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Engaging Unmarried Women Tracking Trends Among a Key Constituency

To: Women's Voices. Women Vote

From: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

In 2008, unmarried women increased their participation by 2.5 million voters compared to 2004. Unmarried women accounted for 48 percent of the increase in votes cast between 2004 and 2008, even though they represent less than 25 percent of the voting-eligible population. Moreover, they delivered 69 percent of their support to progressive congressional candidates. Unmarried women played a critical role in the Democratic surge in the last two electoral cycles, delivering as much as a third of the total Democratic vote in each. As participation among unmarried women has increased dramatically and the participation marriage gap has been shrinking, the marriage gap in the candidate choices—the difference in vote preferences between married women and unmarried women—has increased, and as unmarried women have increased the margins, they have generally provided support to more progressive candidates.

The 2010 election cycle may present a significant challenge to both of these trends.

Current tracking of unmarried women projects a bigger drop-off in participation than other demographic groups. Moreover, their identification with progressive messaging and candidates has dropped somewhat as well. Both these trends tend to amplify each other and if not addressed, together they could yield different political outcomes in 2010. We have already seen three states that voted blue in 2008 vote red in 2009 and 2010, due in no small measure to the change in behavior of unmarried women and other groups in the progressive base. Turnout among unmarried women as a share of the electorate dropped between 3 and 4 points in each of Virginia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts—according to WVWV exit survey estimates—when compared to their share of turnout in the 2008 presidential election. In Virginia, Creigh Deeds only managed 50 percent of the vote among unmarried women statewide.

This report reflects on data drawn from an oversample of a Democracy Corps survey taken between January 7 and 12, 2010, and represents an ongoing effort to track the level of engagement among these voters. It includes a total universe of 1,481 2008 voters, with a total sample of 507 unmarried women.¹ Women's Voices. Women Vote, a nonpartisan educational organization dedicated to civic participation, has conducted this survey to identify what unmarried

¹ This survey also included oversamples of younger voters and people of color, which are addressed in another report.

women care about and what information tends to energize them about taking an active role in our democracy.

What is interesting is the likely causes of these changing trends. The economy does not seem to be a main driver of the withdrawn participation for these voters. The problem of a drop-off in turnout is not entirely about the economy, either. Unmarried women share the same economic concerns of other voters—in fact, even more so—but they are also more optimistic than other voters about the administration’s ability to pull the country out of the recession (fifty-six percent of unmarried women believe the rate of unemployment will be lower in six months time) This is particularly true among those unmarried women least likely to vote. Regression analysis shows that the economy plays, at best, only a marginal role in these voters’ enthusiasm for voting in 2010. This is an important point, as it suggests that the problem is fixable—that turnout among unmarried women and other politically marginalized groups is not tethered entirely to economic performance.

A significant percentage of these voters are disengaging, in large part, because of reasons that are not reflective of current politics and have long undermined participation among these voters. Historically, thirty-five percent of unmarried women drop-out in off-year elections. This reflects issues of greater mobility, less opportunity to vote (no child care) and a certain lack of confidence in their ability to cast an informed ballot. This continuity matters, because it suggests that the disproportionate drop in participation is not inevitable and not tethered entirely to the economy. There are programs developed, tested, and employed over the years by Women’s Voices. Women Vote that have proven effective in increasing turnout.

The drop in vote support for progressive candidates, however, likely reflects a number of discrete, but related, events, and it seems likely that the economic narrative plays a bigger role here, among other factors. These are change voters who want more—not less—change. It is worth noting that unmarried women were among the first to support broad-based health care reform. Now only half support the President’s “proposed plan to change the health care system.” Nonetheless, progressives have room to grow their support here—and Republicans have opportunities to compete for this vote as well. By getting the change and economic narrative right—delivering change that these voters find accessible and tangible and trustworthy—we could see margins at or near what we saw in 2008.

The right program and right message can reengage many of these voters. This report, which tracks some views of unmarried women in terms of political choices, interest, and perceptions of the economy, begins exploring means of accomplishing just that.

