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Women voters

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Oct 23rd 2008 | TROY, MICHIGAN
From The Economist print edition

John McCain has tried to win women's votes, but Barack Obama still leads

ONE month ago Kim Francisco seemed like the Obama campaign's worst nightmare. White, married and blue-collar, Ms Francisco fits into the group John McCain has tried to woo away from Barack Obama—not least by choosing Sarah Palin as his running-mate. And on September 26th wooed she was, wearing a Hillary Clinton cap and a Sarah Palin button to a McCain event in Michigan. But fears that Ms Francisco and her kind will topple Mr Obama are proving unfounded. Women across the country favour the Democratic nominee, by 54% to Mr McCain's 39%, according to Gallup's most recent poll. Indeed women support Mr Obama by a greater margin than they did John Kerry (51% to George Bush's 48%) or Al Gore (54% to 43%).

Women vote in larger numbers than men, and have done so in every election since 1964. Mr McCain's great hope has been to win a greater share of white women. Working-class women who supported Mrs Clinton during the primaries are particularly good targets, as are married suburbanites, older women and small-business owners, says Susan Carroll of the Centre for American Women and Politics. Mrs Palin, the early wisdom went, would help in the endeavour.

The reality has turned out to be more complicated. True, the pro-gun, pro-God, pro-life mother of five has appealed to some women. When Mrs Palin drew nearly 20,000 to a rally in Indiana on October 17th, Janice Legg took a short cut through a ravine so as not to be late. She explained that Mrs Palin is "like us" and is the reason she will vote for Mr McCain. Others are less keen. A whopping 60% of women aged 50 and younger have a negative view of Mrs Palin, according to a poll released by the Pew Research Centre on October 21st. Mrs Palin has also had only a fleeting impact on white women. After the Republican convention white women favoured Mr McCain over Mr Obama by 51% to 40%, according to Gallup. They now favour Mr Obama by 47% to 46%.

The financial crisis and growing doubts about Mrs Palin have boosted support for Mr Obama. But it also helps that he has targeted women for months. Efforts have included speeches, discussion groups and reports that describe his plans' economic impact on women. Michelle Obama has campaigned with gusto, as have a long list of female Democrats. Mrs Clinton has also joined in, though attempts to win her supporters have not been seamless. PUMA (the acronym is for Party Unity My Ass) is one of the groups less than thrilled by Mr Obama's ascent. Still, he has made progress. A *Washington Post*/ABC News poll on October 13th found 81% of Mrs Clinton's voters supporting Mr Obama.

Despite the high-profile efforts mentioned above, the campaign's most striking activity is on the ground. Driven by internet organising, volunteering has taken many forms, from phone banks to canvassing and small gatherings. A house party last month in Ozaukee County, Wisconsin, saw some 40 women and a few brave husbands stream through Lynn Handler's front door, past a sundae bar (for later) to the living room, where they discussed Mr Obama's record on abortion rights, equal pay, domestic violence and women's health.

Mr McCain has left traditional women's issues to Mr Obama—in the final debate the Republican candidate derided women's "health" as an excuse for abortions. The campaign is instead pursuing women through broad arguments of character, leadership and policy—something similar to the appeal to "security moms" that worked well for George Bush in 2004. "Women for McCain" coalitions have been rolled out in key states; women's phone-banks are held each Monday. But time is running out. In 1984 Geraldine Ferraro at first achieved a bump in the polls for her running mate, Walter Mondale. But the pair lost the election anyway.

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