

Single women may decide the 2004 elections

By Allison Stevens
WOMEN'S E-NEWS

WASHINGTON — Are single women the soccer moms of 2004? That's what some national Democrats are betting on as they gear up for this year's presidential election.

Democratic activists are basing their convictions on a study of unmarried women released late last month that showed that single women are more progressive than the average voter but are less likely to vote in national elections. Democrats contend that if they could reverse that trend and persuade more single women to go to the polls on Election Day, they could tap into a gold mine of new supporters and tilt what is now regarded as a difficult race for the White House in their favor.

"If unmarried women voted at the same rate as married women, they would have a decisive impact on this election and could be the most important agents of change in modern politics," said Stan Greenberg, a Democratic pollster who conducted the survey and is chair of Washington-based Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research.

Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster who conducted the study with Greenberg, agreed. "Unmarried women represent millions more voters with very clear concerns about the economy, health care and education," said Lake, president of Washington-based Lake Snell Perry and Associates, Inc. "They want big changes and a more progressive agenda that addresses their economic worries most of all."

Greenberg and Lake polled more than 1,000 unmarried women — defined as those under 65 who never married

or who are divorced, widowed or separated — between Oct. 23 and Nov. 19, 2003. The respondents crossed racial, economic, and geographical boundaries and included women with and without children.

The survey showed that single women could have changed the outcome of the protracted presidential election in 2000 had they voted at the same rate as married women. Nationwide, 68 percent of married women voted in the 2000 presidential elections, according to the survey. But only 52 percent of single women voted — a phenomenon that sucked some 6 million potential voters out of a contest that hinged on a little more than half a million votes.

In the pivotal state of Florida, single women may have been able to turn what was a nail-biter into a landslide if they had voted at the same rate as the average voter in that state. Fifty-two percent of unmarried registered women cast a ballot in Florida, compared to 60 percent of the state's registered voters, according to the survey. Had unmarried women voted at the same rate as the average voter, the study showed they would have expanded the electorate by 202,640 votes — a figure that would have dwarfed the 537-vote margin in the heated battle for Florida's 25 electoral votes.

The election results prompted Democrats to begin a campaign to increase the number of registered and voting single women, a group that comprises about a fifth of the electorate. Democrats contend that if this wealth of progressive voters pull the lever at even a marginally higher rate this year, they could turn some of the states that backed President George Bush in

2000 into ones that will back the Democratic nominee on Nov. 2.

When it comes to economic and domestic policies, such as the future of Social Security, reproductive rights and health care, unmarried women "strongly support the positions of the Democratic Party," said Ann Lewis, chair of the Democratic National Committee's Women's Vote Center. "We know they are more likely, when they hear the differences between the parties, to vote for the Democratic Party."

Democrats began to study and reach out to this key demographic as early as 2000. By 2002, The Democratic National Committee had launched a program called Democratic Voices where media strategists trained women to spread the party's message to their friends and colleagues. This approach is an effective way to reach single women, Lewis said, because they tend to rely more on personal contacts than media or government sources for political information.

In 2002, Democratic strategists taught 750 women in a dozen battleground states in the Southwest and Midwest how to spread the Democratic message strategy to their friends, family members and colleagues. These "messengers" were trained to give speeches, field questions, and make an argument on air and on paper. After their training, the women received "regular talking point memos via email. The Democratic National Committee plans to build upon the program this year but it has not finalized plans yet, Lewis said.

More recently, two politically active women, Page Gardner and Christina

Desser, launched Women's Voices: Women Vote to study the voting habits of single women and increase their participation in the political process. Gardner, a political strategist, says the group commissioned the survey to lay the groundwork for their next step: a "turnkey" program that can be used across the country to increase registration and voting among unmarried women. The project will promote early voting and vote-by-mail programs as well as a get-out-the-vote drive on Election Day.

Republicans dismiss Democrats' claims that they have a lock on single women and instead say they are not targeting specific populations of voters over others.

"We are reaching out to all voters — African American voters, Hispanic voters, married men, single men," said Christine Iverson, a spokesperson for the Republican National Committee. "The Bush Administration and the Republican Party has supported a number of policies that appeal to a broad cross-section of working Americans."

At the same time, Republicans are not willing to cede any ground to Democrats when it comes to female voters. The Republican National Committee, for example, has launched a program called Winning Women, designed to recruit and train female candidates for public office and to reach out to female voters, Iverson said. She added that GOP policies, such as the \$1.35 trillion tax cut package enacted in 2001 and the \$350 billion tax cut package enacted in 2003, will draw all women to their party.

In fact, the survey found that single women are not tied to a single political

party. But Democrats found reason to believe they might support their candidates given that they are more likely to hold progressive views on social policy issues such as abortion, gun control and gay rights. Single women are also more likely to struggle financially and are more concerned about their financial viability than are married women. Democrats also took heart from one of the survey's more dramatic findings: 65

percent of the respondents said the country is headed in the wrong direction, a number that suggests many are dissatisfied with the status quo and may seek a change in November.

Nay-sayers abound, however. Members of this disparate group hold a range of political views and cannot be typecast as easily as more ideologically coherent groups, such as southern white men or members of labor unions, analysts said.

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