1. The leading reason why voters say they are unenthusiastic about voting in 2010 is that they do not know enough about the candidates running. This is a familiar refrain in our research over the years among unmarried women, and suggests that many unmarried women are dropping out for reasons other than “disappointment” or frustration with the pace of economic recovery. Historically unmarried women are less likely to vote than other voting blocs. WVWV has an enviable track record of approaches that gives these voters the confidence they need to complete a ballot.
2. Unmarried women still believe in change. To be sure, the term “change” does not carry the same unvarnished optimism it did a year ago, but it remains a major part of these voters expectations for this President and can remain a significant motivation—properly articulated—for participation in November. It can also frame the

- choice in the election and shift support to progressive candidates, particularly when presented in tangible terms impacting unmarried women hit hard by this economy.
3. Despite suffering disproportionately in the current economic climate, unmarried women are among the most optimistic about economic recovery, and the economy does not seem to be the primary driver of these voters' lack of enthusiasm for voting. This reflects the confidence of this progressive-leaning constituency in a progressive administration. It also suggests that their approach to the new political season is still more one of hope than anger. The economic narrative and choice will have to embrace hope if it is to be impactful.
 4. But unmarried women believe mostly in change they can see. In batteries designed to discover how different contrasts might draw out unmarried women, unmarried women respond strongest to contrasts that are more part of their world and their lives, contrasts that touch "real Americans," that are tangible, like extending unemployment benefits to people who need them and passing health care reform. When the choice is discussed in those terms, unmarried women show an openness to supporting progressive candidates almost equal to their support in 2008.
 5. The economy may be playing a more significant role in the vote shift among unmarried women than in their rate of participation. By a 60 to 31 percent margin, these voters believe Obama is doing more to help Main Street than Wall Street. Relative to other voters (50 percent of independents believe Obama is doing more to help Wall Street), this is a fairly edifying response, but it also tracks very closely with the current vote (60 percent Democratic candidate, 31 percent Republican candidate) and obviously reflects a decline in Democratic support from 2008 levels. Either way, it is fairly clear that the Democrats are "speaking past" a significant number of these voters, including unmarried women.
 6. The economic narrative needs to get away from discussions of accomplishment, which do not do well among these voters. Comments related to the millions of jobs otherwise "saved" may not mean much to voters on the economic brink. The narrative needs to be future-oriented and hopeful, but also in touch with the current economic realities, something that addresses their specific economic challenges at the household level. The contrast of Democrats fighting for programs to help working people in an economic crisis and Republicans trying to block such help gets their attention. They rally to Democrats trying to bring change and against Republicans trying to block it.

Unmarried Women At Greater Risk of Dropping Out

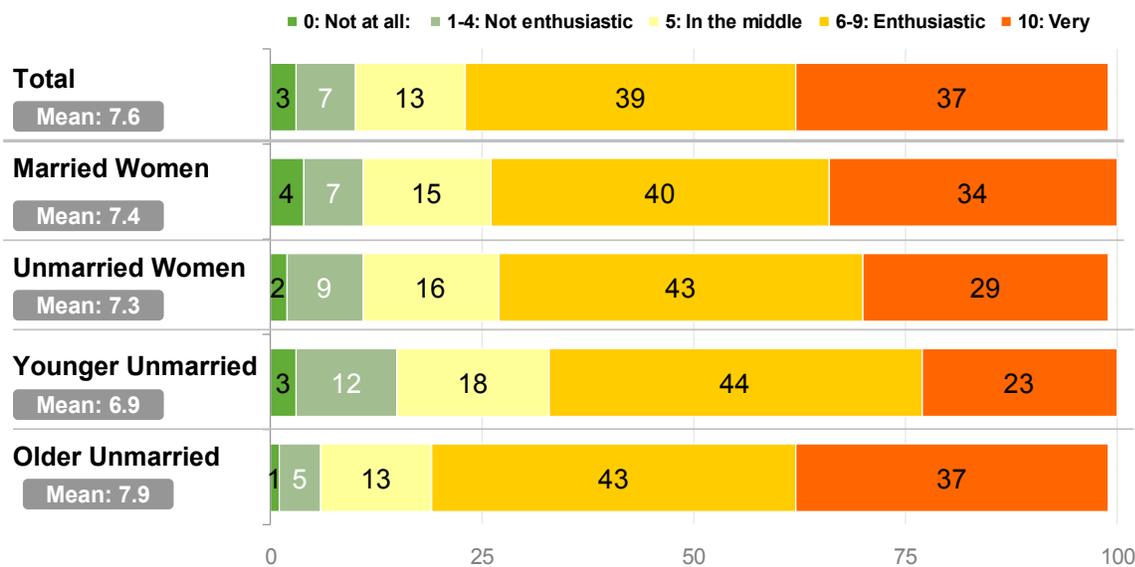
Turnout naturally falls in off-year elections. Since 1960, turnout has averaged only 40 percent in years without a national race compared to 55 percent in Presidential years. But both polling and recent special election experiences suggest a disproportionate drop among key constituencies, including unmarried women. In 2009, as a share of the electorate, unmarried women dropped 4

