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Women Voters and Presidential Politics

Unmarried Women Drive Progressive Support in Post-Primary Period

To: Interested Parties

From: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

A recent poll of unmarried women in battleground states conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and commissioned by the Women's Voices, Women Vote Action Fund underscores the critical importance of unmarried women to the progressive base. This survey shows unmarried women moving to Obama in the post-primary period and anchoring his support among women overall. Moreover, there is very little drop-off in these women's engagement in this election after the Clinton loss.

It is impossible to understand the women's vote without examining the impact of marital status and differences in political outcomes between married women and unmarried women, the marriage gap.

Two recent public surveys chronicle Barack Obama's improvement among women voters in the post-primary period; both the Gallup tracking survey (June 11) and the Rasmussen poll (June 9) show that the much feared alienation of women voters over the Democratic primary outcome did not materialize in a substantial way. Obama leads with 51 percent of women's vote in both surveys. While this news is welcome to progressives, this analysis fails to appreciate the power of marital status as a driver of political decisions and the centrality of unmarried women as a source of Obama's lead among women overall.

As we see in the Gallup tracking, while Obama improved among married women in the post-primary period, the Democrat still manages a 45 – 45 percent "tie" with McCain. In 2006, married women split evenly in the congressional elections and in 2004, supported George Bush by an 11 point margin (44 – 55 percent Bush). In contrast, unmarried women consistently delivered huge margins to progressives candidates, supporting Kerry 62 – 37 percent in 2004 and Democratic candidates by a 65 – 32 percent margin in 2006.

This latter point is critical. Although we have seen improvement in recent years, unmarried women still do not vote in the same numbers as married voters. Given their steadfast loyalty to the progressive candidates and their relative size, 26 percent of the voting age population, a

significant increase in turnout among unmarried women represents one of the biggest potential gains for the progressive base. Increasing their turnout from 22 percent of the vote share (their 2004 proportion) to 24 percent of the vote share would yield a minimum 2 percent increase in the Democratic total, a huge gain in presidential politics. Stated in terms of actual numbers of voters, the number of unmarried women in the electorate increased by 4 million from 2000 to 2004, growing from a 19% point share in 2000 to a 22% share.

Unmarried women are the fastest growing large demographic in this country, now equal in size to married women at 53 million each. Since 2000, 10 million more unmarried women have been added to the voting age population, making them an enormous target and opportunity for any progressive candidate as the numbers swell and their presence in the electorate grows

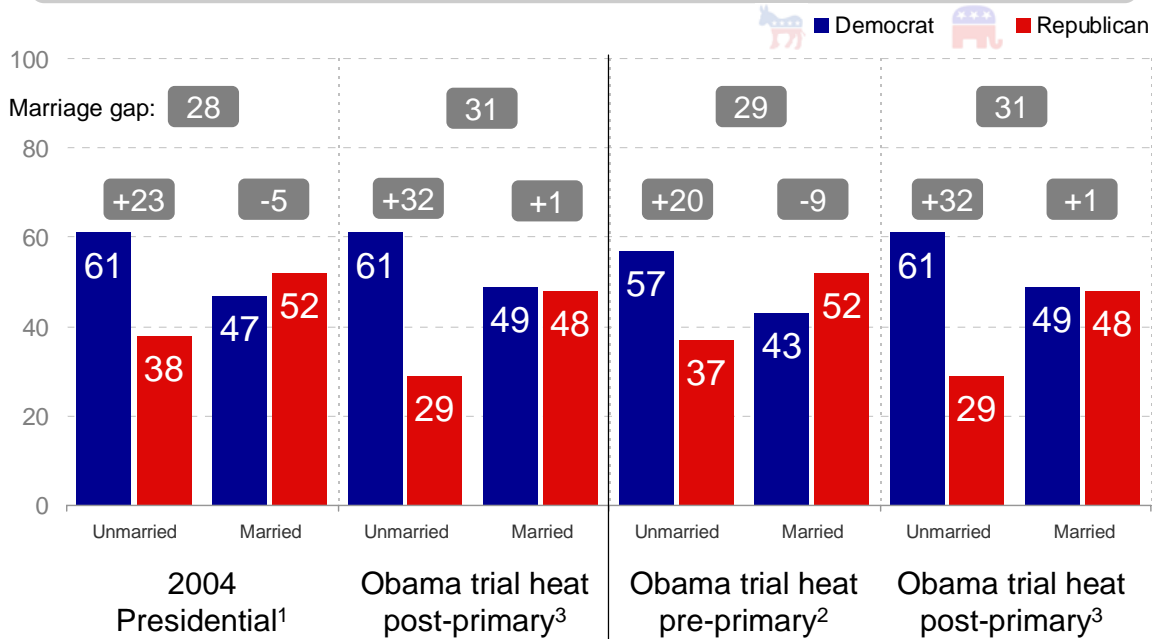
This memo is based on a survey of 1,004 registered unmarried women conducted from June 19-24, 2008. The survey carries an overall margin of error of +/- 3.10 points. The battleground is defined as the states of Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Moving Toward Obama

