

How Are Women Responding to Candidates' Debate Policy, Tone and Body Language?

TRANSCRIPT

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- [Where They Stand: How Voters, Pollsters and Historians Judge Presidents](#)
- [Campaigns Try to Win Over Women Voters](#)

JEFFREY BROWN: Throughout the presidential race, both sides have made women voters a strong focus.

After last night's exchange, we check in with pollsters from each party without co-wrote the 2005 book "What Women Really Want."

Democrat Celinda Lake is president of Lake Research Partners. Republican Kellyanne Conway is president of The Polling Company and WomanTrend.

Celinda Lake, let's start with you. Pick up on last night first. What did you hear in the words, messages, demeanor insofar as the candidates were trying to reach women voters?

CELINDA LAKE, Democratic pollster: Well, I think they were both trying to reach women voters. And their advertising has shown that as well.

And women are not monolithic. So they both have targets among their women voters.

But if you look at women overall, who will in the end I think be the ultimate swing vet and the decisive vote, you saw them give the highest rating to any comment that Joe Biden made last night to his response on a woman's right to choose, and give Paul Ryan the lowest ratings that he had on his answer on a woman's right to choose.

And I think that Biden was very strong when he said this is not a decision — it's personal decision. It is not a place that politicians and governments should interfere.

The other thing you saw very, very strong among women voters for the Democrats was the strong statement about the middle class.

Women don't want to hear a bunch of statistics, a bunch of acronyms. They want to know, what are you doing to help my family? How are these economic programs going to create jobs in my community, create higher-wage jobs for my husband and myself, or my partner, and give our children a future?

And I think that Joe Biden in his very strong statements about the middle class targeted women voters with those statements.

JEFFREY BROWN: All right, Kellyanne Conway, again picking up on last night, what did you hear?

KELLYANNE CONWAY, Republican pollster: Both Vice President Biden and Congressman Ryan hit some really high notes in terms of convincing America's women that they can have confidence in their competence.

I don't think there was any breakout moment, but if you had the volume off, clearly, Paul Ryan would have been the victor, because quite confounding even to many in the Democratic Party, Vice President Biden was rolling the eyes and speaking in a very snarky manner.

One nonpartisan analysis said he interrupted Paul Ryan more than 80 times. It didn't seem that many, but it certainly seemed like enough. And nobody needs a pollster to tell them that women don't like men who roll their eyes and interrupt other people.

So I think that women respond to both message, messenger and delivery. All three of those are very important to female voters as they assess these candidates.

And why these debates are so important to these women voters, I think three quick reasons. One is they are the "late in the game" deciders. There are several million women in about five or six swing states who will be the deciding factor to whom the next president and vice president are.

Number two, women were told for three straight weeks before last week's disastrous presidential debate for President Obama that the race was other than. President Obama had already won it. Just as women were tuning in, they were being told don't bother, it's already over.

So that debate actually mattered more than it normally would because they encountered a Mitt Romney they weren't expecting and they encountered a Barack Obama they had never before seen.

The third reason is that women — this whole matter of abortion is important to women, but it's not in the top five in anyone's polling.

It's a great conversation spark, and it's very important to women, but it's also baked in the cake, meaning those swing women already know where Romney-Ryan are on abortion and where Obama-Biden are on abortion to a large degree.

They're waiting to hear and more importantly to see something outside of that issue.

And let's just see, does anybody ever talk about men's issues? What are these women's issues? All issues are men's issues. I want to put out that I think all issues should be women's issues.

JEFFREY BROWN: Well, that is a fair point. I always think about asking as a general question.

But to the extent that pollsters like yourselves do look — let me go back to you, Celinda Lake, on this question, because the polls, recent polls in particular, show that Gov. Romney closed what had been a very large gap, especially among women voters, just in the last week.

So what do you think's going on there and what do you think are the issues driving that?

CELINDA LAKE: Well, there are two things going on.

First of all, we need to remember that — and Kellyanne said it as well — women voters didn't like Mitt Romney at all. In fact, by 20 points, they personally disliked him going into that first debate.

They saw a Mitt Romney that was very different than what they had expected and they saw someone that they thought of as much more moderate, much more likable than they expected.

That said, women still were voting for Barack Obama after the debate in the Battleground poll, for example, by 10 points.

And so women are still supporting Obama. Men are still supporting Mitt Romney. And in the battleground states, that's even more.

The biggest difference in the polls were how energized the Democratic women were. A lot of unmarried women, a lot of younger women were not very energized after that first debate. And that's where I think Vice President Biden was a home run.

I think that these women wanted to see someone stand up for the policies they believe in, stand up for a role for government, call malarkey when it is.

And I think you're going to see many more — the Democratic base of women far more energized. And you're going to see women then turn out in higher numbers, which is very, very important to Democratic victories.

JEFFREY BROWN: Well, Kellyanne Conway, let me come back to what you picked up. You can pick up on that, but also just on what you said about how we approach these things, how we think about women's issues per se.

Because we keep hearing that the campaign could well hinge on women voters.

Do you think that is a wrong way of looking at it?

KELLYANNE CONWAY: It is absolutely correct that the next president and vice president will be decided ultimately by women.

But it's absolutely a false premise to believe that there are — quote — “women's issues,” and that they all have to do with, you know, waist down. What about waist up, where our brains and our hearts and our eyes and our ears are?

And I think 2010 really proved it. That's where, two short years after 56 percent of women gave a stratospheric — Barack Obama, 56 percent of the vote was unheard of for a non-incumbent.

And two years after that, women voted Republican over Democrat for the first time in over 40 years at the congressional level. Why?

What were we talking about? Were we talking about abortion or marriage? No. It was mostly all economics. Debt was a four-letter word, deficit, the Tea Party movement, taxes and government spending, the role of government, the reach of government.

And so I think that that cues and clues to 2012 for women lie somewhere between 2008 and 2010. And, sure, chemistry is important to women. Biology is important to women. But, in 2012, the most important issue to them really — subject to them is math.

JEFFREY BROWN: All right, Kellyanne and CelindaLake, thank you both very much.

KELLYANNE CONWAY: Thank you.

CELINDA LAKE: Thank you very much.

JEFFREY BROWN: In her weekly blog post, Gwen Ifill looks at how the campaigns are pitching hard to undecided women voters.

And if you missed any of last night's debate, you can watch the vice presidential matchup in full on our website.