

AlterNet

VOTER GUIDES



Progressive Voter Guide to Reproductive Justice and Gender

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In 1916, Margaret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in the United States. Just 10 days later, the clinic closed and Sanger was arrested. It took seven years of court battles before she was able to open another clinic, 20 years before the United States stopped classifying information about birth control as obscene, and another 36 years before the Supreme Court extended the right of privacy to include the use of contraceptives outside of marriage. Today, virtually every woman (98 percent) who has ever had sexual intercourse has relied on some form of contraception. Yet that right, along with so many other hard-fought gains (reproductive choice, equal pay for equal work, gender equity in education), is under assault.

The list of setbacks is as depressing as it is long: A growing number of pharmacists is refusing to fill birth control prescriptions, the Department of Health and Human Services is trying covertly to redefine contraception as abortion, *Roe v. Wade* is on the brink of being reversed, equal pay for equal work has never been fully realized, women's sports continue to be underfunded, domestic violence is routinely ignored, and on and on.

At the same time, the past two years have seen big gains and historic firsts for women in politics: Nancy Pelosi was sworn in as the first female speaker of the house, Sen. Hillary Clinton came within a hair's breadth of being the first female presidential nominee for a major political party, and now the Republican Party carries a woman -- Gov. Sarah Palin -- on its ticket for the first time. Unfortunately, Palin's support of abstinence-only sex education programs and recent troubling statements on forcing sexual assault victims to bear their rapists' children raise serious questions about her views on reproductive justice and gender.

Whether women's rights continue on their downward trajectory depends in large part on the next president, and the differences between Sens. Barack Obama and John McCain are not small. To help you determine which candidate's positions most closely match your own, we've put together an election guide, summarizing voting records and public statements on a range of issues from equal pay to abortion.

1. REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE

Roe v. Wade, the 1973 landmark Supreme Court decision that allowed women the right to safe, legal abortion, is under threat of being overturned. A 2007 Quinnipiac poll shows that 62 percent of Americans support *Roe*. The legislation's fate is largely in the hands of the next U.S. president, who will be in a position to nominate several new Supreme Court justices, as six of the nine sitting justices will be over 70 on Jan. 20, 2009. A restacking of the court could mean the end of *Roe*.

Solution: Electing a pro-choice, progressive president is the surest safeguard against dismantling reproductive freedoms, including abortion.

Obama's position: Obama supports a woman's right to choose and says he would make preserving *Roe* a priority. Obama supports late-term abortions when medically necessary and is open to receiving advice from reproductive rights groups on legislation.

McCain's position: John McCain says he thinks *Roe* needs to be overturned and would fight vigorously to make that happen. McCain thinks abortion should be decided individually, state by state. He then recommends that anti-choice grassroots groups build momentum and dismantle abortion rights at the state level. It is also worth noting that McCain's running mate, Sarah Palin, also opposes abortion, even in cases of rape and incest.

Learn more: RH Reality Check¹, NARAL Pro-Choice America², The Guttmacher Institute³

2. CONTRACEPTION

Birth control is basic health care. And education about and access to affordable contraception is one of the surest ways to prevent unintended pregnancies. Yet some forms of contraception have been under assault, as the Department of Health and Human Services has been working covertly to redefining contraception as abortion.

Solution: Contraception should remain available to men and women nationwide and should be covered by health insurance.

Obama's position: Barack Obama supports legislation that would expand access to contraception, including emergency contraception. In 2007, Obama introduced the Prevention First Act, which would also end insurance company discrimination against contraception.

McCain's position: John McCain has either been unable or unwilling to answer questions regarding contraception. When asked about his position on contraceptive use in the United States, McCain said he thinks he supports the president's policy. When asked if he thought it was unfair that insurance companies will cover *Viagra* and not birth control, he said -- after a long pause -- that he did not know enough about it to give an informed answer. McCain

1 <http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/>

2 <http://www.naral.org/>

3 <http://www.guttmacher.org/>

has voted against legislation that would ensure insurance coverage for birth control. He also voted against legislation that would increase awareness about emergency contraception.

Learn more: RH Reality Check⁴, Planned Parenthood⁵, Guttmacher Institute⁶

3. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND FAMILY PLANNING

The ability of a woman to choose the number and spacing of her children is fundamental to gender equality, women's health, and the health of families, communities, economies (local, national and international) and the environment. Publicly funded family planning clinics, which provide women with the resources -- contraception, health services, abortion counseling, etc. -- to do this are in danger. While 89 percent of the voting public supports publicly funding these services, Title X funds (which make a wide variety of health care services available to lower-income families) have not kept pace with medical inflation. As more and more individuals become uninsured, these strapped-for-cash clinics are unable to meet that rising demand and, in some cases, are closing.

