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From Seneca Falls to … Sarah Palin?

Odd, yes, but there we are. Still, history suggests issues of policy will ultimately trump the politics of identity.

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When Walter Mondale chose New York Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro as his running mate in 1984, he set off the briefest of crazes. The sheer newness of the first female vice presidential candidate for a major party delighted the media and—initially—the public. She drew large crowds wherever she went; schoolgirls were brought along to witness her speeches. Her supporters chanted, "Run with a woman, win with a woman." Much of the media response was predictable—she was described as "feisty" and "pushy but not threatening," and was asked if she knew how to bake blueberry muffins. She was also questioned, in a debate with Vice President George H.W. Bush, about whether the "Soviets might be tempted to take advantage of you simply because you are a woman." When she stood before the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, anchor Tom Brokaw announced: "Geraldine Ferraro … The first woman to be nominated for vice president … Size 6!"

It was not, to say the least, an entirely successful campaign. Much of the coverage was dominated by Ferraro's refusal to disclose her husband's tax records. Ronald Reagan carried 49 out of 50 states, and 56 percent of women voted for him, up 10 percent from 1980. But what Ferraro was most surprised by, in focus groups convened after the election, was that stay-at-home mothers had been horrified by her candidacy, despite the fact that her three children were teenagers. "What we found was that some women felt intimidated," she says now. How would their husbands view them if they were just staying at home rather than shattering glass ceilings and conquering the world? "I thought, 'God almighty, how did that happen?' … They thought it would somehow hurt them. That if I could do all these things—be a supermom or whatever—how would it look for them, if 'all' they were doing was taking care of their children at home?" They wondered, she says, if it would jeopardize their marriages.

Nearly a quarter of a century later, Sarah Palin is also being grilled about her capacity to negotiate with the Soviets (well, the Russians, but they are acting like Soviets at the moment), asked if she will still cook for her family if elected vice president and praised for her chic glasses and copper highlights. But this time, women are flocking to her, cheering her can-do attitude and her unabashed embrace of the hockey-mom label. After her nomination as the Republicans' vice presidential candidate, the Washington Post/ABC poll reported a remarkable 20-point shift toward McCain. The new NEWSWEEK Poll also finds that some movement occurred: in July, John McCain led Barack Obama among white women by 44 to 39 percent; now his lead is 53 to 37 percent. There was no shift among white men, although other polls vary. One in three white women says she is more likely to vote for McCain because he chose Palin as a running mate.

What is now known as the Palin Effect seems to be overturning almost a century of wisdom about the way women think and vote. Republican women, who have long been loath to vote for mothers of small children, are suddenly defending the right of women, or a woman, rather, to return to work three days after giving birth, and to seek higher office with five kids—one of whom is a pregnant teenager, and another a newborn with Down syndrome. Some Democratic women are threatening to defect to the Republicans—even if it means voting for pro-life candidates—just because Palin is a woman.

The hyperbole of the hour is bipartisan. Conservatives are gleeful, liberals gloomy. Republicans are pushing a simple narrative to explain the Palin bounce: for women of whatever party, Palin is one of them, a working mother whose values resonate with other working mothers even when her views may not. As the GOP chortles over the current reversal of fortune in the polls, Democrats are sputtering, also favoring a simple narrative explanation, blaming McCain's Rovean tactics and bullying of the media for Palin's star turn in the race—a star turn that has, for the first time since the defeat of Hillary Clinton, given Obama's supporters significant pause about their man's chances in November.

These competing arguments are ultimately unsatisfactory because their answers to a crucial question are unnuanced. And that question may be the fundamental one of this election: what do women really want? Men have scratched their heads for centuries over what appears to women to be either a stupid or patronizing question. Pollsters neglected to actually ask them for most of the past century. They do want a better economy, their sons and daughters brought home from war, better health care, a good educational system. They want fairer media (the NEWSWEEK Poll found that 34 percent of white women think the media have been too critical of Palin, and that one quarter of Clinton supporters agree). And to see more mothers making decisions that affect their lives. To have the chance to run for office alongside men without being called hags or fools. And, as Aretha Franklin might say, a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

