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COMMENTARY

Wooing the unmarried female non-voter

By Ellen Goodman

There are times when political polling reminds me of one of Liz Carpenter's favorite stories. Back in the Carter administration when the indomitable Texan was working on women's rights, she asked a university president how his campus was broken down by sex. "Well, ma'am," he answered thoughtfully, "liquor is more of a problem."

Over the years, sexual breakdowns became a regular feature in the polling firmament. The gender gap was discovered and then elevated to a truism, and finally divided into various subsets of the gene pool.

We had long treatises and longer campaigns built around Soccer Moms and Security Moms, not to mention NASCAR Dads. And we added something new, something borrowed and something blue to the 2004 analysis: an intra-gender gap called the marriage gap. Married women leaned to the right. Single women leaned to the left.

The story of the hour was Sex and the Single Voter, as if unmarried women formed a cohort of Manolo Blahnik Wearers for Kerry. In reality, they were more Payless. But in the end, 62 percent of unmarried women voters picked Kerry and 55 percent of married women voters chose Bush.

The good news for the Democrats was and is that unmarried women are the most progressive block in the demographic neighborhood. The bad news is that they were and are less likely to vote. In 2004, 59 percent of unmarried women voted compared to 71 percent of married women.

In the words of Republican pollster and soundbitetress Kellyanne Conway, "Women who have what we call the four magic M's — marriage, munchkins, mortgages and mutual funds — are much more likely to vote." And vote Republican.

Women who are unmarried because of three magic D's — delay, divorce and death — are more likely to vote Democratic. But less likely to vote at all.

Fast-forward now to the onset of the 2006 election cycle. Many believe the best place for Democrats to go fishing for new voters is in the pond of 20 million single women who either aren't registered or don't vote.

Enter Anna Greenberg, who conducted a survey for Women's Voices, Women's Vote to figure out why they aren't trekking to the polling booths.

It turns out that single men who don't vote are mostly young and disaffected. Single women are spread out further along the age spectrum, clustered lower on the economic scale, and more likely to believe in a role for government in their lives.

But here is the nut. "Unmarried men are cynical about politics and policymakers," says Greenberg. "Unmarried women are insecure about politics." They know less, are more likely to admit it, and a good half told her that people shouldn't vote unless they are informed.

This isn't just a matter of boys raising their hands in class first. We know, alas, that women are less informed about objective facts such as, say, how many justices serve on the Supreme Court. In my least-favorite footnote to the 2004 campaign, 40 percent of Americans believed incorrectly that Saddam Hussein was connected to 9/11. But there was another sex breakdown: 29 percent of men and 51 percent of women believed it.

The information gap may be due to women's overwhelmingly busier lives. Single women especially have less money and more kids than single men. But it may also be due to the media gap. In the gendered media world, men are the target audience of talk radio where the subject is sports and politics, and the style is anger. Women are a prime audience for "Oprah" and reality shows where the subject is relationships and the style is empathy.

Even Jon Stewart's "Daily Show," where young people get their "news" hit with a pox on both houses, has barely a woman on staff or screen. Meanwhile, "American Idol" draws votes from some 30 million viewers but doesn't require them to register for the real election.

This year, I am sure Democrats will look for ways to, um, engage single women without ignoring wives. Even if Democrats are the preferred party of the unwed, we won't see them promoting an anti-marriage platform.

Greenberg insists that saying "I do" does not mean saying "I do become a Republican." The marriage gap does not come from sleeping with the enemy or being drafted by Republican husbands. Divorced women are not likely to change politics when they find new partners. Those who marry young and stay married may be more conservative to begin with. These are somewhat different economic and social groups.

As for the growing cohort of young women who have delayed marriage? Greenberg is convinced that they will bring their more progressive views with them on the honeymoon.

Well, she ought to know. The 37-year-old pollster is getting married today. The groom, she adds quickly, is a Democrat.

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