



5 “Truths” About Women Voters

By Melinda Henneberger

(That Are Flat-Out False)

Except for phonetically, I never did figure out what “W Is for Women” was supposed to mean. But since this year is purportedly all about women voters, it’s time we figured it out: Can a Woman for Rudy ever find happiness as an Obama Mama? And is every woman who doesn’t hate Hillary Clinton inclined to vote for her? If I learned anything from my 18 months of interviews with women across the country, it’s that—like selling magazine subscriptions and talking on television—running a winning campaign is harder than it looks. So to all of my fellow second-guessers who think that what women (voters) want is blatantly obvious, I say: No, it isn’t. No matter how many people write otherwise, sometimes the dots do not connect. Not neatly, anyway.

My interviews with women of all ages, races, tax brackets and points of view, in 20 states, were the unscientific opposite of a poll. I asked almost no questions—I wanted to know what they were thinking about, not what I thought they should be thinking about—and then spent hours listening to their highly enlightening non-answers. These conversations certainly brought home how difficult actual polling is, not because voters lie but because their inclinations are so complicated and contradictory. Not to mention unexamined. In Washington, if you’ve run into someone at the dry cleaner twice, you probably have a pretty good idea which way he leans politically. But out in America, politics might be the new sex—unmentionable in polite company even now, and thus chronically untested and subject to revision. And retired or in college, wealthy or without a permanent address, the women I spoke to convinced me that much of what we think we know about their behavior in the ballot box is flat-out false.

Myth #1: **Women Automatically** **Prefer the Female Candidate.**

Theoretically, sure, all things being equal, women favor the female in the race. Voting is such a complicated calculus, though, that they never are equal. The idea that “if you look like me, then sister, I’m with you” is so widely assumed that a recent *New York Times* story registered surprise that Barack Obama was even bothering to pitch to women voters as such: “In the intensifying battle for the votes of Democratic women, Senator Barack Obama’s campaign is trying to turn years of feminist thinking on its head and argue that the best candidate for women may, in fact, be a man.” (As a thought exercise that might or might not prove whether we’ve come further on gender than on race in this country, ponder how likely we are to read that Clinton is trying to turn years of anything on its head by arguing that the best candidate for people of color is, in fact, white.) Yet significant numbers of women from left to right continue to express skepticism about Clinton, particularly on the not-at-all trifling matter of likeability.

Women across the political spectrum consistently say they like the idea of a female president, but that does not mean that support for a woman is a given. That’s such a simplistic view, some women find it insulting. Which is why explicit gender-based appeals are a turnoff, for

younger women in particular.

The equally false flip side of the assumption that women naturally favor other women is that when they don’t, it’s because they’re self-hating: “We’re always hardest on our own.” On the contrary, Obama and John Edwards’ female backers murmur earnestly about wishing they liked Clinton better than they do; they profess to be feeling guilty—to the point that the next over-the-top anti-Hillary e-mail they receive could be the one that turns them into her supporters.

Myth #2: **Conservative Women Just Aren’t Ready** **for a Woman in the White House.**

Though I did meet some strongly religious women who see a biblical injunction against women in even secular leadership roles, theirs was the minority view. Right-leaning women regularly mention Condoleezza Rice as someone they’d love to see run: “For a black woman to rise the way she has? She had to be extra crafty,” says Beth Barach, a non-salaried mom in the Boston exurbs who swung all the way from Ralph Nader in 2000 to Bush in ’04. Clearly, she means “crafty” as a compliment to Condi, and adds, “And she’s not Hillary; she’s not riding on someone’s coattails.” If Clinton is not to her liking, it’s not because as an outsider at the boys’ club, she lacks any requisite snap in the old towel. On the contrary, one of the few

points of consensus among women of varying ideologies is that that might be a good thing.

Myth #3:

Like Donors at a Cocktail Party, Women Pay Little Attention to the Candidate's Spouse.

In 2004, I argued against the notion that Teresa Heinz Kerry lost her husband any support. Yet in interviews, a number of women cited their perception that Sen. John Kerry's wife was condescending as the deciding factor in their vote for Bush. "I'm a registered Democrat and I'm not for being in Iraq," says Candy Kemper, a public health nurse in Illinois. "I don't know that Bush is totally truthful, and he's not the smartest person in the world. But Kerry, I really didn't like his wife, and that influenced me. She has a smart mouth and doesn't control it." The fact that Laura Bush, who remains well-liked, was rarely mentioned as a factor one way or the other suggests that it's easier for a presidential candidate's spouse to hurt than help. But according to one recent poll, fully a third of women voters say that not only does the candidate's spouse weigh heavily in their choice of a president, but that they take the perceived happiness of the candidate's marriage into account as well.