What we might call the "Franklin Doctrine" (note to Charles Gibson: you can ask Palin about it next time) is a crucial one, and may help explain the swing to Palin by some women who, if they had been supporting Clinton, appear open to making an epic about-face on matters of policy in favor of voting on issues of identity in ways that women have never done before. The support for Palin along gender lines is understandable, but the past suggests that issues of policy could still trump the politics of identity. It is a story that is ever ancient, ever new: the history of women and

voting in America is a tale of high hopes and harsh disappointments. Decades of experience, stretching back to the suffrage movement, suggest that the brew of excitement (for Palin), horror (from the Democrats) and drama (who knows how it will end?) is fully in keeping with the tumult of the world the women of Seneca Falls, N.Y., made all those years ago.

Throughout the campaign, something unpredictable has been stirring among women that commentators unfamiliar with the Franklin Doctrine (like Palin with the Bush one) have struggled to understand. Women have rushed to the defense of both Clinton and Palin in a visceral, angry way: they have identified with their slights and shaken fists at anyone seen to be patronizing these two historic candidates. "It turns out that women in America aren't finished yet!" cried Palin at her nomination. Asked why they don't stick to the issues, they insist sexism *is* an issue. Women with large, fake, heavily painted lips attended Republican rallies in support of Palin after Obama's comment that "you can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig" when talking about McCain's policies. It was misinterpreted as a dig at Palin's joke that the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull is lipstick. Women like her most of all because she is a woman who is unafraid to push men around, and punch even before being provoked. She is not weak or overwhelmed. She is determined to win.

The apparent excitement coming from some women may well be large enough to determine the outcome of the election, though the election is several weeks away. And Palin, who is untested on the national stage and has received far less media scrutiny than other candidates, could still flame out. Polls are notoriously unreliable and subject to quick fluctuations. Even some top pollsters disagree about what the recent polling means. What is clear is that both sides will be fighting particularly hard for the support of female voters, perhaps as never before. Carly Fiorina, who is advising McCain on economic issues, believes women are "a deciding constituency in this election. They represent 54 percent of the vote, and a great number of them are independent or undecided."

Many Democrats have been puzzled by the sight of Republicans cheering on a working mother of five. As recently as this summer, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that only 20 percent of Republicans would support a candidate who is the mother of school-age children. In a 2007 Pew survey, 53 percent of Republicans said it was bad for society for mothers of young kids to work outside the home. Only 38 percent of Democrats agreed. This is the extraordinary thing about Palin—Republicans have not necessarily changed their views about working women generally. They just like *her.* And she can help them win. Instead of being threatened by her candidacy, as happened with Ferraro, more traditional mothers appear to be empowered by Palin. This is her great skill: she works extraordinary hours but appears ordinary, thereby validating all moms and what they do each day—and what they might be capable of. When Democrats question how she can do it, Republicans accuse them of sexism and cry, "Women can do anything," flipping feminist rhetoric about competent, unapologetic working women back in their faces. Palin has exploited what has long been a burden on women in executive office—to prove that they will not be distracted or hindered by domestic responsibilities—to great advantage, seemingly modeling the idea that being a mother is not a liability but a qualification for office: the greatest credential of all.

The debate about what being a mother means has boiled for centuries, most fiercely when women have attempted to exercise their rights as citizens. Throughout the 19th century, suffragists argued that motherhood was an important qualification for political life. They would be more compassionate, and better housekeepers of the state as well as of the hearth. Their opponents argued that they should stay at home, where their skills lay, and not bother with the affairs of state. In 1917, a Southern congressman warned that the vote would disrupt the family and "destroy the home, which is the foundation of the republic."

There was much trepidation when the day finally arrived, nationally, in 1920. Women were triumphant; political parties were nervous about the emergence of a demanding new voting bloc. Twenty states passed laws to allow women to serve on juries; Congress introduced bills to finance children's health care and prenatal education; both parties brought women into their national committees. Republican Warren Harding won the presidency with 60 percent of the popular vote. But the hordes failed to materialize—only one third of women voted (two thirds of men did), and they voted in much the same way as men. Assuming it was because women would simply mimic their husbands, pollsters failed to ask why. Women did not rally behind women's issues, or women candidates. Missouri suffragist Emily Blair said in 1924: "I know of no woman today who has any influence or political power because she is a woman."

