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### Pander to them at your own peril

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Get a group of women together to talk about the presidential election, and one thing becomes immediately clear: There is no such thing as "the women's vote," no more than there is any such thing as a men's vote.

And there is no such thing as the easily labeled female voting blocs of the past, be they the "bra-burning feminists" of the '60s or the "soccer moms" of the '90s. If there ever was.

"There is no women's bloc," said Nancy Maurer, one of nine Sparta-area women who gathered at a private home to discuss the campaigns. "Women are evolving in the society, and there has to be a recognition that we can no longer be categorized. I don't think of women as 'soccer moms' or, now, 'hockey moms.'"

"These descriptions make me think suburban women are still being treated in a frivolous way," said Sue Kehl. "When I hear them, I think we're not being taken seriously when it comes to the issues of substance, such as the opportunities for women in the work force, the war and abortion."

"To speak about women as a group is belittling, as if there is one issue on the table to which they can pander to all of us," said Rose Gong Monier.

Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics, said the general trends in women's voting show them to be more active in the process.

"Since 1980, women vote at higher rates and in higher numbers," she said. "And there is a gender gap in that women tend to vote Democratic as a group."

Walsh said -- and the Sparta women confirmed -- that the issues women say are most important to them are the same issues in the forefront for everybody. The economy, the Iraq war, health care.

Only one woman in the group saw abortion as the defining issue, and only two saw future Supreme Court nominations as a serious issue. None saw the candidacy of Sarah Palin as a particularly defining moment for women in politics.

Even on the abortion issue, it is hard to pigeonhole "the women's vote." Some polls, like the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, find the issue is very much split. The poll, conducted in August, says "a slim majority of the public (54 percent) says abortion should be legal in all (17 percent) or most (37 percent) cases, while 41 percent say abortion should be illegal in all (15 percent) or most (26 percent) cases." The poll also says the numbers remain virtually identical when broken down by gender.

In the group of Sparta women, only Grace Shilling called abortion a defining issue. "I would never vote for anyone who is pro-choice," she said.

Some of the others said the abortion issue concerns them and wish government would withdraw from the equation.

"I think there should be more confidence in women to make these decisions, these very difficult decisions, that are right for them," said Paula Lawrence.

Perhaps the greatest concern of the women was what they viewed as a decline of values in society, as seen through the lens of a failing economy.

Greed on Wall Street. Runaway consumer spending. Government bureaucracy and waste getting in the way of effective human services. Stagnant care of the disabled and elderly. A devaluation of education. Taxes, taxes, taxes.

"What are we doing with the values?" asked Marjorie Strohsahl. "The older generations struggled mightily to improve their lives in this country. Their incomes were small, but their wants were very limited. We did not grow up as the kind of consumers Americans are today. Today everything is a necessity, but we live in a throwaway society."

"Greed is the pitfall of capitalism," Shilling said. "We have to get that greed under control."

Susanne Olsen said she was worried the economy and government bailout would jeopardize the care of the disabled.

"We've made great strides in helping the disabled, but we need some more help at the grassroots level. And now we have all these young soldiers coming back from Iraq," she said. She also said she was disappointed about how little campaign talk there has been about education.

Maurer's family recently lost their health care plan at her husband's job, and she said the costs of continuing payments were strangling family finances.

"I never really understood how hard it was until now," she said.

The rising cost of living -- food, heat, gas, stretching paychecks week to week, mortgage costs and property taxes -- were described by Walsh as "kitchen-table economic issues" and they resonate more with women than men.

"Women feel more economically vulnerable than men," she said. "They get paid less on the dollar than men do. They make up more single heads of household, and make up the majority of poor.

"We live in an anxious society."

True enough, no matter who's in the kitchen.

Is there such a thing as the women's vote? Join the discussion at [NJVoices.com](http://NJVoices.com) where Mark Di Ianno's column also appears.

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