points and 3 points, respectively, in Virginia and New Jersey.² This year, the vote share dropped 4 points in Massachusetts.³

The problem is not isolated to these states. Nationally, a total of 37 percent of 2008 voters describe their enthusiasm as a 10 on a 10-point scale. This drops to 29 percent among unmarried women and 23 percent among younger unmarried women. Unlike voters overall, notably, enthusiasm among unmarried women is not correlated with party identification.

Figure 1: Enthusiasm Among Unmarried Women

Please rate your level of enthusiasm about voting in this year's election for Congress on a scale from zero to ten, where zero means you're not at all enthusiastic about voting this year and ten means you're extremely enthusiastic about voting this year. You can use any number from zero to ten, the higher the number the more enthusiastic you are about voting this year.



Put another way, 62 percent of unmarried women describe themselves as almost certain to vote in 2010, compared to 74 percent among married women, a finding consistent with the historical gap in the participation rates based on marital status.

Although we do not have enough cases to report the data statistically, it is notable that more than half of the unmarried women who report lower levels of enthusiasm say the main reason they are less enthusiastic about voting is they don't know the issues or candidates. More contextual issues like "anti-politics" or "don't like the candidates" are much further down the list.

The "I don't know enough to vote" response—offered in a volunteered, open-ended question—is identical to similar queries from research over the years into the motivation of these voters and non-voters. It suggests some of the problem is not entirely contextual, not focused on "disappointment" or "anger," but is reflective of a population that traditionally falls out of an off-year election.

² Estimate based on November 2009 GQRR post-election survey of voters and non-voters in Virginia and New Jersey.

³ Estimate based on January 2010 Lake Research Partners and American Viewpoint post-election survey of voters in the Massachusetts special election.

It is also fixable, with proven approaches to providing information that educates these voters about their choices; these efforts have had a significant impact on participation levels in the past. The ongoing research challenge this year will be to construct a program and messaging that has resonance.

Disappointed, But Still Not Drinking Tea

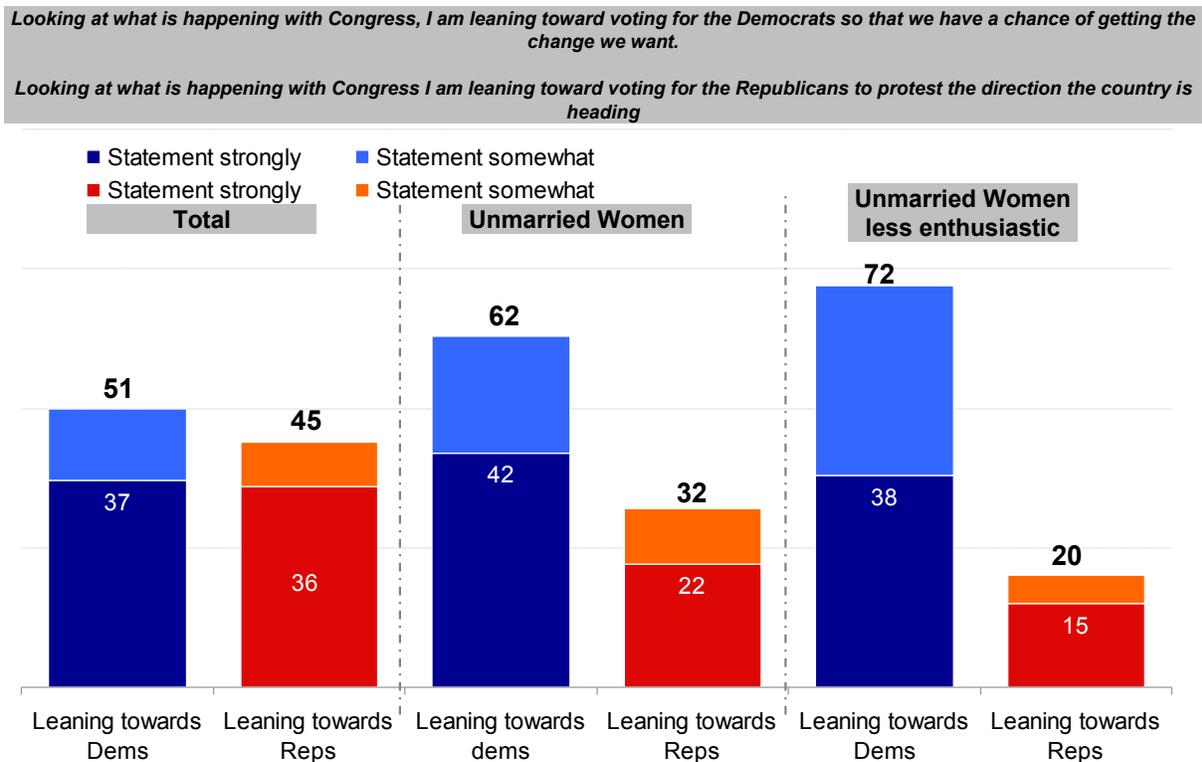
Unmarried women still support President Obama, are relatively optimistic about the direction of the country and, importantly, still believe in change. Still, some disappointment is clearly registered in this survey. The problem Democrats have is that these are base voters; they account for up to a third of the total Democratic vote and any hesitation here is amplified in real political impacts. This can work to the advantage of Republicans, obviously.