This was the great revelation of the 1920s: women do not all think the same. They reason, and vote, as individuals, not as a pack. Nor did women politicians act in concert or always think alike, as Clare Boothe Luce (pictured below), called "Connecticut's gift to the glamour department of Congress," found in 1940. She complained that the media portrayed her disagreements with other women as catfights. It was not until 1980, with the election of Ronald Reagan, that distinctions in the political behavior of men and women became clear. That year, the percentage of women voting outnumbered men for the first time. Since then, the idea of a gender gap—how women vote differently from men—has been fiercely contested: strategists have miscalculated it, pollsters have misinterpreted it and political parties have clumsily attempted to capture it. What we do know is this: more women than men say they make up their minds in the last few days of a campaign. Since 1980, women have skewed Democratic. And, until fairly recently, women have been loath to vote for other women—particularly stay-at-home mothers and elderly women. But the moose-shooting, defiant Palin may be changing that. Her gender is an asset —particularly in an election where sexism has been the subject of heated exchanges. When voters are looking for change, freshness and humanity, as women in Western democracies have found for the past 20 years, being a woman, not a conventional male politician, can provide a critical edge.

"Women are seen as outsiders to the political system," says Susan Carroll, professor of political science and senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "Whenever voters are eager for change, women candidates fare well." (The clear benefit of the Palin pick for McCain was that it allowed him to cast himself as the real candidate of change.) In 1992, which was called the Year of the Woman, the representation of women in the Senate tripled, and women boosted their numbers in the House of Representatives by nearly 70 percent—from 29 to 48. Women now formed 10 percent of Congress. "That year, voters very much wanted change for a variety of reasons, including a number of scandals in Congress, and there was a 'throw the rascals out' climate," says Carroll. "We had also just had the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill hearings, and TV viewers saw this all-white-male Senate Judiciary

Committee passing judgment, and concluded that maybe we need someone different up there. If you want a candidate who embodies change, you look for someone who doesn't look like the traditional officeholder."

When campaigning for senator in 1992, Washington state's Patty Murray capitalized on the fact that she was seen as someone outside the Beltway system. When a state legislator dismissed her as "just a mom in tennis shoes," she adopted it as her slogan. Voters responded, and ignored her lack of national experience. Importantly, she was strongly supported by women—even stay-at-home moms, who at that time were reluctant to support women politicians. Murray credits women, and their response to her personal story, for her success. "A lot of women sent me a check for $5 and said, 'I've never gotten involved before.' It wasn't just that I was a woman— I was talking about issues that were important to them. I was bringing the issues, like health care and economic planning, to the debate."

Despite being a governor—and part of the political system—Palin is seen as an outsider and potential change agent because she is a former beauty queen from Alaska who can field-dress a moose. On the trail, says one McCain adviser, Palin "comes across as an average mom. People see her as someone not of Washington, a working woman who really knows what average people are going through, and in an election about change, that really resonates." She both represents average women and transcends them. She has been compared to the celebrity sharpshooter Annie Oakley (dubbed "Little Sure Shot" by Chief Sitting Bull). She has also been drawn as the latest in the proud lineage of frontier women who shouldered physical work alongside men and were renowned for their strength and courage. It is no coincidence that the Western frontier territories were the first to give women the vote (Wyoming was the first, in 1869, followed two months later by Utah; the territory of Alaska voted in favor in 1913). The West "wasn't as conservative and hidebound as the East," says historian Susan Ware, author of "Beyond Suffrage." Women were so critical to the formation—and good order—of these frontier states, she says, that "it was easier for people in the West to think our women ought to be able to vote, too." The first woman elected to Congress, in 1916, Jeannette Rankin, was from Montana. Ware, an Obama supporter says, "Sarah Palin is our idea of an independent spirit from the West … It's not defiance. It's being sure of yourself."

There is clearly something that mothers find affirming about seeing one of their own being sure of herself. Palin somehow manages to come across as a strong mother of five, not a politician who happens to have kids. She validates motherhood by reviving the archetype of the impossibly confident supermother, simultaneously managing teenagers, teething and the trials of a vice presidential campaign. No wonder she drinks Red Bull.

