

Swing States poll: Women push Romney into lead

Susan Page, USA TODAY 9:06 p.m. EDT October 15, 2012

(Photo: Charles Dharapak, AP)

Story Highlights

- Romney holds 4-point lead in swing states among likely voters
- Gains made among female voters have been key for the GOP nominee
- Enthusiasm about voting has risen in both parties

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WASHINGTON — Mitt Romney leads President Obama by four percentage points among likely voters in the nation's top battlegrounds, a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll finds, and he has growing enthusiasm among women to thank.

As the presidential campaign heads into its final weeks, the survey of voters in 12 crucial swing states finds female voters much more engaged in the election and increasingly concerned about the deficit and debt issues that favor Romney. The Republican nominee has pulled within one point of the president among women who are likely voters, 48%-49%, and leads by 8 points among men.

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The battle for women, which was apparent in the speakers spotlighted at both political conventions this summer, is likely to help define messages the candidates deliver at the presidential debate Tuesday night and in the TV ads they air during the final 21 days of the campaign. As a group, women tend to start paying attention to election contests later and remain more open to persuasion by the candidates and their ads.

That makes women, especially blue-collar "waitress moms" whose families have been hard-hit by the nation's economic woes, the quintessential swing voters in 2012's close race.

"In every poll, we've seen a major surge among women in favorability for Romney" since his strong performance in the first debate, veteran Democratic pollster Celinda Lake says. "Women went into the debate actively disliking Romney, and they came out thinking he might understand their lives and might be able to get something done for them."

While Lake believes Obama retains an edge among women voters, the changed views of Romney could be "a precursor to movement" to the Republican candidate, she says. "It opens them up to take a second look, and that's the danger for Obama."

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Female voters are a critical part of the president's coalition. Four years ago, he led Republican rival John McCain by a single point among men, according to surveys of voters as they left polling places. The decisive Democratic margin of victory came from women, who supported Obama by 13 points.

Now, the USA TODAY/Gallup Poll shows Romney leading Obama 50%-46% among likely voters in the swing states. Men who are likely voters back him 52%-44%. The states are Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Romney pollster Neil Newhouse says the poll shows "encouraging movement" in the wake of the first debate in Denver. Obama pollster Joel Benenson calls the method used to identify likely voters flawed.

"In the last election, Gallup's registered voter model — not its likely voter model — was a much more accurate predictor, with their likely model missing the mark in 2010 by 9 points right before the election," Benenson says. "That explains why Gallup's results are way out of line with a dozen recent swing state polls that show the president with a double-digit lead among women."

Among all registered voters in the survey, Obama leads by nine points among women and by two points overall, 49%-47%.



President Obama is now tied with Mitt Romney among women who are likely voters in 12 swing states. (Photo: Mandel Ngan, AFP/Getty Images)

The poll of 1,023 registered voters, including 869 likely voters, was taken Oct. 5-11 — just after the first presidential debate and before the second one in Hempstead, N.Y. It is the 10th in USA TODAY's series of surveys in the swing states that, in the Electoral College system, are likely to determine the outcome. For the first time, with Election Day looming, the poll includes a screen to identify likely voters.

Romney's improved standing among female voters is "likely to cause major consternation among Obama supporters," says Richard Eichenberg, a Tufts University political scientist who is studying gender differences in state-level polling with Elizabeth Robinson. "If Mr. Romney has tied President Obama among women in swing states, then he has likely taken a step toward winning the election.

"But a word of caution is necessary," Eichenberg adds. "Although swing states share many similarities, President Obama's support among women is holding up well in some of them and less well in others. For example, his support among women is largely unchanged since the first debate in Ohio and Wisconsin, but it is definitely down in Colorado, Virginia and Florida."

The politics of gender

Newhouse declines to detail what the Romney campaign's internal polls show, but he says that after the first debate Romney's support rose among both men and women.

He calls female voters critical in the campaign's closing weeks. "In general, women tend to be later decision-makers than men and the Obama campaign has gone out of their way to run a negative campaign against Governor Romney among women," Newhouse says. "The first debate had a significant impact on these voters as they watched it and Governor Romney appeared nothing like the candidate that was essentially a caricature in the advertising by the Obama campaign. It's these voters who began to realize that the picture being painted of him was not reality."

To be sure, there continues to be a gender gap, a phenomenon in most presidential elections since Ronald Reagan won the White House in 1980 with disproportionate support from men. Now, the gender gap is nine points — that is, there is a nine-point disparity between the support men and women give Obama and Romney.

That disparity has narrowed since last spring, when the gender gap was about 20 points among registered voters in Swing States polls taken in March, April and May. The gender gap drops to 13 points among registered voters in the latest survey.

It narrows even more among likely voters in part because Republicans continue to be more enthusiastic about voting than Democrats are — one of the measures considered in determining who will actually cast a ballot. Other factors include previous voting history, knowledge about where to go to vote and thought given to the election.

