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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## What Women Voters Want

By LANCE TARRANCE and LESLIE SANCHEZ

**P**resident Bush's post-convention "bounce" shows that he has managed to invigorate many of his supporters. According to Gallup surveys, among likely voters, Mr. Bush increased his slight lead over Mr. Kerry (50 percent to 47 percent) in the days following the Democratic convention to a more comfortable margin (52 percent to 45 percent) just after the Republican convention. Other surveys also show that Mr. Bush's lead has widened.

What accounts for this change in Mr. Bush's fortunes? According to our research, the answer is simple: women.

The same series of Gallup polls among likely voters showed women favoring Mr. Kerry by five points (51 percent to 46 percent) immediately following the Democratic convention. After the Republican convention, however, the Bush-Cheney ticket closed to a virtual tie among women (49 percent for Mr. Kerry to 48 percent for Mr. Bush). At the same time, according to the Gallup numbers, Mr. Bush's huge lead among men (57 percent to 42 percent) remained stable.

Mr. Bush's growing strength among women is the result not just of his emphasis on issues they care about. Instead, his boost stems from his skill at articulating the issues in a way that appeals to women - especially in his acceptance speech 10 days ago.

Some commentators criticized parts of Mr. Bush's speech for resembling a State of the Union address, complete with a laundry list of domestic agenda items. His references to schools, children's health care and mothers who work outside the home were seen as a transparent effort to win favor with women. Other critics portrayed the convention mostly as a testosterone-fueled rally at which Republicans stressed Mr. Bush's toughness and strength in the war on terrorism.

Our analysis of the speech differs. For the first time, the president was able to broaden his appeal to women not just by discussing social issues. He also found a way to talk about terrorism and the war in Iraq in a way that resonates with women.

The president's speech was interesting to us because it overlapped with some of the work

we did this year analyzing the women's vote for a conservative women's group. Our work culminated last month with focus groups among undecided Republican and independent women voters. It soon became apparent that Mr. Bush's popularity among women would hinge on three critical elements: his building an emotional connection, humanizing himself and portraying himself as the candidate who can keep America safe.

Mr. Bush managed to hit all these points in his speech. He wasted no time building an emotional connection. "In the heart of this great city, we saw tragedy arrive on a quiet morning," he said in the first moments of his speech. "We saw the bravery of rescuers grow with danger. We learned of passengers on a doomed plane who died with a courage that frightened their killers."

Then, near the end of his speech, he humanized himself, telling his listeners that, in the presidency, "whatever shortcomings you have, people are going to notice them - and whatever strengths you have, you're going to need them." He told a story to give Americans - women in particular - a glimpse into his persona: "I've held the children of the fallen, who are told their dad or mom is a hero, but would rather just have their dad or mom."

Far from being a reckless, gun-toting cowboy, George W. Bush presented himself as a compassionate, thoughtful leader who made tough, lonely choices to keep Americans safe. The almost unspoken contrast was with Mr. Kerry - whose name Mr. Bush mentioned only once - as an indecisive, unknown commodity who could make us all vulnerable.

Doubtless many women - and men - would rather focus on "safer" domestic issues, like jobs or health care, that may be controversial but are rarely life-threatening. But events like 9/11 or the recent terrorist attack on a Russian elementary school have left many Americans wondering what could be next. Mr. Bush appealed not just to their fears but to their hopes as well.

To be sure, the president did not erase Mr. Kerry's lead among women with one speech. Yet Mr. Bush's speech was the culmination of a studied, nuanced effort to alter the Republican message to women, and - perhaps more significant - to overhaul the approach of the party in reaching out to the majority of voters.

It's a revision of strategy, and a reversal of fortune, that deserves greater attention. In this presidential election, it is becoming more and more clear that the female voter is the true swing voter.

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