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A Little Gab, a Little Politics

'The View' Becomes a Must-Stop For Politicians Trying to Reach Women, And Willing to Dish on Iran and Love
By AMY CHOZICK

"Vice President Joe Biden is here, and he looks very handsome."

With those words, Barbara Walters opened up a recent segment of "The View," a daily TV gabfest known for gossip and girl talk. But on this day, Ms. Walters asked Mr. Biden about UN sanctions against Iran. An audience member shouted a question about middle-class tax cuts. And then another asked co-host Sherri Shepherd where she buys her plus-size bras.

The Biden-and-bras mix offers one answer to a vast question hanging over marketers and politicians trying to connect with women: What exactly do women want today? They are an increasingly crucial constituency who make most household buying decisions and are more likely than men to vote in midterm elections, but striking the right tone is a delicate balancing act. At "The View," producers are drawing in millions of women by veering from serious to sassy, and back. The show is tilting away from simple celebrity plugs and devoting more time to weighty political topics.

Women are looking for "a filter on the news of the day," says Brian Frons, president of daytime at Disney-ABC Television Group. "Every host is a mother. They filter the conversation through the family."

ABC's daytime talk show is planning more frequent political guests in the run-up to the 2010 midterm elections. Women, mostly middle-class in their 40s and 50s, are a voting bloc expected to disproportionately participate in 2010. According to Nielsen, 79% of "The View" audience is female with a median age of 59.

The show is in talks with senior White House adviser Valerie Jarrett to appear. Nikki Haley, an Indian-American Republican running for governor of South Carolina, plans to go on "The View," depending on the outcome of a June 22 runoff. Jimmy Carter and Condoleezza Rice are booked for next season. Political daughter Bristol Palin will co-host the show in July. In February, Indiana Sen. Evan Bayh chose "The View" as one of his first stops after he announced he would not seek reelection.

Designed as a live, televised version of what actual female friends might be dishing about in their own homes, "The View" typically features Ms. Walters and a panel of female hosts who sit around a table and chat as they sip coffee. The show is divided into the "Hot Topics" section when the women debate current events, often speaking over each other. They then interview a guest or two, either at the table or on a casual yellow couch where the guest is expected to plop down surrounded by the gaggle of hosts. A musical guest and an audience giveaway like Amazon Kindles or portable TVs often close the live show. There is a two-year wait list for tickets to sit in the audience at the show's New York studio and shout out questions during commercial breaks.

"The View" can make for some unlikely couplings. When former Mass. Gov. Mitt Romney's black SUV with tinted windows pulled up for his appearance on the show in March, young women wielding autograph books swarmed the car. After a brief moment thinking the reception was for him, Mr. Romney realized the crowd had mistaken his entourage for the show's other guest: "Twilight" star Robert Pattinson, says Eric Fehrnstrom, a political adviser to Mr. Romney.

Mr. Fehrnstrom sought out an appearance on "The View" for Mr. Romney as part of a strategy to push Mr. Romney's new book. The "ladies have a strong appetite for current events...[and] understand it's not just the issues making the news but the personalities," he says of the show's hosts. "The View" appearance generated more online buzz than any of the other shows Mr. Romney did including NBC's "Today" and Fox News's "Hannity," he says.

Connecticut Republican Linda McMahon, a candidate for the U.S. senate and former World Wrestling Entertainment chief executive, went on "The View" in January, just after Julie Andrews stopped by to talk about her new movie "Tooth Fairy." The show gives women viewers "a more complete understanding of who a candidate is" than a traditional news show, says Ed Patru, Ms. McMahon's communications director.

"The View" has been on air since 1997, designed in part by long-time ABC news anchor Barbara Walters as a showcase for celebrity interviews more typical of daytime television. Its cast of hosts has changed over the years, and ratings fluctuated. (Ms. Walters is currently on leave after a medical procedure. Guest hosts are filling in.)

Its ratings soared during the 2008 election when "The View" hosts fell into heated partisan debates. The fights between hosts Ms. Walters, Whoopi Goldberg, Elisabeth Hasselbeck, Ms. Shepherd and Joy Behar, sparked water-cooler banter and popularized a "Saturday Night Live" parody with male comedians impersonating two of the hosts.

The political wrangling helped set a ratings record, with 3.9 million viewers in 2008, according to Nielsen. Ratings remain up with 3.8 million viewers watching the live show each day in the 2009 to 2010 season, compared to 2.8 million a decade ago. NBC's "Meet the Press," the Sunday leader, attracts about 3.7 million viewers each week. The most dominant daytime talk show, "The Oprah Winfrey Show" has about 6.7 million.

Although women voted for President Barack Obama 56% to 43% for Sen. John McCain in the 2008 election, according to exit polls, older women voters, especially those who are middle- and working-class, tend to be swing voters, political analysts say.

Older women vote in midterm elections in much larger numbers than their male counterparts and younger voters who are less inclined to follow politics in a non-presidential election year, says Susan Carroll, a senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. They rarely watch the Sunday morning news shows.

"Because [politics] is a vital part of the conversation at home, it's a vital conversation on the show," says Anne Sweeney, president of Disney-ABC Television Group, which classifies the show as entertainment.

"The View" executive producer and main guest booker Bill Geddie, who has worked with Ms. Walters for more than two decades, often taps the well-connected Ms. Walters to make inroads with elected officials.

The show landed Mr. Biden, the highest-ranking sitting official to go on the show, after Ms. Walters ran into his daughter at an event in Washington. Ms. Walters says the vice president called her the next day and the two spoke about setting up a date.

On the April show, Mr. Biden talked about how he proposed to his wife Jill five times before she said yes. That charmed Ms. Hasselbeck, the show's outspoken conservative host. "We may not sit on the same side of the political aisle but it's good to share the sofa," she told the vice president.

Another host, Ms. Behar, swooned over the "sexy" and "emotionally unavailable" secret service agents that accompanied Mr. Biden. Of getting frisked she told the audience "I haven't had that much foreplay in years."

Previous efforts to steer "The View" into politics have backfired. Rosie O'Donnell had a tumultuous nine-month tenure that culminated in a heated televised squabble with Ms. Hasselbeck, the show's Republican host, over the Iraq War. (ABC says Ms. O'Donnell had decided to cut short her contract prior to the dispute with Ms. Hasselbeck.)

Ms. Walters says daytime viewers still don't want to be hit over the head with politics. "There are times when I have to say we are not a Sunday morning show," Ms. Walters said, after one show in her dressing room festooned with pink, floral wallpaper and silk flowers. "We still have to talk about 'Dancing with the Stars.'"

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