Altogether, unmarried women divide fairly evenly in assessing the direction of the country (45 percent right direction, 43 percent wrong track), down from a 2009 high of 55 percent in April and down from the 50 percent average we saw through most of 2009. Among voters overall, a 55 percent majority describe things as headed off on the wrong track.

President Obama's approval score similarly reflects a decline from post-election highs (64 percent approve, 27 percent disapprove), numbers that have held steady over the last six months. These are strong numbers, but recall also that 70 percent of unmarried women supported Obama against John McCain in 2008. Among younger unmarried women, his approval scores reach 69 percent positive.

Most important, these voters still believe in change. By a 62 to 32 percent margin among all unmarried women, these voters say they will support Democrats in order to have a chance at the kind of change "we want." Among unmarried women least likely to vote, the support for "change" jumps to 72 percent. At least among these voters, the results suggest a far different narrative than some of the current post-Massachusetts analysis. It is not that they want *less* change, but *more* change.

Figure 2: Statement Pairs



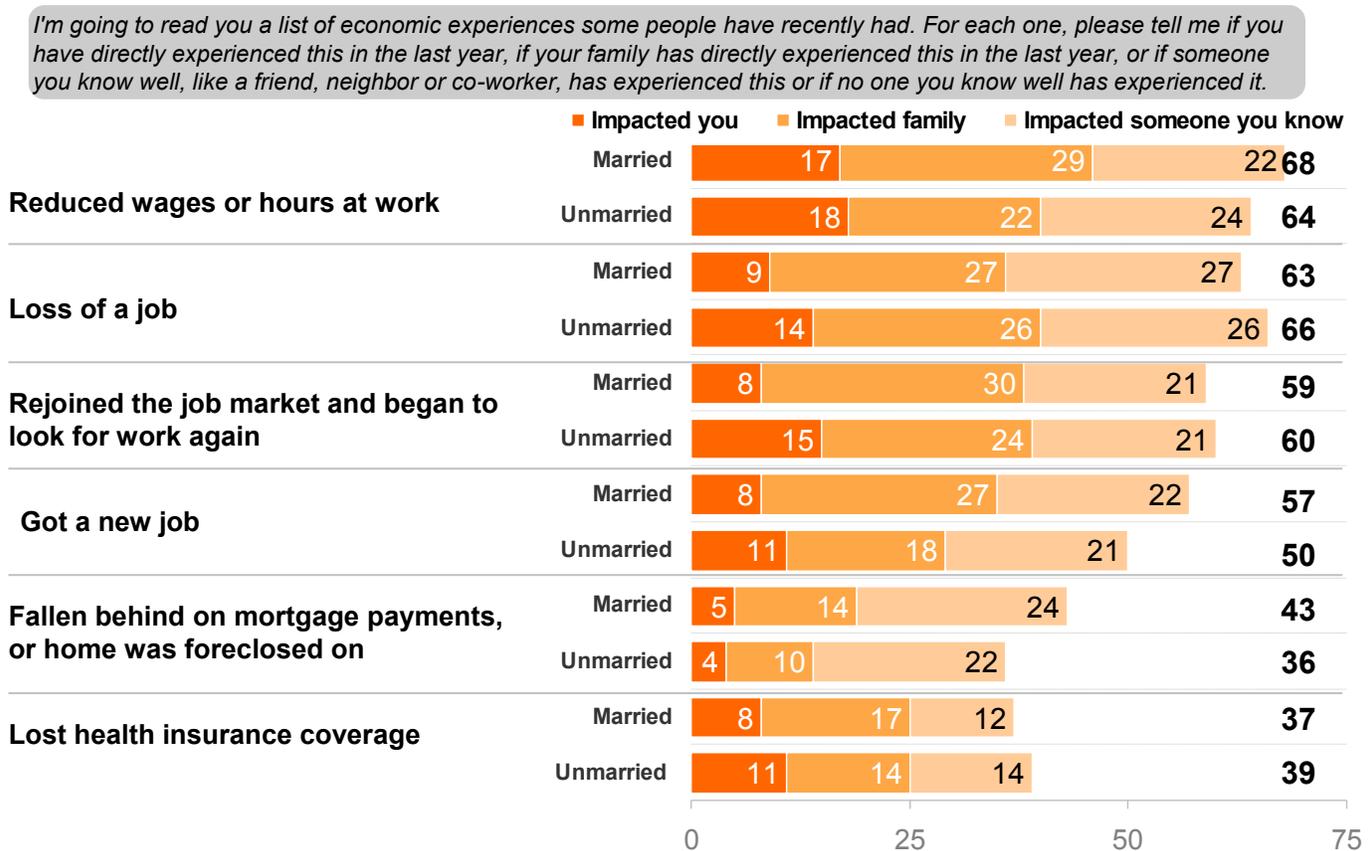
We will explore their specific reactions to the economy below, but at present, focusing on the current performance of the economy does not amplify Democratic support among unmarried women. Only 51 percent of unmarried women believe that, “looking at what is happening with the economy, I am leaning toward voting for Democrats so we don’t jeopardize the chance of economic recovery.” Only 50 percent of unmarried women unenthusiastic about voting agree with this statement.

Arguably, candidates wishing to reach these voters need to change the economic narrative. One part of the problem Democrats faced leading up to the Massachusetts special election was the perception that President Obama and Congress were too focused on Wall Street and not sufficiently focused on middle class voters. Overall, a 46 percent plurality believe Obama and the Democrats are more concerned with bailing out Wall Street than creating jobs for ordinary people. Unmarried women disagree (62 percent more concerned with creating jobs for ordinary people, 29 percent more concerned with Wall Street), but at numbers that reflect a drop from 2008 levels of support.

The Economy and Unmarried Women

By definition, most unmarried women struggle with a single income, including the 19 percent of unmarried women who have children 18 and under. More than one in four (28 percent) unmarried women in this survey receive some sort of public assistance (not including Social Security and Medicare), compared to 22 percent overall and 16 percent among married women. Compared to married women, unmarried women are significantly more likely to have lost a job and somewhat more likely to have lost health insurance as well. As such, they have proven even more vulnerable to the current economic recession than other populations in this country.

