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August 27, 2000

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O, To Be Single and Have a Politician Pay Attention

By K. A. DILDAY

THE family values platform has been the stomping ground of Republicans for so long that there has been little room for the Democrats. But last week, riding a wave of strong polls following his family-friendly speech at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, Vice President Al Gore reiterated his intention to make families, particularly "working families," the focus of his campaign. Mr. Gore projected himself as a devoted husband and father who understands that all families want the same opportunities for their children.

But where does all the talk about parents leave unmarried, childless voters, a group that has supported the Democratic Party by a strong majority in recent years? The risk is that such appeals will keep this block at home, including single women, a group that has been growing since 1970.

According to polls by the Voter News Service, a consortium of television networks and The Associated Press, single adults made up 34 percent of voters in 1996. These voters have supported the Democratic candidate for president in significantly larger percentages than married voters have in every presidential election since 1980.



Mark Loader for The New York Times
A single guy's refrigerator.

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Both political parties have directed appeals particularly to mothers by stressing certain issues like education, gun control and health care. But they have virtually ignored unmarried women. The percentage of women between the ages of 20 and 24 who had never married doubled from 35.8 percent in 1970 to 70.3 percent in 1997. During that same period, the percentage of never-married women increased nearly fourfold in the 25-to-29 age group.

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Time just proclaimed that single women have moved to the center of national social and cultural life from a position of obscurity. Yet in the political landscape they are still invisible.

Mr. Gore chose his oldest daughter, Karenna Gore Schiff, to nominate him for president at the convention.

He sent a message: his role as a father is one of the most important criteria that qualify him for president. Although Ms. Schiff has been an adviser to her father, she became a more visible member of his campaign only after she married and became a mother. In his convention speech Mr. Gore invoked family no fewer than 50 times. On the other hand, Mr. Bush, the Republican candidate, used it only six times.

When Mr. Gore announced his candidacy in June 1999, he used family 25 times. Delivering the commencement speech at Harvard University in 1994, he said: "I believe in finding fulfillment in family, for the family is the true center of a meaningful life. Cynics may say: All families are confining and ultimately dysfunctional; the very idea of family is outdated and unworkable. But the cynics are wrong. It is in our families that we learn to love."

But with the single lifestyle becoming increasingly popular, particularly among women, Mr. Gore's family focus may alienate those who are trying to take pride in what has been seen as a less than ideal choice in a society that values marriage and childbearing highly.

Mr. Gore's national spokesman, Doug Hattaway, said many of the issues Mr. Gore addresses, like prescription benefits, appeal to all people, including those "who are not yet parents." Implicit is perhaps the assumption that the childless and single will one day become parents, that they are responsive to a message that focuses on families.

In fact, that is often true. Still not everyone is destined for

parenthood. "In every society there are people who never marry and live a contented life," said David Popenoe of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University.

Why do politicians often ignore this huge group of voters? This rather large and amorphous body does not define itself as a group; the voters in it are also often folded into other target demographic categories, including younger voters, ethnic groups, divorced people, widowers and those older adults who have never married.


"A lot of the groups we look at are groups that we've heard campaigns are targeting," said Jeffrey M. Jones, managing editor of the Gallup Poll. "Single voters are a group that's never really been talked about."

It is difficult to obtain data on unmarried voters, probably because they have not yet emerged as a lobby, although the lobbying branch of the American Association for Single People, a California-based organization that promotes the rights of unmarried people, is planning a national advertising campaign directed at unmarried voters who feel underserved by the political process.

Thomas F. Coleman, executive director of the association, says that he has been struggling for decades to secure equal rights for single people and to enlist organizations like the National Organization for Women and the American Civil Liberties Union to promote the inclusion of marital status as a nondiscrimination category in proposed civil rights legislation.

"Single people feel that they're being ignored or discounted," Mr. Coleman said. "It certainly doesn't make you feel very motivated to go out and vote."

President Clinton skillfully appealed both to people with families and to those who are alone. In his 1996 speech he stressed working families, too, but welcomed anyone who wanted to be part of a larger American family.

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