"The one good thing, whatever comes of this, is that social conservatives have started saying, 'Don't you dare say a woman can't be a mom and take on a high-powered career'," says Stephanie Coontz, author of "Marriage, a History." "That's the first time we've ever heard them say that. We ought to be able to move past the mommy wars now."

The pioneer women politicians were not nursing babies through teleconferences. Few mothers of young children ever ran for office, and the first two women in Congress were widows of male politicians who swept in to take the place of their men. (To date, 46 women have succeeded their late husbands there. Margaret Chase Smith [below], dubbed "The Lady From Maine," filled the seat left by her husband in 1940, and served in Congress for 32 years. She was also the first woman to have her name placed in nomination for the presidency by one of the major parties.) Pat Schroeder was the first mother of small children elected to Congress, and had a 2-year-old daughter when she campaigned in 1972. She was inundated with queries from journalists about how she would manage. Bella Abzug, a fellow congresswoman, called to congratulate her, adding: "I hear you have young children. You aren't going to be able to do it. It's impossible."

Women who did have children initially insisted they combined work and family reasonably effortlessly. Then—representing a broader discomfort among working women in the 1980s with the mythology of the superwoman who could raise kids, triumph in her career and run marathons in high heels without breaking a sweat—many revealed it wasn't easy. Rep. Connie Morella of Maryland, who was raising nine children (six were her sister's), said the logistics were "stunning … absolutely," but that, happily, her husband had learned to cook.

Michelle Obama has fit neatly within this tradition, where women are honest about difficulties they might face as working mothers. In Indiana last Thursday she said, "[Barack has] seen me worry that when I'm at work, I'm not spending enough time with the kids. And when I'm with the kids, I'm not spending enough time at work. Never feeling like I'm doing anything right—always feeling just a little guilty. Barack understands this." Cindy McCain has made no such admissions. When asked on "The View" last Friday how she managed public duties and motherhood, she answered: "The busier you are, the busier you are," adding that women "can do anything." This is the can-do Alaskan spirit with which Palin has infused the campaign. She is like an action figure: breast pump in hand, baby on her hip, dressed in a power suit and standing at a microphone, giving Democrats hell: *Gals can do anything!* (A Palin action figure has actually just been released, but it is more sexual fantasy—tartan miniskirt, cleavage prominent in a red bra —than a working-woman superhero.) Her working-mother feats—giving a speech after amniotic fluid had started to leak, marching back to work three days after giving birth, running a state while tending to a sleepless newborn—seem almost superhuman, and unreal. But somehow, unlike Ferraro, instead of making women feel inadequate, she inspires them. To many mothers she is empowering: she wields motherhood with pride, as something that doesn't diminish ability but enhances it—a sign of competence, indeed a qualification to speak on a national platform. The NEWSWEEK Poll shows few think she is properly qualified—nor do they know what her views are—but that her popularity abides regardless. For now.

"What really frightens me about Sarah Palin is, they're using her gender in a powerful way and a radical way," says Naomi Wolf, the feminist author who advised Al Gore in 2000. "She's pressing every single button that says 'working-class white woman'." Women candidates like Hillary Clinton had an "Ivy League gloss." Not Palin. "But it's a very superficial button when you look at the gamut of what women with small children can do as fronts of the wrong policy."

It is important to be cautious about generalizing about female voters. The voting record of women in the past few decades shows that they are more likely to vote for issues—particularly the economy and foreign policy—than gender. Female voters tend to be more concerned about war, education and health. And groups identified during campaigns—like single moms, soccer moms

and security moms—are not always as influential as predicted. According to Karen Kaufmann —associate professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland and coauthor of "Unconventional Wisdom: Facts and Myths About American Voters"—despite the hype, "the 'soccer moms' and 'waitress moms' did not swing disproportionately more than the average American voter over the 1996-to-2004 period." She also found "that 'moms' (soccer, security or otherwise) were actually slightly less supportive of George W. Bush in 2004 than they had been in 2000—in contrast to the security-mom storyline."

