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McCain's 'bold choice' of running mate stuns many

By STEVE KRASKE
The Kansas City Star

John McCain's daring pick of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate Friday sparked a fierce debate over how much Palin would help the GOP ticket with women voters.

In a Gallup Poll conducted before this week's Democratic National Convention, Barack Obama led McCain among women 47-41 percent, although McCain led among men 49-43 percent.

"This type of bold choice is going to cause a lot of people to take a second look at McCain," said Amy Blunt, a Kansas City lawyer and sister of Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt. "A lot of Democratic women and swing votes think Hillary (Clinton) should have been the choice as vice president."

But others saw the pick of the first-term governor and mother of five as doing little.

"She is so overconservative that Democratic women aren't going to switch because of her," said former Missouri Rep. Marsha Campbell, a Kansas City Democrat.

McCain's pick shocked political veterans and newcomers alike. Some called it the greatest gamble in modern American political times.

At 44, Palin is three years younger than Obama and a generation younger than McCain, who turned 72 on Friday.

Having served just 20 months as governor, Palin makes history as the first woman to run as a Republican vice presidential candidate.

"Everyone was surprised," said Susan Carroll at the Center for American Women and Politics, at Rutgers. "Women's names always end up on short list, but they never get chosen."

The pick could recalibrate a presidential race that had been close until the Democratic convention. Gallup reported Friday that Obama had reopened a lead at 49-41 percent. The GOP convention is scheduled to start Monday in St. Paul, Minn., although Hurricane Gustav in the Gulf of Mexico could delay it.

Carroll said the Democrats in Denver did a good job of pulling disaffected Hillary Clinton supporters back into the fold. "This," she said, "pretty much throws a wrench into the works."

"My guess is the vast majority of them will really heed what Hillary Clinton said, and they'll probably stick with the Democrats. Obama is closer to them on the issues than McCain is. Some will probably go over, and the selection of Palin will help with that."

Frank Newport, editor-in-chief of the Gallup Poll, said Friday that by picking Palin, McCain was aiming at independent white female voters who were virtually split between McCain and Obama.

Before Friday, the leading contenders to be McCain's running mate had included former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut.

McCain introduced his running mate at a crowded rally in Dayton, Ohio, an event that quickly refocused media attention from Obama's Denver success.

"When you get to know her, you're going to be as impressed as I am," McCain said.

"She's got the grit, integrity and good sense and fierce devotion to the common good that is exactly what we need in Washington today. She knows where she comes from, and she knows who she works for. She stands up for what's right, and she doesn't let anyone tell her to sit down.

"She's exactly who this country needs to help me fight the same old Washington politics of 'Me first and country second,' " McCain said.

Palin paid homage to two Democratic women pioneers — Geraldine Ferraro and Clinton

"It was rightly noted in Denver this week that Hillary left 18 million cracks in the highest, hardest glass ceiling in America. But it turns out the women of America aren't finished yet, and we can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all."

She quickly displayed an assertive speaking style that some said matched a no-nonsense governing style.

"I told Congress, 'Thanks, but no thanks' on that 'bridge to nowhere,' " she said about the \$400 million earmark that became a national symbol of wasteful spending. "If our state wanted a bridge, I said we'd build it ourselves."

Later, she decried the willingness of too many politicians to go along with the status quo.

"But I didn't get into government to do the safe and easy things," she said. "A ship in harbor is safe, but that's not why the ship is built."

Conservatives hailed the choice as near-perfection and predicted the GOP would close ranks firmly behind McCain, whom some on the right always viewed with skepticism.

"McCain is to be commended on his choice of Sarah Palin, a true Christian, for vice president," said the Christian Anti-Defamation Commission's Gary Cass.

Democrats were quick to note that Palin undermined the GOP's chief criticism of Obama as lacking experience. Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York said McCain was taking a "roll of the dice" and declared that Palin's "lack of experience makes the thought of her assuming the presidency troubling."

Obama's campaign offered mixed messages, with a spokesman at first labeling Palin a "former mayor of a town of 9,000 with zero foreign policy experience."

But later, a spokeswoman offered a kinder statement from Obama and his running mate, Sen. Joe Biden.

"Her selection is yet another encouraging sign that old barriers are falling in our politics," their statement said. "While we obviously have differences over how best to lead this country forward, Governor Palin is an admirable person and will add a compelling new voice to this campaign."

Despite Palin's clean-hands reputation, an investigation is under way by a legislative panel into whether she dismissed Alaska's public safety commissioner because he would not fire state Trooper Mike Wooten, her former brother-in-law who went through a messy divorce from Palin's sister.

The governor denied orchestrating the dozens of telephone calls made by her husband and members of her administration to Wooten's bosses. She says she welcomes the investigation: "Hold me accountable."

Palin's confrontations with the state GOP began when then-Gov. Frank Murkowski named her chairwoman of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission. There, she exposed current Alaska Republican Party Chairman Randy Ruedrich, who was also on the commission, for ethical violations.

In 2005, Palin co-filed an ethics complaint against Murkowski's longtime aide and then-attorney general, Gregg Renkes, for having a financial interest in a company that stood to gain from an international trade deal he was helping craft.

In the 2006 primary, Palin defeated incumbent Murkowski, who also had 22 years of experience in the U.S. Senate.

She then handily beat Tony Knowles, a Democrat who had served two earlier terms.

Palin also refused to kowtow to the oil industry, instead presiding over a tax increase on oil profits that now has the state's treasury swelling.

But she is a proponent of petroleum development, in tune with McCain, although the two disagree on Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. She favors drilling there; he opposes.

The governor also opposed designating polar bears as threatened, fearing that step would get in the way of a proposed natural gas pipeline tapping the North Slope's vast reserves.

Before she became governor, her political experience consisted of terms as Wasilla's mayor and councilwoman and a stint as head of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission.

"Sarah Palin for her entire political career has been underestimated," said Paulette Simpson of the Alaska Federation of Republican Women. "She's tough, she's tenacious. I believe that she does have what it takes to get out there. Again, her ability to connect with voters and make a case is very, very, very strong."

@ Go to **KansasCity.com** for video, photos and more coverage of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, and read what area women have to say about her on mom2mom kc.com.

The Associated Press contributed to this report. To reach Steve Kraske, call 816-234-4312 or send e-mail to skraske@kcstar.com.