

Democrats lose share of women to GOP

By Mimi Hall • USA TODAY • October 21, 2010

NEW YORK — Michelle Obama's campaign pitch is laced with references to hardworking women.

There's the mom who has "just lost her job and worries about how her family will pay the bills." There's "Barack's (late) grandmother" who was passed over for promotions at work. There are the two "brilliant, accomplished women" her husband appointed to the [Supreme Court](#).

The first lady's effort to motivate female voters is the same wherever she goes: at a rally in Ohio, a lunch in Colorado or here in a Broadway theater packed with Manhattan Democrats, all dressed to the nines, who have turned out for a fundraiser emceed by Sex and the City actress Sarah Jessica Parker and rocked by singer Patti LaBelle.

"Rest yourselves," Obama tells the mostly female audience, urging them to take their seats. "We have a lot of work to do."

Do they ever.

Female voters, once a [reliable](#) force for Democrats, are roughly split this fall between the Democrats and Republicans running for Congress and governor. Recent Gallup polling, assuming a traditional turnout for a midterm election, finds that Republicans are favored by female likely voters, 49% to 46%.

Overall, men generally tilt toward GOP candidates, so a significant narrowing of the gender gap among women is contributing to Democrats' struggles in an election when control of Congress is in play. Four years ago, nearly six in 10 female voters preferred Democrats.

In many areas of the country, "to the extent that they have any hope" of winning, Democrats "are going to have to do it by mobilizing women voters," says Susan Carroll of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Today at a campaign stop in Seattle for Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., President Obama will talk about how his economic [policies](#) have helped women. Obama's National Economic Council will release a

report on the child care tax credits, small-business loans and other programs it says have helped create jobs and provide economic security for women, who make up nearly 50% of the workforce and still face a wage gap.

Focusing on the economy may be a good strategy. Republican pollster Kellyanne Conway says, "Economics has replaced abortion as the driving issue" for female voters — a shift that will work to the GOP's advantage Nov. 2 and in elections to come.

"If the Republicans can erase most of the gender gap in this off-year election, they're poised to [win](#) 2012 big," Conway says.

More popular than her husband, Michelle Obama is working hard to persuade women to keep faith with the Democrats. She is campaigning for women, such as Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., and drawing on her own experiences as a wife and working mom to highlight other issues of enduring importance to female voters. Among them: [health](#) care and education.

Her story resonates. "This is a family with a [value](#) system we could all live by," says Phyllis Fisher, a retired school librarian from Long Island, N.Y.

Linda McEvoy, 24, a first-grade teacher from New York City, says Michelle Obama "does a great job rejuvenating us."

Inside the St. James theater, yes. Outside, not necessarily.

In Broadway's half-price ticket line, Karen Berube, a 50-something general contractor from outside Los Angeles, says she has no use for President Obama or his wife.

Berube calls the president a socialist, says incorrectly that he's Muslim and complains that she hasn't seen him recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

As for Michelle Obama, "I don't like her," Berube says. "I don't think she's very patriotic."

Others waiting nearby applaud the first lady for speaking out.

"Michelle is a huge voice for her husband," says Cheri Scharffs, 42, an interior designer from Park City, Utah. "She's impressed a lot of women" with her work on behalf of children and military families.

Democrats need the first lady to do more than impress. Their challenge "is to convince women that what they thought about Obama in 2008 is a good reason to vote for (Democrats) now," says Peter Brown of the non-partisan Quinnipiac University Polling Institute.

To that end, the tales of bad luck, determination and achievement woven through Michelle Obama's speeches are aimed squarely at women who may be too turned off, too busy or not interested enough to vote this fall.

"Find those folks who are planning to sit this one out," she implored during a recent campaign stop in Milwaukee. "Tell them that they can't vote just once and then just hope for change to happen."

Fisher doesn't have to be told how important it is to get out and vote. She remembers when she was 10 years old in 1944 and her mother was turned away from the polls in Kilgore, Texas, because she was black.

"How can you not vote?" she asks.

