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Both Sides Seeking to Be What Women Want

By KATE ZERNIKE

For evidence of how intensely the presidential candidates are battling over women, consider their investment in Oprah Winfrey. After the news programs, “Oprah” is the chief recipient of campaign advertisements this year, with Senator John McCain buying more commercial spots on the program in the last month than Senator Barack Obama — even though Ms. Winfrey herself is backing Mr. Obama.

Mr. Obama, the Democratic presidential nominee, is teaming stars from soap operas and “Sex and the City” with congresswomen in contested states. Mr. McCain, the Republican nominee, is sending tailored mailings on taxes to women who drive minivans, watch “The Biggest Loser” or “Lost” and know their way to the nearest big-box store.

And both campaigns are trying to highlight the issues they think will draw more support from women, with Mr. Obama emphasizing pay equity and abortion rights and Mr. McCain playing up his “maverick” image and raising questions of respect.

The fierce, and complicated, competition for the female vote has been escalated by Mr. McCain’s selection of Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska as his running mate. Even before the Palin selection, Mr. Obama was moving to shore up support from women, especially those who had supported Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton in the Democratic primaries.

Now Obama campaign officials are stepping up their efforts, and both campaigns are recalibrating pitches to women to navigate cultural forces and policy positions that can give them an advantage.

In particular, they are competing for working-class white women, the group that could be especially pivotal in the states likely to decide the election.

For Mr. Obama, the push for women means emphasizing that he is running against Mr. McCain, not Ms. Palin, and drawing attention to Mr. McCain’s record on issues that particularly resonate with women: his opposition to abortion rights, his votes against expanded health insurance for children and pay equity legislation, and his support for private investment accounts for Social Security, of concern among white women over 50, a group Mr. Obama has had trouble winning over.

This week, Obama events have a theme, “Women for the Change We Need,” as the campaign tries to connect with women in conference calls, rallies and registration drives.

The campaign will also begin increasing advertising on television programs watched by women — besides “Oprah,” some of the biggest investments for the campaigns have been during “Dr. Phil,” “Live With Regis and Kelly” and “The Ellen DeGeneres Show.”

Each campaign is also beginning to put more spots on Lifetime, and a McCain media buyer recently lamented that the Food Network did not accept political advertising.

Mr. McCain will continue to campaign this week with Ms. Palin, with a rally on Tuesday in Ohio, an important state for working-class women. The two are expected to be together frequently in the seven remaining weeks of the campaign.

Beyond that, the McCain campaign’s strategy is to emphasize personality, capitalizing on the booming celebrity of Ms. Palin, highlighting Mr. McCain’s story as a war hero, showcasing their families, and trying to keep alive the anger about sexism that many women felt during Mr. Obama’s primary campaign against Mrs. Clinton.

Democrats have relied heavily on women in recent presidential elections — so much so that McCain strategists say they believe that to win they need to run even among women over all, and lead among white women.

Women have voted in greater proportions than men for almost three decades — in 2004, nearly nine million more women voted than men, 67.3 million to 58.5 million. But the hard-fought candidacy of Mrs. Clinton and Mr. McCain’s selection of Ms. Palin as the first woman on a Republican presidential ticket have put new cultural and ideological elements more fully into play.

“It’s because there were these women who supported Hillary Clinton, some of whom so visibly said they might not support Obama or might sit it out or vote for John McCain,” said Susan Carroll, a senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers who has written extensively on the gender gap in voting. “That really called attention to the fact that women were going to be critically important.”

Mr. McCain's strategists do not expect to win more than a small fraction of Mrs. Clinton's supporters. But they do see blocs of women they think they can win.

Democrats have been accused of taking women for granted, in part because they have been able to count on them: More women have voted Democratic in the last four presidential cycles. More men have voted Republican in all but two of the last nine, the exceptions being 1976, when [Jimmy Carter](#) was the Democratic candidate, and 1992, when [Bill Clinton](#) was elected.

But white women have voted Republican in all but two of the last nine presidential elections. In 1992, they were evenly divided between the first President Bush and Mr. Clinton; in 1996, they voted for Mr. Clinton, 48 percent to 43 percent. And while unmarried women have consistently given their majority to Democrats, married women gave President Bush the majority in 2004.

"It's about how much Democrats can maximize the gender difference and how much the Republicans can hold it down," Ms. Carroll said.

The McCain campaign's polling identifies two ripe demographics: So-called Wal-Mart women, who shop at the store at least once a week, earn less than \$60,000 a year, have less than a college education, and hold a poor impression of Mr. Bush; they tend to call themselves independents and say their economic situation is fair or poor, listing the economy as their prime election issue. McCain strategists believe this group will be attracted by the ticket's "maverick" image.

The second group is women in important suburbs in Florida, Michigan, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

The McCain campaign is also on the offensive in trying to stoke anger about perceived sexism. The campaign has designated a squad of prominent Republican women to call out what they see as gender-based smears against Ms. Palin. Last week, it released two spots accusing Mr. Obama of being "disrespectful" toward her.

Mr. Obama appears to have a strong advantage among young, unmarried women. But, said Anita Dunn, a senior adviser: "We are not ceding women with children. We have a candidate whose wife is a working mom with two young children."

In part, the Obama campaign is emphasizing the Republican ticket's opposition to abortion rights. The campaign ran a radio advertisement during the Republican convention calling the party's platform on abortion "extreme" because it did not include an exception for rape or incest.

But that issue alone may not swing many women. In a Gallup poll in May, 14 percent of women said that a candidate for major office must share their view on abortion (about the same percentage as among men). For half the women in the poll, abortion was one issue among many affecting their decision.

The Obama campaign is also emphasizing Mr. McCain's opposition to pay equity legislation, with a television spot that began running on Sunday saying that he "just doesn't get it."

The Obama campaign's focus on women this week will start with a conference call Wednesday between 20,000 women in leadership positions nationwide and Mr. Obama's running mate, Senator [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) of Delaware, who the campaign believes commands respect among women, particularly because of his advocacy for laws against domestic violence. Mr. Biden and Mr. Obama will then hold rallies with women Thursday and Friday, setting up a weekend of voter registration, beauty shop canvassing and mobilizing events.

To secure working-class women, the campaign sees Mrs. Clinton as its best surrogate, and has sent her to Florida, Nevada and Ohio, states she won in the primaries. In recent days, female aides and surrogates to Mr. Obama have also begun arguing in television appearances that Mr. McCain has a history of insensitivity toward women — recalling a joke he made about [Chelsea Clinton's](#) appearance when she was a teenager, or his going along at a South Carolina event last year when a woman used a coarse term to refer to Mrs. Clinton. (Mr. McCain now frequently lauds Mrs. Clinton.)

Though there is little question that Ms. Palin's bursting onto the scene has put pressure on the Obama campaign, it is unclear how much difference she will make. [Geraldine A. Ferraro](#) created a small bounce in the polls when [Walter F. Mondale](#) chose her as his running mate in 1984, making her the first woman on a major party ticket. But in the end, the nation went in a landslide for President [Ronald Reagan](#).

"Ultimately in that election," Ms. Carroll said, "people voted the top of the ticket."