There was little investigation of the female vote before the 1970s. Women were assumed to be naturally more conservative, and had slightly preferred Eisenhower to Stevenson, and Nixon to Kennedy. Political scientists began paying attention to the female vote in 1980, when 59.4 percent of eligible women cast a ballot for president, compared with 59.1 percent of men, a gap that has increased ever since. Together, they elected Ronald Reagan over Jimmy Carter. In 1984, while the Democrats had hoped to woo swing female voters by placing Ferraro on their ticket, the Republicans strategically targeted women on the basis of economic interests: their ads successfully targeted single working women, married working women and elderly women.

In recent years, however, women have consistently skewed to the Democrats. In 1992, many more women voted for Clinton (45 percent) than Bush (37 percent) or Perot (17 percent). In 1996, women flocked to Clinton, and most preferred Gore to Bush in 2000. In 2004, they slightly favored Kerry. In the simplest terms, the vote of women was significant in Clinton's victories, while men helped both Bushes to win. The votes of women remain important, however, especially because they are the majority of voters, says Susan Carroll of Rutgers. In 2004, 60.1 percent of women voted, compared with 56 percent of men. This means there are 9 million more female voters.

Before 1972, many women preferred voting for men. "When women first started organizing for the vote, they thought women would all vote the same, but they were disappointed," says Stephanie Coontz. That's true today, too. "I don't think there's anything in their DNA that would cause them to identify only with other women," she says. "They tend to vote for women of their own political party," says Karen O'Connor, founder and director of the Women and Politics Institute at American University in Washington, D.C. "If a woman thinks *Roe* is an important law, and wants equal pay for equal work, they tend to vote Democratic. They're not going to vote for a woman who has different stands on those issues because she's a woman." All things being equal between candidates, however, there is evidence to suggest that women are increasingly likely to support female candidates because they are women—if they believe there are too few women in positions of power. But gender remains only one consideration of many.

The possible payoffs for the Republican ticket of capturing undecided women are so great that even McCain is discovering—or trying to find—his inner Oprah. Working women and older women—"swing moms" that they believe might come from the Clinton camp—are precisely those the Republicans are seeking to target, not just by choosing Palin but by attempting to add warmth to McCain's image as well. In the past few weeks he has done interviews with Rachael Ray, People, Marie Claire and the women on "The View."

On the day McCain announced that Palin had been picked, a McCain senior adviser told NEWSWEEK that the campaign was hoping to attract women voters and exploit a "great opportunity" to pull in Clinton supporters. This might sound implausible—the two women disagree on almost every issue—but former Clinton strategist Mark Penn thinks McCain could succeed at picking off a slice of lower-income working women. He believes undecided women are critical: "The undecided here are primarily women—women over 35, hockey moms, soccer moms, active grannies. They really will ultimately decide the election."

Many women have rightly argued that it is insulting to assume they would simply switch votes from one woman to another just because she is a woman, despite what her policies or experience might be. The Obama campaign acknowledges that, overall, there has been a recent shift in the female vote toward McCain. But they believe it is a modest movement among middle-aged women voters, with kids, who live in suburban and rural areas, and that the shift is already reversing itself. There is much disagreement among the parties about whether Hillary supporters will in fact defect to McCain. Many pollsters are skeptical about this claim, and the polls are inconsistent. In the NEWSWEEK Poll, asked if Palin made them more likely to vote for McCain, 14 percent of Clinton supporters said yes. But since our previous poll, in July, the number of them who say they will vote for Obama rather than McCain has gone up by 7 percent.

Lynette Long, a therapist who is working with the McCain campaign, spoke as a former Clinton supporter at a McCain-Palin rally in Fairfax, Va., last Wednesday. While she is strongly pro-choice—her mother almost died of an illegal abortion—she said she does not believe that *Roe v. Wade* would really be threatened by a McCain win. She believes it is more important to take a stand for her gender than to vote on one issue. "The first issue for me is the blatant sexism and treatment of Hillary Clinton," she said.

