

The Women's Vote in 2004

October 7. Ask any pundit, pollster, or party operative and they all will agree on one thing: Kerry *must* carry the women's vote to win the election on November 2. Simple as that.

This was *not* supposed to be such a Herculean task, given that women have favored Democratic candidates in *every* presidential election since 1980, while men have consistently favored Republican nominees. This long-standing gender gap was front and center in the 2000 election. Gore garnered 54% of the women's vote to Bush's 43%; Bush secured the men's vote 53% to 42%. The Democratic candidate led women by 11 points; the Republican candidate led men by the same. If trends are any indicator, clearly the women's vote is Kerry's to lose in 2004.

With less than one month to go, Kerry seems to be doing just that. Throughout this presidential campaign season, polls have shown that women are *not* following the same voting patterns as they did in 2000 (or even as they did in elections over the past twenty-five years). The most recent poll of women voters (*Washington Post*, October 6) reports Bush ahead of Kerry, 49% to 47%. Political strategists (especially the Democratic ones) have been scrambling to figure out what happened to the gender gap. Why is Kerry struggling to secure the support of voters who have traditionally been a Democratic stronghold—women? Why is the Democratic nominee *losing* the women's vote to a Republican president, who trailed Gore in this constituency by 11 points four years ago?

One prominent explanation has been the rise of "security moms" since 9/11—white women living in suburbs, married with children, who are concerned first and foremost about the safety of their families and communities. The "soccer moms" of the 2000 election—whose top priorities were good schools and lower health care costs—have given way to the "security moms," whose major concerns going into the 2004 election are terrorism, the war in Iraq, and national security. The security-moms-flattened-the-gender-gap thesis is as follows: 9/11 shifted mothers' priorities from bread-and-butter issues (traditionally Democratic) to security issues (traditionally Republican). With safety of the homeland now at stake, security moms are shifting their allegiance away from Kerry to Bush, attracted to the Republican president for his tough stance in the war on terror.

But do security moms really represent a *new* voting bloc? Are they really the "hot new swing group of the presidential campaign," a target group that the candidates must win over to ensure success on November 2? Are they really the reason Kerry is lagging among women?

Let's take a closer look. According to a *Washington Post-ABC News Poll* (September 27, 2004), security moms are *no more likely* than any other set of voters or constituencies to identify terrorism, security, or Iraq as their top concern. In fact, white married women with children are *no different* from white married men with children with respect to security questions. Perhaps *gender* is less of a determinant in the voting patterns of the so-called "security moms" than their *marital* status.

Anna Greenberg, a Harvard professor and Democratic pollster, aims to debunk the "myth of the security mom." She argues that women with young children

(26% of all women voters) are traditionally *more conservative* than unmarried women—not just on security issues but on taxes and social issues as well. Why?

Greenberg argues that married mothers identify with the GOP's "moral traditionalism" and the party's emphasis on family values. In the 2002 midterm elections, 56% of married women voted for Republican candidates while only 39% of unmarried women cast ballots for the GOP. It's tough to be considered a swing group—a sizable voting bloc that shifts its party allegiance from election to election—when you consistently vote Republican. Security moms, she argues, are pretty reliable conservatives, solidly behind Bush from the get-go.

So perhaps John Kerry is lagging in the women's vote simply because he is not addressing issues important to women *beyond* security. 9/11 and the Beslan hostage seizure still resonate with women across the political spectrum. But the Democratic nominee's primary focus on security issues (and arguably on gaining the nebulous "security mom" vote) in the past few months has, in many respects, been at the expense of other critical constituencies. Kerry cannot take for granted traditional Democratic voters—unmarried and older women—if he aims to secure the women's vote.

Kerry *must* gain ground with single women—a 47-million-voter pool. According to the non-partisan group *Women's Voices. Women Vote.*, 21 million single women did not vote in 2000. Single women (and men for that matter) are more liberal than their married counterparts—that is, they are more likely to favor an active government role in helping disadvantaged groups. The majority are not single-issue voters—focused on gun control or abortion rights. They are concerned about job security, affordable health care, and education—all issues that traditionally fall in the realm of the Democratic Party.

The remaining presidential debates are sure to address these domestic concerns (some of which were touched upon in the vice-presidential debate on Tuesday night). The domestic debate stakes are especially high for Kerry. Can he gain ground with women, especially single and older women (not to use yet another label, but the so-called Medicare grandmothers who care about issues such as prescription drugs and retirement benefits)? In terms of married women—who are more likely to vote than single women—Kerry can at best try to break even with Bush, something Gore failed (by 1%) to do in the last election. (Among married women the *least conservative* are those who work outside the home—often switching their party allegiances from election to election.)

In these last few weeks of campaigning, we can expect the two partisan initiatives "W Stands for Women" and "Women for Kerry" to be out in full force to register and mobilize women to vote for their respective candidates. The women's vote is critical to the outcome of the 2004 election. And the decision is far from over. Women, more so than men, make up their minds about who to vote for *late* in the campaign, comprising a disproportionately large share of the undecided voters. What role will the gender gap and the marriage gap play in the final outcome?

Finally, we can expect both campaigns and the media to continue to search for, label, and court more "swing" constituencies as the final sprint of this neck-and-neck race nears. Which leads us to ask: What value do politicians and political strategists get out of such labels as "security moms," "waitress moms" (single, blue-collar, working mothers), or even "office park dads"? Are these legitimate "swing"

groups? Did anyone really think John Kerry had a chance with the much-talked-about NASCAR dads?

According to ABC News polling director, Gary Langer, white married males with children who live in rural towns, small cities, or suburbs and have incomes below \$50,000 total approximately 2% of all voters. And (surprise, surprise) they overwhelmingly supported George Bush in 2000—70% to 27%. While NASCAR dads don't swing like independent voters and white Catholics, they're still a good excuse for an Air Force One pit stop at the Daytona 500.