

## Moms Praised as Romney, Obama Hunt for Women Voters

By Lisa Lerer and Julie Bykowitz - Apr 13, 2012

Long before the two parties directly engaged in the 2012 general election, White House senior adviser [David Plouffe](#) identified the key political target for [Barack Obama](#): a middle-aged white woman in [Ohio](#).

Less than a week into the full-fledged re-election fight, that demographic is already the focus of the campaign conversation.

A Democratic strategist ignited a political furor by saying that [Ann Romney](#), the wife of presumptive Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, “never worked a day in her life.” So began a debate about stay-at-home mothers that dominated social media, cable television and campaign messaging, drawing in the White House and dozens of prominent women.

Through the chatter, what became clear was that in an election many strategists believe will be decided by a few percentage points, no one can risk making moms mad.

“The fact that this has become so critical, so sensitive that neither campaign can afford not to pay attention to some comments about women says something about the power of women voters,” said Ruth Mandel, head of Rutgers University’s Eagleton Institute of Politics in New Brunswick, New Jersey. “An understanding of American women voters at this moment in history is a central issue for the campaigns and something that they have to understand.”

### Apology, Cancellation

Democratic strategist Hilary Rosen kicked off the controversy when she said in an interview on CNN April 11 that Ann Romney, who grew up wealthy and hasn’t had a career outside the home, couldn’t relate to other women struggling in the economic downturn. She publicly apologized yesterday to Ann Romney, and today canceled a scheduled April 15 appearance on NBC’s “Meet the Press.”

“I deeply apologize again to work-in-home moms,” she wrote in a Twitter message saying she won’t be on the talk show.

“I’m going to be a mom who stays at home,” she said, referring to her own children.

Ann Romney, 62, fired back at Rosen’s initial comments yesterday in an interview on [Fox News](#), saying raising five sons was a full-time job that her husband considered as important as his work running a private-equity firm.

“My career choice was to be a mother,” she said. “Other women make other choices. We have to respect women in all the choices they make.”

### 52 Percent

Female voters make up 52 percent of the U.S. electorate, and polls have shown Obama favored over Romney by as much as 19 percentage points. The gap poses a major electoral hurdle to the Republican’s chances of winning the White House.

Rosen’s remarks offered Romney’s campaign an opening to change the narrative following a primary campaign in which he and his Republican challengers touted such issues as their opposition to abortion rights and their support for allowing some employers to deny health insurance coverage for contraception -- positions which Democrats attacked as a “war on women.”

On a conference call with reporters yesterday, Romney backers pushed hard to link Rosen to the White House.

### ‘Larger Problem’

“I’m outraged by the remarks that Hilary Rosen made,” said Penny Nance, president and chief executive officer of Concerned Women for America. “I think it’s indicative of a much larger problem with the administration.”

When asked for specifics, several speakers pointed to broader economic issues such as the health-care overhaul, the growing federal debt and high gasoline prices.

The effort pulled in some of the biggest names in the party, including former first lady [Barbara Bush](#), a Romney backer and wife of former President George H.W. Bush.

“Raising five boys is a handful, trust me,” she said in a phone interview with Fox News yesterday. “Raising George Walker was not easy,” referring to her son who preceded Obama as president.

Sensing political danger, top Obama campaign advisers swiftly distanced themselves from Rosen’s remarks, calling them “inappropriate” and “wrong.” First Lady [Michelle Obama](#), 48, joined the fray, with a message on Twitter saying, “Every mother works hard, and every woman deserves to be respected.”

## **President’s Comments**

Later, President Obama, 50, told ABC affiliate KCRG TV in Cedar Rapids, [Iowa](#), “I don’t have a lot of patience for commentary about the spouses of political candidates.”

Ann Romney “seems like a very nice woman” who supports her husband, he said.

White House officials stressed that Rosen, a partner in a [Washington](#) public-relations firm and a former top executive for the Recording Industry Association of America, didn’t work for the re-election campaign or the [Democratic National Committee](#).

Records suggested Rosen has visited the White House during Obama’s tenure as many as 35 times. White House press secretary [Jay Carney](#), though, said he knows three women with the same name who come to the White House, and so he couldn’t be sure all those visits were by the strategist.

Rosen issued her apology to Ann Romney yesterday afternoon, saying that, as a mother, she knows “raising children is the hardest job there is.”

## **‘Poorly Chosen’**

She termed her CNN comments “poorly chosen,” and said: “Let’s declare peace in this phony war and go back to focus on the substance.”

The denunciations of Rosen’s comments by Obama campaign manager Jim Messina and adviser [David Axelrod](#) underscores the political harm Rosen’s comments could cause Democrats in November, said [Karlyn Bowman](#), a senior fellow studying public opinion at the [American Enterprise Institute](#) in Washington.

“There’s good data on women’s attitudes showing they are happy with the choices they are making, whether it’s to stay at home and raise kids, work or do both,” Bowman said. “They resent anyone making them feel as if there’s a wrong choice.”

The debate spurred by Rosen’s initial remarks further elevated Ann Romney, a frequent presence at campaign events who is considered an asset for Romney by his supporters and some Democrats. Romney campaign aides say her life story of raising five boys and battling [breast cancer](#) and multiple sclerosis resonates with female voters.

Still, much of her background and experience is far from typical, and the flap has a potential downside for her husband, said Jennifer Lawless, director of the Women & Politics Institute at American University in Washington.

[Mitt Romney](#), 65, has estimated his wealth to be as much as \$250 million on financial disclosure statements. More than 71 percent of mothers work, according to the 2011 Bureau of Labor Statistics Databook on Women in the [Labor Force](#). Women also held a majority of non-farm payroll jobs in January 2010 for the first time since the U.S. Department of Labor started collecting data in 1964.

“Ultimately the issue is really one of class,” Lawless said. “Most people don’t have the luxury to make the choice Ann Romney made.”

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