

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

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'Roe, Roe, Roe your vote'

High number of college-age women at abortion-rights rally could have political implications

By Steven Thomma
KRT CAMPUS

WASHINGTON — Though the pictures of Sunday's abortion-rights march in Washington focused on the size of the crowd, the truer story of its political impact could be measured by the age of the demonstrators.

More college-age women showed up than usually attend abortion-rights rallies, which tend to be dominated by older women. If that translates to increased voting in November by young women — a group that usually doesn't vote in high numbers — it could help Democrats in a close election.

If not, the march probably had no lasting political significance, for it reflected a longstanding partisan divide over issues related to abortion rights and is unlikely to change the political equation or affect the outcome of the election.

The march attracted hundreds of thousands of women to the National Mall in downtown Washington, where they rallied for abortion rights and protested against President Bush. A key complaint was Bush's signature on two new laws: the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, which grants a fetus legal rights, and the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act, which criminalizes a medical procedure sometimes used to terminate late-term pregnancies.

In the short term, the march could serve as a caution to Congress, said one senior Republican senator, who spoke on condition that he not be identified lest he draw criticism from his peers: "That was a very impressive showing by any fair standard. I think it will discourage any more votes this year on abortion."

But Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., who attended the event, said the march's impact on voter turnout was what mattered: "I don't know if the march changes anything (in Washington). It was really aimed at the whole country and what they do at the ballot box."

The key question is whether the large turnout signals a more widely held passion for abortion rights that will change U.S. politics and have an

impact on the election. Aides to Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry distributed voter-registration forms at the march, and tables were set up along the Mall for people to sign up.

"I can vote now," an excited Anne Vetter, 20, of Charlottesville, Va., said after she registered.

"Roe, Roe, Roe your vote," said Lindsay Morris, 22, a college student from Haddonfield, N.J., in a reference to the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision by the U.S. Supreme Court that legalized abortion.

Vetter and Morris could signal a boost for the Democrats if they represent a larger trend of voters who otherwise would avoid the polls. That would be a shift on an issue that never has been pivotal in presidential politics, and would herald a deeper level of involvement by an age group that traditionally tunes out politics.

Despite media hype about marches in Washington both for and against abortion rights, the issue consistently ranks low on the list of priorities cited by most voters. In a February Gallup poll, for example, abortion ranked 13th, below such issues as education, the economy, the war in Iraq, health care and immigration.

"The public is no more concerned today about the abortion issue than it was in the last two presidential elections," Gallup analyst Lydia Saad concluded in an article written last week.

Moreover, a slight majority of those who've been motivated to vote on the single issue of abortion in the past opposed it; single-issue abortion voters favored Bush by a small margin over Democrat Al Gore in 2000.

The most intriguing aspect of Sunday's march that could signal a noteworthy change was the turnout of women in their late teens and 20s. Americans aged 18 to 29 vote less than any other age group, according to polling-place exit surveys. But young women favor abortion rights by 54 to 39 percent, according to Gallup — the biggest margin of any age group — and they could vote Democratic if persuaded to vote at all.

"There were a ton of young women," said Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster. "It speaks to the ability to mobilize young people. That could



PHOTO COURTESY OF KRT CAMPUS

Tina Welke, 28, of Minneapolis, Minn., joins thousands of fellow protesters as they parade down Pennsylvania Avenue, in Washington, D.C., Sunday, April 25, during the "March for Women's Lives," a pro-choice rally.

change the margin in battleground states," where the presidential race is expected to be close.

Stephanie Cutter, a spokeswoman for Kerry, said abortion rights was a winning issue for Kerry in such swing states as Arizona, Colorado, Florida and Nevada, as well as in California and New York, where the Massachusetts senator is airing ads appealing for contributions on the basis of his stance supporting abortion rights.

Republicans refuse to concede women's votes to Democrats, however, saying many women support the president's opposition to abortion and that more women will vote for him for reasons that have nothing to do with abortion.

"The record on banning partial-birth abortion

and (protecting) unborn victims is going to be popular and resonate with people," said Terry Holt, a spokesman for Bush's campaign, who said the president's stance reflected mainstream views.

A majority of Americans support at least some restrictions on abortion. A Gallup poll last October showed that 17 percent thought abortion should be illegal in all circumstances, and 40 percent thought it should be legal in only a few circumstances.

Moreover, Holt said, Bush hopes that women will endorse his record on the economy, education, health care and national security, as well as for appointing women such as National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice to his senior staff.

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