a vice-presidential nominee failed to sway women beyond a brief "bounce" just after the Republican convention, added Barakso.

"The idea that, somehow, Sarah Palin's nomination would attract Hillary Clinton supporters was completely inaccurate," she said.

Myth No. 4: The gender gap is growing

First, a review of the definition of "gender gap," that disparity between sexes that first showed up in the 1980s: The gender gap is the difference in the percentage of women and men who support a certain candidate, according to Walsh.

The gender gap was at its peak in 1996, when women favored Democrat Bill Clinton over Republican Bob Dole by a gap of a dozen points. Since then, the gender gap has averaged about 7 points, as it was in 2004, when 48 percent of women favored George W. Bush, compared to 55 percent of men.

Polls in the 2008 election seem to suggest that the gender gap is likely to remain the same or even shrink slightly, noted Beckwith, the Case Western political scientist. That difference could be significant in a close race.

Some polls have recorded gender gaps as low as zero or even 1 point, though most have been higher. In a Gallup poll released this week, 54 percent of women favored the Democratic nominee Obama, compared to 47 percent of men, a gap of 7 points.

One factor that could influence the gender gap depends on the women who actually turn out to vote. Those unmarried women who have been historically less likely to vote are far more likely to vote for Obama than for his Republican opponent McCain, 61 percent to 30 percent, according to Gallup. Among married women, the race has been nearly even with 46 percent for Obama and 48 percent for McCain.

If the single women stay home, they could cut into Obama's margin. If more married women show up, they could boost numbers for McCain. Either way, women's turnout will be crucial this year, Walsh said.

"I think it has the potential of women determining the outcome of the election," she said.

Myth No 5: Women cause the gender gap

A related belief is that women have changed their voting behavior over the years, noted Dolan, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor. In truth, the division between the sexes has been driven "by men becoming more conservative over the past 25 years," she said.

"It is men who left the Democratic party in fairly large numbers in the 1980s," she said. "In political science circles, it is men's changing behavior over the past few decades that has changed the gender gap."

If the gap narrows this year, it will also be because of the men, she added. Polls show Obama and McCain virtually tied for the male vote, while Obama's lead among women appeared considerable, about 54 percent to 39 percent.

"Sen. Obama has the predicted advantage among women, but McCain doesn't have the expected advantage among men," Dolan said.

Overall, estimates of the tightness of race have varied widely, from polls that suggest Obama has a 10-point lead to a much closer margin.

Myth No. 6: Women care only about 'women's issues'

If party trumps gender when it comes to supporting female candidates, it also tops issues, experts said.

Women may generally support issues related to education, health care, child care and the environment, and they may oppose military intervention more often than men do, but in general, men and women care about the same issues.

During the 2004 election, the top issue was the war in Iraq, followed by the economy, Barakso said. This time, it's the economy, followed by the war in Iraq.

Even a hot-button issue such as abortion isn't a reliable predictor of women's views.

"Women are as likely to be pro-choice or pro-life as men," Dolan said.

This year, candidates who convey a successful solution for a tattered economy may do well with women, who see themselves as more vulnerable to fluctuations in income and employment, noted Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women.

"If they want to sway women at this point, they really have to focus on the economy," she said.

This year, of course, the economy is everyone's issue.

Explore More:

Find out more about Science and Technology, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Special Interest Groups and Women's Issues, or try these articles:

- October 23, 2008: Will Voter Turnout Continue To Climb?

- September 10, 2008: Taking Pills? Writing Down Plan Can Help
- August 4, 2008: Should You Marry A Man With Bad Genes?
- August 1, 2008: Oblivious Texters Hurt As They Walk, Even Skate
- May 29, 2008: Primary Voting Ends Soon; Scamble Continues

Copyright 2007 by MSNBC.com. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.