

## 'A powerful group': How parties are courting the female factor

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Canwest News Service

*Sunday, October 05, 2008*

Women - the target of campaign tactics from warm-and-fuzzy commercials aired on female-centric specialty channels to family focused promises - are centre stage in the election arena.

"They want our votes. Being 52 per cent of the population, we can be a very powerful group," says Jennifer Sweeney, president of the Canadian Women Voters Congress, which encourages women to participate in the political process. "However, I think people assume that women will vote for the same things, that we're all somewhat alike."

Women have more diversified voting habits than men and more of them gravitate to parties that focus on social and environmental issues, says Darrell Bricker, CEO of Ipsos Reid Public Affairs. Ipsos polls show women are more likely to support the Liberals, NDP and Greens than men, and for the NDP and Greens, that support is highest among female voters aged 18 to 34.

The Liberals have traditionally received "a real bonus out of the women's vote," Bricker says, but that advantage is slipping.

The biggest reason is lack of confidence in the leadership of the party, believes Kathy Brock, a political studies professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. An environmental "tug of war" among the left-of-centre parties is also causing the Liberals to lose female support to the NDP and Green party, she adds.

"The Liberals are a little later off the mark," she says, adding that the party is now airing ads with female voice-overs talking about what Stephen Harper's economic policies mean for them. "I think perhaps they took it for granted at first, but now they realize they really have to shore up the vote there."

For the Conservatives, female voters are a traditional weak spot they're trying to



CREDIT: Reuters

Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion cuts a piece of his birthday cake after speaking at the Liberal Celebration of Women in Politics rally during a campaign stop in Toronto.

turn into a new source of support, she says.

According to analysis by PunditsGuide.ca, women are the minority in just 42 of 308 federal ridings.

"The Conservatives know they've got to pull some of that vote if they're going to come ahead in some of the ridings where they're close," Brock says.

According to a Conservative source, the party is "narrowcasting" its advertising message on specialty networks and TV shows that are popular among women, such as YTV and the Food Network, and in movie theatres before family friendly films. They have identified voting groups by nickname and decided they are not going after "Zoey," a hip urban woman who eats organic vegetables, but instead are targeting "Sheila," a suburban mother of two who drives a mini-van.

"The lowest hanging fruits would be moms with two children," the Conservative says. "With each child you have, the more likely you are to vote Conservative."

Ads featuring a sweater-vested Stephen Harper are an effort to soften up his image with female voters, the party source says, and an ad entitled "\$1,200" that claims the Liberals will revoke the Universal Child Care Benefit is also specifically aimed at that demographic.

The Harper "makeover" ads are a "brilliant" way to connect with female voters, says Nadine Changfoot, a professor of politics at Trent University in Peterborough, Ont.

She showed the spot in which Harper discusses his relationship with his son to her class, and one of her students immediately concluded he must be in favour of childcare since he's a devoted father, she says.

Campaign proposals aren't crafted according to the whims of focus groups or other opinion research, says former Liberal party strategist John Duffy, but voter feedback tells parties which pre-drafted policies to pull off the shelf and go with.

"When it works, it moves large amounts of votes," he says. "If you can bring together a policy, a leader and a concern that's out there in the public, lightning can strike."

But in focusing on certain voting segments, it's a mistake to assume an entire gender can be wooed by the same message or campaign promises, Sweeney says.

People never talk about "men's issues" as a niche interest in the same way they speak of women's issues, she says, and there's a mistaken perception that women don't care about topics such as the economy, budgets or crime.

Other issues such as education and childcare are treated as female-specific when they should be of importance to all voters who want strong communities, she adds.

"I don't have children but I care about the children in my neighbourhood and I want them to grow up happy and healthy," says Sweeney. "But I don't think that

makes me any different from my husband."

Women are also participating as candidates in record numbers in this campaign. In all, there are 446 women running in this election, compared to 379 in 2006 and 377 in 2004.

According to PunditsGuide.ca, the Liberals have 113 female candidates comprising 37 per cent of their national slate, while the NDP has 105 women representing 34 per cent of its candidates. With 89 female candidates, the Green party has 29 per cent, while the Conservatives are fielding 63 women candidates or 21 per cent of their total. Twenty-one of the Bloc's 75 Quebec candidates are women, amounting to 28 per cent of the total.

But Canada currently ranks 51st internationally in terms of elected female representatives, below countries like Burundi and United Arab Emirates, says Francoise Gagnon, executive director of Equal Voice, which promotes the election of women.

"If we'd gone to the Olympics and we'd placed 51st, every columnist in this country would be writing, 'What's wrong with our sports funding? Why aren't we promoting athletes?'" she says. "Well, we're 51st internationally in terms of female representation. It's not because we don't have qualified, educated, articulate women in this country. Why aren't we addressing the barriers?"

-With files from Andrew Mayeda

## **FACTBOX:**

Trent University politics professor Nadine Changfoot gives her take on each party's ideal female voter:

### **Conservatives**

Age: 40s, 50s

Income: Makes ends meet plus some (above average)

Location: Lives in urban, suburban area

Education: College or university

Family: Married with children; children are in college or university. Has senior parent(s).

Hot button issue: Family and economic stability

### **Liberals**

Age: 30s and up

Income: Makes ends meet plus some (above average)

Location: Lives in urban, suburban area

Education: College or university

Family: Married with or without children; children are in college or university

Hot button issue: Change from Conservative party

### **NDP**

Age: 20s and up

Income: Working hard to make ends meet

Family: Married with or without children

Hot button issue: Family and personal needs aren't being met the way they'd like (i.e. no doctor, jobs that pay the bills, child care); believes in publicly funded child care, job creation programs, health care.

### **Green party**

Age: 20s-30s, younger generation

Income: Working hard to make ends meet

Family: Single or married; no children (yet)

Hot button issue: Environment; need for change from political establishment

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