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Single-minded focus: unmarried nonvoters

No voice for 22 million women

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"Politics has long been thought of as a male-dominated field."

— *Lorraine Licata,*
Georgian Court
University professor

Everyone knows that the women of "Sex and the City" have had their final flings, and it's been a while since Bridget Jones was on the big screen or the best-seller list. But it's looking like single females are back in the spotlight this election year.

Forget soccer moms and NASCAR dads. Unmarried women are the target demographic in the presidential campaign. Or they should be, according to the nonpartisan organization Women's Voices, Women Vote.

About 22 million unmarried women did not cast ballots in the 2000 presidential election. And 16 million of them didn't even bother registering to vote.

"They're the largest demographic group on the sidelines of our democracy," said WVWV co-founder Page Gardner.

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Single

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And as the nation observes Unmarried and Single Americans Week today through Saturday, advocacy groups like California-based Unmarried America hope that issues important to singles — both women and men — will remain in the public eye long after Elec-

tion Day.

"The status quo is not very favorable to single people," said Tom Coleman, executive director of Unmarried America, formerly known as the American Association of Single People.

Single women polled

When Gardner realized the extent of voter apathy among unmarried women, WVWV commissioned the polling firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research of Washington to find

out "who these women were, what they cared about and why they did and did not vote."

The study revealed that non-voting single women spanned all age groups and socioeconomic situations, including those who are divorced and widowed, and those with and without children. WVWV's goal is to register and mobilize them as a powerful voting bloc.

"This demographic is growing. We better pay attention to who they are and what they

want," Gardner said. "We can not ignore them. We need to bring them into the process."

One of those women is Izabella Treitli of Ocean Grove. She didn't vote in 2000, mostly because she was preoccupied with her mother's battle with cancer. But Treitli, 32, said she is determined to get to the polls in November because this year's election "is a cliff-hanger."

A USA Today poll conducted earlier this month shows 49 per-

cent of registered voters favor President Bush and 48 percent back Democratic challenger Sen. John F. Kerry.

Treitli has paid close attention to this race, partly because of the war in Iraq and partly because of the proximity of the GOP's national convention, which was held three weeks ago in New York.

"I'm so much more aware of what's going on," she said. "It's more on the news, in your face."

She's particularly interested in health care, which was identified by WVWV as key concern for single women who, if they lose their jobs, do not have a spouse's health insurance to fall back on.

"When they talk about health care, I pay attention," Treitli said. "It's getting to be harder and harder in America to get health care, even when you work for a company."

Jobs and the economy are also a top concern for single women. About 29 percent of unmarried women earn less than \$15,000 a year, compared with 8 percent of married women and 16 percent of the general population, according to 2000 Census data cited in the WVWV study.

Importance of voting

Both Bush and Kerry have tried to tap into the female vote with gender-specific support

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groups — Bush has "Women," and Kerry has "Women for Kerry" — but neither has targeted single women in particular.

Though the candidates have spelled out their positions on health care and jobs — on Web sites as well as in countless newspaper articles and TV

appearances — WVWV's research shows that many unmarried women don't have the time to learn about them and choose not to vote to avoid making uninformed decisions.

Lorraine Licata, a professor who teaches a women's psychology course at Georgian Court University in Lakewood, isn't surprised at single women's lack of participation.

"Politics has long been thought of as a male-dominated field, so they don't get involved," Licata said. "Part of it, too, is that they don't have the role models (of female politicians)."

Yet the lack of interest does surprise unmarried Neptune City resident Barbara Lazarus, 53.

Lazarus went to the polls in 2000 and plans to vote again this year, albeit by absentee ballot. Her choice, however, won't be dictated by any issues specific to being unmarried.

"I never actually thought about (voting) in terms of being single," she said.

Lazarus' married friend, Cindy Greer of Wall, doesn't consider her marital status a factor, either.

"I just never looked at it as single vs. married," Greer said.

If anything, said Greer, she based her decisions on topics important to "women in general." Yet women's interests can be wide-ranging, she noted — anything from abortion to military issues, what with so

many females in the armed services.

Regardless of what subjects draw women's attention to the campaign, professor Licata said the important thing to remember is that if they don't follow through by voting, politicians will continue to ignore them.

"If women get out to vote and (candidates) see that these women are voting ... that is what's going to give them a wake-up call," she said. "Isn't that what the soccer moms did?"

Discrimination issues

With 48 percent of households nationwide maintained by unmarried men and women, according to the Census Bureau, singles advocates hope any election-year publicity will eventually lead to a consistently higher profile in the national dialogue.

"It seems like politicians talk endlessly about families," said Dorian Solot, executive director of the Alternatives to Marriage Project based in Albany, N.Y. "They keep forgetting about all the other ways that people live."

Solot is particularly outraged by President Bush's initiatives to promote marriage, which she called "a really inappropriate use of government money."

Single people get nagged by their mothers to get married, she said, and "they don't need to hear it from the government as well."

For Tom Coleman, the executive director of Unmarried America, the real issue is "whether discrimination on the basis of marital status or family status should be prohibited by federal law."

Specifically, he'd like the statute that forbids discrimination on the basis of race, gender and religion to include marital status as well.

Discrimination against singles takes many forms, Coleman argues. At work, he said, single people are paid less per year than their married counterparts when benefits are taken into account.

An employer can spend thousands of dollars a year subsidizing health benefits for married employees' spouses, said Coleman, effectively making them better compensated than single people who have the same job.

Singles are also unfairly expected to relocate, work holidays or put in overtime to cover for workers who have to leave early to pick up their kids, he said. And don't get Coleman started on the breaks married people get on their car insurance, and income and estate taxes.

But David Popenoe, a sociology professor who co-directs the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, said that singles advocates' focus on the individual as opposed to society as a whole is "a frightening trend that speaks ill of this nation."

Married couples with children are essentially creating tomorrow's workforce, he said, and "it's not as if these parents are getting any benefits that begin to cover the cost of their child-rearing."

Still, Coleman wonders why more unwed Americans aren't standing up for their interests.

"The silence just perpetuates the status quo," he said.

Solot was skeptical that a full-out singles revolt would ever take place, but said it wouldn't be unwelcome.

"I don't know if unmarried people are going to start banding together and marching in the streets," she said with a laugh. "I would love to see that happen."

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BY THE NUMBERS

● **97.5 million:** Number of unmarried Americans. This group constitutes 43 percent of all U.S. residents 15 and older.

● **54:** Percentage of unmarried Americans who are women.

● **50:** Percentage of adults in New York who are unmarried, the highest rate of any state.

● **34:** Percentage of unmarried voters in the 2000 presidential election. Those who were widowed (59 percent), divorced (54 percent) and never-married (44 percent) voted at lower rates than married people (67 percent).

● **59:** Percentage of respondents in Women's Voices, Women Vote survey of unmarried women who agreed with the statement: "When something is run by the government, it is usually inefficient and wasteful."

● **44:** Percentage of respondents in WVVV survey of unmarried women who identified affordable health care and prescription drugs as a top priority that government could help them with.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; Women's Voices, Women Vote