For women, presidential debates presented choices from health care to economy

By John Lantigua

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For Florida International University political scientist Kathryn DePalo, Tuesday’s second presidential debate at moments sounded like a street fight.

“All the bullying and schoolyard tactics probably turned a lot of women off,” she said. “And especially women who are still undecided, I’m not sure that style won any of them over.”

The debate between President Barack Obama and GOP challenger Mitt Romney did feature many interruptions, face-offs and putdowns, but woven through the 90-plus minute verbal prize fight were numerous attempts to court the women’s vote.

In 2008 Obama won the female vote by 13 points over the GOP’s John McCain, and he held a comfortable lead this campaign season until his weak showing in the first debate in Denver on Oct. 3. A recent Gallop poll showed the two men tied 48-48 among likely women voters in swing states, including Florida, although Democratic Party campaign officials later questioned the poll.

Tuesday they were both looking to curry favor with women voters.

Obama touted free contraceptives coverage, which is included in his Affordable Care Act, and attacked Romney for saying he would end funding for Planned Parenthood, which supplies health care, including mammograms, cervical cancer screenings and abortions for many American women. Obama also pushed his support for equal pay for women through the passage of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which makes it easier for women to sue if they are not being paid on a par with men doing the same work.

“This is not just a women’s issue,” Obama said. “This is a family issue. This is a middle class issue. And that’s why we’ve got to fight for it.”

Romney countered by saying that women have suffered much through the Great Recession and through the Obama administration’s failure to resurrect the economy. He said he could do more to help them and their families by creating jobs.
And Tuesday night his campaign released an ad saying Romney does not oppose contraception and believes abortion should be legal in some cases.

University of Miami political scientist Susan Kaufman Purcell says most women have already decided whom to vote for. But for those who haven’t, the decision between Obama and his positions on women’s issues and Romney, who some women feel would do more to improve the economy, can be a tough one, she said.

“Some of those women are torn,” she says.

DePalo agrees. “The choice is not so easy,” she says. “A good economy can bring a job and a job can bring health insurance that helps solve some of those women’s health care coverage issues.”

Charles Zelden, Nova Southeastern University political scientist, noted that the word “abortion” was not uttered during the debate.

“Romney wasn’t about to mention it because he has to deal with positions taken by his party that are unpalatable to a lot of women,” he says. He said he was referring to a plank in the GOP platform that opposes abortion even in cases of incest and rape.

“Obama didn’t mention it either,” Zelden said. “He mentioned contraception and women’s health care issues in general, which is talking abortion without mentioning it. There are women who may have doubts about Romney but may also have issues with abortion. This way your message is just ‘a woman’s right to choose.’”

Florida Atlantic University political scientist Kevin Wagner also said that Obama had to be careful. He mentioned, in particular, Catholic women voters who have issues with abortion.

“Women’s health care issues is a good issue for Obama,” he said. “But he has to be measured.”

Wagner said he believed that Obama came out ahead on women’s issue during the debate. He said the fact that Romney has never voiced support for the Lilly Ledbetter Act hasn’t helped him with women swing voters.

“On top of that, Paul Ryan voted against it in Congress,” Wagner said, mentioning Romney’s running mate.

“And then there was the ‘binders full of women’ comment, which didn’t help,” Wagner said.

He was referring to a reference made by Romney to his attempts to recruit women to work in Massachusetts government when he was governor. The full quote:

“I went to my staff and I said, ‘How come all the people for these jobs are — are all men.’ They said: ‘Well, these are the people that have the qualifications.’ And I said: ‘Well, gosh, can’t we — can’t we find some — some women that are also qualified?’ And — and so we — we took a concerted effort to go out and find women who had backgrounds that could be qualified to
become members of our cabinet. I went to a number of women’s groups and said: ‘Can you help us find folks,’ and they brought us whole binders full of women.”

The comment has gone viral and is being used to attack Romney’s stances on women’s issues, although Romney said he had ended up with more women in important positions than most states.

Zelden said Romney still managed to energize his base, including conservative women, by emphasizing his business experience, which he will use to create jobs.

Purcell agreed, saying that while Romney has trailed among younger, unmarried women, who might care more about an issue like free contraception, Romney has done better among married women who have families and who might care more about economic issues.

Lynn Leverty, a University of Florida political scientist reached in Gainesville, said she believed Obama would continue to press women’s issues because of the wide gap between his positions and that of Romney and the advantage he sees there. “Obama would like to keep the gender gap alive and well,” she says.