

The Other Woman in the Race

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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

If John McCain wins this race, it will be because of the woman he put on the ticket. That, in sum and substance, is the prevailing opinion of the moment—about both the presidential contest and Sarah Palin.

Maybe so!

But a compelling counterargument can be made for an equally persuasive proposition: if John McCain wins this race, it will be because of the woman Barack Obama didn't put on the ticket. Hillary Clinton has become the other woman in this race. And the "other woman effect" is transforming the 2008 presidential contest.

Nowhere is there a better place to see this playing out than in Pennsylvania. Joe Biden had seemed a good fit for Obama's running mate in the Keystone State. His roots in the working class Scranton area and wide recognition from media coverage in the Philadelphia television market made him a popular choice. But that was before Palin was named to the Republican ticket. Now state polls show the race much closer. The most recent Real Clear Politics average has Obama's once comfortable lead down to below two points.

In Pennsylvania as elsewhere, Palin is propelling the shift away from the Democrats. But how she is doing it may be as worrisome to Obama as the fact itself. Palin is melding the now enthusiastic Republican base vote with substantial numbers of the blue collar, working class, and older voters that Clinton won convincing in the primary. Palin's pro-life, pro-gun positions and small town roots and values make her very appealing to this demographic. But it is Clinton's absence from the ticket that provides Palin with the opportunity to make that appeal

It may get worse. Losing the Clinton, blue collar voters is a complication for Obama, but losing the Clinton, suburban, middle class, college-educated women is a calamity. They are pro-choice and favor gun control, and Palin will not have an easy time attracting them. Yet her appeal is undeniable. In Pennsylvania the Quinnipiac Poll shows McCain actually leading by 6 points in the Philadelphia suburbs, home to thousands of middle class, college-educated women.

Nationally the other woman effect looms equally ominous for Obama. McCain now leads the popular vote in most national polls. And a big part of McCain's lead has been fueled by white women moving to the McCain/Palin ticket. The ABC post convention poll showed a 20 point swing from Obama to McCain among white women. Most other national polls have recorded a less sharp but similarly dramatic swing away from Obama by white women.

Doubt that the Democrats are having second thoughts about leaving Clinton off the ticket? Don't take our word for it. Here's Joe Biden talking off the cuff in New Hampshire: "Hillary Clinton is as qualified or more qualified than I am to be vice president of the United States of America. Quite frankly it might have been a better pick than me."

Quite frankly, Senator Biden, a lot of other people think so too. One of them might be a guy named Obama who has to be more than a little discouraged seeing his lead evaporate as Clinton supporters and kindred souls desert his cause.

But it's not just the Democrats talking publicly about the electoral cost of the Clinton snub. Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin herself has spoken candidly about Clinton's omission from the ticket, telling ABC's Charles Gibson: "I think he's regretting not picking her now, I do."

Probably so! One doubts, however, if Palin herself much regrets Clinton's absence from the ticket. It's allowed her to reach out to disaffected Hillary voters.

If Obama loses, not putting Clinton on the ticket is going to look like the bonehead political decision of the century. Not only did Obama give McCain a chance to galvanize his base by naming Palin to the ticket, but he also gave McCain a hunting license to reach out to all the disaffected Clinton supporters who were left in the lurch with no place to go. Now, thanks to the other woman effect, they have a place to go. And they are going there in droves.

The milk is spilt; the toothpaste is out of the tube. It's not clear what Democrats can do to regain momentum and salvage at least some of the voters he has lost. Obama has transformed a probable rout into a likely cliff-hanger.

Cable news sources are speculating about a deal where Joe Biden resigns the ticket for the good of the party, etc., etc., and Hillary replaces him. Not a good idea! And if you doubt that, check with George McGovern who pulled such a stunt in 1972, turning a difficult challenge into an unmitigated disaster for the Democrats.

So what other options does Obama have? Few it would seem. Damage control mode may be his best choice at this point. Some of the blue collar, social conservative, white women have gone for good. Finding a candidate who shares their view and values trumps policy issues for many traditional voters. As polling shows Palin now has the edge on Obama when voters are asked which candidate best understands the problems of everyday life. Here as elsewhere the absence of Clinton and the presence of Palin are having a huge impact on the race.

Obama may yet muddle his way through all of this. College-educated, middle class women offer him opportunity to counter the other woman effect. Most of these voters identify with Obama's policies. Nevertheless, many of them were disaffected by Clinton's primary loss and disappointed she was not named to the ticket. Current polls show that about 25% of Clinton primary voters are not supporting him.

These women are not yet lost to the Obama candidacy. But neither are they on board. And Obama probably can't win the electoral votes of the battleground state without them. If Obama is going to pull this one out, he should start there. And he must start soon.

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