The McCain camp claims to be surprised by the extent of Palin's success. She has generated enormous crowds—an estimated 12,000 at a rally in Colorado Springs, Colo., roughly 12 times the number McCain attracted at his solo events last month—although there have been questions about whether the campaign is exaggerating the crowd sizes. "We did expect some of this movement," says a senior McCain aide who declined to be named so as to discuss the state of the race more freely. "But she's had a greater impact on the battleground than we anticipated … Suddenly there are states that could have been in play that are not, like Montana and Georgia, and we're gaining in Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania. We never expected to get Obama-size crowds, that's not John McCain's audience, but here we are. I don't think any of us saw that coming."

It is unclear, however, how long this excitement will last and if it will translate into votes. There are some sobering, cautionary notes to be taken from history. Put simply, issues matter. Women may cheer on one of their own, but the economy is their primary concern. This is one thing political scientists and pollsters do all agree on. And it is certainly true in this election. Whether it's the Wal-Mart mothers and grandmas, the unmarried or the happily wed and over-50s, the economy ranks first for all female voters. In a recent Zogby poll, 65 percent of women included jobs and the economy as their top issues, compared with 47 percent of men. The war in Iraq and health care both came in at a distant second place. The NEWSWEEK Poll found the top three concerns of white women to be the economy, taxes and government spending, and the war in Iraq, with women more concerned about the war than the rest of the electorate. "Women are very change-

oriented," says Democratic pollster Celinda Lake. "They turned against the war in Iraq before men did, and they were the first to say the economy was personally affecting their families."

Signs of a return to issues emerged on Saturday with a poll showing that McCain has lost male voters in Ohio since he picked Palin. "Ohioans seem more concerned about which candidate will fix their ailing economy than about the vice presidential nominees," says Peter Brown, assistant director of the polling institute at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut.

Economic insecurity applies to both men and women, but women tend to feel more economically vulnerable than men, says Democratic pollster Anna Greenberg. "In part that's because they are. But women are also usually the ones taking the kids to the doctor and pushing the grocery cart through the aisles."

The McCain campaign thinks Palin—with her working-class vibe—will help on this front. Obama is hoping to capitalize on these concerns, too. Dana Singister, Obama's senior adviser on women voters, says the campaign is very focused on voters' fears about "kitchen-table, pocketbook issues, what they're facing in their households every day: economic security, retirement security, concerns that their health care will be there when they need it." Although polls show the abortion issue may not move many votes, a significant proportion of women wrongly believe that McCain has a pro-choice record. So the Obama camp is also planning to highlight McCain's position: he opposes abortion, except in cases of rape, incest or where a woman's life may be at risk. He believes *Roe v. Wade* should be overturned. Though most voters know that Palin opposes abortion, many wrongly believe she favors exceptions in cases of rape and incest.

It is difficult to predict if the Palin effect will endure in the face of a recession and an unpopular war. These are the issues that will decide the election. And Palin's impact may well have been initially inflated—polls are very fluid following nomination conventions, and can fluctuate daily. Palin has not yet been tested by the full glare of media scrutiny. Her confidence is appealing; what of her substance? She has been interviewed in her new role only once, by Charles Gibson. In that appearance she seemed awkward, uncomfortable and rehearsed. With voters already harboring serious reservations about her experience, particularly when it comes to foreign policy and the economy, performances like that one will do nothing to assuage them. In the NEWSWEEK POLL, only 45 percent thought she was qualified (49 percent of women), outranking only Dan Quayle among recent veep candidates. Seven in 10 thought Joe Biden was ready. The initial buzz and excitement are bound to fade. Geraldine Ferraro is convinced Palin's dream run is temporary. Polls go down: "Ours did. People never vote for vice president. We drew huge crowds. The Secret Service told me that we had the largest crowds they'd seen since JFK … I would see these men in the audience with their little girls on their shoulders, saying, 'You got to see the first woman nominated. This is historic.' Hillary saw the same thing, and Palin will too. It was exciting, and people wanted to be a part of the candidacy. But it doesn't necessarily translate into making a difference on Election Day and who becomes president."

Ferraro believes that in some ways the symbolic power of watching a woman run for higher office can be victory enough. "Every time a woman runs," she says, "women win." One suspects Sarah Barracuda might not completely agree: she seems plenty interested in both running *and* winning.

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