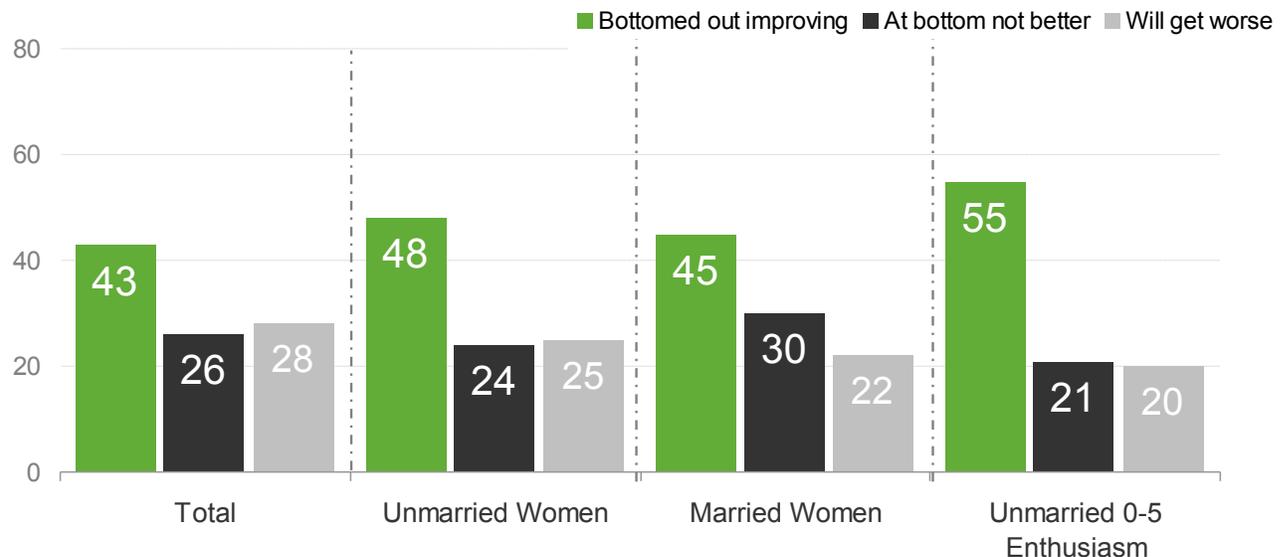
Figure 3: Economic Stress Among Unmarried Women



Despite these results, unmarried women indicate far more confidence in the Administration's ability to pull the nation out of its current economic crisis than voters who have experienced, relatively speaking, far less economic pain. This is not surprising for a group that supported Obama with 70 percent of the vote share in 2008, but it is notable that those unmarried women least likely to vote are among those most likely to believe the economy will turn around.

■ Figure 4: Assessment of Economic Timeline

Now, thinking about the nation's economy, do you believe the economy...has already bottomed out and is starting to improve, is at the bottom but is not yet getting any better or has not yet bottomed out and will still get worse?



A fair number of analysts studied election results in New Jersey, Virginia, and Massachusetts, and came to the conclusion that the economy and disappointment with the pace of change played key roles in drops in turnout among key voting blocs, including unmarried women. This project, as well as other post-elections surveys done at the time, tell a somewhat different story. The economy, per se, does not seem to be a primary driver of these voters' enthusiasm to vote in 2010. Many voters least enthusiastic about voting are the most optimistic about seeing a change in the near-term. In regression analysis, perceptions of the economy—either at the personal level or perceptions of the economy for the nation as a whole—play only a slight and nearly insignificant role in these voters' enthusiasm for voting in the 2010 elections. This is an important point because to suggest otherwise would be to suggest that a huge drop in turnout in 2010 is inevitable unless economic conditions fundamentally change.

There is evidence that the economy is playing a more active role in vote preference among unmarried women, despite their relative optimism. The Democratic margin shrinks when presented with a statement pair that focuses specifically on the current economy.

For unmarried women, Democrats do not have the right economic narrative. These voters are unimpressed with the current economic performance of the country and are struggling disproportionately. To say that a policy brought the nation "back from the brink" is of little solace to someone whose own economic situation already carried them over the cliff.

This does not mean these voters have become cynical. These voters still believe in "change" and remain economically hopeful about the future. It does mean that parties, candidates, and

voter participation groups seeking to engage these voters would do well to create a message on the economy that balances their hope for change against the real-world economic experience.

Arguably, candidates on both sides have not sufficiently spoken either to the real world economic circumstances of voters or to their hope for change. Democrats in particular will need to focus more on issues of more immediate relevance to the lives of these women. Issues like the rising stock market, a 4 or 5 percent increase in GNP, or jobs “saved” misses these voters almost entirely. Change is certainly something they want and something they still believe in, if not with the same optimism of the previous two cycles. This survey shows that it gains relevance when the election begins to frame that real world choice.