Solution: Fully fund family planning services and increase awareness of them through comprehensive sex education.

Obama's position: Obama supports family planning services. The Prevention First Act, legislation he introduced in 2007, would increase funding for Title X to expand access to family planning services for low-income women.

McCain's position: McCain has voted to end Title X, voted against programs that would help prevent teen pregnancy and voted against promoting family planning services.

Learn more: NARAL Pro-Choice America⁷, National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association⁸, United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA)⁹

4. SEX EDUCATION

Abstinence-only education has been a 10-year, \$1.5 billion failed federal project. Studies have shown that teens who attend schools with abstinence-until-marriage programming are just as sexually active as those who don't. But, in spite of all evidence against them, the Bush administration has been a stalwart champion of these ideologically motivated programs, which downplay the effectiveness of condoms and other types of contraception, exaggerate and sometimes fabricate health risks associated with abortion, hype medically inaccurate information, reinforce damaging gender stereotypes and generally use fear and shame in

4 <http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/>

5 <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

6 <http://www.guttmacher.org/>

7 <http://www.naral.org/>

8 <http://www.nfprha.org/main/index.cfm?Category=Main&Section=Main>

9 <http://www.unfpa.org/>

an attempt to control sexuality. Many states have begun to turn down federal funding for chastity-based education, but many others -- including those with some of the highest rates of STIs and unintended pregnancies -- still support it.

Solution: Federally fund comprehensive sexuality education in all states to ensure that kids have access to medically accurate information that helps them make emotionally and physically healthy decisions about sex.

Obama's position: Obama strongly supports comprehensive sex education and opposes abstinence-only education. He has called for comprehensive sex education in all grades -- as long as it is age-appropriate. Obama supports the Responsible Education About Life (REAL) Act, which would fund science-based sex education, and co-sponsored the Prevention First Act -- legislation meant to increase access to contraception services and information. He voted yes on an amendment to the Senate's fiscal year 2006 budget that would put \$100 million toward reducing unintended and teen pregnancy through education and contraception.

McCain's position: McCain opposes comprehensive sex education. He voted against legislation to allocate \$100 for preventing unintended and teen pregnancy through education and contraception. He has also voted no on legislation to fund programs that provide comprehensive, medically accurate sex education and voted no on legislation that would require abstinence-only programming to be medically accurate and scientifically based.

Learn more: Coalition for Positive Sexuality¹⁰, Planned Parenthood¹¹, Guttmacher Institute¹², Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)¹³, RH Reality Check¹⁴

5. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is an ongoing problem in the United States. One in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. One in six women has either been raped or experienced an attempted rape. Besides its emotional and health tolls, domestic violence affects the economy, with an estimated cost of \$5.8 billion each year in medical bills and lost productivity.

Solution: Develop a national legislative agenda to address and help prevent domestic violence and to identify the needs of its victims.

Obama's position: Barack Obama has supported legislation to reduce domestic violence. He co-sponsored the Violence Against Women Act, which helps give nonprofit organizations

10 <http://www.positive.org/>

11 <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

12 <http://www.guttmacher.org/>

13 <http://www.siecus.org/>

14 <http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/>

and police the resources needed to combat domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking.

McCain's position: McCain has been largely silent on this issue. He did not vote on legislation that would increase funding for domestic violence programs by \$17 million. He has also opposed grant programs for children who have witnessed domestic violence. McCain has also made public jokes about wife-beating.

Learn more: National Coalition Against Domestic Violence¹⁵, Amnesty International USA¹⁶, Women's Human Rights Program¹⁷, Feminist Majority Foundation¹⁸

6. EQUAL PAY

Women make only 77 cents for every dollar a man makes, and the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington, D.C., estimates that, if progress continues at its current rate, it will take until 2057 for the gender wage gap to close.

Solution: Expand enforcement of the Equal Pay Act.

Obama's position: Obama is a strong advocate of gender pay equity. He supports improving women's economic situations at every level, from strengthening the Equal Pay Act to increasing investments in women-run small businesses.

McCain's position: McCain has said publicly that he supports equal pay for equal work, but his legislative record shows otherwise. McCain opposed a recent Senate bill (the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act) seeking equal pay for women. The bill would have made it easier for women to sue their employers for pay discrimination.

