

August 29, 2008

Can Sarah Palin Appeal to White, Female Independents?

Biggest gender gap is among those who are white and independent

by Frank Newport

PRINCETON, NJ -- John McCain's surprise selection of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his vice presidential running mate raises again the issue of gender in presidential politics. McCain, as is typical of Republican presidential candidates, does significantly less well among women than among men, and an analysis of more than 25,000 Gallup Poll Daily tracking interviews in August shows that the biggest gender gap is among whites who are independents.

Here are the key points relating to gender and presidential politics:

1. Among all registered voters Gallup has interviewed in August (through Aug. 28), McCain wins over Obama by a 6-point, 48% to 42% margin among men, while Obama wins among women by a 10-point, 49% to 39% margin. The swing in the margin of support for the two candidates between genders is thus 16 points.

Support for Presidential Candidates, by Gender

Among registered voters

■ % Obama ■ % McCain



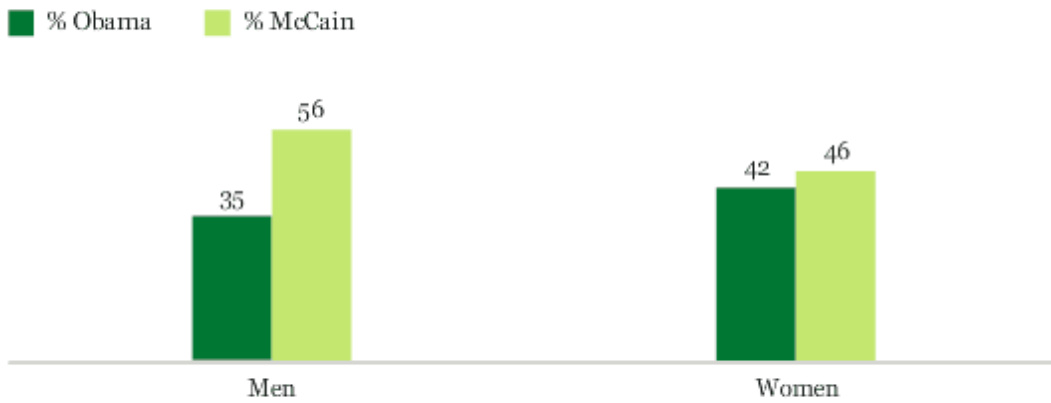
Gallup Poll Daily tracking, Aug. 1-28, 2008

GALLUP POLL

2. Most of this gender gap is evident among whites; there is little difference by gender in candidate support among blacks or Hispanics.

Support for Presidential Candidates, by Gender

Among non-Hispanic white registered voters



Gallup Poll Daily tracking, Aug. 1-28, 2008

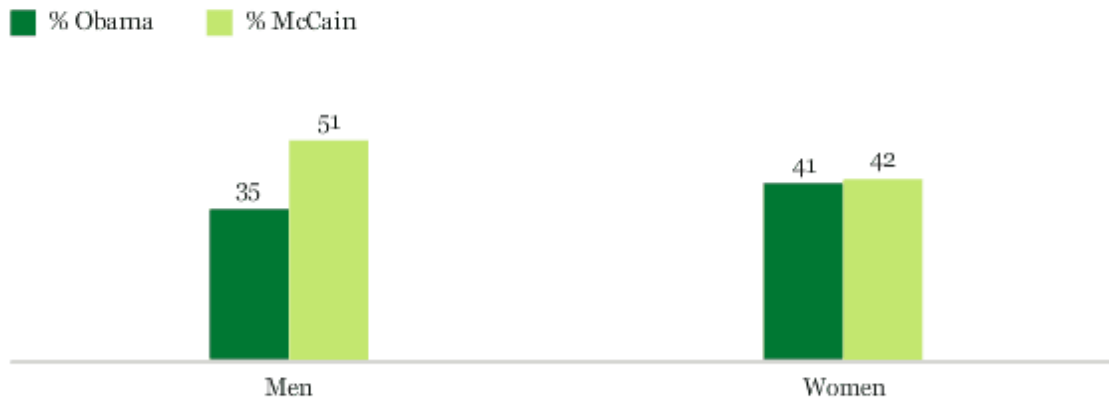
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Black registered voters very strongly support Obama over McCain regardless of gender. Hispanics also support Obama, although at a lower level, but there is also little meaningful difference by gender. Among (non-Hispanic) whites, however, it's a different story. White men favor McCain by 21 points, while white women support McCain by a much smaller 4 points. In other words, there is a 17-point swing by gender in candidate support among whites.

3. Among whites, most of the gender difference can be narrowed down to differences within independents.

Support for Presidential Candidates, by Gender

Among independent non-Hispanic white registered voters



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White Republicans overwhelmingly support McCain over Obama, and that doesn't differ meaningfully by gender. White Democrats overwhelmingly support Obama, and that too doesn't vary by gender. But there is a big swing in support by gender among independents -- individuals who in response to an initial party identification question say they do not identify with either party. White male independents go strongly for McCain, by a 16-point margin, while white female independents are evenly divided, 41% for Obama and 42% for McCain. This represents a 15-point swing by gender in candidate support.

Implications

There is a significant gender gap in American presidential politics today, but it is confined for the most part to white voters who are politically independent. There is very little difference in presidential vote choice by gender among blacks and Hispanics, and among whites who are Republican or Democratic in their political identification.

Many assume that McCain's choice of a female running mate could increase his chances among female voters. If that is the case, it would appear that white independent women -- who are currently split almost down the middle in terms of their candidate support -- would be most susceptible to changing sides, given the strongly skewed (and gender-neutral) existing vote choice among blacks, Hispanics, and loyal partisans.

Additionally, of course, McCain's selection may have been designed as much to help reinforce loyalty from his conservative Republican base as it was to change voters' minds. If that was the case, it would be Gov. Palin's conservative positions on issues -- including abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, and taxes -- more than her gender that would be the operative factor.

Survey Methods

Results are based on telephone interviews with 25,007 registered voters, aged 18 and older, conducted Aug. 1-28, 2008 as part of the Gallup Poll Daily tracking program. For results based on the total sample of national adults, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 1 percentage point.

Interviews are conducted with respondents on land-line telephones (for respondents with a land-line telephone) and cellular phones (for respondents who are cell-phone only).

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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