

## Debate, women voters could decide presidential election

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Mitt Romney, Barack Obama

In this Oct. 3 file photo, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama talk after the first presidential debate in Denver. Their next debate is Tuesday at Hofstra University. / ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Could the presidential debate Tuesday night decide the race of

2012?

Monmouth University pollster Patrick Murray thinks it could.

“This next debate is going to make it or break it,” he said. “(The race is) likely teetering on the brink.”

And as that race nears the homestretch, women voters may determine the winner, political analysts and a new USA Today/Gallup Poll suggest.

Taken as a group, recent national polls show a virtual dead heat when considering the margin of error of those polls. But it’s clear that Republican Mitt Romney saw a huge bump after the first debate with President Barack Obama, a Democrat.

A Monmouth University national poll last week showed Romney picking up 4 percentage points following the debate — the sort of impact that Murray has not seen in 20 years, he said.

“It caught a lot of us (pollsters and political observers) by surprise,” he said.

The Monmouth University poll in September showed Obama with a 3-point lead. The post-debate numbers showed Romney up by 1 point.

Similarly, the Republican nominee has pulled within one point of the president among women who are likely voters, and leads by eight points among men in the new USA Today/Gallup poll.

But the election obviously hinges on more than just debate performance, Murray said. And this is such a tight race that the debate may not bring clearer focus.

“There is a possibility that (the second debate) will just muddy the waters further,” he said.

## Women voters

Romney garnered a lot of support among likely women voters after the first face-off, or conversely, Obama lost their vote. Obama was up 2 percentage points with women in the October Monmouth University national poll. In September, the poll results showed the split was 53 to 39 percent in favor of Obama.

Romney's gain with that group was a result of the debate, Murray said.

Women tend to gravitate toward the liberal camp even if they are not liberal per se, he said, if they view Republicans as becoming too ideologically extreme.

But during the first debate, "voters got to see a Mitt Romney who was more moderate and reasonable," Murray said. "Romney has been able to close that gap."

It's all about comfort level, Murray said.

"They were just not as comfortable with the devil they did not know" before the debate, Murray said, as compared with the devil they did know — the president.

But Brigid Harrison, a professor of politics and law at Montclair State University, offered a different take on those numbers that show Romney gaining support among women.

"He's really making up for ground he should have had at the outset," she said, referring to Republican-leaning women who were initially put off by Republicans' handling of issues that Democrats have branded a "war on women," such as Rep. Todd Akin's claims that "legitimate rape" rarely led to pregnancy.

Romney and other major Republicans have called on Akin, a Republican running in Missouri for U.S. Senate, to withdraw from the race. Akin apologized for his remarks, but refused to withdraw.

Harrison was basing her comments on a USA Today/Gallup poll released Monday that showed Romney picking up support in swing states. Those states include Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin.

The poll showed Romney up by 4 percentage points overall in those states.

When trying to predict the role women will play in a presidential race, a historical perspective helps, said Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, New Brunswick.

"The past is prologue," Mandel said, referring to the traditional "gender gap" in presidential elections. Since 1980, exit data has shown that women favor Democratic presidential contenders by 7 percentage points on average.

"You would expect the gender gap on Nov. 6 with women preferring a Democrat," Mandel said. "Is that a guarantee? No."

There is little doubt about the impact that women voters have on elections. There are more women than men in the population and more women turn out to vote, to the tune of about 10 million more female votes than male, Mandel said.

Mandy Wilson, 36, a disabled mother of three from Toms River who cleans houses for a living, did not join the Romney bandwagon after the debate. Wilson liked neither candidate immediately after the first face-to-face, calling the two of them "dumb and dumber."

But the independent took a second look at that debate, and liked Romney even less, she said, by a wide margin, especially because of the issue of health care.

“Romney was repeating himself the whole debate,” she said. “There was nothing that he said that made sense. He should be ashamed of himself.”

Dorothy Coburn, 84, of Avon, continues to support Romney, and her dislike of the Democratic ticket only deepened after Vice Presidential Joe Biden’s performance at his debate with Republican vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan.

“He’s a buffoon,” Coburn said. “It reinforced my opinion.”

Other factors

Another factor that will be in strong competition with the views of women at the polls will be the average voter’s take on the economy, Murray said.

Good economic reports in recent days have favored Obama. If those reports — on retail spending and consumer confidence — gain momentum, that will benefit the Democrats, he said.

Harrison says a third factor — women’s feelings about abortion — could also play heavily into the race, again citing the USA Today/Gallup poll

This race has been tough for a pollster to follow, Murray said. So far, it’s been bitterly partisan and all about appealing to each party’s base, he said.

But with only weeks away from the finish line, that may have changed.

“Historically, by mid-October, you don’t see 10 percent of the electorate up for grabs” as you do now, Murray said.

Which is why this debate is so significant, Mandel said.

“The first (debate) always gets lots of attention and typically there’s a drop off of viewership,” Mandel said. “This time it’s different.”