Among likely (unmarried women) voters, Barack Obama holds a convincing 61 to 29 percent lead over John McCain in the presidential battleground. This is a commanding lead and it reflects both movement toward Obama, and more decisively away from McCain, in the post-primary period among likely voters.

■ Figure 1: Support for Obama in the Battleground

Now let me ask you again about your vote for president, but with candidate names. I know it is a long way off, but if the election for president were held today and the candidates were Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain, for whom would you vote?



¹ Based on data from 2004 Edison/Mitofsky/CNN exit surveys in select battleground states.
² Based on combined Democracy Corps data set from March-May, 2008.
³ Unmarried women numbers reflect likely voters only on June WVWV battleground survey; married numbers reflect results of June Democracy Corps survey.

There is likely room to grow this margin further. Even with these gains, Obama struggles among unmarried women somewhat with white seniors and white women without a college education. There is clearly some overlap here with some of the groups where Obama underperforms in the broader population. However, these unmarried women have a history of voting for progressive candidates. In 2004, for example, John Kerry won white unmarried seniors by a 57 – 42 percent margin. Barack Obama only manages 48 – 39 percent among this group currently.

To win in 2008, any progressive candidate—Republican or Democrat-- will likely need to change the complexion of the American electorate and turn out those groups that traditionally have been underrepresented in American politics (see below). But winning in 2008 will also require achieving the utmost fidelity among historically Democratic groups like unmarried women.

Unmarried Women Committed to Voting

Unmarried women are energized in the 2008 cycle and we do not see a significant deterioration in these women’s commitment to voting in the post-primary period. Currently, 76 percent of unmarried registered women in the presidential battleground describe their likelihood of voting as a ten on a ten-point scale, a number that echoes results in the pre-nomination period. Hillary Clinton enjoyed fairly strong support among unmarried women—like other women—in the primary. In Democratic primary exit polls where marital status was asked, she averaged 48

percent among unmarried women over the nomination process. To expect some disappointment among some unmarried women in the post-primary period is understandable.

Unmarried women still do not turn out in the same numbers as married women. In 2004, 41 percent of eligible unmarried women failed to make it to the polls, compared to 29 percent among married women. This difference in turnout arguably cost John Kerry the White House; but times are changing. The historic 2006 election cycle saw a 13.4 percent increase in the number of unmarried women voters, compared to an 8 percent increase in the number of married women. Similarly, the 2008 primary period also saw improved participation among unmarried women.

Conclusion

Sometimes politics comes down to simple math. Unmarried women represent the nation's largest progressive base group and, according to current data, will support Barack Obama by at minimum 2:1 in November. Increasing their turnout—as a proportion of the total electorate—by 3-points will increase Obama's vote share by 2 points, unless views on the candidates change. In other words, rather than comprising 22 percent of the vote share, they would make up 24 percent of the vote share. Recall that they make up 26 percent of the voting age population — this simple math suggests that in unmarried women we will likely see the biggest potential gain in the progressive base.

The fight for swing groups like married women is important, but any progressive's overall margin among women depends on the continued loyalty and enthusiasm of unmarried women.