Myth #4:

The Women's Vote is All About "Women's Issues."

Given that some women put universal health care at the top of their political wish lists, and others want nothing so much as a fence along the Mexican border, what issues would those be? Even on abortion rights, they're divided—and even within the pro-choice camp, subdivided into so many shades of gray that I met self-described pro-lifers who see no practical point in opposing *Roe v. Wade*, and a nun who calls herself pro-choice because she thinks abortion should be a legal option for rape victims. In '04, even Heinz Kerry described herself to me as "not really pro-choice."

Her husband talked early and often about all he would do for women, surely mentioning pay equity more than any candidate since Shirley Chisholm. Yet he still lost support among women, relative to Gore's advantage with female voters in 2000. Why was that? We were told the Bush-backing women were "security moms," putting greater emphasis on feeling safe against terrorism than on other issues. But again, the conventional wisdom proved unconvincing, since in my interviews just weeks after the election, "security moms" seemed to have disappeared, presumably into hiding in a well-stocked shelter somewhere. So, why did those who turned away from Kerry, despite his stands on "women's issues," do so? Maybe because ...

Myth #5:

Women Vote for the Candidate Whose Views Best Match Their Own.

The longer women spent working through their '04 decisions aloud, the more they tended to boil down to: I just liked Bush better. (And the fact that he disagrees with you on what you just said was your No. 1 issue?) Yes, but I just liked him. Or just did not like the other fella, what's-his-name, the one who did agree with me. Take Martha Leasure, a retiree I met at a union hall in Clarington, Ohio, where the unemployment rate is one of the highest in the state. What she says she wants more than anything in a president is "someone who is in there for the people and not these big corporations." But when I gather from this near perfect iteration of Al Gore's "the people, not

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the powerful" theme that she voted for Kerry in '04, she sets me straight: No, she went for Bush.

"I got talked into it by my son. He belongs to the NRA, and they had him all riled up" that Kerry wanted to take away his gun. Did she see it that way, too? She sighs. "Bush was supposed to be a good Christian man, and he didn't believe in abortion, so maybe I wasn't that hard to talk into it. But I guarantee I'd never vote for Bush again, even if he could run." So does that mean she plans to vote Democratic in '08? She laughs, as if I've said something terribly funny: "I don't make a difference between Republican and Democrat. I just go for the best man."

That view seemed to be echoed by a high school Spanish teacher I met who was infuriated by No Child Left Behind, yet said she couldn't resist what she saw as the president's appealingly high comfort level with gay people. After a while, I began to wonder if picking a candidate wasn't a little like dating, with chemistry and timing regularly trumping reason and a common vision. (You know your friend who insists she's looking for a man who's a solid citizen, but can find the out-of-work landscape artist in the room blindfolded?) Not that men base their political choices strictly on the merits of the candidates' respective position papers; see Drew Westen's "The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation," or Bryan Caplan's "The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies." Even my own staunchly Republican father surprised me recently, by announcing that after 30-odd years as a

single-issue pro-life voter, he is enthusiastically backing Rudy Giuliani in '08. So, what happened to abortion as a litmus test? "He doesn't support it like those Democrats do."

When we talk about women voters, the real question, of course, is which women? White, married, rural and suburban women have been trending Republican for years, while single urban women of color remain reliably Democratic demographics. Yet there might be one way to pander to all of us better: Across the board, women said the key was ... not to pander at all. Maybe some of you are thinking sure, and once you can fake sincerity, everything else is a curtain call. But many women said they are looking for someone they trust even more than someone they agree with in all the particulars. "I was against the war" from the start, says Mary Hurd, a convenience store manager in Clearfield, Pa. Last time around, "I actually had decided on Kerry. But the more I listened, the more I just couldn't believe some of the things he'd say and I thought he didn't believe them, either." Because Kerry seemed to be promising more than even he thought he could deliver, she went for Bush in the end. And next time, she says, she'll again go for the candidate who strikes her as most sincere. "I just have to be convinced." ■

Melinda Henneberger is a Slate contributing writer and author of "If They Only Listened to Us: What Women Voters Want Politicians to Hear."

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