Change in Vote

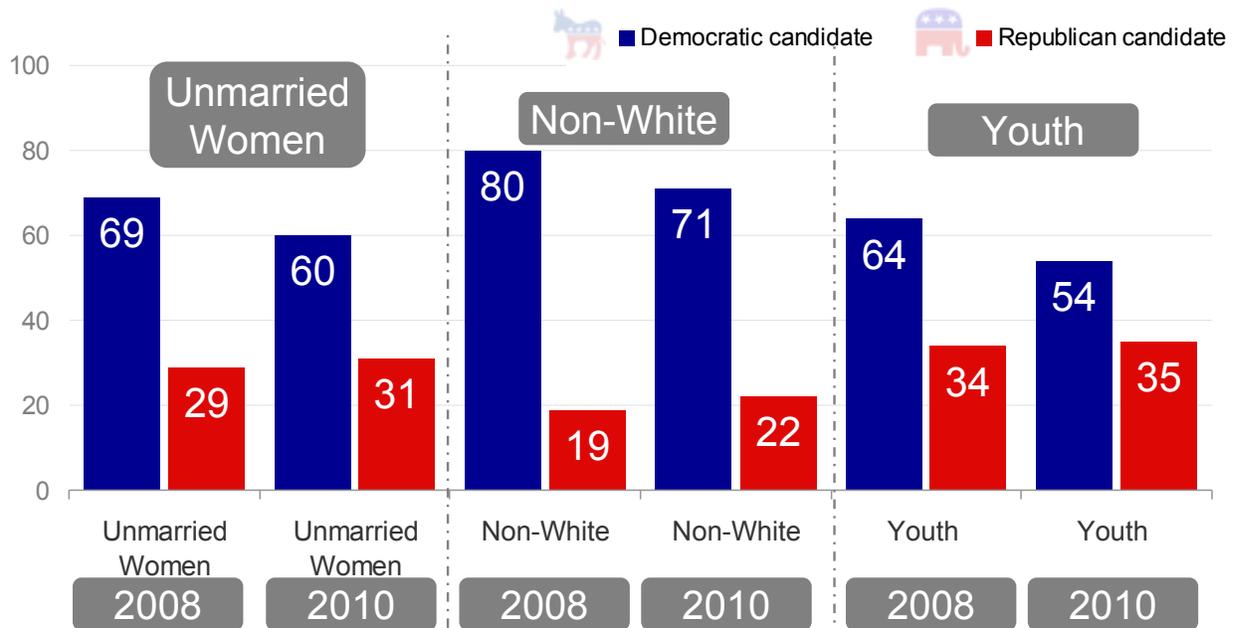
Republicans Bob McDonnell in Virginia and Scott Brown in Massachusetts won voters under 30 and voters under 40, respectively.⁴ Democratic candidates in Virginia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts all held unmarried women, but at dramatically reduced margins in New Jersey and Massachusetts. Are these outcomes, with reduced margins and participation, likely to be repeated in November?

Nationally, we see declines in Democratic support among both unmarried women and younger voters compared to high water marks in 2008.

⁴ Findings reflect two post-election surveys conducted by Women’s Voices, Women’s Vote.

Figure 5: Change in Congressional Vote Compared to 2008

I know it is a long way off, but thinking about the elections this November, if the election for U.S. Congress were held today, would you be voting for (DEMOCRATIC HOUSE CANDIDATE) or (REPUBLICAN HOUSE CANDIDATE)?



**Note: 2008 data from Dcorp post election survey November 2008*

There is still a significant marriage gap. Married women prefer the Republican candidate by a 46 to 43 percent margin. But current Democratic support among unmarried women for down ballot candidates is not only down from 2008 but 2006 as well (65 percent). Notably, we do not see much difference between unmarried women most enthusiastic about voting (61 – 33 percent Democratic candidate) and unmarried women least enthusiastic about voting (62 – 30 percent). The Democrats face a problem not only related to turnout, but margin as well.

Framing

How each party chooses to frame the 2010 election will play a significant role in participation in 2010. An overly angry approach by the Republicans might improve current margins among white men or Independents, but will do little to engage unmarried women. Similarly, a Democratic framework which speaks past the current economic condition of unmarried women will likely do little to reignite the energy of the 2008 election. But there is a concrete economic narrative centered on change that begins to shift the vote.