Learn more: 9to5, National Association of Working Women¹⁹, National Committee on Pay Equity²⁰, Women's Institute for Secure Retirement²¹

7. PAID FAMILY LEAVE AND WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY

The United States is the only industrialized country that does not provide workers with paid maternity leave. This, combined with other discriminatory workplace policies, can make work-life balance nearly impossible for women.

Solution: Create more family-friendly workplace policies and expand the Family and Medical Leave Act.

15 <http://www.ncadv.org/>

16 <http://www.amnestyusa.org/>

17 <http://www.amnestyusa.org/violence-against-women/page.do?id=1011012&n1=3&n2=39>

18 <http://feminist.org/>

19 <http://www.9to5.org/>

20 <http://www.pay-equity.org/>

21 <http://www.wiserwomen.org/portal/>

Obama's position: Obama strongly supports expanding the Family and Medical Leave Act and wants states to adopt paid-leave systems. He has proposed providing \$1.5 billion in aid to states to assist in start-up costs for instituting a paid-leave system.

McCain's position: McCain voted to pass the original Family and Medical Leave Act in 1993. Since then, he has remained silent on the issue.

Learn more: National Partnership for Women and Families²², Moms Rising²³, Progressive States Network²⁴

8. MINIMUM WAGE

Women disproportionately represent the number of people living in poverty, both globally and domestically. Fifty-six percent of Americans 18 or older living in poverty are women.

Solution: Raising the minimum wage is a crucial step toward pulling women out of poverty. Of the workers who would benefit from a raise in the federal minimum wage, 59 percent are women.

Obama's position: Obama has voted for minimum wage increases. He is also a co-sponsor of the Global Poverty Act, which aims to cut extreme global poverty in half by 2015 -- an outcome that would greatly benefit women.

McCain's position: McCain has voted both for and against minimum wage increases. McCain did vote to increase the minimum wage in February 2007; however, historically, he has voted against minimum wage increases.

Learn more: The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life²⁵, Economic Policy Institute²⁶, UNIFEM²⁷

9. GENDER-BASED HEALTH DISPARITIES

Heart disease, depression, osteoporosis, STDs and autoimmune diseases are just a few of the health conditions that disproportionately affect women. Disparities are even greater for low-income women and women of color.

Solution: Conduct more research on the biological links to health, allocate more funding for research on women's health, and include more women in medical studies.

22 <http://www.nationalpartnership.org/site/PageServer>

23 <http://www.momsrising.org/>

24 <http://www.progressivestates.org/>

25 <http://pewforum.org/>

26 <http://www.epi.org/>

27 <http://www.unifem.org/>



Obama's position: Obama supports legislation to examine gender health disparities and increase low-income women's access to health services. He has been an advocate for the Centers of Excellence in Women's Health at the Department of Health and Human Services.

McCain's position: McCain has been silent on this issue.

Learn more: Society for Women's Health Research²⁸, Women's Health Research at Yale²⁹, Office of Research on Women's Health³⁰

10. TITLE IX

Title IX, the 1972 legislation that guarantees equal opportunities for women and girls in federally funded sports and education programs, has made significant strides toward achieving gender equity in the classroom and on the playing field. But it still faces challenges and sometimes goes unenforced when schools have trouble deciding how to allocate money for sports facilities, events, etc. Women's teams still often wind up with smaller budgets and have to fight harder to get their fair share of budgetary resources.

Solution: Increase resources for monitoring and enforcing compliance of Title IX.

Obama's position: Obama is a strong advocate for Title IX. He has said he will improve its enforcement (in sports and academia) at the Department of Education. He also supports the High School Sports Information Collection Act, which compels schools to make publicly available information on gender equality in sports programs.

McCain's position: McCain's support of Title IX has been less clear. While he has acknowledged Title IX's successes, he has also been quick to say that its enforcement should not cause the elimination of any existing athletic programs. Essentially, McCain thinks Title IX should provide women and girls more opportunities -- as long as that doesn't interfere with men's programs. His position, however sugarcoated, would allow for women's programs to get short shrift.

Learn more: Feminist Majority Foundation³¹, Association for Gender Equity Leadership in Education³²

28 <http://www.womenshealthresearch.org/site/PageServer>

29 <http://www.med.yale.edu/womenshealth/>

30 <http://orwh.od.nih.gov/>

31 <http://feminist.org/>

32 <http://www.agele.org/index.cfm?secid=13316&ssecid=0>