



What Do American Women Voters Want?

By KELLYANNE CONWAY

Women comprise more than half of the U.S. electorate and have influenced election outcomes for more than 80 years.

The average woman in the United States wakes up each morning to a myriad of responsibilities, curiosities and concerns, none of which are political, per se, but all of which are affected by political and governmental action. These issues might include: Is my child learning in this school? Is this neighborhood safe? If I switch jobs, will I lose my health insurance? Is Social Security income enough for my parents to keep their house and not deplete their savings?

Since 1964 American women have comprised a majority of the eligible electorate, but it was not until 1980 that the percentage of eligible women who actually voted surpassed the percentage of qualified men casting ballots. For all the angst by the statisticians that a fraction of women seek or hold elective office in the United States (and that a woman has never been elected president), women voters have influenced electoral outcomes for more than eight decades, deciding on presidents and precedents in a way that has shaped public policy directly and dramatically.

Women tend to favor incumbents, especially for president, preferring to stick with a trusted brand already on the shelf rather than trying something new and unknown. In fact, the last three presidents who won reelection increased their support among women in their second bids. Women are also reliably pro-incumbent in congressional elections, evidencing more consistency in their voting patterns than men. Ironically, this natural bias toward reelecting incumbents is one reason many women who run for office as challengers are unsuccessful.

The female nonvoter has been ignored by politicians, parties, pundits and professional consultants, who seem obsessed instead with “likely” or “swing” voters. In the 2004 presidential election, more than half (54.5 percent) of women between the ages of 18 and 24 did not vote. However, women in this age bracket voted at a higher rate than their male counterparts, only 40 percent of whom cast ballots. At the other end of the age spectrum, only 29 percent of women aged 65 to 74 did not vote, compared to 26.1

percent of men in the same category. The top reasons women offer for opting out include “illness/disability” (19.8 percent), “too busy/scheduling conflict” (17.4 percent), “not interested” (10.7 percent), and “did not like candidates or campaign issues” (9.7 percent). Excluding the final two responses, it is important to note that nearly nine in 10 women did not participate for reasons other than a lack of feeling engaged.

Traditionally, women are thought to gravitate more toward the “SHE” cluster of issues, Social Security, health care and education, while men are considered more interested in the “WE” issues, war and the economy. The last three national elections (2002, 2004 and 2006) show that these convenient boxes no longer apply.

In 2004 and again in 2006, women told pollsters that the concerns that motivated them to decide whether and for whom to vote were centered on nontraditional “women’s issues.” From a closed-ended question in which 10 possible choices were offered, the situation in Iraq topped the list as the motivating concern (22 percent), followed by the war on terror (15 percent). Morality/family values and jobs/economy each received 11 percent, while the remaining six options only garnered single-digit responses.

As my coauthor, Democratic pollster Celinda Lake, and I posit in *What Women Really Want: How American Women Are Quietly Erasing Political, Racial, Class, and Religious Lines to Change the Way We Live* (Free Press, 2005), women are not single-issue voters, either. Rather, they tend to consider a plethora of ideas, issues, individuals, impressions and ideologies before making a final decision. The media’s focus on the contentious ones makes it seem as if women only care about one issue on Election Day and that it takes special attention to that issue to compel women to vote. In reality, women’s voting patterns indicate quite the opposite.

Women are not monolithic in their attitudes about, or votes within, the political system. When it comes to voting, one woman might vote for all Democrats, another might vote straight-ticket Republican, while a third might take the salad-bar approach and pick and choose from who and what suits her best. In the end, women voters ask themselves two core questions when deciding whom to support for president: “Do I like that

person?” and “Is that person like me?” The first question is the classic “living room” test: Would you like to see that candidate on the television set in your living room for the next four or eight years? The second is a more complex inquiry that probes whether women believe a candidate cares about, values, confronts, and fears the same things they do.

It is impossible to divide the life experiences and attitudes of American women into the binary Republican and Democrat categories. As women take more than their political ideology to the polls, politicians must be cognizant of the life stages, as well as the demographic categories, into which women fall. A concept we frequently use at my firm, the polling company TM inc./WomanTrend, is the “Three Faces of Eve,” which is illustrated through the three very distinct lives a 48-year-old woman in America might have. She could be a blue-collar grandmother, an unmarried and childless professional, or a married mother of two young children. Technically, they would all fall into the same age and gender demographic categories, but their life experiences vastly differ, resulting in varied perspectives on the current state of affairs. Politics is not an isolated category for women; rather, politics is an all-encompassing arena into which women export their life experiences, needs and expectations.