The most compelling economic messages reinforce key learning from above. Unmarried women react well to arguments focused on change, broadly, and to an electoral framework which duns those blocking change. But just as powerful are arguments that define “change they can

see.” Specifically, this means health care reform and help for ordinary Americans like extending unemployment benefits—recall, a quarter of these voters are on public assistance—and unemployment insurance. These are the frameworks that push these voters close to 2006 levels of progressive support, if not quite 2008 levels of support. It also makes clear that this election can potentially be framed in ways that get these voters’ attention.

Figure 6: Framing the Election for Democrats

Statement	Total More Likely	Much More Likely
Democrats have helped ordinary Americans get through the economic crisis by extending unemployment benefits and health insurance. Republicans voted against all new support for hurting Americans, leaving people to face the crisis on their own.	54	35
Democrats will continue working hard to bring change and move us forward. Republicans want to go back to the policies of George W. Bush.	50	35
Democrats are fighting to make the economy work for the middle class. Republicans are fighting for more breaks for the wealthiest Americans, the biggest corporations and special interests.	50	35
Democrats battled to pass Wall Street reforms to hold the banks accountable and limit mortgage abuses, CEO bonuses, and high-risk investments that endanger the economy. Republicans opposed reforming Wall Street and sided with the lobbyists protecting CEO bonuses.	49	30
Dems are at least trying to tackle the biggest problems and make things better for the country. Reps have voted in a bloc against every plan for change while offering no solutions of their own	48	35
Democrats are at least trying to tackle the biggest problems and make things better for the country. Republicans are offering no new ideas on how to solve the country's problems.	48	33
Over the powerful opposition of insurance companies, Democrats are finally passing reforms to make health care affordable for all and make sure nobody loses insurance if they get sick or lose a job. Republicans are committed to repealing the health care reforms and giving power back to the insurance companies	47	33
Facing a possible economic free fall, Democrats worked to get the economy back on track, help people and get growth back. Republicans opposed every effort to fix the economy and their reckless policies would put the still-fragile recovery at risk.	46	28
Dems are working to pass mainstream, pragmatic solutions and win broad support. Republicans take their lead from extreme partisans like Rush Limbaugh, Sarah Palin and Dick Cheney	44	35

Reflecting the partisan leanings of most unmarried women in recent elections, Republican messaging proves less successful than Democratic messaging. There is only a small audience here for arguments about taxes, limited government, and the deficit. Despite the ever-present generational language that envelops talk on both sides (“burden future generations...”), a Republican framework around the deficit performs considerably worse among younger unmarried women (just 12 percent much more likely) than among older unmarried women.

Figure 7: Framing the Election for Republicans

Statement	Total More Likely	Much More Likely
Republicans know that getting the deficit down is essential to our economic health and the well-being of the next generation. Democrats are exploding the deficit by throwing money at every problem.	51	34
Republicans know that lifting the tax burden for all families and small businesses is the best way to get an economic recovery. Democrats support massive spending, deficits and tax increases that will prevent any economic recovery	50	36
Republicans believe in limited government and giving people control of their own money. Democrats hiked spending, bailed out failed car companies and Wall Street, and oversaw the largest expansion of government ever	50	34
Republicans believe that keeping Americans safe is priority number one. The Democrats have let our guard down, giving rights to terrorists and naively depending on the good will of our sworn enemies.	46	36
Republicans represent the views of mainstream Americans. Democrats take their orders from out-of-touch liberals like Nancy Pelosi.	43	33
Republicans want to end the failed TARP bailout program for Wall Street. Democrats promised to govern for the middle class, but bailed out the Wall Street elites and want to continue the TARP bailout program.	41	26

Conclusion

Unmarried women represent a greater and greater proportion of the American voting age population. While historically underrepresented in American elections, these voters have proven more and more willing to participate in our democracy when targeted and energized. Over the past few cycles, the marriage gap has grown wider, even while the gender gap has become almost anachronistic. But 2010 represents a fundamentally different challenge for the voter participation community. These voters have given fair warning in their turnout rates in special elections. Nonetheless, the key finding of this research is the degree to which this process can be staunched and, potentially, reversed. “Change” and “hope” are more defined and, inevitably, somewhat less appealing than was the case in 2006 and 2008. Still, this survey underscores that they are still the path to these voters.