Benenson says Gallup's likely voter screen includes questions that make it harder for those who move frequently to be counted as likely voters. That includes some groups that tend to vote Democratic, including young people, city dwellers and those who rent rather than own their homes. "This could explain why there is a big shift towards Republicans when they move from registered to likely voters," he says.

Gallup notes that its likely voter model predicted a slightly more Democratic outcome than the actual results in the last two presidential elections, in 2008 and 2004. In both, the likely voter model more accurately predicted the final outcome than the registered-voter sample.

The USA TODAY findings are consistent with a nationwide Pew Research Center Poll taken after the first presidential debate and released last week. Obama's 18-point lead among women in mid-September evaporated in Pew's October survey, showing him tied 47%-47% with Romney among female likely voters.

Enthusiasm about voting has risen in both parties: 41% of Democrats and 45% of Republicans in the USA TODAY poll now say they are "extremely enthusiastic" about voting for president this year, a significant jump since June, before the conventions. Among women, the rise is particularly steep — perhaps reflecting the tendency among many women to tune into elections later than men.

The percentage of female registered voters who are extremely enthusiastic about voting has doubled since June and tripled from October 2011, when the first Swing States poll was taken. Women, who consistently had lagged men, are now more engaged: 41% of women and 35% of men report being extremely enthusiastic.

Among women, more Romney supporters are extremely enthusiastic than Obama supporters, 46% versus 38%. Married women, who tend to vote Republican, are more enthusiastic than unmarried women, who tend to vote Democratic.

Marge Joefreda, 73, of Wainville, Ohio, "pretty much decided" to vote for Romney after watching the Denver debate.

"I was shocked at President Obama's responses; I didn't understand it at all," she says. The retired real-estate broker from suburban Dayton was among those called in the poll. She liked what she heard from Romney about his specific economic proposals, "anything that has to do with people running their own businesses and less government." And she approves of Romney's running mate, Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan.

"Between the two of them, they ought to be able to get this country out of some of the mess we're in," she says.

Karen Farrell, 42, of Alexandria, Va., watched the first debate, too. She calls the president's performance perplexing. "He didn't bring his 'A' game," she says. Even so, Farrell, who works for a non-profit organization focused on international development, has decided to vote for Obama, as she did in 2008. "We're digging out of a very deep well and one can't reverse course," she says.

Men and women have somewhat different perspectives on the role of government: 56% of men say the federal government is trying to do too much, compared with 48% of women. They also differ on what issues are most important in influencing their vote for president. At the top of the list for men is the federal budget deficit and national debt; the top issue among women is health care.

At the same time, concern about the deficit and debt has increased dramatically among women: 50% call it extremely important, up from 35% in a March poll in the battleground states. Then, it was fourth on a list of five issues among women. Now, it ranks second.

That plays to Romney's strength. By 52% to 43%, those surveyed say Romney would better handle the deficit and debt. He and Obama are tied at 48% on who would better handle the economy and manage national defense and terrorism. Obama has a two-point lead on health care.

The president's strongest issue by far, 56%-35%, is handling government policies concerning birth control, an issue in the news because of a requirement in the new health care law, the Affordable Care Act, that contraceptives be covered by insurance policies. Nearly a third of women call that issue extremely important to determining their vote, double the number of men who said so.

The economy versus abortion

Men were asked an open-ended question: What is the most important issue for men in this election? Three of four said either jobs or the economy, and 10% cited the federal budget deficit or the need for a balanced budget.

When women were asked to identify the most important issue for women, though, the answers were strikingly different. The top concern by far was abortion, an issue that didn't even register among men. Nearly four in 10 women cited it, and those who did supported Obama by more than 3-1. Fifteen percent cited equal rights, pay or opportunity.

That could signal an opening for Obama among women in the second debate and the final 21 days of the campaign. Romney said during the Republican primaries that *Roev. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision recognizing a right to abortion, should be overturned. He promised to eliminate federal funding for Planned Parenthood clinics that provide health services for women.

Those issues are why Nicole Prins, 23, of Alto, Mich., decided a few months ago to vote for Obama. "He has a better record with women's issues than Governor Romney," says Prins, who is going back to school to become a registered nurse. She mentions Planned Parenthood, birth control and abortion rights. "Republicans want to take that away."

Still, more than a third of women cite jobs and the economy as the most important issues for women in this election.

Mary Edwards, 46, of Wilson, N.C., plans to vote for Romney. "I'm not completely confident Romney is going to be the answer," she says, but "I think we do need some major changes.

"Women are really hurting out there for jobs," she says. In her view, that makes the economy the top issue for women. For men, too.

Correction: This story has been revised after incorrect numbers were discovered in a statistical analysis that calculated the standing among likely voters. The correct numbers show that Mitt Romney leads President Obama by 50%-46% among likely voters in the swing states, not by 51%-46%. Women are divided 49% for Obama, 48% for Romney, not tied at 48% each. And men support Romney by 52%-44%, not by 54%-42%.