



August 25, 2008

Understanding the Women's Vote Marriage Gap Drives Political Decision-making Among Women

To: The Progressive Community
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In 2004, John Kerry won women by a 51 percent to 48 percent margin. In so doing, he lost married women 44 percent to 55 percent. He only held the women's vote due to his huge margin among unmarried women (62 – 37 percent Kerry). We saw a similar dynamic in 2006, where unmarried women delivered a 33-point margin to Democratic congressional candidates, giving the Congress to Democratic control. Married women divided fairly evenly (49 – 48 percent Republican candidate).¹

In both these elections, gender mattered much less than marital status. In fact, 2004 saw a 15-point gender gap; it saw a 35-point marriage gap. Moreover, it is impossible to understand the “women's vote” broadly considered, without understanding the impact marital status has on *how* women vote and *whether* women vote. The fact is, unmarried women clearly favor the more progressive candidates (generally Democrats).

Polling in the current election cycle makes these facts plain.

- The most recent (August 11-17) Gallup tracking survey shows Barack Obama leading 49 to 39 percent among women. However, Obama leads 57 to 30 percent among unmarried women, while trailing 49 to 40 percent among married women, a 36-point marriage gap.
- A new Democracy Corps battleground survey shows Obama leading 63 – 30 percent among unmarried women, while narrowly trailing married women 46 – 45 percent, a 34-point marriage gap.

¹ Data reflect 2004 and 2006 Edison/Edison/CNN Network Exit Polls.

- A Women's Voices. Women Vote Action Fund battleground survey of unmarried women shows Democratic candidates leading 61 to 29 percent in named congressional trial heats.²
- While unmarried women are engaged in this election, they are less engaged than married women and less engaged than voters overall. This Women's Voices Women's Vote Action Fund battleground survey of unmarried women shows that 50 percent of unmarried women are more enthusiastic about voting this year, 30 percent are less. Obviously, these are encouraging numbers, but they compare unfavorably to married women (58 percent more enthusiastic). *This means that, among women, the most progressive group remains the least likely to vote.*
- Unmarried women deliver impressive progressive margins regardless of their other demographic characteristics; Obama and the Democratic congressional candidates lead among older unmarried women, younger unmarried women, college educated unmarried women and non-college educated unmarried women alike. Comparing these results to the results in the Democracy Corps battleground survey shows large marriage gaps among younger voters, older voters, blue collar voters and better educated voters alike.

■ **Figure 1: Marriage Gap**

	Married Women Under 40	Unmarried Women Under 40	Married Women 40 and over	Unmarried Women 40 and over
Obama	50	62	42	56
McCain	48	28	47	30
Marriage gap	32		31	

	White Married Women Under 40	White Unmarried Women Under 40	White Married Women 40 and over	White Unmarried Women 40 and over
Obama	46	53	39	50
McCain	52	37	51	36
Marriage gap	22		26	

² The survey was conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner from August 12-18, 2008, and sponsored by the Women's Voices. Women Vote Action Fund. The survey results are based on telephone interviews with a random sample of 500 registered unmarried women. In order to amplify the sample size, this report includes 281 interviews cases from a Democracy Corps and a NPR survey. The battleground is defined here as the states of Alaska, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, New Mexico, New Hampshire, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin.

A lot of attention has been paid to younger voters this election cycle and with good reason. However, it is worth noting that progressive advantages are particularly large among unmarried younger voters.

Conclusion

The progressive voting patterns we see among women voters are driven in large measure by marital status. Not only do unmarried women deliver huge margins to progressive candidates, but absent their support, progressives would not carry the women's vote at large. Unfortunately, unmarried women vote in fewer numbers than married women. They are 9 points less likely to register and 13 points less likely to vote. In thinking about the women's vote as a whole, it is obviously important to compete among married women, but it critical progressives energize and turn out unmarried women.