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What White Women Want, Surprisingly the GOP

By **David Paul Kuhn**

This week, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a Florida Democrat, told reporters the GOP offers a "back-of-the-hand treatment to women." Later she said two conservative female representatives only serve to further "repulse women." You see, Schultz said on MSNBC, Republicans "don't really get very many women when it comes to elections."

The week before, in Virginia, the Republican gubernatorial candidate won women. And in blue New Jersey, the Republican lost women but won white women by 18 percentage points.

Last year, John McCain won a majority of the white female vote. They sum to more than 25 million women. Democrats, so many forget, have not won a majority of white women since 1964.

Few subjects evoke more wrongheaded conventional wisdom than the gender gap. Consider a more common expression of the same factoid. In Democratic commenter Steve McMahon's words, "the Republican party is becoming, regressing to become, a white male southern party." NPR's Juan Williams said the GOP was a "regional southern party of white men." Even Republican strategist Mike Murphy called his GOP "the party of white males." Or as BBC's Katty Kay framed the danger, Republicans "don't want to end up being the party of white men."

The white part is correct. It goes without saying that Republicans must, foremost, win new minority voters. And Republicans do fare significantly better with white men than women. But take BBC's Kay. She's a fair-minded pundit and has written a book about women. But even Kay overlooks that the GOP consistently wins white women.

Republicans do, to be certain, have women troubles. Democrats have won a majority of women in every presidential election since 1996. The women most behind Democrats—women of color, college educated women, single and young women—are all a growing share of the electorate.

But Republicans' ranks are hardly without women. Republicans have won roughly a third of Hispanic women in the last three presidential races -- worth noting, though nothing to brag about. GOP women are indeed, even more than men, overwhelmingly white.

Republican women are also more likely to be married, more likely to not work outside the home and more likely to not live in an urban area. It is a bloc of voters that is literally furthest from the political class -- meaning not highly represented in the DC-NYC corridor (unless Staten Island is included).

But Democrats cannot afford to ignore these women. More white women currently disapprove of Obama's job performance than approve, 48 to 45 percent respectively, according to Gallup polling. Last year, Obama made gains with white men compared to Al Gore. But Obama fared worse than Gore with white women. As for the much-discussed white suburban women's vote, they went to McCain.

The gender gap joined the popular lexicon in the early 1980s. Democrats had lost millions of white men. That trend enhanced the difference in male and female voting patterns. Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan won roughly the same share of white women as Gerald Ford four years earlier.

But in 1980, women became a larger share of the electorate. The successes of feminism also brought a wave of women into the professional world. Many of the reporters and Democratic strategists who were following the gender gap were also women breaking professional barriers themselves. They presumed the feminist platform would woo large swaths of women to vote

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Yet it was not that simple. Even among white women, where feminist identity is the strongest, only 6 percent said in 1980 that the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion were the issues that mattered most to them. Reagan narrowly won women that year. Four years later, Reagan won women by a 12-point margin.

It took another decade for Democrats to win women's strong loyalty. By 1996, Bill Clinton won a majority of women -- but still not a majority of white women. Clinton's reelection marks the only year Democrats have won a plurality of the white female vote since 1980. In 1992 and 2000, white women broke evenly between the two major parties.

This was the gender backdrop that Debbie Wasserman Schultz stepped before this week. She was speaking up for, as is her job, many liberal women who felt stepped on. There was the recent ugly episode on the House floor. Some male GOP representatives had repeatedly interrupted, and shouted down, a group of Democratic female lawmakers.

Then there was the provision restricting abortion coverage. It was added at the eleventh hour to the House health care bill. The provision was meant to please Democratic moderates. It angered many more liberal women.

The bulk of Schultz's broadsides were focused on Republicans, however. She told reporters that there was a "clear sense that Republicans were opposed to our efforts at advancing women's health interests."

Schultz, and many liberal women alike, forget the tens of millions of women who view women's interests differently. White women are the largest bloc of social conservatives. And that indeed has regional implications. Half of all social conservatives live in the South.

But it would be a mistake, as is true of men as well, to limit the GOP's white female appeal to the South. Consider that McCain won a majority of working class white women in the Midwest and West. That bloc was roughly the size of the entire Hispanic vote in 2008. And no political observer would dare say that the Democrats "don't really get very many" Hispanics. After all, that would be ridiculous.

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