Some groups of women to watch in 2008 include:

- **Woman Entrepreneurs:** Women own approximately 10.4 million firms in the United States and employ more than 12.8 million Americans. While 75 percent of all U.S. firms do not have employees, an eye-popping 81 percent of woman-owned firms are single-person or “Mom-and-Pop” operations. The rate of growth of woman-owned firms consistently increases at a rate double to that of all firms.
- **Unmarried Women:** American women are delaying marriage not because they are without choices, but simply because they do have choices. Currently, 49 percent of all women over the age of 15 are not married and more than half (54 percent) of these women fall in the 25 to 64 age category.
- **Not-Yet-Moms:** With more women entering the workforce and the ever-increasing number of women having children beyond the traditional childbearing years, fewer women in their late 20s and early 30s can identify with the “married-with-children” label.

- **Junior-Seniors:** Women aged 50 to 64, many with children living at home, are expecting entitlements and eternity (the quest to extend life), seeking solutions and sophistication.

- **Minority Women:** Minorities now comprise one-third of U.S. residents, and four states are already a majority-minority, with five others expected to follow by 2025. The

Senator Hillary Clinton greets a woman after casting her vote at the Douglas Grafflin Elementary School in Chappaqua, New York. Women comprise more than half of the U.S. electorate.



Hispanic population is poised to have the most significant impact on the U.S. population, but the increase in Asian American voters is also a trend to follow.

● **Generation Y Women:** A survey for Lifetime Television by the polling company™ inc. and Lake Research Partners found that a majority (54 percent) of Gen Y women (those born since 1979) believe that the best way to make a difference in American politics is to vote. Beyond politics, almost half (42 percent) of Gen Y women indicated that the best way to make a difference in the world was to “help those less fortunate than I, with either time or money.” Among the six other options posed to them, only 2 percent said that taking an “active role in politics” was the best way to do so. Behind helping those in need, included “be a good person” (16 percent), “help stop violence and sexual assaults against women” (9 percent), “help save the environment” (8 percent), and “defend my country and keep it safe by serving in the military” (4 percent).

If a woman bristles, “I hate politics,” what she is saying in effect is that she cares not who manages the public schools and what is taught there; how health care is accessed, delivered, and paid for in the United States; whether the nation is safe, prosperous and globally competitive. Yet, clearly, she does not mean that. Politics and governance are the vehicles through which change in these areas is accomplished but not necessarily the prism through which women interact with them.

What can the 2008 presidential contenders expect from women voters? The variable in this presidential election could be a woman candidate, taking the debate from if to when. The discussion has shifted from a hypothesized woman president to a real, possible woman president; namely, Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Still, past practice has proved that women do not necessarily

For more information:

Center for American Women and Politics

<http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/Facts/Elections/PresWatch2008.html>

League of Women Voters

http://www.lwv.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=About_Us



Brenda McClellan cheers as Senator Barack Obama speaks at a rally in Concord, New Hampshire. Obama won most of the women's vote in Iowa, and he won the state. However, in New Hampshire, he lost the women's vote and the state.

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vote for other women. If they did, U.S. Senators Elizabeth Dole or Carol Moseley Braun would have won their parties' nominations for president when they sought the nod in 2000 and 2004, respectively, based on the simple notion that women comprise a majority of the voters. The 2008 race differs from past elections in that this is an election of many firsts. A woman, an African American, a Mormon and a Hispanic were running campaigns for their major-party nominations.

Party loyalty trumps gender, as indicated by a July 2007 *Newsweek* survey, which found that 88 percent of men and 85 percent of women say that if their party nominated a woman candidate they would vote for her if she were qualified for the job. Americans express less enthusiasm, however, about the “female factor,” when it comes to how they judge their fellow citizens: Only 60 percent of men and 56 percent of women believe that the country is ready for a woman president. With regard to race, voters are less hesitant to vote for a qualified

African American candidate of their party, as 92 percent of whites and 93 percent of nonwhites say that they would endorse such a candidate. Like gender, fewer voters doubt that the country is ready for an African American president: Only 59 percent of white voters and 58 percent of nonwhite voters believe that the country would elect a black president. When responding to polls, voters can sometimes displace their attitudes and stereotypes onto their friends, family and community members as a way to reaffirm their own position while simultaneously hiding what they believe or know to be an “unacceptable” or “unpopular” position. One caveat of this concept is that voters' opinions could be influenced by the fact that in 2008 there is a prominent African American and a prominent woman candidate. Any opposition to an African American or a woman could well be the dislike of an individual candidate.

Whereas the contest for president is the most wide open in decades (it is the first time in 80 years that neither a sitting president nor vice president is seeking the presidency), one thing is certain: Women, as they have since 1980, will be a majority of the electorate that decides who next occupies the Oval Office.

Kellyanne Conway is the president and chief executive officer of Washington-based polling company™ inc./WomanTrend.