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Politicians find 'women's vote' not so simple

By JULIET FLETCHER, Staff Writer, 609-272-7251 | Posted: Wednesday, September 30, 2009 |

Call it "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pols."

In less than a week, the two leading candidates for governor have pushed women's issues to the top of their agenda.

After incumbent Gov. Jon S. Corzine pushed his Republican opponent Chris Christie with campaign ads that needled his position on providing health care to women, Christie made it this week's job to fight back - with new ads and a chatty outreach strategy.

Women are a key to winning, as New Jersey politicians of the recent past have learned. With a slightly higher voter registration rate than men, they have been considered part of the core Democratic Party base. A recent poll conducted Sept. 15-17 by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College found that women expressed more support for Corzine than for Christie.

So at a library in Camden County on Monday night, the Republican challenger said he wanted to pull up a chair and have what he called one of his "Conversations With Women."

Someone bought doughnuts and others wondered whether the night promised less political discourse and more of a coffee klatch.

But Jane Russell knew where this was going.

The 85-year-old from Gloucester Township used to work as a doctor. Whether remembering the praise heaped periodically by politicians on health professionals or on women voters, she made it clear she was tired of feeling like a campaign bargaining chip. When Christie implored the women present not to write off all politicians as the same, Russell stuck her hand in the air.

"I've said that!" she yelped. "I've been the one saying that!"

Though her hand was raised almost as if in religious witness, Russell didn't give much sign of repenting.

"When you get to my age, you feel you've heard all of this before," she said afterward, her impatience showing.

But what demographics fail to show is that the profile of a female voter no longer can be summed up simply, nor pandered to.

In more ways than one, Christie acknowledged later that his Camden County conversation opened a can of, if not whup-ass, then at least passion, directed fiercely at him by the assembled breadwinners, educators and small-business owners -all of whom happened to be female. In an economy that many called "disastrous," most in the crowd didn't want to talk of "women's issues," choosing instead universal issues - unemployment, health coverage and education.

Gisele Love thought she knew why.

"Women, I'd say, are the barometers," she said. "We hear the husband's gripes, and the children's thoughts and feelings. So we know what's going on in the schoolyard and at our own workplace."

"We're also in the neighborhood," she added. "We hear from every quarter."

Christie, chugging bottled water after the two-hour question-and-answer session, said that despite attacks by Corzine about mammogram coverage, he had not polled on women voters' intentions. He said he preferred "to go with my gut" and schedule the conversations across the state. But having collected local female voters for a chat, he seemed happy to admit they were as varied as anyone else in their outlook.

"We heard about everything from pensions, to job security, to health care, to taxes," he said.

"They're no different in that respect than the things men care about."

He wasn't alone in his gallantry.

"Women care about exactly the same issues as men - they just discuss them in a language they're comfortable with," state Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-Bergen, Corzine's running mate, said Tuesday. She said Christie's camp was trying to "back away" from their original comments on mandate-free health coverage.

And from Chris Daggett: "Ultimately I believe men and women have the same interest in making this state a better state." The issue about mammograms, he said, was an important issue, but paled in comparison to the financial problems faced by the state as a whole.

But to anyone still bent on wooing female voters, there's a further wrinkle.

Andi Blizzard, 53, waited to put three points to Christie: She watched her husband recently wait two months to restart his unemployment benefits; the state's job market had driven her kids to work out of state; and personally, as a trained teacher, she raged against the standardized tests

taught in public schools.

But Jean Morschauser, 78, left without asking a question. Now retired, she had worked in her husband's dental office. Her generation grew up with wildly different expectations than women Blizzard's age did. As Morschauser put it while she put on her coat, the younger career women's concerns were as far from relevant to her own life as the gripes of a young, male go-getter.

"I'm old," she said flatly. "I'm not interested in the same things these young women are." She didn't take a doughnut.

For candidates, it's hard to travel with the sisterhood when the sisterhood doesn't travel in packs.

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