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In weak economy, an opening to court votes of single women

By Shaila Dewan
New York Times

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LAS VEGAS -- Being single, Alyson Sheradin had no one to rely on when the financial crisis hit. She lost the considerable savings she had tucked away after selling her business in 2002, and struggled to find work as a business consultant, recently moving in with a friend in the suburbs who does not charge her rent.

Sheradin, 49, a registered Libertarian, voted Republican in 2008. But now, as she weighs competing inclinations -- she believes Americans should have health care but is wary of President Barack Obama's plan; she bristles at burdens on small business but also at constraints on women's rights -- she is not so sure.

"I am definitely a swing vote," she said over a pizza lunch with single friends. "I have no idea."

As much as Sheradin is up for grabs in this election, so too are the legions of unmarried women who helped lift Obama to victory in 2008. Single women are one of the country's fastest-growing demographic groups -- there are 1.8 million more now than just two years ago. They make up a quarter of the voting-age population nationally, and even more in several swing states, including Nevada.

And though they lean Democratic -- in a recent New York Times/CBS News poll, single women favored Obama over his Republican rival, Mitt Romney, by 29 points -- they are also fickle about casting their ballots, preoccupied with making ends meet and alienated from a political system they say is increasingly deaf to their concerns.

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But the Obama campaign, needing their support to offset traditional Republican strength among married women, is lavishing attention on them. Obama and his allies are highlighting issues like Romney's support for cutting federal funds to Planned Parenthood, which they say resonate with single women and that help draw a contrast between the two sides. A new Obama ad calling Romney "out of touch" with average women on health and contraception issues began running last weekend in battleground states.

"It's a very Democratic voting population, but it's not registered or turning out at the same rate as their married counterparts," said Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster who has canvassed single women for the Voter Participation Center in Washington, pointing out that Obama had won among single women by a wide margin, but lost married women by 3 percentage points.

In 2010, though, turnout among single women, especially 18-29 year olds, dropped more than for other groups, and Republicans won the women's vote for the first time in 30 years. "The terrain is very fertile," Lake continued, "but we have to till the field."

Both campaigns say they are not drafting messages specifically for single women, even though single women have strikingly different concerns and voting habits than married women.

"How many campaigns start out with an ad that shows a happily married candidate, perfect kids, and talk about the marriage tax credit?" Lake asked. "And you wonder why single women don't turn out to vote."



The economy has damped enthusiasm among even core members of Obama's base. In 2008, Carolyn Essex, 52, a black single mother in Las Vegas, knocked on doors and held house parties for Obama.

Not this year. Essex and her 9-year-old son are a step away from homelessness, living in transitional housing. "Right now," she said, "what's more important is that I find a job." (After the interview, Essex was offered a job at a casino, but said she would continue to focus on attaining stability rather than the election.)

Democrats say single women are highly motivated by women's issues like threats to abortion rights, access to contraception and equal pay, arguing that what seem like social issues have a direct impact on their bottom line.

But Republicans insist those concerns have been trumped by the poor economy. "Rome is burning -- our country's burning -- and you're concerned about these issues?" asked Maureen Karas, southern director for the Nevada Federation of Republican Women. "Birth control pills are like nine bucks. That's like two lattes."

Opinion research shows that single women are less responsive to issues that have no immediate bearing on their daily lives, like corporate tax rates or the federal debt.

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Tabitha Farr, a 32-year-old divorced mother of two whose income as a waitress has plummeted since the recession, agreed. "Deficit?" she said. "No. I think about, 'Can I pay for my child care this week?'"

In several interviews, women of various political stripes said they believed the president could do little to help them personally, or bolster prosperity in general.

"I feel like it doesn't matter how I vote, what I think. They're going to do what they're going to do anyway," said Jeannine Loewy, 35, a divorced mother of two and a hairstylist who has lost a quarter of her clients since the recession. "And we just have to deal with it."

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