

Will Moderate Mitt win the hearts of female voters?

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Moderate Mitt's charm offensive is not working on Caitlin Taylor.

The 23-year-old sociology undergrad and reservist in the Wisconsin Air National Guard meticulously researched the election issues that mattered most to her, including foreign policy and defence. Republican nominee Mitt Romney might have stood a chance with her were it not for his amorphous stand on abortion and vow to end funding for Planned Parenthood.

"The Republican Party doesn't truly understand why some women who can't afford birth control would need to go to Planned Parenthood," Ms. Taylor says of the non-profit that provides health services to low-income women at 820 clinics across the United States. "As someone who goes to Planned Parenthood myself, I just don't think they get it."

Mr. Romney's sudden rise in the polls is largely attributed to the moderate guise he adopted during the Oct. 3 presidential debate, a move aimed in part at shrinking the gaping gender gap that had him trailing President Barack Obama by 20 percentage points in some polls among women. The GOP candidate kept it up this week by insisting, for a few hours anyway, that his agenda included "no legislation with regards to abortion."

If Ms. Taylor is unmoved, plenty of other American women appear to be warming to the kinder, gentler version of Mr. Romney that has emerged since the debate. Several state and national polls this week showed him closing in on Mr. Obama among women voters. A Quinnipiac University poll still had Mr. Obama with a 10-percentage-point lead among women in Wisconsin, but that was down from 13 points before the debate.

Mr. Romney obviously has little hope of winning over women for whom abortion rights are a top election priority. Moderate Mitt, as he has become known, aims to woo married women in the suburbs who might be wavering in their support for Mr. Obama but remain wary of Republican radicalism on reproductive rights and the social safety net.

Can Moderate Mitt hold up all the way until election day? He does not need to win female voters outright, but only prevent Mr. Obama from winning them by double digits.

Mr. Romney, however, is caught between the need to woo these Wal-Mart Moms and the need to shore up support among the hard-right Republican base. Only hours after Mr. Romney uttered his "no abortion legislation" pledge, he told a rally that he would be a "pro-life president." His press secretary also told the conservative National Review that Mr. Romney would "of course support legislation aimed at providing greater protections for life."

The mixed messaging was likely intentional. The base needs constant reassurance in order to turn out and vote for Mr. Romney. His campaign gurus, meanwhile, are betting that there are few female voters out who, like Ms. Taylor, have the time and inclination to research the issues so thoroughly. Busy women who absorb their news in snippets may be understandably confused by Mr. Romney's varying pronouncements on abortion and, hence, may factor it out of their election decision-making altogether.

Indeed, it may be working.

Why else did Mr. Obama this week accuse Mr. Romney of trying to "cloud" his stand on abortion by "hiding positions he's been campaigning on for a year and a half?"

Unfortunately for Mr. Romney, reality keeps interfering with his campaign.

In Thursday's vice-presidential debate, Paul Ryan was unequivocal: "The policy of a Romney administration is to oppose abortion with exceptions for rape, incest and life of the mother."

And what about Missouri GOP Senate candidate Todd Akin, who suggested victims of "legitimate rape" could will away an unwanted pregnancy? He may have done more damage to the Republican brand among women than Mr. Romney can possibly repair.

Even more problematic for Mr. Romney is the fact that there are plenty of Todd Akins in the Republican Party. Wisconsin state assemblyman, Roger Rivard, became the latest Republican to outrage women by telling a local newspaper that "some girls rape easy." He was passing on his father's advice about women who consent to sex only to claim rape later. His remark became national news this week after the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel picked up on it.

For Moderate Mitt, election day cannot come soon enough.