

Women's support proves key

Female voters heavily favor Obama, helping propel historic victory

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For the first time in at least two election cycles, Mary Gockowski voted for a Democrat Tuesday, surprising herself and joining the ranks of women who switched their allegiance from 2004.

The 52-year-old Ohio preschool worker was among women in key battleground states to support Sen. Barack Obama over Sen. John McCain, helping push Obama over the top for his historic victory.

The margin was narrow but telling in hard-fought Ohio, where 54 percent of women chose Obama, compared with 53 percent in 2004, when President Bush won a narrow victory in the state over Sen. John Kerry.

In Pennsylvania, another crucial state where McCain had pinned his hopes, 60 percent of women opted for Obama, compared with 54 percent who went for Kerry in 2004. In New Hampshire, exit polls suggested that 63 percent of women supported Obama, compared with 54 percent who supported Kerry four years ago.

Women voters typically are crucial to a Democratic presidential victory, and Obama was pulling 55 percent of their votes, compared with 43 percent for McCain, according to exit polls. Obama and McCain were nearly even among male voters, who split 49-49 percent.

Although Gockowski voted twice for President Bush, she said a single crucial decision diverted her from McCain.

"I do like Barack Obama, but Sarah Palin was the nail in the coffin," she said. "I objected to (McCain's) judgment and to the idea that, 'Here, we'll give another female to the women of American because they might be dumb enough to vote for a female because of her sex.'"

She wasn't alone. Four in 10 voters overall said Palin was an important factor in deciding whom to vote for.

The Alaskan governor and vice presidential nominee figured large in a presidential campaign that featured historic firsts for female candidates. Across the country, women swamped polling stations Tuesday, drawn to a race that guaranteed change through either race or gender.

Women voters outnumbered men nationally by about 53-47 percent, according to exit polls. Women make up not only more of the general population, but also more of adult voters, historic census figures show.

'Women decided this election'

"He just captured me," said Letitia Hughes, 42, an African-American mother of three from Fishers, Ind., a battleground state.

While some 95 percent of African-American men and 96 percent of women voted for Obama, according to exit polls, white voters generally favored McCain. But 46 percent of white women voted for Obama, according to exit polls, compared with only 41 percent of white men.

"If men split evenly between Obama and McCain, then women decided this election," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Monique Craig, a 40-year-old white administrative assistant from Boca Raton, Fla., was among those who landed in the McCain camp.

"I support (McCain) because I'm afraid if Obama gets elected we're going to go to a more socialistic government," said Craig. "I don't feel like he's strong enough to run the country with any kind of terrorist attack."

Craig, who supported Mitt Romney in the primaries, said she liked McCain's choice of Palin as his running mate, but thought a different woman might have improved his chances.

"My daughters and I loved Sarah Palin, but I would have been happier with (Secretary of State) Condoleezza Rice," she said.

Analysts expected Tuesday's crowds to include record numbers of single women voters, who could help fuel a "marriage gap" that could be more significant than a gender gap, or the difference between how men and women support the same candidate. The Women's Voices. Women Vote Action Fund registered 900,000 new unmarried female voters, according to Page Gardner, the advocacy agency's president.

"There's something about being on your own as a woman in this country that is politically significant," Gardner said. "Unmarried women are at the razor's edge of the economic crisis."

The gap between Obama and McCain was closer among married women. Those with children supported Obama 53 percent to 45 percent for McCain, exit polls showed. Those without children favored McCain 54 percent to 44 percent.

70 percent of single women choose Obama

But at least 70 percent of unmarried women with and without children supported Obama, a margin of more than 2-to-1. By contrast, 53 percent of unmarried women opted for Kerry in 2004, said Anna Greenberg, a Democratic pollster and vice president of the research firm Greenberg, Quinlan Rosner.

"I just really wanted change," said Jen Dudley, 22, who is unmarried and works as an accountant at a small business in Richmond, Va. She waited an hour and 40 minutes to cast her vote in the battleground state.

What does she hope an Obama victory will change?

"Everything, I hope," said Dudley.

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