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Romney Taking Steps to Narrow His Gender Gap



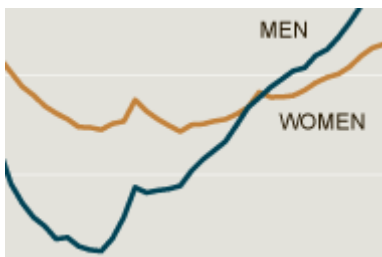
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Mitt Romney, campaigning in Hartford on Wednesday.

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[Mitt Romney](#) moved Wednesday to confront one of his most vexing general election problems — how to narrow the gender gap he faces against [President Obama](#) — but his campaign immediately found itself squeezed between its intensifying efforts to appeal to women and its need to avoid alienating conservatives.



Comparing Job Losses

Female voters have emerged as one of Mr. Romney's largest vulnerabilities. A Washington Post/ABC News poll this week showed that women preferred Mr.

Obama to Mr. Romney by 19 percentage points, and an earlier Gallup/USA Today poll of voters in 12 key swing states showed Mr. Obama leading over all, buoyed by independents and women — two critical voting blocs.

Now, in the face of mounting attacks from Democrats and the Obama campaign, Mr. Romney is taking steps to address that gender gap head on. In the past week, his campaign has devised a three-pronged strategy, which it finalized Tuesday night, advisers familiar with the internal discussions said. They will try to debunk the notion that Mr. Romney's policies have hurt women, turn the criticism back on Mr. Obama and outline how they believe women have suffered under his administration, and brand those issues in a memorable way.

But the campaign stumbled Wednesday just as it was rolling out its new focus: top Romney policy aides, questioned on the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act signed by Mr. Obama, which makes it easier for women to sue in equal pay cases, seemed uncertain of how to respond when a reporter asked about Mr. Romney's position on it during a campaign conference call.

While the campaign later released a statement saying Mr. Romney supports pay equity, the law is opposed by conservatives whom Mr. Romney is trying to rally for the general election. The Democrats, meanwhile, seized the opportunity to e-mail news releases citing Ms. Ledbetter's "shocked and disappointed" reaction.

As the Romney campaign shifts to the general election, his aides will reintroduce him to voters, warming up his image by emphasizing his role as a devoted father and husband. Mr. Romney's wife, Ann, has already made several Web videos that feature her reminiscences, along with gauzy family photos; voters are likely to see more of these. Mrs. Romney will also increase her campaign appearances; she has already begun to talk about how women tell her they care deeply about the economy, where the campaign wants to keep its focus. Polls showed that as the Republican primary campaign dragged on, Mr. Romney began losing support with women, who may have been put off by the contest's focus on social issues like Planned Parenthood, [immigration](#) and contraception.

"Women voters are pocketbook voters, and the highest casualties of President Obama's failures on the economy have been among women," said Eric Fehrstrom, a senior adviser to Mr. Romney, a former governor of Massachusetts. "Governor

Romney has a good record on women's issues. When he was in office, he was judged to have the best record of all governors in hiring women into senior positions."

On the campaign trail on Tuesday and Wednesday, Mr. Romney began highlighting how under Mr. Obama, women have suffered disproportionate job losses, repeatedly citing the figure of 92.3 percent, which he said was women's share of all the jobs lost since the president's inauguration in January 2009.

The net number of jobs held by women has in fact fallen by 683,000 since Mr. Obama's inauguration, while those held by men have fallen by 57,000. But the statistic is misleading for several reasons. For one, while women have lost many jobs in the past three years, men lost far more jobs during the [recession](#) which officially started in December 2007, as men are disproportionately employed in industries sensitive to early swings in the business cycle, like manufacturing and construction.

But as the Romney campaign began aggressively fighting for women's votes, the Obama campaign was simultaneously preparing to make sure voters hear about every conservative stance — especially those involving women's issues — that Mr. Romney took during his party's bruising primary race. On Wednesday, they released a "greatest hits" video featuring some of his oft-repeated comments — "Planned Parenthood, we're going to get rid of that" — that will surely be repeated by his opponents as he tries to appeal to swing voters in November.

"Women are the majority of the electorate, and they believe that Mitt Romney doesn't understand them and doesn't even care to try," said Stephanie Cutter, the deputy campaign manager of Mr. Obama's re-election team. "He's absolutely right that women care about the economy, but that begs the question: Why did he skew his policies against them, and why did he spend so much time playing to the right wing by committing to get rid of Planned Parenthood and giving employers the right to deny women contraceptive coverage?"

In addition to focusing on the economy, Romney advisers said they would also play up the strong professional relationships Mr. Romney has had with women, including from his time as governor. They are considering both ads and testimonials from women — including minorities — who worked with him in the Statehouse, and have already started rolling out female surrogates to vouch for his record on women's issues.

But Daniel Mitchell, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said Mr. Romney's statement about pay equity was potentially troubling to conservatives who were already worried about Mr. Romney being sympathetic to issues like the Ledbetter Act.

"It depends on if he was being Clintonian and saying something that can be interpreted in multiple ways, because every free market person will say they're in favor of equal pay," Mr. Mitchell said. "But the suspicion among free market people is that Romney won't contest the left's framing and narrative on this issue."

Restore Our Future, a pro-Romney "[super PAC](#)," is preparing to run positive ads reintroducing Mr. Romney to the electorate. If necessary, they will also run ads attacking Mr. Obama's record with women, mirroring the argument that Mr. Romney and his staff unveiled on the trail this week. Brandishing a glossy graphic in Hartford on Wednesday, Mr. Romney spoke at a women-owned business for the second straight day and cited a series of statistics that he said showed how Mr. Obama's economic policies have had a devastating impact on women.

"I was disappointed by listening to the president as he said, 'Oh, Republicans are waging a war on women,'" Mr. Romney said at Alpha Graphics, a woman-owned commercial printing business. "The real war on women is being waged by the president's failed economic policies."

In the coming days, the Romney campaign plans to lay out more details about the "real" war on women, especially as it relates to Mr. Romney's favorite topic — jobs and the economy. The issue of energy, for instance, could be used to talk about how rising gas prices will affect soccer moms who need to drop their children at practice, or commute to work.

"The point we're trying to make is that women should know exactly what this administration has done and what's happened to women in the workplace under this president's leadership," said Lanhee Chen, Mr. Romney's policy director. "There is something unique about this recession that has hammered women in the work force."

Reporting was contributed by Nicholas Confessore, Alison Kopicki, Michael D. Shear, and Catherine Rampell.